Chapter 2
London is a Stage
Gender Identity, Class and Urban Theatrical Artifice in *Tipping the Velvet*

Introduction

Published in 1998, Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* depicts London's late-Victorian period, taking the reader on a journey through the city that was known for its wicked lifestyle, but which concurrently tried to assert itself as a city of virtues and well-established social manners. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters focuses on lesbianism at the end of the nineteenth century in London, narrating a history of the city and of the period that has often been overlooked by dominant historical accounts. History is told through the life of Nancy Astley, a young girl from Whitstable, in Kent, who goes to London after falling in love with the male impersonator Kitty Butler. Divided into three parts, the novel begins with Nancy's sexual awakening as she watches Kitty perform at a local theater in Whitstable. In the first part of the novel, Nancy's debut as Kitty's sidekick on stage displays the possibilities of theatrical performance as a means to denaturalize gender and sexuality as fixed identity categories, given that Nancy uses the stage as a way to live out her sexual relationship with Kitty and to perform a non-binary gender identity. In the second part, which is marked by the end of Nancy's career as an actress in London theaters, Nancy finds places on the streets of the city on which she can stage her performance as a man and can explore London's sexual possibilities, on the streets of the West End in particular. Lastly, the third part of the novel takes the reader to East London, and to Bethnal Green more specifically, where Nancy encounters other women who, like herself, are masculine and who nurture same-sex desire for other women.

In this chapter, I aim to elucidate how Waters employs the theater as a literary device to discuss vulnerability and legibility in gender and sexual performance in the city, asserting that theatrical artifice and the necessity to perform identity is something that must be negotiated in order to warrant the protagonist's subjectivity and survival in urban space. Additionally, I propose an analysis of the role played by

class in the representation of different parts of London and in the development of Nancy's character throughout the novel. In so doing, I will argue that Waters uses class to determine the ways in which the protagonist will perform each of her gender identities and the ways in which they are enacted in distinct spatial configurations.

The novel's central thematic and aesthetic elements, which are attuned to gender performance, have been discussed previously by several critics.[1] However, none of these critics has directly addressed class as a defining category in the construction of gender and sexual identity, as they mainly focus on the Butlerian performance of lesbian identity and of female masculinity.[2] In my reading of *Tipping the Velvet*, I wish to associate London's socio-economic geography in late-Victorian London with its sexual and artistic subcultures, which are located in the cosmopolitan West End, in Brixton, Soho, and East London in the novel. As Alden has noted, *Tipping the Velvet* is "the most performative of Waters's texts".[3] In choosing the performative aspect of gender as a central topic in the novel, Alden contends that "Waters makes explicit the provisional nature of any enactment of gender, in any period, and simultaneously makes explicit the performative, provisional nature of historical fiction more generally".[4] For Alden, Waters' employment of Butlerian reflections about gender performance and performativity in the novel functions as a way to evince the contingency of gender identity. If Waters' novel displays the provisional nature of gender identity, as Alden points out, then it is important to stress that this provisionality is, in fact, informed by historical, cultural, and spatial frameworks that are at stake during a specific period.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, the Victorian past and contemporary reflections about gender are conflated to challenge the passivity of women in the nineteenth century and the widely spread assumption of female (passive) domesticity from that same period. Language is a pivotal concern in Waters' novel, as she imitates the style of prominent Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens, but in the act of repeating Victorian vocabulary and terms, she accrues contemporary meanings to nineteenth-century vocabulary and language that pertains to the sexual and gender politics of our time. A recurring example is the use of the word 'queer' throughout the novel, which often varies from its nineteenth century meaning of strangeness and oddness to its contemporary meaning of LGBTQ sexualities. For instance, as Nancy is in Whitstable to watch Kitty's performance, she has a view, which is "side-on and rather queer, but

1 Cf. Alden, "'Accompanied by Ghosts': The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters's Lesbian Fiction" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*; Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction*; Neal, "Neo-Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and *Tipping the Velvet*"; O'Callaghan, "'Grisley "L" business': Re-valuing Female Masculinity and Butch Subjectivity in *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Night Watch*" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*.

2 Cf. Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction*; Neal, "Neo-Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and *Tipping the Velvet*"; O'Callaghan, "'Grisley "L" business': Re-valuing Female Masculinity and Butch Subjectivity in *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Night Watch*" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*.

3 Alden, "'Accompanied by Ghosts': The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters's Lesbian Fiction" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, p. 66.

4 *Ibid*.

when [Kitty] strode, as before to the front of the stage it seemed to [Nancy] her step was lighter".[5] Later, after Nancy had already seen Kitty's act several times, she realizes her "wildness of the past seven days", and she thinks "how queer it is! – and yet, how very ordinary: *I am in love with you*".[6] In this passage, the word queer resonates the contemporary meaning of same-sex desire (i.e., queer love) as it still makes reference to Nancy's feeling of oddness in discovering her sexual desire for another woman.

It is the act of repetition in Waters' novel that interests Davies in her analysis of *Tipping the Velvet*. Davies questions whether Waters' portrayal of the late Victorian period actually yields transformations in patriarchal history or just simply repeats Victorian norms without any "liberatory transformation".[7] Drawing on discussions about Butler's gender theories, Davies concludes that, where Butler foresees possible shifts in the repetition of gender norms, Waters is ambivalent about these transformations. On the one hand, she argues that "gender trouble repeatedly emerges as Nancy re-cites and subverts the heteronormative script of gender to express development of her queer subjectivity"; on the other hand, though, Davies writes that Nancy "can never wholly free herself from the machinations of gendered scripts […] which constrains her agency and autonomy".[8] In Davies' reading of the novel, even as Nancy finds true love in the feminist-socialist milieu in Bethnal Green after she meets Florence Banner, the protagonist realizes that "stepping outside of this system is not an option",[9] and that one's agency is always constrained by norms and regulation.

Nancy recounts her story retrospectively, in an autodiegetic narration, giving an account of her trajectory in discovering sexual desire for other women and in performing a non-binary gender identity. In doing so, her story expresses viewpoints of alterity and of Nancy's own perception of selfhood. I will argue that the slippages that propel the development of her queer subjectivity are precisely the moments in which others' perceptions of her coincide with the non-binary gender identity that she wishes to convey through her identity. Conversely, it is in the moments that she cannot enact an ambiguous gender identity, which happens precisely as she begins to circulate in London in masculine attire, that her agency becomes limited to the 'gender scripts' to which Davies refers. In my reading of the novel, I am interested in the ways in which some spatial configurations enable the emergence of a non-binary gender identity, and the enactment of same-sex desire, while other spaces curtail the possibilities for more fluid identities. As I will elucidate further in this chapter, class plays a pivotal role in the materialization of Nancy's various identities, since it is class that dictates the 'gender scripts' that she must perform.

As we will see, the first two parts of the novel mark the passage of the stage in the theater to the city as a stage. The first part focuses on Nancy's career as a male impersonator in London theaters, and the second on her performance as a young man in London's various social spaces. I argue that it is possible to read these two parts

5 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 17.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

7 Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p. 115.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 115–116.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

in light of Butlerian notions of gender construction: firstly, this can be undertaken in terms of the function exercised by drag performances in revealing the imitative characteristic of gender construction, and secondly concerning the *necessity* to perform gender in order to yield substance and coherence upon one's gender and sexual identity as a means to obtain intelligibility within a social space. In the third part, however, I argue that the notion of performance is ultimately superseded by notions of *naturalness* and *authenticity* of self and identity that is suggestively associated with working-class femininity.

The development of Nancy's queer subjectivity is defined by the challenges that emerge throughout the narrative in many ways. On stage, Nancy must perform as a soldier and as a gentleman and, in order to do so, she must learn specific gestures and body language that will provide the impression of a woman impersonating a man. As Nancy becomes a renter in the second part of the novel, her roles are given by chance, not by her manager Walter Bliss. As a renter, Nancy must embody a 'real' man who moves through the West End's cruising networks, so that she can encounter the sexual gaze of other men. As Diana Lethaby's escort, Neville King, Nancy must perform masculinity according to the upper-class economy of language and behavior. Later, as she meets Florence, Nancy's gender identity finally consolidates as a working-class butch who is portrayed as more authentic than the other identities that Nancy takes up in the novel.

It is through Nancy's life-journey in London that Waters discusses representations of homosexuality, gender, class, and different cultural backgrounds, articulating them in concert with the rapid and overwhelming urban development experienced by Londoners in the late Victorian period. As Lynda Nead has argued, London was the Victorian Babylon; "it was a place that symbolized material wonder and tumultuous destruction; a city whose splendour was its downfall".[10] On the one hand, London was the notable capital of the Empire, which stood out for its accelerated urban development and advanced technology; on the other hand, urban growth also meant the rise of subcultures and the possibility of anonymity in the city. Cook explains that urban growth and the increase of anonymity in the city allowed "a subcultural network to become more organized and integrated into city life",[11] resulting in venues frequented by 'mollies' or 'sodomites'. However, it was mainly men who circulated in London's sexual subculture. As I will discuss further in chapter 8, lesbian spaces in the nineteenth century have been largely invisible throughout history and culture, since women's circulation in urban spaces was more restricted than men's and they did not have the same financial independency as their male counterparts.[12]

Apart from the ascent of a sexual subculture, there was also great fascination with working-class communities and slums during the Victorian era. As we can see in the writings of Charles Dickens, the London underworld came to be a prominent trope to represent the variety of 'street stereotypes', as well as the contrasts between the

10 Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, p. 3

11 Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914*, pp. 9–10.

12 Cf. Gowning, "History" in Medhurst and Munt (eds.) *Lesbian and Gay Studies: a Critical Introduction*, p. 61; Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p. 10

rich and the poor in an urban context. Wilson notes that a large part of Victorian journalism "was a literature of voyeurism, revealing to its middle-class audience a hidden life of the city which offered not so much grist for reform as vicarious, even illicit enjoyment of the forbidden 'Other'",[13] as is the case with George Augustus Sala's texts about London life. For Wilson, Sala and Dickens were writers who "saw everything from [their] privileged perch on an omnibus roof",[14] as they were able to remain invisible while watching the city as a spectacle. Women, of course, were not granted the same privilege. Wilson maintains that the gaze presented in Victorian literature is almost strictly a male gaze that was able to be anonymous and watch, while women were always the object of that gaze and were, therefore, considered vulnerable to it. It is in this context that the circulation of women in cities was of great concern to governmental authorities and society, given that public discourse claimed control over women under the premise of guaranteeing their safety in urban space.[15]

With their limited agency to circulate in the city, it is not a coincidence that the period's popular genres, such as the picaresque novel and the *Bildungsroman* are, as Emily Jeremiah puts it, "by definition masculinist forms".[16] Jeremiah reads Waters' first novel as a queer version of the picaresque novel and the *Bildungsroman*, arguing that *Tipping the Velvet* challenges these genres' masculinist conventions by introducing a queer heroine who "progresses from oyster-girl to dresser, to music-hall artiste to rent boy, to sex slave to housewife/parent and socialist orator".[17] Although I do see elements of the *Bildungsroman* in the novel, which are mainly articulated in terms of the protagonist's maturing and psychological development,[18] my reading of the novel will focus mainly on the picaresque plot, since its episodic narration is constructed around the frequent shifts in the spaces in which the protagonist circulates.[19]

In creating a lesbian picaro, Waters appropriates the dominant male gaze that is historically attributed to the figure of the *flâneur* as a means to represent "Victorian London from female and queer viewpoints".[20] In so doing, Palmer argues that Waters' depiction of London in the novel juxtaposes already established references of "dominant culture with its marginalized counterpart" that are found in Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, to include discussions about gender and sexuality in "feminine and queer areas of metropolitan life at which [these authors] merely hint".[21] In her debut novel, Waters brings the participation of women in London to light by exploring the 1880s as an important moment for the circulation of women in urban space. It was in the late Victorian period that women began to effectively take part in the city's

13 Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*, p. 27.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Idem*, "The Invisible Flâneur", p. 90.

16 Jeremiah, "'The "I" inside "her": Queer Narration in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* and Wesley Stace's *Misfortune*", p. 135.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Cf. Garland, *The Oxford Companion to German Literature*, p. 87.

19 Cf. Hartveit, *Workings of the Picaresque in the British Novel*, pp. 12–14.

20 Palmer, "Representations of Queer London in the Fiction of Sarah Waters" in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, p. 83.

21 *Ibid.*

life, accessing theaters, department stores, libraries, and parks, for instance, and to promote new models of femininity that did not necessarily converge with the familial and domestic spheres.[22] By the late 1870s, women comprised a great part of the audience in music halls, which thirty, forty years earlier had consisted, by and large, of men.[23] In theaters, women increasingly became a visible part of the audience and, as artists, they achieved great success on London stages.

One of the most prominent acts in the late-Victorian theaters were male impersonations, which destabilized gender norms, parodied the dominant male behavior of the time, and presented models of femininity that conflated masculine gestures, language, and dressing.[24] Stokoe points out that the first generation of male impersonators, whose popularity was at its peak in the 1870s and 1880s, "thrived on theatrical realism, stereotypically 'masculine' gestures and attributes, and the resignification of male-coded behaviours".[25] Throughout the 1880s, male impersonation acts came to embody more elements of femininity and androgyny in their performance, as was the case with the popular male impersonator in this period, Vesta Tilley. Stokoe interprets this shift to be a result of the anxieties that were exposed in women acting out male roles. In adding "affectation of 'refinement' and delicacy […] with a deliberate replication of childish innocence", the act could be considered, according to Stokoe, "less threatening to stereotypical gender roles".[26] As I will show, the success of performing masculinity on stage, something Kitty and Nancy achieve, hinges on their ability to display their femininity as a form of entertainment. That is, as performers, they must always ensure that they are women pretending to be men; they must not be associated with inversion and, therefore, homosexuality or be perceived as a woman who enacted masculine gestures in her daily life.

Music hall culture triggered a great deal of anxiety in London's conservative society due to its "connotations of degeneracy, vulgarity and the potential danger to the sexual mores". In this sense, "the female cross-dresser on the stage posed a further concern to society",[27] being often considered, in Marjorie Garber's words, "a sign and symptom of the dissolution of boundaries, and of the arbitrariness of social law and custom".[28] The perils of gender and sexual transgressions were not the only cause for concern in late-Victorian music halls. As Stedman Jones explains, music hall culture was most popular among the working-class population and it was considered an extension of the public house, because of the sale of alcohol in the venues. Although there were central palaces in London that were attended by a middle-class audience, music halls were predominantly a working-class leisure activity not only because of its audience, but also because the performers stemmed mainly from a working-class background

22 Cf. Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets*; Nead, *Victorian Babylon*; Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* and Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*.

23 Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 45.

24 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

25 Stokoe, "Are Drag Kings Still Too Queer for London? From the Nineteenth-Century Impersonator to the Drag King of Today" in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, p. 98.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

27 Neal, "(Neo-)Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and *Tipping the Velvet*", p. 56.

28 Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 25.

and the songs' and sketches' contents narrated working-class life and culture.[29] For Stedman Jones, music halls were so attractive to the working-class because they were "escapist and yet strongly rooted in the realities of working-class life".[30]

While Stedman Jones regards the music hall as a way to escape the difficulties of poverty, scholars such as Neal, Stokoe, Garber, and Walkowitz perceive music halls as places for potential transgression in gender and sexual mores. As a matter of fact, Neal points out that Waters' performers, Kitty Butler and Nancy Astley, were inspired by the prominent male impersonators in Victorian music halls, Vesta Tilley and Hetty King.[31] The features of subversion of sexual mores and the aspects of class appear as historical artifices for the depiction of late-Victorian London music halls and the discussion of performance of gender and sexuality in *Tipping the Velvet*. Waters' descriptions of music hall audiences, venues, and male impersonation acts are described according to social class and neighborhood. In the beginning of the novel, Kitty and Nancy are usually found performing in music halls in the East End and in South London in which they encounter working-class audiences. As they become more popular, they come to perform in better-off theaters in the West End, such as the Theatre Royal, and in East London, such as the Britannia Theatre in Hoxton, where there are middle- and upper-class audiences.

As I will elucidate elsewhere in this chapter, Waters explores the contrasts between working-, middle- and upper-class music hall cultures in London in tandem with the potential subversion of male impersonation acts. While Nancy's life as a music hall artist is shown as the beginning of sexual discovery and a potential starting point for the embodiment of a non-binary gender identity, music hall culture is also depicted as a possibility of class ascension. Stokoe writes that Vesta Tilley married her manager Walter de Frece partly as a means to obtain respectability from the media. According to Stokoe, Tilley's marriage offered her the possibility of moving from a modest working-class and musical background to the status of an upper-class artist, thereby repelling "any suspicion of impropriety that might have been allotted to her as an actress at that time".[32] Waters composes a similar story in the development of Kitty's character, as she marries their manager Walter Bliss to obtain respectability and eschew the rumors of her being a 'tom'. The novel suggests that both Kitty and Nancy come from working-class backgrounds, yet while Kitty opts for social ascension and respectability through marriage, giving up her life on the stage, Nancy rejects her life as an actress and takes to the streets to turn them into stages in her journey.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters intertwines historical narratives about London in the late-nineteenth century, regarding namely urban development, the participation of women in the public sphere and music hall culture, with contemporary reflections on gender performance. The thematic scope of male impersonation and Victorian class culture permeates the whole novel, but Waters appropriates these topics to queer the

29 Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, pp. 204–205.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 227–228.

31 Neal, "(Neo-)Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and *Tipping the Velvet*", p. 56.

32 Stokoe, "Are Drag Kings Still Too Queer for London? From the Nineteenth-Century Impersonator to the Drag King of Today" in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, p. 100.

boundaries of the picaresque novel. Where the traditional male protagonist explores the world to obtain social ascension, as is usually the case in the picaresque plot, Nancy rejects this objective straight away. In doing so, she chooses to explore the world by embodying different gender identities, choosing sexual pleasure over financial comfort, and confronting the risks of being sexually deviant in a city of intense moral surveillance.

London, History, and the Music Hall

Prior to pursuing my analysis of gender performance in the novel, I wish to provide an overall background history of class culture in London in the late-nineteenth century and discuss Waters' representations of the city's different socio-economic milieus. As I will show throughout my reading of the novel, social class is, as Michael Savage and Andrew Miles contend, deeply related to space. In reflecting on the working-class and urban space, Savage and Miles write that "class formation is a spatial process"[33] in which places acquire social meanings according to the social groups that inhabit them and the ways in which individuals organize themselves within them. They suggest that, to a certain extent, people produce the identity of the place they inhabit in much the same way that their own identities are formed in relation to those spaces.

Savage, Miles and Stedman Jones argue that territorial issues played a great role in the formation of working-class culture in the Victorian period. Stedman Jones points out that, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the middle-class displayed great anxiety towards workers' political positions (e.g., Chartism, trade unionism, and republicanism) and also towards their ways of living, given that there were innumerable problems of urban order that involved illnesses, such as cholera and scarlet fever, and waves of high unemployment combined with the formation of slums and an increase in price of food.[34] By the end of the nineteenth century, lower middle-class populations began to migrate to the suburbs in search of "the realm of security and peace" just as middle-class concerns over paupers and poor areas in East London increased and as public transport developed in the city.[35] Savage and Miles argue that a working-class culture emerged, especially in East London, in this new context of urban mobility in the late nineteenth century, in which members of lower-middle classes moved to the suburbs and could commute to central parts of London.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, workers generally worked closer to their homes and experienced more conviviality in the workplace and also at local pubs, which also functioned as sites for political organization and discussions.[36] Stedman Jones, Savage and Miles assert that it was at the end of the nineteenth century and

33 Savage and Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class*, p. 57.

34 Stedman Jones, *The Language of Class*, pp. 194–195.

35 Savage and Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class*, p. 62. Savage and Miles state that the peak of the suburbanization process in London took place between 1890 and 1914: "In 1891, 538 million journeys were made on local trains, trams and buses [...]. Elsewhere, however, suburbanisation only began to have a marked impact on urban living after 1900" (p. 63).

36 Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, p. 217.

beginning of the twentieth century that working-class culture gradually instituted itself and came to be recognized as distinct from middle-class culture. While churches and philanthropists sought to 'civilize' and 'moralize' working-class subjects in the first half of the nineteenth century, the territorial separation between the middle- and the working-classes in the second half of the century contributed to the development of a new working-class culture that was "impervious to evangelic or utilitarian attempts to establish its character or direction".[37] In Stedman Jones' analysis, he defends that this new working-class consciousness entailed less radicalism in class politics, passive approval of imperialism, a growing interest in pubs, race-courses, and music halls, and less engagement with politics and education.[38]

In Waters' first novel, these historical aspects are construed in terms of the spatial segregation that divides and distinguishes upper-, middle-, and working-class neighborhoods in London, emphasizing the ways in which these spaces influence the protagonist's identity and subjectivity. As is the case with Dickensian literature, the contrasts between the lives of the working- and middle-classes in London depict the unequal material contexts that determine the characters' lives, agency, and citizenship. In *Tipping the Velvet*, notions of class lend the plot an aesthetics of realism that historically portrays different class cultures in London and their spatial organization. In Waters' representation of London, middle- and upper-class neighborhoods, such as the West End and St. John's Wood, display great material disparity in relation to their working-class counterparts, such as Brixton and Bethnal Green.

The contrasts between light and darkness, commonly used in Dickens' novels, define the unequal access that certain social milieus had to urban development; we can see this in Waters' depictions of the West End, described in terms of colors, variety, and cosmopolitanism, in contrast to East London and Brixton, which lack both safety and light.[39] The different spatial and social conditions represented in Nancy's mobility in London are crucial for the making of the picaresque novel, in which the protagonist circulates through several social contexts and overcomes challenges in order to find a place in which they can belong. Nancy's character is constructed in terms of her ability to easily adapt to and move through numerous social environments; these abilities are some of the features that define the figure of the picaro, whose "chameleonlike skill in adopting the language and manners of the class he is trying to infiltrate is also evidence of the extent to which he has been bitten by social ambition".[40]

Waters uses the established picaro character as the basis for the construction of her protagonist. As Hartveit notes, the picaro usually comes from a low-class origin and maintains a conflictive relation with their surroundings, struggling to find a position in society.[41] Nancy Astley is presented as a chameleonlike figure, as Hartveit describes, who moves from one social group to the next, confronting villains and overcoming many misfortunes, such as the breakup with Kitty, the end of her career

37 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 217–219.

39 Cf. Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, pp. 344–345.

40 Hartveit, *Workings of the Picaresque in the British Novel*, p.16.

41 Cf. *Ibid.*

as an actress, and her life as Diana Lethaby's sex toy. Waters queers the picaresque plot by both introducing a lesbian protagonist and also by shifting the picaro's ambition. While Hartveit contends that the picaro's main ambition lies on their desire to obtain class ascension, Nancy seeks spaces in which she can openly act out her sexual and gender identity.

Following the picaresque plot's features of mobility and adventure, Nancy Astley's circulation in the city also operates as a means to present London's spatial inequalities, starting with the colorful West End and Brixton's darkness, moving through the affluent St. John's Wood, where Diana lives, and ending up in working-class East London. In the first part of the novel, Nancy only circulates in carriages and never alone, given that she is often accompanied by Kitty and, when out on the streets, by their manager Walter Bliss. As soon as both girls arrive at Charing Cross, Mr. Bliss takes them on a carriage tour starting in Trafalgar Square, passing Haymarket, and finally taking a look at some of the theaters near Leicester Square. Nancy and Kitty are overwhelmed by the glamour of the bohemian West End and by the grandiosity of theaters such as the Empire and the Alhambra. As a spectator, Nancy describes the variety of people she sees on the streets: men and women getting off their carriages, women dressed in shawls and in neckties, soldiers, black men, Italians, and Greeks. After a quick drink near the Shakespeare monument in Leicester Square, they begin their journey to Brixton, in South London, where Nancy and Kitty shall live:

> Once we had left the West End and crossed the river, the streets grew greyer and quite dull. The houses and the people here were smart, but rather uniform, as if all crafted by the same unimaginative hand: there was none of that strange glamour, that lovely queer variety of Leicester Square. Soon, too, the streets ceased even to be smart, and became a little shabby; each corner that we passed, each public house, each row of shops and houses, seemed dingier than the one before. […] I kept my face pressed to the window, wondering when we should ever leave behind these dreary districts and reach Greasepaint Avenue, our home.[42]

Nancy's crossing of the river displays stark differences between the North and the South of the River Thames, describing the areas around Leicester Square as colorful and diverse, which are related to better material conditions, in contrast to poorer areas of the city, such as Brixton, which are perceived as grey, dark, and dodgy; the latter's characteristics are reminiscent of the protagonist's own home in Whitstable. In fact, Nancy's disappointment when they arrive in Brixton concerns the similarities found between Greasepaint Avenue, a popular name for the fictitious Ginevra Road, and the streets of her hometown. Before going to London, when Walter says they are going to live on a street where many artists live, Nancy fantasizes about a place where streets are "set out like a make-up box", and each of the houses has a "different colour roof".[43] The reality that gets closer to her fantasy is the one visited in the West End, an entertainment area for middle- and upper-class groups that had been stage to much of the theatrical and artistic life in late-Victorian London.

42 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 67.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

While the traditional picaresque plot proposes the performance of class to achieve social ascension, *Tipping the Velvet* suggests the performance of gender and sexuality as a means to achieve a sense of belonging as a masculine lesbian. In this sense, the depiction of class in the novel functions as a way to determine the mannerisms, language, and gestures that Nancy must imitate in order to perform a certain kind of male or female identity, and the notion of theatricality is crucial for the discussion of authenticity in the character's performance. In the first part of the novel, the enacting of Nancy's sexual and gender identity takes place on theater stages, whereas her participation in urban life is limited to the role of the spectator whose eyes are frequently guided by Walter Bliss. It is the first misfortune that Nancy encounters, her breakup with Kitty, that marks the transition between the first and the second part of the novel, triggering an important shift in her agency as she walks out the Britannia Theatre's stage door in Hoxton, to step onto the streets of London as an actor and not as mere spectator. In this part, the interconnectedness of class and space are crucial in dictating Nancy's gender performance in the city, as she leaves her acting career on London stages to confront the challenges imposed by London's staged realities.

Garber writes that "when gender enters into such [social] codes, as, inevitably, it does, it is usually as a subset of class, status, rank or wealth",[44] suggesting that dress codes are consolidated according to gendered roles that are unavoidably established by class relations. Nancy's and Kitty's characterization for their stage performances are outlined by types, such as the guardsman, the sailor, and the gentleman, whose dress codes are imposed by their professions and class. Following the shifts in male impersonation acts in the late nineteenth century, in which the performance of masculinity was marked by feminine gestures, Kitty's and Nancy's performance on stage is comprised of them dressing up as men, but also of emphasizing that they are women playing a male role. The stage is a space that Nancy can dress outside the rigid Victorian dressing codes for women, as long as she can convey the image of femininity in male attire. Yet, where Nancy subverts these norms in terms of gender on stage, she does not so in terms of class, precisely because what makes these male figures recognizable to the public is the meaning of their social position: the gentleman, a well-off type who wears a hat and carries a cane; the sailor and the guardsmen, a more masculine type in garment, who usually stems from a working-class background.

Before Nancy takes to the streets of London, after her breakup with Kitty, she takes a bag full of costumes that she has worn on stage. As she realizes that it is extremely difficult to walk as a woman in London, she remembers that she does look a lot like a boy. Nancy is able to circulate in London as a man by taking advantage of her gentlemen's suits, male serge jackets, and guardsman attire. However, as I will elucidate in the following section, performing as a man on the streets of London entails the necessity of not being recognized as a woman. As Nancy is dressed in "a guardsman uniform, with a neat little cap"[45] near the Burlington Arcade, a gentleman approaches her and offers her money for sex. In this scene, her role as a guardsman determines her position as, at least apparently, a working-class rent-boy, whereas the

44 Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 23.

45 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 196.

man, who is described as a gentleman, is someone who is cruising in the area and finds the renter by chance. This episode takes place on Burlington Arcade, in West London, very near Piccadilly Circus, a place known as a cruising spot for gay men. In wearing her guardsman costume in this place, Nancy unknowingly puts herself in the cruising network of gay men, entering the realm of the recurring encounter of middle- and upper-class men with working-class boys on the streets of London.

Nancy's transition from spectator to actor in the city is vital for the development of the picaresque plot, particularly in the passage from the second to the third part of the novel, which is marked by Nancy's achievement of social belonging, as she encounters Florence and her lesbian/feminist friends in Bethnal Green. As I will show, the two first parts of the novel display a clear relation with theater performance, whereas the third part conveys a notion of wholeness and authenticity of self, as it were, in which performance is not necessary. This is because the working-class environment in East London provides a social space for the protagonist's full identification. East London appears as a part of the city that welcomes all marginalized subjects, a place in which the poor are happy and homophobia can be ignored. It is possible to argue that this part of the city functions as a utopian place, a place in which all of the protagonist's problems regarding her gender and sexual identity are resolved: the working-class norms are able to give naturalness to the protagonist's masculine lesbian selfhood.

Waters uses the stage to open up the discussion on gender performance, asserting the historical importance music hall acts – male impersonations in particular – had in the formation of cultural, gender, and the period's sexual identities. The figure of the cross-dresser appeared as an alternative to the strict binary femininity and masculinity models that circulated at the time. The s/he figure embodies the masculine and feminine, an amorphous body that oscillates between the figure of the woman and that of the man: it partly manifests desired male figures, represented through characters who are womanizers, and it partly displays female figures, who are delicate and sensual to the public's gazes. The s/he character performed by the male impersonator embodies the figure of the oyster the protagonist Nancy Astley claims to be in the very beginning of the novel: "the oyster, you see, is what you might call a real queer fish – now a he, now a she, as quite takes its fancy. A regular morphodite, in fact!".[46]

Yet, while the oyster figure remains a character on stage, it demands caution in its performance on the streets of London. Here, Nancy must enact *either* a male *or* a female persona, repeating gestures, and mannerisms that her class environment imposes. The protagonist's ability to move in between male and female gives the novel a queerness that destabilizes heteronormative dichotomies of homo/heterosexuality and male/female to construe an imaginative possibility of a queer London that offers various stages for the enacting of temporary and contingent sexual and gender identities. Nevertheless, in depicting East London as a utopian space for lesbian identity, Waters restrains the possibilities of transgression encountered in the appropriation of space as a means to disrupt normative discourses, a process that is often restricted in reality but that can become a potential force of representation in literature.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Drawing on the relationship between literature and lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), Kilian understands literature as a heterotopia, "an *other* place that, as Foucault argues, simultaneously represents, questions and subverts real places".[47] In tracing Foucault's definitions of this concept in various works, her discussion about literature as heterotopia proceeds from the French philosopher's definition of heterotopias in *The Order of Things*, in which he relates the concept directly to language. Here, Foucault defines heterotopias as a "non-place of language",[48] where naming becomes impossible and the holding together of language is scattered: "heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they undermine language [...] they desiccate speech, [...] they dissolve our myths and dissolve the lyricism in our sentences".[49]

It is in this power to displace language and subvert discourses that Kilian sees potential for literary heterotopias, stressing that many levels of spatial relations can be encountered in literature. On the one hand, she argues that literature, as heterotopia, functions as an "institutionalized place in arts, as another space"[50] that acts in relation with the spaces that shape our reality; on the other hand, Kilian points to the fact that literature is able to create its own worlds and realities that entail "a parallel network of spaces that enters a multilayered relationship with real spaces that exceeds its own referential".[51] For Kilian, to perceive literature as a Foucauldian heterotopia, as another space, involves looking into the differences between reality (lifeworld) and literature and the ways in which they relate, bearing in mind that the constructions of the lifeworld in literature is not construed materially, but linguistically, which allows the encounter between reality and literature to be composed through various orders of time-space frameworks.

Literature as heterotopia implies the notion of transgression, of going beyond the objects and limits that the lifeworld presents, even when the literary representation in question relies on historical accuracy and facts, given that the fictitious depiction of history opens up fruitful possibilities for critical reflection. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters uses this potential in literature as a means to create a fictional lesbian historiography in the nineteenth century, portraying London, at least in the first and second parts of the novel, as a heterotopia: a space constituted by various spaces that disrupt the boundaries of heteronormative social relations which rely on binary categories and shape the limits of bodily intelligibility in space. In doing so, queer spaces are produced according to Nancy's queering of spaces that are supposedly heteronormative; these queer spaces are temporary, and they function according to her agency and to what is visible to the common passerby on the streets.

Queer spaces emerge in the novel as Nancy narrates her non-binary identity and how she is able to subvert strict gender norms that demand either a male or female presentation. However, in her narration about the reaction of regular passersby on the streets, we find out that the fluidity in her identity goes unnoticed: like the man who

47 Kilian, "Literarische Heterotopien", p. 40. My translation.

48 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xvii.

49 *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

50 Kilian, "Literarische Heterotopien", p. 46. My translation.

51 *Ibid*. My translation.

picks her up at the Burlington Arcade, most people around her perceive her either as a woman or as a man. As Nancy enacts the part of a rent-boy in the West End, only Diana detects her performance of gender ambiguity, which is precisely what calls her attention: where Nancy thinks Diana perceives her as a boy, Diana suggests that it is her being a girl dressed as a boy that she finds attractive.[52]

The perception of Nancy's shifting gender identity not only depends upon her performance, but also upon mobility and the gazes that she encounters. Moving is a key feature for queering space in the novel as it is through the protagonist's movement in the city that she is able to appropriate space and to perform different embodiments of masculinity and femininity. The protagonist's autodiegetic account makes sure to present how her own body materializes on the streets of London by narrating the impressions others have of herself, and also by conveying accounts of how she perceives her own body and selfhood. The queer spaces created in the two first parts of the novel do not function as an exclusive space for lesbians, but they are produced according to Nancy's agency in the city and to the conditions and limitations specific spaces impose; this goes beyond the notion of queer spaces as fixed spaces that enable the lives of homosexuals.

Queer spaces in East London, however, are defined by lesbian sexuality and identity. Although the East London represented by Waters is created according to geographical and historical accuracy, it is possible to argue that these spaces are utopic because homophobia is depicted as a less damaging form of violence, as it is portrayed in comparison with other difficulties that the working-class community must confront in their daily lives. As Nancy and Florence are walking back from the Boy in a Boat, the lesbian pub in Bethnal Green, Nancy asks her if there has ever been trouble "between women at the Boy and local people".[53] Florence replies that there are sometimes rows, like "some boys dressed a pig in a bonnet, and tipped it down the cellar stairs"[54] into the pub and there was a woman who broke her head in a fight over another girl. While the incident with the pig is clearly a homophobic attack against the pub, a friend of Florence, Annie, describes the act of violence as a quotidian scene in the East End: "there is such a mix round these parts, what with Jews and Lascars, Germans and Poles, socialists, anarchists, salvationists… The people are surprised at nothing".[55] Annie's explanation about the episodes at the pub suggests that nobody really pays attention to 'toms' because there are so many types that represent otherness, and most of these types are exemplified by immigrants. The women show indifference to the men's homophobic attitude, even as the groups of lesbians pass by two men, one of which gives "a mutter and a sneer" while the other "cup[s] his hand at the fork of his trousers, and shout[s] and laugh[s]",[56] as they see two of Florence's friends arm-in-arm.

52 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, pp. 233–234.
53 *Ibid.*, p. 424.
54 *Ibid.*
55 *Ibid.*
56 *Ibid.*, p. 425.

It is true that Waters aims to represent homophobia in East London by explicitly narrating the reactions of other passersby. However, Annie's comment about the ways in which East Londoners are supposedly used to 'unwanted' variety of people, such as immigrants, 'toms', and radical activists, implies that, though there are homophobic responses to their lifestyle, their non-normative sexuality is still tolerated. In the novel, Waters creates a contrast between the East and the West End that goes beyond material conditions and urban development. In the West End, homophobia is a terrifying presence, especially for Kitty, because it could ruin her career as a male impersonator. As Nancy and Kitty meet two female artists, whom Nancy identifies as lesbians, Kitty becomes extremely offended and refuses to recognize herself as a lesbian, claiming that "they're not like us, at all. They're *toms*"[57] and making sure to affirm that Nancy and Kitty's relationship is nothing like theirs. Kitty fears being associated with homosexuality and masculinity, which is what motivates the character to marry Walter Bliss. In West London, homophobia seems like an insurmountable obstacle for their relationship. In East London, however, homophobia is an issue that can be ignored because people have got nothing to lose there, particularly considering that they do not, in fact, own anything.

On the one hand, lesbian desire is not always welcomed, as I have shown, but is mostly tolerated along with the East End's cluster of 'otherness'; on the other hand, the sense of community and solidarity that emerges in Bethnal Green diminishes the effects of homophobia and of poverty, since lesbians like Florence and her friends have a wide network of support that helps them to fight the homophobic reactions that follow them, and they also engage with work that offers services to their most vulnerable neighbors. In this sense, Waters represents homophobia in the East End in tandem with the relations of solidarity that Florence, her friends, and neighbors maintain with each other. In doing so, she creates an East End that – in contrast to the other parts of the city that are depicted in the two first parts of the novel – provides a social environment that allows greater freedom on the streets.

As she begins her life with the Banners, Nancy says that she wants "to be ordinary", which was only possible because there is "no one's eye to charm".[58] Ordinariness, at this point, entails moving herself away from flirting and from demonstrating her feelings towards Florence. However, this soon changes as she discovers that Florence and her friends are also 'toms' and she feels that Bethnal Green is a safe environment for her sexual and gender identity. At first, Nancy has doubts about expressing her sexuality and presenting herself in male attire, but she overcomes this anxiety as soon as she begins a relationship with Florence, and she is welcomed into their friendship circle. She decides to cross-dress again during a walk in the Whitechapel, where she sees male clothing that interests her:

> I went in – perhaps the tailor thought me shopping for my brother – and bought a pair of moleskin trousers, and a set of drawers and a shirt, and a pair of braces and some lace-up boots; then, back at Quilter Street, I knocked on the door of a girl who was

57 *Ibid.*, p. 131. Emphasis in original.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 380.

> known for doing hair-cuts for a penny and said: 'Cut it off, cut it all off, quick, before I change my mind!' She scissored the curls away, and – toms, grow easily sentimental over their haircuts, but I remember this sensation very vividly – it was not like she was cutting hair, it was as if I had a pair of wings beneath my shoulder-blades, that the flesh had all grown over, and she was slicing free…[59]

In this passage, Nancy describes cutting her hair as an act of freedom, as if she were liberating herself (the wings) from a body that was entrapping her 'true' self. This is only possible in East London because this is the space in which Waters creates a sense of community that does not feature in other parts of London, such as Diana's St. John's Wood, or the West End, where Nancy cannot be recognized as a lesbian because of her career in the theater and, as a renter, she must be careful not to get spotted by authorities, since homosexuality and prostitution were criminalized. Despite the sense of community and solidarity in East London, which is a significant factor in Nancy's feeling of freedom, Waters' association between the tolerance of diversity and of homosexuality suggests that, because East Londoners lack sufficient material conditions to live, they can endure the effects of homophobia in a way that middle-class characters, such as Kitty, cannot. Although Florence, her brother Ralph, and their friends work tirelessly and conduct many social services for their neighbors, they are depicted as 'happy' with the poverty to which they are submitted. Since these working-class people have neither reputation to preserve nor any respectability to prove, they are entitled to a kind of freedom that characters, such as Kitty and Diana Lethaby, cannot entirely have, at least not publicly, given that they have a social position to protect.

In the following section, I will discuss the role played by class in gender performance in the theatrical realm that Waters portrays in her novel. To do so, I will reflect on Judith Butler's theories about gender performance and performativity in identity and subjective formation, relating these reflections to the ways in which Waters constructs Nancy Astley as a character and her relation to her spatial surroundings. I will contend that while Butler and Waters provide meaningful reflections about the limitations of social binaries of male/female and homo/heterosexuality, their works do not dispute or denaturalize class relations or norms that are also reiterated in the process of subjectivation.

Staging Reality

Butler contends that gender is the first mark that confers legibility to the body, thereby arguing that it serves as a norm and operates as a form of regulation "whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls".[60] To an extent, she understands the body in the Foucauldian sense, as an investment of power, functioning both as a

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 404–405.

60 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 1.

receptor and as a form of dissemination of power. However, she extends Foucault's argument by contending that sex as a regulatory power is ideal, given that the apparent materiality it conveys is constructed by the constant reiteration of norms, which confer upon sex the ostensible consistency and coherence it presents. It is the forceful necessity of repeating norms that unveils the instability of gender as a category, for it is the reiteration of norms that warrant its apparent identity coherence.

Butler discusses the role played by gender in the Lacanian construction of subjectivity, and how the use of binary sex categories in psychoanalysis contributes to the pervasive notion of heterosexuality as a norm, by elucidating how the body attains materiality and legibility through gender and sexuality. In this fixed binary realm of identification possibilities, there is no space for the detachment of gender and sexuality, since it presumes that one can only identify with one of the sexes and desire the opposite one, thereby reinforcing heterosexuality as a norm. In light of Lacanian psychoanalysis, what prevails is exactly the presumption that the lesbian becomes masculine because she envies the penis or, as Lacan suggests, "is orientated on a disappointment".[61]

Nancy's life-journey in London illustrates the conflictive process of identification within this heteronormative structure. What is at stake for her is not only the difficulty of identifying either with the female or male sex, but also how to pursue recognition as an individual within urban space without being compelled to take up any of the limited female (heterosexual) roles that were available in Victorian London. Her struggle to place herself as a subject in the city is also related to the fact that she is unable to identify herself completely with any of the binary sex positions. If gender is the first mark that endows the individual legibility within social space, then identifying with neither of the two sex categories entirely – or perhaps identifying with both of them – implies a profound conflict between the inner and the outside worlds, where one is coerced to assume one sexed position, but does not feel at ease with it.

In Whitstable, Nancy is partially aware that she is different from other girls and that she has a more manly appearance. As she mentions her admiration for girls who work on stage, she admits that "they weren't like [her]", but rather "more like [her] sister: they had cherry lips, […] bosoms that jutted", while she "was tall, and rather lean. [Her] chest was flat, [her] hair was dull, [her] eyes a drab and an uncertain blue".[62] It is in the music hall that Nancy discovers her own desire to cross-dress and first understands that another model of femininity is possible, being able to experiment along those lines once she goes to London to work as Kitty's dresser and later as a music hall artist. In the theater, Nancy consciously understands imitation and repetition in the construction of gender. As their manager, Mr. Walter Bliss, prepares Kitty for her new act in East London theaters, he asks her and Nancy to go "about the city and *study the men*! […] Catch their characters, their little habits, their mannerisms and gaits" in order to know them and to "copy them [and] make [the] audience know it in their turn".[63] The idea of studying men conveys the very notion

61 Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 290.

62 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 7.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 83. Emphasis in original.

of gender performance as the reiteration of norms, gestures, and behavior in order to reproduce them in our own actions. In preparing Nancy for her character on stage with Kitty, Mrs. Dendy and Walter have difficulties in presenting her as a fictional male figure precisely because her masculine presentation is too genuine:

> 'She's too real,' [Mrs. Dendy] said at last, to Walter.
>
> 'Too real?'
>
> 'Too real. She looks like a boy. Which I know she is supposed to – but, if you follow me, she looks like a *real boy*. Her face and her figure and her bearing on her feet. And that ain't quite the idea now is it?'[64]

Copying male behavior demands to explicitly show that the man on stage is fictional, that the act itself presents a girl *performing* a man, instead of a girl *being* a man. The drag performance in the theater only serves as entertainment if all elements of the spectacle assert a clear boundary between the actors and their characters. In this case, the audience must be aware "that what they are seeing constitutes parody, pastiche or gender transgression",[65] otherwise they are bound to clearly perceive the actresses' sexual relationship and Nancy's masculinity. The stage appears as an opportunity to publicly live out a relationship that is socially considered immoral. Nancy and Kitty's performances become a secret way to act out their love, as Nancy comes to admit, "the two things – the act, our love – were not so very different. They had been born together – or, as I liked to think, the one had been born of the other, and was merely its public shape".[66]

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler contends that drag performances are subversive, for they deliberately undermine the essential notion ascribed to the body marked by sex and they denounce the fantasy of a stable gender identity.[67] She argues that drag draws attention to the very contingency of the ideal coherence between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance, as the performer's anatomical sex does not necessarily correspond to the performed gender or even to the performer's own gender identity. In this sense, she asserts that drags overtly exposes the supposed naturalness of the sexed body, for "*[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*".[68]

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler delves further into the discussion about drag and gender performance by analyzing Jennie Livingston's film *Paris is Burning*. For Butler, Livingston's lesbian gaze captures the different kinship system in the balls, as those men "'mother' one another, 'house' one another, 'rear' on another" in ways in which they can re-signify the social, affective, and discursive relations of the heterosexual family.[69] In her view, the film "documents neither an efficacious insurrection nor a

64 *Ibid.*, p. 118.
65 Neal, "(Neo-)Victorian Impersonators", p. 60.
66 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 127.
67 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 186–188.
68 *Ibid.*, p. 187. Emphasis in original.
69 *Idem*, *Bodies that Matter*, pp.136-137.

painful subordination, but an unstable coexistence of both".[70] She contends that the attempt to present 'realness' in drag balls exposes the rules that regulate womanhood and femininity: these rules are produced by white heterosexual middle-class ideals and they create the fantasy and imaginary that the drag children aim to achieve. However, according to Butler, the repetition and mimicry of those rules can potentially create spaces of ambivalence and disidentification that will bring about the instability of these norms in the subject's constitution.[71]

Butler considers the effects of racialized and class-based norms on the formation of gender identity, as she contemplates the ways 'realness' in drag contests is constructed. In Butler's Lacanian reading of *Paris is Burning*, the rules that regulate and legitimate realness are based on race and class, and the film is able to expose "that the order of sexual difference is not prior to that of race and class in the constitution of the subject".[72] In the case of Venus Xtravaganza, who was brutally murdered during the filming of Livingston's documentary, Butler argues that "gender is the vehicle for the phantasmatic transformation of that nexus of race and class, the site of its articulation",[73] through which there is hope to escape poverty, homophobia and racist subjugation.[74]

For Butler, the conditions for the film's success in exposing the contingency of gender rely on the spectator's perception of ambivalence in the repetition of norms: its effects depend on the movement between approximating to and, at the same time, exposing the norms, in which a slippage is necessary in order to produce ambivalence and, therefore, disidentification. If the spectator does not catch this slippage, and sees only "exotic fetish", then this ambivalence is not possible and what is produced is the "commodification of heterosexual gender".[75] In this sense, even when the film succeeds, what is produced is a self-reflexive shift *within* the subject, but it does not necessarily propel radical transformations in the social space they inhabit.

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70 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

71 *Ibid.*, pp.128-131.

72 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 130

73 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

74 Bell hooks and Vivian Namaste convey opposing readings of the racial and class relations that are represented in Livingston's documentary. For hooks, Livingston appropriates black culture to create a film that reinforces white dominance over black bodies, as it shows a parody of women based on the idealization of white, middle-class womanhood (hooks, "Is Paris Burning?", p. 147). She contends that the fixation of being a ruling-class white woman "means [that] there is also the desire to act in partnership with the ruling-class white male" (*Ibid.*, p. 147). Viviane Namaste pursues an analysis of Livingston's film that straightforwardly disagrees with Butler's reading and discussions of drag performance, particularly concerning Venus Xtravaganza's death. Namaste claims that Butler overlooks the social context involving transsexuals and transvestites, who are more likely to be exposed to violence due to their work as prostitutes, particularly regarding male to female transsexuals, disputing Butler's understanding that it is Venus's race that is mainly connected to her death (Namaste, "Undoing Theory", pp. 17–18). Cf. hooks, "Is Paris Burning?"; and Namaste, "Undoing Theory: The 'Transgender Question' and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory".

75 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

In literature, the discursive construction of this ambivalence and self-reflexivity is crucial for the production of texts that attempt to question social norms and relations and that seek new ways to represent the limits of reality. It is in the space of ambivalence that the reader can potentially transgress the restrictions of the real and reflect on transformations and alternatives to reality. This does not mean, of course, that social changes are a direct consequence of questioning social norms, yet it does mean that literature and art in general have the potential to produce sites for the disruption of rules. This is precisely the potential of Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, since the novel ultimately uses male impersonation and the theater to denaturalize gender norms and heteronormativity. However, as I will elucidate further, the novel's potential of disruption pertains only to the aspects related to gender and sexuality, given that the norms that determine class relations in the novel remain uncriticized and are conveyed in stereotyped and idealized images of middle-, upper-, and working-class cultures.

Male impersonation acts expose the instability of and denounce the naturalness of gender presentations in both the first and second parts of *Tipping the Velvet*. In these two first parts, we see Nancy's identity materializing in a diversity of contexts and we see her making use of performance to expand the limitations of her agency and to experience different ways to be intelligible. The theater is a significant place for Nancy to appropriate and it functions as a space for possibilities that conflate fantasy and reality and provides an ambiguous setting for the interaction between spectacle and spectator. In the theater portrayed by Waters, the boundaries between private/public and reality/fiction are blurred, and surveillance through the public's gazes becomes flawed because of the duality of performance and reality, for the stage and theatrical rehearsal obscure the reality of Kitty's and Nancy's sexual relationship and also Nancy's masculinity. As a theatrical performance, the actresses' act confers the illusion that what happens on stage remains a performance and not reality:

> Making love to Kitty, and posing at her side in a shaft of limelight, before a thousand pair of eyes […] – these things were not so very different. A double act is always twice the act the audience thinks it: beyond our songs, our steps, our bits of business with coins and canes and flowers, there was a private language […]. This was a language not of the tongue but of the body, its vocabulary the pressure of a finger or a palm, the nudging of a hip, the holding or breaking of a gaze, that said, *You are too slow – you go too fast – not there, but there – that's good – that's better!* […] But, that *was* our show: only the crowd never knew it. They looked on, and saw another turn entirely.[76]

In associating the feeling of being on stage beside Kitty with her sexual desire, Nancy claims that the sexual relationship between them is somehow perceptible, but it is obliterated by the fantasy implied in the notion of the stage as a space for artistic performance. Their "private language" is veiled by their dancing, singing, and acting, which grasp and hold the public's gaze, distracting them from the (sub)act that simultaneously takes place within the main one. In the first part of the novel, queering the

76 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, pp. 127–128. Emphasis in original.

stage functions as a means to enact a private and sexual language that can only be understood by the two lovers by playing with the premise of theatrical performance; this entails the duality of reality and fiction, realness and performance. Nancy narrates the way that both she and Kitty appropriate the stage to publicly display their relationship, which enables the transformation of the stage into a *queer space* that depends on theatrical performance and on the male impersonation act itself to materialize, even if temporarily. It is this space that functions as a 'safe place' for Nancy's and Kitty's sexual relationship and gender identities. Yet, the condition for the acceptance of this public display of sexual affection relies on the assertion that their private language is not exposed publicly.

Once members of the audience threaten to understand this private language, Nancy and Kitty are compelled to confront the spectators' cruel and moralizing gazes. As they arrive late to perform at the Deacon's Music Hall in Islington, the girls face a hard crowd, who have anxiously waited for them. They begin their number and a drunken man, who is sleeping back in the stalls, angrily wakes up, interrupting their act. Nancy and Kitty manage to continue singing, but a row breaks out and the drunkard cries out, "they're nothing but a couple of – a couple of *toms*!"[77] What actually discloses their secret is not the drunken man's accusation, but Kitty's own reaction to it, as she stiffens, grows tense in the situation, and eventually leaves the stage. It is in this moment, when fantasy fades away and reality takes its place, that the veiled act emerges as a shameful truth; the gazes, which saw only pleasure, entertainment, and fiction on stage, can now only see a form of perverse, disgraceful, and immoral behavior: the secret language that the two girls had tried to keep private.

Waters' employment of the stage as a queer space that enables Nancy's and Kitty's sexual relationship, and Nancy's ambiguous gender identity, is devised in very similar ways to Butler's readings of drag performance in Livingstone's *Paris is Burning*. Apart from the stage as a space of sexual possibilities, male impersonation as a theatrical act is self-reflexive in the sense that it points to the cultural and historical aspects of gender norms. Nancy and Kitty studying the men implies them observing and learning what the dominant model of masculinity is among the men in the late-Victorian period in London. The types that they enact, such as the soldier, the guardsman, or the gentleman are models that are also based on class codes that define these stereotypical behaviors. While male impersonation in the novel offers the reader the possibility of reflecting on gender and sexuality as cultural and historical constructions, it does not have the same effect in terms of the class relations that are at stake in the novel. In the next section, I will discuss Waters' deployment of gender performance in the second part and third parts of the novel, arguing that in the third part, which is set in the East End, the notion of performance dissipates and creates the possibility of the emergence of a 'true self'. Moreover, I will contend that, in emphasizing the denaturalization of gender and sexuality, Waters uses class relations, particularly in the East End, to give coherence to Nancy's chameleon-like identity, which changes according to the environments in which she circulates.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

The City as a Stage

In the first and second parts of *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters blurs the borders between stage and reality, leading us to reflect on the performative aspects of identity and subjectivity. The stage in the theater functions as a space in which it is possible to live an identity that is not tolerated in real life; the stages of life, however, constrain the very possibility of enacting narratives that do not correspond to heteronormative behavior. In both cases, space proves to be important in the presentation of identity, since it determines and shapes agency. Butler contemplates the relation between space and identity in her first article about performative acts and gender construction, published two years prior to *Gender Trouble*.[78] This association is articulated as she discusses Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body as a result of historical possibilities, in which he argues that the body is not formed by an interior essence, but rather by a material expression of appropriated and repeated historical possibilities.

The body, thus, acquires materiality through the meaning it conveys and Butler argues that the way this meaning is assumed "is fundamentally dramatic". By the term 'dramatic', she means "that the body is not a self-identical or merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities".[79] In contending that the materialization of the body is continuous, Butler suggests that this process is also temporary and subject to transformations. In light of these reflections on the performative, the body functions both as a recipient and as an actor within historical possibilities, as it incorporates signs, language, and gestures from the outside to then reproduce them.[80]

The intentionality in gender performance implied in this essay is partially related to the various references to theatrical lexicons that Butler employs to corroborate her argument. The very *appearance of substance*, she contends, is "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief".[81] The use of the words 'actors', 'audience', and 'perform' evoke intentionality, as it suggests that one could take up a gender role in the same way that an actor could perform a certain part in a fictional performance. Further on, Butler openly states the consciousness of the enactment, as she considers gender to be "a *corporeal style*, an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative".[82] In doing so, Butler suggests intentionality in the assumption of a gender role, implying that there is a possibility of *choice* within the "mundane social audience" and, furthermore, that the social environment is a stage *per se*, for it is in this space that performance takes place. In this formulation, the terms performance and performativity infer the same notion of repetition as a means to materialize the body and identity, a notion that Butler will revise later in *Bodies that Matters*.

78 Butler, "Performative Act and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory".

79 *Ibid.*, p. 521. Emphasis in original.

80 *Ibid.*, pp. 521–522.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 520.

82 *Ibid.*, pp. 521–522. Emphasis in original.

It is possible to read Waters' engagement with theatrical performance in light of Butler's discussions on gender performance by discussing the parallel between the stage in the theater and the city as a stage and by exploring the thin line that separates both. The stage in the novel is not restricted to the space of the theater, but is extended to the city of London, and to the scenery transformations that strongly determine the protagonist's identity. It is through social and cultural interactions, and through her position in a specific environment, that she is able to understand her own sense of selfhood and subjectivity. While the performance on stage demands a rehearsed act, which is determined by acting out a specific male type (e.g., a soldier, a gentleman, a guardsman, or a sailor), performance in the city demands forging naturalness to materialize a male gender identity. On stage, Nancy must make sure to show signs of femininity in her performance so that she is not perceived as an 'invert' or a masculine woman. Thus, the male types that she interprets are conveyed by repeating class norms and social norms that compose the meaning of those types, and also by producing feminine gestures in masculine attire. On the streets, however, the incorporation of class norms and the use of male clothing that constitute her male role must be enacted in a way that guarantees that she does not appear to be a woman in men's clothes.

In the same way that Nancy can express her sexuality and sexual desire for Kitty on stage under the veil of theatrical fiction, she can use the city as a stage to perform roles such as a rent boy, a young gentleman, a widow's charity case, or a woman; this can take the form of adopting different names according to her roles: Nan King, Neville King, and Nancy Astley. In fact, the protagonist often mentions that performance and real life do overlap, as she is fully aware that the role ascribed to her in the theater is not different from the ones assigned by various circumstances in the city. Nancy admits, for instance, that "as easily, and fatefully, as [she] had first begun [her] music-hall career – thus easily did [she] refine [her] new impersonations, and become a renter".[83] Both situations are very similar because they require gender roles that can be enacted and improved through observation and repetition. The only difference between them is that, in the performance in the theater, her male character must produce an impression of femininity in order to convey fantasy and parody (a girl *playing* a boy); in real life, her performance must express substance and wholeness in order to assert an engendered body whose sex is coherent to its gender (a male subject *being* a man).

It is in this transition from the music hall stage to London as a stage that Waters contemplates Butler's later reflections on gender performance. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler modifies the argument that she had delivered previously, distancing herself from parallels with theatrical performances to claim that "[p]erformativity is neither free play nor theatrical" and that it "cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms", in which "repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject".[84] Butler dismisses the theater analogy to assert the view that the act of performing gender is less an option than a *necessity* in

83 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet.*, p. 202.

84 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 95. Emphasis in original.

order to warrant intelligibility within a social space. This reiteration of norms impels gender and sex coherence and, additionally, heterosexuality to yield the ideal of a stable identity.

Waters follows a similar course in *Tipping the Velvet*, as she reflects on male impersonations as a means to question authenticity in gender constitution and then shifts this discussion to the city, thereby contemplating the necessity of performing gender to warrant authenticity and substance to one's identity presentation. In the first part of the narrative, Nancy and Kitty's act denaturalizes gender stability and challenges normative femininity models in presenting women who enact masculine behavior. Nevertheless, their performance reproduces dominant masculine behavior that yields misogynist and heterosexist discourses: their male characters are usually soldiers, princes, or gentlemen, figures who are generally admired by men and desired by women. Performance here is, therefore, effective to the degree that it denounces naturalness in gender and that it publicly insinuates the girls' own sexual and gender identities, which are recognized by some girls in whom Nancy "recognised a certain – something' to which she 'could not put a name […], only knew that it was there, and that it made their interest in [her] rather special".[85]

On the streets, however, Nancy's male impersonation must be so perfect that counterfeit and original overlap, conveying the ideal of *realness* and *substance* that confer the body the temporal condition of an engendered subject. As a male renter, she must *be* a man in order to survive in the underground world of prostitution in the West End and also to protect herself on the streets, given that she is fully aware that she is "a solitary girl, in a city that favoured sweethearts and gentlemen; a girl in a city where girls walked only to be gazed at".[86] Gender performance in this part appears as a necessity to remain unrecognized as a female subject, and to be perceived as a male subject in order to change her own agency within the city. Although Nancy gains more mobility in the city once she can circulate as a man, she faces a different set of surveillance that takes place throughout the prostitution underworld, since, in this social space, she must keep herself visible only to those who will have interest in her sex work, never to authorities or regular passersby.

In fact, she admits that the only regret she has about being a male renter is the absence of an audience to watch her act. Nancy misses the public's gaze because there is nobody to watch how she deceives her clients, who think she is a man. Her pleasure in being a renter stems mainly from letting her male clients believe that she is the man they desire:

> […] though I was giving such marvellous performances, they had no audience. […] 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.
>
> But that – considering the circumstances – seemed quite impossible.[87]

85 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 128.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

It is interesting to notice the protagonist's relationship with different environments in London and her own awareness of which gazes are watching her and the consequences and effects they produce. Nancy's life as a renter empowers her agency, due to the given of masculine mobility, in contrast to her experience as a woman in the city in which she can only be seen as a heterosexual woman and is almost completely objectified. However, her social position as a male subject is limited by the lower and marginalized class status of male prostitution and, moreover, by the performance of male homosexuality that, as a criminalized sexuality, increases the vulnerability of her subject position. As a male renter, Nancy is able to enter a network of gazes and of sexual desire that was inaccessible to her as a woman. In so doing, she appropriates a space that would supposedly be a masculine space, and yet she turns it around as a personal revenge against dominant and hyper-sexualized masculinity. At the same time, there is an appropriation of male homosexuality that – despite its impossibility of an audience and the peril of being caught – is enacted as a way to enhance her independence in the city, since she comes to financially rely only upon her sex work.

Once again, the West End is depicted as an important location for Nancy's performance. In the first part of the novel, Nancy's accounts of the West End are given mostly from a position of a spectator guided by Walter. In their first tour in London, Walter takes Kitty and Nancy on a carriage ride and they pass the National Gallery, the Houses of Parliament, finally arriving at Leicester Square in the West End:

> Mr. Bliss opened the carriage door, and led us to [the square's] centre. Here, with William Shakespeare on his marble pedestal at our backs, we gazed, all three of us, at the glorious façades of the Empire and the Alhambra – the former with its columns and its glinting cressets, its stained glass and its soft electric glow; the latter with its dome, its minarets and fountain.[88]

In having Walter guide them, Nancy and Kitty gaze at the Shakespeare monument and at the West End theaters through his perspective. The passage stresses the idea that the three of them share a similar perspective, since it is Walter who introduces them to London and takes them to the places that he considers to be most exciting. In the second part, as Nancy becomes an actor in the city; her circulation in the West End depends upon her ability to master masculine spaces and make her way into the male prostitution world on the borders of Soho and the West End. The similarities between the world as an artist and the world as a renter are understood immediately. Geographically, Nancy claims that both worlds "have London as their proper country, the West End as their capital" and, in terms of performance, she understands that these two worlds present "a curious mix of magic and necessity, glamour and sweat".[89] Performing on West End stages and on the streets of the West End is so similar because both hinge on rehearsal, hard work, and Nancy's capacity to satisfy her audience. In the theater, her audience are the spectators; on the streets, it is her clients, although most of them do not see it as a performance. Although both performances take place in the West End, what Nancy's experiences show is that the

88 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

same place can function as different social spaces, since it imposes different norms and different degrees of vulnerability according to the subject's position. In Waters' novel, there is a clear intersection between class, gender, and sexuality, in which the two latter categories represent more of a struggle in the protagonist's subjectivity and identity in the city, for it is her sexual and gender identities that yield conflicts with herself and that limit her agency. Nancy's vulnerability also depends on her class position, given that it is the class norms in a specific social space that empower or limit her agency in the city.

As she begins to live with the wealthy Diana Lethaby, for instance, Nancy admits that "it did not take [her] long to settle into [her] role there and find [herself] a new routine".[90] In St. John's Wood, a wealthy suburb in NorthWest London in the nineteenth century, Nancy's life is lazy, and she is spoiled with breakfast in bed every day, good food, and clothes in exchange for her sexual services. Nancy must play the role of two figures in the circle of wealthy philanthropists: Diana's sex toy and her ward. In the first role, Nancy remains confined at home, waiting to satisfy her mistress' desires and she is constantly exposed as a sexual object, given that she must entertain Diana's friends by performing different characters, such as Cinderella, Perseus, or Cupid, for instance. Like in the Cavendish Club, a fictitious upper-class lesbian club located near Piccadilly Circus, also in the West End, Nancy is shown off as a sex toy, which changes its function according to her owner's wishes. In the "public world, the ordinary world beyond the circle of Cavendish Sapphists, the world of shops and supper-rooms and drives in the park", the protagonist is introduced as Neville King, a boy who Diana has generously taken in as a charity case. In fact, Mrs. Lethaby has had several ladies trying to arrange their daughters with Neville; to these requests she would reply that "he's an Anglo-Catholic, ma'am […] and destined for the Church. This is his final Season, before taking Holy Orders…"[91]

The performance of charity is so perfect that it cannot be read as such; Nancy's performance as a boy is so flawless "that a reading is no longer possible, or that a reading, an interpretation, appears to be a kind of transparent seeing, where what appears and what it means coincide".[92] Waters explores the notion of performance and performativity, blurring the boundaries between the repetition of gender norms to denounce the contingency of gender in the construction of identity, and to stress the *necessity* of reiterating gender norms to pass as a stable subject. In the roles that Nancy takes up, she must observe the norms that make up that role and repeat them according to the environment in which she circulates.

Class plays an important role in her performances; as a renter, Nancy finds herself in an underworld of peril, since she can get caught for prostitution and for homosexual activities, but she also relies on prostitution to become financially independent. As Neville King, she must perform a religious and obedient ward in the affluent environment that Diana has prepared for her. She can easily perform various personas,

90 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 279.

92 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 129.

being able to pass as both a man and a woman, and to effectively take part in various social environments. In this series of performances, there is no questioning of the norms that constitute class behavior and the ways in which it informs gender identity. In *Tipping the Velvet*, the protagonist's performance of gender and sexuality critiques the stability of gender norms and also the idea that Victorian women were passive and prone to domesticity. Nevertheless, Waters' criticism of gender and sexuality is conveyed at the cost of strict (and uncritical) class norms that present the villains as middle- or upper-class – as is the case with Diana Lethaby, Walter Bliss, or even Kitty Butler –; and the heroines as working-class characters, as we see with Nancy Astley herself and Florence Banner.

It is in East London that the protagonist's gender fluidity is seized and norms become fixed, thereby creating a sense of belonging that can only be achieved with the presumption of a stable and intelligible identity. The East London that Waters portrays is constructed by a pervasive sense of solidarity and freedom enjoyed by the poor inhabitants of Bethnal Green, implying that not having proper material conditions to live also offers the possibility of living in a society in which Victorian sexual and gender mores can be bypassed. As Beverley Skeggs puts it, "respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class"[93] and it is "property of middle-class individuals defined against the masses".[94] She argues that respectability is a sign that determines class comes from the upper-class and goes down the social ladder and, even though the upper-class differentiates itself from the middle-class, the middle-class also seeks the means to assert distinctions between themselves and the working-class masses by establishing moral parameters of respectability, usually associated with family, religion, and social status.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters' working-class characters are certainly portrayed as 'respectable' characters, but not in terms of the ideals of femininity, kinship, and domesticity that are attributed to members of the middle- and upper-classes. The women have rough jobs (e.g., Annie is a sanitary inspector), they work in factories or carry out domestic services for houses across the city. Although Waters changes the terms that define respectability, which are more related to community life, solidarity, and activism in the novel, working-class culture is displayed only as an identity category that defines the characters in that milieu, rather than being represented as a social relation. We can perceive the strict characterization of working-class personages in the novel in the sense that they are defined by the notion of goodness, kindness, solidarity, tolerance, and revolutionary thoughts, but they seldom interact with members from other social classes or those that reside elsewhere in West London. In changing the role of performance and urban mobility in the last part of the novel, Waters makes a clear-cut separation between East and West London, a separation that has been criticized by scholars, such as Judith Walkowitz.

According to Walkowitz, the class divide depicted by the separation of East and West London is more complex than "Victorian writers […] had imaginatively con-

93 Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender Production*, p. 1.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

structed to fix gender and class difference in the city".[95] She argues that working-class women "were less conducive to fantasies of female autonomy and self-creation"[96] than their middle- and upper-class counterparts because of working women's reduced material conditions. However, Walkowitz argues that there were still small groups of working-class women who organized themselves to do charity and social work. One example is the Hallelujah Lasses of the Salvation Army, a religious group who "stretched the boundaries of a working woman's space and prerogatives within her community and impinged on the civic spaces of her class superiors".[97] These women were not like the middle- and upper-class philanthropists, particularly because they lived in the slums to help the poor and did not just commute to do charity work. Though Walkowitz perceives this movement as "a new style of working-class woman, with a new relation to the family, to social destiny [and] to the city as a place of experience and adventure", she admits that its direct relation to the Salvation Army "contained and channeled discontent into obedience to a highly authoritarian institution".[98] Thus, despite their relative independence and autonomy in comparison with other working-class women, they were still morally and socially formed by an institution that sought to preach 'respectable' social values.

In Waters' fictional representation of East London, it seems that she amplifies the role of working-class women in politics, social work, and activism as a means to address the under-representation of working-class culture in historical fiction. Nevertheless, in insisting on a representation that is more concerned with class as an identity category, Waters falls into what Munt considers to be a common characterization of working-class subjects in literature, in which "class designation tend to be *aesthetic*, to do so with way of life, appearance of language".[99] In doing so, Waters depoliticizes class relations by representing class only as a specific way of life, related to certain activities and actions. While *Tipping the Velvet* denaturalizes norms of gender and sexuality through Waters' use of male impersonation, class appears as a natural social division that determines certain ways of living and specific London neighborhoods. The Banners' house "was set in one of the poorest, noisiest quarters of the city; had one dark room to do duty as bed-chamber […] had windows that rattled and chimneys that smoked".[100] Quilt Street is described as noisy, and Nancy has the impression that it "might as well be made of india rubber – there was such a passage of shouts and laughter and people and smells and dogs, from one house to its neighbours".[101] In the West End, Nancy appropriates the streets to perform her ambiguous gender identity and act out her lesbian identity, whereas in the East End there is not appropriation of space. Rather, the East End community in the novel

95 Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 80.
96 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
97 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
98 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
99 Munt, *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, p. 3. Emphasis in original.
100 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 375.
101 *Ibid.*

displays a resigned portrayal of how working-class people live, a culture and lifestyle to which Nancy naturally adapts and which she assimilates as an authentic identity.

The transition from Nancy's comfortable, albeit exploited, life in St. John's Wood begins with Nancy's decision to sell her male clothes, the ones from her time as a West End actress, in order to buy a frock. This decision is crucial because it foreshadows the last part's main idea: Nancy's abandonment of performance to encounter an 'authentic self' in East London. She walks around the city to look for Florence Banner, whom she had met briefly in the second part of the novel, and she finds out that Florence lives in Bethnal Green.

Entering East London via the City Road and Old Street, Nancy narrates the uneven urban development of Victorian London, given that these streets were not "like Soho, where light streamed upon the pavements from a thousand flares and windows. For every ten paces of my journey that were illuminated by a pool of gas-light, there were a further twenty that were cast in gloom".[102] Not only were the paths to Quilter Street in Bethnal Green darker and shabbier, but people also dressed differently: "men wore scarves instead of collars […]; the girls wore dirty aprons, or no apron at all".[103] As opposed to St. John's Wood and the West End, the reader is taken into the slums of London. In contrast to the West End, by the 1880s East London had become the city's main location for industry and also for poor workers who lived in precarious urban conditions that led to serious epidemics such as cholera and typhus.[104] The combination of filth and the neglect of proper sanitary reform in the area seriously compromised the lives of workers, who depended mainly on work at industries and the docks and whose jobs were constantly at stake in times of recession, particularly in the last decades of the nineteenth century.[105]

Waters' depiction of East London is conveyed in terms of life in urban poverty, solidarity among the area's inhabitants, and also by political fervor supporting workers, socialism, and feminism. The Banners' home is a meeting point for many of Florence's and Ralph's friends who are engaged with the local labor movement. While Florence works with unions, charities, and the Women's Cooperative Guild, Ralph serves at the secretary in the silk factory's guild. The atmosphere constructed in the Banner's Bethnal Green household is very similar to E. P. Thompson's historical account of the English working class from 1780 until 1832. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson elucidates the period in which a working-class consciousness was defined by and through the workers' culture, experience, and political battles. For Thompson, the working class in England played a pivotal role as a historical agent in the constitution of social welfare, as radical politics were ingrained in various spheres of working-class life, such as in cultural, social, and community networks.[106] In Quilter Street, Nancy finds herself "handing out cups of tea, rolling cigarettes, nursing babies while

102 *Ibid.*, pp. 344–345.

103 *Ibid.*, p. 345.

104 Marriott, *Beyond the Tower*, pp. 123–149.

105 *Ibid.*, pp. 211–212.

106 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 401–418.

other people argued and laughed",[107] talking about the Social Democratic Federation, the Independent Labour Party, and the Tories.

Waters' account of East London reverberates Thompson's views on class-consciousness, given that the Banners nurture autodidactic and intellectual culture, a communal practice that, according to Thompson, was often the case in working-class environments in the first half of the nineteenth century. Like the working-class described by Thompson, the Banners "formed a picture of the organisation of society, out of their own experience and with the help of their hard-won and erratic education, which was above all a political picture".[108] Although the East London depicted in *Tipping the Velvet* is set at the end of the nineteenth century, Waters takes up Thompson's account of an intellectualized and politicized working class to depict the ways in which early radical labor politics influenced trade unionism and socialist movements at the beginning of the century.

Nairn and Anderson point out that radicalism found among workers in late Victorian England was not necessarily the case. In spite of their appreciation and respect for Thompson's work, Nairn and Anderson dispute some of Thompson's arguments about radical labor politics. Nairn and Anderson argue that late Victorian working-class politics could not transform the workers' movement into an actual political threat. Despite organized revolts throughout the nineteenth century, Nairn contends that extreme class-consciousness impeded direct conflicts between the bourgeoisie and the working class. He perceives workers' culture and values as "positive", but he argues that the impossibility of a real separation between classes turned class-consciousness into "a specific vehicle of assimilation, whereby bourgeois ideas and customs were refracted downwards into the working class".[109] For Nairn, this assimilation resulted in a "caricature" of the bourgeoisie and hindered the formation of socialist and radical movements at the end of the century; this led to the trade union model of political organization that prevailed throughout most of the twentieth century and which Nairn considers a "moderate and timid form of corporate act".[110]

Anderson argues, along similar lines, that apart from class-consciousness, the fact that British working-class radicalism took place in the beginning of the nineteenth century with Owenism, and later with Chartism, was an important factor for more moderate movements at the end of the nineteenth century. For Anderson, the movements were weakened and could not thrive into strong socialist movements, since there was "minimum availability of socialism as a structured ideology" [111] in the times of Owenism and Chartism. He recognizes these two movements as crucial for the

107 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 378.

108 Thompson, *The Making of The Working Class*, p. 712.

109 Nairn, "The British Working Class", p. 55.

110 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

111 Anderson, "Origins of the Present Crisis", p. 33. Anderson compares the historical conditions for working-class movements in England to those found in Germany, Italy, and France, arguing that because these countries industrialized later, Marxist and Socialist theories were more mature and could be reflected within the workers' movements. In England, he writes, "Marxism came too late: the *Communist Manifesto* was written just two months before the collapse of Chartism" (p. 34).

working-class, but he claims that, due to their brutal defeat and violent oppression, "the English working class movement went through a kind of prolonged catatonic withdrawal", thereby becoming "the most numbed and docile" class.[112]

Waters' depiction of East London leans towards Thompson's heroic reflections about the British working class and their political force into bringing significant changes about in Britain. One example is Ralph Banner's speech that he is supposed to give at the workers' rally in Victoria Park, in East London. Ralph gets stage-fright and Nancy takes over his speech, since she knows it off by heart, having helped Ralph to memorize it:

> *Why Socialism?* And you will find yourselves obliged to answer as we have. "Because Britain's people," you will say, "have laboured under the capitalist and the landlord system and grown only poorer and sicker and more miserable and afraid. Because it is not by charity and paltry reforms that we shall improve conditions for the weakest classes – not by taxes, not by electing one capitalist government over another, not even by abolishing the House of Lords! – but by turning over the land, and industry, to the people who work it. Because socialism is the only system for a fair society: a society in which the good things of the world are shared, not amongst the idlers of the world, but amongst the *workers*" – amongst yourselves: you who have made the rich man rich, and been kept, for your labours, only ill and half-starved![113]

The rally in Victoria Park is depicted as a huge event and even Diana Lethaby and Kitty Butler attend it. Ralph's speech, which Nancy performs, relates radical socialist politics that fosters the view that workers should take over state power. As I have explained previously, Nairn's and Anderson's viewpoints about workers' politics at the end of the nineteenth century do not reverberate Waters' portrayal of socialist revolution in the novel. Instead of invoking socialism, Nairn and Anderson have shown that trade unions and workers' social movements were more interested in reforms that granted better labor and living conditions than an actual transformation of the capitalist system. Perhaps it is not particularly relevant to contemplate the historical accuracy conveyed in this part of the novel, since it is possible that Waters fictionalized nineteenth century working-class to provide a more positive representation of East-enders than is usually purported. However, it is important to discuss what Waters' representations of the working class produce in terms of interdependencies between gender, class, and sexuality.

The novel's positive representations of working-class life, displaying its respectability and progressive influence in London's cultural life, is of great importance when considering the neglect or even invisibility of class as a topic for analysis in contemporary culture.[114] It is clear that Waters devises class relations that are very appreciative of working-class culture in *Tipping the Velvet* by emphasizing relations of solidarity, affection, and community life that were in fact present among working-

112 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

113 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 459. Emphasis in original.

114 Cf. Munt's *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, and Skeggs' *Formations of Class and Gender* and *Self, Class and Culture*.

class neighborhoods in London from the nineteenth century onwards.[115] However, there are pervasive moral standards that constitute the characters in East London as more politically engaged and critical than the West London characters, such as Kitty, Diana, and Walter. This is precisely the kind of representation that Munt criticizes in her book. She rightly elucidates that the point of representing working-class subjects and communities in arts and literature is to denaturalize, criticize, and defamiliarize class structures and relations, not to persist with stereotypes "that the only good worker is a revolutionary one", or the one that suggests that there are "the good poor, who are industrious and know their place, rendered in such archetypes as the honest factory hand or 'our Mam', symbol of hearth and home".[116] In an attempt to provide positive images of working-class subjects, Waters constructs her characters around the examples designated by Munt. If the upper-class widow Diana is depicted as a villain because of her exploitation of women inside her home or the middle-class artist Kitty Butler is displayed as selfish because she chooses familial respectability over artistic independence, then Florence Banner and her friends are selfless, generous, revolutionary, and accepting of all kinds of 'otherness'.

While Nancy Astley must appropriate space in order to queer space in the first and second parts of the novel, East London appears to be the ultimate queer space in the third part, since rules and norms are always bound to be disrupted due to the progressive aspect that the characters and their surroundings represent. Notions of kinship in Bethnal Green are, in fact, queer because they do not entirely subscribe to heteronormative forms of familial relations. For instance, Florence and Ralph may look like a straight couple to the naked eye, but they are actually siblings who take care of baby Cyril, who was actually Florence's former partner's baby. Despite all social disadvantages, Nancy discovers new possibilities of kinship and affect among East Londoners, especially among Florence's circle of friends, who are mostly engaged in different forms of charity and activism.

What prevails in East London is the sense of solidarity and community, the ways neighbors help each other and how they are also very present in each other's lives. It is this account of Bethnal Green that Young and Willmott give in their ethnographic research of the neighborhood in the 1950s. One of the findings relayed in their work is the fact that many of the families in the borough had already resided there for decades, sometimes even for two generations. Due to the inhabitants' shared background and long residency period, the community's relationships were not restricted to their families, but they were also extended to friends and acquaintances around the neighborhood, given that they normally knew their neighbors' and relatives' acquaintances relatively well.[117]

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115 Cf. Young and Willmott's *Family and Kinship in East London* and Paul Watt's "'It's not for us': Regeneration, the 2012 Olympic Games and Gentrification of East London". Watt's article relates the housing crisis in East London to the effects of the Olympic Games in the area. Although he does not necessarily analyze social relations among the area's community, he does provide a valuable account of the ways in which East Londoners are organizing themselves in terms of resistance to regeneration and gentrification schemes.

116 Munt, *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, p. 8.

117 Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, p. 113.

It is this kind of community that Waters construes in her novel, emphasizing the ways East Londoners' kinships were strengthened by the poor and miserable conditions in which they lived. Although Nancy is self-conscious about her dressing in a masculine way at first, this soon becomes trivial, given that "no one appeared to mind it […] after all, it was a luxury to have any sort of clothes at all, and you regularly saw women in their husbands' jackets, and sometimes a man in a shawl".[118] Nancy also has the chance to go to the East London version of the Cavendish Club, a pub called 'The Boy in the Boat'. The pub is attended only by 'toms', and Nancy is even recognized as the actress who played Nan King on music hall stages. When dressing to go to the pub for the first time, Nancy considers a pair of moleskins from her West End days, but realizes that "while they might have caused something of a sensation at the Cavendish Club", they might be "rather too bold for an East End audience",[119] and decides on a skirt, a man's shirt, and a necktie. Nancy's choice of clothes displays her own identity as a lesbian who presents herself in between feminine and masculine identities, and who adapts her taste to a working-class public.

As Waters limits London to Bethnal Green and restricts Nancy's movement around the city, she also restricts the meanings of queer spaces to a specific lesbian identity. The protagonist's movement and necessity to appropriate spaces in the two first parts of the novel convey a notion of ambiguity and instability in the constitution of gender and sexual identities, thereby playing with the notions of performance and performativity. In the third part, however, Nancy's discovery of the possibility of enacting a 'true self' suggests that this environment allows her to cross-dress and to act out lesbian relationships, since homosexuality is more tolerated than in the other spaces in which she had circulated in the previous parts. While the protagonist's journeys across London constitute the notion of repeating language and gestures of a specific social class in order to embody a non-normative sexual and gender identity, the lack of mobility in the third part of the novel shows assimilation to a masculine lesbian identity as an authentic form of enacting same-sex desire.

As a picaro, Nancy mimics class norms in order to embody different gender and sexual identities, particularly in the two first parts of the novel. While her performance of these norms destabilizes the apparent coherence of gender and sexual identity, it also repeats class norms without denouncing them as constructs. In the last part of the novel, it is the working-class model of femininity that informs both her sexual and gender identity. Skeggs argues that working-class femininity is defined as the lack of middle- and upper-class femininity which denotes fragility, restraint, and passivity.[120] In contrast, working-class women are often "associated with the lower unruly order of bodily functions such as that of expulsion and leakage (reproduction) which signified lack of discipline and vulgarity".[121] Nancy's identification with the working-class women around her can be related to their deviant behavior in terms of

118 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 407.

119 *Ibid.*, p. 411.

120 Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender Production*, pp. 99–100.

121 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

clothing, autonomy, and homosexuality, since most of the working-class women who are presented are lesbians.

These women pertain to the 'unruly order' because they seem to be in charge of their own bodies and sexuality in ways in which Kitty and Diana are not. Though Diana is shown to have more freedom than Kitty, due to her status as a widow and the wealth left by her late husband, she only acts out same-sex desire at parties at home or at the 'Cavendish Club'. In East London, however, public displays of affection among lesbians are tolerated, as Florence and her friends have shown in simply ignoring the homophobic reactions to them on the streets. Class norms remain unquestioned throughout the novel and function exclusively as categories that stabilize identity, while gender and sexual identity are portrayed as ambivalent. In the third part of the novel, a stabilizing identity occurs by Nancy's encounter with the ideal combination of gender and sexual identities, which is constituted by the stereotype of working-class femininity and by the stereotype of the masculine lesbian.

The novel ends with the grand socialist event at Victoria Park, attended by all of the characters that Nancy has encountered along her journey, including the wealthy Diana Lethaby and the now married Kitty Butler. In this final scene, the protagonist realizes that she has "been repeating other people's speeches all [her] life" and now she can hardly find ways to express herself in her own words.[122] Given the theatrical performance aspect of the novel, Nancy's awareness of her ability to perform and also the idea that she has stopped performing suggests that she has stabilized her identity in an environment that ultimately fulfills her.

In contrast to the first and second parts of the novel, which portray the necessity of queering London in order to survive it, Waters constructs a fixed and stereotyped space in East London that yields an ideal of stabilized identity represented by the working-class moral and political values, by women's autonomy and financial independence, and finally by lesbian sexuality. In so doing, Waters marks a clear delimitation between the city and the stage, as we notice in the last lines of the novel, in which Nancy has a panoramic view of the event at Victoria Park and describes it as someone who is on stage watching it: she sees "the crush of gay-faced people […] the tents and stalls, the ribbons and flags and banners", and holds Florence's hand squeezing a daisy between their fingers to then kiss her. Under the light of a sunset, she looks across the field in the park and realizes that "from the speakers' tent there came a muffled cheer, and a rising ripple of applause".[123] The last lines show Nancy's consciousness of her role as a performer, who can finally speak her own lines; however, as Davies notes, she "recognizes that stepping outside of this system is not an option".[124] In drawing clear-cut boundaries between theater and the city, the end of *Tipping the Velvet* implies that Nancy is doomed to repeat norms that are imposed on her as a means of necessity, not as theatrical performance. Ambivalence is taken over by authenticity in this split between spaces, that of fiction and that of reality, since it does not seem that Nancy can produce slippage in her reiteration of norms. Thus,

122 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 471.

123 *Ibid.*, p. 472.

124 Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p. 124.

what prevails is the notion of essentialist gender and sexual identities that can only come true under the premise of ideally constructed working-class freedom.