

Preface

This book is the result of a research project that started with my master's thesis on Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* at Humboldt University in Berlin, and which was later developed into a doctoral research project that I began in 2012 and finished in 2018, at Humboldt and at King's College London. Rereading the book that you finished writing four years ago makes you question your previous thoughts and, in a way, engage in a discussion with the author from the past. *London, Queer Spaces and Historiography* is the final result of my years as a postgraduate student in Berlin and in London. At that point, my perspectives on postmodernism informed my belief in its critical potential to question authority and universal narratives, alongside its claim to reflect upon marginalized histories and identities. The research that I have been conducting in the last couple of years, however, have made me review many of the discussions about postmodernism and history that I put forward in this book.

Rereading my discussion about historiography and fiction, particularly those conveyed by Linda Hutcheon, has led me to question much of what has been discussed in the realm of postmodernism in relation to history and historiography, and the approximation between fiction and history. In a moment in which fake news and the refusal to acknowledge objective historical facts seem to have taken over the social and political contexts all over the world, it is problematic to claim that history is limited to the ways in which “the *reality* of the past [is available only in] its *textualized accessibility* to us today”.¹ Although it is true that our access to history relies on its representation, it cannot be simply reduced to narrative, for historiography, as opposed to fiction, relies on documentation, sources and historical archives. This does not mean, however, that fiction and historiography cannot be approximated.

According to Reinhart Koselleck, both history and fiction rely on rhetoric and language to represent events and, like the poet, the historian also counts on imagination to write history. Nevertheless, Koselleck asserts that there is a crucial distinction between the two, namely that history represents events that actually took place and, therefore, depend upon historical evidence; while fiction portrays events that might have happened. For Koselleck, “historical reality never entirely overlaps with what can

1 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 114. Emphasis in original.

be articulated in it and about it”, and “history is never identical to language”.² What is interesting is that Koselleck also sees in fiction the potential to articulate history, since novels, like historiography, yield the illusion of totality and unity to series of events. This discussion about the limits of language in the representation of events as well as the distinctions between history and fiction are crucial because they do not part from the premise that fictional and historical discourses are the same. Instead, they reflect on the rhetorical and linguistic tropes that constitute fiction and history in order to evince their distinctions in terms of representing factual and imagined events.

Editing this book for publication has made me realize that Sarah Waters’ and Alan Hollinghurst’s works are indeed examples of fiction that bring to light the historical experience of gay and lesbian subjects in London in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, I believe that Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction would be insufficient to deal with the historical aspect of their works, particularly in the case of Waters’ Neo-Victorian novels. The reading that has been prominently established of these works, to which I myself have subscribed in this book, views these novels as means to imagine what the lives of lesbian women might have been like in the nineteenth century. Although there is historical truth in these novels, as I point out in Waters’ depiction of music hall culture and male impersonation acts, of prison and of Victorian upper- and middle-class domesticity, I would re-consider my understanding of her novels as pieces of “fictional lesbian historiography”. This is due to the fact that these novels do not rely on historical documentation about female homosexuality in the nineteenth century, as do Waters’ 1940s novels.

Hutcheon’s claim that historiographic metafiction “plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record”³ is certainly a dangerous one because it suggests that there is a lack of reliability on what has been registered in historical documentation. This is certainly an assertion of which I am very critical today, especially considering the political events of the last few years, such as Brexit, Donald Trump’s election in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro’s election in Brazil and the innumerable pieces of fake news that have been spread about Covid-19 and vaccination around the globe. It is true that history lies on the paradox that it is only accessible to us through its representation, documents, official records and testimonies. However, it is extremely important to stress, as Koselleck does, that history cannot be reduced to its representation; its dimension extrapolates its registers, and its effects are not curbed by its narration. History is factual and cannot be constructed only through the narrative of possible or imagined events. Of course it is possible to contest the veracity of a piece of historiographical work when its content is incoherent or somehow misrepresents what is stated in historical documents or archives. This kind of rebuttal cannot happen in fiction, given that its content is still valid even when it contradicts historical events. I still think that Sarah Waters’ Neo-Victorian novels have been crucial to dealing with lesbian invisibility in fiction and the possibilities of imagining how they might have lived in the nineteenth century. However, I would qualify my assertion

2 Koselleck, “Fiction and Historical Reality”, p. 17.

3 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 114.

that she creates “fictional historiography” about female homosexuality, even though her nineteenth century novels do convey several historical aspects of this period, as I elucidate in my readings of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*.

The content of this book has not been modified for publication, although I have edited several passages and made corrections where I thought necessary. I believe that, despite its theoretical limitations, this volume offers a good contribution to literary criticism about Waters’ and Hollinghurst’s works, as well as to the discussions on gay and lesbian history and queer spaces. *London, Queer Spaces and Historiography* is a book that must be situated in the context of my years as a postgraduate student, which have been crucial for my formation as a researcher and as a professor, for it points to the research interests that have accompanied me throughout my academic trajectory, which revolve precisely around the (at times conflictive) relationship between history and fiction.

