

**Space and Sexuality in the Post-Victorian Fiction of
Sarah Waters**

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Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts

School of English, Journalism and European Languages
The University of Tasmania

July 2006

Abstract

This thesis analyses the work of British writer Sarah Waters, focussing on the inseparability of spatiality and the expression of sexuality in her novels. Since 1998, Waters has published three books set in the mid-to-late Victorian era, featuring lesbian protagonists: *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*. All three novels are examples of lesbian fiction, but they are also arguably works of historiographic metafiction and “post-Victorian” novels. They have been critically and popularly acclaimed, added to university reading lists and adapted for television. There has thus far been a small amount of scholarship in response to Waters’s novels, primarily concerned with generic classification and lesbian identity.

The entwined discourses of space and sexuality form the theoretical basis of this discussion. There is a large body of academic work on this subject, by cultural theorists such as Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Mark Wigley as well as geographers such as Tim Creswell. Previous studies of Waters’s work have made little use of theories of space and sexuality, despite their relevance to her novels. I draw upon these theories in my analyses of *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*, exploring the way in which the historically transgressive sexualities of Waters’s heroines are constructed spatially, via the characters’ movement (or lack thereof) through confining interiors.

Chapter One looks at the ways in which theatrical and performative transgressions affect sexual expression in Waters’s first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*. Sites of performance, or stages, are not only located in theatres in this text, but are present everywhere: on the streets and in the homes of both the rich and poor. Upon these numerous and diverse stages Nancy Astley, the protagonist of the novel, reveals the inherent performativity of gender and sexuality through cross-dressing and impersonation. The second chapter shows the way sexual identities are confined within both the private sphere and the prison in *Affinity*. The desires of the protagonists can be articulated only through spiritual or ghostly transgressions, which are simultaneously arousing and frightening. The third chapter focuses on domestic spaces and madness in *Fingersmith*. Waters draws on

Victorian notions of hysteria and female sexuality in this novel, re-appropriating them for her own purposes. This thesis concludes that Waters re-presents Victorian sexuality through the spaces in which it was enclosed.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my primary supervisor Dr. Elizabeth Leane for all of her constructive criticism. I feel I have learnt a great deal over the last four years, much of which is thanks to you. I would also like to thank my co-supervisor Dr. Lisa Fletcher for the fresh approach she brought to the final stages of the writing of this thesis. Further, I would like to extend my gratitude to Professor Lucy Frost and Professor Ian Buchanan for all of their encouragement when I decided to embark on this project. As well as the School of English, Journalism and European Languages for funding my trip to the UK in 2002, which allowed me to attend a conference, and meet with Sarah Waters, whose novels I explore in this thesis.

Perhaps most of all I would like to thank my beautiful boyfriend Johnny for motivating me and being my best friend, and my family: John, Alex, Selby, Sarah and Mark. Thank you for everything guys, I really could not have done this with out your rallying assistance and love.

Numerous people have provided me with spaces in which to compose this thesis. I would like to thank: Mary, David and Ella McCann for all of the help, love and space they gave me in their beautiful home on the water at Tranmere; Simon de Little, Tim and Duncan for letting me stay with them in both their new and old houses on Duke Street in Sandy Bay; Angela Forrest for not only inviting me into her mother's home in Howrah, but always picking me up, giving me a shoulder to cry on and a few laughs when I need them most. The same goes for Alex Links, Philippa Morgan (Grace) and Belinda Harper who have all cooked and looked after me when I have not been at my best.

Finally, I would also like to acknowledge my amazing friends who have supported me during the writing of this thesis: Belinda Abey, Matthew Brown, Jessica Connor, Martin Cowling, Saul Darby, James Gearman, Jason Linton, David Nixon, Jane Thomson and Michael Upton. Thank you for tolerating both my poverty and complaining during the last four years. I promise it will all stop now.

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Introduction

The “Other Spaces” of Waters’s “Other Victorians”

Gaston Bachelard claims that “both room and house are psychological diagrams that guide writers and poets in their analysis of intimacy” (38). Bachelard’s observation aptly describes Sarah Waters’s first three novels *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002). Waters’s representations of female sexuality in these texts are intimately linked with the rooms, houses and institutions her characters inhabit. Each novel looks at one prominent Victorian space: the theatre or music hall in *Tipping the Velvet*, the women’s prison in *Affinity* and the private madhouse in *Fingersmith*. Each text shows that the characteristics of these spaces are not confined to their precincts but are instead far-reaching, and affect sites such as the Victorian home. Waters’s characters move between these spaces and eventually beyond them, in their attempts to find ways to express their lesbian sexuality.

Tipping the Velvet, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* are all tales of “other Victorians” in “other spaces.”¹ The prostitute and brothel, and the hysteric and madhouse, have traditionally been presented as the only bodies and spaces in which non-procreative models of sexuality were “tolerated” during the nineteenth century (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 1: 4). What Waters, like Foucault, explores through her novels is the idea that “other Victorians” and “other spaces” were in fact all around. Waters centres her narratives around/in/through what Foucault calls “other spaces.” Foucault labels institutions such as prisons or psychiatric hospitals—established to contain society’s nonconformists—“heterotopias of deviation” (“Of Other Spaces” 25). In contrast to utopias, these heterotopias are real as well as unreal in that they have become the place of those deemed placeless (“Of Other Spaces” 24). The inhabitants of these heterotopias are those who are somehow “other.” Heterotopic institutions of deviance are spaces that

¹ The term “other Victorians” was first coined by Steven Marcus in his exploration of Victorian sexuality *The Other Victorians*. In this text Marcus suggests that “underneath the world of Victorian England as we know it—and as it tended to represent itself to itself—a real, secret social life was being conducted, the secret life of sexuality” (100). Foucault borrows the term “other Victorians” from Marcus to describe prostitutes, pimps, hysterics and psychiatrists when outlining his “repressive hypothesis” (*History of Sexuality* 1: 4).

supposedly contain and isolate people with abnormal desires in an attempt to spare society from “their infernal mischief” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 1: 4).

Waters’s depiction of nineteenth-century space and sexuality in *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* focuses on three heterotopias: the theatre, the women’s prison and the private madhouse. Waters emphasises structural failure in her representation of these spaces, by permitting her “illegitimate” characters to occupy other sites, including the home. The permeability of these spaces affects sexual expression in all three of Waters’s novels (not only in *Affinity*, in which it is most obvious). This permeability is accompanied by a post-Foucauldian realisation that heterotopic spaces are in fact potentially everywhere. Foucault claims to be interested in heterotopias because they “have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations they happen to designate” (“Of Other Spaces” 24). By exploring the “elsewhere” spaces to which illegitimate sexualities were exiled during the Victorian period, Waters suggests that “other Victorians,” like “other spaces,” could exist anywhere, not just in hidden interstices.

Most studies of Waters’s work are chiefly concerned with the sexuality of her protagonists. Space is not usually central to these analyses; however, a number of critics have noted its impact. Susan Alice Fischer and Stefania Ciocia discuss the lesbian identity of Nancy Astley, the heroine of *Tipping the Velvet*, as it is depicted against the backdrop of nineteenth-century London. Paulina Palmer, in her discussion of *Affinity*, notes the way in which “entrapment in the domestic sphere” is a prominent feature of lesbian representations in gothic literature (“Lesbian Gothic” 119). Mark Llewellyn, Heidi Macpherson and Jenni Millbank, in their studies of *Affinity*, all relate the lesbian desires of the novel’s protagonists to their ability to transgress the imprisoning boundaries that confine them. There has yet to be any published critical analysis of Waters’s third novel *Fingersmith*. In review, however, the confining spaces the doubled heroines transgress are not without mention. Patricia Dunker states that the “damp slow world” of Briar, for example, places the reader “inside the mental world of the heroine” (2).

In the following section of this Introduction I will “place” Waters herself. Her first three novels have been given a number of different labels such as: “lesbian Gothic

fiction” (Palmer, “Lesbian Gothic” 19; Macpherson 215), “faux-Victorian” (Waters, qtd. in “Hot Waters”) “pseudo-Victorian” (Plunkett) and “historiographic metafiction” (Palmer, “Lesbian Gothic” 142; Heilmann and Llewellyn 141; Kohlke 155). Debates over generic classification have been central to criticism of Waters so far. I want to establish my own perspective on the generic category of Waters’s fiction before offering analyses of the individual novels. Consequently, the following section looks at the label most often applied to her work, that of historiographic metafiction, and recommends an additional one: “post-Victorian” fiction. The term “post-Victorian” suggests an emphasis on issues both temporal and historical. However, one of the most interesting things about the works of this kind is that they also reflect postmodernism’s preoccupation with space. One technique often used by writers of post-Victorian fiction is an ex-centric perspective. Ex-centric perspectives explore identity determinants, such as sexuality, from the de-centred spaces nonconformists traditionally occupy. The second part of this Introduction establishes the interconnectedness of spatial and sexual discourses in relation to Waters’s fiction.

i) Placing Waters

In an interview with Debbie Taylor, Waters claims: “Having gone through academia, I do think that a good book should have an agenda ... something that gives it a point” (4). Waters completed a PhD thesis on gay and lesbian writing from the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* prior to the writing of her first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, like Waters’s PhD thesis, is concerned with homosexual identities at the end of the nineteenth century. Waters’s “agenda” is undoubtedly one that is concerned with literary representations of lesbian histories. In the same interview with Taylor she states: “Lesbianism is at the top of the agenda for my books because it’s at the top of the agenda for my life” (1).

To represent the past from the lesbian periphery, however, is not Waters’s only aim. She also wants to write a satisfying story in the tradition of great Victorian novels. Sarah Broughton reports Waters’s opinion that “if she wanted to write a story about a lesbian who was an axe murderer, it would be because of her interest in exploring that one particular incident and its ramifications rather than from any deep-seated need to create a

representational character” (8). Waters’s agenda, it seems, is multi-faceted. She wants to explore and represent lesbianism at the same time as providing her reader with a “good” story. Due to Waters’s various agendas, issues of genre are pertinent to analyses of her novels. In this section I will discuss briefly the generic categories of lesbian historical fiction and historiographic metafiction in which Waters’s novels have been predominantly situated. Following this analysis, I will look at what I consider a more inclusive and useful category in this context, that of post-Victorian fiction.

Writers of lesbian fiction have an intimate relationship with the genre of the historical novel. In 1996, the same year she completed her PhD thesis, Waters wrote an article for *Women: A Cultural Review* entitled “Wolfskins and Togas: Maud Meagher’s *The Green Scamander* and the Lesbian Historical Novel.” In this analysis Waters recognises a “special affinity” between women or, more specifically, lesbian writers and historical fiction (176). The historical novel allows women to rewrite past fictions and representations that have traditionally been male-dominated from different female perspectives. The way in which postmodern writers of lesbian historical fiction actually manipulate the past, however, varies. In a later article, Waters and co-author Laura Doan ask: “Should the popular novel be a site to recuperate the names and lives of ‘suitable’ or famous lesbians of the past, or is it better approached as a starting-point to invent a history haunted by the present and understood to take its authority from the imperatives of contemporary lesbian identities?” (13). The first type of lesbian historical fiction referred to by Doan and Waters attempts to reconstruct famous lesbian genealogies, such as the life of Sappho, in an effort to imagine “an unbroken tradition of same-sex love” (13). This type of lesbian historical fiction has often been criticised for failing to explore the diversity of female same-sex desire and “simply insert[ing] a mirror image of the contemporary lesbian” into historical narratives (Doan and Waters 20). In recent lesbian fiction, therefore, the lesbian past has begun to be more fantastically re-imagined.

The novels of Jeanette Winterson are primary examples of the second, less realist technique that Doan and Waters outline (20). Winterson sums up her position at the start of *Sexing the Cherry*: “Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are journeys I wish to record ... the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time“ (2). Merja Makinen asserts

that in *Sexing the Cherry* the female protagonist Dog Woman represents “a space for the lesbian body that challenges the construction of femininity and refuses to be seen in relation to any masculine agenda” (98). By largely ignoring modern sexual labels, the characters in Winterson’s novels work to question normative assumptions of gender and sexuality. Waters’s novels are frequently compared to Winterson’s (Cornwell 8); however, as Waters herself notes, the only similarity between their work is that they are both lesbian authors (qtd. in Carey 2). *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* are not stories about famous lesbians from the past, despite Waters’s realist technique. Yet neither are her novels fantastic histories such as Winterson’s.

Waters’s fiction does not adhere to either of the two forms of lesbian historical fiction she and Doan outline in their article. Given the generic ambiguity of her work, it is not surprising that most of the criticism on Waters centres around issues of history and the way in which she represents the lesbian past. In 2004 *Women: A Cultural Review* produced a volume of papers which originated from a conference held at Swansea University entitled “Hystorical Fictions: Women, History, Authorship.” A number of papers presented at this conference dealt with Waters’s novels, including Heilmann and Llewellyn’s “Hystorical Fictions: Women (Re)writing and (Re)reading History” and M. L. Kohlke’s “Into History Through the Back Door: The ‘Past Historic’ in *Nights at the Circus* and *Affinity*.” These discussions, like Waters’s own, focus on the way in which the genre of the historical novel enables women writers to re-present the past and the present via lost female genealogies. As Heilmann and Llewellyn point out in their analysis, “contemporary women writers of historical fiction and their various agendas resist neat categorization” (137). Nevertheless, Palmer (“Lesbian Gothic” 124), Anne Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (141), and Kohlke (155) all suggest that Waters’s novels (particularly *Affinity*) contribute to the mode of historiographic metafiction.

Linda Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction,” describing it as writing in which “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs ... is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (*Poetics* 5). The particular aspects of the past that works of this kind usually depict are those that have been overlooked by conventional historical representations. Historiographic metafiction privileges “decentred perspectives,” preferring the “ex-

centric” or “marginal” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 12). This genre is particularly useful for writers of historical lesbian fiction because it decentres dominant (heterosexual) categories. Ex-centric re-presentations of the past, however, are acutely aware of the fact that all history can ever be is a representation. One of the main traits of historiographic metafictional narratives is that they are “intensely self-conscious” about their “metafictional status” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 113). In their effacement of the boundaries governing historical fact and fiction, all works of historiographic metafiction “dualistically point towards the events which are being represented in the narrative and towards the act of narration itself” (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 76).

The nineteenth century is the period that historiographic metafictional novelists seem most keen to develop a dialogue with. Since the 1960s—the era Fredric Jameson posits as the dawn of postmodernism (*The Cultural Turn* 19)—the nineteenth century has become central to depicting current conditions. Even the most basic elucidations of postmodernism include some discussion of the nineteenth century. Peter Barry in his textbook *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* states that where the high modernists rejected Victorian excesses, finding the “overelaborate art forms of the nineteenth century deeply offensive and repulsive,” postmodern pastiche now embraces the excesses of the era (84). Postmodern authors, particularly contemporary British writers of historiographic metafiction, are major participants in this Victorian revival.² John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff propose that Victorian rewritings have “flourished” because “the postmodern fetishizes notions of cultural emergence, and because the nineteenth century provides multiple eligible sites for theorizing such emergence” (xv). Works of historiographic metafiction set in the Victorian era explore, and frequently de-bunk, homogenised perspectives on the nineteenth century whilst at the same time drawing parallels with the dominant ideologies of their own period.

Three much-quoted models of historiographic metafiction set in the Victorian era are John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* (1987) and A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990). Tatiana Jukic uses these novels

² Patricia Waugh (49), Palmer (“Lesbian Gothic” 119), and Jukic (77) all acknowledge contemporary British novelists are the principal writers of historiographic metafiction. Consequently, the following analysis of the trends that have characterised the genre from the 1960s until today is mainly British in focus.

in her analysis of the shifts in British literature's depiction of the nineteenth century; Sabine Hotho Jackson discusses them in her exploration of the presence of literary tradition in contemporary British historical literature; and Frederick M. Holmes also analyses them in his study of postmodernism and the treatment of the past. Jukic's discussion of the novels is the most helpful to my own as she concentrates the developments of historiographic metafiction since the 1960s and thus provides a framework in which to examine late examples of the genre such as Waters's. Her discussion of the defining features of historiographic metafictional texts is particularly helpful in determining to what extent the generic label accurately describes Waters's fiction.

Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is credited by Jukic with initiating the literary dialogue between postmodernism and the nineteenth century (85). The self-consciousness which makes this text the primary example of historiographic metafiction stems from both the multi-period layering of the narrative as well as Fowles's polymorphous representation of Victorian sources. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the cultural concerns of the modern narrator in 1967 are echoed in the social unease of Charles Smithson in 1867. Through this reflection, Fowles demonstrates that all representations, literary and historical, are re-presentations governed by the cultural concerns of the day. At the start of Chapter 13 Fowles's narrator addresses the reader directly about the construction of his own fiction: "This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and 'voice' of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story ..." (85). As Fowles demonstrates in this passage, we never actually know the past. All we ever get are depictions of the past that are inextricably governed by the concerns of the period in which they are produced.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, then, Fowles reveals both historical and literary discourses to be representations. By the 1980s, however, all that was left for historiographic novels to represent was "possible histories of representation itself" (Jukic 80). Ackroyd's *Chatterton*, with its multi-period meditations on the nature of literary and

artistic forgery, heralds the second stage of contemporary British writers' depiction of the nineteenth century (Jukic 80). As with Fowles, the self-consciousness of Ackroyd's writing stems, for the most part, from his multi-period layering of the narrative and concentrated intertextuality. By rewriting the life and works of the famous plagiarist Thomas Chatterton in three different stories from three different centuries, Ackroyd shows that what remains from the past "is not people or their deeds but representations of them" (Jukic 81). Belief in any sense of total knowledge is thwarted in *Chatterton* as histories are frequently mis-represented, confused and manipulated, frustrating the possibility of a neat ending. In his exploration of literary representations, Ackroyd is charged by Jukic with turning the Victorian era into a "mass of words," a style which by the end of the decade came to be seen as clichéd (82).

In the 1990s, depictions of the nineteenth century took on a third form with Byatt's *Possession* (Jukic 83). Like her predecessors, Byatt maintains metafictional self-consciousness via multi-period layering and intertextuality. The elaborate plot of *Possession* features two strands that eventually unite. The first involves two nineteenth-century poets, Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash, and the second, two twentieth-century academics, Maud Bailey and Roland Mitchell. The present and the past are materially connected in Byatt's novel, when Maud realises that Christabel is in fact her great-great-great grandmother. What makes *Possession* different from *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Chatterton*, Hotho-Jackson suggests, is the "solidity" of Byatt's narrative (118). "Modern reality," according to Byatt, has robbed events of "solidity" ("People in Paper Houses" 31). Whereas Fowles and Ackroyd have been charged with turning representations of the Victorian era into a "heap of words, patterns and sterile quotations" (Jukic 83), Byatt has been credited with representing the nineteenth century like a Victorian writer. Byatt reanimates the Victorian period by "superimposing" the romance genre over the novel's metafictional aspects and firmly re-establishing historical links (Jukic 83).

Byatt's technique has proved popular. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of fiction focussing on the Victorian period, such as Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), Andrew Martin's *The Necropolis Railway* (2002), Lee Jackson's *London Dust* (2003), and Clare Clark's *The Great Stink* (2005). Just as Byatt does in

Possession, these narratives tend to favour “solid” representations of the nineteenth century. Novels such as Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*, however, are different from *Possession*, in that they are not overtly self-conscious. *The Crimson Petal and the White* is set entirely in the nineteenth century. The metafictional moments of self-consciousness in the text are minimal, involving only an occasional direct address to the reader:

Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you’ve read, that you know it well, but those stories flattered you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether. (3)

Faber gradually dispenses with these direct communications only to return to them on the last page of the novel. Recent examples of historical fiction set in the nineteenth century, such as Faber’s, are less self-conscious than Fowles, Ackroyd and Byatt in their manipulation of the past. Furthermore, texts such as Faber’s and Waters’s maintain, for the most part, an untarnished sense of historical verisimilitude. There are even fewer metafictional moments in Waters’s novels than there are in Faber’s. Moreover, the instances which can be read as self-conscious in *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* are so subtle they barely make a ripple in the narrative.

Waters, like Byatt and Faber, applies established generic structures to her narratives. *Tipping the Velvet* is both a *Bildungsroman* and picaresque tale whilst *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* draw on the traditions of Gothic and sensation novels. Like Faber, Waters is reluctant to make her postmodern seams apparent. *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* are set entirely in the nineteenth century; consequently there is no modern narrator or parallel story line to distract from the Victorian narrative. As Stephanie Brown states, Waters does not attempt to “rupture the narrative and highlight the fact that the text[s] wear [their] ‘realism’ as foregrounded artifice” (1). There is, admittedly, a degree of self-consciousness in Waters’s novels. In *Tipping the Velvet*, for example, Nancy Astley, the narrator, is always aware that she is being watched (or read). Another metafictional aspect of Waters’s novels, according to Llewellyn, is the characters’ frequent, and seemingly unself-conscious, use of the word “queer”

(Llewellyn, ““Queer”” 213). In all three texts, Waters’s heroines often use this term and, for the main part, the word follows moments of sexual expression. In *Tipping the Velvet* Nancy describes the sexual arousal she experiences from wearing trousers as “queer” (114); in *Affinity* middle-class women go to Selina Dawes and her spirit guide Peter Quick for “healings” when they are prone to “queer fits” (301); and in *Fingersmith* Sue describes the sound of arousal in her voice as “queer” (141). “Queer” began to be used as a term to describe sexual deviance from the late nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries (Ayto 26). Prior to this, however, it referred to anything which was considered “abnormal” or “odd” (97). While there is for the reader a postmodern knowingness in the characters’ use of the word, therefore, Waters is not obviously disrupting the historical verisimilitude of her novels by using it. Unlike Fowles, Ackroyd and Byatt, Waters dispenses with metafictional arrangements which draw attention to both the postmodern and fictional status of her novels. Anna Carey claims: “One of the most remarkable things about Waters’s novels is how well she captures a nineteenth-century voice... Her books feel as if they were written by a person from the nineteenth century who had somehow read a lot of twentieth-century fiction” (1). Any sense of multi-period layering in Water’s (and Faber’s) post-Victorian novels seems to come from the past into the future, as though the author is a Victorian who has travelled into the future and back again.

For the most part, the metafictional quality attributed to Waters’s novels stems from intertextuality. Waters’s explicitly refers to many well-known Victorian texts in *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*. A number of historiographic metafictional novels completely re-write past literary novels from ex-centric positions. Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a primary example. Rewriting *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Bertha Mason, Rhys both subverts the original text and allows for a different reading of it. Christian Gutleben and Susana Onega call this process “refraction” (7). For Gutleben and Onega refraction is a “double process” that describes the way in which “a text both exploits and integrates both reflections of a previous text *and* the new light shed on the original work by the re-writing” (7; original emphasis). In the last decade many key Victorian texts have been refracted. Most popular by far are the works of Charles Dickens. Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Louis Bayard’s *Mr Timothy* (2004), for

example, refract Dickens's *Great Expectations* and *A Christmas Carol* respectively. Like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the perspective from which these texts represent nineteenth-century worlds is one that gives voice to those largely denied it in the original. Waters's novels, however, are not "refractional" in that she is not specifically rewriting one novel but borrowing from many.

In *Fingersmith*, for instance, Waters makes use of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." There are also obvious references to Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and echoes of *Bleak House*. Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Sheridan le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* and *Carmilla*, provide bleak Gothic undertones. Moreover, Waters's rewritings are not limited to Victorian texts. She also rewrites aspects of contemporary historical fiction. For example, her representation of the music hall in *Tipping the Velvet* mirrors the use Ackroyd made of the space in his novel *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. *Affinity* makes use of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* in revealing the panopticon as a space of lesbian desire, as well as Byatt's *Possession* with its reworking of the Victorian Spiritualist movement. And *Fingersmith* recalls Rhys's *The Wide Sargasso Sea* by once again exploring the perspective of the mad woman.

Due to Waters's significant departures from the defining features of historiographic metafiction, the term may not be the most useful label to apply to her works. Kohlke, although suggesting that Waters's novels belong to the mode of historiographic metafiction, recognises that the genre itself "may have exhausted its transgressive possibilities and become problematic" (155). Kohlke suggests another term, "new(meta)realist fiction," which still ostensibly works within the category of historiographic metafiction but "reflects ironically on the unrestrained playfulness" of the genre (156). However, due to the unfaltering focus on the nineteenth century in novels such as Waters's, I believe they may benefit from a more specific categorisation encompassed by the term "post-Victorian."

Kucich and Sadoff suggest that "given the centrality of historical emergence that contemporary culture locates in the nineteenth century ... aspects of late century post-modernism could more appropriately be called 'post-Victorian'" (xiii). Georges Letissier uses the term "post-Victorian" to describe the prominence of the nineteenth century in

contemporary literature (111). Post-Victorian literature, he claims, is interested in “opening up the Victorian past by making it the locus of an intertextual, dialogic, historicized self-understanding, going far beyond mere nostalgia, voyeurism or epistemological popularisation” (112). Letissier’s description of post-Victorian literature makes no reference to the self-consciousness that is usually considered a key component of historiographic metafiction. Instead, he refers to “historicized self-understanding,” a term that perhaps more accurately describes Waters’s representation of the past, which is subtly self-conscious and intertextual but not explicitly metafictional.

Post-Victorian fiction, like historiographic metafiction, favours ex-centricity. The spaces and identities explored in post-Victorian works are, therefore, those previously silenced and ignored due to their peripheral placing. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example, focuses on the outlying spaces Bertha inhabits: the lush Island of Dominica and the third-floor room in Rochester’s Thornfield Manor. Both of these spaces are shown by Rhys to work directly upon Bertha’s expressions of sexuality and sense of self. Since Rhys, the spaces and identities represented in post-Victorian literature have become increasingly ex-centric. In *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Faber tells the story of a prostitute named Sugar who makes her way up the Victorian ranks. The framework structuring Faber’s five-part book is overtly spatial: Part One is called “The Streets,” Part Two “The House of Ill Repute,” Part Three “The Private Rooms and the Public Haunts,” Part Four “The Bosom of the Family,” and Part Five “The World at Large.” Like Faber, Waters depicts the sexual identities of her heroines via the spaces they inhabit. In representing decentred spaces from ex-centric perspectives, post-Victorian novelists such as Waters not only reclaim the silenced voices of the past, they also undermine the presence of spatial and sexual boundaries informed by ideological norms.

ii) Spatiality, Sexuality and Transgression

When discussing the key factors which make the nineteenth century the preferred site for postmodern historical re-imaginings, Kucich and Sadoff suggest that economic, sexual, technological and political determinants have “joined in a matrix of forces that constitute late postmodernism’s obsession with the Victorian” (xv). Out of all these determinants, Kucich and Sadoff claim that it is particularly Victorian sexuality that

seems most made for postmodern “retellings” (xi). Mark Wigley claims that discourses of sexuality and space cannot be separated (357). Interior and exterior spaces are formed by human intervention. Subsequently, all human-made structures unavoidably encode assumptions about gender and sexuality. In turn these spaces also then form and influence human action and expression. Any discussion of sexuality, therefore, must be one of spatiality. There is also a widespread belief that temporal discourses are currently being replaced by spatial ones in light of a “weakening of historicity” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 6). With all this in mind, perhaps “space” should also join Kucich and Sadoff’s “matrix of forces that constitute late postmodernism’s obsession with the Victorian” (xv).

Since the 1970s, literary, feminist and cultural critics have been looking closely at representations of Victorian space. Margaret Higonnet suggests that there is a great interest in space because “as a wide-ranging metaphor, space invites ideologically inflected analysis ... because space does not just *record* gender-based assumptions and roles but also reinforces them” (16; original emphasis). Critics have noted that the Victorian ideology of separate spheres, for example, not only designated the way public and private spaces were organised but also delineated the way people behaved. Poems such as Coventry Patmore’s “The Angel of the House” and Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “The Princess,” for example, suggest that women are biologically suited to domesticity and that the home, therefore, is their natural place. In recent decades, the influence of such works has been questioned. The spatial dichotomy of public and private spheres is now understood as having been “articulated much more clearly at the level of ideology than it was on the ground” (Domosh and Seager 5). Similarly, Elizabeth Wilson claims: “We cannot automatically accept the ideological division between public and private spheres on its own terms” (“The Invisible Flâneur” 65). Wilson’s analysis of Victorian space undermines the public/private dichotomy by showing that for many women the private sphere was a workplace or an area of sexual danger, as opposed to a space of temperance and virtue (65). Similarly, novelists are now moving beyond dichotomised representations in their Victorian retellings, preferring instead to look at the under-read spaces of the era.

The rethinking of Victorian space is part of a general re-assessment of the Victorians themselves, particularly with regards to sexuality. In his analysis of Victorian sexuality, Foucault draws attention to the repressive conceptions that have influenced both historical and contemporary understandings of sex and sexuality (*The History of Sexuality* 1: 5). Foucault's work, according to Edward Soja, is "imbued with a subtle but persistently spatializing undercurrent" (16). Certainly Foucault's description of the "repressive hypothesis," which he believes governs all discussions of Victorian sexuality, is distinctly spatial in its terms:

Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law ... A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom. (*The History of Sexuality* 1: 3)

Despite being unwelcome in the bourgeois home, "abnormalities" such as same-sex desire still proliferated during the Victorian period. But as far as the official (repressive) story goes, such desires were housed in designated sites, away from domestic spaces: "The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance: the prostitute, the client, and the pimp together with the psychiatrist and his hysteric—seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 1: 4). In "mak[ing] room" for "illegitimate sexualities," the Victorians were attempting to displace the disorderly, removing it from the hearth (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 1: 4). However, the notion that there was only one type of space for Victorian sexuality to occupy is, for Foucault, as convincing as there being only one form of sexuality. Instead, he demonstrates that during the Victorian era there was a virtual plethora of sexualities and, subsequently, as many different overflowing spaces in which to house them.

The Victorian middle-class home, rather than being "a place apart, a walled garden, in which certain virtues too easily crushed by modern life could be preserved" (Houghton 343), is in fact conceived by critics such as Foucault as an open space subject to all kinds of transgressions. "Transgression" is defined as "passing beyond the bounds

of legality or right” (*OED*). An act of transgression is traditionally considered as something negative and sinful. “Trans” derives from the Latin for “cross” and refers to the action of “stepping over,” and “gress” from “gradi,” which means “to go” (*OED*). Therefore, the word “transgression,” as well as denoting a sin, also has a distinctly spatial element in that it implies moving or crossing from one space to another.

Transgression thus links the discourses of spatiality and sexuality. In recent years, the term/action has been used to question dominant spatial and sexual ideologies. Tim Creswell, in his book *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*, uses examples of transgression in “normative geographies” to “delineate the construction of otherness” and challenge dominant belief systems (9). “Normative geographies” refers to the notion that space helps to “tell us who we are in society”: certain spaces expect certain behaviours (Creswell 8). When these spaces are unexpectedly transgressed, behaviour thought to be “natural” to a space is shown to be spatial/cultural construct. Creswell claims:

Transgressions appear to be ‘against nature’; they disrupt the patterns and processes of normality and offend the subtle myths of consensus. These deviations from the dominant ideological norms serve to confuse and disorientate. In doing so they temporarily reveal the historical and mutable nature of that which is usually considered ‘the way things are.’ (26)

Transgression is, unsurprisingly, a common motif in post-Victorian literature. Novelists such as Waters, keen to question overriding ideas about the nineteenth century, use transgression to undermine spatial and sexual expectations, particularly those pertaining to Victorian morality and the “repressive hypothesis.”

Waters questions the moralising and “normative” assumptions of Victorian domestic culture by focussing on heterotopic spaces that efface key boundaries. Heterotopias, as I explained earlier, are permeable spaces. Benjamin Genocchio suggests that the prison, brothel or asylum all function “to transgress, undermine and question the alleged coherence of totality” (37). By focussing on heterotopias, Waters not only disturbs spatial discourses, she also disrupts sexual ones. By showing heterotopic spaces, such as the theatre, prison and madhouse, to be potentially everywhere, Waters introduces the “illegitimate” sexualities they contain into normative spaces such as the

home and the streets. Waters's heroines are ex-centric "outsiders" and thereby familiar with the spaces into which those deemed illegitimate or abnormal are derailed. Through transgression, however, Waters allows her lesbian characters to cross over from the spaces in which they have been historically enclosed into regions where their presence was previously displaced or ignored.

By bringing their knowledge of "other spaces" into the Victorian home, Waters's characters expose the confining dynamics of this space. It is impossible to talk about confining dynamics in lesbian fiction without discussing a spatial metaphor central to queer theory, the closet. In Sedgwick's seminal text, *Epistemology of the Closet*, for example, nineteenth-century narratives are re-read via metaphors of the closet. The closet is "the den or lair of a wild beast" or "a private concealed trouble in one's house or circumstances, ever present, and ever liable to come into view" (Sedgwick 66). Studying Victorian texts through the in/out dynamics of the closet, Sedgwick spatially reassesses conceptions of Victorian sexuality. The closet functions as a metaphor of sexualised space that signifies the presence of transgressive desire. Although Sedgwick is interested in male homosexuality and not lesbianism (39), her epistemology has at its heart an inherently spatial metaphor that complements my readings of space and sexuality in post-Victorian literature.

Waters plays with the ideas of enclosure in her novels, as her characters are constantly positioning themselves in and out of the closet. In *Tipping the Velvet*, for example, her heroines make love in actual closets: "she led me into the pantry, and put a broom across the door, and we caressed amongst the packets of flour and tins of treacle while the kettle whistled and the kitchen grew woolly with steam and Annie called from the parlour. What were we doing?" (436). Alex Clunas claims that "enclosures specify boundaries, albeit permeable ones, between inside and outside" (173). Just like the binaries of male/female, heterosexual/homosexual and public/private, the in/out binary of the closet is shown by Waters to be a "permeable" construct. Discussing the centrality of the symbol of the closet in narrative, Sedgwick warns: "There are risks in making salient the continuity and centrality of the closet, in a historical narrative that does not have as a fulcrum a saving vision – whether located in past or future – of its apocalyptic rupture" (68). Waters shows the closet to be a space which can be both transgressed and

celebrated. In *Fingersmith*, the characters' ability to live out their desires in one of the sites that previously closeted and confined them ruptures the negative connotations of the closet metaphor. According to Annamarie Jagose, "the transgressive potential" of lesbianism "proceeds logically from its alleged location beyond culture and discourse" (2). By focussing on the ex-centric spaces where lesbianism has traditionally been displaced, Waters resituates female same-sex desire within culture and discourse.

* * *

In her interview with Broughton, Waters describes her works as "like a Venn diagram ... sometimes the books can be put into different kinds of contexts and they can make sense in each of those contexts ... " (9). In this thesis analysis centres on issues concerning representations of spatiality and sexuality. However, there are of course numerous other areas of interest which can be explored in Waters's novels that both intersect with and depart from my own. Waters's treatment of class issues in the texts, for example, is an area for discussion in itself; in each of her novels sexual power is distinctly related to class. Diana in *Tipping the Velvet* can express her lesbianism without fear of censure because she is a member of the upper class. In *Affinity*, Margaret's position as a "lady" allows her to voyeuristically fulfil her desires by watching the more unfortunate women in Millbank prison. And in *Fingersmith*, Mr Lilly's obsession with pornographic literature is not censored because he is a gentleman. Additionally, the recent BBC productions of *Tipping the Velvet* (2001), written by Andrew Davies, and *Fingersmith* (2005), directed by Peter Ransley, have provided a further abundance of material for analysis. So too does the fact that Waters has just recently published her fourth book *The Night Watch* (2006). In *The Night Watch*, Waters leaves behind the Victorian period, setting the novel in London during the 1940s. However, as in her previous works, Waters is still interested in depicting sexuality via the spaces in which it is contained. In-depth exploration of these issues is beyond the scope of this thesis as they are large enough to deserve a project of their own.

In this thesis I focus on Waters's post-Victorian novels, in which decentred spaces play an important role in the production of ex-centric identities. The discussion of *Tipping the Velvet* in chapter one looks at the way the space of theatre affects the expression of sexuality. In this novel, theatricality pervades everyday spaces, such as the

home and the city streets, revealing the process of performativity underlying all expression of gender and sexuality. The second chapter explores how notions of imprisonment affect sexual expression in *Affinity*. The spaces of the home and the women's prison are paralleled in this novel; however, Waters has both spaces transgressed by disorderly Spiritualist forces. In this novel, apparitional metaphors work to both undermine and reinforce repressive conceptions of spatiality and sexuality. I explore the way Waters reworks the apparitional tradition of lesbianism in literature in *Affinity*, to show that the transgressive possibilities of the metaphor are limited compared to material transgressions. The third chapter's analysis of *Fingersmith* concentrates on the way that Waters reappropriates Victorian ideas about madness to show female insanity to be a response to social and physical limitations. By looking at the confining spaces of official and unofficial private madhouses in this novel I will show how the spaces themselves distinctly affect female sexuality.

Each of the three chapters examines the way the characteristics of public, or institutional spaces, such as the theatre, prison and madhouse can challenge conceptions of domestic space. It is through their oscillation between these sites that Waters's heroines find spaces in which their specific desires can be freely explored. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Florence's Quilter Street house at the end of the novel functions as a space where lesbianism is openly expressed. In *Affinity*, Italy figures as the site where the confines of the closet may be disregarded. And finally in *Fingersmith*, the reclaimed Gothic (mad)house provides a home in which the heroines can eventually live as they choose.