

## QUE(E)RYING HISTORY: LGBTQ2 HISTORICAL FICTION

QUE(E)RYING HISTORY:  
LESBIAN, QUEER, AND TRANS HISTORICAL FICTION AND THE  
CONSTRUCTION OF CONTEMPORARY PASTS

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## Abstract

This study investigates the way that many contemporary LGBTQ2 historical novels encourage cross-temporal identifications — the process wherein people today identify with historical figures — as a means of both evoking empathetic responses to lesbian, queer and trans characters, and countering temporal shame — progressivist tendencies to disidentify with the past. I contend that historical novels by contemporary authors, such as Penny Hayes, Jeanette Winterson, Sarah Waters, Leslie Feinberg and Jackie Kay, demonstrate the power of empathetic identifications with historical figures to destabilize prejudiced beliefs about contemporary LGBTQ2 people. I begin this study by examining the pleasures, dangers and work involved in developing empathetic identifications with others and using (dis)identifications to emancipatory ends. As I argue in my first chapter, recuperating lesser known or out-of-print novels, such as Penny Hayes's lesbian(-feminist) historical novels *Grassy Flats* and *Yellowthroat*, is a powerful means of challenging reductive stereotypes about the lesbian-feminist movement and countering temporally-based shame that often leads to a loss of LGBTQ2 history and of theories that still have relevance today. In my second chapter, I discuss how Leslie Feinberg and Jackie Kay's depiction of the continued mistreatment of trans-people as abjected subjects in the post-Stonewall era counters the progressivist myth that the post-Stonewall lesbian and gay rights movement has necessarily improved the lives of trans-people; *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* thereby show how historical fiction may challenge apathy and work to inspire political engagement. My third chapter examines how Sarah Waters's depiction of male impersonation in *Tipping the Velvet* highlights the



importance of closely attending to both historical differences and similarities. I argue that this novel shows that historical fiction may use the past to provide insight into issues of contemporary concern, and thereby make difficult political commentaries more likely to be heard and taken seriously.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Reclaiming and Revaluing Historical Identifications and Affective Histories

We do not [...] pursue the history of sexuality just because we think we must; we study it because we know that what we must or ought to do is intimately related to what we want to do. And we want history; the joy of finding counterparts in the past, for example, problematic though it may be, is not simply to be dismissed as anachronism.

Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, *Premodern Sexualities* (viii)

Identifications are the origin of some of our most powerful, enduring, and deeply felt pleasures. They are also the source of considerable emotional turmoil, capable of unsettling or unmooring the precarious groundings of our everyday identities.

Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (2).

### Preface

Historical fiction is often denigrated because it fosters historical identification, a process wherein people today identify with historical figures. These cross-temporal identifications are widely believed to promote trans(a)historical understandings of the past that rely upon an uncritical belief in historical continuity and a projection of the present onto the past.<sup>1</sup> As Norman Jones notes, “Scholars often look down on the genre [of historical fiction], particularly for encouraging identifications with the past that they feel are especially anachronistic when it comes to the history of sex, which attests to so

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<sup>1</sup> The term “transhistorical” is often used when describing the supposed “ahistoricism” of cross-temporal identifications. I work to counter uncritical conflation of these two terms by using “transhistorical” to denote comparative studies of the past and present that closely attend to the specificities of historical continuities whereas I use “ahistorical” to refer to studies of both historical continuities and/or discontinuities that display a lack of attention to historical detail. I use the term “trans(a)historical” to refer to studies of historical continuities that are also ahistorical.

much change — in terminology, in behavioral norms, and in symbolic connotations” (viii). Since the early 1990s, many LGBTQ2 historians and historiographers have maintained that cross-temporal identifications of contemporary LGBTQ2 people with past individuals who expressed same-sex attraction or cross-gender identification result in “gay chauvinism” and “homosexual essentialism” (Halperin, *How to do the History* 16), and reflect a “wounded gay narcissism” (Creech 185).<sup>2</sup> More recently, theorists such as Louise Fradenburg, Carla Freccero, Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, have worked to (re)value studies of historical continuities and have called into question the dominance of studies of historical alterity — the tracing of differences between the past and present — among LGBTQ2 historians and historiographers.<sup>3</sup> My analysis of lesbian(-feminist), queer and trans historical novels joins these recent studies by emphasizing the usefulness of cross-temporal identifications and studies of historical continuities in promoting queer- and trans-positive social change.

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<sup>2</sup> James Creech is critical of Halperin’s dismissal of cross-temporal identification based on the “implicit claim that epistemologically, privileging difference in gay and lesbian studies produces more solid knowledge than the possibilities opened by identification” (194).

<sup>3</sup> David Halperin’s *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (1990) reflects a privileging of historical alterity over continuity as he argues for examining “more closely the many respects in which Greek sexual practices *differ* from ‘our own’—and do not merely confirm current cherished assumptions about ‘us’ or legitimate some of ‘our’ favorite practices” (2). Halperin provides an interesting self-reflexive commentary on the limits of his earlier critique of historical identification in *How to do the History of Homosexuality* (2002). For a more recent example of a similar celebration of historical discontinuity, see Julian Carter’s essay “On Mother-Love: History, Queer Theory, and Nonlesbian Identity” which examines the phenomenon of feminine women in the early twentieth century understanding “their explicitly sexual intimacies with other women in terms of the love between mothers and daughters” (108). Carter maintains that “‘mother-love’ springs into focus as a historical phenomenon only when we make the queer turn away from a lesbian history motivated by the desire for the recognition of the present in the past, a turn away from the search for continuity in the experience of same-sex love” (108). Carter thus suggests that rejections of historical continuity are not only possible but also lead to closer engagements with the “queer” specificities of the past.



In this study, I examine why historical identification — a supposedly self-serving, apolitical and ahistorical approach to engaging with the past — has such staying power and how it operates in literature and culture as a means of challenging prejudiced beliefs about LGBTQ2 people. Simply defined, LGBTQ2 historical fiction refers to literature that depicts same-sex desire and/or cross-gender expression in an historical period preceding the one in which the given literary text was written.<sup>4</sup> The historical novels that I focus on in this project — Penny Hayes’s *Grassy Flats* (1994) and *Yellowthroat* (1988), Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion* (1987), Sarah Water’s *Fingersmith* (2002) and *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* (1999), and Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) — are just a few representative examples of LGBTQ2 historical fiction writing that encourage affective historical (dis)identifications as a way of countering homophobic and transphobic beliefs.

My dissertation is in many respects a recuperative project that works to revalue the supposedly “passé” process of historical identification as well as out-of-print and lesser known lesbian(-feminist) historical novels. I couple this recuperative move with examinations of more recent queer and trans histories, theories and historical novels to demonstrate the similarities, differences and interconnectedness of the approaches offered by proponents of lesbian/gay, queer and trans studies. My (re)turn to and (re)valuing of

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<sup>4</sup> In conjunction with other theorists of historical fiction, I refer to this mode of writing as a literary genre. Considering the diversity among historical fiction, it seems that critics evoke the term “genre” in a loose manner when discussing historical fiction. As M.H. Abrams notes, many contemporary critics view literary genres as “more or less arbitrary modes of classification, whose justification is their convenience in talking about literature” (110). For more sustained discussions of how the genre of historical fiction has been, and should be, defined, see, for instance, Amy J. Elias’s *Sublime Desire*, Fredrick M. Holmes’s *The Historical Imagination: Postmodernism and the Treatment of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction*, Naomi Jacobs’s *The Character of Truth: Historical Figures in Contemporary Fiction*, and Martin Kuester’s *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels*.

“past” movements, texts, and theories aim to disrupt the progressivist message that underwrites many disparagements of lesbian-feminist and lesbian/gay studies that indirectly suggest or take for granted that we are continually producing increasingly nuanced and liberating theories about sexuality and gender.<sup>5</sup> By closely examining both continuities and discontinuities between past and present historical theories and novels, my dissertation provides a means of thinking about and enacting queer- and trans-positive social change that is not dependent upon a linear progressive narrative of sexual “enlightenment” that denigrates and dismisses the important contributions made by past LGBTQ2 theorists and authors of historical fiction.

My interest in (re)valuing studies of historical continuity while attending to both historical similarities and differences is reflected in my choice, at times, to use contemporary terms, such as “lesbian,” “queer” and “transgender,” when referring to past sexual and gender expressions. LGBTQ2 historiographers have developed various nuanced methods to critique their use of contemporary language when describing past sexualities and genders. Valerie Traub, for instance, chooses to italicize the words *lesbian* and *lesbianism* in order to signal the problematics of her anachronistic use of language. It is her hope that “the persistent typographical strangeness of *lesbian* and *lesbianism* will remind readers of their epistemological inadequacy, psychological coarseness, and historical contingency” (emphasis added 16). Similar to Traub, when I apply contemporary sexual and gender labels to the past, I do so in a self-reflexively

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<sup>5</sup> As my project is invested in disrupting linear narratives of progression, my use of scare quotes around “past” is intended to highlight that many of the ideas and movements that we think of as belonging to the past continue to circulate and have effect in the present.

critical manner. Considering that historical fiction highlights similarities *and* differences between the past and present, I maintain that it is both appropriate and important to use contemporary terminology when speaking about these novels, but to do so in ways that highlight and challenge tendencies to uncritically project the present onto the past. To that end, when writing about historical fiction I enclose in quotation marks many identity labels that did not exist during the periods in which these novels are set — a move that, while still allowing for this language to evoke awareness of historical continuities, signals the possible dangers and limitations of applying contemporary terminology to the past and encourages close examination of the specificities of given social and historical contexts.<sup>6</sup>

It is my hope that this anachronistic use of sexual and gender categories may also help disrupt the privileging of examinations of historical differences over similarities in queer historical studies, encourage close analyses of continuities between past and present same-sex desire and cross-gender expression, and help revalue cross-temporal identifications. Reflecting on the use of terms like “lesbian” and “gay” when speaking of the past, Jones argues that “the threat of anachronism can be overstated” and maintains

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<sup>6</sup> I do not place all of the terms that I use anachronistically in quotation marks but, rather, primarily do so for those that are today used as sexual and gender identities. For instance, while I place quotation marks around terms like “lesbian” and “transgender” when using them in an anachronistic manner, I do not employ this tactic when referring to past acts of homophobia or transphobia. This difference signals that I am trying to highlight not only my anachronistic use of language but also the inappropriateness of categorizing those who choose not to label themselves or, in the case of fictional characters, those whom authors have not given sexual or gender labels. This decision also reflects my recognition of the need to limit this approach in order for it to be effective. Placing all anachronistic terminology in quotations — a task that would certainly be exceptionally difficult, if even possible — may numb readers to this method. It is my hope that signalling terms that I consider to be especially anachronistic will be sufficient to raise awareness of the importance of considering how the use of contemporary language when describing the past may, on the one hand, promote uncritical projections of the present onto the past or, on the other hand, foster productive feelings of being connected to the past.

that the “anachronistic connotations” of contemporary terms “do not render them ineffective” (7). Let me take Jones’s defence of anachronistic language one step further and suggest that historical fiction actually calls for a self-reflexively critical use of contemporary terms when speaking of the past. As historical fiction encourages double reading practices wherein we are called upon to read the past in terms of the present and the present in terms of the past, I maintain that using contemporary language when writing about historical fiction is a useful way of promoting awareness of both historical continuities and discontinuities.

Considering that fictional novels that are set in contemporary contexts may also foster productive empathetic identifications with LGBTQ2 people, it is important to clarify why I have chosen to study historical fiction and cross-temporal identifications in particular. Firstly, I maintain that the past is alluring in its otherness, and thus readers — both queer and straight, trans and non-trans — who may otherwise be uninterested in LGBTQ2 fiction may enjoy reading LGBTQ2 historical novels. The mysteriousness of the past makes reading fictional representations of history both fun and satisfying. Historical novels are enjoyable *not* because they erase this mystery but, rather, because they allow us to feel in touch with those who came before us, and thereby work to counter feelings of historical detachment. Jones maintains that historical fiction “conveys a sense of mystery as mystery: something worth knowing even if unknowable” (32). Historical fiction thus teaches us that mystery is not something to be overcome by trying to find the ultimate truth about the past or our genders and sexualities but, rather, something to be embraced and enjoyed for the “intuitive” (33) and pleasurable truths it conveys.

Historical fiction encourages us to question whether being able to fully access the past would actually be desirable and shows us that what is ultimately unknowable still conveys valuable knowledge. As historical fiction is a popular, if often undervalued, literary genre, it may help widely disseminate important awareness of LGBTQ2 history, and thereby encourage queer- and trans-sensitivity among heterosexual and non-trans readers. Historical fiction also counters homogenizations of LGBTQ2 people not only by highlighting the differences among past and present “queer” and “trans” experiences but also by showing the diverse ways that same-sex desire and cross-gender identification are expressed in given social and temporal contexts.

The cross-temporal affective connections that historical fiction fosters also provide a powerful way of teaching queer and trans-people about their collective past. As Jones observes, “many gay and lesbian historical fictions invite readers’ identifications with figures from the past as a complex and sophisticated mode of knowing” (74). Historical fiction uses cross-temporal identifications to provide insight not just into histories of homophobic and transphobic persecution but also into the diverse ways that those who express same-sex desire and cross-gender identification have resisted oppression in various past contexts, and thereby may inspire or further contemporary resistance to homophobia and transphobia among LGBTQ2 people. Considering that minority histories struggle against “‘repression’ or erasure” (33), Jones maintains that “more intuitive, narrative ways of knowing such as historical fiction serve as a useful [antitotalizing] corrective” (33) to traditional heterosexist historical studies. As I discuss in my analyses of affective histories and cross-temporal identifications, historical fiction

may provide readers who feel distanced from traditional, factual, heterosexist histories with a way of engaging with the past.

While my study builds on and is indebted to Jones's analysis of historical fiction as providing "insightful explorations of the unknown *as* unknown" (emphasis original ix), I focus on the ways that cross-temporal identifications foster empathy for LGBTQ2 people and help counter temporal shame — progressivist tendencies to disidentify with the past. As I argue in my first chapter, recuperating lesser known or out-of-print novels, such as Penny Hayes's *Grassy Flats* and *Yellowthroat*, is a powerful means of challenging temporally based shame that often leads to a loss of our history and of theories that still have relevance today. In my second chapter, I discuss how Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* and Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* show the ability of historical fiction to also counter progressivist myths; through their depiction of the continued mistreatment of trans-people as abjected subjects in the post-Stonewall era, these novels counter the notion that the post-Stonewall lesbian and gay rights movement has necessarily improved the lives of trans-people. By showing that the homophobia and transphobia that existed in the past still persists in the present, although often in different forms, historical fiction challenges apathy and works to inspire political engagement. As I elaborate in my analysis of Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* in my third chapter, historical fiction also often uses the past to provide insight into issues of contemporary concern. By defamiliarizing issues of political importance today, these novels may help readers see these issues anew and, by establishing temporal distance between readers and

characters, make difficult political commentaries more likely to be heard and taken seriously.

I begin this introduction to my study of historical fiction by briefly outlining the major issues of debate among theorists of this genre while also examining how my focus on the affective responses elicited by LGBTQ2 historical fiction deviates from usual analyses of the ways that postmodern historical novels comment on the subjective nature of all historical writing. I then consider what the denigration of historical identification and historical continuities by LGBTQ2 historians and historiographers in the 1990s can tell us about the position of LGBTQ2 historical studies within the broader discipline of history. Next, I argue that the affective histories written by Ann Cvetkovich and Leslie Feinberg provide important insight into the possible personal and political motivations behind writing LGBTQ2 historical novels as well as revealing that LGBTQ2 history may be experienced as both traumatic and pleasurable. I then discuss some of the differences between empathetic identifications, violent identifications, and violent disidentifications, and maintain that violent disidentifications with lesbian-feminists lead to reductive understandings of this movement. I build upon this analysis of the negative consequences of violently disidentifying with past theories and political movements in my study of the ways that cross-dressing histories, lesbian-feminist theories and Ellen Galford's lesbian(-feminist) historical novel *Moll Cutpurse: Her True History* (1984) foster both productive empathetic identifications and destructive violent disidentifications. This discussion of the ways that texts can inspire disparate affective responses leads into my analysis of Penny Hayes's novel *City Lights/Country Candles* (1998) which depicts developing

empathy as a long and difficult, yet ultimately pleasurable, process. I expand upon the pleasures of identification in my concluding discussion of how the erotic identifications that historical fiction fosters may function to political ends, thereby disrupting the ostensible binary between political work and pleasure.

## **I. Historical Fiction: Realism, Postmodernism and the Spaces In-between**

By examining the diverse (dis)identifications that LGBTQ2 historical novels may inspire as well as the political generativity of such affective responses, my study deviates from the usual critical focus on defining historical fiction and emphasizing its postmodern historical commentaries. Critical analyses of historical fiction understandably tend to focus on the interrelationship of history and literature, as well as fact and fiction. Recent studies of this literary genre generally open by outlining postmodern critiques of traditional historical ideals, arguing that historical fiction reflects postmodern history in action as “it makes us aware of the fallacy of the supposed objectivity of historical discourse” (Colavincenzo 51).<sup>7</sup> Many theorists emphasize the difference between “realist” historical fiction, on the one hand, which is often depicted as a past and/or passé mode of writing, and contemporary “postmodern” historical fiction, on the other hand.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As Colavincenzo notes, theorists of historical fiction generally summarize the ideas of “Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Foucault, Patricia Waugh, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Brian McHale” (xiv) and relate their historical commentaries to the genre of historical fiction. For summaries of how postmodern perspectives of history inform much contemporary historical fiction see, for instance, studies of historical fiction by Holmes, Jacobs, Jones, Kuester, as well as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn.

<sup>8</sup> Holmes conflates realism in historical fiction with a reinscription of traditional historical ideals, asserting that “traditional historical novels sustain throughout the pretence of supplying direct access to the past in all of its fullness and particularity” (11). In *The Character of Truth: Historical Figures in Contemporary Fiction*, Jacobs also maintains that the realist historical novel is “based on an essentially conservative, respectful approach to historical figures and history itself” (xiv). In contrast, many contemporary novels



Yet other scholars maintain that postmodern historical fiction does not break radically from its predecessors but, rather, is a new manifestation of historical fiction, a form of literature that is often traced back to the writing of Sir Walter Scott in the early nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

While readings of historical fiction as a distinctly postmodern mode of writing are important since they have lent social relevance and esteem to this “low brow” literary genre that has suffered “from neglect, even contempt” (Shaw 9), and have thus resulted in an increased number of historical novels receiving critical attention, recent studies of historical fiction suggest that only those historical novels that can be categorized, at least in part, as “postmodern” are deemed worthy of critical attention today.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, celebrations of postmodern literary techniques and the emphasis placed on the “newness” of postmodern historical fiction have resulted in a model of novelistic supersession which

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reject fact and “offer not a rational reconstruction or re-creation of history but a new creation in which historical figures may, like any other fictional material, be altered to suit the purposes of the work” (xvi). Linda Hutcheon refers to this “new” form of historical fiction as historiographic metafiction and maintains that it differs from realist historical fiction since it “plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record,” “incorporates, but rarely assimilates [...] historical] data” and places “real figures of the past” in the foreground of the novel in order to highlight the “joins between fiction and history” (114). Whereas Heilman and Llewellyn in their study *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women’s Writing* challenge attempts to clearly distinguish between past and present historical fiction by women, they also note that “historical fiction, particularly that written by women authors, has been transformed from an essentially escapist form of literature with a predominant interest in the romantic into a genre at the cutting edge of postmodern conceptualizations of the past and of contemporary worlds” (1).

<sup>9</sup> In *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*, Elias outlines both the similarities and differences between traditional “realist” historical fiction and postmodern contemporary historical fiction, and thereby resists instating a firm divide between the two. For other theorists who read contemporary historical novels as part of the long lineage of historical fiction see, for instance, George Dekker’s *The American Historical Romance* and Harry E. Shaw’s *The Forms of Historical Fiction*.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Waters speculates that “one of the reasons why the historical novel has received such poor and patchy critical attention is that—in this century in particular—it has been a genre dominated by women” (“Wolfskins and Togas” 176). As Waters notes, “Though frequently dismissed as romantic, escapist or historiographically naïve, women’s historical fiction often constitutes a radical rewriting of traditional, male-centred historical narrative” (176).

depicts realist historical novels as being replaced or at least outshone by more “complex” postmodern historical novels that actively work to subvert traditional historical ideals.<sup>11</sup> This celebration of postmodernism leads to authors like Penny Hayes — one of the most prolific writers of lesbian(-feminist) “realist” historical fiction — being ignored by contemporary scholars. As Fredrick M. Holmes notes, “Features of contemporary culture and literature which do not square with *a priori* definitions of postmodernism are often ignored by critics, and sometimes those features bespeak a positive continuity with, rather than a parodic or ironic reworking of, earlier traditions” (emphasis original 14). The binary and hierarchy established between “past” realist historical novels and “new” postmodern historical fiction thus reflect the tendency to celebrate historical discontinuity over continuity, a move that can limit the types of historical novels that are valued by critics.<sup>12</sup>

Although the main thrust of my study is on the affective power of historical fiction, I also work to counter both the notion that realist historical fiction has been superseded by postmodern historical fiction and the attempt to assert a binary between realism and postmodernism. To this end, I examine contemporary “realist” historical novels, such as Penny Hayes’s *Grassy Flats* and *Yellowthroat* and Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*, as well as novels that are distinctly “postmodern,” such as Jeanette

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<sup>11</sup> My study of Hayes’s lesbian(-feminist) realist narratives aims to undermine this hierarchy by showing that even the “more conventional [realist] narrative form in gay and lesbian historical fictions typically conveys identification with figures from the past as a complex process that can express specific mysteries inherent in such identifications” (Jones 73).

<sup>12</sup> In contrast to theorists who celebrate the break of postmodern historical fiction from realist historical fiction, Dekker asserts that “the history of historical romance *as I have read it and wished to write it* is long on continuity and short on foreseeable departures from family type” (emphasis added 1). This statement points to the subjective nature of history and implies that writing about the past in terms of continuity and/or discontinuity is a choice that historians make.

Winterson's *The Passion*. My analysis alludes to the realist tendencies of postmodern texts as well as the postmodern tendencies of realist novels, and thereby works to trouble any clear-cut division between the two. For instance, while Hayes's novels convey a powerful sense of the historical periods that they depict by providing much "factual" historical detail, her anachronistic descriptions of past women who hold strong lesbian-feminist beliefs signal the presentness of her portrayal of the past and undermine readings of this fictional text as attempting to convey historical "Truth." Winterson's *The Passion* — the most overtly postmodern novel that I examine in this project — contains many self-reflexive moments regarding the fictional nature of history in order to make readers aware that, unlike traditional history, this novel is not positing itself as factual and objective. This narrative's repetition of the phrase "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (7) combined with its magic realist elements convey a determined rejection of historical accuracy. Yet even simply evoking a figure like Napoleon and the Napoleonic Wars shows some investment in historical "realism" that, in turn, signals the difficulty of fully repudiating historical fact when writing historical fiction.<sup>13</sup>

Waters's novels *Fingersmith* and *Tipping the Velvet* more clearly borrow from both realism and postmodernism. While these novels demonstrate great skill at conveying period detail, the "queer" depiction of sexual desire in *Fingersmith* and

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<sup>13</sup> Notably, Winterson distances herself from the genre of historical fiction — a move that may reflect temporally based shame. Winterson asserts that "*The Passion* isn't an historical novel. It uses history as invented space. *The Passion* is set in a world where the miraculous and the everyday collide" ("*The Passion*" par. 2). Winterson attempts to disassociate herself from historical fiction, which is generally understood to be a lowbrow form of literature, by emphasizing her "new" postmodern perspective of history and her use of magic realism. Her reinscription of the binary between "realist" historical fiction and "postmodern" historiographic metafiction serves to encourage readings of her novels as "serious," high brow literature.

*Tipping the Velvet* and the use of terminology that evokes awareness of continuities and discontinuities between the past and present — as is most obviously seen in the use of the term “queer” — undermine readings of these narratives as solely trying to convey historical realism.<sup>14</sup> Mark Llewellyn describes Waters as “both political and postmodern with a small ‘p’; she is not interested in the ambiguity and androgyny to be found in Winterson’s work and its often ahistorical approach” (209). Considering that Waters does not, for the most part, employ postmodern literary techniques, attempts to position her as a postmodern writer seemingly tell us more about the dominance of analyses of postmodern literature in the academy than about her writing. While descriptions of Waters’s novels as postmodern seemingly arise out of the queerness of her representations of gender and sexuality, this categorization of her writing may also reflect a desire to justify her popularity and scholarly analyses of her novels.<sup>15</sup>

Although Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* may not initially seem to fit into the genre of historical fiction since the characters it foregrounds are living in the present, this novel may be considered a “realist” version of time-transgression historical fiction as it uses remembrance as a method of moving between the past and present and, through Millicent

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<sup>14</sup> Waters’s description of *Tipping the Velvet* as “Victorian lesbian romp” (“Sarah Waters Interview” par. 1) suggests that she is less invested in highlighting the postmodern, queer elements of her writing than Winterson. As Stefania Ciocia notes in her comparison of Waters and Winterson, Waters’s novels “can all be adequately described as realistic historical novels” whereas Winterson’s novels are “much more obviously experimental and unconventional in style” (24). These stylistic differences may reflect these authors’ differing views of the genre of historical fiction.

<sup>15</sup> While I refer to Waters primarily as a writer of “queer” historical fiction due to her eroticization of power imbalances, it is notable that she does not couple such queerness with postmodern literary techniques. Although her latest novel *Nightwatch* reflects an underlying postmodern impulse as “the narrative unfolds from end to beginning” (Llewellyn 197), and thereby disrupts the progressivism of traditional history, this novel is also written in a realist mode, and thus cannot comfortably be deemed “postmodern.”

and Colman's memories of trumpeter Joss Moody, spends much time recounting the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. I define "time-transgression" fiction as a subgenre of LGBTQ2 historical fiction that includes texts that depict temporally playful shifts between various historical periods or decades often through the use of magic realism, while "period-portraying" historical fiction focuses on a single specific historical period and generally uses more realistic plots and representations of time.<sup>16</sup>

While my analysis of the ability of historical fiction to inspire empathetic affective identifications with LGBTQ2 people is indebted to prior studies of the ways that historical fiction embraces subjective and postmodern approaches to history, I am not primarily concerned with how historical fiction comments on and complicates the discipline of history and preconceived notions of fiction as falsehood and fact as truth. As "There are countless articles and studies about the ways in which [...postmodern historical] fiction destabilizes received notions of history" (Colavincenzo xiii), I turn my focus to the political, educative uses of historical fiction and work to develop awareness of how affect and historical identification operate in historical fiction.<sup>17</sup> Like Roger I. Simon, I am interested in "practices of remembrance that have a transitive function; that is, they may be conceived as putting forward expressive actions that 'pass over' and take effect on another person or persons" (4). My study thus examines how the remembrance

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<sup>16</sup> Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) are examples of time-transgression historical novels that use magic realism to traverse different time periods. These novels pose overt challenges to conventional conceptions of temporality by jumping between various historical periods and/or disrupting temporal linearity. *Orlando*, for instance, documents the life of a character who lives from 1588 to 1928 and transforms from a man to a woman in the late seventeenth century. By explicitly depicting the connection between the past and present, time-transgression novels demonstrate that there are queer ways of representing and understanding time and our relationship to time.

<sup>17</sup> My study is most indebted to Jones whose study is the first to solely focus on LGBTQ2 historical fiction and emphasizes the importance of considering the specific uses of historical literature for LGBTQ2 people.

and reconstruction of the past in historical fiction inspire queer- and trans-positive (dis)identifications that influence readers' beliefs and political actions and, in turn, encourage social justice for LGBTQ2 people.

## **II. Devaluing and Revaluing Historical Identification and Historical Continuity**

As historical identification is often read as fostering beliefs in trans(a)historical continuity between the past and present, much can be learned about the disparagement of this historical approach — and, in turn, historical novels that inspire this form of affective engagement with past figures — by analyzing the debate among historians of sexuality as to whether the past's relationship to the present is better understood in the mode of alterity or continuity. Ongoing debates among LGBTQ2 historians and historiographers regarding the best way to study the past have resulted in the construction of a series of binary historical approaches and methodological hierarchies. As Traub notes, homosexual historiography has focused on “whether eroticism in the early modern period is best understood through the paradigm of acts or identities; whether this history is primarily one of continuity or alterity; and whether the ‘birth’ of the homosexual is a moment worth debating” (28).<sup>18</sup> The initial opposition between essentialist and social constructionist positions among LGBTQ2 historians and historiographers that arose in the 1990s and entailed a debate regarding whether to study identities or acts has, more

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<sup>18</sup> Although Traub's study is specific to the early modern period, like the historiographical analyses developed by other Early Modern/Renaissance scholars, such as Goldberg, Menon, Carolyn Dinshaw, Carla Freccero, and Louise Fradenburg, Traub succinctly outlines the more general debates that exist among LGBTQ2 historians and historiographers. Thus, while it is important to contextualize these analyses as coming out of Early Modern/Renaissance studies, the methodological approaches and critical arguments developed by these scholars have wider applicability and are useful when analyzing various historical periods.

recently, morphed into a discussion about whether analyses of historical continuity or alterity are more useful.<sup>19</sup> As this thesis intends to show, LGBTQ2 historical novels reveal the value of closely attending to both historical continuities and discontinuities, and thereby highlight the importance of rethinking binary approaches to studying the past.

Many LGBTQ2 historians in the 1990s emphasized the alterity of the past as a reaction against the tendency among earlier lesbian/gay and lesbian-feminist historians to posit trans(a)historical readings of similarities between the past and present. As Jeffrey Escoffier, Regina Kunzel and Molly McGarry argue in their 1995 introduction to a special issue of *Radical History Review*, “Historians have [...] *moved from* a search for lesbian and gay ancestors, a project that characterized the first stage of lesbian and gay history, *to more nuanced analyses* of the culturally and historically specific meanings attached to same-sex erotic and sexual ties” (emphasis added 2). This articulation of a shift in LGBTQ2 historical studies — from an essentialist search for similitude in the past

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<sup>19</sup> These debates reveal the influence that Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* has had on lesbian/gay and queer history and historiography. As Dinshaw notes:

Foucault’s contrast between the sodomite and the homosexual has had a big impact on scholarly work on sexuality. It has been taken as a dictum, and scholars of early and late periods have taken up and run with it, analyzing what, exactly, sexual identity is, how it is constituted and manifested, whether or not one can indeed talk about sexuality as a constructed core of identity in modern times. (194)

Halperin importantly problematizes the crediting of Foucault with developing “the distinction between the sodomite and the homosexual - a distinction often taken to be synonymous with the distinction between sexual acts and sexual identities” (*How to do the History* 27). Halperin notes that when Foucault asserted this difference he was reflecting upon “the differing styles of disqualification applied to male love by pre-modern legal definitions of sodomy and by nineteenth-century psychiatric conceptualizations of homosexuality” (29). The frequent decontextualization of this passage’s analysis of discursive judgments made about the sodomite and the homosexual by different social institutions has led to many theorists asserting “an absolute and precise historical opposition between sexual acts and sexual identities” (Dinshaw 195). Although the debate about whether historians of sexuality should focus on sexual acts or identities/categories may stem from a decontextualization of Foucault’s argument, he is still indirectly the initiator of this discussion that continues to mobilize theoretical analyses among historians of sexuality. For an in-depth analysis of the affect that Foucault’s *The History of Homosexuality* has had on contemporary queer history see also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Gender Criticism.”

to a social constructionist focus on historical and social context — reflects the defensive position that LGBTQ2 historians have had to assume within historical studies in order to legitimize their focus on sexuality.<sup>20</sup> This description of the second wave of LGBTQ2 history as “more nuanced” seemingly reflects an attempt to make this sub-discipline of historical studies be taken more seriously. Considering that the “search for lesbian and gay ancestors” is widely believed to involve an ahistorical projection of present identities onto the past, rejections of this approach by queer historians and historiographers worked to assert the validity of “new” LGBTQ2 historical approaches in the broader discipline of history.<sup>21</sup>

As minority histories written by members of the group under study are easily dismissed for being too subjective and self-interested, the rejection of historical continuity and historical identification by central LGBTQ2 historians, like David Halperin and

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<sup>20</sup> LGBTQ2 historians and historiographers in the 1990s often overstated the divide between essentialist and social constructionist historical approaches, and thereby simplified lesbian-feminist and early lesbian/gay histories. A close reading of lesbian-feminist Adrienne Rich’s historical analysis, for instance, shows the importance of considering the trans(a)historicism of some LGBTQ2 history to be a strategic move. Rich critiques the notion that “women and men [...] are] equal partners in the making of ‘sexual arrangements’” (230), asserting that “The fact is women in every culture and throughout history *have* undertaken the task of independent, non-heterosexual, woman-connected existence, to the extent made possible by their context, often in the belief that they were the ‘only ones’ ever to have done so” (230-231). While Rich makes a broad claim that cannot be either proven or disproved and erases the specificities of historical and social contexts, she simultaneously notes the important role that “context” plays in influencing the shape of female interactions. In light of this contradiction, Rich’s trans(a)historical celebration of women’s resistance to patriarchy may be read as a strategic means of critiquing women’s oppression by encouraging women and, more specifically, lesbians to feel a sense of historical worth and to take inspiration from past acts of resistance against patriarchy. For other LGBTQ2 historians who developed (strategic) trans(a)historical analyses of the past, see, for instance, Susan Cavin’s *Lesbian Origins* (1985) and Lillian Faderman’s *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981). Rictor Norton provides a critique of the tendency to dismiss early LGBTQ2 histories in his account of “‘homophile history’” in *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual* (3-6).

<sup>21</sup> The emphasis on social construction in 1990s may be read as signalling the beginning of “queer history.” Recently, queer historians, like queer theorists, have embraced studies of sexual deviancy and historical figures who cannot easily be categorized as “lesbian” or “gay.” See, for instance, Carter’s “On Mother-Love” and Martha M. Umphrey’s “The Trouble with Harry Thaw.”



Jeffrey Weeks, may be read as an attempt to provide LGBTQ2 historical studies with an air of objectivity and to establish sexuality as an important area of historical study.

Weeks, for instance, rejects attempts to assert “a mystical continuity between *our* desires and *their* desires across the ranges of cultures and histories” (emphasis added 93).

Weeks’s emphasis on the difference between contemporary and past desires points to the pressures placed on LGBTQ2 historians to assert historical alterity in order to have LGBTQ2 histories taken seriously.

While Halperin offers quite a contradictory account of historical identification in *How to do the History of Homosexuality*, he notes that when he was writing *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, he considered recognitions of the similarities between “ancient paederasty and modern homosexuality” to be “sloppy, inept, ethnocentric, a wishful fantasy, a cheap thrill” (14). Understandings of historical identification as a “cheap thrill” position this affective means of engaging with the past as historical pornography that, rather than serving a greater historical purpose of discovering and attempting to objectively convey “Truth” about the past, only provides sensationalistic and self-serving pleasure to the researcher or reader of history.<sup>22</sup> While hindsight leads Halperin to consider the value of historical identification and ask “what’s wrong with cheap thrills?” (15), he seemingly becomes increasingly comfortable outing and valuing the pleasures associated with history because “The history of sexuality is now such a respectable

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<sup>22</sup> Critiques of historical identification on the basis that this approach to the past is self-serving imply that only “selfless” historiographical analyses can serve collective interests. Dismissals of historical identification as self-interested reflect the common-sense binary between individualistic or personal interests and communal or political interests. This approach reinstates the myth that historians must be objective, detached and self-sacrificing in their pursuit of knowledge and that those who embrace an emotive engagement with the past are necessarily poor scholars.

academic discipline, or at least such an established one, that its practitioners no longer feel much pressure to defend the enterprise” (104).<sup>23</sup> This disciplinary security allows Halperin to assert that “Historical analysis is not argument against pleasure, least of all against the pleasures of identification, which even the most austere or the most self-aware historical scholar cannot resist for very long” (15).

Whereas past LGBTQ2 historians vocally rejected subjective historical identifications in order to seem as though they had overcome personal biases toward their subjects of study, the recent affective histories of theorists like Leslie Feinberg and Ann Cvetkovich may now be taken seriously by many — especially in the case of Cvetkovich whose writing is critically acclaimed — because of the work done by prior LGBTQ2 historians to validate historical studies of sexuality and gender through the rejection of affect. Cvetkovich and Feinberg’s unabashed expression of emotion in their historical analyses suggest that LGBTQ2 historians now have the disciplinary security to experiment with alternative modes of writing the past. Although affective histories may be read as not really belonging to, or somehow exceeding, the discipline of history, reading affective history as a valid type of historical writing is important in order to undermine the myth that historical objectivity is possible and to call into question the

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<sup>23</sup> Fradenburg and Freccero maintain that repudiations of certain subjects of analysis and methodologies are never neutral. They assert that one central challenge of queer historiography is to “recognize and confront the pleasure we take in renouncing pleasure for the stern alterities of history” (xix). They show that critiques of historical continuities and disparagements of openly enjoyable engagements with the past provide both pleasure and power to their critics.

view that compiling facts about the past is the most useful and desirable historical approach.<sup>24</sup>

The resistance of LGBTQ2 historians in the 1990s to studying historical continuities must be contextualized not only within the discipline of history but also in relation to LGBTQ2 theory and politics. Considering that historical continuity may be read as implying that there is an essence to homosexuality regardless of social and historical context, the rejection of studies of historical similitude reflects the larger critique during this period of essentialist understandings of homosexuality. Moreover, wariness toward celebrating the contributions of past “lesbians” and “gay” men reflects the move away from challenging homophobia by idealizing same-sex figures and relationships — a political approach that I describe in more detail later in this introduction when I analyze lesbian-feminist tendencies to establish counter-hierarchies. This refusal to celebrate past “lesbian” and “gay” figures signals a rejection of the normalizing impulse of studies that challenge the association of homosexuality with deviancy and perversion by emphasizing that homosexuals are both functioning and contributing members of society.

Although it is vital to understand where critiques of continuity, historical identification and the pleasures of history in the 1990s were coming from, we must also

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<sup>24</sup> In her essay “Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity” that is included in a recent issue of *Radical History Review* devoted to “Queer Futures,” Susan Stryker provides a powerful critique of the tendency to depict affective histories as not truly historical and as inferior to supposedly objective historical studies. She notes that she was invited to “contribute an essay to either the ‘Reflections’ or ‘Public History’ section of *Radical History Review*” (154). She argues that “The journal’s [...] division of knowledge into ‘less formal’ and ‘more formal’ categories, and the positioning of my work within this two-tiered economy, would replicate the very hierarchies I had set out to critique by containing what I had to say within a structurally less legitimized space” (154). Stryker’s analysis shows that even when space is made within the discipline of history for affective engagements with the past, this does not mean that a hierarchy does not continue to exist between objective and affective approaches.

consider the detrimental effects of these approaches as well as the benefits of embracing affect when engaging with the past. Rather than viewing pleasure as foreclosing on historical study which is generally understood as entailing difficult, lengthy, critically objective analyses altruistically undertaken in the service of “Truth,” we must consider how pleasure can provide a way into history, and thereby help disseminate important LGBTQ2 revisionist histories. George Chauncey, Martin Duberman and Martha Vicinus note that “For many, gay history helps constitute the gay community by giving it a tradition, helps women and men validate and understand who they are by showing them who they have been” (12). Although Chauncey, Duberman and Vicinus problematically reinscribe the myth of knowable subjectivity, they highlight the ability of lesbian/gay archives and historical texts to aid LGBTQ2 individuals by providing them with a sense of historical belonging, and thereby potentially challenging feelings of isolation while fostering self-acceptance and pride. Historical fiction performs a similar political purpose. As Heilmann and Llewellyn argue, historical fiction is especially important to oppressed peoples as this mode of writing allows women, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ2 people to develop “a narrative history” (5) that counters the centrality of the white heterosexual male as the subject of historical study.

Moreover, seeing past figures who resemble ourselves may help LGBTQ2 people heal from the trauma of being erased from history. Considering that historical figures largely have been presumed to be “heterosexual” or their sexual desires have been dismissed as insignificant or immoral, the investment of many LGBTQ2 historians in identifying past individuals as “lesbian” or “gay” was, and continues to be, an important

means of challenging the heterosexism and homophobia of many traditional historical studies. Although contemporary queer historians generally reject attempts to identify past “lesbians” and “gay” men, many trans historians show the continued importance of tracing such historical continuities in their arguments that many historical figures previously understood to be “women” or “lesbians” are more aptly described as “transgender” or “transsexual.” For instance, reflecting on post-mortem readings of jazz musician Billy Tipton, who was born female but lived his adulthood as a man and “in 1989 painfully bled to death from an ulcer rather than go to a doctor” (*Transgender* 83-84), Feinberg notes that:

One group argued that he and others passed solely because of women’s oppression — specifically economic inequality — at a time when women couldn’t easily become successful jazz musicians. Another group argues that Billy Tipton passed in order to escape lesbian oppression. Do either of these arguments fully explain the lives of thousands of females who have lived as men? (84)

Feinberg interrogates these accounts of Tipton’s life since categorizations of him as a “woman” or “lesbian” who “passed” in order to have a successful career or to escape homophobia fail to account for the possibility that Tipton experienced strong cross-gender identification and also overlook the dangers associated with “passing.”<sup>25</sup> While alternatively characterizing Tipton as a “trans-person” runs the risk of erasing the

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<sup>25</sup> Feinberg reveals that histories of transphobia are erased when the struggles of those who expressed cross-gender identification are understood solely in terms of sexism or homophobia. Reflecting on Tipton’s life as a man, Jason Cromwell likewise asserts, “The male privileges that accrue from living as a man do not justify spending fifty years living in fear, hiding from loved ones, taking extreme measures to make sure that no one knows what their body is or looks like, and then dying from a treatable medical condition (a bleeding ulcer)” (89). In other words, the attainment of male privileges is unlikely to be appealing enough to override persistent fear of transphobic discrimination and violence, and thus it is vital that historians consider other possible reasons — such as cross-gender identification — for cross-dressing.

unknowability of the past, this approach is useful as it points to the cis-centric nature of not just traditional historical studies but also lesbian and gay histories.<sup>26</sup>

Recently, some contemporary historiographers have questioned the widespread emphasis on the alterity of the past among queer historians and the tendency to represent the present as a clear-cut break from the past. Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, for instance, reflect on the predominance of understandings of the past in terms of discontinuity in Renaissance studies, and importantly question, “Why has it come to pass that we apprehend the past in the mode of difference? How has ‘history’ come to equal ‘alterity’?” (1609).<sup>27</sup> Goldberg and Menon argue that the predominance of studies of historical alterity works against the flexible boundaries that should characterize queer Renaissance studies. They assert that “we need to question the premise of a historicism that privileges difference over similarity, recognizing that it is the peculiarity of our current historical moment that such a privileging takes place at all” (1609). While this emphasis on alterity played an important role in helping to legitimize LGBTQ2 historical

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<sup>26</sup> I derive the term “cis-centric” from the use of the term “cis-gender” to describe non-trans people. The term “cis-people” refers to those whose gender identities correspond to their natal sex in a way that is deemed socially “appropriate” — for instance, a person who is natively male who develops a gender identification as a man (“Cisgender” par. 1). I use the term “cis-centric” to refer to the presumption that one’s gender identification/expression does or should reflect one’s natal sex. As I examine in more detail later in this introduction, readings of “female” cross-dressers as women who “passed” for strategic reasons is a cis-centric historical reading as it fails to take into consideration that these cross-dressers may have experienced themselves as men.

<sup>27</sup> Likewise, while recognizing the beneficial analyses that have resulted from studies of alterity, Fradenburg and Freccero argue that “The concept of difference — difference of past from present, of one culture from another — has come to have an epistemological privilege in a number of branches of historical and cultural studies today” (xv). They challenge the binary between acts and identities and the assumption that identities are inherently restrictive and normative in their assertion “that identities can at least potentially be as productive of pleasure and oppositional power as they can be disciplinary, and [...] identities can be said to be made *by* acts (Dinshaw 1989; Butler 1990, 1993)” (xx).<sup>27</sup> If, as Fradenburg and Freccero suggest, the divide between acts and identities is not as clear-cut as it may initially seem, it follows that the associated divide between alterity and continuity, which is central to the undermining of historical identification, is also not as definite as many queer historiographers would lead us to believe.

studies, as my analysis of historical fiction illustrates, we need to value studies of both historical continuity and alterity in order to attend to the complexities of the past and present.

Similar to Goldberg and Menon, Fradenburg and Freccero work to undermine the hierarchy between alterity and continuity by demonstrating that no one approach is inherently liberating or oppressive:

If the practice of queer theory has taught us that neither alterity nor similarity is an inevitable conceptual guarantor of oppositional political force, that the construction of desirous identifications can be potentially destabilizing as well as totalizing, then we must see that positing the power of the past to disrupt and remake the present is not necessarily to adopt a naïve continuism. (xix).

Fradenburg and Freccero allude to the power of studies of the interconnectedness of the past and present to inspire a rethinking of contemporary sexual and gender norms.

Historical novels show how historical studies may illuminate similarities between past and present forms of oppression while simultaneously highlighting the way that social and historical context affect the shape that oppression takes. As Jones notes, historical fictions “tend to emphasize points of connection alongside differences: similarities enough to make the past readable (literally and figuratively), and differences enough to keep it interesting” (2).

While queer historiographers have only recently begun arguing for close examinations of both similarities and differences between the past and present, lesbian(-feminist), queer and trans historical novels have been attending to this complexity for decades, as my study of works by Penny Hayes, Jeanette Winterson, Sarah Waters, Jackie Kay and Leslie Feinberg aims to show. Depictions of past forms of

discrimination in historical fiction raise awareness of how the struggles of LGBTQ2 people are ongoing. In *Madame Aurora*, for instance, Sarah Aldridge emphasizes the centrality of class concerns to women in late nineteenth-century America who chose not to marry through her depiction of Hannah and Elizabeth's struggles to provide for themselves, especially in their old age, as women in a same-sex relationship with no male financial support.<sup>28</sup> Although heterosexist and homophobic discrimination also lead to class concerns in North America today, rather than worries about class status resulting from choosing not to marry a man, contemporary class anxieties among queer and trans people often revolve around the difficulties of attaining and maintaining employment and receiving equality in pay and benefits. Historical fiction shows that examinations of both the differences and similarities between past and present forms of discrimination may promote understandings of the complex and shifting character of homophobia and transphobia. These novels, in turn, may inspire further development of various strategic means of challenging contemporary forms of discrimination that account for the complexity of homophobic and transphobic oppression.

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<sup>28</sup> Many other LGBTQ2 historical novels focus on the class struggles faced by women who chose same-sex lovers in the past. See, for instance, Nevada Barr's *Bittersweet*, Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, Sarah Waters's *Affinity*, Rose Tremain's *Sacred Country* (1992), Elana Dykewoman's *Beyond the Pale* (1997) and Penny Hayes's novels *The Long Trail* (1986), *Kathleen O'Donald* (1994), *Now and Then* (1996) and *Omaha's Bell* (1999).



### **III. Traumatic Pleasures: Tracing the Intermingling of Positive and Negative Affects in Affective Histories**

In addition to working to revalue historical identification and historical continuity, I also argue for the importance of studying positive affects as well as the interrelationship between negative and positive affects. Michael Snediker maintains that “Melancholy, self-shattering, the death drive, shame: these, within queer theory, are categories to conjure with” (6).<sup>29</sup> Heather K. Love notes that analyses of negative affects amongst queer theorists are usually coupled with interest in “how to incorporate a difficult or shameful past into the vision of a more promising future” (492). While such considerations of futurity suggests that studies of negative affects are often linked to desires for queer-positive social change, and thus have positive undertones, queer theorists rarely provide sustained examinations of positive affects — such as optimism, empathy, and love — or how they interact with negative affects. In this section I examine what is at stake in examining positive and negative affects simultaneously by exploring two examples of affective historical writing. Ann Cvetkovich and Leslie Feinberg write histories that reveal the interconnectedness of pleasure and trauma, and thereby demonstrate the importance of considering how positive and negative affects work together to inform our (dis)identifications. Whereas Feinberg’s trans revisionist historical study provides a rereading of cis-centric history, Cvetkovich develops a revisionist version of trauma studies that engages with individual and collective histories. Although

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<sup>29</sup> For queer studies of negative affect see, for instance, Judith Butler’s study of gender melancholia in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Michael Warner’s analysis of shame in *The Trouble with Normal*, Heather K. Love’s analysis of disidentification in “‘Spoiled Identity’: Stephen Gordon’s Loneliness and the Difficulties of Queer History,” and Leo Bersani’s analysis of self-shattering in “Is the Rectum a Grave?”.

these authors work within different fields, they both challenge disciplinary norms as well as the divide between affect and political action, thereby showing that emotional responses to historical injustices may help us heal from the traumas of the past and confront contemporary homophobic and transphobic oppression.

By asserting that the purpose of gay and lesbian archives is to “preserve and produce not just knowledge but feeling” (241), Cvetkovich destabilizes the privileging of knowledge and “facts” over emotion and subjective responses to the past in historical studies. Reflecting on her decision to work within the realm of trauma studies, Cvetkovich asserts that she uses trauma “as a point of entry into a vast archive of feelings, the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are part of the vibrancy of queer cultures” (7). Like historical novels, “archives of trauma” (241) may elicit powerful emotional responses that, in turn, raise awareness of the way that those who express same-sex attraction and cross-gender identification have been oppressed in various past contexts — oppression that persists, albeit in different forms, in the present. These modes of affective history understandably hold great appeal for authors and historians who are invested in social justice for queer and trans-people as they may inspire heterosexual and non-trans people to think critically about their implication in the discrimination of contemporary LGBTQ2 people and what they can do in their personal and political lives to counter homophobic and transphobic oppression. The compiling of archives — like the writing of historical fiction — may also be inspirational as they provide insight into past strategies of resisting homophobic and transphobic discrimination that may be translatable to contemporary contexts.

Although Cvetkovich describes lesbian and gay history primarily in terms of painful memory, haunting and trauma, she reveals the pleasure that may result from compiling archives, and thereby rescuing pieces of the past “that threaten to become lost history” (242).<sup>30</sup> While these archives provide insight into disturbing histories of oppression, they may also provide political pleasure as they counter the erasure of LGBTQ2+ pasts. Cvetkovich argues that archives “assert the role of memory and affect in compensating for institutional neglect” (241). For instance, Cvetkovich interviews lesbians involved with ACT UP in order to compile an oral archive that works to counter sexist readings of the past by making visible the central roles played by lesbians within this vital AIDS organization.<sup>31</sup> Her “ethnography of lesbian AIDS activists [...] seek[s] to uncover the emotional histories that lead people to activism and to document the legacy of this activism in the present” (13). My study shares a similar interest as I work to show the ways that historical novels may evoke emotions that can transform into political action in a variety of forms both at the individual and systemic level.

In *Transgender Warriors*, Feinberg similarly works to make emotional engagements with history visible and valid. The trauma, loss, melancholia and frustration that ze feels stem from hir sense of trans history being neglected and lost. Yet hir

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<sup>30</sup> Cvetkovich likens lesbian and gay archives to “other archives of trauma such as those that commemorate the Holocaust, slavery, or war...[that] must enable the acknowledgement of a past that can be painful to remember, impossible to forget, and resistant to consciousness” (241). She challenges usual representations of historians as detached collectors and recorders of the past by highlighting the centrality of emotion to the creation and viewing of such archives.

<sup>31</sup> While I see many similarities between historical fiction and Cvetkovich’s description of archives, there are also significant differences between these forms of affective history. Historical novels tend to foreground particular historical subjects and construct a coherent narrative in order to foster reader-character cross-temporal identifications. In contrast Cvetkovich’s analysis reveals that archives bring together diverse materials in order to capture a fragmented group history. As active archives continually shift, they demonstrate that gaining historical knowledge is an ongoing process.

historical study gives hir pleasure as it counters hir feeling of historical isolation.

Considering that Feinberg is an author of both affective history and historical fiction, hir commentary in *Transgender Warriors* on the traumas and pleasures of writing history may also be applicable to hir experience writing hir historical novel, *Stone Butch Blues*. Feinberg's choice to write in two different historical genres points to the importance of disseminating history in a variety of forms in order to increase its accessibility and promote a greater readership. Reflecting on writing *Transgender Warriors* and *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg asserts, "I had already made a decision before I wrote [...*Stone Butch Blues*] to write both books as a consecutive series of books" ("Transgender Warriors: An Interview" par. 7). The connection between these two disparate historical studies is apparent in the similar commentaries both texts offer on the importance of trans history. In *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess, Feinberg's "transgender" protagonist, tells Ruth, a "trans-woman" that, upon beginning to research the past, ze realized that "'We haven't always been hated. Why didn't we grow up knowing that?'" (271). Jess here alludes to the healing potential of history and the importance of history reaching trans youth who may believe that transphobia is a trans(a)historical phenomenon. Jess asserts, "'just finding out that it was ever different, even if it was long ago, made me feel things could change again'" (271). This statement highlights the ability of trans history to restore hope for trans-positive social change and strengthen the will of trans-people to keep fighting and surviving in transphobic environments.

Feinberg's overt cross-temporal identifications with various historical figures in *Transgender Warriors* establishes a sense of historical continuity for trans-people. Ze

invests contemporary trans experiences with historical substance, thereby challenging the notion that “transsexuality” and “transgenderism” are recent constructs of the biomedical industry (Raymond xxiv).<sup>32</sup> Although Feinberg maintains that *Stone Butch Blues* “is not my life story” (“Transgender Warriors: An Interview” par. 2), Feinberg’s commentary on Joan of Arc in *Transgender Warriors* echoes Jess’s reflections on the importance of trans history. While, upon being sentenced to life in prison, Joan of Arc agreed to wear women’s clothing, she shortly thereafter “resumed wearing men’s clothes” (36), and Feinberg notes that it was this act of defiance that led to her execution. Feinberg asserts:

Joan of Arc suffered the excruciating pain of being burned alive rather than renounce her identity. I know the kind of seething hatred that resulted in her murder—I’ve faced it. But I wish I’d been taught the truth about her life and her courage when I was a frightened, confused trans youth. (36)

Like in *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg highlights the healing power of history and the importance of disseminating trans histories to trans youth. While Feinberg problematically claims to know the “truth” about Joan of Arc’s “identity,” unlike cis-centric histories, ze importantly refuses to depict Joan of Arc’s cross-gender expression as insignificant or a secondary reason for her execution.<sup>33</sup> Regardless of whether or not Joan of Arc experienced cross-gender identification, Feinberg’s affective engagement with this

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<sup>32</sup> See Janice Raymond’s argument that transsexuals are “produced” by the modern medical institution and technological advancements, an argument that implies that cross-gender experience does not have any historical basis (xxiv).

<sup>33</sup> Feinberg asserts that “Many historians and academicians view Joan of Arc’s wearing men’s clothing as inconsequential. Yet the core of the charges against Joan focused on her cross-dressing, the crime for which she was executed” (*Transgender* 35). Although the importance of Joan of Arc’s cross-dressing is often erased because she was persecuted for multiple reasons — including her military prowess, class transgressions and association with paganism and witchcraft — Feinberg highlights the importance of taking Joan of Arc’s persecution for cross-dressing seriously. While it would be simplistic to consider cross-dressing to be the sole reason for this persecution, Joan of Arc was able to be executed on the basis of her cross-gender expression which reveals the danger involved with cross-dressing in early fifteenth-century England and exposes the existence of transphobia in the past.

history reveals that certain cross-dressing historical figures can be claimed by contemporary trans-people as role models of resistance to gender policing.<sup>34</sup> Feinberg's history reveals the difficulty of separating personal from political motivations; while his research is self-serving in that it gives him a sense of historical belonging, he wrote *Transgender Warriors* in order to provide contemporary trans-people with a history that counters the notion that they are inconsequential and aberrant.

Feinberg's description of the persecution of those who were discovered to be "passing" in the past highlights the importance of adding discussions of transphobia to historical studies of cross-dressing. Feinberg notes that "Courtroom and police records cite punishments carried out against transgendered people — from flogging to death" (83).<sup>35</sup> The severe consequences of being discovered to be "passing" in various past contexts makes it unlikely that people in the past would have experienced cross-dressing as entirely liberating. As Jason Cromwell points out, for those who "pass," "There is always some risk of being found out and marginalized as a result. Often when discovered, [...] irrespective of the duration of their lives as men, they are turned back into women and again made invisible" (12). Although it is possible that some "female"

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<sup>34</sup> While Feinberg is disturbed by discoveries of past persecutions of those who crossed gender norms, he also examines how people in the past often resisted this oppression, emphasizing that those who transgress gender norms "have a history of fighting against...injustice" (xii). He highlights the ways that many past "trans" figures resisted oppression as is seen in his discussion of Two-Spirited people challenging "the colonizers' efforts to outlaw, punish, and slaughter [them]" (25).

<sup>35</sup> Although it is vital to examine the persecution that outed "passing" people faced in the past, it is important to recognize that transphobia is not an historical constant or a universal phenomenon. While some past cross-dressers were severely persecuted upon being "outed," others were celebrated. As Elisabeth Krimmer notes, "Vacillating between criminality and saintliness, cross-dressers seem to cover the entire spectrum of social valuations" (24). The acceptance or persecution of "female" cross-dressers is thus socially and historically contextual. As Bullough and Bullough assert, "Female cross dressers have not only been tolerated but even encouraged, if only indirectly, through much of Western history, since it was assumed they wanted to become more like men and, therefore, were striving to 'better' themselves" (46).

cross-dressers in the past felt themselves to be women but saw the dangers associated with passing as worth the risk in order to gain greater freedom by living as men, or even enjoyed the risks associated with passing, others presumably decided to live as men because they experienced cross-gender identification. For the latter, being discovered to be “passing” could entail not just physical violence but also the symbolic violence of having their identities disavowed.

Feinberg demonstrates the limits of traditional history not only through hir by and large rejection of objectivity but also by highlighting the distance that ze initially felt from historical texts.<sup>36</sup> Feinberg reflects on the alienation that ze felt from history in school, stating “I couldn’t find myself in history. No one like me seemed to have ever existed” (11). While Feinberg’s alienation certainly stems from the lack of sustained analysis of cross-gender expression in much Western history, the “factuality” of history also contributes to hir initial lack of interest in historical studies as is seen in hir assertion that “I could never make sense out of history. I couldn’t remember whether Greece or Rome came first...I always got confused about who were allies during which war” (11). The alienating nature of traditional, factual history that Feinberg describes suggests that affective histories, such as those produced by Cvetkovich, Feinberg and authors of

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<sup>36</sup> Although Feinberg is critical and suspicious of objectivity, ze briefly succumbs to pressures to appear unbiased, and thereby demonstrates the pervasiveness of historical norms. Even though Feinberg is extremely self-reflexive and outlines hir emotional response to learning about history, ze assumes a guise of objectivity when it comes to dealing with cultures other than hir own. When reflecting on hir cross-cultural historical analysis, Feinberg asserts “I included photos from cultures all over the world, and I’ve sought out people from those countries and nationalities to help me create short, factual captions. I tried very hard not to interpret or compare these different cultural expressions” (xii). Feinberg’s attempt not to “interpret” or “compare” different cultures reflects the myth that historians are able to just convey “facts” about the “other.” While Feinberg’s brief claim to objectivity seemingly reflects hir wariness about speaking on behalf of people from different cultures, and thereby indicates cultural sensitivity, it also implies that such objectivity is possible, and thus, ironically, Feinberg positions hirself as an objective voice of authority about the “other.”

historical fiction, may appeal to a wider audience, or at least to those who find traditional factual histories off-putting. Reflecting on finally “finding himself” in lesbian/gay history, Feinberg states “I cried with relief. I realized how important it was for me to know I had a place in history, that I was part of the human race” (39). Feinberg depicts cis-centric histories as traumatic because they dehumanize trans-people by denying them a past. Hir “relief” upon finding past individuals whose genders reflect hir own signals that trans histories can help counter the pain of such dehumanization. Feinberg’s emotionality not only highlights the importance of history to trans-people but may also encourage trans-sensitive empathetic identifications both with hir as an author as well as with the historical figures that ze describes.

Some readers may find it easier to engage with histories that are told by affective historians who emotionally engage with the past than with disembodied historical accounts that are conveyed by supposedly objective historians. As Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper and Francesca Polletta note, displays of emotion “not only show what those expressing them feel but are also intended to arouse similar feelings in others” (13). Cvetkovich and Feinberg demonstrate that cross-temporal identifications and emotional responses to the past do not weaken historical study but, rather, make explicit the affective relationships that often underlie historical analyses. By outing emotion, Feinberg and Cvetkovich provide readers with a clear sense of their potential biases and encourage them to also respond emotionally to the histories they are reading, thereby potentially increasing reader engagement. In turn, these affective histories may strongly influence readers and encourage them to critically interrogate dominant versions of



history and prejudiced understandings of LGBTQ2 people. While histories that focus on evoking emotion may provide a more “participatory” (Jones 32) experience of the past, this is not to suggest that affective histories are “better” or even necessarily more accessible than traditional “factual” histories. Considering the association of history with objective, fact-based truth, some readers may find affective histories off-putting. Moreover, open displays of emotion may inhibit engagements with affective histories and historians by making readers uncomfortable. As I am aware that different types of historical writing appeal to different readers, like Feinberg, I maintain that it is vital to disseminate queer- and trans-positive histories in a variety of historical genres in order to reach the greatest numbers of readers. Yet it is also vital that we recognize that “historical fiction novels offer intellectually valid ways of exploring history—sometimes more intellectually honest ways than totalizing, endpoint-oriented nonfiction history writing” (28).

#### **IV. Violent Disidentifications with the Past and Temporal Shame**

In addition to analyzing the diverse positive and negative affects that engagements with the past may evoke, we must also consider how different types of historical (dis)identifications inform or reflect our personal and political investments. In order to attend to the diversity of our engagements with others, I begin this section by examining three different types of identificatory practices: empathetic identification, violent identification, and violent disidentification. While I maintain that cross-temporal empathetic identification is a powerful political tool for challenging homophobia and

transphobia, in this section I consider some of the dangers associated with using identification to emancipatory ends. For instance, I analyze the interrelationship between violent disidentifications and temporal shame — the progressivist move to distance ourselves from the past — by critically examining the tendency of contemporary queers to disassociate from our lesbian-feminist predecessors. I work to show how violent disidentifications with the lesbian-feminist movement promote a disparaging of potentially useful political and theoretical approaches, and have led to the creation of reductive stereotypical depictions of lesbian-feminists as asexual, sex-negative and/or sex-phobic women who actively worked to “desexualize” lesbianism.

Before beginning my analysis of violent disidentifications in this section and empathetic identifications throughout my dissertation, it is important to briefly explain what I consider to be the differences between empathetic identifications, violent identifications and violent disidentifications. Diana Fuss notes that among psychoanalysts identification is widely believed to entail an erasure of otherness, asserting that:

read psychoanalytically, every identification involves a degree of symbolic violence, a measure of temporary mastery and possession [...] identification operates on one level as an endless process of violent negation, a process of killing off the other in fantasy in order to usurp the other's place, a place where the subject desires to be. (9)<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Fuss's analysis of identification as appropriation derives primarily from critical race studies and an analysis of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, and thus my incorporation of her analysis reflects my investment in fostering intersectional analyses of oppression. Yet a notable disparity exists between empathetic identifications with queer and racialized subjects as is seen in the (in)ability of the privileged subject to become the oppressed other. As I outline in my later study of Laurie's sexual transformation in Hayes's *City Lights/Country Candles*, empathetic identifications *with* sexual others may transform into identification *as* these others due to the shifting nature of sexual desire. Shifts from opposite-sex desire to bisexual or same-sex desire because of identifications with sexual others often involve a forfeiting of power and heterosexual privilege. In contrast, when empathetic identifications *with* racial others transform into

This understanding of identification as appropriation — what I refer to more specifically as “violent identification” — involves an attempt to eradicate otherness as the privileged subject tries, whether consciously or subconsciously, to assume the position of the other.<sup>38</sup> While recognizing the risks involved with using identificatory practices to promote queer and trans rights, my study intends to show that identifications do not necessarily entail a ““desire to *be* another”” (emphasis added 10) but, rather, may reflect a productive, politically charged desire to better understand others.<sup>39</sup> Although Fuss emphasizes the risks associated with identifications, she alludes to their political potential in her assertion that “Identifications are the origin of some of our most powerful, enduring, and deeply felt pleasures. They are [...] the source of considerable emotional turmoil, capable of unsettling or unmooring the precarious groundings of our everyday identities” (2). While recognizing that identifications may be appropriative, violent and destructive, I maintain that cross-temporal empathetic identifications are a powerful means of promoting queer- and trans-positive perspectives and social change due to their pleasurable nature and ability to inspire personal transformations.

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identifications *as* the racial other these identifications leave the realm of empathy and become violent since they entail an appropriation of identity and voice that is not based on personal experience.

<sup>38</sup> It is important to recognize that this *attempt* at appropriating the position of the other ultimately fails. Although violent identifications work to reaffirm the privilege of the subject and the inferiority of the other, recognizing the inability of the privileged subject to materially assume the position of the oppressed other destabilizes the seemingly all powerful position of the privileged and maintains the other’s authority as a marginalized person.

<sup>39</sup> My choice to talk about violent identifications in terms of identifications with *the other* (in the singular) versus empathetic identifications which involve identifications with *others* (in the plural) is a strategy to draw attention to the erasure of the diversity of othered groups that occurs in violent, appropriative identifications. As Fuss argues, “Reliance upon the Other as a categorical imperative often works to flatten rather than to accentuate difference” (144). To speak of “others” instead of “the other” thus highlights the diversity among othered groups of people.

While my argument in favour of empathetic identifications works to undermine the tendency to view identification as a violent means of appropriation, in order to avoid violently (dis)identifying with LGBTQ2 people, both while reading and in our everyday lives, we must take seriously and remain aware of the dangers associated with identificatory practices. Whereas violent identifications *as* the other entail an attempt to usurp the limited authority of oppressed peoples as others — as, for instance, is seen in acts of cultural and sexual appropriation — empathetic identifications involve *partial* identifications *with* others in which the differences between the self and the other are recognized and respected.<sup>40</sup> Empathy involves maintaining, rather than erasing, the specificity of others.<sup>41</sup> As Jones asserts in his analysis of the process of trying to imagine how another person's experience "must be different from our own" (22), empathy involves realizing "that we have not fully experienced this other person's life and understandings of the world; we have not actually become this other person [...]" The

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<sup>40</sup> Violent identifications are often hard to recognize and critique because they seem to arise out of empathy and/or respect for the oppressed other. Cultural appropriations involve a negation and usurpation of the other's limited authority as a member of an oppressed social group. As Sander L. Gilman notes, some white writers have been charged with appropriating otherness due to the "marketability of certain forms of ethnicity" (23) and "scandals have recently revealed 'ethnic' writers to be whites writing under ethnic pseudonyms" (23). Similarly, appropriations of queerness demonstrate the potentially dangerous results of slippages between identifying with and as the other. As Halperin argues, "What makes 'queer' potentially so treacherous as a label is that its lack of definitional content renders it all too readily available for appropriation by those who do not experience the unique political disabilities and forms of social disqualification from which lesbians and gay men routinely suffer in virtue of our sexuality" (*Saint Foucault* 65). Here Halperin alludes to "heterosexuals" who identify as "queer" without having first hand experience of homophobia. For an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, see Annette Schlichter's essay "Queer At Last?: Straight Intellectuals and the Desire for Transgression" which examines both the limits and potentials of queer heterosexuality.

<sup>41</sup> Dinshaw notes the importance of recognizing that affective connections are partial in her assertion that "partial connections [...] are] queer relations between incommensurate lives and phenomena — relations that collapse the critical and theoretical oppositions between transhistorical and alteritist accounts, between truth and pleasure, between past and present, between self and other" (35). My study modifies Dinshaw's claim since I maintain that instead of "collapsing" these oppositions, empathetic identifications *bridge* the experiences of the self and the other.

exercise of ‘standing in someone else’s shoes’ can be a verifiably useful fantasy, but it remains a fantasy or illusion” (22). Not recognizing that identifications are partial can result in privileged subjects imagining that they can *entirely* understand foreign experiences through merely identifying with the other. If identifications are believed to entail an ability to fully understand the other, identification *with* others — empathetic identifications — may become identification *as* the other, thereby transforming into violent identification. While this example shows how the shifting nature of (dis)identifications can be destructive, the political potential of (dis)identifications also resides in this fluidity as, for instance, is seen when literature inspires empathy with LGBTQ2 people that causes those who are homophobic or transphobic to rethink these biases.

Unlike violent identifications, violent *dis*identifications do not entail an attempt to appropriate the other’s position but, rather, reflect a desire to repudiate and eradicate the other. Although we may expect that violent disidentifications will be more obvious than violent appropriative identifications that present themselves as empathetic, violent disidentifications can be just as difficult to detect as they are often normalized within certain social and historical contexts, and thus may not be recognized as damaging or their negative effects may be considered beneficial. For instance, it is a particular concern for this thesis, which focuses largely on historical fictions by and about women, and, more specifically, “lesbians,” that violent disidentifications with lesbian-feminism have come to be the norm amongst queer theorists and many members of the queer

community. This is a phenomenon that highlights the negative consequences of disavowing our pasts and requires careful critical interrogation.

In her fairytale rendition of how lesbian-feminists are generally represented by queer theorists, Suzanna Dunuta Walters critiques creations of a singular “Truth” about lesbian-feminism. She asserts that the “story” of lesbian-feminism that is told by many queer theorists

goes something like this: once upon a time there was this group of really boring ugly women who never had sex, walked a lot in the woods, read bad poetry about goddesses, wore flannel shirts, and hated men (even their gay brothers). They called themselves lesbians. Then, thankfully, along came these guys named Foucault, Derrida and Lacan dressing in girls’ clothes, riding some very large white horses. They told these silly women that they were politically correct, rigid, frigid, sex-hating prudes who just did not GET IT [...]” (13)

Walters’s wryly humorous account of the (re)writing of the lesbian-feminist movement by queer theorists alludes to the ways that the stereotype of the lesbian-feminist has benefited queer theorists by highlighting the “superiority” of queer understandings of sexuality and gender. In this account, frumpy, sex-phobic lesbian-feminists are “saved” by heroic male (queer) theorists who free them from their repressed sexual and intellectual state. Walters thereby implies that the stereotype of the asexual lesbian-feminist may reinscribe male dominance as it is only male doctors, husbands or, in this case, theorists who can cure women of their sexual repression. As denigrations of lesbian-feminism may derive from (subconscious) investments in temporal conceptual progress as well as sexist and patriarchal beliefs, we must remain aware of the ability of disavowals of lesbian-feminism to reinstate not only limiting historical ideals but also male dominance.

The potential interrelationship of violent identifications and disidentifications is apparent in charges that queer theorists appropriate the ideas of lesbian-feminists — a sign of violently identifying with them — while actively denigrating and disidentifying with this movement. The description of the men in Walters’s account as “dressing in girls’ clothes” (13) implies that contemporary queer theorists appropriate ideas that were central to the lesbian-feminist movement or, in other words, “dress” themselves in theories developed or furthered by women. Considering that some drag queen performances have received feminist critique for having misogynist undertones, Walters’s description of this theoretical drag suggests that misogyny may underlie the tendency of contemporary theorists to disassociate themselves from their feminist roots while simultaneously appropriating feminist theories. Although queer theorists may assimilate ideas developed or furthered by lesbian-feminists, rather than suggest that they are consciously trying to disrespect and override their forerunners, it is more productive to examine what this violent (dis)identification may indicate about views of lesbian-feminism in the present.<sup>42</sup>

As Walters demonstrates, violent disassociations from the past often rely on vast simplifications of past theories and political movements and reflect continued investments in progressivist narratives of theoretical supersession. In the interest of challenging linear

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<sup>42</sup> As Janice McLaughlin, Mark E. Casey and Diane Richardson note, feminists repeatedly express “unease about the lack of apparent appreciation and knowledge of feminist writings within queer texts [...] While occasional feminists are mentioned in queer works, sometimes admirably more often to evoke distain, there is little genuine engagement with the legacy of feminist work” (14). My decision to return to original lesbian-feminist texts when researching for this project arose out of a similar concern that critiques of lesbian-feminist theory often proceed without a close examination of actual lesbian-feminist texts, and thus provide general, hyperbolic accounts of lesbian-feminist theories.

progressiveness and disrupting the dominance of historical alterity and temporal shame in queer historiography, my study draws on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reading of the past's relationship to the present in terms of accretion. Sedgwick critiques "unidirectional narrative[s] of supersession [...wherein] one model of same-sex relations is superseded by another, which may again be superseded by another" (46).<sup>43</sup> As is seen in the celebration of queer theory over lesbian-feminism, unidirectional narratives that emphasize the alterity of the past often position present understandings of sexuality and gender as more conceptually evolved than those of the past. Garber, too, calls attention to such models of progression, cautioning that, "The current trend in LBGT studies and activism is to elevate queer theory and politics to a privileged position from which to sneer at lesbian feminism, which is seen as *outdated*, rigid, and intolerant" (emphasis added 21-22). Sedgwick's theory of accretion complicates this approach as it highlights the persistence of the past in the present and, in turn, works to counter temporal shame that rests on the fallacy that the present can, and should, fully break from the past.

In addition to reinforcing a simplistic divide between the past and present, violent disidentifications with lesbian-feminists have also led to the formation of reductive stereotypes about the women involved in this movement, as is seen in the notion that lesbian-feminists were sex-negative and tried to desexualize lesbianism. While critiquing

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<sup>43</sup> Sedgwick problematizes the notion that categories of sexuality that are generally associated with the past, such as sodomy and inversion, have been replaced by the more recent homosexual identity (45-46). She notes that this linear narrative establishes a false binary between the supposedly unknowable past and knowable present. She asserts that counterposed "against the alterity of the past [is] a relatively unified homosexuality that 'we' *do* 'know today'" (45). Reading the past's relationship to the present in terms of supersession thus positions the past as "other" and entirely unknowable which, in turn, reinstates the myth that contemporary homosexuality "comprises a coherent definitional field rather than a space of overlapping, contradictory, and conflictual definitional forces" (45).



sexual relations that embraced power imbalances, such as butch-femme relationships and sadomasochism, lesbian-feminists promoted “woman-loving” dynamics that often drew on gender essentialist beliefs that women are innately kind, gentle and caring.<sup>44</sup> Although lesbian-feminists are rightly criticized for policing women’s sexualities and genders, and instating an exclusionary lesbian ideal, the erasure of the logic behind lesbian-feminist thought has led to the women involved with this movement being represented as extremist, overly emotional, anti-sex feminists.<sup>45</sup> Considering the long history of dismissing women’s passion as symptomatic of madness, depictions of lesbian-feminists as irrational not only belittle this influential feminist movement but also problematically reinscribe the myths of the hysterical woman and feminist — an approach that reflects a limiting denigration of affect and shows the potentially destructive consequences of demeaning our predecessors.

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<sup>44</sup> While I appreciate much of the creative, politicized terminology developed by lesbian-feminists, some of these terms are problematic. For instance, using the term “woman-loving” to describe relationships that emphasize egalitarianism implies that those relationships that embrace power imbalances are, in contrast, “woman-hating.” My decision to place the term “woman-loving” in quotation marks is meant to encourage critical awareness of this binary while also signalling the historical specificity of this term when I am applying it to historical fiction that is set before the establishment of lesbian-feminism. Similarly, although the lesbian-feminist term “heteropatriarchy” clearly conveys the lesbian-feminist belief that heterosexuality and patriarchy are inherently interconnected, and that, in order to end patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality must be abolished, this term problematically demonizes all heterosexual relationships as being patriarchal, and thereby fails to account for the diversity among heterosexual dynamics.

<sup>45</sup> It is important to note that the idealization of certain genders and sexualities, and policing of others is not solely the domain of lesbian-feminists or an issue of the past. Elizabeth Freeman, for instance, describes accidentally offending one of her students whose gender reflected a more traditional lesbian aesthetic by “telling a story about anachronism, with ‘lesbian’ as a sign of times gone by” in which the student’s body was positioned “as an implicit teaching text” (727). Freeman’s self-reflexive analysis reveals the ways that contemporary queers may marginalize those whose gender and/or sexual expressions reflect past genders and sexualities that are considered passé. The association of identity policing and community ideals only with lesbian-feminism is thus dangerous as this view may inhibit analyses of hierarchies in contemporary queer communities wherein certain aesthetics and ways of expressing gender and sexuality are celebrated over others.

In order to destabilize simplistic representations of lesbian-feminists and encourage awareness of the destructive effects of temporal shame and violent disidentifications with the past, we must examine the reasons that lesbian-feminists deemphasized genital sexual contact between women and broadened the definition of “lesbian” to include all “women-identified women.” The lesbian-feminist move away from defining lesbianism as a form of sexual desire worked to disrupt stereotypical representations of same-sex eroticism that are apparent in a variety of cultural texts — such as pulp fiction and horror films — wherein lesbians are often depicted as aggressive sexual perverts who prey on and corrupt heterosexual women.<sup>46</sup> The association of lesbianism with sexual aggressiveness was also challenged by the lesbian-feminist celebration of gentle “woman-loving” sex as well as the fact that political-lesbians “were not required to have sex with other women” (Chenier par. 10).

Moreover, the lesbian-feminist expansion of the definition of “lesbianism” functioned to break down the barrier between heterosexual and lesbian-feminists. Garber notes that “In the 1970s, lesbian feminists confronted the heterosexism of the women’s movement [...] with the declaration that any woman could choose to be a lesbian” (18). This assertion not only countered the marginalization of lesbians in the second-wave feminist movement but also encouraged heterosexual feminists to see the value of

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<sup>46</sup> Lynda Hart provides a nuanced analysis of representations of lesbians as aggressive in various cultural texts in *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*. See, also, Ann Bannon’s pulp fiction. For examinations of filmic representation of violent lesbians see Rhona J. Berenstein’s *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* and Andrea Weiss’s *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema*. Faderman also provides a nuanced critique of depictions of lesbians in early twentieth-century fiction as hunting down and corrupting heterosexual women in *Surpassing the Love of Men*.

“woman-loving” relationships and consider lesbianism to be a viable and appealing alternative to heterosexuality.<sup>47</sup> Lesbian-feminists not only opened up the definition of “lesbian,” they also asserted the ethical superiority of women and lesbianism over men and heterosexuality as a means of providing “a basis for self-esteem [...] After years of negative evaluation, a sense of worth and pride does not emerge simply from the end of the overt [negative] message. The substitution of a positive message is called for, and that is what lesbian feminism provided” (Phelan 52). Shane Phelan reveals that counter-hierarchies were useful during the lesbian-feminist movement as they not only inspired pride but also provided lesbians with a method of confronting homophobia.<sup>48</sup>

The lesbian-feminist critique of penetration and, to a lesser degree, genital touching, encouraged understandings of lesbian relationships as providing an opportunity for women who have experienced sexual abuse in heterosexual contexts to express desire without feeling the threat of rape. As lesbian-feminists were invested in critiquing male (sexual) violence against women, it logically follows that they would argue for

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<sup>47</sup> Although lesbian-feminists often provided reductively idealizing and homogenizing depictions of lesbian relationships, they also challenged many cornerstones of heterosexist culture by calling into question the notion that marriage, reproduction, and even sex are necessary in order to have a meaningful relationship. For a fuller description of the homophobia that existed in the early second-wave feminist movement, see Faderman’s *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (212).

<sup>48</sup> Laura Doan provides a productive critique of counter-hierarchies in her analysis of Winterson’s writing in which she asserts that the “reversal of binary terms [...] is] a strategy that privileges the status of the lesbian over that of the heterosexual but doesn’t facilitate an ongoing critique of compulsory heterosexuality or patriarchal control” (146). While celebrations of lesbianism reflect an attempt to undermine lesbian shame by completely disavowing internalized homophobia and instating in its place unwavering pride “so that shame about love between women could feel anachronistic” (Faderman 214), we must be wary of attempts to relegate “feelings of shame, solitude, and secretiveness” (Love 495) to the pre-Stonewall past. As Love notes, as a result, it is “disturbing” to see “such feelings outside their proper historical context, in subjects whose only experience of gay identity is the ‘post-Stonewall’ variety” (495). Ironically, the lesbian-feminist attempt to relegate sexual shame to the past encourages temporal shame through a progressivist celebration of the present. By inhibiting analyses of the continuance of shame in the post-Stonewall era, this approach hinders the development of methods of dealing with internalized homophobia today.

alternatives to penetration and genital touching. Thus, rather than a move to destroy sexual pleasure by “promoting humdrum ‘equal time’ touching and cunninlingus” (Faderman, *Odd Girls* 253) the lesbian-feminist celebration of gentle, non-penetrative or non-genital touching may more aptly be read as an attempt to make sex “safe” for women who have experienced sexual assault and “provide a healthy alternative to male-female relationships” (209).<sup>49</sup>

Although thus far I have focused on outlining the rationale behind lesbian-feminist theories while noting some of my concerns with these approaches, in order to avoid fostering uncritical nostalgia for the lesbian-feminist movement we must also examine the reasons that many sex-radical and queer theorists are critical of lesbian-feminist methodologies and theories.<sup>50</sup> Considering that lesbian-feminists expanded the definition of “lesbian” to include “a range [ ... ] of woman-identified experience, not

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<sup>49</sup> Arguments that lesbian relationships are egalitarian promote the dangerous myth that such relationships are “safe” or, at least, “safer” than those between gay men or heterosexuals, and may thereby instil a dangerous false sense of security among women in same-sex relationships. Lesbian-feminist theorist Sheila Jeffreys maintains that:

In lesbian relationships there is no necessity for either partner to assert manhood through sex, and sex is likely to take very different forms, or even to seem relatively unimportant. Lesbians have a history of engaging in sexual relationships on more egalitarian terms than gay men or heterosexuals. (*Unpacking* 157)

Jeffreys’s celebration of lesbianism and critique of gay male and heterosexual dynamics erases the diversity among sexual acts and dynamics within all three of these groups. By implying that non-genitally based relationships that privilege emotional connection are morally and politically superior to genital and penetrative sex, Jeffreys sets up hierarchies not only between lesbians and gay men, and lesbians and heterosexuals, but also among lesbians. In addition to ignoring the intense emotional connection that may accompany genital touching, lesbian-feminist critiques of genitally-based lesbian desire problematically imply that there is something inferior, shameful and/or unclean about same-sex genital contact, and may thereby reinscribe homophobic beliefs as well as historically-rooted views of women’s bodies as dirty and sinful.

<sup>50</sup> I have chosen to refer to the women involved in the 1980s movement to reclaim sexual dynamics that embraced power imbalances, such as pornography, penetration and sadomasochism, as “sex-radical” feminists rather than “pro-sex” feminists or “sex-positive” feminists. Considering the widespread tendency to think in terms of binaries, describing sex-radical feminists as “pro-sex” or “sex-positive” problematically implies that their “opposites” — lesbian-feminists — are “anti-sex” or “sex-negative.”

*simply* the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (emphasis added, Rich 239), it is understandable that many sex-radical feminists and queer theorists read this broader definition of “lesbian” as an anti-sex erasure of the distinctiveness of lesbianism.<sup>51</sup>

Many queer theorists are also critical of the lesbian-feminist tendency to associate power imbalances primarily with heterosexual and gay male couples, and the subsequent disavowal of the possibility that power differentials may exist within “woman-loving” relationships. Yet, while offering productive challenges to lesbian-feminist theories, many queer theorists do not account for the rationale behind lesbian-feminist critiques of power imbalances and celebrations of egalitarianism, and thus their readings of lesbian-feminist thought are seemingly influenced and limited by temporal shame.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Sex-radical feminist Susie Bright provides a scathing critique of “Lesbian-feminist sex theory” for “purging anything aggressive, vicarious, and non-oval-shaped from its erotic vocabulary” (13). The frustration that sex-radical feminists expressed toward lesbian-feminists in the 1980s arose out of not only their belief that sexual rules limit women’s pleasure but also the marginalization that they experienced within lesbian-feminist communities. For instance, reflecting on his decision to start writing explicitly about sadomasochism during the height of the lesbian-feminist movement, Pat(rick) Califia, who identified as a lesbian at the time, reflects, “Why write and publish something that felt so dangerous? Because I was pissed off. I was tired of reading lies about my sexuality, tired of being told I didn’t exist—and if I did, it was only as a distant cousin to a rapist or chainsaw murderer” (12). Notably, the critique of the lesbian-feminist sexual ideal by sex-radicals created a space for those whose sexual practices were deemed “deviant” by lesbian-feminists and, arguably, helped pave the way for the establishment of queer theory.

<sup>52</sup> Consider, for instance, Sedgwick’s critique of lesbian-feminist disassociations from gay men in which she maintains that in separatist feminist thought:

The axis of sexuality [...] was not only exactly coextensive with the axis of gender but expressive of its most heightened essence: ‘Feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice.’ By analogy, male homosexuality could be, and often was, seen as the practice for which male supremacy was the theory.” (*Epistemology* 36)

Although Sedgwick rightly notes that the lesbian-feminist representation of male homosexuals as the height of patriarchy homogenized gay men and led to a failure to recognize the benefits of cross-gender coalitions, she does not consider that lesbian-feminists often distanced themselves from gay men because they feared that establishing such associations could result in women’s issues being ignored in the fight against homophobia (Faderman 211). As McLaughlin, Casey and Richardson note, Sedgwick is one of many queer theorists who have been charged with not recognizing their indebtedness to “the work of feminists, particularly feminist sociologists, who had [...] already established the constructed nature of gender and

Subscriptions to theoretical supersession among queer theorists allude to the invasiveness of progressivist approaches to the past and “the coercive, divisive pressure of the academy to smash our forerunners—even if it means misreading and/or misrepresenting their work—to establish our own careers, which others will later take apart” (Garber 5).<sup>53</sup>

Although Judith Butler’s tendency to ignore the reasoning behind lesbian-feminist theories when critiquing this movement may reflect an (unconscious) desire to distance herself from these now “passé” political and theoretical approaches, she importantly complicates the lesbian-feminist notion that lesbian relationships that do not involve penetration or genital stimulation are “safe” or “safer” than those that do. She thereby shows that queer theories can build upon and aid analyses of women’s material experiences of oppression. In her critique of the “postgenital sexuality” that was idealized by lesbian-feminists, Butler maintains that the “utopian notion of a sexuality freed from heterosexual constructs, a sexuality beyond ‘sex,’ failed to acknowledge the ways in which power relations continue to construct sexuality for women even within the terms of a ‘liberated’ heterosexuality or lesbianism” (*Gender* 39). Since for Butler, and many other queer theorists as well as sex-radical feminists, all relationships are formed “within the terms of discourse and power” (40), non-genital forms of sexual expression

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sexuality long before queer and Foucault were around” (15). Sedgwick’s apparent subscription to theoretical suppression is ironic considering that her theory of accretion encourages awareness and critical interrogations of temporal shame.

<sup>53</sup> Garber not only sees a violent progressive narrative as being central to academia but also implies that denigrations of our lesbian-feminist foremothers are used to support claims about the “newness” and “superiority” of queer theories. Janice McLaughlin echoes this critique in her analysis of theoretical cycles wherein she notes that “The cycle of theoretical trends rules out collaboration because one has to present one’s ideas as so much better and current than those of ‘yesterday’” (71). A break from the past is thus also a break from charges of cross-temporal collaboration and a means of asserting the “originality” of contemporary theories.

are not necessarily “safe(r)” for women. Although both lesbian-feminists and queer theorists are preoccupied with issues of power, lesbian-feminists generally read power differentials as oppressive products of heteronormativity and patriarchy, while queer theorists tend to reclaim power imbalances for their erotic potential.<sup>54</sup> Yet, rather than simply celebrating hierarchies, queer theorists like Butler show us that we must critically examine power imbalances and consider how depictions of “woman-loving” relationships as providing refuges from abuse may reinforce the myth that women do not hurt each other. This fallacy, in turn, may result in a silencing of the voices of abused lesbians who may fear encountering disbelief when describing same-sex abuse.

The destructiveness of violent disidentifications with our past is apparent in readings of lesbian-feminism as an out-of-date movement that has been superseded by queer theory as this approach may lead to important lesbian-feminist theories — many of which still have relevance today — being dismissed as the product of sexually frustrated hysteria. Adopting a wholly critical approach to past theories is limited because, as Elizabeth Grosz notes, “Critique tends to generate defensive self-representations or gestures of counter-critique [...] It tends to function as a form of dismissal of texts, rather than as an analysis of the embeddedness of critique in that which it critiques” (*Time Travels* 2-3). Recognizing that queer theory is indebted to lesbian-feminism and developed, in part, out of and in response to lesbian-feminist thought, may help us confront and become critical of temporal shame. While we may not agree that rejecting

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<sup>54</sup> See, for instance, Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” and Elizabeth Freeman’s discussion of the link between the rise of queer theory and a revival of femme-butuh aesthetics and relationships in “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations.”

penetrative or genitally-based sex will end power imbalances in sexual relationships, unless we recognize the logic behind lesbian-feminist articulations of alternative modes of sexual expression, lesbian-feminists will continue to be dismissed as a group of angry, extremist women who are to blame for “bad” — unfulfilling, unorgasmic — sexual relations between women.<sup>55</sup> Rather than fully rejecting “outmoded” theories, in order to avoid both temporal shame and uncritical nostalgia we should “seize and develop what is of use in a text or position, even in acknowledging its potentially problematic claims or assumptions” (Grosz, *Time Travels* 3). Moreover, carefully contextualizing theories and political movements that are under critique may help counter temporal shame and avoid erasing the logic behind ideas that come to be seen as “out-dated.”

## **V. The Interrelationship of Empathetic Identifications and Violent**

### **Disidentifications**

Building on my analysis of the possible destructive outcomes of violently disidentifying with past theories and political movements, in this section I explore how empathetic identifications and violent disidentifications work together in histories of cross-dressing, lesbian-feminist theories, and Ellen Galford’s lesbian(-feminist) historical novel *Moll Cutpurse: Her True History* (1984). These texts simultaneously encourage empathetic identifications with some socially marginalized people while promoting

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<sup>55</sup> As Faderman notes, sex-radical feminists critiqued lesbian-feminists for encouraging “boring, ‘politically correct’ sex [...] characterized as being obsessively concerned with not ‘objectifying’ women; [...sex-radicals] found absurd the ‘politically correct’ notion that any kind of penetration was heterosexist” (*Odd Girls* 253). Faderman counters critiques of lesbian-feminism for “desexualizing” lesbianism by noting that “in the sex conscious ‘70s women felt [...] guilty about denying themselves sexual pleasures” (207), and thus “most ‘lesbian-feminists’ did not deny themselves erotic relations with other women” (208).



violent disidentifications with others. Their depictions of female-to-male “passing” reveal not only the complex nature of (dis)identifications but also that we often form our identifications with certain groups by disidentifying with others.<sup>56</sup> While these texts provide important analyses of sexism and homophobia — thereby encouraging empathetic responses to women and lesbians — they tend to either disavow the possibility of “trans” identities or actively encourage violent disidentifications with those who express cross-gender identification. I elaborate on the negative effect that describing “passing” in terms of strategy and deception may have on “trans-people” in my second chapter.

Both the danger and productive potential of using identificatory practices to inspire queer- and trans-positivity reside in the ability of (dis)identifications to shift. Identifications that begin as identification with others (empathetic identifications) can transform into identification as or against the other (violent (dis)identifications) and vice versa. While ideally the (dis)identifications fostered by historical novels work to transform homophobic and transphobic beliefs into queer- and trans-positivity, these

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<sup>56</sup> During my discussion of cross-dressing, I often enclose the terms “passing” and “women” in quotation marks to call into question the certainty that “women” who “passed” in the past did so for strategic reasons and not because they experienced themselves as men. I am uncomfortable with the term “passing” as it reinscribes sex essentialism. As Cromwell notes, “Rather than passing, many FTMs and trans-men feel they are being seen as their true selves in living, dressing, and behaving as men” (39). The term “passing” is thus misleading as it implies that those who presented and/or experienced themselves as men in the past were “really” “women,” and thereby may indirectly do violence to cross-dressers — past and present — who experience strong cross-gender identification. The terms “cross-dressing” and even “cross-gender identification” are also questionable as they reaffirm the primacy of one’s natal sex — if a female-to-male trans-person dresses like a man arguably he is not cross-dressing or expressing cross-gender identification but, rather, dressing and identifying as is expected for someone of his gender. Moreover, many transgender people do not identify as either male or female, and thus my references to cross-gender identification may seem inexact or erroneous when discussing those who are transgender. I use these terms for the sake of simplicity and clarity while recognizing that we need to work toward developing terms that are more trans-sensitive.

(dis)identifications always run the risk of going awry and reinscribing prejudiced beliefs, and thus it is vital that we develop critical, queer- and trans-positive, self-reflexive reading practices. As Elin Diamond notes, “The awareness of and politicization of one’s identifications, no less than the act of identification itself, are potentially endless, and endlessly transformative” (94). Diamond’s argument that self-reflexivity regarding one’s identifications is potentially just as transformative as actually identifying with others highlights the importance of developing self-reflexive identificatory practices. Yet arguing in favour of self-aware empathetic identifications is dangerous since “the unconscious plays a formative role in the production of identifications, and it is a formidable (not to say impossible) task for the political subject to exert any steady or lasting control over them” (Fuss 9). Although individuals may not be able to fully control their (dis)identifications, they can work to gain an awareness of not only the (dis)identifications that they make but also the ways that novels call for certain (dis)identifications that may be beneficial and/or detrimental to oppressed peoples.

To select one important example, let me suggest that many histories of cross-dressing promote sensitivity to the plight of “women” and “lesbians” in the past while disavowing the possibility of cross-gender identification. Many historians maintain that “women” in the past cross-dressed solely or primarily to escape sexist and homophobic oppression.<sup>57</sup> Julie Wheelwright, for instance, emphasizes the logic behind decisions to cross-dress, arguing that, “The thread that pulls these stories [of cross-dressers] together

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<sup>57</sup> See also Krimmer’s *In the Company of Men: Cross-Dressed Women Around 1800* and Bullough and Bullough’s *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*.

is women's desire for male privilege and a longing to escape from domestic confines and powerlessness" (19). As Wheelwright believes that cross-dressing is motivated by external factors, she disregards questions of subjectivity and gender identification. She thereby overlooks the possibility that those who cross-dressed in the past were expressing their sense of self and, rather, maintains — like many lesbian-feminist theorists and authors of LGBTQ historical fiction — that cross-dressing was desirable because it provided a means of escaping oppression.

By emphasizing the constraints placed on "women" in various past social contexts, cross-dressing histories foster productive awareness of past manifestations of sexism, misogyny and patriarchy, and encourage empathy with these oppressed "women." For instance, Wheelwright asserts that some of these "female" cross-dressers were actually "lesbians who bravely risked ostracism and punishment by symbolically claiming the right to women's erotic love through their assumption of male clothing" (19). While Wheelwright's recognition of the bravery of "lesbians" who "passed" in the past encourages queer-positive empathetic cross-temporal identifications, as she does not recognize that cross-gender identification may have been a motivating factor in decisions to cross-dress, her study is silent on how readers should interpret decisions to cross-dress that are based on cross-gender identification.<sup>58</sup> Trans theorist Viviane K. Namaste argues that "transsexuals are continually and perpetually *erased* in the cultural and institutional

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<sup>58</sup> Cromwell highlights the importance of questioning whether a relationship between a woman and a cross-dressing "woman" should necessarily be considered "lesbian" since such a reading erases the possibility that those who cross-dress identify as men. He asserts, "although it would seem that sexual intimacy between a couple would indicate a lesbian relationship, that is not the case for individuals who did not (or do not) identify as women" (80). Understanding "trans-men" as "lesbians" may thus invalidate their personal conceptualizations of their genders and sexualities.

world” (*Addressing* 2) and that this erasure is one of the central ways in which transphobia operates. Thus, while Wheelwright does not outright encourage violent disidentifications with past “trans-people,” we need to recognize that the erasure of cross-gender identification — even when not a conscious ploy to harm trans-people — is not a neutral act.

By emphasizing the possible affective reasoning behind “passing,” trans historians counter the cis-centric nature of historical studies of cross-dressing and foster empathetic identifications with contemporary trans-people. As “Nearly all trans-people in searching for their identities turn to the past” (Cromwell 92), trans history and historical fiction are important as they provide alternative readings of cross-dressing and “passing” that not only diversify the current historical record but also help contemporary trans-people feel a sense of historical belonging and pride. While historians have traditionally focused on the “rational” reasons that “women” in the past cross-dressed, as Judith Halberstam notes, “we should be wary of overly rational narratives about lives filled with contradiction” (“Telling” 20). In order to develop a more nuanced historical record, we must recognize that many of the “women” who cross-dressed seemingly for external purposes may have also had affective reasons, been motivated primarily or entirely by affective concerns, and/or experienced themselves as men. While traditional historical understandings of cross-dressing as a response to sexism and homophobia encourage important analyses of the impact of oppression on decisions to cross-dress in the past, these studies are limited in their scope as they fail to account for transphobia, and thereby promote the fallacy that “passing” in the past necessarily liberated “women” from oppression. I examine this

issue in more detail in my second chapter when I analyze how Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* and Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* show the ability of historical novels to simultaneously foster empathy with women, lesbians and trans-people.

Whereas histories of cross-dressing tend to erase the possibility of past cross-gender identification, lesbian-feminist theorists have fostered more explicit and violent disidentifications with trans-people. Cromwell notes that “a significant number of feminists have reduced trans-people to one dimension of life: surgical and hormonal alteration as a reification and reinforcement of dichotomous gender and sex” (40). Lesbian-feminist Sheila Jeffreys, for instance, argues that trans-men — to whom she insists on referring with female pronouns — are “really” lesbians who, by opting for “surgical mutilation,” are destroying lesbianism (*Unpacking* 122).<sup>59</sup> While encouraging empathetic identifications with lesbians who are depicted as the victims in this scenario, Jeffreys promotes violent transphobic disidentifications with trans-men. She implies that the “cure” to the “*epidemic of female-to-male (FTM) transsexualism*” (emphasis added 122) — which is inspired by the desire of trans-men to appropriate patriarchal power —

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<sup>59</sup> Jeffreys maintains that these “lesbians” are driven to transition because of “the oppression of women, child sexual abuse, hatred of female body parts, fear of being socially despised as a woman and particularly an ageing woman, and the allure of male power which they believe can be attained through imitating a male body” (143). Jeffreys thus depicts transmen as “women” who have internalized sexist and misogynist beliefs or have developed disidentifications with their bodies due to abuse at the hands of men. Jeffreys fails to recognize that her latter argument reflects the homophobic notion that women become lesbians because they have been sexually abused by men. Many transphobic feminists accuse trans-men and FTMs of “‘betraying womanhood,’ ‘joining the patriarchy,’ ‘becoming the oppressor,’ and ‘only doing this for male privilege’” (Cromwell 40-41). Through her argument that female-to-male trans-people are patriarchal, misogynists who are destroying lesbianism, Jeffreys refutes the possibility that trans-men can be feminists — a view that reflects historical assertions that “women” who cross-dressed had no feminist motivations and were not trying to send a feminist critique of male dominance (Krimmer 31, Wheelwright 9).

is feminism or, more specifically, lesbian-feminism, which can help trans-men recognize and reject their internalized misogyny and homophobia.<sup>60</sup>

As I recognize that authors of lesbian(-feminist) and queer historical studies may also encourage violent disidentifications with trans-people, an empathetic identification with those who are transgender and transsexual is central to my study of historical fiction. Halberstam maintains that “we need a transgender history, a method of recording the presence of gender ambiguous subjects sensitive enough not to reduce them to either ‘women all along’ or ‘failed men’” (20). Considering that it is impossible to “know” for certain how past historical figures conceptualized their sexes/genders, trans history needs to be open enough to incorporate those who transgressed gender norms in the past regardless of their apparent reasons. My study takes up Halberstam’s call to contribute to a transgender history that accounts for the possibility of cross-gender identification by reading historical descriptions of cross-dressing and depictions of trans-people in lesbian(-feminist) and queer historical fiction from a trans-sensitive perspective. The following analysis of Galford’s lesbian(-feminist) historical novel *Moll Cutpurse: Her True History* as encouraging productive critiques of sexist and homophobic views while also promoting violent disidentifications with people who express cross-gender identification reflects my investment in reading with trans-sensitivity. I offer my analysis

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<sup>60</sup> Although I hesitate to define what is and is not “feminist” since there are a diversity of types of feminism and a single definition would only simplify and homogenize the feminist movement, it is important to question whether discriminating against and encouraging prejudice against a marginalized and oppressed group of people — such as trans-men and trans-women — is a “feminist” act? This dissemination of hatred in the name of feminism is not only destructive because it encourages violent disidentifications with an already marginalized group of people but also because it may make those who are invested in promoting social awareness and human rights disidentify with the feminist movement, and thus be unwilling to join feminist coalitions.

as a cis-person who is a trans ally invested in challenging transphobia. As I am not trans, I recognize that my analysis is necessarily limited since trans-people “see and interpret things in a way that individuals who are not trans-people do not or would not” (Cromwell 7). Yet considering the long history of non-trans historians and theorists writing about trans-people without an awareness of, or sensitivity to, trans issues, my analysis of Galford’s novel is offered in an attempt to explore how cis-people might develop trans-positive analyses.

In *Moll Cutpurse: Her True History*, cross-dressing is depicted as a sign of mental and physical weakness as it signals gender-based shame and a failure to recognize the power of women.<sup>61</sup> This novel which takes place in the early seventeenth century fictionalizes the life and adventures of the notorious criminal figure Moll Frith, also known as the heroine of Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s play *The Roaring Girl* (Bullough and Bullough 101). Moll first meets Bridgett, the central narrator of the story who is an apothecary, when she arrives at Bridgett’s store desperately seeking a potion to turn “her” into a man.<sup>62</sup> Bridgett initially cons Moll by giving “her” a fake potion, only much later telling Moll that it is impossible for “her” to become a man. When explaining

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<sup>61</sup> Considering the association of lesbian-feminism with transphobia, one may expect that only lesbian (-feminist) historical novels encourage violent disidentifications with “trans-people.” Yet, interestingly, Isabel Miller’s queer historical novel *Patience and Sarah* (1972) also provides a transphobic depiction of cross-gender expression and encourages gender policings of “trans-people.” Even though this novel was written before the establishment of queer theory, I categorize *Patience and Sarah* primarily as queer historical fiction because of its eroticization of power struggles and tensions in relationships.

<sup>62</sup> Although I generally employ the pronouns that authors use to refer to their characters, in order to signal and complicate Galford’s belittling and eventual erasure of Moll’s strong cross-gender identification, and show that there are alternative ways of reading Moll’s gender expression, I enclose in quotations the female pronouns used for Moll. Although Galford encourages readers to view Moll as “female,” if this novel is read with sensitivity to trans issues, Moll’s firm assertions of cross-gender identification complicate Galford’s depiction of Moll as “really” a woman.

“her” desire to become a man, Moll asserts, “I’m sure I’m not meant to be a woman” (15). The strength of Moll’s cross-gender identification is further apparent when, reflecting on “passing” as a boy, “she” states, “never in my life, before or since, have I been as happy as I was then, as a boy among the players. So I know my only salvation is to be changed into a man, for there’s nothing in me that feels like a woman” (33). Moll does not link the happiness that “she” gained from “passing” as a boy to “her” freedom from sexism; rather, this happiness is linked to “her” ability to escape womanhood as “she” disidentifies with “her” femaleness.

While Moll’s articulation of strong cross-gender identification seems to subvert the convention of depicting those who cross-dressed as solely trying to avoid sexism and homophobia, readers are encouraged to empathetically identify with Bridgett — a strong “feminist” and “lesbian” character — and thus to adopt Bridgett’s reading of Moll as a confused “lesbian.” Moll tells Bridgett that “Love [...] is also *part* of the *problem*. For when I love, and when I lust, it’s woman who’s my object” (emphasis added 45). As Moll does not have a penis, “she” thinks that no woman will ever desire “her” as “she” would be unable to pleasure a woman. As Laura Doan and Sarah Waters note, Bridgett educates Moll “that her cross-dressing impulses are a symptom not of transgenderism, as she supposes [...] but of lesbianism” (17). Bridgett uses sex to teach Moll that women can pleasure other women and that Moll’s “problem” is not same-sex desire but, rather, “her” adoption of masculinity. While “lesbianism” may be the origin of Moll’s crisis, it is apparent that the “problem” that needs to be fixed is Moll’s cross-gender expression since Bridgett maintains that there is nothing wrong with same-sex desire. Thus, like



Jeffreys, Galford depicts feminism and lesbianism as the means to “cure” cross-gender expression.

Galford also reinscribes the transphobic notion that “women” who express cross-gender identification have internalized misogynistic beliefs. Moll asserts, “‘Anyone as brave and strong as I am ought to be a man. Not a silly petticoated woman who bleeds and breeds and whimpers’” (44). Bridgett is angered by Moll’s misogyny and challenges it by asserting, “‘You’ve been mixing too much with men. The world is full of brave, strong women. If you’re not too stupid to see them’” (45). By giving Moll a lesson in “feminism,” Bridgett works to make Moll see that “her” desire to transition is merely a product of “her” misogynist lack of awareness of female strength.<sup>63</sup>

In this novel, Bridgett’s belittling of Moll’s “trans” experience is positioned as a feminist act. As Galford guides readers toward identifying with Bridgett, we are seemingly expected to replicate Bridgett’s complete lack of empathy for Moll’s plight. While Bridgett’s transphobic reaction needs to be contextualized as arising out of being raised in, what Anne Fausto-Sterling refers to as, a “two-sexed system” (80), she not only fails to understand Moll but also actively ridicules Moll’s strong assertion of “her” manhood. Bridgett thinks, “What an idiot she was, to imagine she could change her sex. And what a fool she was for wanting to” (37). Bridgett describes Moll’s desire to become a man as “foolish,” “idiotic” and indicative of “stupidity” (43). While Bridgett’s critique of Moll’s cross-gender identification is used to celebrate the superiority of women in

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<sup>63</sup> Galford’s description of Moll reflects the historical understanding of past cross-dressers as only being able to “conceive of themselves as active and powerful in male disguise” (Wheelwright 19).

comparison to men, and thereby challenges sexist and misogynist beliefs, this “feminist” commentary simultaneously encourages disidentifications with “trans-people.”

By having Moll recognize the value of women and shed both “her” misogynist views and cross-gender identification, this novel attempts to solidify empathetic identifications with “women” and “lesbians,” and violent disidentifications with “trans-people.” Once Moll and Bridgett become lovers, Moll agrees with Bridgett that “her” initial desire to become a man was “silly” (44) and was caused only by multiple thwarted attempts to find a woman who returned “her” same-sex desire. This novel’s transphobic message that “transgenderism” can be “cured” by finding the right woman reflects the homophobic view that lesbianism can be “cured” by finding the right man. The transphobia of this novel highlights the importance of both reading with an empathetic attendance to the oppressed and questioning whether the (dis)identifications that texts mobilize may be harmful to marginalized groups of people. Importantly, readers do not have to choose between either fully incorporating or rejecting the identifications that authors lead them to make. For instance, readers can allow Galford to guide them toward empathetic identifications that challenge sexism and homophobia, while refusing to partake in violent transphobic disidentifications.

## **VI. The Ambivalence of Empathetic Identifications**

Before embarking on my analysis of the power of cross-temporal empathetic identifications with historical characters to challenge homophobic and transphobic beliefs, it is important to reflect on the difficulties involved in empathizing with others in

order to avoid producing simplistic celebrations of empathy as an easy outcome of identifications and the key to social justice for LGBTQ2 people. Empathetically identifying with others can be an arduous process that requires us to confront the traumas experienced by oppressed groups of people, recognize our implication in the discrimination of others, and/or rethink societal and familial teachings that are central to our identities. Fictional depictions of this process can help us understand and accept the mixed emotions that we may experience when empathetically identifying with others. Hayes's nuanced depiction of cross-temporal identification in *City Lights/Country Candles* prepares readers for the ambivalent responses that they may experience when forming cross-temporal empathetic identifications with characters in LGBTQ2 historical fiction. Hayes provides powerful insight into not only the partialness, but also the difficulty and ambivalence of empathetic identifications. Considering that many historical novels depict traumatic histories and severe acts of homophobia and transphobia, developing empathy with oppressed historical figures is often a difficult process that readers should not expect to be easy, quick or straightforward. Yet, as Hayes reveals, attending to the traumatic experiences of historical others — as LGBTQ2 historical fiction calls upon readers to do — may have positive, pleasurable rewards.

When visiting her long-time friend, Eveleen, Hayes's protagonist, Laurie, is made to listen to Ev's dying grandmother's stories about various women who were imprisoned in an insane asylum in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The plot of *City Lights/Country Candles* incorporates temporal shifts since Grandma McNelly's oral histories that are told to Laurie in 1960 imaginatively transport Laurie back to late

nineteenth-century America. Reflecting on Grandma McNelly's one hundred and two years of living, Laurie "considered all that this wonderful centenarian had lived to see thus far: the Civil War, World Wars I and II, and the Korean Conflict; countries rising and falling; women's suffrage and women joining the armed services [...]" (13-14). Grandma McNelly is positioned as a voice of authority on the past who (re)creates women's histories as a means of raising awareness of women's past experiences of oppression that are often left out of traditional historical accounts (28).

Although Laurie has enjoyed listening to Grandma McNelly's histories in the past, after hearing Grandma McNelly's traumatic story of Helena being imprisoned in an asylum because she was discovered having sex with her lover, Priscilla, Laurie's response to history becomes less celebratory and more ambivalent. When this story finishes, Laurie feels like she is "still immersed in the gripping story of Helena's life...[she] didn't feel that she was completely there, sitting in Grandma's room, in her house, in this century. She blinked hard several times to disengage herself from the bothersome sensation" (81). For Laurie, this cross-temporal connection is "bothersome" for a number of reasons. Exposure to the historical oppression of women who loved other women presumably raises Laurie's awareness of her implication in the oppression of lesbians in the present since she holds many homophobic beliefs as is apparent when she refers to Helena as "'a 'queer'" (85). Moreover, Laurie's difficulty disengaging herself from the past temporarily disrupts her privilege in the present as a "heterosexual" woman.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Although early in the novel Laurie's desire for Ev is outed (8), Laurie has a male partner, and thus benefits from heterosexual privilege throughout much of this novel. *City Lights/Country Candles* begins by outlining Laurie's sexual dissatisfaction with her partner followed by a scene wherein she masturbates in her sleep while thinking about Ev (8). The depth of Laurie's repression of her same-sex desire is

Considering that just imagining homophobic oppression causes Laurie emotional distress and makes her feel disconnected from her privilege, Hayes makes a powerful statement about the devastating nature of material experiences of homophobia. Laurie seemingly resists listening to the rest of Grandma McNelly's stories because her insight into Helena's persecution due to her love of a woman makes Laurie recognize the ways that lesbians in the present are oppressed, and thereby highlights the difficulties that she will face if she acts on her love and desire for Ev.

While this novel ultimately demonstrates the ability of empathy to overpower violent disidentifications, and thereby disrupt prejudiced beliefs, it also highlights the tendency of people to cling to their biases when confronting forms of otherness or similitude that they are unwilling to recognize, especially when these might become costly. As Fuss asserts, "Identifications are erotic, intellectual, and emotional. They delight, fascinate, puzzle, confuse, unnerve, and sometimes terrify" (2). Considering that identifications have the power to undo the illusion of a coherent self as well as reveal our implication in the oppression of others, they may evoke adverse reactions in those who disavow their prejudices and understand their subjectivities to be fixed. As is apparent through Laurie's homophobia and internalized homophobia, the disruption of the self that may be caused or advanced by empathetic identifications with past others may be strongly resisted. Laurie's unwillingness to challenge her homophobic beliefs is apparent

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highlighted as it can only be expressed while she is unconscious. Laurie clings to her heterosexual identity and privilege until the end of this narrative which concludes with her typing her work resignation, implying that she is preparing to leave her husband to return to Ev (192). Laurie thus eventually risks assuming the position of the oppressed sexual other, but only after a long struggle to resist this position because of her understanding of the difficulties involved with expressing same-sex desire in homophobic environments.

when discussing Helena with Ev who tells Laurie, ““She knew how to love, all right”” (85) to which Laurie responds, ““Are you serious? She was a...a queer”” (85). Although Laurie recognizes that none of the women who were imprisoned in the asylum were actually “insane,” she believes that the “lesbians” were “a little warped in their thinking” (135). Laurie’s conflicting emotions and internal struggle with her prejudices may alert readers to their own potentially ambivalent reactions when confronting the traumatic histories foregrounded in LGBTQ2 historical fiction.

Although Hayes reveals that homophobia can transform into empathy, in *City Lights/Country Candles* this transformation is depicted as a slow and painful process. Two weeks after Grandma McNelly’s death, Laurie begins to feel that she has lost not only Grandma McNelly but also the women whom she had (re)created. Laurie reflects on “how real the women [in these stories] had become. Remarkably, Laurie missed them. She thought about their meagre hopes, their great defeats, their shattered lives” (135). By depicting Laurie as missing Grandma McNelly’s women even though their stories remain in the forefront of her mind and she continues to reflect upon their lives, Hayes highlights the sense that the past is both with us and yet lost. As Laurie expresses more sadness for the loss of the historical figures in Grandma McNelly’s stories than for Grandma McNelly herself, Hayes demonstrates the powerful connection that can be established between past and present subjects through historical identifications. Laurie’s mourning of Grandma McNelly’s compassionate rendering of the lives of female historical figures also suggests that affective histories may provide one mode of opening the self up to others, an act that, in turn, transforms the very boundaries or definitions of the self. Notably, it

takes two weeks for Laurie to recognize the power of her identification with Grandma McNelly's women; this temporal delay suggests that readers may be initially unaware of the strength of their empathetic identifications with historical characters in LGBTQ2 historical fiction and that the impact of these novels may not be recognized until after the pages of the book are closed.

While *City Lights/Country Candles* importantly provides insight into the difficulty of empathetically identifying with othered groups of people, this novel also alludes to the pleasures of identification by linking empathetic identification to sexual pleasure. It is Laurie's acceptance of her attraction to Ev — an acceptance that is linked to Laurie's empathetic identifications with Grandma McNelly's women — that finally allows her to experience sexual fulfillment. Hayes thereby suggests that the shifts in subjectivity that can be caused by historical knowledge and cross-temporal identifications may be experienced as pleasurable if they are embraced.

## **VII. Erotic Identifications and the Pleasures of History**

Although my study of historical fiction recognizes that gaining empathy for others is often a difficult process, I maintain that the pleasures that result from engaging with historical others make the cross-temporal identifications that are fostered by historical fiction an engaging means of challenging homophobic and transphobic beliefs. If it were not for the pleasures associated with this means of engaging with the past, it is unlikely that historical identifications would have survived repeated denigrations and dismissals, nor presumably would the genre of historical fiction be so popular. It is notable that

many LGBTQ2 historical novels foreground same-sex love as well as erotic desire and pleasure. In addition to allowing readers to experience first hand the satisfaction associated with feeling a connection to the past and developing caring relationships with (historical) others, historical fiction may also provide erotic pleasure to readers. As Carol Thurston notes in her analysis of romance novels, these texts have the power to both arouse readers' desires and give them new sexual ideas (141). As I examine in more detail in my first chapter, LGBTQ2 novels often give explicit depictions of sex between women, and may thereby elicit sexual arousal and pleasure in readers. We thus need to consider how LGBTQ2 historical fiction uses both the pleasures evoked by cross-temporal erotic identifications and depictions of same-sex desire to engage readers, and thus the erotic becomes a way of encouraging empathy and political action.

In his examination of the lives and writings of Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney, “two ex-patriate Anglophone authors living in *fin-de-siècle* Paris” (emphasis original 55), Scott Bravmann examines the specific ways that the past gets eroticized through the use of cross-temporal identifications. He asserts that “Sappho, Lesbos, and Greek paganism formed a central component of Vivien’s and Barney’s creative, erotic, and emotional life together” (56). Examining Vivien’s poem “Psappha revit” (“Sappho Lives Again”), Bravmann notes that “not only did Vivien identify herself *with/as* Sappho, but she also occasionally regarded Barney as Sappho (and not just Atthis, Sappho’s beloved)” (emphasis added 56). Vivien’s slippage between identifying *with* and *as* Sappho provides important insight into how erotic identifications incorporate aspects of both violent and empathetic identifications.



Like violent identifications, erotic identifications with/as historical figures may be read as appropriative and self-serving since they involve using the other for self-gratification. Indeed, the power imbalance that is central to violent identifications is also a part of erotic identifications. For instance, Vivien and Barney “use” Sappho — a dominant same-sex icon — to attain sexual fulfillment.<sup>65</sup> While it is tempting to read these authors and Sappho as being on a level playing field because of their similar sexual desires, present, living individuals can identify as specific historical figures without encountering resistance from the dead, and thus there is a hierarchy at play in such dynamics. Whereas violent identifications reflect an attempt to eradicate the other, erotic identifications involve a strategic and temporary use of the other for sexual gratification wherein the eradication of the other is not the end goal, but may be an unintended side effect. Erotic identifications may be read as inhabiting a space between violence and empathy since they are not focused on destruction like violent identifications and are not as concerned with the other as empathetic identifications. I provide a fuller examination of the empathetic and violent impulses of erotic identifications in my study of male impersonation and the stage in my third chapter.

While erotic identifications may have violent impulses, they can also lead to empathetic identification as is apparent in Catherine Ennis’s novel *Time and Time Again*

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<sup>65</sup> Linda Garber notes that “The idea of Sappho, whether or not the actual woman was what we would call a lesbian today, has been central to white lesbian identity and community because her presence in history provides a foundation on which lesbians could build a lineage” (10). Although readings of Sappho as a “lesbian” work to provide contemporary lesbians with an historical legacy and role model, such appropriations of Sappho tend to erase the mysteries of Sappho’s life — the fragmentary nature of the historical record on Sappho — and that Sappho apparently loved and desired both women and men. For a sustained discussion of the ways that this historical figure has been taken up by writers and “lesbians,” see Yopie Prin’s *Victorian Sappho*, Garber’s *Identity Poetics* and Bravmann’s *Queer Fictions of the Past*. For examples of how Sappho has been used by authors of LGBTQ2 historical fiction see Ellen Frye’s *The Other Sappho* and Nancy Mars Freedman’s *Sappho: The Tenth Muse*.

(1996). Novels that depict erotic cross-temporal identifications often link this eroticism to the illicitness of same-sex attraction in the past, and thereby reveal that taboo sexual desires may carry a heightened erotic charge. Ennis's protagonist, Millie discovers a suitcase that contains clothes, money, a photo of two women, an unused "train ticket dated July 24, 1933, for a one-way fare from New Orleans to Chicago" (22), and a letter written by "Helen" to an anonymous woman. Millie speculates that these women were "lesbian lovers" (24) who were going to run away together. Her partner, Ellen develops fantasies about the relationship between these two historical figures that lead her to express renewed passion for Millie. Ellen's erotic identification with these women is apparent after having sex with Millie when Ellen reflects, "I'll bet that's what Helen did to her friend" (28). Millie thinks to herself, "I had never seen Ellen so aroused, not even our first time. If this was what happened to her when she fantasized about other lesbians having sex, I'd get a VCR and start renting lesbian movies" (29). Although Millie does not initially make the connection between Ellen's desire and the specific historical context in which these women were lovers, Ellen tells Millie that "Thinking about the letter and the apartment in Chicago and the two women who were in love got me to thinking about how it was sixty years ago, what they did. I'll bet they were really in the closet back then" (29). Ellen's arousal by the illicitness of this past same-sex desire demonstrates that contemporary same-sex and opposite-sex relationships may incorporate fantasy play involving eroticizations of history as a means of increasing sexual desire and

pleasure. Moreover, LGBTQ2 historical novels may be a source of such historical eroticism.<sup>66</sup>

Notably, in this novel, erotic cross-temporal identification leads to Millie and Ellen learning that Marlène, the woman who owned the suitcase, was murdered after she was “arrested for dancing in a lesbian bar” (70) and her name and address were “printed in the morning paper” (70). *Time and Time Again* thus depicts erotic cross-temporal identifications as having the potential not only to improve one’s sex life but also to inspire awareness of past acts of homophobic persecution. This novel thereby demonstrates that erotic identifications may pave the way for developing empathetic identifications and gaining a deeper understanding of LGBTQ2 history. As my analyses of lesbian sex scenes in my first chapter reveals, although much historical fiction emphasizes the difficulty and dangers of expressing same-sex attraction or cross-gender identification in the past, the harshness of this history is countered by erotic depictions of same-sex desire in these narratives, and thus the past is associated not only with loss and pain but also love and sexual pleasure.

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<sup>66</sup> Jones also alludes to the eroticism of history and historical fiction in his analysis of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) by examining the “erotic back-and-forth storytelling” (48) between Shreve and Quentin. Jones maintains that “Telling history becomes a mode of sexual expression for Quentin and Shreve” (50). Jones’s analysis implies that the “pleasurable tension” in this story not only establishes an “erotic connection” between these two men but also between these characters and readers of this novel.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Desexualizing and Resexualizing Our Past: Representations of Same-Sex Desire in Lesbian and Queer Historical Fiction**

Is it possible that queer theory's unspoken Other is feminism, or even lesbianism, or lesbian-feminism?

Suzanna Danuta Walters, "From Here to Queer" (11)

Violent disidentifications with lesbian-feminists often centre on lesbian-feminism's supposed "desexualization" of lesbianism. As outlined in my introduction, the belief that lesbian-feminists "desexualized" lesbianism greatly simplifies the theories, goals, successes and failures of this movement. Shane Phelan notes that lesbian-feminist writings worked to transform "lesbianism as a sexual identity [in]to lesbianism as a *political* definition" (72). Although it is important to examine the negative consequences of emphasizing the politics of lesbianism while deemphasizing sexual desire between women, it is just as vital to attend to the reasons that lesbian-feminists promoted alternatives to genitally-based and/or penetrative sex. The highly erotic descriptions of same-sex desire in Penny Hayes's lesbian(-feminist) historical novels complicate not only the notion that lesbian-feminists argued for a "desexualization" of lesbianism but also representations of lesbian-feminists "as rigid, homophobic, and sexless" (Walters 13). Hayes — a self-identified lesbian-feminist and one of the most prolific authors of lesbian(-feminist) historical fiction who wrote many of her novels during the height of the lesbian-feminist movement — openly depicts genital touching and penetration in sexual

encounters between women.<sup>1</sup> Her novels thus suggest that, although lesbian-feminists deemphasized sex, that does not mean that their sex lives were nonexistent, unfulfilling or necessarily non-genital or non-penetrative.<sup>2</sup> By carefully contextualizing lesbian-feminist arguments, Hayes's narratives indirectly show the importance of closely attending to the social and historical contexts in which lesbian-feminist ideas developed as such awareness may disrupt the association of lesbian-feminism with irrational, extremist thought and, in turn, challenge violent disidentifications with lesbian-feminists.

In order to illustrate and support my argument that reading lesbian(-feminist) historical novels may complicate stereotypical understandings of the lesbian-feminist movement, in this chapter I analyze two novels by lesbian-feminist novelist Penny Hayes. My decision to examine *Grassy Flats* (1992) — a novel that is currently out-of-print — and *Yellowthroat* (1988) — which is still in print, but is distributed by a small publishing company and has received no critical attention — reflects my investment in recirculating historical novels that are lesser known than celebrated postmodern queer narratives. In addition to examining Hayes's lesbian(-feminist) historical novels, I also analyze two

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview for the encyclopedia *Contemporary Authors*, Hayes refers to herself as a writer of “lesbian feminist western fiction” (121). Her representation of women who hold lesbian-feminist beliefs as also having intense and pleasurable genitally-based sexual experiences complicates the notion that lesbian-feminists blindly subscribe to all lesbian-feminist ideologies. Hayes's novels thereby undermine the association of lesbian-feminism with rigidity. As Linda Garber importantly notes, “Declarations of the rigidity of lesbian-feminist ideology are repeated so frequently that they take on an air of accepted truth” (22). Hayes's writing helps to disrupt this “Truth” by revealing that not all lesbian-feminists subscribed to lesbian-feminist sexual ideals.

<sup>2</sup> Representations of lesbian-feminists as asexual not only vastly simplify their descriptions of sex between women but also imply that theory is easily translated into practice. Yet, considering the difficulty that is often encountered when attempting to transform theories into practices, it is reductive to believe that lesbian-feminist celebrations of certain sexual acts between women and rejection of others were subscribed to by all lesbian-feminists in their everyday lives.

“queerer” historical novels, *The Passion* (1987) by Jeanette Winterson and *Fingersmith* (2002) by Sarah Waters.<sup>3</sup> I maintain that these two novels complicate the notion that queer approaches to gender and sexuality preclude examinations of the material realities of women’s oppression. *The Passion* and *Fingersmith* reveal that texts that provide “queer” depictions of relationships between women do not necessarily evade discussions of the violence and discrimination that women experience in male-dominated societies, and thereby demonstrate the tenuous nature of dichotomous readings of queer and (lesbian-)feminist thinking. As Hayes’s narratives provide more numerous and explicit depictions of same-sex desire and pleasure than those offered by Winterson and Waters’s “queerer” historical novels, reading these narratives in relation to each other works to disrupt the pro-sex/anti-sex binary between queer theory/sex-radicalism and lesbian-feminism, and also encourages awareness of the similar preoccupations of lesbian-feminists and queer theorists/sex-radicalists.<sup>4</sup> I maintain that coupling close readings of lesbian-feminist theories and historical novels with close analyses of queer theories and historical novels helps to illuminate the diversity among the experiences and identities of women who express same-sex attraction.

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<sup>3</sup> As my designation of *The Passion* as “queer” historical fiction shows, I primarily differentiate between lesbian(-feminist) and queer historical fiction on a thematic basis rather than temporally as is usually done with lesbian-feminism, queer theory and trans theory. Yet I hesitate to offer fixed definitions of these subgenres of historical fiction. While it is useful to trace differences as well as similarities between lesbian(-feminist) and queer historical fiction, as my examination of the overlaps between these two types of historical fiction aims to show, clearly differentiating between them is not only impossible but also runs the risk of reinscribing the binary and hierarchy between lesbian-feminist and queer theory.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, many sex-radicals are now read as queer theorists which supports the notion that queer theory, in part, arose out of sex-radical feminism. For first hand sex-radical perspectives see Lisa Duggan’s *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, Pat(rick) Califia’s *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, and Susie Bright’s *Susie Sexpert’s Lesbian Sex World*.

## **I. (Dis)identifying with Lesbian-Feminism: A Self-Reflexive Analysis**

Before beginning my study of lesbian(-feminist) and queer historical fiction, I vehemently disidentified with lesbian-feminists and actively denigrated lesbian-feminism, believing it to be a reductive and passé movement. I thought that lesbian-feminist theory had been almost entirely replaced by queer theory, and that any possible lingering aspects of lesbian-feminist thought should be wiped away to make room for queer theory's more complex analyses.<sup>5</sup> As I am a product of queer theory's current dominance over lesbian-feminism in academia, I have tended to align myself more with queer theory than with lesbian-feminism. By (re)valuing past lesbian-feminist theories and historical fiction, I recognize that I risk being labelled a "lesbian-feminist" and subsequently dismissed as a lesser academic as well as a lesser queer.<sup>6</sup> My horror at the thought that someone might consider me a lesbian-feminist is telling as it speaks to how the past is often experienced as abject, and thus many contemporary queer theorists try to repudiate lesbian-feminism from LGBTQ2 history.

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<sup>5</sup> My desire that lesbian-feminism be relegated to the past and forgotten reflects the tendency to represent this movement "as the big drag, drawing politics inexorably back to essentialized bodies, normative visions of women's sexualities, and single-issues identity politics" (Freeman 728). Yet, Elizabeth Freeman maintains that "If identity is always in temporal drag, constituted and haunted by the failed love-project that precedes it, perhaps the shared culture-making projects we call 'movements' might do well to feel the tug backwards as a potentially transformative part of the movement itself" (743). My examination of how queer historical novels provide powerful commentaries about women's material oppression shows the importance of this temporal drag, of the pull that "past" lesbian-feminist thinking has on the present.

<sup>6</sup> Garber notes the risk associated with studying lesbian-feminism today when she asserts that "critics such as [Bonnie] Zimmerman and [Toni A.H.] McNaron can be, indeed have been, dismissed as lesbian feminists opposed to poststructuralist theory" (7). The lack of critical attention on Hayes's novels may be informed by the contemporary animosity toward lesbian-feminist thought in the academy which has made it risky to study fiction that is steeped in lesbian-feminist theory. It is my hope that my analysis of Hayes's novels will inspire further critical engagements with her rich and abundant writings.

Although I have come to respect the passionate tone and creativity of many lesbian-feminist writings, I continue to find their vehement critiques of certain types of “queer” sexual and gender expressions troubling. For instance, as a femme-identified lesbian, it is impossible for me to not take personally lesbian-feminist critiques of femme-butich relationships for being oppressive imitations of the heterosexual norm.<sup>7</sup> My most passionate disidentification with lesbian-feminism stems from the transphobia of much lesbian-feminist analysis as is most apparent in Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire* and Sheila Jeffreys’s *Unpacking Queer Politics*. Whereas Raymond develops a conspiracy theory in which male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals are depicted as part of a patriarchal plot to infiltrate lesbian-feminist communities, Jeffreys argues that female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals who “opt for surgical *mutilation*” (emphasis added 122) are annihilating lesbianism “because lesbians are physically destroyed in this surgery [...] The lesbianism of their female partners is severely tested too” (122). Lesbian-feminist attempts to police the sexual and gender expressions of members of the LGBTQ2 community make it difficult for me to appreciate their nuanced critiques of compulsory heterosexuality, patriarchy and the feminine ideal.

Yet reading historical fiction has helped me to gain respect for the strong political motivations behind lesbian-feminist ideologies and methodologies, and to resist the tendency to homogenize all lesbian-feminists. These novels have also increased my understanding of the difficulty of establishing a clear-cut divide between lesbian-

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<sup>7</sup> For critiques of the anti-butich/femme sentiment of much lesbian-feminist theory see, for instance, the essays in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butich Reader* edited by Joan Nestle and Minnie Bruce Pratt’s *S/he*. These two texts outline and challenge the lesbian-feminist view that femmes and butiches were lesser lesbians because their gender expressions and relationship dynamics “mimicked” oppressive heterosexual dynamics.



feminism and queer theory or, for that matter, lesbian and queer historical fiction.

Interestingly, as I elaborate on in my analysis of Hayes, many historical novels that are heavily steeped in lesbian-feminist theory contain explicit representations of genitally-based sexual interactions between women. It is my hope that recuperating and recirculating lesbian(-feminist) historical novels that are out-of-print or have a small distribution will foster more complex understandings of lesbian-feminist arguments, and thereby challenge simplifications of this movement.

Even though Hayes is a prolific author who has been writing for over two decades, her novels have received no scholarly attention. In contrast, Winterson and Waters are not only celebrated within academia but also have a wide readership beyond the academic realm.<sup>8</sup> Winterson is “one of a very few ‘out’ lesbian writers to achieve a mass readership” (Morrison 1), and, as Stefania Ciocia notes, the fact that Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith* have been made into BBC television serials, “perhaps gives us the exact measure of their popularity with an audience beyond academia and literary circles” (4). As I consider Hayes’s writing to be undervalued, my decision to

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<sup>8</sup> There are many possible reasons for the disparity between Winterson and Waters’s critical and popular reception and that of Hayes. Hayes publishes with small lesbian presses; her early novels were published with Naiad Press and her later novels have been published with Bella Books. In contrast, Winterson’s *The Passion* is published by Vintage Books and Waters’s *Fingersmith* is published by the established women’s press Virago. Thus, Winterson and Waters receive wider dissemination and more critical attention. Notably, while Hayes’s novels are marketed by Bella Books as romantic fiction, Winterson and Waters are rarely described as authors of romance novels even though love is central to the plots of both *The Passion* and *Fingersmith*. As outlined in my introduction, the contemporary dominance of queer theory and postmodern literature presumably also informs the celebration of authors like Winterson and Waters over Hayes.

The lack of awareness of Hayes’s writing reveals one of the negative consequences of contemporary denigrations of lesbian-feminism and historical “realism.” Interestingly, new popular media may increase readership and academic awareness of less critically acclaimed authors. For instance, I learned about Hayes’s writing when searching through lists of lesbian historical fiction on Amazon.com. As Hayes is included in lists that also reference more celebrated authors like Winterson and Waters, this online community of readers works to even out the hierarchy between more and less critically acclaimed authors.

analyze two of her novels while only looking at one novel by both Waters and Winterson in this chapter reflects an attempt to redress the discrepancy in critical reception of these authors' novels.

## **II. Penny Hayes's Explicit Eroticization of "Woman-Loving" Relationships in *Grassy Flats* (1992)**

As *Grassy Flats* was published while queer theory was gaining theoretical dominance, this novel — which is arguably the most didactically lesbian-feminist novel in Hayes's repertoire — may be read as a lesbian-feminist challenge to queer theory. Readers may find the highly erotic and explicit depiction of same-sex desire in *Grassy Flats* surprising because of the insidiousness of the myth of the asexual lesbian-feminist. While it is true that some historical fiction that was written during the height of the lesbian-feminist movement only alludes to sexual acts between women or describes these acts using highly idealizing language, the graphic depictions of "lesbian" desire in Hayes's lesbian(-feminist) historical fiction make her novels read, at times, like lesbian erotica which suggests that interpretations of lesbian-feminists as "anti-sex" and "anti-porn" are homogenizing and hyperbolic.<sup>9</sup>

Published in 1992 — after the height of the lesbian-feminist movement and the establishment of sex-radical feminism, and during the beginning of queer theory — *Grassy Flats* demonstrates the continuance of lesbian-feminist ideas after the end of this movement. The tension that exists in this novel between idealizing "lesbian" sex as

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to the novels by Hayes that I discuss in this chapter, see also the explicit sex scenes in Hayes's *Montana Feathers* (1990) (117-121), *Now and Then* (1996) (86-90), and *Omaha's Bell* (1999) (19-20).

gentle and safe, and depicting both pain and pleasure as central to passionate sexual connection reflects an incorporation of understandings of lesbianism offered by theorists of all three of these approaches. Yet I maintain that *Grassy Flats* is most aptly described as lesbian(-feminist) historical fiction since it reinforces and disseminates lesbian-feminist celebrations of egalitarian “woman-loving” relationships while providing powerful critiques of compulsory heterosexuality and the heterosexual ideal; however, Hayes’s incorporation of lesbian-feminist, sex-radical and queer ideas suggests the difficulty of establishing clear-cut and fixed distinctions between different types of historical fiction.

Hayes’s explicit depictions of sex between women contrast with many other lesbian(-feminist) historical novels.<sup>10</sup> For instance, in Nevada Barr’s novel *Bittersweet* (1984), sex between her protagonists Sarah and Imogene/Karl is only mentioned in passing. Sarah tells Imogene, ““You’ve always been my teacher; teach me to make love to you”” (225). The two women kiss and the passage ends by stating “Sarah felt her heart lifting, light as a dry desert cloud. / Imogene felt as though she had finally reached home” (225). Although, as I elaborate below, such descriptions of “lesbian” sex as both liberating and comforting are also apparent in Hayes’s novels, Hayes simultaneously provides graphic depictions of sexual intimacy between women and also shows how sex can (inadvertently) cause pain. While Jeannine Allard’s novel *Légende* (1984) makes more detailed references to sexual touching between women than *Bittersweet*, Allard also

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<sup>10</sup> An exception to this claim is seen in Sarah Aldridge’s writing which also contains explicit sex scenes between women, although these scenes are often shorter and less detailed than those in Hayes’s novels. See, for instance, *Madame Aurora* (1983) (37, 86, 89-90), *Cytharea’s Breath* (1976) (19, 27, 167), *All True Lovers* (1978) (135, 157-159).

does not provide explicit depictions of these encounters. When describing her relationship with Philippa, Aurélie states:

I would trace the outline of her profile with my finger, and lean over her and kiss her, my hair trailing all about us. And we would hold each other in the firelight, and sometimes *it* would be passionate, and sometimes *it* would be filled with tenderness, but the love was always there, spun strong and golden between us, holding us and linking us, even when we were far from each other. (emphasis added 116)

Notably, although sex is alluded to in this passage, “it” remains unnamed. While Aurélie mentions the passion that sometimes accompanies “it,” she foregrounds gentle kissing and touching and the love that connects her to her partner. Thus, similar to Barr, Allard also emphasizes romantic love over sexual connection.

While sex between women in *Grassy Flats* is often idealized — as is apparent when Hayes describes a kiss between her protagonists, Aggie and Nell, as “lips blending together like the petals of a budding flower” (98) — rather than solely depicting sex as a gentle expression of love, Hayes also highlights the rawer side of sexual pleasure. Her depictions of “lesbian” sex thus differ from authors like Ellen Frye who provides a highly idealized and metaphorical depiction of sex between her protagonist, Lykaina, and Sappho in *The Other Sappho* (1989). Frye writes:

They kissed. The flowers fell from their garlands, making a bright halo around their two heads. Gowns cast off, the two smooth brown bodies moved into one another. Like the predawn glow of the eastern sky, a fire spread slowly over Lykaina’s body until the flames were licking her everywhere. The fire grew hotter and hotter. Finally the soft center exploded. (118)

Although Lykaina’s rising passion and orgasm are apparent in this scene, Frye’s highly poetic and abstract description of sexual intimacy makes it unclear whether this

encounter involves genital touching and/or penetration. This scene is described in such an idyllic way that sex becomes purified of all difficulties, pain and awkwardness, and thus it is fitting that the women in this scene are likened to angels.

The descriptions of sexual intimacy between women in these novels by Barr, Allard and Frye affirm what many may expect from lesbian(-feminist) historical fiction: namely, a deemphasizing of sex, especially genital touching and penetration, and, rather, a greater focus on love and companionship. Interestingly, Hayes's novels which offer graphic depictions of sex between women contain far more numerous and overt lesbian-feminist messages about heteropatriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality than the above mentioned novels. While disseminating many central lesbian-feminist beliefs, *Grassy Flats* immediately foregrounds sex between women as readers are, in fact, introduced to Aggie and Nell while they are having sex.<sup>11</sup> Describing Aggie's orgasm, Hayes writes that "Aggie felt as if her heart soared out of her chest, bounced off the walls of the room, traveled through the open window, and reached the stars before returning to the earth to slam headlong back into her body" (17). As reflected in the "soaring" of Aggie's heart, in this novel "lesbian" sex is depicted as a freeing experience that helps women escape from the struggles of everyday life. Yet the description of Aggie's heart "slamming" back into her body destabilizes the gentleness associated with the lesbian-feminist sexual ideal. That Aggie's heart both "soars" out of her chest and "slams" back into her body implies that love and "fucking" are not incompatible.

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<sup>11</sup> While *Grassy Flats* has fewer sex scenes than most of Hayes's other novels, these scenes are just as erotic and explicit as in her other narratives. Rather than being related to their lesbian-feminist beliefs, the lack of sex in Aggie and Nell's relationship is circumstantial, deriving from the stress of trying to survive as two women living independent of men in 1937 in the sexist and homophobic community of Grassy Flats.

Hayes's use of sadomasochistic imagery further disrupts the idealization of gentle "lesbian" sexual encounters. She writes that, after orgasming, Aggie "could still feel searing heat racing up and down her inner thighs like hot branding irons being swiftly dragged along her flesh" (17). In addition to establishing a link between pleasure and pain, this "branding" of Aggie during sex implies that there is an ownership dynamic between these two women, and thereby complicates the lesbian-feminist tendency to critically contrast heterosexual relationships and especially marriage — which were believed to encourage the ownership and enslavement of women — with egalitarian lesbian dynamics.<sup>12</sup>

Although Nell and Aggie have a "woman-loving" relationship, depictions of the sexual encounters between them involve not only genital touching but also penetration. Hayes writes that "Nell *thrust* her tongue into her lover. Aggie felt an ocean wash over her, electrically charged pleasure, wave after wave of *giving* from her *cherished* Nell. Her climax *hit hard, harder* still because of the long time since she and Nell had last made love" (emphasis added 97-98). Hayes combines an idealizing depiction of Aggie's multiple orgasm — which is likened to an ocean wave that is "given" to her by her "cherished" lover — with a less romanticized description of Nell "thrusting" her tongue into Aggie. Rather than eroticizing tenderness, this scene highlights the violence of pleasure as is apparent in the description of Aggie's orgasm as "*hitting hard.*" Moreover, the use of the term "thrusting" to describe oral sex disrupts the notion that cunnilingus —

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<sup>12</sup> For such critiques of marriage and heterosexuality see, for instance, Monique Wittig's *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* and Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence."

which is often associated with tender, lesbian love making — is inherently gentler than penetrative intercourse. As Aggie and Nell, who make many lesbian-feminist statements, are anachronistically depicted as lesbian-feminist figures, this sex scene challenges understandings of lesbian-feminists as being opposed to penetration. Considering the widespread association of lesbianism with oral sex, it is significant that Nell penetrates Aggie with her tongue rather than, say, a dildo.<sup>13</sup> Hayes's decision to encompass this penetration within the realm of oral sex reflects the lesbian-feminist idealization of modes of sexual expression that challenge the heterosexual norm of penis in vagina sexual intercourse and offers readers an alternative type of penetration that may be read as decidedly lesbian.

Whereas in *Grassy Flats*, “lesbian” sex is depicted as a highly intimate means of two women consolidating their love, “heterosexual” sex destroys women's desire and love of men. The denigration of heterosexual sex in this novel serves to elevate “lesbianism” and reflects lesbian-feminist attempts to counteract homophobic beliefs about the perversity of lesbians by establishing a counter-hierarchy. After Aggie and Nell catch Hank — a man who is unemployed during the Depression — trying to steal their chickens, they blackmail him in order to get him to work on their farm. Hank and Clara thus move in with Aggie and Nell who nurture and support Clara while she is pregnant, and protect her from Hank — a violent figure who uses physical, verbal and sexual abuse to control Clara.

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to note here that the emphasis placed on oral sex in depictions of lesbianism encourages ignorance regarding the diverse sexual practices among lesbians. I do not want to reinscribe this homogenization of lesbian sex but, rather, reveal that *Grassy Flats* evokes this association in order to show that certain forms of penetration may be marked as lesbian.

Clara's description of sex with Hank positions heterosexual sex as not only devoid of pleasure for women but also as grotesque. After Hank abandons Clara while she is pregnant, she reflects on their last sexual encounter, noting that "he rode her like a dog, panting and slobbering over her back, his rough calloused hands painfully pinching her heavy breasts hanging loose in her gown, his hips ramming against her bottom [...] he said 'This is gotta last me for a while, honey. Uh, uh, uh...'" (150). This unflattering description of heterosexual sex as male-dominated, unfulfilling and painful for Clara denigrates heterosexual relations in order to elevate lesbian sex as more respectful, enjoyable and mutually fulfilling. Yet, interestingly, Hayes's use of the term "ramming" in this scene establishes a link between heterosexual and homosexual sex in this narrative as it reflects her earlier uses of the terms "slamming" and "thrusting" when describing sex between Aggie and Nell. Hayes thus distinguishes between the relationship dynamics of Hank and Clara, and Nell and Aggie not by describing heterosexual sex as necessarily rougher than homosexual sex but, rather, by depicting the former as devoid of love and unfulfilling for women. As Clara's sexual encounter with Hank is depicted as solely painful, it differs from Aggie's experience of painful pleasure.

Hayes disrupts linear conceptions of history by depicting various female characters who hold "lesbian-feminist" beliefs in 1937, long before the establishment of the lesbian-feminist movement.<sup>14</sup> While the disparate depictions of lesbian and

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<sup>14</sup> Like all historical fiction, *Grassy Flats* calls for a double reading practice that requires readers to maintain an awareness of the time period in which the novel takes place as well as when the novel was written. Considering that this novel is set in 1937 — well before the rise of the lesbian-feminist movement in the late 1960s — the lesbian-feminist statements in *Grassy Flats* seem temporally anachronistic. This historical anachronism is important not only because it encourages complex reading practices, but also



heterosexual sex and relationships in *Grassy Flats* celebrate the value of same-sex dynamics, Hayes's conflation of heterosexuality with abuse may promote the myth of the man-hating lesbian and inspire violent disidentifications with the "lesbian" characters in this novel. For instance, when explaining to Aggie and Nell that Hank is gone, Clara tells them that "he...used me last night" to which Aggie replies "Men use women all the time" (152). This sexual act is not only another manifestation of Hank's abusive and selfish nature, but becomes *the* symbol of the destructiveness of this male-dominated relationship, and thereby reflects the lesbian-feminist description of sexual abuse as the culmination of heteropatriarchy. Aggie's description of heterosexuality as (ab)use runs the risk of alienating readers who may find this depiction of heterosexual relationships reductive and/or offensive. Although this harsh critique of heterosexuality is extreme and generalizing, it is difficult to entirely dismiss Aggie's angry statement because of the context out of which it arises: Aggie's animosity is in direct response to Hank — who is an extremely abusive figure — abandoning his wife while she is pregnant. Hayes thereby encourages readers to contextualize lesbian-feminist theories and recognize that these analyses derive from women's lived experiences of oppression.

### **III: Mixed Messages: Power, Desire and Love in Penny Hayes's *Yellowthroat* (1988)**

Many of Hayes's historical novels that provide didactically lesbian-feminist critiques of compulsory heterosexuality and heteropatriarchy also link power imbalances between women to the erotic, and thereby reflect queer representations of same-sex

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because it counters the linear progressive notion that ideas that were central to the lesbian-feminist movement have only existed since the late 1960s.

desire. Hayes's novel *Yellowthroat* — published in 1988 during the latter half of the lesbian-feminist movement and before the beginning of queer theory — provides an in-depth examination of power struggles between women. Consequently, *Yellowthroat* reflects the difficulty of translating the ideal of egalitarianism into practice, even in works of fiction: this novel vacillates between representing lesbianism in terms of cooperative, “woman-loving” dynamics, on the one hand, and depicting sexual desire between women as aggressive and, at times, exploitative, on the other. Hayes's ambivalent depiction of power in this novel seemingly reflects the influence of both lesbian-feminist and sex-radical thinking on her writing. While Hayes, like sex-radicalists, eroticizes power, her depiction of women manipulating and hurting each other shows the danger of uncritically celebrating power imbalances, and thereby conveys a lesbian-feminist wariness toward a full embracing of “polarities such as ‘top’ and ‘bottom’” (Faderman, *Odd Girls* 260).

By revealing that “queer” views of same-sex eroticism existed before the rise to prominence of queer theory, *Yellowthroat* points to the role that sex-radical feminism played in the “transition” from lesbian-feminism to queer theory. This novel thus encourages increased awareness of the sex-radical feminist movement that is often overshadowed by queer theory and ignored in discussions about the links between lesbian-feminism and queer theory. The sex wars of the early 1980s, which involved heated debates among feminists regarding “bisexuality, sado-masochism, pornography, butch/fem, transvestism, prostitution and intergenerational sex” (Jagose 64), were central to the formation of queer theory. Lesbian-feminists “felt betrayed and furious” (Faderman 250) when sex-radical feminists — “some of who emerged out of lesbian-

feminism” (249) — (re)claimed sexual power imbalances. The sex-radicals argued that “until women are free to explore their own sexuality any way they wish, they will never be truly free” (250).

The plot of this novel establishes a power differential between Margarita, a Mexican bandit living in the Old West, and Julia, a white Anglo who is Margarita’s victim and, later, her captive. The racial difference between Margarita and Julia contributes to the tension in this relationship as Margarita tries to resist her desire for Julia because she holds much animosity toward Anglos. Margarita becomes a bandit in order to get revenge on white Anglos because her husband Seth — a white American man — was killed by Anglo men who disapproved of his interracial relationship with a Mexican woman.<sup>15</sup> Margarita first encounters Julia when robbing her stagecoach and later she kidnaps Julia, who is known for her doctoring abilities, in order to save Bill, one of the men in her gang who is dying from a gunshot wound.

Although circumstances establish Margarita’s power over Julia, Hayes qualifies Margarita’s control by depicting Julia as strong and fearless. While Margarita is terrified of Julia because Julia knows that Margarita robbed her stagecoach and the town’s bank, Julia shows no fear of Margarita, sarcastically asking her as she is being kidnapped, ““And now, do you bind and gag me?”” (68). Considering that Julia later expresses an intense and aggressive sexual desire for Margarita, this question may be read as a

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<sup>15</sup> Margarita’s wariness toward Julia reveals that tensions in interracial same-sex relationships may be informed by histories of racist persecution, an issue I discuss further in my analysis of Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* in my second chapter. Another one of Hayes’s novels, *Kathleen O’Donald* (1994), examines the way that histories of racial oppression can inhibit women’s relationships. The open hostility of Hayes’s Irish protagonist Kathleen toward her future lover, Rose, an Englishwoman that she meets while on the boat journey to immigrate to New York in the early 1900s provides a powerful commentary on the enduring trauma that results from histories of colonization.

sexually suggestive invitation rather than just a sarcastic comment. Whereas Julia is generally represented as the sexually dominant figure in this relationship, her masochistic offering up of her body to Margarita's control suggests that she wants to be sexually dominated by Margarita.

While Julia appears to submit to Margarita's power by allowing Margarita to tell her what to do and inviting Margarita to tie her up, Julia simultaneously asserts her agency by highlighting her control over the situation. When staying overnight at Julia's house, Julia tells Margarita to put her gun away, stating "'I'm not going anywhere until you tell me to, and no one is coming by that I know of. If they do, I'll take care of it'" (70). Considering the sadomasochistic undertone of their interactions, this scene implies that bottoms in S/M encounters retain agency, and thereby undermines lesbian-feminist critiques of S/M as an exploitative and woman-hating practice.<sup>16</sup> Yet Hayes simultaneously provides a powerful lesbian-feminist commentary since, although Margarita possesses a phallic weapon, Hayes foregrounds Julia's strength, and thereby demonstrates that women need not appropriate the phallus in order to be powerful. This indirect critique of the phallus reflects the lesbian-feminist rejection of dildos as many lesbian-feminists consider this appropriation of the phallus to be unnecessary and also view penetration to be a male-centred form of sexuality.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Jeffreys's argument that sadomasochism is a product of heteropatriarchal violence and that lesbians who participate in S/M practices are not only duped by heteropatriarchy but are also abusive toward other women (*The Lesbian Heresy* 46). She productively highlights the need to interrogate what consent to sadomasochism means in heteropatriarchal societies that naturalize women's passivity and abuse of their bodies. Yet, by implying that it is impossible for women to actually consent to partake in S/M practices, Jeffreys problematically conflates S/M with abuse.

Although Julia retains power when she is Margarita's captive, when they meet up with Sam, the member of Margarita's gang who insisted that she find a doctor for Bill, Margarita becomes Julia's protectress as she works to shield her from Sam's wrath. When Sam tells Margarita to either tie Julia to her bed or have her sleep where he sleeps, Margarita responds by threatening to kill Bill and yelling, "'Julia will not be kept *tied like an animal*, you bastard. And by God, we will not sleep in here — ever'" (emphasis added 85). Margarita revolts against not only Sam's mistreatment of Julia, but also his attempt to interfere with the relationship she and Julia are developing. Julia's desire for Margarita to dominate her contrasts with Margarita's refusal to tie Julia up because she sees this as a dehumanizing act. Julia and Margarita's different approaches to same-sex eroticism thereby reflect the tension in *Yellowthroat* between embracing the erotic nature of power imbalances and disavowing the presence of power in female same-sex relationships.

While Margarita's symbolic rejection of power works to reinstate the lesbian-feminist view that same-sex relationships between women are egalitarian, ironically, she replaces the hierarchy between assailant and captive with another hierarchy — that of hero and victim — when she expects gratitude from Julia for "saving" her from Sam. Margarita internalizes her role as Julia's protectress to such a degree that she is shocked when Julia asks her, "'What would you do if I ran away from you while Sam's gone?'" (99). Margarita responds, "'Why would you do that? I've done a lot for you — helped you'" (99). Julia scoffs at this comment, telling Margarita, "'I *am* a captive, remember? Not a visitor. You didn't have to help me'" (99). Whereas Margarita expects Julia to appreciate the protection she has offered her, Julia resists Margarita's attempt to position

her as a victim and Margarita as her saviour. Rather than fully rejecting the hierarchy that exists between them, Margarita works to replace an explicitly oppressive dynamic with one that is more celebratory in order to win Julia's indebtedness and dissuade her from leaving. Considering that this move reflects the lesbian-feminist establishment of counter-hierarchies, it indirectly signals that although lesbian-feminists critique power imbalances, ironically, lesbian-feminist theory which tries to reverse sexist and homophobic hierarchies is heavily reliant upon power differentials. The fact that Margarita continues to operate within a hierarchy sends the "queer" message that although we may try to reject power imbalances, they cannot be so easily negated.

*Yellowthroat* provides a critical commentary on both the negative consequences of repressing one's sexual desires as well as the potentially disturbing nature of same-sex intimacy. While Julia is being held captive, Margarita watches Julia sleep, desiring "to take her in her arms and comfort her seeming vulnerability" (71). Margarita admires Julia's naked body and has to restrain herself from "reach[ing] down and caress[ing] that softness" (81). She does not understand her desire for Julia, thinking "There was something she yearned to do, and the way she felt and what she was thinking as she continued to stare at Julia's body was alien to her" (81). The foreignness of this desire implies that Margarita's love for her dead husband, Seth, was not coupled with intense sexual attraction. Margarita decides to tend to Julia's wounds while she sleeps and the guilt that she feels when Julia wakes to find "Margarita caressing her thigh" (82) makes

her realize what her own intention had been. She had been touching the woman sexually. *Sexually!* She had realized it the moment Julia had asked what she was doing. Margarita could feel her face searing with embarrassment. She had been after Julia the way men go after women. (emphasis original 83)

The shame that Margarita feels alludes not only to her understanding that she sexually took advantage of Julia while she was asleep but also to Margarita's feeling that this same-sex desire is somehow wrong. Although Hayes highlights the power imbalance at work in this scene by likening Margarita's lust to "the way men go after women," she carefully differentiates between same-sex and opposite-sex dynamics throughout *Yellowthroat*. Margarita reflects that her actions were not really like those of a man since "Her touch had been soft, gentle, not pinching and grabbing the way she had been grabbed dozens of times by men. She had been very kind with Julia. Men hurried. She hadn't hurried!" (83). In her attempt to emphasize her tenderness and difference from men, Margarita sounds suspiciously like a rapist trying to excuse her actions. Margarita's reference to not "hurrying" links this erotic touching to sexual intercourse and the desperate tone of her attempt to convince herself that she did not sexually take advantage of Julia weakens her claim that her intent was innocent.

While Margarita internalizes the feminine ideal and subsequently normalizes sexual passivity in women, Julia openly and aggressively desires Margarita, and thus Julia may be read (anachronistically) as a sex-radical figure. Margarita's discomfort with the intensity of Julia's passion is apparent when she reflects that she is "not quite able to adjust to this side of her lover, and unsure whether she liked it or not [...Julia] just didn't look the type to be so forward — but then what exactly did a forward woman lover look like?" (137). In response to Margarita's discomfort, Julia states "What difference does it make if I'm aggressive or not, as long as you like what I do and I don't hurt you?" (137).

While this assertion evokes the sex-radical feminist and queer critique of celebrations of sexual egalitarianism for inhibiting passion and pleasure between women, the sex scene that follows this conversation examines the fine line that exists between consent to sexual aggressiveness and sexual exploitation.

Hayes legitimizes lesbian-feminist concerns about power imbalances in sexual relationships between women in her depiction of Julia's sexual assault of Margarita. While having sex, Margarita asks Julia to both "Stop" and "wait" (139). Hayes writes, "Julia either didn't hear or deliberately paid no heed as she continued to manipulate Margarita, sliding a finger in...out...in...out..." (139). Julia tells Margarita "Stop fighting me [...] You love me and you know it. Why do you fight me?" (139). While the use of the terms "manipulation" and "fighting" position this sexual encounter as a rape, Margarita's resistance is represented as resulting, at least in part, from her sexual repression: Margarita "fights" Julia because she has internalized homophobic beliefs about the superiority and naturalness of opposite-sex relations. Not heeding Margarita's resistance, Julia brings "her wildly to another climax and then a third, and a fourth" (139). Subsequently, Margarita forgets "her earlier resistance to Julia and seized her with near madness as passion continued to possess her" (139). Julia's sexual aggressiveness is thus depicted as "curing" Margarita, at least temporarily, from her tendency to repress her sexual passion and same-sex desires.

While this complex sex scene alludes to the ways that internalized homophobia and sexism may inhibit sexual pleasure, it also highlights the devastating consequences of women becoming so invested in reclaiming sexual aggressiveness that they fail to listen



to their partners. Even if we allow that Margarita's resistance to Julia arises out of sexual repression, Julia nonetheless violates Margarita by not "stopping" or "waiting" when Margarita asks her to. Margarita's multiple orgasms show readers that even though women's bodies may respond to forced sexual contact, this "pleasure" does not erase the sexual abuse that has occurred. Hayes's depiction of Margarita initially struggling against Julia and eventually succumbing to her repressed desires plays on, and indirectly critiques, the convention of excusing rape by depicting those who are raped as frigid women who do not know what they really want. This scene shows not only that sexual assault can occur between two women but also how such abuse may be disturbingly excused by describing it as a cure for homophobic sexual repression.

Moreover, Margarita experiences sex as a means by which Julia imprisons her in this relationship. After this troubling sexual encounter, Margarita returns to her previous state of feeling "trapped, forgetting that just moments before she had thought she could not live without Julia. Was it only the act of love itself, then, that made Julia so attractive to her? Considering all the men she had been with, it was best with Julia" (140).

Although, like in *Grassy Flats*, Hayes positions sex between women as more pleasurable than "heterosexual" sex, she constructs this pleasure as a potential trap by demonstrating that sex can be used to exploit and manipulate within female same-sex relationships. This scene thereby reveals the dangerousness of Margarita's belief that "a woman would never hurt another woman, as Bill — and other men at times — had hurt her; not deliberately — not knowingly" (29). Julia's recognition of Margarita's resistance to the sexual encounter described above — as is apparent when she questions why Margarita insists on "fighting"

her — suggests that she deliberately and “knowingly” hurts Margarita. Hayes thus reveals the negative consequences of idealizing relationships and sex between women as egalitarian and safe.<sup>17</sup>

Julia’s sexual aggressiveness suggests that, while women should be able to freely express their passion, it is vital that celebrations of women’s sexual liberation not be used to excuse sexual assault. This sex scene mediates between sex-radical feminist and queer reclamations of sexual aggression, on the one hand, and lesbian-feminist critiques of power imbalances in sexual relations, on the other. *Yellowthroat* thereby shows not only the ability of writers to be influenced by multiple theories but, also, to bring these seemingly disparate positions into dialogue with each other in order to disseminate complicated and powerful political commentaries about same-sex dynamics.

#### **IV: What’s Sex Got To Do With It?: Jeanette Winterson’s Ironic Depiction of Passion in *The Passion* (1987)**

Whereas Hayes’s novels disseminate many didactically lesbian-feminist messages while also explicitly depicting sexual pleasure between women, sex between women is notably absent in Winterson’s novel *The Passion* (1987) which is set during the early nineteenth century in Russia and Venice. Although written before the ascendancy of

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<sup>17</sup> While Margarita is sexually abused by Julia, Margarita’s strategic and temporary use of Julia to gain financial security undermines understandings of Margarita as completely victimized in this relationship. Margarita is uncertain about her feelings for Julia and knows that she will eventually end their relationship (194). Although Margarita constructs her decision not to tell Julia that she is going to leave her as a selfless attempt to spare Julia’s feelings, her decision to stay with Julia until she has enough money “to rebuild her life” (194) reveals that she is using Julia. Margarita’s assertion that she must finally be “truthful” reflects her awareness that by not telling Julia that she has no place in Margarita’s future, Margarita has essentially been lying to Julia throughout their relationship.

queer theory in the academy, Winterson's depictions of gender and sexual desire as multiple and shifting are decidedly "queer." Yet she deviates from the sex-radical feminist and queer investment in "resexualizing" lesbianism since she does not depict "lesbian" sex in this narrative. Sexual passion, in *The Passion*, belongs primarily to an abstract realm of feeling; by only alluding to sex, Winterson's novel foregrounds the emotional experience of passionate love rather than its physical manifestations, and thereby reflects the lesbian-feminist privileging of affective connections between women. The romanticizing and highly poetic rhetoric that Winterson employs — as is seen in her lyrical descriptions of Villanelle's relationship with the woman who both figuratively and literally steals her heart — works to highlight the power of affective female bonds. Yet while *The Passion* emphasizes love over genitally-based sexual encounters, Winterson does not uncritically idealize emotional connection between women but, rather, provides a queer commentary on the destructive potential of "lesbian" love.

Many of Hayes's novels instate a linear narrative of sexual progression whereby the "lesbian" protagonists have relationships with men until they recognize their "true" same-sex desires that are positioned as more powerful and fulfilling than their "heterosexual" relationships. In contrast, the more fluid and unstable desires of Winterson's characters reflect postmodern, queer understandings of sexuality. Winterson, who has been described as a "queer postmodernist" (Morrison par. 7), challenges understandings of the subject's sexual development in terms of linear progress by validating attraction to both men and women. *The Passion* implies that "the search for clear-cut distinctions where gender is concerned is futile" (Doan 149) and reflects the

queer theoretical tendency to interrogate “the binaristic thinking that has traditionally characterized sexual politics, in particular such familiar oppositions as heterosexuality/homosexuality, masculine/feminine, [and] sex/gender” (Hanson par. 1).

Whereas in Hayes’s novels same-sex attraction is often the source of internal turmoil, in *The Passion*, Villanelle and Henri accept their bi-sexual interests without question. Villanelle asserts, “I am pragmatic about love and have taken my pleasure with both men and women, but I have never needed a guard for my heart. My heart is a reliable organ” (65). Villanelle’s heart only fails to be reliable in her relationship with the Queen of Spades — the woman who steals her heart. While validating bi-sexual attraction, Winterson’s depiction of Villanelle foregrounds love and desire between women, and thereby reinscribes the lesbian-feminist tendency to celebrate lesbianism over heterosexual dynamics. As Laura Doan asserts, “Winterson pursues her own peculiar vision of a lesbian-feminist political agenda” (138) through the use of postmodern literary techniques, and thereby reveals that lesbian-feminism “need not be at odds with postmodernism” (154). *The Passion*, in particular, demonstrates that postmodern writing and queer depictions of sexuality and gender may work together with lesbian-feminist politics in order to produce complex and politicized depictions of desire.

As Villanelle’s “queer” state of fluid sexual desire and gender expression is suspended while she experiences all consuming “lesbian” passion for the Queen of Spades, this novel implies that “lesbian” love problematically fixes sexuality and gender. After her lover leaves for Christmas with her husband, Villanelle asserts, “I thought I’d mind, but since the first few days, when my stomach and chest were full of stones, I’ve

been happy. Relieved almost. I've seen my old friends and walked by myself with almost the same-surefootedness that I used to" (78). Villanelle's "lesbian" love results in a loss of self, and thus distance from her lover helps Villanelle regain her confidence and independence. While with her lover, not only are Villanelle's desires mono-sexual rather than bi-sexual, but, after outing her biological sex to her lover, Villanelle stops cross-dressing in her female lover's presence.<sup>18</sup> While her lover is away, Villanelle reconnects with her queer state of being which she describes as "freedom." Villanelle reflects, "I flirt with waiters and gamblers and remember I enjoy that. I sing to myself and I bask in churches. Is this freedom delicious because rare? Is any respite from love welcome because temporary?" (79). As Villanelle uses the male designation of "waiters" instead of the female "waitresses," presumably some, if not all, of the "waiters and gamblers" that she flirts with are men or, possibly, cross-dressers. Thus, the Queen of Spades's absence allows Villanelle to reconnect with her attraction to men and/or masculinity, and thereby embody a more fluid sexual state.

Even though sex between women is not described in *The Passion*, Winterson highlights the power of same-sex desire, and thereby reveals that not knowing how same-sex passion was physically expressed in the past does not invalidate the existence of this

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<sup>18</sup> For a nuanced analysis of Villanelle's cross-dressing that relates to my discussion, in chapter two, of the problematics of reading cross-gender expression in terms of deception, see Doan's "Jeanette Winterson's Sexing the Postmodern" (148-151) as well as Vanessa Asensio's "Subversion of Sexual Identity in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*" (265, 268, 273, 274). As Villanelle is "a bisexual woman who cross-dresses as a man for money" (Asensio 268) as well as for her own amusement (273), *The Passion* implies that cross-dressing is a "performance" rather than being related to cross-gender identification.

desire.<sup>19</sup> When recounting her love story to Henri, Villanelle tells him, “It was a woman I loved and you will admit that is not the usual thing. I knew her for only five months. We had nine nights together and I never saw her again. You will admit that is not the usual thing” (104). Although the “nine nights” that these two women spent together were passionate and involved “touching” (105) that was presumably of a sexual nature, by not describing these encounters or labelling them “sexual,” Winterson signals the impossibility of knowing the “Truth” about “lesbian” eroticism in the past. Regardless of the fact that these women spend few nights together and thus, if they have sex, they do so infrequently and sporadically, Villanelle’s love and passion for the Queen of Spades remains unwavering not only during their relationship but for years afterwards.<sup>20</sup> By highlighting the ability of “lesbian” love and desire to persist regardless of the frequency or means of physical consummation, *The Passion* not only counters the notion that “lesbian” love is a passing phase but also supports the lesbian-feminist assertion that lesbianism is not solely about same-sex genital touching.

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<sup>19</sup> We should consider how the lesbian-feminist broadening of the definition of “lesbian” beyond sex may be useful in historical studies. For instance, this expanded definition allows for reading a wider range of historical figures and documents as being part of “lesbian” history. As Martha Vicinus maintains, “A more open definition of women’s sexual subjectivity, and of same-sex desire, will enable us [...] to retrieve a richer past” (58). Theorists such as Lillian Faderman, Jeffreys and Vicinus argue that it is difficult to know whether genital touching was part of same-sex relationships in the past due to the private and taboo nature of such encounters. Jeffreys aptly notes that “if we accept that proof of genital contact is required before we may include any relationship between two women in the history of lesbianism, then there is a serious possibility that we will end up with no lesbian history at all” (“Does it Matter” 214).

<sup>20</sup> While *The Passion* highlights Villanelle’s long-lasting love for the Queen of Spades, unlike in many lesbian(-feminist) historical novels, in Winterson’s novel, sexual desire is not necessarily an expression of love. Reflecting on kissing acrobats who are strangers to her, Villanelle states, “Now and again, one will dangle by the knees and snatch a kiss from whoever is standing below. I like such kisses. They fill the mouth and leave the body free. To kiss well one must kiss solely. No groping hands or stammering hearts. The lips and the lips alone are the pleasure. Passion is sweeter split strand by strand” (64). Whereas these purely sexual interactions leave the body free, in this novel love is, at times, depicted as an imprisonment of both the body and mind.

By privileging the affective rather than sexual manifestations of love, Winterson invites readers to fill in the sexual gaps in this narrative. In her analysis of Winterson's recent novel *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), Jago Morrison notes that, "Love is again and again figured here, not as a conjunction of fleshly bodies, but as a gift that transcends the erotic" (par. 23). Likewise, in his analysis of *The Passion*, Michael Wood notes that "The situation is without flesh [...] and pretty much without suspense, but not without passion or consequence. We fill the story in, not because stories are all we have but because this is one of the things stories happily invite us to do" (193). Whereas the explicit depictions of same-sex desire in Hayes's novels reflect a willingness to speculate about the form that women's erotic encounters took in the past, Winterson's choice not to provide detailed descriptions of such interactions highlights our inability to fully know the past. While it may seem that Winterson is rejecting historical sexual speculation, the lack of sexual description in *The Passion* encourages readers to fantasize about the sexual dynamic between Villanelle and her lover. Thus, Winterson — while avoiding speculation herself — indirectly promotes the use of speculative reading practices when reading not only this novel but also other historical texts.

While love between women in *The Passion* is depicted as powerful, it is also destructive as is seen in the power imbalance operating in Villanelle's relationship with the Queen of Spades, who both figuratively and literally steals Villanelle's heart. Years after this relationship ends, Villanelle returns to her lover's house with Henri in order to retrieve her heart. Henri does not believe Villanelle's story about her heart literally being stolen until he finds a throbbing jar inside the house of Villanelle's past lover. When he

gives the jar to Villanelle, Henri states:

I heard her uncork the jar and a sound like gas escaping. Then she began to make terrible swallowing and choking noises and only my fear kept me sitting at the other end of the boat, perhaps hearing her die. / There was quiet. She touched my back and when I turned round took my hand again and placed it on her breast. / Her heart was beating. / *Not possible*. / I tell you her heart was beating. (emphasis original 133)

Although Henri, who is in love with Villanelle, gives her back her heart, she seemingly remains unable to love him as anything other than a brother because her heart figuratively still belongs to another, and thus Winterson once again depicts “lesbian” love as undying (134). At the same time, Henri’s persistent love for Villanelle undermines tendencies to celebrate “lesbian” love over “heterosexual” love, and thus Winterson avoids the lesbian-feminist technique of offering a counter-hierarchy as a means of challenging homophobia. As Louise Horskjaer Humphries notes, “Villanelle’s love for the ‘Queen of Spades’ is neither presented as a political choice, nor as essentially different from Henri’s (unrequited) love for Villanelle” (7). Winterson undermines homophobic beliefs by likening lesbian love to heterosexual love, both of which are depicted as long-lasting yet ultimately painful and destructive.

In contrast to Hayes’s representation of love in *Grassy Flats* as providing women with strength and freeing them from daily struggles, in *The Passion* love causes strife and pain. Considering the association of passionate love with destruction in *The Passion*, Winterson’s title evokes the use of this term to refer not just to sexual desire but also to “physical suffering and pain” (“Passion” def. I). Although both Villanelle and Henri



gamble with their hearts and lose, they have significantly different perspectives on love.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to Villanelle who experiences freedom when her lover is away, Henri reflects that:

being free is not being powerful or rich or well regarded or without obligations but being able to love. To love someone else enough to forget about yourself even for one moment is to be free. The mystics and the churchmen talk about throwing off this body and its desires, being no longer a slave to the flesh. They don't say that through the flesh we are set free. That our desire for another will lift us out of ourselves more cleanly than anything divine. (168)

Whereas Villanelle loses herself and her heart through loving — a loss that is depicted as negative — Henri considers the loss of self caused by love and, more specifically, the passionate expression of love through the “flesh,” to be freeing. Yet, after being imprisoned in an insane asylum for killing Villanelle’s abusive husband the “meat man,” Henri, who is “*madly* in love” (emphasis added, Bengtson 23) with Villanelle, contradicts his earlier celebration of love as liberating by conflating passion with madness. He notes that if he were to be near Villanelle again, he would dissolve into tears and “never stop” (173) crying. Notably, Henri has no desire to leave the asylum because this prison protects him from Villanelle and the pain of continually experiencing his heart breaking.

Although Winterson’s depiction of Henri as gentle and kind undermines the lesbian-feminist convention of representing men as villainous figures who control and dominate women, *The Passion* also offers a powerful critique of male violence. Even though Villanelle is in love with the Queen of Spades, she eventually agrees to marry the

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<sup>21</sup> Villanelle reflects that “We gamble. Some do it at the gaming table, some do not. / You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play” (79). Christy Burns notes that “gambling is not merely a card game in *The Passion*, but also a metaphor for how one deals with the chanciness of love and desire” (par. 3). As this description of gambling with one’s heart emphasizes the “play,” Winterson implies that it is the thrill of the game that makes love alluring — love is desirable because of the experience not the outcome of the game which is often painful.

grotesque meat man, who exoticizes her because of her gender transgressions (69). Lost in memories of the woman she loves, Villanelle does not notice her future husband touching her; she states, “I hardly felt his hand along my leg, his fingers on my belly. Then I was reminded vividly of squid and their suckers and I shook him off shouting that I’d never marry him” (70). The likening of this man to a creature that lives below the water is significant considering Villanelle’s inability to swim. As Villanelle explains to Henri when he tips their boat and discovers that she cannot swim, she is a boatman’s daughter and, as “No boatman would end up like this” (137), she has no need to be able to swim. By comparing the abusive figure meat man to creatures from the underwater world, Winterson highlights his frightening otherworldly character.

Villanelle’s decision to marry the meat man even after he rapes her highlights the insidiousness of both compulsory heterosexuality and the virgin/whore dichotomy. The disturbing depiction of rape in *The Passion* provides a powerful critique of male abuse of female bodies and the way that women are socialized to accept this exploitation. In response to Villanelle’s resistance to his sexual advances, she notes that the meat man:

hit me then. Not hard but I was shocked. I’d never been hit before. I hit him back. Hard. / He started to laugh and coming towards me squashed me flat against the wall. It was like being under a *pile of fish*. I didn’t try to move, he was twice my weight at least and I’m no heroine. I’d nothing to lose either, having lost it already in happier times. / He left a stain on my shirt and threw a coin at me by way of goodbye. (emphasis added 70)

This scene highlights the naturalization of male access to women’s bodies. Villanelle’s assertion that she has “nothing to lose” excuses this rape and reinscribes the virgin/whore dichotomy by positioning the rape of women who are sexually active as not worthy of

complaint. Chloe Taylor Merleau notes that “As a fatherless, working-class woman, and moreover as a cross-dressed non-virgin who works in a casino, Villette [sic] counts for nothing, has no position from which to voice a complaint or even to feel damaged” (par. 26). While Villanelle’s “acceptance” of this sexual abuse suggests that she has internalized the notion that rape is an understandable punishment for women who are too sexual, her seeming indifference to abuse may also be read as a survival strategy — albeit one that is, ironically, self-destructive — that she has adopted in order to navigate a patriarchal society. Merleau asserts that “Perhaps the greatest mark of Villette’s [sic] social invisibility, of the degree to which violence to her body does not matter, even to herself, is that she very quickly decides to marry her rapist” (par. 26). Possibly more disturbing than reflecting an internalization of the virgin/whore dichotomy or the heterosexual ideal, Villanelle’s decision to marry this grotesque, abusive figure — who in his aggressiveness and monstrosity resembles Hank in *Grassy Flats* — suggests that the abuse that she has encountered has destroyed her will to resist oppression, and thus she has come to “accept” misogyny and heterosexuality as inevitable and unavoidable.

*The Passion’s* complex critique of sexism and misogyny reveals that literature may couple queer and postmodern representations of gender and sexuality as shifting and unstable with critical depictions of the material oppression that women experience in order to disseminate important critiques of patriarchy and internalized sexism.

McLaughlin, Casey and Richardson note that it is generally believed that “Queer writers explore the deconstruction and fluidity of transient identities and feminists explore the materiality of the body and the things done to women’s bodies such as rape and violence”

(3). The powerful critique of rape in *The Passion* demonstrates the tenuous nature of such dichotomous readings of queer theory and feminism. As Doan notes:

Fiction, for Winterson, is the site to interrogate, trouble, subvert, and tamper with gender, identity, and sexuality; her fiction is a serious invitation to readers to imagine the emancipation of 'normal' and 'natural' from the exclusive and totalizing domain of patriarchal and heterosexual authority. (154)

Thus, Winterson's *The Passion* is not just playfully postmodern and queer but also contains serious critiques of sexist oppression, and thereby troubles beliefs in a divide between postmodernism/queer theory and politics.

## **V. Sarah Waters's Critical Reclamation of Pornography in *Fingersmith* (2002)**

Sarah Waters's complex commentary on pornography in her queer historical novel *Fingersmith*, which is set in London in the 1860s, also troubles the divide between lesbian-feminist and queer theorizing. Her depiction of pornography highlights the ability of historical novels to eroticize power differentials while conveying concerns regarding possible exploitation in hierarchical relationships. *Fingersmith* foregrounds the erotic potential of power imbalances through its depiction of the ways that women may appropriate pornographic literature that is directed at a male audience and use these texts to their own ends. Yet, like *Yellowthroat*, *Fingersmith* depicts the potentially destructive effects of power differentials, as is seen when Waters's protagonists, Sue and Maud, manipulate, betray and hurt each other. By refusing to either fully denigrate or uncritically celebrate pornography, Waters disrupts the binary between anti-porn and pro-porn feminists — a binary that is often depicted as a struggle between lesbian- and

cultural-radical-feminists, on the one side, and sex-radical feminists and queer theorists, on the other.<sup>22</sup>

By examining both the productive and destructive ways that pornography may influence women's sexualities, *Fingersmith* provides a more nuanced engagement with pornography than is offered by theorists who are invested in the pro-porn/anti-porn dichotomy. Whereas anti-porn feminists tend to describe pornography as a form of sexist abuse and emphasize the importance of considering how and why women get into this industry, pro-porn feminists generally highlight the importance of women (re)claiming pornography and stress the difference between erotic fantasy and reality. While anti-porn feminists often depict sex workers as "victims" who need to be saved and enlightened, pro-porn feminists frequently evade providing sustained analyses of the (mis)treatment of sex workers within this industry.<sup>23</sup>

Waters rejects such dichotomous analyses of pornography in her novel *Fingersmith* in which she highlights both the productive potential and dangers of

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<sup>22</sup> Sex-radical feminists are not to be confused with cultural-radical-feminists, many of whom were highly critical of power imbalances in sexual relations.

<sup>23</sup> Lesbian anti-porn feminist, Sheila Jeffreys argues that "Before using women in the new lesbian sex industry it is important to think about how such a woman got into the industry. Was it through poverty, homelessness, child sexual abuse, drug use, through learning at the hands of men that the only way to get praise or status was to be sexually used?" (*The Lesbian* 42) While Jeffreys encourages careful consideration of the context in which sex work takes place and the power dynamics functioning in this industry, her assertion that lesbians who use or support the porn industry are "abusing" (43) other women indicates a failure to recognize the diverse reading practices and uses of pornography — for instance, many women use pornography and sexual fantasies of domination as a means of dealing with sexual abuse and reclaiming their sexualities. Jeffreys also problematically erases the agency of workers in this industry by positioning them as "victims" who need to be saved and enlightened by lesbian-feminists. Pro-porn feminist Pat(rick) Califia, on the other hand, provides a valuable critique of beliefs in a direct correlation between pornography and violence against women, but evades a discussion of the experiences of sex workers. His assertion that "I think that the only problem with pornography is that there's not enough of it, and the porn that does exist reflects the sexual fantasies of aging Catholic gangsters" (13) privileges audiences of pornography over workers in this industry.

pornography and power imbalances in relationships between women. Waters's description of a relationship developing between two women who are simultaneously conning each other clearly challenges egalitarianism. Richard — a con artist who is known to Sue as "Gentleman" because of his upper-class persona that he uses to try to seduce rich women, and thereby con them out of their inheritances — approaches Sue with an offer to partake in a con to steal Maud's money by getting her to secretly marry him. Sue agrees to leave home and play the role of Maud's maid in order to convince Maud to trust Richard. Once Maud and Richard elope, Sue and Richard plan to imprison Maud in an asylum and then collect her inheritance. Whereas Sue believes Maud to be an innocent, simple upper-class lady, in reality Maud is working with Richard to win her freedom from her uncle's patriarchal control. Maud intends to switch identities with Sue after marrying Richard and then imprison Sue in an asylum having convinced the doctors that Sue is actually Maud; subsequently, Maud will be able to live freely in London, having been given part of her inheritance that Richard will receive as her husband.

The con at the centre of *Fingersmith's* plot establishes a power struggle between Sue and Maud that arises out of their mutual desire for money and the freedom it affords women living in Victorian England. In her analysis of Waters's use of and deviation from the conventions of sensation fiction, Mariaconcetta Costantini asserts that Waters "aims at investigating the sociological causes of crime, which could prompt any individual to violate law without being constitutionally evil" (par. 35).<sup>24</sup> Although Maud

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, Waters's adoption of many of the conventions of sensation fiction may be partly responsible for her popularity since sensation fiction "was the literary rage in mid-nineteenth century Britain [...and today] is showing signs of popular resurgence" (Fantina and Harrison ix). The success of Waters's writing career suggests an apparent historical continuity in interest in sensational "themes such as

and Sue betray and manipulate each other, they do so in order to win freedom from restrictive social conditions, and thus the plot of *Fingersmith* highlights the limitations placed on women in the Victorian era. In *Fingersmith*, “the escape from bleak material conditions becomes a priority over any romantic considerations,” (Ciocia par. 13).

During the majority of this novel, both Maud and Sue privilege the con over their love for one another. While they reunite at the end of *Fingersmith* and Maud works to protect Sue’s feelings by shielding her from the truth about the way that her guardian, Mrs Sucksby, betrayed her, throughout most of this novel these two women are primarily invested in the con and each is prepared to — however reluctantly — imprison the other in an asylum in order to win her reward and freedom from sexist constraints.

Waters initially depicts pornography as a tool by which Maud’s uncle asserts his patriarchal authority. As a child, Maud comes to live with her uncle who collects and catalogues pornographic texts. He trains her through abusive methods to become his secretary and has her read passages from these texts to men who visit their home, Briar; consequently, Maud is well versed in various types of sexual contact, including sex between women.<sup>25</sup> When initially reading her uncle’s pornographic texts, Maud reflects, “The books fill me, at first, with a kind of horror: for it seems a frightful thing, that

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bigamy, illegitimacy, drug abuse, murder, inheritance scandals, and adultery” (ix). Yet, as Richard Fantina and Kimberly Harrison note, “today’s audiences of sensation narratives [...] are unlikely to be shocked by candid depictions of crime and sexuality” (ix). Thus, while these themes may still be captivating, Fantina and Harrison show that there are also differences in the ways that past and present readers respond to sensation fiction.

<sup>25</sup> Maud describes her abusive uncle as a “deranged” (184) man and believes that if it were not for his privileged gender and class he would be institutionalized. When Maud initially refuses to wear the gloves that function as a symbol of her oppression in this novel, her uncle hits her hands with metal beads while Mrs Stiles, his housekeeper, holds her wrists (187). Maud is shaken (189) and beaten (192-3) by Mrs Stiles who is depicted as an agent of patriarchy. Maud reflects, “My passions are met by punishments, each fiercer than the last. I am bound about the wrists and mouth. I am shut into lonely rooms, or into cupboards” (192).

children, in becoming women and men, should do as they describe—get lusts, grow secret limbs and cavities, be prone to fevers, to crises, seek nothing but the endless joining together of smarting flesh” (200). Maud’s initial horror when reading descriptions of the physical changes that are evoked by adult sexual desire reflects the lesbian-feminist critique of sexual encounters that are purely physical and lack emotional connection.

As Maud begins to experience desire, she gains an unwelcome understanding of these texts. She feels “restless” while she watches her maid, Barbara, sleeping and reflects upon the differences between the idealized “fair” female bodies that are described in her uncle’s books and Barbara’s “dark” body. Maud reflects, that Barbara’s legs “are dark with hair” and “the place between them—which I *know* should be neat, and fair—darkest of all” (emphasis added 200). Waters highlights the ability of pornographic texts to create “Truths” about women’s bodies and about what physical characteristics are sexually desirable in women. As *Fingersmith* critiques pornography for being male dominated and “filled with falsehoods” (201), this novel implies that pornographic literature may negatively influence women’s views of their bodies and sexual desires. Yet Waters reveals that readers of pornography may be attracted to both the ideal and the real since Maud’s desires are aroused by both the idealized female bodies that are described in pornographic literature as well as the female bodies that she encounters in her everyday life.

Not only does reading pornography increase same-sex lust in *Fingersmith* but, conversely, Maud’s “queer” desire for Sue brings her uncle’s pornographic texts to life. Maud reflects, “my uncle’s books are changed to me [...] I have supposed them dead.



Now the words—like the figures in the walls—start up, are filled with meaning. I grow muddled, stammer. I lose my place” (279). While pornography gains meaning for Maud once she begins to desire Sue, Maud is troubled by seeing her yearning reflected in these lowly texts; she notes, “I am ashamed to think that what I have supposed the secret book of my heart may be stamped, after all, with no more miserable matter than this” (280). Maud’s understanding of her “lesbian” love and desire as being tainted by its presence in her uncle’s pornographic literature reflects lesbian-feminist critiques of pornography for contaminating the purity and egalitarianism of same-sex desire (Jeffreys, *The Lesbian* 20).

While these texts help Maud recognize and act on her same-sex desire, Maud’s disturbing sexual manipulation of Sue is linked to her exposure to pornography, and thus Waters outlines both the productive and destructive potential of pornography. As Mark Llewellyn notes, the pornographic texts in Fingersmith “and the fictions they contain are both an education and a betrayal” (203). Although they are invested in destroying each other for personal gain, Maud and Sue end up falling in love. Maud’s power over Sue is established not only through the fact that Maud knows about Sue’s plan to imprison her in the asylum while Sue is unaware that Maud intends to steal her identity, but also through Sue’s role as Maud’s maid which affords them much intimacy while also heightening the taboo nature of their mutual love and desire. Maud’s position of power in her first sexual encounter with Sue is furthered by Maud’s exposure to pornography that has enlightened

her to “lesbian” possibilities.<sup>26</sup> Maud feigns sexual ignorance in order to manipulate Sue into having sex with her. She asks Sue to tell her ““what it is a wife must do, on her wedding-night,”” asserting that, “I am too ignorant even to know what it is I am ignorant of” (139). Maud strategically employs the notion that upper-class women are uninformed about sex in order to get Sue not just to tell her but also to show her what she will be expected to do on her wedding night.

Although Sue desires Maud, Sue shows no awareness of sex between women being a possibility before this encounter, and thus Maud “is a lot less sexually naïve than Sue” (Ciocia par. 12). Maud reflects, “at first, it is easy. After all, this is how it is done, in my uncle’s books: two girls, one wise and one unknowing” (281). Maud’s use of a traditional pornographic script in order to manipulate Sue into pleasuring her both evokes and shows the limitations of lesbian-feminist critiques of porn for inhibiting sexual creativity between women. In her critique of pornography, Jeffreys argues that during the early lesbian-feminist movement, “Lesbian sex was innovative, imaginative, self-taught, low-tech, did not cost any money or provide any sex industrialists with an income” (*The Lesbian* 20). While Waters’s depiction of Maud following a pornographic model in order to seduce Sue supports Jeffreys’s argument that pornography can limit women’s sexual creativity, this model also provides Maud with a means of expressing her desire, and thus

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<sup>26</sup> For the purposes of this section’s focus on pornography, I have chosen to concentrate on Maud’s description of her desire for Sue. Yet, as the first section of *Fingersmith* is narrated by Sue, readers are, like Sue, initially led to believe in Maud’s performance of innocence. Sue is unaware of Maud’s knowledge of the con and believes Maud to be kind and pure. She thus engages in sexual intimacy with Maud under false pretences and her description of sex with Maud is much more idealizing than Maud’s account. While Sue is recounting her sexual encounter with Maud in the first section of this novel, readers are also unaware of Maud’s history, and thus when Maud’s sexual manipulation of Sue is later outed readers may share in the sense of betrayal that Sue feels upon discovering that Maud was not sexually or otherwise innocent.

may be read as both limiting and useful. Llewellyn notes Maud's ambivalent relationship to pornography when he asserts that "The anger Maud feels toward the texts which have simultaneously opened up her understanding of her desire and have tainted her approach to other women is released when she slashes her uncle's priceless collection" (204). This violent act symbolizes her liberation not only from her uncle but also from the power that these male-dominated narratives have held over her, and, as I will examine in my analysis of the end of *Fingersmith*, her destruction of these texts allow her to eventually write within this literary genre from a distinctly female and "lesbian" position.

*Fingersmith* encourages readers to recognize the value of pornography since they are provided with access to a highly erotic sex scene because of Maud's familiarity with explicit descriptions of sexuality. Waters toys with readers by making it seem as if Maud will, like Sue, be too bashful to describe explicitly this sexual encounter. At the point where Sue begins to show Maud how Richard will touch Maud on her wedding night, Waters halts this description by ending the paragraph and beginning a new section (282). As Sue's earlier recounting of this sex scene ended in this way, readers are led to expect that Maud's break in describing this sexual encounter signals an end to this depiction of same-sex intimacy. Yet Waters continues her outline of this sexual encounter in the new section. Maud reflects that when Sue

puts up my nightgown and reaches between my legs, we both grow still. When her hand moves again, her fingers no longer flutter: they have grown wet, and slide [...] Now I begin to feel a longing so great, so sharp, I fear it will never be assuaged. I think it will mount, and mount, and make me mad, or kill me. (282)

Waters's linking of sex between women to madness and death emphasizes the destructive

potential of same-sex eroticism, and thereby departs from lesbian-feminist theories that generally stress the healing power of “woman-loving” sexual encounters.

Maud’s description of this sex scene reflects queer theorist Leo Bersani’s understanding of sexual pleasure in terms of “self-shattering.” Like Hayes, Waters reveals that sex involves a mingling of pain and pleasure as is seen when Sue “reaches” inside Maud until Maud feels that she is “breaking, shattering, bursting out of her hand” (283). Bersani argues that “the self which the sexual shatters provides the basis on which sexuality is associated with power” (218). He links the adoption of sexual positions of powerlessness with a “radical disintegration and humiliation of the self” (217). This break down of the self reflects processes such as masochism or suicide. Michael Snediker describes Bersani’s self-shattering as “a temporary figurative suicide, a moment’s disorganization within a field of otherwise intense regulation; or oppositely, an internalization of the destructive, shattering energies otherwise directed outward” (16). In *Fingersmith*, Maud’s experience of sexual pleasure temporarily shatters her investment in the con as she no longer feels that she can imprison Sue in an insane asylum in order to win her own freedom. This sexual connection thereby “disorganizes” Maud’s priorities and disrupts the “intense regulation” (16) of her relationship with Sue that is provided by this con. The disruptive power of sex that is apparent in the ability of this sexual encounter to shatter Maud’s future plans reflects the power of lesbian(-feminist) and queer historical fiction to shatter stereotypical views of lesbian-feminists and beliefs in a clear-cut divide between lesbian-feminism and queer theory.

Although Waters highlights the ability of women to manipulate and hurt each

other in *Fingersmith*, at the end of this novel Maud and Sue reunite. Sue falls ill after finding out that Mrs Sucksby, who raised Sue from infancy, was in actuality Maud's birthmother and the mastermind behind the elaborate con that led to Sue's imprisonment in a mental institution (533-534). As Sue realizes that Maud tried to shield her from this painful truth, she slowly lets go of the hatred that she has felt toward Maud since she and Richard had Sue incarcerated. Sue reflects:

I still wept, and cursed and twisted, when I thought of Mrs Sucksby and how she had tricked me; but I wept more, when I thought of Maud. For all this time I had had as it were a sort of dam about my heart, keeping out my love: now the walls had burst, my heart was flooded, I thought I should drown...My love grew level, though, as I grew well again. (535)

This description of the "bursting" of the dam around Sue's heart not only likens Sue's emotional reconnection with Maud to an orgasm but also reveals the self-shattering nature of not just sexual pleasure but also love which transforms Sue's hatred for Maud into affection. Yet love is also linked to death and destruction in *Fingersmith* as those who feel love may "drown" in this emotion. Although upon finding Maud in the library at Briar at the end of *Fingersmith*, Sue is overwhelmed by her love for her, she has another flash of hatred when she remembers that Maud is Mrs Sucksby's birth child (542). This hatred reveals that fragments of the shattered self may persist and erupt unexpectedly, and thus Sue's love for Maud is haunted by her past anger and feeling of betrayal.

While Sue is ready to resume their relationship, Maud hesitates because Sue does not know the truth about her background and present employment. Maud reads aloud passages from her uncle's pornographic books to make Sue understand how she was raised and the type of literature to which she has been exposed. Reflecting on their past

sexual experience, Sue exclaims, ““You knew it all [...] You said that you knew nothing, when all the time—”” (545). Although Maud responds, ““I did know nothing,”” and thereby attempts to excuse her manipulation of Sue by highlighting her sexual inexperience, Sue’s feeling that her heart “had shrunk so small and tight, it hurt” reveals that Sue’s love for Maud is almost once again destroyed by her discovery of this betrayal (545). It is only upon contemplating the way that Maud was used by her uncle that Sue begins once again to shed her pain and embrace her love for Maud. Waters thus shows the shifting nature of emotions and the fragility of love.

Waters concludes *Fingersmith* by depicting pornography once again as a motivating force in women’s sexual encounters. Maud explains to Sue that she now makes her living by writing pornographic literature and the novel ends with Maud “showing” Sue “the words she had written, one by one” (548). As this erotic literature arises out of Maud’s imagination and sexual fantasies, Waters problematizes the lesbian-feminist notion that pornography limits sexual creativity among “lesbians.” Llewellyn demonstrates wariness toward reading Maud’s appropriation of pornographic writing as a wholly positive or freeing act in his assertion that “It is debatable whether this reclaiming of a pornographic heritage is a liberation for the female character, or readers [...] [I]dentification with male-focused pornography might not be considered such a positive move” (204). Considering the many critiques of pornography offered in *Fingersmith*, it seems unlikely that Waters is encouraging a full celebration of “lesbian” pornography, even when these texts are written by women. Maud is not only working within a male-dominated genre but also producing texts that, given her social and historical context,

would presumably be read predominantly by men. Yet by placing same-sex desire at the centre of her erotic texts, Maud perverts the pornographic tradition of only depicting “the means a woman may employ to pleasure another, *when in want of a man*” (emphasis added 279). Waters thus displaces the pornographic tradition of understanding women’s sexualities only in relation to men. She reveals that pornography can be reclaimed and used to queer ends, and thereby animates Judith Butler’s assertion “that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 40).

The difficulty of drawing clear-cut divisions between lesbian-feminist and queer theory, and lesbian(-feminist) and queer historical fiction, becomes apparent when reading Hayes’s *Grassy Flats* and *Yellowthroat* in conjunction with Winterson’s *The Passion* and Waters’s *Fingersmith*. Hayes, Winterson and Waters all explore same-sex eroticism — albeit in disparate ways — examine power imbalances and tensions in same-sex relationships, and demonstrate a shared concern with the material oppression of women in patriarchal societies. The similarities between these novels complicate the notions that lesbian-feminists are anti-sex, that queer theorists and writers are uninterested in challenging sexist oppression, and that only formally innovative texts perform queer theorizing. These narratives thus show that postmodern “queer” historical novels and more traditional realist lesbian(-feminist) historical romances are informed by and participate in similar social projects. Reflecting on the relationship between lesbian-feminism and queer theory, Linda Garber asserts “The point is not that one is right and

the other wrong, nor that one type of theory is smarter or more sophisticated than the other, but that either taken alone leaves great patches of theoretical canvas bare” (7).

Reading lesbian(-feminist) and queer historical novels in relation to each other reveals both continuities and discontinuities between the past and present theories, methodologies and political approaches employed by LGBTQ2 people in order to challenge homophobic discrimination. By fostering awareness of historical (dis)continuities, these novels may, in turn, help counter temporal shame and violent disidentifications with the past that limit the strategies available to us for challenging the oppression of LGBTQ2 people.



## CHAPTER TWO

### **Abjected Subjectivities: Gender Liminality and Transphobia in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998)**

Somehow we have to learn to live with and perhaps even use abjection.

Noelle McAfee, "Abject Strangers: Toward an Ethics of Respect" (117)

Transgender and transsexual people are often viewed as abject, an association that works to excuse transphobic acts of violence. Julia Kristeva asserts that abjection is caused by "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Trans-people are considered to be abject because they embody, to varying degrees, gender liminality, and therefore trouble beliefs in the binaries between men and women, and, in turn, heterosexuality and homosexuality. As Jody Norton notes, when the transsexual woman's gender liminality is exposed on the screen — as, for instance, in *The Crying Game* — her body is read as abject: it "makes one sick" (154) and must be "punished" (154), repudiated and/or eradicated. Trans historical novels such as Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998) use the association of trans-people with abjection to alternative, trans-positive ends by emphasizing the harmful outcomes that responding to those who are "transsexual" or "transgender" as abject may have on both "trans" and "cis" people. Feinberg's first person narrative provides powerful insight into the destructive effects of violently reacting to gender abjection through its explicit and disturbing descriptions of the physical and sexual abuse that Feinberg's protagonist, Jess, encounters because of hir gender liminality. *Trumpet*, on the

other hand, provides insight into the reactions of various non-trans-people to the post-mortem discovery that jazz musician Joss Moody had a female body, and thereby highlights the harm that “cis-people” do to themselves when rejecting those who are “transgender” or “transsexual.”

Although readers may experience a host of conflicting emotions when encountering descriptions of gender liminality in *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet*, Feinberg and Kay ultimately encourage us to view transphobia, not trans-people, as repulsive and, in turn, work to rid ourselves of transphobic beliefs. While it is important to recognize that the process of establishing empathy with people who are transgender and transsexual requires an ongoing commitment, *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* may initiate or further this work toward empathy by challenging understandings of gender liminality as *innately* abject. As Feinberg notes, “One can only be gender-bent in a gender-rigid society” (qtd. in Ormiston 201). These novels show readers that views of trans-people as abject derive from living in a “two-sexed system” (Fausto-Sterling 80). Even though abjection is a necessary part of the subject’s formation — Anne McClintock asserts that “In order to become social the self has to expunge certain elements that society deems impure” (71) — what we regard as abject is, at least in many cases, socially determined, as is seen in the fact that liminal genders are understood differently depending on social and historical context.<sup>1</sup> *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* emphasize

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<sup>1</sup> The contingency of abjection is apparent in Elizabeth Grosz’s explanation that, “oral abjection has its social equivalent in the broad-ranging social taboos surrounding unclean foods. Clearly these are culturally specific. Yet *some* form of taboo, some mode of inclusion and exclusion of what is considered edible and what is prohibited seems universal” (*Sexual Subversions* 74). Likewise, while what constitutes gender norms and taboos is culturally specific, prohibitions regarding improper gender behaviour seem universal.

the importance of being aware and critical of the destructive nature of transphobic beliefs and the ways that living in a two-sexed system limits the gender options and expressions of all people as well as how we conceive of intimacy and kinship.

In this chapter, I maintain that trans historical novels critique the treatment of trans-people as abjected subjects not only by refuting the notion that trans-people are innately perverse but also by depicting transphobic behaviour as unhealthy and violent. I refer to trans-people as “abjected subjects” in order to emphasize that novels like *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* associate trans-people with abjection in order to humanize them, and thereby challenge usual responses to trans-people as abject that involve pathologizations, dehumanizations and repudiations of those who are transgender and transsexual.<sup>2</sup> These novels highlight the fact that “trans-people” are abject because they are abjected from society for not complying to essentialist gender binaries, and thus there is nothing innate about their abjection. My argument that Feinberg and Kay represent

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See Feinberg’s *Transgender Warriors* for a description of how “transgender” people have been treated differently in various social and historical contexts.

<sup>2</sup> Kristeva maintains that the abject is neither subject nor object (1), and thereby suggests that abjection, which is a “twisted braid of affects and thoughts” (1), exists in experience — in a violent reaction against liminality. Kristeva’s rejection of the terms “object” and “subject” to describe abjection seems to be a strategy to make readers recognize that abjection is a response; she likens it to the sublime which “has no object either” (12) as what inspires the sublime, like what inspires abjection, “dissolves” (12) through the experience of it. Kristeva’s rejection of descriptions of abjection in terms of objects or subjects is also seemingly tied to her assertion that abjection results from liminality as is apparent when she states that “abjection is above all ambiguity” (9). Yet certain liminal subjects and objects evoke the experience of abjection, and thus may be deemed “abject.” Interestingly, Kristeva, at times, hesitatingly evokes the term “object” in her description of abjection. For instance, she refers to the abject as “the jettisoned object [that...] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (2). She also maintains that “The abject is that pseudo-object that is made up *before* but appears only *within* the gaps of secondary repression. *The abject would thus be the ‘object’ of primal repression*” (emphasis original 12). Like Kristeva who tentatively evokes descriptions of the abject as an “object,” my discussion of “the abject” and “abjected subjects” is not meant to erase understandings of abjection as an experience but, rather, to show how this response is linked to certain objects and subjects that, in turn, come to be seen as “abject.” My description of trans-people as “abjected subjects” follows from McClintock’s discussion of abjection both in terms of “abject peoples” and “socially abjected groups” (72).

trans-people as abjected subjects runs the risk of being misread as reinscribing transphobia since the association of “trans-people” with abjection is usually negatively conceived. Yet I hope that my analyses of *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* will show that it is possible for fictional texts to use the historical link between trans-people and the abject to counter transphobic beliefs, and thereby inspire trans-positivity.

*Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet*, as historical novels, call on readers to think about the socially marginalized position of trans-people as abjected subjects in relation to trans and queer history. By highlighting the widespread continued subscription to and enforcement of gender and sexual binaries in the postmodern, post-Stonewall period, *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* challenge the notion that postmodern theory and gay rights activism have resulted in the acceptance of gender liminality. Unlike the novels that I have studied thus far, *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* depict both the pre- and post-Stonewall past. In doing so, they complicate the notion that the gay rights movement has improved the lives of trans-people and that in the postmodern period “binary logic and historical totalities...[are giving] way to an altogether more ambiguous and indeterminate condition” (Felski 138).<sup>3</sup> By showing the continuity of transphobia in post-Stonewall environments, Feinberg and Kay suggest that Stonewall-inspired activism has not resulted

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<sup>3</sup> Rita Felski provides an interesting analysis of the link between postmodern understandings of gender and sexuality and postmodern views of time and history; she notes that “As the male/female divide becomes ever more fragile and unstable, it is claimed, so we are also witnessing a waning of temporality, teleology, and grand narrative” (138). Yet Felski argues that beliefs in the postmodern destruction of linear temporality exaggerate “the fragmented, chaotic nature of present time (clock time, timetables, and other forms of regulated, ‘objective’ time have not yet disappeared from our lives)” (13-14). Similarly, dichotomous understandings of gender and sexuality are still dominant in contemporary Western societies as is seen in the ongoing transphobia and biphobia that people encounter when they challenge these binaries.

in a widespread rejection of gender binaries nor has it ended, or necessarily even lessened, violent disidentifications with trans-people as abject.<sup>4</sup>

While *Trumpet* uses characters' memories of Joss as a means of moving between the pre- and post-Stonewall eras, notably, Kay makes no mention of the Stonewall riots that occurred in New York in 1969 and the subsequent emergence of the lesbian and gay rights movement in North America. While Kay's silence on Stonewall may signal the different trajectory of lesbian/gay rights in the United Kingdom — *Trumpet* is set in both England and Scotland — Kay also makes no mention of the British Wolfenden report of 1957 that recommended “‘that homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offense’” (qtd. in Edsall 316) nor the Sexual Offenses Act of 1967 which decriminalized sexual intimacy between men who were at least 21 years old (“United Kingdom II” 9). These silences may be read as countering tendencies to conflate homosexuality with transsexuality and transgenderism by alluding to the way that “trans-people” may have felt and, in many cases, continue to feel disassociated and/or marginalized from the gay/lesbian rights movement and community due to being viewed as abject by many lesbians and gay men.<sup>5</sup> As Wendy Ormiston

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<sup>4</sup> Stonewall is contentious terrain among many lesbian/gay and trans theorists. Stryker notes that “in 1995, the role of drag queens in the Stonewall riots had become a site of conflict between transgender and normative gay/lesbian histories—transgender activists pointed to the act of mythologizing Stonewall as the ‘birth’ of gay liberation as a homonormative co-optation of gender queer resistance, while homonormative gay and lesbian commentators tended to downplay the significance of antidrag oppression at Stonewall” (152).

<sup>5</sup> Stryker discusses misunderstandings and marginalizations of trans-people in lesbian and gay communities (147-148). She maintains that the various ways that trans-people have been conceived of within lesbian and gay communities “becomes a containment mechanism for ‘gender trouble’ of various sorts that works in tandem with assimilative gender-normative tendencies within the sexual identities” (148). Stryker also questions the conflation of LGBTQ people and those who are transsexual and transgender noting that “homo hetero, and bi in fact all depended on similar understandings of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ which trans

notes, “Transgender individuals face violent rejection from privileged and disadvantaged groups alike, for their existence challenges the viability of an entire society’s identification system” (201-202).

Like *Trumpet*, *Stone Butch Blues* indirectly calls into question the relevance and importance of gay pride for trans-people by suggesting that the gay rights movement has failed to provide nuanced critiques of gender binaries and has not sufficiently worked to counter readings of trans-people as abject. *Stone Butch Blues* takes the form of a coming-of-age narrative that follows Jess’s transformation from the 1950s to the 1980s. Jess comes out in the American butch-femme bar scene of the 1950s where ze finds much support and caring. Hir decision to pass as a man is informed by hir loss of a sense of community in the 1970s with the increased police “harassment after birth of gay pride” (135) and the rise of the lesbian-feminist movement wherein butches and femmes were marginalized since they were read as reinstating oppressive heterosexual gender norms. Feinberg not only shows the continued oppression that Jess, as someone whose gender does not fit into the two-sexed system, faces in the post-Stonewall era but suggests that Jess encounters increased persecution and social isolation after Stonewall. As both *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* show the persistence of transphobic oppression in the present, they may challenge the apathy that can result from beliefs that improvements in human rights follow a linear progressive model.

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problematized. People with trans identities could describe themselves as men and women, too—or resist binary categorization altogether—but in doing either they queered the dominant relationship of sexed body and gendered subject” (147).

## **I. Leslie Feinberg's Humanization of the Abjected and Abused "Trans" Subject in *Stone Butch Blues* (1993)**

In *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg challenges usual representations of trans-people as abject by reclaiming the abused trans body as a site of political intervention. Discussions about trans-people often focus on the trans body as a pre-, mid-, or post-op object, or involve pathologizing trans-people through attempts to find the "origin" of "gender dysphoria" usually with the intent to "cure" the "troubled" patient. In her analysis of male-to-female transsexuality, Norton asserts that "transgender is a perennial cultural curiosity: sensational, abominable, fascinating" (140). Likewise, in her description of the abject, Noelle McAfee notes that "The subject finds the abject both repellent and seductive" (*Julia Kristeva* 49-50). Feinberg challenges the usual fearful fascination with trans-people due to their gender abjection by transforming hir protagonist, Jess, into a highly empathetic abjected subject. Feinberg's humanization of Jess works to counter views of trans-people as seductively repellent and to educate cis readers about both the struggles and joys of trans-people's everyday lives.

Jess is physically and sexually abused because of the challenge hir gender liminality poses to the North American gender binary.<sup>6</sup> Feinberg shows how prejudice is

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this chapter, I have tried to use strategic phrasing when discussing the way that gender liminality troubles the binaries between man and woman, heterosexual and homosexual. I am not suggesting that trans-people necessarily experience their genders as subversive but, rather, that when gender liminality is visible it may cause those who are invested in gender and sexual binaries to rethink their beliefs in such dichotomies. For a nuanced critique of how arguments that trans-people "queer" gender may result in a simplification and homogenization of the experiences of trans-people see, for instance, Jay Prosser who critiques Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity since

there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to *be*. What gets dropped from transgender in its queer deployment to signify subversive gender performativity is the value of the matter that often most concerns the transsexual: the

written on the body through Jess's descriptions of being repeatedly arrested and assaulted when the early gay bars ze patroned were raided by police. Considering that Jess is arrested because ze is not wearing three articles of female clothing, ze is persecuted based on hir gender abjection. The "penetration" of the literal space of these bars by male police officers may be read as a symbolic rape of the LGBTQ2 community meant to instill fear, disrupt any sense of collectivity, and destroy kinship bonds between trans and queer people. Attempts to undermine solidarity in, what McClintock refers to as, "abject zones" (72) — spaces where abjected subjects are forcibly relegated or congregate in an attempt to temporarily escape oppression — alludes to the fear that abjected peoples may inspire in those who have systemic power. Ironically, in many cases, raids on such spaces have the reverse effect by increasing solidarity, affirming kinship bonds and confirming the need to fight against social persecution, as is apparent in the eventual Stonewall riots.

Descriptions of this rape of community space in *Stone Butch Blues* are coupled with detailed accounts of Jess's personal experiences of rape. As McAfee notes, "cultures have set up rituals to deal with [the] threat" (*Julia Kristeva* 49) posed by abjection. *Stone Butch Blues* suggests that sexual and physical violence are two "rituals" used to try to purge cis-society of the threat of abjection, as is clearly seen when trans-people are murdered because of their gender liminality. Describing being arrested in a letter ze writes to hir ex-lover Theresa, Jess notes, "*They cuffed my hands so tight behind my back I almost cried out. Then the cop unzipped his pants real slow, with a smirk on his face, and ordered me down on my knees*" (emphasis original 10). Interestingly,

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*narrative of becoming a biological man or a biological woman (as opposed to the performative of effecting one).* (32)



Kristeva asserts that abjection is “a hatred that smiles” (4), a portrayal that aptly describes this abusive police officer. As he is associated with the abject in this scene, readers are encouraged to view him and his actions as repulsive.

The rape of Jess, who is a stone butch, is depicted as a punishment for hir gender and sexual transgressions, and a means by which men enforce their patriarchal power. Ze usurps the male domain not only by sexually pleasuring women but also by expressing masculinity. Jess’s attackers seemingly view rape as a way of emasculating hir as this act works to reaffirm hir “femaleness” and “put *her* in *her* place.” This emasculation reflects an attempt to eradicate gender abjection by relegating Jess to one side of the gender binary — femaleness — which is, notably, the socially persecuted and oppressed gender in this dichotomy.

Although *Stone Butch Blues*, at times, likens rapists to the abject, this novel ultimately encourages readers to view rapists as more horrific than abjection. For instance, after being arrested at a gay bar, one of the cops orders Jess to ““Suck my cock”” (62) and when Jess refuses he tells hir ““Either eat me or eat my shit, bulldagger”” (62). The “choice” that he gives Jess between his penis or shit indirectly likens this man’s penis to feces, one of the examples that Kristeva gives of an abject “object” (3). While this scene may thus be read as implying that the penis is abject, Jess “chooses” shit over the rapist’s penis, and thus the penis is positioned as worse than abjection.

Feinberg’s description of Jess’s encounter with feces making hir vomit shows that confronting abjection — bodily waste — may inspire further abjection — nausea.

Feinberg encourages a rethinking of the abject as being purely negative since Jess's vomit holds the potential to save hir from being sexually abused. Jess notes:

I held my breath the first time he shoved my head in the toilet. The second time he held me under so long I sucked in water and felt the hard shape of the shit against my tongue. When Mulroney pulled my head back out of the toilet I spewed vomit all over him. I gagged and retched over and over again" (62).

Notably, it is not the "non-trans" abuser who is made sick during this encounter but, rather, the "trans-person." Jess does not just vomit but actually vomits *on* Mulroney who has been abusing hir, and thus he becomes an embodiment of abjection. Reflecting on food loathing, Kristeva asserts that "spasms and vomiting [...] protect me" (2). Jess's nausea, through which ze expels himself, may be read as a way to escape the psychic pain of this abuse. Hir vomit is a literalization of the "out of body" sensation that many women describe experiencing when they are raped. In addition to Jess's vomit protecting hir from having to eat shit, it also holds the power to potentially save hir from being raped. After Jess vomits, ze notes that "the cops yelled to each other," "Aw shit, fuck, get her out of here" (62). Jess's abject response to being violated evokes a similar abject reaction in hir abusers who seemingly want to distance themselves from hir because hir vomiting makes them feel sick. Although readers are encouraged to hope that Jess's nausea will make the rapists too disgusted to continue their abuse, hir vomit ultimately fails to stop Mulroney from raping hir, and thus Feinberg depicts the phallus as more powerful and destructive than the abject.

While Jess's embodiment of liminality makes hir an abjected subject, in *Stone Butch Blues* the trans body only becomes abject after it is abused by transphobic men. When Jess regains consciousness after one of the many times that ze is attacked by the

police, ze reflects, “My teeth ached. When I pushed against one of them with my tongue, it popped out and lay in my palm like a Chicklet in a tiny pink puddle of my own blood [...] As I looked in the mirror I felt sorry for the reflection—bloody, bruised, lumpy” (137). Jess’s assertion that ze feels sorry for “*the* reflection” rather than “*my* reflection” highlights hir disidentification with this abused body. The distance that Jess feels from hir body reflects the coping mechanism of trying to situate the abject as “other.” By experiencing hir body as other instead of abject, Jess can remove herself temporarily from the pain — both physical and mental — that results from transphobic abuse. Jess’s identity as “stone” is seemingly not just linked to hir personal disidentification with hir female body but also to the abuse that this body endures for representing a forbidden space between female and male.<sup>7</sup> Jess’s stone identity thus highlights the influence that oppression may have on the development of one’s subjectivity and affective (dis)identifications.

Feinberg’s descriptions of the abuse that Jess encounters and hir broken down body illuminate both the political potential and the danger associated with using the abject to trans-positive ends. While Feinberg uses descriptions of abjection to inspire readers to violently disidentify with those who abuse Jess, this is a risky move considering the wide range of emotions that abjection may evoke in readers. Vivid descriptions of the bodily abjection that is caused by transphobic violence may make

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<sup>7</sup> By highlighting that trans-men are physically and mentally attacked primarily because they transgress gender norms, Feinberg resists reinscribing the transphobic notion that trans-men want to be men because they have been abused as women, and thus hate their female bodies. Considering that trans-men are assaulted because they embody a liminal gender, under this type of rationale they should reject being trans as this is the experience that provokes such violent discrimination. Interestingly, Jess more firmly identifies with a liminal gender as the novel progresses, and thus Feinberg challenges the supposed correlation between abuse and disidentification.

readers feel ill, a response that may inspire strong empathetic identifications and/or violent disidentifications with Jess. For example, feeling nauseous when reading the scene where Jess vomits on the police officer may establish a corporeal bond between reader and character that may intensify an empathetic identification with Jess. *Stone Butch Blues* uses abjection to call on readers not to reject Jess but, rather, to want to protect hir from transphobic and homophobic violence. The use of graphic depictions of physical and sexual abuse in this novel thus promotes a rethinking of conventional understandings of abjection solely in terms of repudiation by showing that feeling disgust for another does not preclude the possibility of also feeling empathy for this person.

On the other hand, considering the widespread aversion to vomit and the abject more generally, readers may feel so disgusted and disturbed by the rape scenes in *Stone Butch Blues* and depictions of the breakdown of Jess's body that they feel repulsed by Jess and/or unable to continue reading. The difficulty of engaging with descriptions of abjection in this novel is apparent in the fact that, when originally writing this chapter, I avoided discussing the abject altogether and, when revising, I found myself skimming the quotes from *Stone Butch Blues* that depict abjection. As I elaborate in the conclusion to this project, *Stone Butch Blues* is the LGBTQ2 historical novel that has had the strongest influence on my life which suggests that descriptions of abjection can have intense and long-lasting trans-positive effects on readers. It seems that in order to continue reading *Stone Butch Blues* our empathy must override our repulsion, and thus those who finish reading this novel are likely to have developed a strong empathetic identification with Jess that they will take with them into their everyday lives.

Feinberg encourages a rethinking of abjection solely in terms of repulsion not only by using abjection to inspire empathy for Jess but also by depicting Jess ultimately choosing gender liminality over maleness or femaleness. Although *Stone Butch Blues* highlights the difficulties of openly living in a space between gender extremes and being viewed as abject, this novel also depicts gender liminality as a viable, and even desirable, means of self-expression. While Jess's childhood experience of being repeatedly confronted with the "refrain: 'Is that a boy or a girl'" (13) is confusing and hurtful since it positions Jess as abject and leads to his social marginalization, in his adulthood, Jess comes to feel most himself when embodying a space between maleness and femaleness.

Interestingly, Jess comes to accept his gender liminality through his negative experience of passing as a man which causes him to feel "self-alienation and almost virtual erasure" (Noble, *Masculinities* 109). Jess decides, after years of being abused and raped by homophobic and transphobic men, that in order to survive he must take hormones and pass as a man (141).<sup>8</sup> While passing provides Jess with a temporary survival strategy, Feinberg does not suggest that Jess's desire to transition is solely influenced by his experience of discrimination but, rather, also highlights Jess's discomfort with identifying as a woman. Jay Prosser argues that:

In its description of her transition the narrative suggests that Jess's move away from femaleness is emphatically not a case of a 'lesbian's' or a 'woman's' going under cover as a man to escape stigmatization but part of one stone butch's attempt to embody her transgender. Passing for Jess (in spite of how the plot turns out) is emphatically not a woman's or lesbian's passing phase. (183)

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<sup>8</sup> In a discussion about taking hormones, Jess asks two of his butch friends, Grant and Ed, "'What happens? Does it just last for a little while? I mean can you go back to being a butch later, when it's safe to come out?'" (145). While this novel thus seems to reinscribe the view that passing is a survival strategy, unlike many authors of lesbian and queer historical fiction, Feinberg emphasizes the influence that transphobic discrimination has on the making of such decisions and also reveals that this move is not solely strategic.

Notably, Jess's negative experience of passing is not only related to hir discovery that hir problems and experience of oppression do not disappear when ze is seen as a man, but also to hir realization that ze only feels comfortable when inhabiting a space between gender binaries.<sup>9</sup>

Jess decides to stop passing because ze wants to return to a state of gender liminality. Jess reflects that ze had hoped that passing:

would allow me to express the part of myself that didn't seem to be woman. I didn't get to explore being a he-she, though. I simply became a man. / Who was I now—woman or man? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices; it could never be answered if it had to be asked. (222)

Hir reflection that ze cannot choose between male and female and that this question is inadequate to hir experience supports readings of this novel as "transgender" and highlights the importance of recognizing differences between and among those who are "transgender" and "transsexual." Jess's experience of passing deviates from that of many transsexuals since "Passing for Jess has involved the production of an illusion—a projection, not a reflection—of being a man; it is not a stage in the process of becoming one as it is in transsexual narratives" (Prosser 185-186). By creating a character who feels most comfortable when expressing both maleness and femaleness, Feinberg deessentializes gender binaries, and thereby calls into question the "naturalness" of cis-genders.

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<sup>9</sup> Feinberg complicates the notion that passing provides an escape from oppression in hir depiction of the relationship that Jess has with Annie, a heterosexual cis-woman, while passing as a man. Jess discovers that Annie is homophobic when at a wedding Annie refers to a man as a "fag" and a "queer" (194). Jess feels hir blood run cold and responds, "'How can you hate somebody just because of who they love'" (195). As is signalled by Jess's decision to promptly end this relationship, ze is obviously deeply affected by this homophobia and continues to feel an affiliation to the gay community while passing.

While Jess's decision to stop taking hormones and return to a space of visible gender liminality makes hir once again a target of transphobic hatred and fear, the fact that ze chooses liminality implies that there is something desirable about embracing a space between gender extremes. As Elyssa Warkentin notes, "Androgyny, for Jess, might be a difference that she likes, but it brings with it an immense lack of choice in her life" (169). Jess asserts, "Before, strangers had raged at me for being a woman who crossed a forbidden boundary. Now they really didn't know what my sex was, and that was unimaginable, terrifying to them" (225). This terror is apparent when Jess is attacked by a group of men and one of them asks hir, "'What the fuck are you? [...] I can't tell what you are. Maybe we should just find out, huh, guys?'" (258). Whereas in earlier rape scenes Feinberg highlights the intertwining of homophobia and transphobia by revealing that Jess was raped because ze was perceived to be a butch lesbian who had usurped a male (sexual) position of power, this man's hostile question shows that here rape is threatened as a means of discovering the "truth" about Jess's sex, and thus is distinctly transphobic. As Marilyn Frye notes, "Closely connected with habitual and obligatory sex-marking is a constant and urgent need to know or be able to guess the sex of every single person with whom one has the slightest or most remote contact or interaction" (22). This need to "know" the sex of the other results from the fact that in a two-sexed system "one has to know what sex each person is before one can allow one's heart to beat or one's blood to flow in erotic enjoyment of that person" (22). The men who attack Jess may do so, at least in part, because not knowing Jess's sex makes their desire for hir

unintelligible as either heterosexual or homosexual, and thus implicates them in sexual abjection.

*Stone Butch Blues* suggests that transphobic violence arises out of a disavowal of gender abjection in the self since readings of “trans-people” as abject distract “cis-people” from their own ultimate inability to fully exemplify “ideal” or “pure” masculinity or femininity. While some readers may find this novel hard to consume because of its descriptions of the abject, arguably the power of Feinberg’s novel lies in its use of abjection to promote trans-positive (dis)identifications. The aversion that we may feel when encountering acts of transphobic violence on the page sends a powerful message about the brutality of actual acts of transphobic abuse. *Stone Butch Blues* thereby gives the violence that is done to “trans-people” a political, educative purpose, and indirectly encourages other “trans-people” to share their experiences of transphobia as a means of healing and teaching “cis-people” about the destructive results of trying to violently disavow gender liminality.

## **II. Living Liminal Maleness: Passing and Gender Abjection in Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* (1998)**

Whereas *Stone Butch Blues* highlights Jess’s experience as an abjected subject whose gender liminality involves living in a space between femaleness and maleness, in *Trumpet*, Joss “passes” as a man, and thus is not viewed as an abjected subject until after his death when others learn that he had a female body. Unlike Feinberg’s Jess who feels alienated from himself when ze tries to pass, Joss lives an enjoyable, albeit restricted, life



expressing what may be deemed “liminal maleness.” While Joss aligns himself with maleness in his adulthood, he rejects hyper-masculinity and, rather, couples his expression of masculinity with feminine characteristics and feminist thinking. His refusal to internally disavow his girlhood provides an indirect critique of the transphobic notion that trans-men are misogynists who are ashamed of their female bodies and femininity.

Moreover, Kay foregrounds the attempts of various cis-people to (re)read Joss as a woman in order to erase his gender abjection and relegate him to female otherness, a move that, as is most clearly seen in the case of Joss’s adopted son, Colman, reflects an ultimately self-destructive refusal to see gender liminality in oneself. *Trumpet* shows the importance of cis-people recognizing and accepting that “every aspect of a person’s gender expression and sex will not be consistently either masculine or feminine, man or woman” (Pratt 21). Kay suggests that transphobic readings of Joss arise out of investments in the two-sexed system and the tendency of cis-people to deny their own gender liminality. While people who knew Joss when he was alive ultimately cannot rewrite their memories of him as a man, they also cannot erase the fact of his dead female body, and thus in order to reconcile Joss’s maleness and femaleness they — like readers of *Trumpet* — must learn to think outside of the two-sexed system or at least recognize the limits and exclusionary nature of this system.<sup>10</sup>

*Trumpet* was inspired by the life of Billy Tipton (1914-1989), a white American jazz pianist who had a female body but lived his adulthood as a man. Kay made many

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in her analysis of *Stone Butch Blues*, Wendy Ormiston asserts that studying this novel in class requires students “to abandon the convention of binary opposition” (199).

significant changes to Tipton's character and life in her depiction of Joss Moody as a mixed-race jazz trumpeter who resides in both Scotland and England. These changes highlight Joss's position as an abjected subject who lives liminality in terms of not only his gender but also his race and nationality. Kay thereby works to foster intersectional analyses of oppression by encouraging readers to consider the "inextricability of racial issues from ones of gender, sexuality, class, and generation" (Clandfield 2). Even Joss's musical career as a trumpeter associates him with liminality as the trumpet has an "ambivalent form. When Joss plays it [...] the phallic trumpet physically compensates for his absence of male sexual members. But a trumpet has [...] a concave end, combining thus the masculine and the feminine in its form" (Monterrey 172). Notably, Kay sets "Joss Moody's musical career [...] much later than Tipton's" (Eckstein 55). Her choice "to set *Trumpet* in the 1960s, not the 1930s" (King 102) increased the likelihood that a female trumpet player could find employment as a jazz musician, and thus challenges readings of Joss as strategically "deceiving" the world and "passing" for the sake of his career.<sup>11</sup> The changes that Kay makes to the historical "facts" of Tipton's life highlight the power of historical novels to rework the past in order to present strong and important political commentaries.

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<sup>11</sup> Kay encourages readers to critically interrogate the belief that "women" pass solely in order to gain privilege by having the most explicitly transphobic characters in this novel — Colman, and the journalist, Sophie Stone — hold this view. Reflecting upon his father's decision to "pass" as a man, Colman asserts, "If the jazz world was so 'anything goes' as my father claimed, then why didn't he come clean and spit it out, man? The 1960s were supposed to be cool. Flower people. Big joints. Afghans. Long hair. Peace. Why not a woman playing a fucking trumpet, man, what was wrong with that?" (57). Colman implies that it was cowardice that kept his father from "coming clean" about his "true" identity as he believes that Joss hid his sex because he did not want to deal with sexism in the jazz world. Ironically, Colman undermines this assertion by recognizing that, in the particular social and historical context in which Joss lived, a woman could presumably succeed as a jazz musician.

While Joss lives his adulthood as a man and Kay emphasizes the importance of respecting this gender expression, notably, she also validates his childhood as a girl, and thereby depicts Joss as embodying a liminal maleness that signals the “impurity” of all expressions of masculinity. Reflecting on Joss’s youth as Josephine Moore, his wife Millicent notes that “whenever the name Josephine Moore came up, he’d say, ‘Leave her alone,’ as if she was somebody else. He always spoke about her in the third person. She was his third person” (93). While Joss’s reluctance to discuss his past as Josephine seemingly reflects a disidentification with his girlhood, he also sounds protective of Josephine: he does not deny her existence but, rather, wants her to be left alone.

Interestingly, Joss reflects positively on his girlhood in the section of the novel entitled “Music” that gives readers insight into his thoughts and experiences while he inhabits a transitional state between life and death (136). Although Joss seems to disidentify with his past when he thinks that in his youth “he was something else. Somebody else. Her. That girl” (132), he later asserts that “He is himself again, years ago, skipping along the railway line with a long cord his mother had made into a rope. In a red dress. It is liberating. To be a girl. To be a man” (135). By depicting the merging of past femaleness with present maleness as “liberating,” Kay encourages readers to think critically about how trying to conform to a gender extreme may potentially be limiting. As femme theorist Minnie Bruce Pratt notes, “the categories male and female, do not contain the complexity of sex and gender for any of us” (21). While, on the one hand, passing allows Joss to express his liminal maleness, on the other hand, the restrictions that he lives under as a “passing” man show the failure of a two-sexed system to allow for

gender complexities.<sup>12</sup> Considering that Joss may be read as a “transsexual” character, Kay’s depiction of him celebrating both his past and present gender experiences undermines the notion that transsexual people necessarily find their youths oppressive in contrast to their “freedom” when “passing.”

Considering that Joss internally resists the erasure of his past by embracing both his femaleness and his maleness, it seems likely that he does not want to discuss Josephine with Millicent not because he entirely disidentifies with his past as a girl but, rather, because he worries that discussing his girlhood may undermine his wife’s view of him as a man, potentially causing her to see him as abject and, in turn, reject him. While Joss’s fear may seem irrational considering that Millicent knows about his female body and continues to love him, it highlights the insidiousness of worries about transphobic repudiation and the stress that trans-people live under. Moreover, Millicent’s response to Joss revealing his childhood name to her suggests that his fears are not entirely unfounded; Millicent thinks “I couldn’t say much. I remember finding it slightly distasteful, the idea of Joss having another name. If I am honest, perhaps I found it frightening too. It unsettled me, the idea that Joss had not always been Joss, that Joss Moody had once been Josephine Moore” (93). While Millicent accepts Joss’s liminal maleness in the present, she is disturbed by the thought of Joss as a girl which suggests that the stories that trans-people develop about their pasts — as is apparent in Joss’s decision to tell Millicent and Colman that his mother is dead — may be informed by their awareness of the difficulty that people living in a two-sexed system have comprehending,

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<sup>12</sup> The restrictions that Joss faces are apparent in Colman’s assertion that it “Makes a lot of sense in hindsight” (68) that his father had a fear of doctors and never took him swimming when he was a child.

accepting and respecting the fluid nature of gender.<sup>13</sup> Yet, Joss's decision to stay in contact with his mother via letters seemingly reflects a desire to stay connected to his past as a girl (218).

Although Joss is given a voice in the chapter entitled "Music," the vast majority of this book is told from the point of view of Joss's family, friends and those who encounter or learn about his female body after his death. By foregrounding the voices of cis-people, Kay diverts attention away from the "trans" mind and discourages pathologizations of Joss as a "transsexual." Kay distracts readers from focusing on the "reasons" that Joss "passed" and, rather, encourages interrogations of the thought processes of non-trans-people and the biases they hold, thereby implying that cis-people are the ones who need to be studied and cured of transphobia.

Whereas *Stone Butch Blues* examines the use of rape and physical violence as a ritual purging of "trans" abjection, *Trumpet* highlights how many cis-people use the language of "deception" to disavow gender abjection and marginalize "trans-people." As Jason Cromwell notes, "Within this discourse there is no transition or passing out of a stigmatized group and no realness, but rather there is the discovery of truth and the unmasking of deception" (39). Transphobic cis-people use this discourse to assert their "knowledge" of the "truth" about the trans-person, and thus erase what they see as the abject liminality of trans-people's experiences and identities. By challenging the view

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<sup>13</sup> While Joss values both his past and present gender experiences, his need to have his maleness recognized and respected is apparent in his decision not to see a doctor when he becomes ill. As this "choice" presumably leads to his early death, it shows that fear of transphobic hostility may restrict the lives of trans-people and have devastating consequences. Joss's refusal to see a doctor seemingly signals a resistance to the symbolic violence, and potential physical violence, that he would experience if his female body were to be outed.

that trans-people actively “lie” to the world and enjoy “tricking” others, *Trumpet* counters cis-people’s attempts to repudiate gender liminality in order to reaffirm the supposed naturalness of the two-sexed system and their own seemingly successful embodiment of gender extremes.

Kay provides a powerful critique of discursive repudiations of trans-people in her depiction of the tendency of the press and, in particular, the journalist Sophie Stone, “to revise, reform, and rescript” (Halberstam “Telling” 26) Joss’s identity and his relationship with Millicent. Sophie — who is interviewing Colman because she plans to write a book about his father — describes Joss as a woman, and thereby rewrites gender liminality as female otherness. Judith Halberstam notes that Stone resembles Diane Middlebrook who wrote a biography of Billy Tipton’s life in which she undermined Tipton’s gender expression and depicted his wives as “betrayed” and “deceived” (“Telling” 24). Sophie similarly negates Joss’s life as a man by understanding his liminal maleness as simply being a means by which he can succeed as a trumpet player and attain male privilege.

Sophie’s unwillingness to take his liminal maleness seriously is apparent in her understanding of Joss’s “performance” of masculinity as giving “her” a thrill. Sophie “realizes” that Joss “liked wearing those bandages, didn’t she? *She* liked the big cover up. Going about the place taking everybody in. Going to the Gents. *She* got a buzz going to the Gents, didn’t *she*?” (emphasis added 263). Sophie’s rhetorical choice to refer to Joss with female pronouns shows how language can be used to violently erase trans-

people's identities and/or gender expressions while reaffirming gender binaries.<sup>14</sup>

Considering that Joss lived his whole adulthood as a man, it is unlikely that after years of “passing” he experienced his gender as a thrilling game. In light of the fact that the public washroom is a space wherein much transphobic violence occurs, Sophie's recasting of the danger experienced by trans-people in this public yet private space as “thrilling” demonstrates insensitivity to those who experience transphobic oppression.<sup>15</sup> While Kay does not depict physical violence against trans-people in this novel, her focus on transphobic thought processes and discourses highlights the symbolic violence that can be done to trans-people and also provides insight into the type of beliefs that inform transphobic acts of physical violence, thereby indirectly evoking awareness of the physical abuse that trans-people also face.

Through her representation of Colman, Kay illustrates the self-inflicted harm that results from being transphobic. Kay highlights the destructive consequences that subscribing to the two-sexed system and rejecting abjected trans subjects may have not

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<sup>14</sup> The use of language as a transphobic weapon is apparent in Janice Raymond's decision to refer to MTF transsexuals as “male-to-constructed females” (xxi), “transsexed men” (xxi), and continually use male pronouns when talking about transsexual women in *The Transsexual Empire*.

<sup>15</sup> Sophie's reading of Joss reflects the belief among historians that “women” cross-dressed in the past because it was an enjoyable source of excitement. Elisabeth Krimmer, for instance, asserts that:  
 Surprisingly, female cross-dressers preferred the occupations of sailor and soldier even though these two professions offered a minimal degree of privacy, thus exposing the cross-dresser to a proportionally larger risk of discovery. The fact that female cross-dressers aspired to these careers in spite of such substantial obstacles suggests that they were not only interested in securing a livelihood but also in exchanging a monotonous existence for one that promised excitement and adventure. (27)

Although Krimmer is intrigued by the fact that “women” chose such careers “in spite of” the dangers of discovery, she implies that they actually chose this work *because of* these dangers and the related “excitement and adventure” associated with the risky act of cross-dressing. Like Sophie, Krimmer thus identifies part of the pleasure of cross-dressing as the “thrill” of potential discovery. While it is certainly possible that some people experience “passing” as exciting, this “thrill” implies real danger, and thus it is notable that Krimmer does not reflect on the potential severity of transphobic discrimination.

only on trans-people but also on cis-people through her depiction of Colman's attempt to repudiate his father upon learning that Joss had a female body. As previously explored in my analysis of Winterson's *The Passion* and Waters's *Fingersmith*, many authors of historical fiction link love to pain, madness, manipulation, betrayal, self-shattering, and destruction. Considering that Colman's strong love for and identification with his father while growing up is the root of his later pain and violent disidentification with Joss, like Winterson and Waters, Kay depicts negative emotions as part of loving others. Yet, while Kay shows that love underlies Colman's violent repudiation of his father, she also depicts Colman as a hostile, self-absorbed, and "self-pitying bastard" (50) who fails to empathize with Joss throughout most of this novel. Colman's rejection of his father as abject encourages cis readers to adopt a more sensitive response to Joss as well as trans-people in their everyday lives.

Colman is raised without knowledge that his father has a female body and feels both "deceived" and disturbed when he discovers that his masculine role model was biologically female. Upon seeing his father's naked female corpse in the funeral parlour, Colman reads his father as abject. Colman describes being haunted by "the image of my father in a woman's body. Like some pervert. Some psycho" (63). Colman's description of his father as a "pervert," "psycho" (63) and "freak" (64) reflects traditional transphobic discourses that position trans-people as abject in order to condone the marginalization of and violence against those who do not subscribe to gender binaries. Such verbal violence functions as an attempt to contain and control abjection by warning others of the persecution that they will face if they do not succumb to gender norms.



The disgust that Colman feels when confronted with his father's corpse also seemingly reflects, at least in part, resistance to accepting the loss of his father: Colman's repudiation of Joss's dead body functions as a way of protecting his memory of his father as a living being. While Colman is a mostly unsympathetic character, readers may feel some empathy for him since the hostility and anger that he expresses toward his father seemingly arise out of not just transphobia but also a refusal to deal with the fact that he has lost a family member that he loved. As the corpse is "death infecting life" (Kristeva 4), encountering Joss's corpse is presumably traumatic for Colman because it forces him to recognize, on some level, the inevitability of his own death. Kristeva asserts that "the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel [as in the case of bodily waste], 'I' is expelled" (3-4). Joss's corpse is thus abject because it seemingly upsets Colman's belief in the binary between the living and the dead.

In response to seeing Joss's dead female body, Colman attempts to relegate his father to femaleness, and thereby eradicate his gender abjection. Colman aims to get revenge on his father for "deceiving" him by uncovering his father's youth as a girl. He reflects, "I'm going to *track him down*. I'm going to trace him back to when he was a girl in Greenock, to when he lived under the name of Josephine Moore" (emphasis added 61). Considering that Colman states that he wants to be his father's Judas (62), this "hunt" for his father's past is seemingly undertaken with a desire to violently erase his father's adulthood as a man and position him as female, and thereby other. Yet Colman cannot repudiate Joss as other since, as McAfee asserts "What is abjected is radically excluded

but never banished altogether. It hovers at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's own tenuous borders of selfhood" (*Julia Kristeva* 46). Joss haunts Colman as the abject within since Joss was Colman's masculine role model growing up, and thus Colman has internalized his father by adopting his masculinity.

By highlighting the affect that Joss had on Colman's gender formation, Kay challenges the notion that the gender expressions of cis-people are "natural," "innate" and "pure" in contrast to the "performed," "devious," and "inauthentic" genders of trans-people. Although, at times, Colman recognizes the influence that his father had on his life and gender formation, he tries to prove that, while his father's masculinity was a "performance" that was tainted by the feminine, his own masculinity is "real" and "pure." Reflecting on his experience of feigning indifference to his father's opinion of him in his youth, Colman asserts, "I pretended I didn't give a flying fuck what my father thought of me. But I did. I suppose I wanted him to be proud of me as a man, as a black man. I fucking worshipped him" (49). Joss had a great deal of power over Colman's gender construction as he was not only Colman's role model as a man but, more specifically, as a black man, and thus Colman's idealization of Joss counters racism by depicting black masculinity as desirable. Colman's affective shift highlights how binaries inform and may limit not only our gender expressions but also our (dis)identifications. He states, "I used to be my father's disciple. Not any fucking more, mate. I've gone over to the other side" (62). While Colman asserts that he entirely disidentifies with his father, his complex emotional response to Joss — his love and resentment, admiration and disgust

— undermine this assertion by showing the complicated and messy nature of (dis)identifications with abjected subjects.

Colman's crisis of masculinity largely relates to learning that Joss did not have a penis which, in Colman's mind, is the central signifier of maleness. Colman reflects, "My father had tits. My father didn't have a dick. My father had tits. My father had a pussy. My father didn't have any balls" (61). His assertion that his father had "tits" and a "pussy" but did not have a "dick" or "balls" reflects an attempt to make the materiality of his father's female body override his understanding of Joss as male. Yet Colman's reflection that Joss may have worn a strap-on dildo — an object that establishes a bridge between maleness and femaleness — complicates this relegation of Joss to womanhood based on his biology. Colman thinks:

My father never got a leg over. Had a hard-on. My father was never tossed off. He never stuck it up, or rammed it in, never spilt his seed, never had a blow job. What did he have down his pants? A cunt — is that it? Or did he wear a dildo? Shit. If he did, he would have rammed it in, I promise you (169).

Colman's misogynist suggestion that "women" cannot successfully wield the penis implies that he is threatened by the thought of a "woman" appropriating the phallus since this troubles his definition of manhood and subsequently his own identity as a man.

Notably, after learning that Joss had a female body, Colman experiences his penis in an exaggerated form. Colman's performance of hyper-masculinity is apparent not only in his crude and aggressive transphobic rhetoric when talking about Joss but also in his description of masturbating while thinking of Sophie Stone. He reflects that "His cock seems bigger since his father died. Bigger and harder [...] There's more come too since his father died. That's weird, but it's definitely true. He's losing it" (140). While

Colman's belief that his penis is bigger, harder, and more potent than when Joss was alive seemingly reflects an attempt to assert the "realness" of his maleness in comparison to his father's "inauthentic" masculinity, his reflection that he is "losing it" implies that his intensified experience of the phallus is a fantastical coping mechanism.

Colman's expression of hyper-masculinity after Joss's death may be read as a backlash against Joss's femininity and feminism. Although Joss functions within the two-sexed system by living maleness, his tenderness reveals that he does not disavow characteristics that are usually deemed "feminine." By outlining feminine and feminist aspects of Joss's character, Kay counters the notion that "transsexuals" embody gender stereotypes as is seen in the transphobic belief that "trans-men" perform hyper-masculinity in an attempt to gain patriarchal power (*Unpacking* 122). In contrast, Joss challenges the masculine ideal and strict gender binaries in his parenting. For instance, he teaches Colman that "Black men need to be more gentle [...] They could learn a lot from women" (192). Joss's feminist teaching of his son to question the association of masculinity, and more specifically black masculinity, with aggression undermines the notion that female-to-male transsexuals have internalized misogyny and also challenges the racist view that black men are innately violent. Joss's feminism suggests that his past as a girl positively informs his present experience as a man.

Colman's rejection of Joss because of his gender liminality is ironic considering that Colman is also, on many levels, an abjected subject that lives liminality. As Colman was born in Scotland and raised in England, both his nationality and ethnicity are abject. His assertion that he "didn't feel Scottish. Didn't feel English either" (51) shows that he,

like Joss, embodies a space between or beyond borders. Colman is also an abjected subject as an adopted child who belongs neither fully to Joss and Millicent nor to his birthparents. Moreover, he is of mixed race; he reflects “If I’d got a chance I’d have probably liked to see a photograph of my mother and one of my father. I don’t even know which one was black or where the black one came from” (58). Colman is forced to “out” his abjection when he is repeatedly asked where he comes from, an invasive question that implies the presumption that because he is not white he is nationally and ethnically other. By aligning him with otherness, this questioning works to erase his ethnic abjectivity. Considering that Colman is part white and has not “got a clue” (58) about his ethnic origins, he cannot truthfully claim this otherness and, instead tells these inquisitive strangers “I dunno” (58). The difficulty of living with this ethnic abjection is apparent in Colman’s assertion that “the next fucker that asks me where I come from I’m going to say, yes, I come from Hawaii, Morocco, Trinidad, or any place they ask. What does it matter anyway?” (58). Colman’s frustration suggests that it is easier to succumb to binaries and align with otherness than to inhabit a liminal space which is widely considered incomprehensible and refuted.<sup>16</sup>

While, for the most of *Trumpet*, Colman fails to empathize with Joss or see parallels between their experiences as abjected subjects, near the end of *Trumpet*, Colman

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<sup>16</sup> Although Colman faces much racism, he fails to see parallels between his experiences of discrimination and the transphobia that his father would have faced if he were known to have a female body. Colman reflects, “It is not easy to travel in this country. Black guys like him. People always think that they are going to be wrong or they’ve done something wrong or they’re *lying*” (emphasis added 189). While Colman knows the oppressiveness of feeling like he is under constant surveillance, he fails to consider how this experience may, in ways, reflect what Joss feels as someone who is “passing.” Considering that Colman believes that Joss “lied” to him, Colman’s reflection on the social mistrust that he encounters as a black man is ironic.

begins to show respect for the gendered story that Joss constructed about himself.<sup>17</sup> Kay thereby shows the importance and potentially positive outcomes of doing justice to the “narratives [that “trans-people”] meticulously circulated about themselves when they were alive” (Halberstam “Telling” 14). Colman starts to feel guilty about selling his father’s story to Sophie Stone and is haunted by memories of his father’s gentleness and caring. Thinking about what Sophie’s book will look like, Colman imagines a “photograph of his father as a little girl [...] with sinister captions. His father keeps coming back to him. He won’t stop it. He won’t let him alone. Corrie in, coorie in, he says and tucks him into bed” (256). Notably, Colman is haunted by an interaction with his father that emphasizes Joss’s liminal maleness as he performs the stereotypically maternal role of tucking his son into bed. This memory calls upon Colman to attend to and accept Joss’s gender complexity. Colman’s apparent decision to stop working with Sophie — after they sleep together, he leaves her a note that says “No can do. Sorry, mate” (264) — suggests that he recognizes the violence that would be done to his father by outing his childhood as a girl.

By alluding to Colman’s increased empathy for Joss, Kay shows that affective shifts are possible. In addition to refusing to work with Stone, Colman decides to go see

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<sup>17</sup> Alison Lumsden maintains that *Trumpet* implies “that gender is not a biological imperative, not an essential given, but a contingent ontology which we can constitute almost at will” (88) and also maintains that “*Trumpet* seems to posit the idea that subjectivity and identity are almost infinitely flexible” (89). Lars Eckstein, in contrast, provides a more nuanced depiction of the construction of subjectivity that accounts for Kay’s commentary on the difficulty of rewriting the past. He asserts:

*Trumpet* acknowledges that there are stories that are ‘real’ enough, with which human beings place themselves and rely upon in the process of identity formation. While we have to deal with our bag of history, however, *Trumpet* suggests that we may nevertheless choose to reinvent ourselves by creating additional, alternative stories departing from those that are given to us. (62)

While Kay’s depiction of Colman’s failure to rewrite Joss’s gender shows that our pasts cannot be easily changed, Joss’s shift in gender expression reveals that we can write new stories to add to the old. Kay thus simultaneously validates the power of personal histories while signalling the possibility of change.

his mother in Torr which suggests that he is beginning to accept the kinship bonds that he rejected after his father's death. While Colman's decision to read the letter that his father left for him seemingly also signals a desire to re-establish a connection to his family, his reasoning behind opening the letter left to him by his father is unclear. Whereas Colman may expect the letter from Joss to provide excuses for "lying" about his gender, instead Colman is confronted with Joss's recounting of his own father's history. Joss notes that he was "changed for ever by the death of [his father,] John Moore" (276) and asserts, "I missed holding his black hand in the street. Looking at it, comparing it to my own. I was on my own then. Looking at my own hand, trying to remember my father's lines. They were darker than mine, his lifeline, his heart" (276). This comparison of hands suggests that Joss (sub)consciously modelled his masculinity on his memory of his father.<sup>18</sup>

Kay's commentary on the power of father figures creates a parallel between Joss and Colman's lives, and thereby emphasizes that the genders of both "trans-men" and "cis-men" are influenced by social and familial forces. Notably, "We do not learn details of Colman's response to the letter" (Clandfield 19), and thus *Trumpet's* ambiguous ending signals that Colman's work toward empathy is not complete, and thereby sends the message to cis readers that the empathetic identifications that they make with trans-people need to continue beyond the pages of trans historical novels. *Trumpet* thus encourages understandings of working toward empathy as a liminal experience that is never fully completed and requires ongoing dedication.

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<sup>18</sup> Joss's cross-gender expression may thus function as a way of keeping alive both his father and his tie to black culture while being raised by a white mother.

### III. Loving Liminality

Although *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* foreground relationships between “trans-people” and “cis-people” and, in the latter case, also among “trans-people,” these novels make broader statements about the struggles and difficult decisions that must be made in relationships regardless of the gender expressions of those involved. *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* thereby counter the notion that relationships with trans-people are harder or less rewarding than those with cis-people and, in turn, challenge views of partnerships with trans-people as constituting a form of abject kinship. *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* undermine understandings of both trans-people and their kinship bonds as abject not only by depicting “trans-people” as being worthy of love but also by highlighting the benefits of loving those who are “transgender” or “transsexual.” Importantly, while Feinberg and Kay show the value of developing respectful and loving relationships with trans-people — both as readers and in our everyday lives — neither author idealizes these relationships. Rather, they work to bridge the gap between trans-people and cis-people by indirectly likening the difficulties faced in relationships between trans-men and cis-women, as well as between trans-people, to those experienced by non-trans couples.

In *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, Kath Weston reflects upon her experience studying gay and lesbian “families,” and thereby provides insight into why queer and trans kinship may be viewed as abject.<sup>19</sup> Weston asserts, “Fluid boundaries and

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<sup>19</sup> Although Weston often describes queer kinship bonds in terms of “family,” I try to avoid using this term since I agree with Judith Butler that we need to refuse “to allow kinship to become reducible to ‘family’” (*Undoing* 129) and must try to change “the terms by which such topics are rendered thinkable” (129).



varied membership meant no neatly replicable units, no defined cycles of expansion and contraction, no patterns of dispersal” (109). While she notes that participants in her ethnographic study viewed this fluidity “in a highly positive light as the product of unfettered creativity” (109), to an anthropologist these relationships “represented a nightmare” (109). People who are invested in biological ties and the heterosexual, nuclear family model that can be clearly defined and mapped out may experience queer and trans kinship bonds that deviate from traditional family structures as “nightmarishly” abject.

Judith Butler’s broad definition of kinship as “a kind of doing, a practice that enacts the assemblage of significations as it takes place” (*Undoing* 126) is especially useful when thinking about the kinship bonds that queer and trans-people choose which often differ from traditional familial models. The value of employing such an open-ended definition of kinship that allows for the diversity among trans and queer kinship bonds becomes apparent when reading *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* in relation to each other. Both novels challenge the notion that “kinship is always already heterosexual” (123), although they do so in disparate ways. Feinberg rejects traditional family models through his depiction of the importance of “queer” community support and the formation of romantic partnerships between abjected subjects. Kay, in contrast, shows how the heterosexual, nuclear family structure may be appropriated by those who are considered to be abject, and thus *Trumpet* alludes to the “queer” secrets that may hide behind traditional family structures.

In order to better understand the commentaries that *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* provide about kinship we must recognize that the chosen “families” of queer and trans-people cannot “be understood apart from the families in which [...they grew] up” (Weston 3). The kinship bonds and romantic partnerships that Jess and Joss establish in their adulthood must thus be read in relation to the biological families from which they become estranged. Notably, in *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess completely cuts off ties with his birthparents who try to force him to be feminine in his youth by institutionalizing him (21) and enrolling him in charm school (23). As Warkentin notes, Jess “is unable to pass as female, even as a young child [...] Jess presents herself as transgendered from the start, despite her own best efforts to perform as female (and later, as male)” (168). Jess’s parents become a distant memory in the novel as Jess chooses in his adulthood to form relationships with other abjected subjects who are not biologically related to him. Feinberg thereby implies that chosen relationships that provide emotional support are superior to biological family dynamics that are abusive, as is clearly conveyed through his depiction of the strong bonds between and among butches and femmes in the early lesbian community in which Jess comes out.

Although Joss, in *Trumpet*, remains in contact with his mother, Edith, through letters and sends her money on a weekly basis, like Jess, he too keeps physical distance from this parental figure. In the section of *Trumpet* that is told from Edith’s point of view, she recollects Joss coming to visit wearing a suit and tie, and alludes to Joss telling her about his gender transition which, notably, she cannot hear because “The memory has no sound. It is a silent movie” (221). Edith seemingly does not understand the

consequences of her refusal to listen to Joss and recognize his maleness as she wonders “Why won’t she [Josephine] come and visit like she used to? Nobody knows her like Josephine knew her. And if nobody knows you how can you be yourself?” (221). Kay’s description of Edith’s loss of Joss as also entailing an alienation from herself implies that the familial breakdowns that happen as a result of transphobia or homophobia may entail loss and pain not only for the trans or queer person but also for the cis-people whose prejudices lead to the disintegration of these familial bonds. Part of the way that Joss deals with his estrangement from his mother is by developing his own traditional family unit. Joss’s appropriation of the nuclear family model by getting married and adopting a child presumably provides him with a sense of safety as it consolidates his manhood to the world.

Feinberg and Kay highlight the powerful nature of chosen kinship bonds by examining how the identities, experiences and emotions of partners become intricately interconnected. The reaction of Jess’s femme partner, Theresa, to Jess’s decision to transition in *Stone Butch Blues* shows that the interconnectedness of the lives of those in romantic relationships may result in partners becoming invested in each other’s subjectivities and bodies remaining constant. Jess and Theresa’s relationship falls apart when Jess decides to pass as a man. While it is tempting to read Theresa’s unsupportive reaction to Jess’s desire to pass as transphobic, in order to better understand her response we need to closely attend to the interrelationship of Theresa and Jess’s identities and experiences. Jess has a dream in which, as ze tells Theresa, “‘I had a beard and my chest was flat. It made me so happy. It was like a part of me that I can’t explain’” (143).

Describing this dream, Jess asserts, “‘I’m not even sure I felt like a woman’” (143).

When Jess asks Theresa what she thinks about hir dream, Theresa responds, “‘I think we should go back to sleep’” (143). While Theresa’s dismissiveness establishes a divide between herself and Jess that further isolates Jess as ze contemplates transitioning, Theresa’s unwillingness to discuss Jess’s “transgender” feelings must be examined in relation to her strong investment in a femme lesbian identity.

Theresa is a character who does not just embrace gender and sexual liminality in her partner and herself but also is strongly invested in proudly claiming, and thereby politicizing, her position as an abjected subject. Although butches are more obviously liminal as they embody female masculinity, considering that feminine women are socially expected and pressured to desire cis-men, femmes are also liminal abjected subjects not just because of their queer sexual desires for butches but also because of their rejection of “proper” feminine desire for male masculinity and the subsequent challenge that they pose to the link between the feminine and heterosexual ideals. As femme theorist Minnie Bruce Pratt notes, lesbianism is “a sexuality thought too aggressive and ‘masculine’ to fit with my ‘femininity’” (21). Femmes thereby show how gender and sexual binaries and ideals are connected and inform each other. Considering that Jess and Theresa bond as liminal abjected subjects who love and desire each other, at least in part, because of this liminality, femme-butche desire challenges the notion that abjected genders are repulsive.

Theresa’s decision to end hir relationship with Jess if ze transitions is depicted as extremely difficult, but one that Theresa feels is necessary in order to maintain her identity as a femme lesbian and continue to live liminality. While Theresa has difficulty

accepting Jess's "trans" experience, as is seen in her insistence that Jess is a woman, she understands hir need to pass for the purposes of survival.<sup>20</sup> When Jess finally decides to transition, Theresa tells hir, "'Maybe I do understand what you're saying. I just don't want to admit that I think you're right'" (151).<sup>21</sup> Theresa understands, as an abjected subject herself — albeit one who encounters less physical violence than Jess because she (unwillingly) passes when not with a butch partner — the difficulty of facing persecution for living liminality.<sup>22</sup> Theresa's understanding of Jess's need to "pass" is apparent when she tells Jess that if ze does not transition, "'you'll probably be killed on the street or take your own life out of madness'" (153). Theresa seemingly initially resists admitting that Jess needs to pass because doing so means that she will have to choose between sacrificing her identity as a femme for the sake of her partner's survival or losing a loving relationship.

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<sup>20</sup> While Theresa does not as actively denigrate her partner's "transgender" expression as Bridgett does in Ellen Galford's *Moll Cutpurse* which I discussed in my introduction, like Bridgett, Theresa tries to get Jess to accept hir "womanhood." Theresa yells at Jess, "'You're a woman!'" (147) to which Jess responds, "'No I'm not [...] I'm a he-she. That's different'" (147). Yet, rather than just stemming from transphobia, Theresa's reaction against Jess's decision to transition is primarily self-motivated, reflecting her political, emotional, as well as sexual desires for women. She tells Jess, "'I'm a woman, Jess. I love you because you're a woman, too / [...] I just don't want to be some man's wife, even if that man's a woman'" (148). Considering that partners develop attachments to their lovers' bodies, presumably Jess's decision to physically alter hir body also influences Theresa's affective and sexual connection to Jess.

<sup>21</sup> Before Jess makes the decision to transition and Theresa, in turn, ends their relationship, Jess is once again arrested and assaulted by police officers. Theresa expresses her frustration and sense of helplessness, telling Jess "'I'm so sorry [...] I couldn't stop them. They cuffed me so fast. I just couldn't do anything'" (137). Reflecting on Theresa's emotions, Jess thinks, "'That's exactly how I felt. We really were in this life together'" (137). Feinberg thereby highlights Theresa's empathy and Jess's sense that they have a mutual understanding due to the oppression that they encounter.

<sup>22</sup> Theresa and Jess have disparate experiences of abjected subjectivity: Theresa copes with her usually invisible gender and sexual liminality by openly proclaiming it while Jess, who deals with ongoing persecution because hir liminality is visible, gets to the point where, for the sake of survival, ze must try to make hir abjection invisible.

While Theresa empathizes with Jess, she refuses to stay with hir not just because of the consequences that this decision would have on her identity, but also on her lifestyle. Theresa is unwilling to live in fear of Jess being discovered to have been born female; she tells Jess, “I can’t live as the scared couple in apartment 3G who can’t trust people enough to have friends. I can’t live like a fugitive with you. I wouldn’t be able to survive it” (152). Feinberg thereby highlights the stress of passing and how isolating this experience can be for both trans-people and their partners.

For Theresa, this stress is related not just to potential “discovery,” but seemingly also to the mental stress of experiencing passing as an admittance of shame. Theresa’s insistence on rejecting the shame associated with being a lesbian and, more specifically, a femme lesbian, is apparent when she explains to Jess, “If I’m not with a butch everyone just assumes I’m straight. It’s like I’m passing too, against my will. I’m sick of the world thinking I’m straight” (151).<sup>23</sup> In order for Theresa to continue to openly live as a femme, her partner must be a woman who is masculine. Considering that the identities and experiences of those who form strong kinship bonds become intertwined, if Jess becomes a man, Theresa will be seen as a feminine heterosexual woman, and thus her abjection — which she reclaims by taking pride in it — will be forced underground.

As Theresa experiences her gender and sexuality as politically charged, critiquing the feminine and heterosexual ideals is central to her subjectivity. Theresa and Jess, as a femme-butth couple, signal the artificiality of the supposed heterosexual original. As Butler argues, “The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames

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<sup>23</sup> Misreadings of Theresa as heterosexual occur even within the lesbian community wherein many people read her femininity as an attempt to pass as straight because she is ashamed of her desires.

brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original” (*Gender Trouble* 41). Theresa’s investment in making a political statement is apparent when she tells Jess, “I put on lipstick and high heels and walk down the street arm in arm with you, Jess. This is my life, and I’m damn brave to love who I love. Don’t try to take who I am away from me” (151). This assertion reflects Theresa’s experience of who she loves as who she is. Theresa’s decision to end her relationship with Jess shows that people may resist changes in their partners because such transformations call for undesired changes in themselves. Although the circumstances between Jess and Theresa are quite unique, Feinberg’s depiction of the tension that occurs in relationships when the needs of partners conflict has a wider applicability, and thus may encourage readers to consider how the difficulties experienced in relationships between trans and non-trans-people reflect hardships in relationships between cis-people.

While fostering empathetic identifications with Jess, *Stone Butch Blues* does not paint Theresa in an entirely unsympathetic light. Rather, Feinberg shows the difficulty of Theresa’s decision to end her relationship with Jess even though she loves him. Yet critical readings of Theresa often vastly simplify Feinberg’s complex depiction of Theresa’s decision to end her relationship with Jess, fail to closely examine how the gender identities of Theresa and Jess are intertwined, and tend to erase Theresa’s gender and sexual liminality. While Jean Bobby Noble maintains that “Theresa chooses the emerging lesbian-feminist separatist movement that provides a way for her to transcend her own past and the limitations of passing as heterosexual with Jess” (*Masculinities* 131), Theresa does not end her relationship with Jess because she “chooses” lesbian-

feminism but, rather, because she wants visibility as a lesbian and, more specifically, a femme lesbian which is only possible if she has a butch partner. In contrast to Prosser's claim that Theresa finds "no bar between femme and lesbian feminist" (182), Feinberg reiterates repeatedly that Theresa is not readily welcomed into the lesbian-feminist community and, actually, is generally viewed as suspect by lesbian-feminists (135, 136, 139, 151).

Theresa is critical of the lesbian-feminist denigration of butch-femme dynamics wherein butches are viewed as "male chauvinist pigs" (135) and femmes are considered to be "sleeping with the enemy" (136).<sup>24</sup> Theresa's refusal to sacrifice her identity for the sake of her partner complicates lesbian-feminist readings of butch-femme dynamics as replications of oppressive heterosexual relationships wherein the feminine partner is passive and selfless. Many critical readings of Theresa as a lesbian-feminist fail to account for her continued assertion of both a femme lesbian identity and desire for butches. While she asserts that butches could "learn a thing or two from the women's movement about how to respect femmes" (139), there does not appear to be proof in the novel to support the claim that Theresa uncritically adopts the lesbian-feminist egalitarian sexual ideal of "mutuality, reciprocity, and equality" (Halberstam *Female* 129).

Although it is important for readers to respond empathetically to trans characters, this empathetic identification should not be coupled with an erasure of the complexities of non-trans characters. Simplifications of Theresa seemingly arise out of the strong

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<sup>24</sup> Pratt provides a powerful summary of the type of marginalization that many femmes and butches experienced in lesbian-feminist communities in *S/he*. She asserts "Often a lesbian considered 'too butch' was assumed to be, at least in part, a male chauvinist [...] Frequently a lesbian who was 'too femme' was perceived as a woman who had not liberated her mind or her body" (19).



empathetic identifications that critics develop with Jess; as Theresa ultimately rejects Jess, those who empathetically identify with hir may view Theresa as a villainous character even though *Stone Butch Blues* does not support such a wholehearted critique of Theresa. We must thus closely attend to the nuances of novels in order to avoid instating a reductive binary between “good” and “bad” characters — those who deserve empathy and those who deserve scorn. Considering that *Stone Butch Blues* calls on readers to empathize with both Jess and Theresa, the critical depictions of Theresa developed by Noble, Prosser and Halberstam reveal that authorial attempts at guiding identifications may go awry.

Critical (mis)interpretations of Theresa show readers the importance of being self-reflexive when reading historical fiction. Self-reflexive analyses may help readers recognize when their strong empathetic identifications with certain characters are leading them to violently disidentify with other characters who are portrayed in a more ambivalent manner. Moreover, considerations of how empathetic identifications and violent disidentifications often work in tandem may inspire critical awareness of how such binary approaches to (dis)identifying may erase the nuances of characters. Reflecting upon the (dis)identifications that we make as readers may not only open us up to more nuanced reading and identificatory practices but also make us aware and critical of how our personal and political investments may limit our understandings of others, and thereby lead to the loss of (potential) relationships.

Although Jess’s partnership with Theresa ends, Feinberg challenges the notion that trans-people cannot find supportive relationships by depicting the loving, although

initially tumultuous, dynamic between Jess and hir neighbour, a trans-woman named Ruth. Interestingly, Ruth is initially unwilling to establish a friendship with Jess because she believes that forming a relationship with this “gender identity crisis” (248) would be too much work (254). Feinberg’s depiction of one “trans-person” rejecting another highlights the insidiousness of the urge to repudiate abjected subjects. Ruth rejects Jess because she fears that this relationship may disrupt the stability that she has in her life and force her to come face-to-face with her own persecution as an abjected subject.

Considering that the traumas that trans-people experience are also experienced second hand by their loved ones — as is apparent in this novel’s depiction of femmes nursing butches who have been abused — Feinberg shows that wariness to establishing relationships with trans-people may be understandable. Yet hir depiction of the supportive and caring relationship that Jess and Ruth eventually establish emphasizes that avoidance of developing kinship bonds with abjected subjects may seriously limit one’s experiences of pleasure and love.

Although Ruth gains a loving relationship upon letting Jess into her life, Feinberg does not idealize this relationship. For instance, after being physically attacked, Jess hesitates to take hir pain to Ruth. When ze finally goes to Ruth, she tells Jess, “‘This is why I didn’t want to let you in my life [...] Because I knew I’d have to look. When it’s me I don’t have to see it. But when I care about you I have to look. I see it and I don’t want to’” (260). While Feinberg here highlights the shared pain of trans-people, ze also provides a more general statement about the intertwining of lives that happens in loving relationships and the ways that partners may take on each other’s pain. By emphasizing

Jess's fear that Ruth will reject him, Feinberg highlights the difficult nature of love as well as the vulnerability that comes with establishing dependencies on others. In her ethnographic study of lesbian and gay chosen "families," Weston asserts that "Like their heterosexual counterpart, most gay men and lesbians insisted that family members are people who are 'there for you,' people you can count on emotionally and materially" (113).<sup>25</sup> This description of queer kinship reflects the dynamic between Jess and Ruth who establish a strong bond by nurturing and caring for each other. This loving relationship provides them not only with companionship but also with the pleasure of knowing that they have somewhere to turn when in need of support. Considering that Feinberg's description of the diverse positive and negative affects that are evoked by love is also applicable to relationships between cis-people, *Stone Butch Blues* encourages cis readers to see similarities between their kinship bonds and those that Jess develops.

Whereas *Stone Butch Blues* depicts two abjected "trans" subjects developing a strong and supportive relationship, *Trumpet* explores love between a "cis-woman" and "trans-man." As Millicent readily accepts Joss's liminal gender, Kay reveals that non-trans-people can show their trans partners compassion and respect.<sup>26</sup> The emotionally and sexually satisfying connection between Joss and Millicent encourages readers not just

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<sup>25</sup> In his analysis of Tom Spanbauer's *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon*, Norman Jones likewise notes that Spanbauer's protagonist "comes to understand kinship not according to biological ties defined by a given mother and father but rather according to the volitional bonds formed through a shared history of emotional and material support, imperfect and even fractured as those bonds may be" (151). Similarly, Feinberg does not uncritically celebrate bonds between trans-people but, rather, shows the pleasure that such bonds can provide even if they are "imperfect and fractured."

<sup>26</sup> Kay's depiction of the diverse reactions of characters to discovering that Joss had a female body reveals that transphobia, in addition to being changeable, is not a universal or inevitable reaction to trans-people. See, for instance, Kay's depiction of the registrar, Mohammad Nassar Sharif who expresses a gentle curiosity about Joss's life and relationship with Millicent.

to empathetically identify with them as individuals but also to admire their relationship. Reflecting on her purpose in writing *Trumpet*, Kay asserts, “I wanted to write a love story where the reader would become so involved with the story that they too would believe Joss and be calling him ‘he’ to themselves” (Kay “Interview” par 5). Kay uses the loving dynamic between Joss and Millicent to foster trans-sensitivity, and thus this novel shows the power of literature that foregrounds love to promote empathy for the oppressed.

As readers are introduced to Joss through Millicent who respects her husband’s maleness, Kay establishes a powerful trans-positive first impression that readers take with them throughout the novel. Millicent evokes sympathy by describing her love for her dead husband — outlining the generally compassionate and supportive nature of this relationship — and the loneliness she feels after he has died. Kay highlights the effect that transphobia may have on both trans-people and non-trans-allies in her depiction of Millicent’s persecution after Joss’s death. As Tracy Hargreaves asserts, Millicent’s

narrative is in dispute with the repeated attempts to re-inscribe Joss as female, lesbian, dyke or pervert, a range of biological, sexual and medical categories, which are offered as possible solutions to the riddle posed by the perceived dislocation of Joss’s lived masculine gender and the material fact of his moribund female body. (6)

Individuals and institutional forces attempt to make Joss, and subsequently Millicent, fit into the heterosexual/homosexual binary as “lesbians” so that they can relegate them to otherness and disavow the abject nature of their desire which cannot be accurately or fully described as either “heterosexual” or “lesbian.”

Throughout her relationship with Joss, Millicent lives with the knowledge that his female body could be discovered, and thus she is presumably aware of and prepared, on

some level, to deal with how misreadings of Joss would subsequently lead to misinterpretations of her sexuality. Reflecting on the media's erasure of Joss's liminal maleness, Millicent asserts, "No doubt they will call me a lesbian. They will find words to put on to me. Words that don't fit me. Words that don't fit Joss" (154). Reading the dynamic between Joss and Millicent as "lesbian" involves a problematic erasure of Joss's male gender expression. Just as rereadings of Joss as a woman after his death are harmful and disrespectful, so are readings of Millicent as a lesbian — a label that makes no sense to her as she views her husband as a man. Hargreaves argues that Kay depicts the relationship between Joss and Millicent as "an enduring and apparently heterosexual love" (3). Hargreaves's use of the word "apparently" here is telling since, when Millicent rejects the term "lesbian," she does not do so by asserting that she is heterosexual. This novel thereby seemingly attempts to complicate the tendency to presume that because Millicent is not a lesbian she must be heterosexual. *Trumpet* thus highlights the insidiousness of the sexual binary between heterosexual and homosexual, and the failure of these terms to adequately account for the complexities of desire.

Kay highlights both the pleasures that can result from developing loving relationships with "trans-people" and the effect that transphobia has on the life partners of those who are "transgender" or "transsexual." Millicent reflects that "One of the bits in the papers said something like, 'Millie Moody must have felt lonely or frightened. Must have felt like she was sitting on a time bomb.' But of course it didn't feel like that at all. I was never lonely, seldom frightened. I am frightened and lonely now" (40). Although Millicent's assertion that she never felt lonely when Joss was alive conveys the power of

their loving connection and encourages awareness of the potential benefits of being open to developing caring relationships with trans-people, after Joss dies Millicent feels socially marginalized and alone, and reflects upon the difficulties that she faced in the past because she chose to have a relationship with a black man who was of mixed race and had a female body. After they marry, Millicent distances herself from her mother not only because she is afraid that her mother will discover that Joss has a female body but also because of her mother's racism (85). Millicent only realizes that she "felt at all nervous about Joss" (85) in retrospect which suggests that one of the survival mechanisms that trans-people and their partners adopt is to repress their fear of social persecution. Millicent realizes that she is "nervous" around her mother after her mother "pats Colman's hair and says, 'My, my, what a thick head of hair. I think this hair could do with shearing'" (85). Her mother's use of the term "shearing" presumably irritates Millicent as it likens her adopted son who is black to an animal. Millicent's mother both dehumanizes Colman and positions him as racially other, thereby eradicating his liminality as a mixed race subject and asserting her white superiority. Millicent's distancing of herself from her mother reflects a privileging of her chosen kinship bonds with Joss and Colman over a biological familial bond and alludes to her position as an ally for trans and mixed race people.

While Joss and Millicent's relationship reveals the ability of those who experience white privilege to accept and respect abjected black mixed-race subjects, the racial tensions in this relationship also highlight the limitations of cross-racial understanding. Kay shows the divide between these two lovers due to Millicent's inability as a white

woman to fully understand Joss not only as a trans-man but also as someone who is black. For instance, while they are trying to agree on a name for Colman, Joss responds to Millicent's mocking of the names that he proposes — Miles, Louis, Alastair — by slapping her across the face, telling her ““That's enough [...] White people always laugh at black names”” (5). By foregrounding this power struggle and the tension caused by racial differences near the beginning of *Trumpet*, Kay refuses to challenge transphobia by idealizing relationships between “trans-people” and “cis-people,” and, rather, attends to the complexities of relationships between those who are of different gender and racial backgrounds. This scene of abuse inhibits straightforward empathetic identifications with either Millicent — whose mockery of Joss reflects an uncritical approach to her white privilege — or Joss — whose physical abuse of Millicent signals a lack of awareness of his power as a man in this marriage.<sup>27</sup> As Anne Whitehead notes, Millicent and Joss come to a compromise by naming their son “Colman” “after the black jazz musician, Coleman Hawkins” but spelling this name “in the Celtic form” (158). Thus, while this scene highlights the difficulties that may arise in relationships between differently racialized subjects, Colman's name shows that racial differences can be bridged.

Kay further resists idealizing the relationship between Joss and Millicent in her depiction of the diverse emotions that Millicent experiences upon finding out that the man that she has fallen in love with has a female body. Looking at a photo of Joss, Millicent thinks:

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<sup>27</sup> While *Trumpet* highlights the limits of cross-racial understanding and the insidiousness of white privilege, Millicent is also depicted as an ally for people of colour. For instance, Colman recollects one time when he was on the bus with his mother and a black man was called “a fucking ape or some shit like that. And my mother, in a fucking flash, was on her feet giving the guy donkey. Saying she was ashamed to come from the same country as him and that he was pig ignorant” (54).

no matter how hard I try, I can't see him as anything other than him, my Joss, my husband. It has always been that way since the first day he told me. I can't remember what I thought the day he first told me. I remember feeling stupid, then angry. I remember the terrible shock of it all; how even after he told me I still couldn't quite believe it. I remember the expression on his face; the fear, that I would suddenly stop loving him. I remember covering his mouth with my hand and then kissing it. But I don't think I ever thought he was wrong. (35)

Although Millicent's assertion that she felt "stupid" reflects the notion that she should have "known" the "truth" about Joss's identity and her anger implies that she felt betrayed or "deceived," she quickly overcomes these transphobic reactions because she still sees Joss as a man and, more importantly, a man whom she loves. Unlike Colman who tries desperately to rewrite his memories of his father, Millicent's continued view of Joss as a man after he outs his female body to her is informed by the fact that she does not question her past experiences with Joss and, rather, lets her understanding of him as a man guide their present and future relationship. Millicent may be able to quickly accept Joss's liminal abjected gender because this interracial relationship has already required her to make social sacrifices in order to be with Joss and also has called upon her to recognize her privilege as a white woman and question her biases.

Kay importantly demonstrates that acceptance of "trans" experience is not the only struggle those in trans/non-trans relationships may face as is apparent in the conflict that arises between Joss and Millicent due to their inability to have a child. Considering that partnerships between many cis-people also often involve tensions around getting pregnant, Kay encourages awareness that relationships, regardless of the genders of those concerned, often involve similar struggles. Upon getting frustrated with Joss because he cannot get her pregnant, Millicent reflects, "I feel furious with him. Why can't he give



me a child? He can do everything else. Walk *like* a man, talk *like* a man, dress *like* a man, blow his horn *like* a man. Why can't he get me pregnant" (emphasis added 37). Millicent's assertion that Joss can do things "like" a man undermines his manhood and implies that he is just performing maleness, as is apparent when she thinks, "Joss pulled the wool over my eyes" (37). Like Colman who feels that Joss deceived him and made him love a father that he did not really know, Millicent reflects that Joss "tricked me, he made me fall in love with him [...] I couldn't do anything else but marry him" (38). This statement reinscribes the transphobic notion that abjected "trans" subjects are undesirable, and thus a cis-person would need to be "tricked" into having a relationship with someone who was trans.

Kay reveals that even relationships wherein a non-trans partner is largely accepting of her trans partner's identity may contain moments when cross-gender expression is targeted and mocked. When they start to talk about adopting a child, Millicent says to Joss that they can tell the adoption agency that "'your sperm count is too low'" (40). Millicent reflects, "The look on his face is a picture. I laugh so much my stomach hurts" (40). Although Kay does not describe the look on Joss's face, presumably he is hurt by this joke that targets his "lack" of a penis and his failure to "fully" embody maleness by getting Millicent pregnant. By establishing a parallel between trans-men and cis-men who have a low sperm count, Kay encourages readers to contemplate the similar ways that the masculine ideal negatively affects men from diverse backgrounds by asserting impossible, and often detrimental, objectives that men are expected to try to meet at all times. While Millicent's hysterical laughter appears to be insensitive, it is

seemingly less about Joss's insufficiency as a man than about Millicent needing an outlet for her frustration and pain. As Kristeva notes, "laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection" (8). Laughter helps Millicent to release the frustration she feels because of the difficulties that arise from loving a liminal abjected subject.

In addition to creating parallels between socially accepted and abjected kinship bonds as a means of encouraging trans-positivity, *Trumpet* also calls upon readers to admire Joss and Millicent's relationship because it is erotically fulfilling. By depicting a "cis-woman" who passionately desires a "trans-man," *Trumpet* challenges the tendency of partners of outed "passing" people in the past to deny their sexual relationships with these abjected subjects. As Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough note, generally the female partner of a female-to-male cross-dresser who "passed" as a man denied "knowledge of her partner's biological sex" (163) and also maintained that she had had no sexual contact with her partner. This disavowal situates "trans-people" as abject and undesirable, and sends the message that sexual contact with these abjected subjects is shameful. Kay's decision to give Joss one life partner who expresses much desire and love for him may thus be read as countering the history of "cis-people" repudiating their "trans" partners. Interestingly, Kay's decision to represent Millicent as a supportive figure who "steadfastly refuses to have anything to do with a biography of Joss" (Halberstam "Telling" 25) contrasts with Billy Tipton's last wife who commissioned Diane Middlebrook to write her husband's biography seemingly in an attempt to "exonerate her from the supposed crime of impersonation so successfully enacted by her late husband" (25).

Kay challenges the notion that partners of trans-people are “deceived” victims by depicting Millicent as not only accepting her husband’s gender expression but also desiring Joss both before and after she knows about his female body. Upon first seeing Joss, Millicent notes that “He was well dressed, astonishingly handsome” (11). Importantly, this desire does not waver when Millicent finds out that Joss is biologically female. Rather, she and Joss have an active and satisfying sex life. In response to Colman asking Joss about sex with Millicent, Joss responds that “it’s good. It’s really good” (168) and tells him that they have sex “Three times a week” (168). Reflecting on their passion for one another, Millicent states “We make love on the living room floor. He pulls my hair and kisses me all over my face. He pushes himself into me. He mutters things in my ear. I am possessed” (36). By highlighting the sexual gratification Millicent receives from loving Joss, Kay shows how opening oneself up to developing relationships with trans-people may lead to both pleasure and happiness.

As *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* show, depicting loving relationships with trans-people is a powerful means of countering transphobic representations of trans-people and their kinship bonds as abject. Considering that the trans protagonists in both *Stone Butch Blues* and *Trumpet* find loving, supportive relationships, these novels may also be read as critiquing the view that trans-people are doomed to lives of isolation and loneliness because they are abject or that they can only find happy relationships if they change their gender expressions, as suggested in many lesbian(-feminist) and queer historical novels like Ellen Galford’s *Moll Cutpurse: Her True History* (1984) and Isabel

Miller's *Patience and Sarah* (1972).<sup>28</sup> Feinberg and Kay use the allure of loving and supportive romantic relationships to foster admiration, and possibly even love, for the “trans” and “trans-positive” characters in their novels. The power of romance to inspire empathetic identifications with socially abjected subjects is presumably part of the reason that the vast majority of LGBTQ2 historical novels foreground loving relationships. As Carol Thurston notes, romance novels provide “one of the most effective channels for communicating feminist ideas to the broad base of women who must be reached if the women’s movement is to continue to effect significant social change” (163). Likewise, LGBTQ2 historical fiction, which has a wide and diverse readership, uses depictions of the benefits of loving trans and queer people to encourage readers not only to question the transphobic beliefs that they may hold but also to be open to developing caring relationships with trans-people.

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<sup>28</sup> Similar to Galford's *Moll Cutpurse* which I discuss in my introduction, Isabel Miller's groundbreaking novel *Patience and Sarah* — which is widely recognized as being one of the first and most influential LGBTQ2 historical novels — depicts “passing” as a means of attaining independence and avoiding sexist discrimination. Similar to Bridgett in Galford's narrative, Patience attempts to teach Sarah to be a proper woman and to recognize the superiority of womanhood over manhood. Subsequently, *Patience and Sarah* send the message that Sarah's female masculinity is misguided.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### **Desire, Pleasure, and Danger: Erotic Identifications and the Stage in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet***

[The] theatre is a site of desire. Not only in the sense that desire must be played out in the dramatic narrative, but the actors themselves must seduce the audience to some degree to get them involved and focused on the performance. It is this very eroticism and seductive power that has elicited enormous criticism against the theatre at various points in its history.

Leslie Ferris, "Cross-dressing and Women's Theatre" (168)

As outlined in my introduction, many queer theorists have recently called into question the celebration of studies of historical alterity over historical continuity. Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon assert that "we need to question the premise of a historicism that privileges difference over similarity, recognizing that it is the peculiarity of our current historical moment that such a privileging takes place at all" (1609). Sarah Waters's queer historical novel *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) provides a simultaneous commentary on present day and late nineteenth-century male impersonation that highlights the importance of recognizing both historical similarities and differences. This novel thereby offers an indirect critique of the dominance of studies of historical alterity in LGBTQ2 history and historiography, on the one hand, and tendencies to establish trans(a)historical connections between the past and present, on the other. By alluding to (dis)continuities between male impersonation in the Victorian period and drag king performances today, Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* provides insight into the political potentials and limitations of staged cross-gender expressions, and also shows the ability of LGBTQ2 historical fiction to help revalue studies of historical continuities.

While — unlike time-transgression fiction — this period-portraying novel that takes place in Victorian England does not incorporate any explicit temporal slippages between the past and present, the double reading practices called for by historical fiction encourage readers to make connections between the male impersonation that Waters describes and drag king performances today. Waters uses rhetorical strategies to promote awareness of historical (dis)continuities as is apparent in her use of the term “queer” throughout this novel which continually calls on readers to simultaneously be aware of the meaning of this term in the Victorian period as well as its usage today.<sup>1</sup> For instance, after writing to her sister, Alice, describing her love for Kitty, Waters’s protagonist, Nan, receives a letter back wherein Alice asserts, “I can never be happy while your friendship with that woman is so wrong and queer” (134). This description of Nan’s relationship with Kitty evokes both past definitions of “queer” to mean “Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric” (“Queer”) and present usages to denote same-sex desire and sexual deviancy.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas Emily Jeremiah argues that “Present-ness is [...] stressed in *Tipping* by the repeated use of the word ‘queer’ [...] whose insistent use appeals to and affirms a contemporary queer sensibility” (133), I maintain that this term functions not only to establish the “present-ness” of this novel but also to encourage reader awareness of the different meanings of this term in the past and, in turn, to establish the specificity of the

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<sup>1</sup> As Rachel Carroll asserts in her analysis of Waters’s *Affinity* (1999), the use of the term “queer” in this neo-Victorian novel is “placed simultaneously within the late-nineteenth-century continuum of the peculiar and within a late-twentieth-century continuum of desire” (par. 14).

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* “queer” has been used since the end of the nineteenth century as a slang term for a “homosexual; esp. a male homosexual” (“Queer” n2). Yet, notably, the first known usage of this term in such a manner was in 1894, after the time in which *Tipping the Velvet* is set.

historical and social setting of *Tipping the Velvet*. While contemporary reclamations of “queer” recall the earlier connection of this term to eccentricity, they also involve a new celebration of sexual “strangeness” and perversion.<sup>3</sup> Waters’s evocation of both the past and present through her rhetorical choices reveals that studies of historical differences and similarities are not incompatible.

Waters’s open and unabashed use of contemporary terminology to describe past male impersonation calls on readers to recognize historical continuities, and thereby encourages a revaluing of studies of similarities between the past and present. Nan changes her name from Nancy Astley to Nan King upon beginning her stage career (125) — a name that mirrors and evokes the contemporary term “drag king.” Considering that projections of the present onto the past are unavoidable, it is important to recognize the value of such projections as they can tell us much about present political and personal investments. Waters’s anachronistic evocation of the term “drag king” suggests that her depiction of past male impersonation alludes to, and may actually tell us more about, contemporary drag practices and audience readings of these performances than about historical staged cross-dressings. Readers are thereby called upon to contemplate what

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler’s discussion of hate speech and reclamations of term “queer” in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* shows how the ability of terminology to shift may be linked to reclamations of power. She notes that “no speech act has to perform injury” and maintains that “the gap that separates the speech act from its future effects has its auspicious implications: it begins a theory of linguistic agency” and “shows how words might, through time, become disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes” (15). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s embracing of the term “queer” highlights the ability to assert “linguistic agency” over terms that are often used in a hateful manner. She maintains that “‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ still present themselves (however delusively) as objective, empirical categories governed by empirical rules of evidence (however contested). ‘Queer’ seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation” (*Tendencies* 9). The reclaiming of “queer” in contemporary contexts which signals not only opposition to hate speech but also a celebration of sexual deviancy, reveals the ability of the negative impulses of language to be reread as positive, and thereby stripped of their potential to harm others.

political commentaries the depiction of past male impersonation in *Tipping the Velvet* may provide regarding present drag performances.

By defamiliarizing issues of contemporary importance, historical fiction can subtly convey contentious political commentaries without sounding didactic. As Helen Hughes notes, “features of present-day society may be presented for criticism [in historical romances...] The effect is to defamiliarize them, encouraging a stricter scrutiny” (5). In light of the contemporary celebration of drag kings in queer spaces and the tendency to idealize queer communities as accepting and inclusive, Waters’s decision to set her novel in the Victorian period allows her to establish temporal distance between readers and characters, thereby potentially making LGBTQ2 readers more receptive to her critical depiction of “queer” audience reading practices and “lesbian” communities in *Tipping the Velvet*. This subtle critique may, in turn, encourage readers to think critically about the hierarchies that exist in contemporary queer spaces.

Throughout this study, I use the term “male impersonation” to refer primarily to diverse theatrical acts in the past when “women” adopted male dress while I employ the term “drag” in reference to contemporary staged cross-dressings. Past male impersonations — which are often referred to as “breeches” or “trouser” performances — were manifested in a variety of different theatrical forms and settings, and were a popular mode of entertainment in Victorian England.<sup>4</sup> Breeches performances usually took place in the theatre in front of a primarily “heterosexual” audience while drag performances

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<sup>4</sup> For accounts of the various manifestations of male impersonations in the past see, for instance, Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix’s *Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage*, Marjorie Garber’s *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, and Yvonne Shafer’s “Women in Male Roles: Charlotte Cushman and Others.”



today often take place in bars in front of mostly queer audience members. While it is important not to conflate past male impersonation with present drag king performances since such a trans(a)historical approach erases important differences between past and present staged cross-dressings, *Tipping the Velvet* demonstrates the political usefulness of not clearly distinguishing between these two related phenomena. As Jay Sennet and Sarah Bay-Cheng note in their critique of Judith Halberstam's attempt to distinguish between "the drag king, the male impersonator, and the drag butch" (41), there are "gaps and overlaps" between "these distinctions and definitions" (41).

Although theoretical debates about past male impersonation and present drag performances share many similarities, they are generally treated as separate areas of study. My decision to bring analyses of nineteenth-century male impersonation among theorists like Yvonne Shafer, Cheryl A. Wilson, Leslie Ferris and Peter Bailey into conversation with studies of contemporary drag by Judith Butler, Jean Bobby Noble, Judith Halberstam and Viviane Namaste arose out of my desire to better understand how Waters uses historical fiction to provide a commentary on both the past and the present. Reading these critical perspectives in relation to Waters's nuanced analyses of male impersonation has helped me to parse the novel's depiction of individual and collective audience reading practices, the gendered nature of readings, and the possibility of deviating from the types of audience interpretations that are collectively expected. In this novel, male impersonation takes place onstage and offstage, inside and outside of the theatre, and in front of both "heterosexual" and "homosexual" audiences. *Tipping the Velvet* thus highlights the diversity among and interrelationship between performance

spaces and audience reading practices, and suggests that what audiences experience while watching these performances largely depends on their acknowledged and unacknowledged desires.

I begin this chapter by exploring how late-Victorian music hall audiences respond to and eroticize Kitty's male impersonation act. I consider how the different responses that male and female audience members have to Kitty provide insight into not only gender and sexual norms in Victorian England but, more specifically, how the cultural space of the theatre may inform (in)appropriate social behaviour, both fostering homoerotic desires among women while limiting their expression of these desires. The second section of this chapter explores whether the stage is a "safe" space for the performance of sexual and gender transgressions. I examine a specific moment in *Tipping the Velvet* when the stage allows for a violent outing of not only Nan and Kitty as "lesbians" and gender transgressors but also the audience as (subconscious) supporters of this sexual and gender perversion. Next, I consider the contrast between celebratory commentaries on the agency of drag kings in contemporary drag theory and Waters's depiction of how Nan is read and (mis)treated by her "queer" audience, which consists of her lover Diana and Diana's Sapphic circle of friends. I maintain that Waters provides a much more critical depiction of not just audience-performer relations but also queer spaces and reading practices than is usually offered by drag king theorists. Finally, in the last section of this chapter, I read *Tipping the Velvet* as disrupting the association of onstage with "pretence" and offstage with "reality." My analysis of the way that Nan's performances influence the construction of her subjectivity deviates from many critical

interpretations of this novel that read Nan's "progress" through *Tipping the Velvet* as signalling a move to reject the stage and adopt an "authentic" ("lesbian") identity.

### **I. Audience "Acceptance" of Gender Transgressions in the Victorian Music Hall**

Although the stage in queer communities today is often understood as providing a space wherein gender transgressions are accepted and validated, Waters encourages contemporary readers to examine carefully the nature of the "acceptance" of staged cross-dressing in both the past and present. *Tipping the Velvet* promotes understandings of audience reaction and performer intent as existing on a spectrum: while some performers and audience members experience staged cross-gender performances as personally and politically transformative, others may find these performances primarily playful and fun. While Nan's reaction to watching Kitty's male impersonation act reveals that the gender expressions and sexual desires of audience members may be disrupted by watching these performances, Waters depicts persistent desires for male impersonators as rare and, rather, emphasizes the fickleness of the audience's desire for and "acceptance" of cross-gender expression. *Tipping the Velvet* thereby implies that while some audience members may experience "drag" performances as transformative, these performances do not generally disrupt the genders or sexual desires of the majority of the audience because the stage — which is widely understood to be a space of temporary performance — may discourage audience members from taking male impersonation seriously or having sustained reactions to these performances. By closely attending to the diversity of audience reading practices, *Tipping the Velvet* highlights the importance of recognizing

both the power and limitations of staged cross-gender performances, and also that the political potential of drag depends not just on the performer's intent or audience's response but, notably, on the interrelationship between the two.

Audience reactions to male impersonation in *Tipping the Velvet* destabilize beliefs that "lesbian" readings of male impersonation are more erotic than those of "heterosexuals." Kitty's male impersonation act at the Canterbury Palace is presented to what is seemingly a predominantly "heterosexual" audience who read her female masculinity as a captivating, yet fun and temporary performance. Upon first seeing Kitty's act, Nan reflects, "Her effect upon that over-heated hall was wonderful. Like me, my neighbours all sat up, and gazed at her with shining eyes" (13). Considering that Nan later establishes a "lesbian" relationship with Kitty, it is tempting to view Nan's desire for Kitty and the pleasure that Nan receives from watching her as more intense than that of the "heterosexual" audience members in the theatre. Yet Waters describes eroticizations of Kitty while she is onstage as a collective audience experience. For instance, when Kitty sings her final song, "a ballad about roses and a lost sweetheart," the audience lets "out one huge collective sigh" (14). The ability of the stage to inspire identifications that are both erotic and empathetic in nature is apparent in the audience's sympathetic response to Kitty's lost love.

While showing that eroticizations and empathy are not incompatible, *Tipping the Velvet* also depicts the "heterosexual" male audience's erotic identifications with Kitty as stripping "drag" of its subversive potential. This novel highlights the lack of sustained impact that Kitty's performance has on Nan's male family members and beau. After

Kitty finishes performing, Nan watches her brother Davy and her father who “were both on their feet calling for more; but letting their calls die, and beginning to stretch” (24). Freddy’s enjoyment of Kitty’s performance is likewise clear yet temporary; Nan reflects that her beau, “was still smiling at the stage [...] his cheek was red and had a pimple on it. ‘Ain’t she a peach’ he said to me. Then he rubbed his eyes, and shouted to Davy for a beer” (24). Although the flush of Freddy’s cheek implies that he is sexually aroused by this performance, his attention quickly shifts once Kitty leaves the stage. The short-lived nature of male desire for Kitty signals that erotic identifications often entail a temporary use of the other for sexual gain, and thus has much to do with the self and very little to do with the other.<sup>5</sup>

The fleeting pleasure that Nan’s father, brother and beau feel while watching Kitty’s act supports the notion that Victorian audiences experienced staged cross-dressings as fun and generally did not feel threatened by onstage gender and sexual transgressions. Yvonne Shafer, for instance, argues that:

As a phenomenon of the nineteenth century, the actress playing male roles revealed a challenge to the male domination of the stage, a taste for novelty, and the willingness on the part of the critics and audiences to accept the process as one of the many conventions of the nineteenth-century theatre” (72).

While Shafer maintains that these performances importantly opened up female access to the stage, she emphasizes that audiences viewed these performances as alluring in their

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<sup>5</sup> As outlined in my introduction, erotic identifications may be understood as occupying a space between empathetic identifications and violent identifications. If empathetic identifications entail identifications *with* the other and violent identifications involve an attempt to eradicate the other by identifying *as* her or him, erotic identifications involve both identifications *with* and *as* the other. *Tipping the Velvet* reveals that erotic identifications involve not only a temporary violent appropriation of the other but also a use of the other to sexual ends with or without the other’s consent.

novelty and as merely part of nineteenth-century stage conventions. She thus implies that the widespread “acceptance” of male impersonation indicates that these performances were received as politically neutral, titillating sights by heterosexual men, not as providing critical commentaries on gender or sexual norms.

While the male desire for Kitty that is expressed by Nan’s father, brother and beau may seem “queer” because it reflects an eroticization of masculinity, this “queer” desire is made safe by the belief that Kitty is “really” a woman — as opposed to someone who experiences sustained cross-gender identification — and the presumption that offstage she will resume wearing female clothing and return to femininity. Although Kitty does express femininity when offstage, this male presumption erases the fact that many male impersonators — some breeches performers, for instance — attempted to “pass as men both on and offstage” (Mullenix 4). Readings of male impersonators as “never achiev[ing] a convincing illusion of masculinity” (7) work to reaffirm the centrality of the male gaze as men are encouraged to erotically consume these performers who are “known” to be “truly” female and feminine.<sup>6</sup> Such readings of Kitty entail a violent erasure of her subjectivity as she is judged solely on her external physicality and performance abilities.<sup>7</sup> Freddy’s presumption that this ““peach”” (24) is feminine and

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Senelick maintains that the masculinity that some male impersonators expressed offstage also was not read as challenging gender norms since “The personal ‘masculinity’ of [...male impersonators offstage] was, in fact, neutralized by their costumes [...] They were accepted in their time because the seams between their masculine personalities and their masculine stage personae overlapped” (332). Thus the threat of this female masculinity was contained through readings of these “women” as just continuing their performances offstage rather than possibly having strong cross-gender identification.

<sup>7</sup> As performances by women in music halls were often expected to titillate the male audience, prostitutes “had a guaranteed clientele” (Davis, “Indecency” 124) at music halls. Tracy C. Davis notes that music halls were charged with being pornographic as they flaunted “women’s bodies in combination with licentious words, gestures and costumes” (111) and they were understood by “[s]ocial purity campaigners” (111) to be

experiences “herself” as female when offstage highlights the “consumption” of this performer by her male audience who enjoys her “juicy” stage performance only to throw away the “core” of who she is. Waters’s depiction of male audience members disregarding the identities and experiences of male impersonators shows that erotic identifications are self-interested, entailing a potentially exploitative “use” of the other.

Male impersonation in the Victorian period may have been read as reaffirming not only the centrality of the heterosexual male gaze but also essentialist gender norms. Female performances of masculinity may not have been experienced as threatening to male audience members not only because they reaffirmed the norm of “women” performing for the male gaze but also because they reinscribed the “naturalness” of male masculinity. Viviane Namaste’s analysis of readings of contemporary drag queens by gay men is useful in gaining a better understanding of how staged cross-dressings can reinforce gender norms. Namaste challenges the notion that drag necessarily disrupts hegemonic genders and desires by arguing that the juxtaposition of gay men in the audience and drag queens onstage establishes “Gay male identity [...] as something prior to performance” (13) and that “relegating [...] gender performances to the stage implies that gay men [in the audience] do not ‘perform’ their identities: they just are” (11). Watching drag queens may not only naturalize the genders of gay male audience members but also reaffirm their same-sex desires since this audience “knows” that these performers are “really” men who are just temporarily “playing” the role of the woman for the audience’s pleasure. Similarly, *Tipping the Velvet* suggests that male impersonation

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“impure leisure” (113). For a discussion of the association of the music hall with immorality and the lower classes see, also, Russell Jackson’s *Victorian Theatre: The Theatre in its Time*.

in the Victorian period may have reaffirmed both heterosexual desire and the “realness” of male masculinity since male audiences “knew” that male impersonators were “really” women.<sup>8</sup> Thus, like Namaste, Waters implies that rather than simply celebrating drag for its subversive potential, we must critically examine how drag may reify and naturalize the genders and sexual desires of viewers through the disavowal of queer and trans identities and experiences.<sup>9</sup>

By highlighting the collectivity of certain audience reactions and showing how audiences are conditioned to respond in ways that are deemed socially acceptable, *Tipping the Velvet* complicates the individualistic notion that “depending on each individual’s gender and sexual preference, each spectator will have their own personal response to such a performance” (Ferris, “Cross-Dressing” 168). *Tipping the Velvet* shows that male and female audience members are often expected to respond differently

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<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in his analysis of Victorian male impersonation, Senelick argues that these performances may have been “highly gratifying to male chauvinism. Watching a woman impersonating a man confirms male superiority, his unconscious hope that the female performer is displaying her desire to be him, her envy of his status” (327). Thus, similar to Namaste, Senelick calls into question the notion that “drag” necessarily subverts gender norms and undermines male authority.

<sup>9</sup> Waters suggests that those who enthusiastically consume staged cross-dressings and homoerotic dynamics, may be transphobic and homophobic outside of the theatre. Whereas the disavowal of eroticism between Kitty and Nan allows a (homophobic) audience to receive enjoyment from this performance, likewise in many contemporary queer spaces (transphobic) audience members may take pleasure in watching drag kings perform while disavowing the possibility that these performers may have strong cross-gender identifications and/or be trans identified. The “acceptance” of male impersonators and drag king performers is thus precarious and erratic.

Notably, before establishing a personal relationship with Kitty, Nan erases the possibility that Kitty may experience strong cross-gender identification as is apparent in the fact that, for Nan, the “thrill” (13) of watching Kitty’s staged gender transgression resides in “knowing” that there is a disjunction between Kitty’s sex and the gender that she is “acting.” Nan desires Kitty not because she embodies maleness but, rather, because she is a “woman” expressing and appropriating masculinity. Nan notes that Kitty looked “like a very pretty boy” (13) and describes her as “boy-like and slender — yet rounded, vaguely but unmistakably, at the bosom, the stomach, and the hips in a way *no real boy’s* ever was [...] she strode *like* a boy, and stood *like* one” (emphasis added 13). It is the fact that Kitty is “like” a boy but not a boy that appeals to Nan, and thus she presumes that Kitty’s male impersonation is solely a performance.



to male impersonators. Whereas Nan's father, brother and beau openly express much enthusiasm for Kitty, Nan's mother and her sister, Alice, are notably silent when it comes to Kitty's performance.<sup>10</sup> After watching Kitty's act for the first time, Nan is mesmerized by the memory of Kitty and completely disinterested in Gully Sutherland, the act that Nan and Alice had come to the theatre to see. Nan's decision to leave the theatre during Sutherland's performance perplexes Alice whose enjoyment of Kitty's act remains unspoken and is seemingly short-lived (14). Alice's reaction when Nan later tells her about the love and desire that she feels for Kitty clearly reveals that outside of the theatre and communal audience desire, same-sex eroticism is forbidden. Nan notes that Alice was silent, "There was a look on her face — it was not ambiguous at all now — a look of mingled shock, and nervousness, and embarrassment or shame. I had said too much" (20). Although Alice is a part of the audience that collectively desires and identifies with Kitty, she is disturbed by the persistence of this desire in Nan's mind. By recalling the erotic nature of the collective audience experience of which Alice was a part, Nan's sustained desire for Kitty outs the similarity between this audience's eroticization of Kitty and Nan's persistent homoerotic desire. The "shame" and "embarrassment" that Alice feels thus suggest that she is aware, to some degree, of her implication in this homoeroticism. Reflecting on Waters's depiction of the Victorian music hall, Mark Wormald notes that Waters seduces "her readers into believing in the possibility of [...] a desire that inhabits the codes of Victorian theatricality only to move beyond them" (188).

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<sup>10</sup> While music hall theorists have noted that it was not unusual for families to attend these performances together (Kift 72-73), it is important to consider how male and female family members may have experienced these performances in disparate ways due to the different expectations placed on men and women in these theatrical spaces.

While Nan's desire for Kitty during Kitty's performance follows collective audience reading practices, the lasting nature of this desire reflects a transgression of appropriate theatrical and social codes.

Nan's mother is also silent when it comes to Kitty's act; rather than comment on this male impersonator with whom her daughter is fascinated, Mrs. Astley reflects upon a performance that preceded Kitty, asking "How did the lady in the evening dress read all those numbers with a blindfold on?" (24). Mrs. Astley's reaction implies that while male desire for male impersonators is allowed to linger beyond the performance, female desire must be contained to the collective audience experience while watching Kitty. Mrs. Astley's silence thus alludes to the dangers involved with expressing same-sex attraction in Victorian England. Her apparent lack of interest in Kitty's performance may reflect a refusal to recognize her daughter's sustained desire for Kitty, or even her own (fleeting) erotic identification with Kitty. While Waters's depiction of Nan's persistent desire for Kitty seems to allot women more empathetic identificatory practices than men, Mrs. Astley's dismissal of Kitty's performance complicates such a gender essentialist reading as Waters shows that women are also implicated in violent, temporary and disavowed erotic identifications.

While the men in *Tipping the Velvet* enjoy and do not seem threatened by Kitty's performance of female masculinity, the reactions of Nan's mother and sister support Wilson's claim that male impersonations "posed a threat to established gender boundaries" (par. 18) and "made some Victorian audiences uncomfortable" (par. 23). Considering that female performers of any sort "were 'defeminized' by the very act of

taking up a public career in the theatre” (Davis, *Actresses* 105) watching male impersonators who were doubly masculinized may have made female audience members who were invested in the feminine ideal protective of the boundaries of femininity. Whereas opponents of the music hall deemed women audience members immoral and likened them to prostitutes, defenders of music halls emphasized the attendance of wives as a means of giving “the whole institution an aura of respectability” (Bailey 74).<sup>11</sup> Considering that women who attended music hall performances were at risk of having their morality and, in turn, their femininity called into question, the silence of Alice and Mrs. Astley may reflect an attempt to avoid being seen as indecent or immoral. Considering that wives, in particular, carried the burden of morality, the seeming indifference of Nan’s mother to seeing Kitty’s act may reflect the pressure placed on wives in these spaces to appear virtuous and proper.

In comparison to Mrs. Astley and Alice’s silence regarding Kitty’s performance, Nan’s passionate and sustained desire for Kitty seems unruly and “perverse.” Yet Nan is cast in a favourable light since, unlike the male audience members previously discussed, she values Kitty’s offstage identity. Importantly, Waters documents the development of Nan’s erotic identification with Kitty as a performer into a supportive friendship that, in turn, transforms into a sexual relationship. While the pleasurable relationship that Nan and Kitty develop beyond the theatre shows the value of respecting the offstage identities of male impersonators, interestingly, Nan initially displays resistance to accepting Kitty’s

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<sup>11</sup> Although music halls arose out of “the saloon entertainments, all-male drinking clubs and music clubs of the first half of the nineteenth century” (Booth 11), music hall performances attracted a diverse audience — including men and women, families and single people, “urban working class and also [...] some sections of the lower middle class, with the middle classes joining hesitantly only toward the turn of the century” (Bailey 75).

femininity, and thus violence also underlies Nan's erotic identification with this male impersonator. Nan reflects that "Every time [...Kitty] stepped from behind the screen, clad as a girl, small and slim and shapely, a false plait smothering the lovely ragged edges of her crop, I had the same sensation: a pang of disappointment and regret that turned instantly to pleasure and to aching love" (37). While Nan's disappointment that Kitty is not masculine beyond the stage quickly transforms into love, it signals the difficulty of shedding audience reading practices wherein the performer is read solely as her performance and stripped of her offstage subjectivity.

By depicting erotic identification with male impersonators as a collective audience experience, and especially by foregrounding Nan's desire for Kitty, *Tipping the Velvet* constructs an alternative history and encourages readers to contemplate the types of "queer" reading practices that may have taken place among audience members in the past. Waters asserts that *Tipping the Velvet* was inspired by her curiosity regarding whether male impersonation acts in the Victorian period carried "any queer or erotic charge for anybody in the audience" (qtd. in Jones 97). Although Waters highlights the violent impulses of erotic identifications, similar to Catherine Ennis's novel *Time and Time Again* that I discussed in my introduction, *Tipping the Velvet* also shows the potentially empathetic and productive outcomes of eroticizations by highlighting Nan's love for Kitty.

## II. Violent Outings, Safety and the Stage

*Tipping the Velvet* suggests that the Victorian music hall stage provided a space for expressing gender and sexual transgressions as long as they were made “safe” by audience reading practices that erased their association with sustained “trans” or “lesbian” experiences. While, in this narrative, onstage expressions of same-sex desire that are temporally and spatially limited are often enjoyed for their taboo erotic potential, Waters also shows the precariousness of this “acceptance” of “lesbianism.” Considering that the audience “knows” that Kitty is female, her expression of desire for another woman while onstage is presumably recognized, on some level, to be homoerotic. As we see in *Tipping the Velvet*, audiences may react negatively when their implication in same-sex eroticism is recognized and outed.

The audience’s celebration of homoeroticism is apparent when Kitty’s expression of same-sex desire is met with applause. Kitty closes her performance by throwing a rose into a “pretty girl’s lap” (14). Nan reflects, “We went wild for her then. We roared and stamped and she, all gallant, raised her hat to us and, waving, took her leave” (14). Such an exuberant reaction is not unusual within the context of the Victorian music hall wherein the audience actively and enthusiastically responded to performers.<sup>12</sup> Michael R. Booth notes that in the second half of the nineteenth century, lower-class audiences

largely deserted the theatre for the music hall [...] finding both the entertainment and the easy social freedom of the halls more to its liking — a secession which may also have hastened the transformation of the lively, bustling, occasionally riotous, and fully illuminated pre-Victorian theatre auditorium into the generally

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<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Dagmar Kift’s sustained analysis of the audiences of Victorian music halls in *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict* (68-74).

quiet, passive, and darkened West End house of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. (12)

The working-class audience that moved to the music hall took with them their lively audience practices. While the audience's enthusiasm for Kitty is thus understandable given the historical and spatial context of Kitty's performance, it also suggests that they recognize something novel and worthy of celebration in Kitty's expression of homoerotic desire since it is unlikely that they would react with such passion if Kitty were a biological man who ended his performance by expressing desire for a woman. Novelty and variety were highly valued among music-hall audiences (Jackson 3-4) and, as Laurence Senelick notes, "female assumption of male identity appeared in the theatre as novelty" (326). Considering that the audience presumably celebrated Kitty's male impersonation and also her expression of "lesbian" desire because it was considered "unusual," this "acceptance" of same-sex eroticism is seemingly exoticizing and tenuous, and does not necessarily translate into approval of "lesbianism" beyond the theatre. The taboo nature of same-sex desire in the late nineteenth century is apparent when Nan's family rereads her desire for Kitty as heterosexual by believing that she repeatedly goes to the theatre not to watch Kitty but because she is interested in "a young chap in the orchestra pit" (19).

The audience's enjoyment of Kitty's homoerotic closing song highlights the tendency to celebrate social transgressions in the theatre as a means by which to vicariously experience social disobedience. Social taboos may be enjoyed in the theatre because the audience "knows" the temporariness of such desire and the association of the theatre with subversion. Leslie Ferris argues that the "theatre is a site of desire. Not only

in the sense that desire must be played out in the dramatic narrative, but the actors themselves must seduce the audience to some degree to get them involved and focused on the performance” (“Cross-Dressing” 168). Kitty’s seduction of female audience members in particular through her closing song shows the allure of both gender and sexual taboos that are performed onstage. While *Tipping the Velvet* reveals that there is not necessarily a correlation between finding male impersonation performances thrilling and erotic, and experiencing them as transformative, backlashes against the theatre because of its “eroticism and seductive power [...] at various points in its history (168) point to the disruptive potential of the stage which can open audiences up to new desires in their lives outside of the theatre. Waters’s representation of Nan’s newfound same-sex desire after seeing Kitty’s performance points to the ability of LGBTQ2 historical fiction, like *Tipping the Velvet*, to also inspire unfamiliar sexual desires in readers.

Nan’s description of the pleasure that she receives from performing masculinity onstage with Kitty after joining Kitty’s act not only provides insight into the complex relationship between audiences and performers but also emphasizes their often disparate experiences and understandings of performances. Nan’s enjoyment of performing with Kitty arises out of their “deception” of audience members who appear to be unaware of the same-sex desire being expressed before them onstage. Nan’s wish for acceptance is apparent as she takes pleasure in the audience’s celebration of the dynamic between herself and Kitty even though this celebration is based on false premises and does not actually signal an approval of same-sex desire. As Nan notes, “It was 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! [...] that was our show; only the crowd never knew it. They looked on, and saw another turn entirely” (128). Considering that Nan and Kitty inspire audience members, who may be hostile to gender and sexual transgressions that take place offstage, to enjoy same-sex desire and cross-gender expression, the pleasure that Nan receives from “fooling” the audience into accepting not only her cross-gender expression but also her desire for Kitty may derive from a sense that she is, on some level, subverting homophobia and transphobia.

Whereas Nan experiences power over audience members by inspiring them to (unknowingly) celebrate her sexual and gender transgressions, Waters also demonstrates the power of the audience to withdraw this “acceptance.” *Tipping the Velvet* reveals that both the performer and audience’s sense of safety may be easily disrupted, and thereby highlights the precariousness of the audience’s celebration of “queer” genders and desires onstage. Waters thus shows that a performer’s experience largely “depends on the audience present” (Sennett and Bay-Cheng 41). Whereas previous audiences have “accepted” and enjoyed Nan and Kitty’s double act and, in turn, these women have taken pleasure performing for them, Nan and Kitty are eventually harassed by an audience member who calls them “toms” (140).<sup>13</sup> Nan notes, “Toms! / At the sound of it, the

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<sup>13</sup> Similar to Waters’s use of the term “queer” throughout *Tipping the Velvet* to evoke comparisons between the past and the present, her use of the term “toms” to describe Nan and Kitty signals both historical continuity and discontinuity. While this term reflects the contemporary term “tomboy,” in *Tipping the Velvet* it signals both gender and sexual transgression. It is thereby distinct from contemporary uses of the term “tomboy” to refer primarily to female masculinity and not sexual desire. Nicholas C. Edsall notes that the term “Tommy (perhaps related to *tomboy*) [was...] fairly commonly understood in eighteenth-century England” (221) to refer to same-sex desire. The abbreviated term “tom” in *Tipping the Velvet* thus reflects the use of the term “tomboy” since the sixteenth century to refer to “A bold or immodest woman” (“Tomboy” def. 2) or “A girl who behaves like a spirited or boisterous boy” (def. 3) coupled with sexualized understandings of the term “tom” which, notably, has also been used to refer to prostitutes since the early twentieth century (“Tom” n.1.e). Although this scene of homophobic persecution encourages



audience gave a great collective flinch. There was a sudden hush; the shouts became mumbles, the shrieks all tailed away. Through the shaft of limelight I saw their faces — a thousand faces, self-conscious and appalled” (141). The outing that takes place in this scene is twofold — not only are Nan and Kitty outed as “toms,” the audience’s repressed suspicion that these male impersonators may be “homosexual” is also outed. The audience’s “flinching” signals that they are also hurt by this man’s exposure of Kitty and Nan because he reveals that they have been not only publicly condoning but also celebrating this gender and sexual “perversion.”

Although Nan believes that the audience does not previously recognize the homoerotic desire between herself and Kitty, notably, the audience is not shocked and incredulous when these two women are called “toms,” but rather “self-conscious and appalled” (141) which suggests that they suspect on some level that Nan and Kitty are “queer.” This man’s violent outing of Kitty and Nan undermines the notion that the stage is a “safe” space and shows that the fourth wall between performers and the audience may provide a dangerous false sense of protection.

### **III. “Consenting” to Eroticization: Erotic Agency and Male Impersonation**

As is seen in the outing of Nan and Kitty, *Tipping the Velvet* encourages readers to critically examine audience-performer relations. By providing diverse depictions of the eroticization of male impersonators, this novel reveals that erotic identifications exist on a

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readers to identify similarities between past “tomhood” and present “lesbianism,” by employing a term that is no longer widely used to refer to same-sex attraction, Waters inhibits full cross-temporal identifications.

continuum: while some constitute and enable empathetic identifications, others are of a more violent and exploitative nature. Waters provides much important insight into this spectrum through the contrast between Nan's erotic identification with Kitty, which develops into a loving relationship, and the eroticization of Nan by her lover Diana and Diana's friends who value Nan solely as an object of their desires and pleasures. As erotic identifications involve an appropriation of the other who is used to sexual ends, it is important to consider the issue of consent when studying such dynamics. Does the stage performer consent to being eroticized? If so, what is the nature of such consent? And, importantly, how does this consent vary according to the audience present?

Nan's desire for Kitty shows that drag can have transformative effects on viewers since this eroticization leads not only to a relationship developing between the two but also to Nan's own cross-gender expression. Waters's complication of understandings of male impersonation as either subversive and transformative or playful fun reflects Butler's theory of drag. Butler views drag as having the power to disrupt essentialist beliefs in gender originals, maintaining that "The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" (*Gender Trouble* 174). Yet Butler also recognizes that "parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural

hegemony” (176-177).<sup>14</sup> While Nan’s experience of male impersonation as life altering seems to be a relative anomaly in *Tipping the Velvet*, Nan’s gender and sexual transformation shows the ability of male impersonations to influence one’s life choices and subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> Noble argues that drag audiences in queer spaces are “made up of [...] desiring and identifying boys and girls, actively reading against the grain of hegemonic gender and desire, desiring and authorizing not just the complex performances ‘onstage,’ but reading and read by the many other performances ‘off-stage’” (62). Nan’s desire for and erotic identification with Kitty leads her to first express a transgressive gender onstage and, later, to “perform” masculinity offstage in her everyday life, thereby signalling the difficulty of instating a firm divide between onstage and offstage experiences.

Nan’s desire for Kitty is coupled with a desire for the stage, and thus it is not just Kitty as a performer who is eroticized, but also the stage as a potential space of expressing gender and sexual transgressions. The erotics of the stage are apparent when

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<sup>14</sup> While Butler argues that drag has the potential to disrupt beliefs in an original, essential gender, her analysis also implies that drag may be adopted by hegemonic forces in order to reinforce gender norms. She builds on this wariness regarding the political potential of drag in her discussion of “Ambivalent Drag” in *Bodies that Matter*. She asserts that drag may signal a “reiteration of norms which cannot be called subversive” (125). While she reflects that “drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality” (125), she maintains that “there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion [...] drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms” (125). Although drag may call into question heterosexuality’s “naturalness,” Butler recognizes that this “denaturalization” of heterosexuality may be coupled with a continued idealization of heterosexual norms.

<sup>15</sup> Notably, near the end of the novel, Nan is recognized as being “Nan King” by toms in the all women’s space at the Boy in the Boat. It thus becomes apparent that “Nan’s early suspicion that her audience includes girls who share her sexual desires [...] turns out to be correct [as she...] learns [that] her performances won her many fans among the ‘toms’ (lesbians) who still relish their recollections of her act” (Jones 98). The enthusiasm that the women in the Boy in the Boat express for Nan’s past performances suggests that other women may have also experienced male impersonation acts as transformative.

Kitty comes offstage after a performance, “flushed and gay and triumphant” (37). Nan reflects, “I did not quite like her then. She seized my arm, but didn’t see me. She was like a woman in the grip of a drug, or in the first flush of an embrace, and I felt a fool to be at her side, so still and sober, and jealous of the crowd that was her lover” (37). Nan’s jealousy regarding Kitty’s affair with the audience can be read as being motivated by both her desire to be the exclusive “lover” of Kitty and the object of this audience affection.

While Nan’s expression of same-sex desire reveals that there may be deviations from the disavowed eroticism that characterizes collective audience reading practices in *Tipping the Velvet*, this narrative implies that those who experience sustained desire for male impersonators are often (subconsciously) searching for gender and/or sexual alternatives. In part, Nan identifies with Kitty because Kitty’s male impersonation signals the possibility that Nan may be able to assume the stage which she previously understood as being closed to her due to her lack of feminine appeal. Nan notes that “we had had male impersonator turns at the Palace before; but in 1888, in the provincial halls, the masher acts were not the things they are today” (12). Nan seemingly does not identify with the male impersonators who preceded Kitty because they undermined their performance of masculinity by wearing “tights and bullion fringe” (12). Kitty’s alternative, modern, and more realistic performance of masculinity makes evident to Nan that there are different ways to be on the stage.

In keeping with many theoretical depictions of drag that emphasize the agency of drag performers and provide insight into the pleasures of performing, Waters describes the sexualized thrill and enjoyment that Nan and Kitty receive from their performances.

Waters thereby counters historical accounts that refuse to recognize any possible link between “female” “transvestitism” and sexual gratification.<sup>16</sup> Yet, although she shows the pleasure that “women” may receive from adopting male dress, Waters provides a more ambivalent depiction of this eroticism than offered in contemporary drag king writings since her description of Nan’s mistreatment by Diana and Diana’s friends reveals to readers how violent erotic identifications may undermine the agency of performers.

Many contemporary drag kings describe their “performances” as “thrilling,” “arousing,” “titillating” (Neevel 33) and “pleasurable” (bradford 25), and thereby emphasize the erotic enjoyment that they receive from performing in drag. Neeve “Amy” Neevel reflects that “lip-syncing, mirrored swaggers, and meticulously drawn beards are not for want, rather they are for desire, meant to satisfy my masculine wiles and beguile the willing audience [...] / I savor the titillation of challenging the archaic” (33). Neevel is not just aroused by “donning drag attire” but also due to “his” belief in the subversiveness of “his” act. In “his” description of the experience of performing as Johnny T., a parody of John Travolta, k. bradford notes that “As Johnny T., I get totally charged up by and in charge of my body, my movement, my multiple—*and multiplyin!*—desires. Johnny T. knows how to strut his stuff, how to make his moves, electrify both

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<sup>16</sup> In their analysis of Magnus Hirschfeld who developed the term “transvestism,” Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough note that Hirschfeld’s study of “sixteen men and one woman” (207) led him to conclude that, for transvestites, “their dominant sexual urge was focused on themselves in women’s finery rather than on other persons of either sex” (208). The male bias of this study that is apparent in the disparity between the number of “male” and “female” research subjects seemingly also informs the reading of the one woman in this study as not gaining autoerotic pleasure from cross-dressing. Bullough and Bullough note that Hirschfeld spent less time speculating on the motivations of “female” cross-dressers and that “From the data presented, it often seemed to be a desire for the role of the man rather than for the clothing of the man” (212) that appealed to these “women.” Regardless of whether such readings reflect a patriarchal denial of female sexuality or whether the women that Hirschfeld studied truly did not experience sexual gratification from cross-dressing, many contemporary depictions of “female” transvestitism highlight the erotics of donning male dress, and thereby pose a challenge to the deeroticization of female cross-dressing.

himself and his audience” (28). bradford describes both “his” pleasure and the audience’s pleasure, and notes the power that “he” has over both. bradford asserts, “Johnny T. is electric, he’s greased lightning because he’s magnetic, because he throws his hot stuff around and demands that you throw hot stuff back at him” (28). Johnny T. is not just eroticized by “his” audience but also “demands” to be desired. As Johnny T. actively positions “himself” as the object of desire, “he” reveals that objectification and lack of agency need not be synonymous.

Similar to these contemporary drag king performers, the stage provides Nan with the pleasures of adopting masculinity and also with a means of making her gender extraordinary and worthy of celebration. Before watching Kitty’s performance for the first time, Nan reflects “I had a fondness — you might say, a kind of passion — for the music hall; and more particularly for music-hall songs and the singing of them” (5). Nan’s “passion” for Kitty may thus be understood as also reflecting her longstanding yet suppressed passion for becoming a music-hall performer.<sup>17</sup> Although Nan enjoys singing music-hall songs and her mother tells her that she “should be on the stage” (7), Nan notes “When she said it, however, she laughed; and so did I. The girls I saw in the glow of the footlights, the girls whose songs I loved to learn and sing, they weren’t like me. They were more like my sister: they had cherry lips, and curls that danced around their

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<sup>17</sup> Although, upon joining Kitty’s act, Nan reflects that she has never “yearned” to be on the stage (112), her earlier statements about the music hall contradict these later assertions of personal disinterest in stage performance. This inconsistency alludes to the ways that many women in the Victorian period repressed their desires because of the constraints placed on them as women and, as is apparent in Nan’s case, less feminine women. Nan’s underlying desire for the stage is brought to the surface through her interactions with Kitty, and thus Waters shows readers that we may remain unaware of our desires unless they are aroused by an external catalyst.

shoulders [...]” (7). Nan’s desire to perform for an adoring audience is thwarted by her lack of feminine charm.

We may thus infer that her erotic desire for Kitty is coupled with a desire to make her unremarkable gender noteworthy by taking the stage dressed as a man. In contrast to the shapely and feminine girls who are usually found on the stage, Nan notes that “I was tall, and rather lean. My chest was flat, my hair dull, my eyes a drab and uncertain blue” (7). Although Nan’s appearance is initially described as bland rather than masculine, it later becomes apparent that her physicality lends itself to male impersonation as, when she first dresses in a suit, Kitty describes her as ““too real”” (118). While, in *Tipping the Velvet*, male impersonation provides a means for women who do not fit the feminine ideal to receive acclaim for their genders, Kitty’s comment highlights the social danger involved with actually passing as male, even in theatrical spaces where cross-dressing is celebrated. As Senelick notes, “Theatregoers were rarely confronted with a woman plausibly playing a man’s man. The male impersonator of the 1860s who did set out to convey a convincing impression of the opposite sex was embarking on a risky enterprise” (326). This risk is alluded to when Kitty and Walter alter Nan’s suit in order to produce the illusion of female curves (119). The feminine touches and tucks that they add work to ensure that Nan’s gender liminality is conveyed to the audience since if she were to pass as a man the audience would not understand her “act.” Considering the context in which Nan performs, this added femininity — while signalling her troubling of gender norms — ultimately works to contain gender transgression by ensuring that audiences read Nan as a

male impersonator, and thus “really” a woman who is just temporarily performing masculinity.

While Nan’s power varies greatly depending on the context in which she performs and how she is treated by her audience, Waters allots Nan some agency by depicting her sexualized enjoyment of donning male clothing. Nan wants to share the erotic pleasure that she receives from both donning male clothing and from her relationship with Kitty with an audience who will, in turn, erotically identify with these transgressions. Upon first trying on a pair of Kitty’s trousers, Nan “blushes” and reflects on the difference between her past experience wearing a suit to a masquerade party and wearing Kitty’s trousers. Nan asserts:

it was quite different, now, to pull Kitty’s handsome trousers up my naked hips, and button them over that delicate place that Kitty herself had so recently set smarting. I took a step, and blushed still harder. I felt as though I had never had legs before — or, rather, that I had never known quite, what it really felt like to have *two* legs, joined at the top. (114)

Nan is aroused not only by the fact that these trousers belong to Kitty, but also by her heightened awareness of the space between where her legs connect. While holding Kitty, Nan thinks, “there was something rather thrilling about embracing her, in such a costume, with Walter so near and unknowing” (114). Waters links desire to danger in her depiction of the erotic thrill that Nan receives from expressing “masculine” desire for a woman while wearing male clothing.<sup>18</sup> Unlike authors of trans theory and trans historical novels who tend to highlight the dangers associated with passing, Nan finds passing thrilling and

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<sup>18</sup> Nan also experiences an erotic rush upon first getting her hair cut for her stage performance; she notes, “I had blushed because my new, shorn head, my naked neck, felt saucy. I had blushed because — just as I had done when I first pulled on a pair of trousers — I had felt myself stir, and grow warm, and want Kitty. Indeed, I seemed to want her more and more, the further into boyishness I ventured” (124). Waters depicts Nan’s masculine transformation as not just enjoyable for the audience, but also for herself.



erotic. While Nan claims to believe that the audience is unaware of the same-sex desire between herself and Kitty, considering the link that Waters establishes between danger and desire, Nan may gain pleasure from performing her desire for Kitty in front of an audience whom she knows could at any minute out her as a tom.

As becomes apparent through Nan's relationship with Diana, an upper-class widow with a Sapphic circle of friends, the strength of Nan's desire for an audience that admires and gains erotic enjoyment from her performance has destructive consequences. After Nan discovers that Kitty is having an affair with Walter, she leaves Kitty and ends her career in the theatre. She decides to cross-dress in order to avoid sexist discrimination on the streets and eventually she becomes a "gay" "male" sex worker. Nan is frustrated while renting because she desires an audience that recognizes and "accepts" her "performance" of female masculinity. Reflecting on her seduction of men by performing masculinity, Nan asserts:

My one regret was that, though I was daily giving such marvellous performances, they had no audience. I would gaze about me at the dim and dreary place in which my gentleman and I leaned panting, and wish the cobbles were a stage, the bricks a curtain, the scuttling rats a set of blazing footlights. I would long for just one eye — just one! — to be fixed upon our couplings: a bold and knowing eye that saw how well I played my part, how gulled and humbled was my foolish, trustful partner. (206)

Nan's longing for not just an audience, but an audience with a "knowing eye" is eventually fulfilled by Diana who, unbeknownst to Nan, watches her from a carriage while Nan performs her role as a male sex worker. Nan becomes Diana's "tart" and is kept by Diana as an object of desire whose sole purpose is to give pleasure to both Diana and her friends. Although Nan later comes to describe Diana as "a kind of devil" (431),

Nan remains with Diana until she is kicked out after getting caught having sex with Diana's maid, Zena. In light of the fact that upon meeting Diana, Nan reflects, "I felt for a second — what I had not felt, it seemed, for a hundred years — the thrill of performing with a partner by my side" (235), the length of Nan's stay with Diana alludes to the intensity of Nan's desire for a knowing audience, even if that audience is abusive. Nan's acceptance of exploitation is seemingly also informed by a longing for a community of women who experience same-sex desires as such a community allows for a "normalization" and open expression of "lesbianism."

Waters's depiction of the mistreatment of Nan by Diana and Diana's friends complicates idealizations of the reading practices of "queer" audiences. In many autobiographical accounts of drag kinging the queer contexts in which drag performances take place are described as "safe" (27). bradford, for instance, asserts that "With drag kinging, audience is community—a community with a range of histories, realities, meanings and fantasies, that recognizes, validates and celebrates your act" (27-28). Such idealistic interpretations of both queer audiences and community ignore the hierarchies that exist within communities and the possibility that audience reading practices may deviate from that which the performer expects and desires. Ironically, bradford both recognizes and erases the diversity among "his" audience/community as "his" celebration of the audience for validating drag king performances homogenizes all "queer" audience reading practices as respectful.

Waters calls into question uncritical idealizations of "queer" audiences in her depiction of Nan's treatment by Diana and Diana's friends. The abuse that Nan accepts

in order to have her performance be “celebrated” complicates the full agency that is often attributed to male impersonators and provides a complex commentary on the issue of eroticization and consent. As Diana “rescues” Nan from renting on the streets, a class hierarchy is central to their relationship and Nan is eroticized by Diana and her friends for both her female masculinity and her class otherness. Waters thereby encourages awareness of the hierarchies that exist in communities and the ways that community members may exploit each other. Waters’s depiction of the classism that both informs and hides behind the celebration of Nan’s performances resonates with Namaste’s critique of the way that celebrations of trans-people while on the stage may work to hide the transphobia that exists in “queer” spaces. As Namaste asserts, “The relegation of drag queens to the stage is a supplementary move that excludes transgendered people even as it includes us. Appropriate objects to look at, we are not subjects alongside whom one marches” (11). Similarly, as Nan is the object of the upper-class gazes of Diana and her friends, she is not truly a part of this circle: wherever she goes with Diana, she is expected to perform the role of Diana’s “tart” and accept that she is “valued” solely as an “object” of desire, and thus she is at all times confined to a figurative stage.

Whereas Waters’s earlier emphasis on the performer’s pleasure works to humanize Nan and demonstrate Nan’s agency, while Nan lives with Diana, the “pleasure” that she receives from performing is fraught and linked to her exploitation. Before approaching Nan, Diana watches her perform her role as a male sex worker. Nan thinks:

It made me horribly uneasy to think she really had been observing me, all those times...And yet, was it not just such an audience that I had longed for? [...] I thought of all the parts I had handled, the gents I’d knelt to and the cocks I’d

sucked. I had done it all, as cool as Christmas; now, the idea that she had watched me went direct to the fork of my drawers and made me wet. (237)

Although Nan is initially uncomfortable with unknowingly being the “object” of Diana’s desiring gaze, this discomfort is coupled with reciprocal desire, and thus the power imbalance between Diana and Nan is eroticized. After Nan moves in with Diana, she is encouraged to spend her days preening herself for Diana’s gaze (263). Regardless of the fact that Nan’s masculinity is central to her eroticization, Nan may be read as embodying a version of the feminine ideal — albeit a perverted one — since she is valued solely for her body and encouraged to see her physicality as the only aspect of her that is of worth. Thus, Waters shows that performing masculinity does not necessarily release women from gender constraints and the valuing of female bodies over minds.

Interestingly, in *Tipping the Velvet*, Nan’s eroticization by the “queer” audience consisting of Diana and her friends is depicted as more troubling than that of the “heterosexual” audience who only temporarily and conditionally “accept” gender and sexual transgressions. Nan’s objectification by this Sapphic circle is apparent when she is stripped of her subjectivity and likened to inanimate objects. Nan notes that upon first speaking, Diana’s friend, Mrs. Maria Jex, responds, “‘But it speaks! [...] All this’ — she gestured to my face, my costume — ‘and the creature even speaks!’” (273). Maria dehumanizes Nan by referring to her as both a “creature” and “it.” Although the use of the term “it” may reflect an attempt to use a pronoun that respects Nan’s liminal gender expression, as this word is usually used to refer to lifeless objects, it ultimately erases Nan’s subjectivity. Notably, Maria also refers to Nan as “‘a find’” (277), and thereby likens her to “a statue or a clock that Diana had picked up for a song in some grim

market” (277). This description reveals the class imbalance at play between Nan, a working class renter who was “picked up” off of the “grim” streets of London, and Diana and her Sapphic circle who are wealthy, and thus can buy people for their entertainment.

During Diana’s parties, Nan is shown off as though she is an inanimate object to be visually and tactilely enjoyed without consequence. The private, upper-class stage on which Nan performs in Diana’s home reinscribes a severe class imbalance and allows for direct access to Nan’s body that would be more difficult to attain in public music halls. Nan’s reflection that she is seen by Diana’s friends as a “statue” is ironic considering that she later performs tableaux vivants for Diana and friends — a form of performance that was popular in Victorian music halls wherein performers tried to replicate “the composition of original works of art” (Davis, “Indecency” 117) and women simulated nudity by wearing “body-stockings” (117). While initially associating violent eroticizations with public, largely working-class music halls, *Tipping the Velvet* implies that public performances of tableaux vivants in music halls — spaces that were often read as morally impure — were safer for female performers than private performances for wealthy audiences. By depicting private spaces of affluence as more morally corrupt than the supposedly deviant Victorian music halls, Waters offers an alternative interpretation of classed spaces and alludes to the classism underlying many past critiques of the music hall.

Although Nan becomes increasingly exploited as her relationship with Diana progresses, Nan expresses some agency during the beginning of her relationship with

Diana. While Nan is objectified, she is not depicted as passive or powerless. She reflects that:

The ladies watched me — indeed, even while they laughed and chattered, they studied all my movements, all my parts. When I leaned to knock the ash from my cigarette, they blinked. When I ran a hand over the stubble at my hairline, they coloured. When I parted my trouser-clad legs and showed the bulge there, Maria and Evelyn, as one, gave a shift in their chairs; and Dickie reached for her brandy glass and disposed of its contents with one savage swig. (275)

Nan is aware that her performance of masculinity inspires the desires of the women around her. Although she courts these women's attentions and uses her erotic appeal to gain sexual power over them, notably this is the only form of power that Nan has while she is Diana's "tart." Reflecting on the "admiration" of these women, Nan notes that "being admired, by tasteful ladies — well, I knew it wasn't being loved. But it was something. And I was good at it" (277). By revealing the disturbing nature of this "admiration," Waters alludes to the mistreatment that those who are lonely and/or socially marginalized may endure because of their desire for "acceptance," whatever form it may take. The objectifying dehumanization that Nan accepts indicates that understandings of male impersonators and drag kings to be "staging" their gender transgressions solely for the sake of others' pleasure may lead to these performers being stripped of their subjectivities by their audiences.

The disturbing nature of the women's "admiration" of Nan becomes clearer when Diana places Nan back on an actual stage. Nan notes, that Diana "grew tired of gentlemen's suits; she took to displaying me in masquerade — had me set up, behind a little velvet curtain in the drawing-room [...] and when she was ready, Diana would pull a tasselled cord and uncover me" (280-281). This "uncovering" of Nan becomes

increasingly literal and this gradual shift toward nudity works to highlight Nan's exploitation by these women as she transforms from male impersonator into stripper. First Diana has Nan display one breast, then both, and finally Nan is "presented" as Hermaphoditus; Nan notes, "I wore a crown of laurel, a layer of silver greasepaint — and nothing else save, strapped to my hips, Diana's Monsieur Dildo" (281).

Although Nan literally leaves the streets upon becoming Diana's "tart," it is questionable whether Nan ever really stops being a sex worker as she is expected to share her body with the women she entertains. Diana essentially pays for Nan's sexual and theatrical services with not just sexual but also material pleasures. Moreover, Diana may be read as "pimping" Nan out to her friends. For instance, when "dressed" as Hermaphoditus, Nan is led by Diana "amongst the ladies [...who] stroke the leather" (281) of the dildo until Nan orgasms. Although Nan receives pleasure when these women touch the dildo, and thus she associates herself with the "renter's gent" rather than the renter (281), her description of this "pleasure" is not celebratory; rather, Nan asserts, "when I twitched and cried out there were smiles in the shadows; and when I shuddered, and wept, there was laughter" (281). As Nan's eroticization by these women results in her being objectified and dehumanized, the "pleasure" that she describes seems in actuality to be the pleasure of her "smiling" and "laughing" audience rather than her own. As Nan is understood by Diana and her friends to be performing for their gratification, her pleasure or discomfort is thus viewed as inconsequential to her audience and ultimately erased. Although Nan's body reacts to being touched and she does orgasm, her physical responses that denote discomfort are ignored, or perhaps even enjoyed, by her

audience, and thus this scene reads like a rape, thereby providing a powerful critique of uncritical idealizations of queer audience reading practices.

Notably, Nan's association of herself with a "renter's gent" (281) provides her with more agency and power than she actually appears to have in this scene. Reflecting on her experience interviewing drag kings, Halberstam asserts that "While I believe this methodology is absolutely crucial to the project of charting the emergence of a nineties dyke drag king culture, I also think that interviews can be a frustrating obstacle to knowledge as much as they can produce important ethnographic information" (*Female* 242). Halberstam recognizes the value and limitations of interviews as well as the importance of critically interpreting the comments of interviewees. Although *Tipping the Velvet* is neither an ethnography nor an autobiography, it is written in the first person, and thus readers should question Nan's assertion of agency in the face of exploitation which may be read as a strategy that she adopts in order to survive the abusive dynamic between herself, Diana and Diana's friends. Waters highlights the potential power imbalances between performers and their audiences, and the possibility that "queer" audience reading practices may be abusive. Yet, interestingly, while critiquing the sexual exploitation of Nan, Waters also depicts the power differential between Diana and Nan as highly erotic, and thereby presents a "queer" interpretation of the erotic potential of power imbalances. While this novel implies that a truly "safe" space may be a utopian dream, the stage, communities and relationships are depicted as potentially pleasurable and exploitive. By encouraging readers to identify erotically with this fictional relationship, Waters



discourages policings of sexual fantasies and, rather, implies that readers should allow pleasure to come from what may seem like politically problematic sources.

Although the class imbalance between Nan and Diana is eroticized, Waters also critiques the classism of the upper-class women in this novel as is apparent in their debate about whether the clitorises of lower-class women are enlarged and their decision to examine Diana's maid, Zena, who was a "slum-girl" (313), in order to find out if there is truth to this claim. In this scene, Waters makes evident the potential violence of not only the female gaze but, more specifically, the "lesbian" gaze. Diana demands that Zena lift her skirts, telling her "'Good gracious, girl, we *only* want to look at you —!'" (emphasis added 314). Diana's dismissive description of the gaze contrasts with the violence of this scene. Nan notes that Diana "had put her hand upon Zena's skirt, and I could see the other ladies, all gripped, in their turn, by her wildness, making ready to assist her. The sight made me sick. I stepped out of the shadows and said, 'Leave her, Diana! For God sake, leave her alone!'" (314). Although Nan does not resist her own exploitation and sexual assault at the hands of Diana and her Sapphic circle, she "steps out of the shadows" in order to protect Zena from facing a similar fate. As is apparent in Nan's prior attempts to establish a friendship with Zena, she feels an affinity with this maid who is also a class other in this affluent space. Nan's protection of Zena thus reflects a resistance to the classist eroticizations that she endures while Diana's "tart."

While Waters challenges the notion that eroticization is harmless as well as tendencies to celebrate "queer" and "women" only spaces as "safe" and supportive, significantly, the community of toms that Nan finds when she starts seeing Florence

provides a more favourable depiction of queer reading practices and spaces. Upon entering the ladies' space at the *Boy in the Boat*, Nan is recognized as being "Nan King" and is celebrated for the erotic legacy that she left behind when she departed the stage. By evoking Nan's past stage name at this point in the novel, Waters not only encourages readers to see parallels between Nan and contemporary "drag kings," but also to compare the supportive queer space in the *Boy in the Boat* to contemporary queer environments. The distance that Nan feels from her past and the stage, at least the literal stage, is apparent when, after admitting to being Nan King, she reflects, "It was the truth, and yet I felt like an impostor" (419). Although Nan initially describes being asked to sing as "a terrible dream" (423), and thus community is once more associated with exploitation, Waters reverses this reading by having Nan quickly change her tune once the women around her begin to sing. Reflecting on the difference between Kitty singing and this chorus of twenty women, Nan thinks that the song now

had a certain trueness, too, and a new sweetness all of its own. I listened to the boisterous girls, and found myself beginning to hum...In a moment I had knelt upon my seat and joined my voice with theirs; and afterwards they cheered and clapped me, and I found I had to put my head upon my arm, and bite my lip, to stop the tears from coming. (422)

Although these women seem to pressure Nan into returning to the stage, they take the stage before Nan, a move that signals an empathetic awareness of Nan's discomfort and establishes a collective and welcoming performance environment in which Nan is willing to sing.

In this scene, Nan transforms from audience member to performer and back to audience member when she does not know the next song that these women choose to

sing. This community performance thus breaks down the boundaries between the performer and audience, and offers Nan the chance to perform in a space where there is a sense of mutuality and respect between audience and performer. Nan is emotionally moved by this return to the stage since she, for the first time, has not only a knowing audience — as she had with Diana and her Sapphic circle of friends — but also a respectful audience who celebrates the erotic “queer” legacy that Nan has left to same-sex desiring women. Similar to Nan’s desire for Kitty, these toms express sustained desire and respect for Nan King. While Waters previously eroticizes the power imbalance between Nan and Diana, in this scene, her celebration of mutuality and community may be read as reflecting the endurance of lesbian-feminist idealizations of equality among “women.” Waters also seems to return to and revalue lesbian-feminist thinking in her depiction of the dynamic between Nan and Flo which, while at times tumultuous, is more egalitarian than Nan’s relationships with Kitty and Diana. *Tipping the Velvet* encourages erotic identifications with various types of same-sex relationships, thereby portraying the diversity among “lesbian” dynamics and offering readers a variety of ways of engaging with *Tipping the Velvet*.

#### **IV. Rejecting the Stage?: Understanding Performance as Performativity**

Many critics have argued that Nan gains agency at the end of this novel by shedding her desire to perform for a knowing audience, and thus they see Nan as rejecting both the literal and figurative stage. Stefania Ciocia, for instance, argues that it is only at the end of the novel, after Nan forms a relationship with Florence and helps Flo’s brother,

Ralph, give a talk on socialism, that she “can successfully terminate her ‘theatrical’ career, repudiate her stage name and reconcile herself with a newfound authentic sense of personal identity” (par. 2). Ciocia reads Nan as rejecting the stage at the end of this novel, an act that supposedly signals a denunciation of performance and an assertion of “authentic” identity. Wilson likewise argues that, with Flo:

Nan does not have to hide her feelings, as she did with Kitty, or live in a state of constant performance, as she did with Diana, and she begins the painful separation of her sexual identity from her music hall performances and the memories of Kitty that have pursued her. (par. 29)

By linking Nan’s relationships with Kitty and Diana to “performance,” Wilson implies that Nan’s dynamic with Flo is more “real” and signals a movement away from both the literal and figurative stage.<sup>19</sup>

Such readings imply that Nan is devoid of subjectivity and agency while she is “acting,” and set up a problematic binary between “performance” and the “real” — a dichotomy that fails to account for how performances may be performative. Nan’s subjectivity is influenced by her everyday life both onstage and offstage, and thus it seems simplistic to suggest that she can ever shed the stage in order to don an authentic individuality. During her days passing as a boy, Nan reflects that the madam who kept her “changing room,” “was never quite sure if I were a girl come to her house to pull on a pair of trousers, or a boy arrived to change out of his frock. Sometimes, I was not sure

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Llewellyn argues that the end of *Tipping the Velvet* shows Nan and Florence “actively engaging in a social revolution; embracing the possibilities of literature, thought and sexual desire in one and the same moment” (198-199). I question whether Nan truly displays an investment in politics at the end of this novel and, rather, agree with Ciocia’s more critical assessment of Nan’s apparent transformation. Ciocia asserts, “Nancy’s development [...] is only apparent, and her delivery of Ralph’s speech is successful not in as much as it is a heartfelt plea to the crowd, but because it is a competent oratorical performance, acted out by someone who knows how to beat stage fright and deal with hecklers” (15).

myself” (195). The destabilization of Nan’s identity as a woman once she begins to pass as a man reveals the performative nature of gender performances.

Reflecting on the confusion caused by her discussion of gender performativity in terms of performances, such as gender parody and drag, in *Gender Trouble*, Butler asserts that “It is important to distinguish performance from performativity” (qtd. in Osborne and Segal par. 9), noting that “One of the interpretations that has been made of *Gender Trouble* is that there is no sex, there is only gender, and gender is performative. People then go on to think that if gender is performative it must be radically free” (qtd. in par. 5). While Butler’s move to clearly distinguish between the performative and performance is an understandable response to critical (mis)readings of her work, her use of drag as an example of performativity in *Gender Trouble* may be read as productive since it alludes to the way that performance has performative effects that transform identity. Butler maintains that “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (44). A repetition of acts is central to the formation of a naturally appearing gendered subjectivity. Considering that drag performances are most often rehearsed and performed multiple times, drag consists of a repetition of acts that affects the performer’s subjectivity. As Butler asserts, “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (33). The doing of drag, like everyday doings of gender, thus constructs one’s subjectivity and gender expression.

bradford highlights the performativity of drag in “his” reflection that “his” character, Johnny T., “more and more [...] is part of my daily walk and my identity—he pops up when I am out doing errands and the assorted mundanities of my daily life” (23). The masculinity that Nan first begins expressing when she is onstage persists after she ends her theatrical career. This offstage masculinity is apparent in her decision to wear trousers and cut her hair after she begins living with Flo. Male impersonation in *Tipping the Velvet* is thus both performance and performative. Although Nan may say goodbye to Diana and Kitty at the end of the novel, and tell Kitty that Nan “‘ain’t my name, and never was’” (467), Nan can never fully shed her performance of Nan King nor fully repudiate the stage as these “acts” are part of her present persona that will continue to inform her future identity.

Although there does seem to be a repudiation of the stage at the end of this novel, this “curtain call” (Ciocia par. 17) does not signal the end of performance but, rather, may reflect a break from the type of performance Nan gave while with Kitty — the performance of “heterosexuality” — and the performance of subservient and eroticized object of desire while with Diana. Thus, the ending of *Tipping the Velvet* need not be understood as establishing a binary between “fake” performances and “real” identities that take place offstage. Rather, this ending may reflect the beginning of a new performance, one that, considering the complicated dynamic between Nan and Flo — whose relationship is certainly not devoid of tension or performance — readers should not presume to be more “authentic.” Readings that link Nan’s newfound “authentic”

sense of self with her shedding of the stage imply that the stage is wholly exploitive, and thereby erase the pleasures that Nan receives from being a male impersonator.

While Waters's depiction of the way that Nan's past on the stage affects her present subjectivity establishes continuity between her past and present identities, Nan has transformed since her days as an oyster girl in Whitstable, and thus it would be reductive to suggest that readers could trace a one-to-one correlation between Nan in the past and present. The (dis)continuities in Nan's personal history reflect the (dis)continuities that are apparent between the past and present in LGBTQ2 history. As my analysis of both historical continuities and differences in Waters's text shows, this novel avoids reinscribing an uncritical celebration of historical alterity and also resists constructing a trans(a)historical depiction of the past. Rather, *Tipping the Velvet* demonstrates the importance of critically examining what (dis)continuities in both personal and collective histories may tell us about both the past and present.

## CONCLUSION

### **Embracing Affect: A Personal Self-Reflexive History of Reading LGBTQ2 Historical Fiction**

This promise of ‘the touch of the past’ opens up the possibility of learning anew how to live in the present with each other, not only by raising the question of to what and to whom I must be accountable, but also by considering what attention, learning, and actions such accountability requires.

Roger I. Simon, *The Touch of the Past* (4-5)

As my study emphasizes the importance of self-reflexivity while reading and outlines the value of affective historical modes of engagement like cross-temporal identifications, in this conclusion I attempt to translate my theory into practice by developing a personal affective history in which I reflect upon the ways that the (dis)identifications that I have made while reading LGBTQ2 historical novels have informed my personal, political and professional experiences. Recalling my interpretation of stage performances as having performative effects, I see reading as a performative act that influences us in ways that we cannot completely comprehend. While I maintain that it is impossible to fully trace the effects that reading has on our lives and experiences of selfhood, being self-reflexive about our reading practices can help us better understand how the (dis)identifications that we make while reading shape our beliefs and actions. Writing this dissertation has helped me to recognize ways in which the empathetic cross-temporal identifications that I have formed with characters in LGBTQ2 historical novels have affected my personal relationships, my academic career and my community activist work. I offer this self-reflexive history not to suggest that I “know” exactly how literature has influenced me but, rather, to show, as Elin Diamond



puts it, that “The awareness of and politicization of one’s identifications, no less than the act of identification itself, are potentially endless, and endlessly transformative” (94).

Although we cannot fully control our (dis)identifications, we can critically reflect upon the types of (dis)identifications that we make as well as their potential effects on others, and work toward developing nuanced, flexible, and queer- and trans-sensitive reading practices.

I want to begin by voicing my concern about taking this affective approach. My wariness about concluding with a self-reflexive personal history of reading is ironic considering the focus of my study. My uneasiness with expressing affect in my work supports Janet Mason Ellerby’s claim that “a standard of unbiased rationality still dominates” in the academy (par. 2). As Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper and Francesca Polletta note, emotions “have regularly fallen on the ‘bad’ side of a number of prominent dichotomies in Western thought, including body and mind, nature and culture, female and male, private and public” (15). The insidiousness of the binary and hierarchy between reason and emotion is apparent in the fact that even academics who work to value affective histories and empathetic identifications may feel uneasy expressing emotion in their writing. Since, in the academy, “The convention of the objective, disinterested, scholar/teacher [...] haunts those of us who are passionate about our profession” (Ellerby par. 2), outing emotion is a risky move for academics. The move to establish LGBTQ2 history as a “serious” area of historical study by critiquing historical identifications for being too subjective suggests that the pressure to be objective and emotionally detached is heightened for those of us who work from within the minority groups that we study. As a

queer woman writing about LGBTQ2 historical fiction and social justice, it is thus understandable, however unfortunate, that I am hesitant to express my emotional responses to literature in my writing. I offer my affective history of reading in an attempt not only to resist the pressure to appear detached and unbiased but also to show the benefits of embracing and self-reflexively pondering our affective responses to LGBTQ2 historical fiction.

The emphasis that I place on developing self-reflexive reading practices arises out of my awareness of the risks associated with using identification, eroticism and affect to political ends. We must remain aware that affective responses can both inspire or detract from political action. In their analysis of the relationship between emotion and social change, Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta note that “*Moral outrage* over feared practices, the *shame* of spoiled collective identities or the *pride* of refurbished ones, the *indignation* of perceived encroachment on traditional rights, the *joy* of imagining a new and better society and participating in a movement toward that end” (emphasis added 13) are but some of the emotional motivations for becoming politically involved. The belief that affective engagement may inspire political action is reflected in my argument that developing empathetic identifications with “lesbian,” “queer” and “trans” characters can lead to queer- and trans-positive social change.

While I maintain that reading is a performative act that translates into action in ways that we cannot hope to fully grasp, it is also vital that we recognize that “the links between personal and social transformation are by no means guaranteed” (Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings* 1). As Cvetkovich argues, “Rather than leading to social change, the

expression of feeling can become an end in itself or an individualist solution to systemic problems” (1). While I hesitate to draw a clear-cut divide between the individual and the systemic since the system cannot transform without changes in individuals and individuals’ beliefs may be deeply influenced by systemic changes, Cvetkovich offers an important warning regarding the potential dangers of strategies that are based in affect. I share Cvetkovich’s concern that feeling may be used as an excuse for not fighting for social justice which is why I argue for developing passionate empathetic identifications rather than empathetic *disidentifications* that involve an understanding of the oppression of the other and yet a failure to act to support the other. It is not enough to just read books and feel feelings — we need to passionately empathize with LGBTQ2 characters so that we take those feelings with us beyond the pages of the book and into our everyday lives.

While I expect that in most cases our readerly (dis)identifications influence our everyday actions in ways that we are usually unaware of, I maintain that critically reflecting on these (dis)identifications and what we do or do not do with our emotional responses to literature may not only counteract the dangerous impulse to view emotion as constituting political action but also inspire stronger awareness of the importance of fighting for LGBTQ2 social justice. Considering the shifting nature of emotions, it is important to recognize that just because we feel empathy one moment for an oppressed group of people there is no guarantee that this empathy will last or will be coupled with productive political action, and thus we must work to sustain our feelings of empathy and allow them to guide our actions and investments. Developing passionate and partial

empathetic identifications may be rewarding since they help us to bridge experiential and temporal differences, and thereby potentially help us to gain better understandings of both others and ourselves.

My belief that passion is often what transforms empathy into social action arises, in part, out of my experience during and after reading Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*. Feinberg's use of the abject — hir powerful and explicit descriptions of the rape of trans-people and the breakdown of trans bodies when confronted with ongoing abuse — taught me about the severity of transphobic oppression and inspired my strong investment in trans rights. As Cat Moses notes, "The violent acts of oppression in *Stone Butch Blues* remain etched in the reader's mind" (par. 17). While reading this novel I experienced a variety of powerful negative and positive emotions; I felt horrified, anxious, sad, overwhelmingly angry at the violence directed at Jess, inspired by the loving relationships between femmes and butches, and hopeful, like Jess, that transphobic beliefs can be changed. My experience reading and rereading *Stone Butch Blues* has shown me the complex and shifting affects that LGBTQ2 historical fiction may evoke.

While it was certainly a painful experience, reading this novel also provided me with both erotic and political pleasure. In addition to finding the sexual dynamics between the femmes and butches in this novel very alluring, I also received (painful) pleasure from gaining an awareness of the oppression experienced by trans-people. For me, learning about histories of marginalization is both traumatic and satisfying. Like Feinberg, I felt alienated by the history that I was taught in elementary and secondary school which consisted of learning about wars and memorizing "facts." I was unable to

feel a connection to the past not so much because I could not see myself in history but, rather, because I could not see humanity in history. I only came to grasp the appeal and importance of the past when I was exposed to histories of oppression — to women's history and Aboriginal history — while taking Women's Studies undergraduate courses at York University in which we were allowed to emotionally engage with the past. It was by making strong identifications with groups of people who were discriminated against in the past that I came to care about history.

By encouraging affective responses to the past, historical fiction has not only provided me with another way of accessing history but has also shown me the power of using the past to challenge present forms of oppression. Although I cannot say with any certainty what my awareness was of transphobia before reading *Stone Butch Blues*, I did not have any trans friends prior to reading this novel. While this may be entirely coincidental, it is possible, and I think probable, that Feinberg's depiction of the benefits of loving trans-people in *Stone Butch Blues* opened my mind up to developing relationships with those who are transsexual and transgender. If this novel did foster my increased openness toward trans-people, part of this openness was presumably due to increased comfort as it is easier to reach out to others if you have some understanding of their experiences. In this way, LGBTQ2 historical fiction helps to bridge divides between heterosexual, queer, cis and trans readers.

In addition to influencing my personal life by encouraging me to develop caring relationships with both trans-men and trans-women, reading *Stone Butch Blues* also affected my academic career and my activist experiences. My exposure to this novel in

Professor Terry Goldie's undergraduate course "Gender Studies" inspired me to write my undergraduate thesis on representations of femmes and femme-butich relationships. This book also encouraged me to become an avid defender of trans rights in queer and feminist spaces. I have fought, sometimes without reward, to increase the trans-inclusivity of queer and feminist communities. I am continually amazed at the difficulty I have faced when trying to foster trans-positivity. My experience of being marginalized within queer spaces as a trans ally makes me even more attuned to the extreme oppression that trans-people experience not only in cis-society but also in supposedly welcoming and inclusive queer environments. My work as a trans ally shows that not only the process of developing, but also the experience of asserting, empathetic identifications with trans-people may be difficult and frustrating. Yet this work has also been rewarding as it has aided my development of caring and supportive relationships with many trans-people.

In addition to fostering political action and increasing awareness of the struggles and resistance of LGBTQ2 people, LGBTQ2 historical novels may also help us recognize and challenge our biases. I have learned the value of self-reflexive engagements with LGBTQ2 historical fiction not only through reading these novels but also through the process of writing this study, an experience that has made me view these novels in new and often challenging ways. Writing my first chapter was extremely difficult as it required me to rethink my critique of lesbian-feminists for "desexualizing" lesbianism and realize that my disparagement of lesbian-feminist thought not only simplified the theories developed by the women in this movement but also disrespected an important part of feminist and lesbian history. While reading Penny Hayes's novels I became

acutely aware of my need to reconcile the fact that this lesbian-feminist author writes highly erotic and explicit, genitally-based sex scenes between women. Reading her novels caused a crisis of belief in terms of what I “knew” about lesbian-feminism and undermined the clear-cut distinction that I saw between lesbian-feminism and queer theory. Recognizing that my violent disidentification with lesbian-feminism was, in part, a response to “the coercive, divisive pressure of the academy to smash our forerunners—even if it means misreading and/or misrepresenting their work—to establish our own careers, which others will later take apart” (Garber 5) made me aware of my subscription to progressivist readings of queer theory as superior to “past” lesbian-feminist thinking. My desire to bring critical recognition to Hayes’s literature reflects my investment in raising awareness of how the celebration of queer theory and postmodern, queer historical novels is often coupled with a denigration of lesbian-feminist theory and lesbian(-feminist) historical fiction that can limit contemporary political action as well as literary pleasure.

Critiquing lesbian-feminism was not just a way of asserting my identity as a queer theorist in the academy but, more importantly to me, a means of demonstrating my trans-positivity. As lesbian-feminists like Sheila Jeffreys and Janice Raymond are well known for their transphobia, there is a tendency to link empathetic identifications with trans-people to violent disidentifications with lesbian-feminists. My desire to raise awareness of Hayes’s prolific writing derives in part from an interest in challenging this binary approach to (dis)identifying. As one may both empathetically identify and violently disidentify with a given political movement or discipline of thought, recognizing value in

lesbian-feminist critiques of compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy does not mean that one agrees with transphobic depictions of transsexuality and transgenderism.

In conversations with friends and colleagues, I now find myself emphasizing the importance of historicizing and identifying the rationale behind lesbian-feminist theories. In retrospect, I see that my work to counter depictions of lesbian-feminists as hysterical and anti-sex has been informed by my awareness, as an emotional woman, of the ease with which the ideas and actions of those who are passionate can be dismissed. While my valuing of the passion behind lesbian-feminist thought shows how interpretations of texts that arise out of our personal experiences may be productive, our political investments and biases may also limit our textual analyses. For instance, my desire to counter the tendency of traditional histories of cross-dressing to erase the possibility of cross-gender identification initially guided me away from performing a close analysis of the complexities of Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* and Kay's *Trumpet*. Like Judith Halberstam, Jean Bobby Noble and Jay Prosser whose strong empathetic identifications with Jess seemingly led to their reductive readings of Theresa, my trans-positive interest in challenging cross-dressing histories that identify past cross-dressers as "women" or "lesbians" who passed for strategic reasons rather than because of strong cross-gender identification initially inhibited me from seeing that neither *Stone Butch Blues* nor *Trumpet* provide a strong commentary on issues of cross-gender identification and, rather, explore liminal gender expressions. While subjective responses to texts may lead to important new analyses, it is vital that we also be self-reflexive about the way that our biases and political agendas influence our interpretations of LGBTQ2 historical fiction.



Historical fiction not only may inspire cross-temporal empathetic identifications with queer and trans-people among cis and heterosexual readers but also may provide political commentaries directed at LGBTQ2 people. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters uses the past to articulate important critiques of the view that contemporary queer communities and lesbian relationships are “safe.” Although it is tempting to idealize queer spaces as a means of countering homophobia, Waters resists this approach, choosing instead to provide risky critical representations of “queer” communities and “lesbian” relationships. For me, this is the most important and compelling aspect of her writing as I believe that the idealization of queer spaces and lesbian relationships is dangerous since such a belief may provide a false sense of security that can have destructive effects on the lives of queer women. While, on the one hand, the realization that community does not provide a safe haven from discrimination may lead to disillusionment and isolation, on the other, women in same-sex relationships may be blinded to power imbalances because of the myth of egalitarianism, and thereby potentially more willing to tolerate abusive dynamics. Waters’s novels warn queer women about the dangers of idealizing community spaces and same-sex relationships. Her popularity speaks not only to her ability to convey such critiques in a subtle manner but also to the usefulness of historical fiction which allows authors to defamiliarize contentious contemporary issues, and thereby to encourage readers to see these issues anew. Waters’s depiction of the diversity among “lesbians” also counters stereotypical understandings of queer women that rely on homogenizations and simplifications of this complex group.

I believe that LGBTQ2 historical fiction has the power to inspire affective

transformations and political action because of my personal experiences reading, analyzing and incorporating these novels into my everyday life as well as into this critical study. As Roger I. Simon argues, the past has the ability to touch us and transform our relationships with others. He maintains that “‘the touch of the past’ opens up the possibility of learning anew how to live in the present with each other, not only by raising the question of to what and to whom I must be accountable, but also by considering what attention, learning, and actions such accountability requires” (4-5). LGBTQ2 historical fiction uses the pleasures of forming affective connections with the past to teach readers to be accountable to each other in the present and to think critically about how this accountability can be enacted in our everyday lives. As I hope my examination of LGBTQ2 historical novels in this study as well as my personal affective analysis in this conclusion have shown, engaging with creatively constructed queer pasts can help us develop empathetic identifications with queer and trans people in our daily lives and work to enact queer- and trans-positive social change on both individual and systemic levels.

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