Final Words

My readings of Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels have shown that their representations of queer spaces in London are informed by both the specificities of gay and lesbian histories in the city and by the gender differences that relate to the circulation of women and men in urban space. London appears as a site of sexual possibilities in their works, in which there are two opposing forces at play: on the one hand, there is the homophobic and heterosexist legislation that sought to regulate deviant sexualities and women's bodies; on the other hand, their characters are able to appropriate regulated and conservative spaces and can create spaces in which they can act out their homosexual desire and identities.

This appropriation of space not only depends on the characters' power to confront homophobia, but also in the ways in which class, gender, and race can enable or restrict their agency in the city. In Waters' neo-Victorian novels, being a woman demands the ability to constantly subvert gender and sexual mores and to overcome obstacles that are frequently imposed by social violence at home or on the streets. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy Astley is able to surmount Diana Lethaby's abuse and exploitation; in *Affinity*, Selina Dawes frees herself from the constricting lessons of Victorian femininity in prison and escapes with her lover, Ruth Vigers; Maud Lilly and Sue Trinder in *Fingersmith* break free from their families' conniving schemes, Maud having become a writer of pornographic stories and Sue taking hold of the will left by her real mother. The only female character in Waters' neo-Victorian novels that has a tragic ending is Margaret Prior, who ends her life because she fails to free herself from the oppressions of Victorian domesticity. Her tragedy can be read as a corollary effect of her class position: while her upper-class upbringing gives her the opportunity to engage with intellectual activities that were almost exclusively encouraged by her father, her father's death also takes away Margaret's chance to leave home and to pursue an intellectual career in Italy. Thus, it is possible to look at her father's figure as both enabling and curtailing, since he is the one who gives her the power to obtain agency by studying and researching, but his death paves the way for Margaret's downfall, suggesting that her agency and intellectual independence relied on him as a paternal figure.

My examinations of Waters' neo-Victorian novels have also shown that class relations became more complex with every new book she wrote. In *Tipping the Velvet*, as I have explained, class is uncritically represented as a fixed identity category that is based on upper-, middle-, and working-class stereotypes. Although it is true that Waters portrays a positive image of a working-class community, by bringing out relations of solidarity and political consciousness, this image also falls back on the stereotype that Sally Munt has criticized, which associates the "good worker" with the image of the "revolutionary".[1] Apart from the anachronism that I have pointed out in terms of working-class organization and politics at the end of the nineteenth century, the main problem with Waters' depiction of class in *Tipping the Velvet* is that she does not perceive it as a social relation, only as an aestheticized and fetishized stereotype which describes upper- and middle-classes as the 'villains' (e.g., Walter Bliss, Kitty Butler, and Diana Lethaby) and the working-class characters as heroes (e.g., Nancy Astley, Florence Banner, and Ralph Banner).

In *Affinity*, class acquires an element of complexity, as Waters interconnects class relations (and not just identity) with notions of the ideal Victorian femininity. The fact that most critics have overlooked class relations and have mostly drawn attention to the queer elements in the novel points to the ways in which class has often been a dismissed or underrated social relation in queer theory. In this book in particular, Waters creates elaborate upper- and working-class protagonists and, as readers, we are 'tricked' into trusting Margaret's diary more than Selina's because she offers us more intimate and personal information about herself and because her intellectual knowledge lends her more credibility than Selina's supernatural accounts of séance circles. Thus, we fail to notice the importance of Ruth Viger's character as a servant, who, as I have noted, are often portrayed in the Victorian Gothic as 'ghosts' who inhabit the house, and yet do not belong to it.[2] As I have pointed out in my reading of *Affinity*, it is spiritualism that queers spaces, especially the prison, since it is Selina's and Ruth's involvement with the supernatural, whether it is a scheme or not, that grants them their freedom.

Class continues to be an important element in the construction of the characters and of the spaces in which they circulate in Waters' 1940s novels. In *The Night Watch*, interclass relations, such as that between Kay and Helen and later Julia and Helen, evince the privileges of the upper- and middle-classes both during and after the war. Moreover, class and gender differences in the novel also indicate how subjective positions mark the unequal conditions that determine the characters' engagement with the war effort and their lives in the post-war period. Duncan and Fraser, who refuse to take part in the war, are marginalized and isolated in prison. After the war, Duncan's mental and social statuses are seriously damaged, as he becomes stuck in his own prison with Mr. Mundy and is unable to recuperate his agency. Fraser, conversely, has the chance to thrive as a journalist in the post-war period, which invokes his own class privileges, given that he stems from an upper-class background. I have also

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

2 Cf. Lynch, "Spectral Politics: the Victorian ghost story and the domestic servant" in Bown et al. (eds.) *The Victorian Supernatural*, p. 68.

claimed in chapters 4 and 8 that class differences have shaped the lives of the female characters in the novel by arguing that Kay, in spite of her depression and melancholy, is able to live off her family's money, and Julia engages with an exciting career as a writer. By contrast, Helen and Viv work at a dating agency and seem discontented with their jobs.

The interdependency between class and gender also plays an important role in the construction of the country house plot and in the characters' outcomes in *The Little Stranger*. As I have elucidated in chapter 8, Caroline Ayres's refusal to get married to Dr. Faraday, and to continue to live at Hundreds Hall, displays the character's lack of interest in being a part of a tradition that has only excluded women. It is only Dr. Faraday, who epitomizes class ascension and a male dominating voice, that is interested in the estate and in acquiring the social status of a decaying landowning class. At the end of the novel, Caroline's suicide after her mother's death suggests the impossibility of partaking in a tradition that is increasingly deteriorating, even though her social environment insists on the idea that marriage and social status are still crucial to obtaining social respectability. In his turn, Dr. Faraday spends years of his life visiting the abandoned house, trying to find the ghost that Caroline saw on the day that she died. It is possible to read his failure to find the ghost as the impossibility of him acknowledging the social constraints that Caroline underwent as a woman. Dr. Faraday is the character who profits from the upward social mobility that the post-war period offered, and he wishes to access the tradition into which he was not born. However, he cannot look beyond his own social position to recognize that women could not gain the same access to the post-war social advancements, even if they were upper-class women such as Caroline.

Waters' depiction of the interwar years in *The Paying Guests*, published in 2014, also relays the unequal condition of men and women in 1922 and, moreover, depicts the perpetuation of domesticity in the period. The domestic sphere is once more a central trope in Waters' work, as the novel is set in a middle-class home in Camberwell, London. The novel's protagonist and heroine, the spinster Frances Wray, lives with her mother in a genteel home that became unaffordable after the death of her brothers, who died on the battlefield, and of her father, who died of a heart attack during the war. Due to the financial difficulties, Frances and Mrs. Wray decide to rent out bedrooms in the house, and they take in the recently married couple Lilian and Leonard Barber, who belong to the recently established 'clerk class'. In this novel, Waters explores the crime and thriller plots, since Frances and Lilian murder Leonard, who systematically abuses Lilian.

In *The Paying Guests*, domesticity, class mobility, lesbian desire, and feminist resilience are reworked, but in the context of the interwar years. Frances is constantly overworked and unhappy as a spinster who is responsible for taking care of the house. She had experienced a limited amount of freedom, both before and during the war, having had a romantic relationship with her friend Christina and even participating in the suffragette movement in London. However, Frances is forced to go back home in order to help her mother to make ends meet, as she is left alone and in serious debt, which Mr. Wray left behind after his death. Like Caroline Ayres and Kay Langrish, Frances misses the war, although she was opposed to it. She misses it because during

the war, she had plans "to change the world" and "put things right", since "[o]ne looked ahead to the end of the War and felt that nothing could ever be the same".[3] Indeed, the war brought changes to Frances' life, since her father had died only a few months prior to its end and Frances had to abandon her plans to move in with Christina in order to take care of her mother and their house.

While the Wrays' financial decay is depicted in terms of a deteriorating house and of its broken objects, which they cannot afford to replace, the Barbers represent an upward class mobility, since they come from a working-class background and move to Camberwell after Leonard gets a promotion. The domestic sphere in this novel intertwines domestic violence, outdated Victorian morality, lesbian desire, and feminist alliances. While Leonard epitomizes the patriarchal, abusive, and sexist figure in the novel, who obtains social ascension by working in the financial market, Mrs. Wray appears as a Victorian mother who consistently controls Frances' relationships with other women, having previously learned about her lesbian affair with Christina. Conversely, Frances and Lilian, who engage in a romantic affair, build up a strong friendship based on trust, companionship, and love. It is the strength of their alliance that avoids any suspicion about the crime they have committed, given that they invent a story about Leonard having been beaten up on the streets and stick to it until the very end, despite the obvious danger of getting caught.

While Waters' feminist alliances (such as Nancy's and Florence's, Selina's and Ruth's, Kay's and Viv's, and France's and Lilian's) enable women to overcome the oppressions from their social environments, Hollinghurst's male bonds only function as a means to strengthen their privileges. Moreover, it is relevant to stress that these male bonds are only effective when they are formed between men that come from the same social class. Will's interclass and interracial relationships are volatile and based on domination and, at times, sexual exploitation; Nick's relationship with Leo does not last because the latter cannot be part of his elitist social environment, even though Nick does not belong to that environment himself. With Wani, Nick seems to have a stronger affective relation, as Wani even leaves Nick a building in his will and Nick tries to be by his side until his death. However, once the scandal about their relationship breaks out, they are forced to stay apart from each other because of the Ouradi's public relationship with the Tory circle.

In *The Stranger's Child*, interclass relationships between men become less relevant than in Hollinghurst's previous novels, since the male bonds in this novel are almost strictly devised to hinder women's participation within the realm of both authorship and literary tradition. As I have argued in my reading of the novel in chapter 7, the women, particularly Daphne Sawle, are relegated to the role of objects who deflect the men's homosexuality and who take care of Cecil Valance's literary legacy. Although Madeleine Sawle is an intellectual and history professor at Cambridge, her character is conveyed as awkward because she does not fit into the traditional roles of motherhood and of nurture; this is an issue that defines most of the novel's female characters.

While conservatism is mainly promoted in terms of sexism and in the representation of fixed sexual identities in *The Stranger's Child*, in Hollinghurst's earlier novels it is

3 Waters, *The Paying Guests*, p. 85.

classist and racist behavior that evinces the reactionary feature of the gay characters. In both *The Swimming-Pool Library* and in *The Line of Beauty*, interclass and interracial relations between men are elaborated to emphasize the privileged position of white upper-class men. In his debut novel, Hollinghurst focuses his narration of London on the perspective of Will Beckwith, which in my reading I associate with the presentation of the neoliberal subject. In not relying on any kind of social welfare, and in his ability to afford a luxurious life without having to work, Will's social position in a neoliberal society entails the possibility of only profiting from his social and personal relations with men of color and working-class men. Yet, as I have shown, this kind of profit cannot be obtained in working-class neighborhoods, in which his privileges become targets of class conflicts and his sexual advances towards other men are violently rejected. While in East London the teenage boy is only interested in his money in exchange for sex, in New Cross, Will's class is seen as an enemy presence and his homosexuality is perceived as a sign of weakness and effeminacy. These factors trigger the skinheads' rage and violence towards him.

In *The Line of Beauty*, Nick's role as a center of consciousness evinces the class differences between him, a member of the middle-class, and the majority of the characters in the novel, who stem from an upper-class or an aristocratic background. As I have argued in my reading of the novel in chapter 6, Nick can only be welcomed into the Feddens' household and into the Tory circle if his homosexuality is not exposed. Once Nick's relationship with Wani is disclosed to the press, he is immediately thrown out of their mansion. Since neoliberalism demands good health from the population to enhance their productivity, the public exposure of the protagonist's homosexuality and his relationship with a man who has AIDS automatically places him as an abject body that has no value in society. As soon as Nick loses his value to the Fedden family, he is marginalized and the "Love-Chord", which is the title of the first part of the novel set in 1983, is broken. In 1983 and in 1986, homosexuality is tolerated because it is culturally and financially profitable, as we have seen with Nick's escalating cocaine and sex drives.

Similar interclass and interracial relations are represented in *The Spell*, Hollinghurst's third novel, in which gay men of color and working-class men are described merely as sexual objects. Set in 1995, the novel recounts the post-Thatcherite period by showing how her neoliberal project lived on in a subsequent Tory government, now in the hands of John Major. The novel narrates the stories of four men: Robin, a gay architect in his 40s, who has a son, Danny, who is in his 20s and who is also gay. Robin is mourning his partner who died of AIDS by engaging in a relationship with Justin, also a young gay man. On a trip to Dorset, Justin brings along his ex-partner, Alex, also a gay man in his 40s who works at the Foreign Office and who starts a relationship with Danny, Robin's son. Robin's and Danny's father-son relationship is far from a traditional one, given that Robin is described as a fellow gay friend and hardly displays parental concern with Danny, who struggles to find a career and spends his time cruising and partying in London clubs or in their country house in Dorset. The novel strangely combines the queer spaces of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, in *The Line of Beauty*, and *The Stranger's Child*, since the characters circulate in gay

venues in London, fall into intense ecstasy drives instead of cocaine, and they also make occasional visits to Robin's Dorset country house.

In *The Spell*, class and race are also combined to bring out the social hierarchies that exist in the queer spaces that are presented. While Alex and Danny are high on ecstasy and partying at a gay club in Soho, Alex kisses a black man on the cheek, the closest he has ever got to a black man: "[h]e had never done more than shake hands with a black man, or tackle one perhaps in a school rugger game – he sighed at how black he was, and ran his fingers in slow arcs up and down the small of his back".[4] Later, as Danny throws a gay birthday party at his father's country house in Dorset, Robin asks Gary, a black man, to leave the house for no reason. He asserts that it is not Gary's fault that he asks him to leave, but he claims that he "just [doesn't] want [him] in his house".[5] Feeling self-conscious about his action, Robin reflects on how unreasonable his action was, and he wishes "the guy wasn't black, and so obviously nice enough. He thought he had the characterless niceness you'd expect from someone who pleased strangers for a living".[6] For Robin, Gary's niceness and pleasantness cannot overcome the fact that he is black and, hence, he feels that it should be made clear that Gary is not welcome in his house.

While classist and racist behaviors are systematically enacted in both *The Swimming-Pool Library* and in *The Line of Beauty*, they are not as straightforward as they appear in *The Spell*. This novel can be read as the apotheosis of homonormative gay culture in the sense that all characters' actions are overtly hedonistic and individualistic, and this also applies to the characters' deliberate expression of racism and classism. The constant partying and ecstasy drives suggest a sense of freedom and of pleasure that are disrupted by the categorical racism and classism of the characters and by Robin's mourning of his partner, which functions as a reminder that the feelings of liberty and power are only artificial effects purported by the drug. Robin is reluctant to try ecstasy, but when he finally does, he feels "something inexpressibly vivid".[7] The effect is soon cut off as he kisses a man and feels "the ghost presence of his [former] lover's cold kiss […] some oblique and painful reminder, the drug's jumped connections".[8] The novel conjures a tragic-comic effect, which is conveyed by the juxtaposition of moments of intense pleasure and freedom with moments of mourning and exasperation, which end up defining most of the novel's gay spaces and characters. It is only in *The Stranger's Child* that public mourning of gay men is enacted, given that the characters meet at Peter Rowe's funeral in 2008. As I have argued in chapter 7, this scene can be read as the possibility of openly mourning the death of gay men, but it can also invoke the death of a gay culture that has limitedly subverted heteronormativity with its promiscuity and rejection of monogamous relationships, which is the gay scene as depicted in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, *The Spell*, and *The Line of Beauty*.

4 Hollinghurst, *The Spell*, p. 86.
5 *Ibid.*, p. 127.
6 *Ibid.*, p. 128.
7 *Ibid.*, p. 134.
8 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

While Waters' representations of lesbian history, relationships, and spaces point to the prospect of resisting male domination and tradition, Hollinghurst's construction of gay spaces, culture, and relationships indicate a kind of hopelessness in acts of resistance. This can be attributed to the fact that his representations of history bring out sexist, classist, and racist aspects that also form gay culture. Although he recognizes the conservatism found in traditional institutions, such as the Oxbridge circles, the parliament, and the country house, and the influence they have had on gay history, he adamantly insists on gay men's participation in these institutions and traditions. In doing so, his works raise the question of whether or not it is possible for a gay subculture that is mostly formed by white, upper- and middle-class men to break with the traditions that have formed them as privileged male subjects.

Waters' novels, conversely, imply that it makes no sense for women, lesbian women in particular, to long for belonging and approval from these institutions, since they have been historically rejected and effaced from tradition. Waters does not dismiss tradition, but instead engages with it directly by bringing out the exclusions that it has inflicted upon 'ex-centric' subjects. It is in this sense that her novels affirmatively represent women in history and in London: while they stress active female participation in the city, and articulate them with literary and historical traditions, they also remind us of how women were effaced from both traditional historiography and culture. In emphasizing the role played by women in history and in literature, Waters' works suggest that it is possible to critically engage with tradition, as long as we recognize its limitations. Thus, while Hollinghurst's works hint at a dead end for gay culture, because of their categorical participation in reproducing tradition, Waters' novels convey the necessity to persist with social criticism and the need to consistently re-visit the past to pursue critical reflections on historiography and on the limitations of social resistance that were enacted. This cannot be done without feminism.