

QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY AND TACTILITY IN SARAH WATERS'S NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION*

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ABSTRACT

Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian trilogy, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002), have been largely discussed from many perspectives. Queer approaches have been utilised in the analysis of these three novels, bearing in mind that Waters has made clear her lesbian agenda. This article will consider Waters's neo-Victorian trilogy from an altogether new perspective: Sara Ahmed's notions of orientation and queer touch, which she draws from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists. In addition, this article will analyse the relevance of the Victorian past through affective materiality and corporeal hermeneutics, in particular the sense of touch with a special emphasis on the hand and the skin. Lastly, Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian fiction illustrates the sensuous interplay between the Victorian past and today's culture by employing critical approaches such as phenomenology and sensory studies.

KEYWORDS: Sarah Waters, neo-victorian fiction, phenomenology, tactility.

RESUMEN

La crítica especializada ha analizado la trilogía neo-victoriana de Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) y *Fingersmith* (2002), desde perspectivas diversas. Se han empleado los estudios *queer* para el análisis de estas novelas ya que la autora ha puesto en evidencia su punto de vista y orientación lésbicas. Este artículo examina la trilogía de Sarah Waters desde una perspectiva innovadora: las nociones de orientación y contacto *queer* de Sara Ahmed, quien parte de los presupuestos de Maurice Merleau-Ponty y otros fenomenólogos. Además, este artículo versa sobre la relevancia del pasado victoriano a través de la materialidad afectiva y la hermenéutica corporal, y sobre la importancia del sentido del tacto, en especial la mano y la piel. Por último, la narrativa neo-victoriana de Waters ilustra la interacción sensorial entre el pasado victoriano y la cultura contemporánea mediante la aplicación de enfoques críticos tales como la fenomenología y los estudios sensoriales.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Sarah Waters, narrativa neo-victoriana, fenomenología, tactilidad.



Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian trilogy, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002), have been largely discussed from many perspectives: *Tipping the Velvet* was extremely well-received by critics interested in Judith Butler's notion of performativity, in spatial studies, and in Victorian culture of spectacle (Pettersson; Wilson 285-305). *Affinity*, in turn, drew the attention of those fascinated with spiritualism and the occult in the Victorian age, while signifying a landmark in neo-Victorian literature. Finally, *Fingersmith* was welcome as a well-crafted novel, heavily influenced by sensation fiction and Charles Dickens's work. Queer approaches have been utilised in the analysis of these three novels, bearing in mind that Waters has made clear her lesbian agenda. This article will consider Waters's neo-Victorian trilogy from an altogether new perspective: Sara Ahmed's notions of orientation and queer touch, which she draws from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists. In addition, this article will analyse the relevance of the Victorian past through affective materiality and corporeal hermeneutics, in particular the sense of touch with a special emphasis on the hand and the skin. In so doing, my combined approach will shift the focus on corporeality and the phenomenon of the body in relation to the perceived world, as a source of transformative potential, which involves a re-orientation towards the flow between subject and the object world. Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian fiction illustrates the sensuous interplay between the Victorian past and today's culture by employing critical approaches such as phenomenology and sensory studies.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's figure is crucial to the philosophical debates over the body, and over the senses and perception, that have sprung in recent years. Partly neglected after his death in 1961, he attracted renewed interest towards the end of the twentieth century, including Jacques Derrida who engaged with Merleau-Ponty in *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* (2005), a book which was already in production when Derrida died in 2004. Phenomenology was founded by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century, a philosophical method later followed by French philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty. It is not an easy task to define phenomenology since, depending on the phenomenologist, the philosophy can be conceived differently. Komarine Romdenh-Romluc has succinctly defined it as “philosophy that investigates experience from a first-person point of view, that is, as it is presented to the subject” (4). What interests me here is Merleau-Ponty's view on phenomenology, heavily influenced by Edmund Husserl.

Merleau-Ponty's second doctoral thesis, with this emphasis on phenomenology, came to be published under the title *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), and constitutes his main contribution to philosophy. His last work was a book published posthumously, after his sudden death in 1961, titled *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) (Baldwin 2-5). My focus is on the “phenomenon of the body” as embracing

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and constituting the world: for Merleau-Ponty, there is a need to rediscover the perceived world (in the philosopher's terms, the real world) through the senses which organise experience and situate the subject as another object in the world of objects, with the indispensable help of modern art and philosophy (Baldwin 9-11). We, as embodied subjects, are situated in the world (as being-in-the-world), and our experience is always embodied, thus involving an embodied situatedness. In this sense, the sensory experience draws from and contributes to form and give meaning to the world, to social life. This means that there is mutuality between self and world in the constitution of sense and meaning, because it occurs in the interaction of both:

We shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover our self, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 239).

According to Christopher Watkin, “meaningfulness must be understood in terms of a strictly irreducible mutuality of self and world” (19), in an effort to move beyond the Cartesian duality. In other words, there is a mutual constitution, an interweaving between self and the world, subject and object, whose separation is cancelled out in a space, known as the “field”, which is later developed into the “flesh” in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term “element,” in this sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an “element” of Being. Not a fact or a sum of facts, and yet adherent to *location* and to the *now*. Much more: the inauguration of the *where* and the *when*, the possibility and exigency for the fact; in a word: facticity, what makes the fact be a fact (139-40).

In paying attention to the space between subject and object, “midway” as Merleau-Ponty affirms, there is a movement from the object/thing to the field of experience and the flow. This results in “the mind-body and the subject-object dichotomies [becoming] redundant: the sensorial field and the sensorial flows encompass material substances... gestures, and movements, as well as discourses, affects, memories, and ideas, which, as far as sensoriality is concerned, are of equal ontological status” (Hamilakis 115). Additionally, there is a link between the sensorial and the affective because the senses contribute to activate and evoke affectivity, and unlock affect when they operate. The senses are a reservoir of material memories, and “every sensorial perception is at the same time past and present” (Hamilakis 122).

Phenomenology is now being utilised in a variety of contexts and disciplines, for example, studies of landscape and monumentality, particularly, archaeology,



and museology, feminist studies and literature, among others. John Wylie drew on recent work on the topics of landscape, embodiment, perception and material culture to explore the tension between *opening-onto* and *distancing-from*, openness and distance, by supplementing his analysis of the tension between presence and absence in landscape studies with Derrida's reading of Merleau-Ponty (275-89). Queer studies have made an incursion into phenomenology and have re-considered Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in a more positive light. This has been accomplished by Sara Ahmed, who has already discussed the possibilities inherent in phenomenology intersecting with migration: "migration involves reinhabiting the skin...the different 'impressions' of a new landscape, the air, the smells, the sounds... which accumulate like lines, to create new textures on the surface of the skin...the social also has its skin, as a border that feels and that is shaped by the 'impressions' left by others" (9). In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) Sara Ahmed uses Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* as a springboard to discuss the notion of 'orientation' in a host of different ways: our embodied subjectivity is oriented towards others, as objects, and their place in sexual desire, and this perspectival orientation in turn affects other bodies and spaces:

I suggest that a queer phenomenology might offer an approach to sexual orientation by rethinking the place of the object in sexual desire; by attending to how the bodily direction "toward" such objects affects how bodies inhabit spaces and how spaces inhabit bodies (Ahmed 23).

One argument against Merleau-Ponty's embodied subjectivities has been posited by feminist critics like Judith Butler who have found some critique of Cartesian philosophy (i.e. dismantling the subject/object division, for example), but lacking in gender specificities: "[Merleau-Ponty's] bodies are 'neutral' and un-gendered, leading thus to phallogocentric effects" (Ahmed 68). Ahmed in a way corrects Judith Butler's criticism against Merleau-Ponty's "universal orientation towards the world" by suggesting a "sensitive body" in which orientation is a form of "bodily projection" in which orientation "becom[es] ways of inhabiting and coexisting in the world" (67). Ahmed's sense of "orientation" has cast new light on the potential Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers for sexual desire, feminist and queer studies.

In this "sensitive body" the sense of touch plays a predominant role. In an attempt to open up the dialogue between self and world, subject and object, "carnal hermeneutics" has emerged as a new approach, proved by the publication *Carnal Hermeneutics* (2015). Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's analyses of embodiment become key texts in this perspective, according to which "all experience, from birth to death, is mediated by our embodiment and only makes sense of sense accordingly" (Kearney and Treanor 2). Flesh, in its ample incarnations as individual flesh and as "flesh of the world", the sense of touch and bodies have recently come under renewed scrutiny in this approach, also mediated through works by Jean-Luc Nancy and Julia Kristeva in the last few years. In "What Is Touch?," philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe argues that touch (or 'tactual perception' as he uses the two terms interchangeably) "encompasses a range of very different experiences and has many different



functions” (2-3).¹ At this point it is necessary to remember that the sensorial turn has mainly privileged the sense of touch, while sight had always ranked highest in the scale of senses. Touch is an enigmatic sense, but also extremely philosophical because “touch crosses all the senses” (Kearney, “What?” 103). The sense of touch erases the distinction between self and other, and it has the capacity to bridge the gap between subject and object, and “to cross the threshold between the inanimate and the animate, the tomb and the flesh, the dead and the living” (Classen 35). In this sense, the tactile experience in contemporary novels set in the Victorian past seems to flatten out the distance, to narrow the time and space existing between the Victorian dead (past) and the contemporary present, thus inviting the reader in the present to ‘inhabit’ and ‘embody’ the past.

Since the beginnings of neo-Victorianism as a critical field, when Dana Shiller used the term “neo-Victorian” for the first time in her groundbreaking article “The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel” (1997), critics have mobilised conceptualisations and theoretical frameworks to offer productive readings into contemporary fiction set in the Victorian past. Critical interventions into the neo-Victorian mode have been carried out following theoretical frameworks such as intertextuality, haunting and spectrality, and adaptation, to name a few. All of them imply a double engagement with the Victorian age. Therefore, neo-Victorianism has been described as a double-oriented movement as it looks back to the Victorian past, as well as it turns itself to the future, possessing a double edge as developed by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010).

In the latest issue of the online journal *Neo-Victorian Studies*, devoted to neo-Victorianism and the stage, co-editors Beth Palmer and Benjamin Poore acknowledge the impact of “the idea of haunting and hauntedness” on the field of neo-Victorian studies (1). Indeed, the pervasiveness of the Victorians in contemporary culture has been addressed through the master trope of haunting and spectrality, as I have explored elsewhere, alongside other critics (Arias and Pulham; Kontou). More recently, Kate Mitchell and Deborah Parsons have concretely made reference to the relevance of the spectral return of the past as questioning postmodern notions of the inaccessibility of the past:

...the spectral return of the past as it haunts the present, challenging, though not entirely discrediting, postmodern notions of the absence and inaccessibility of the past. Here, rather than existing only in its textualised remains, the past *returns* though fictional representation and, through the reader’s imagination, achieves a phantasmic *presence* in the present (Mitchell and Parsons 12; my emphasis).

The *presence* of the (spectral) past, through “its textualised remains”, has led me to move beyond the productive ambiguity (presence vs absence) that the figure of the ghost (spectre) encapsulates, and towards a consideration and conceptualisation

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Matthew Ratcliffe who has generously sent me a copy of his article.



of the actual textualised remains and vestiges of the past, felt and perceived as vivid and present. Along these lines, Cora Kaplan in *Victoriana* (2002) aptly suggested that the Victorians are ghostly, but also *tangible* (5). Here I will focus on the materiality of the Victorian past, as well as the overflow of the past into the present through sensorial materiality, in contemporary literature and culture. In so doing, I will focus on Sarah Water's neo-Victorian trilogy that illustrates the sensuous interplay between the Victorian past and today's culture, and by employing critical approaches such as phenomenology and the senses. Then, I will give predominance to the sense of touch, tactility, which had been traditionally subordinated to the sense of sight, and that is now attracting more attention in various disciplines.

As the editors of *Thinking Through the Skin* pose, there is always a danger in fetishising the body if the focus is entirely on its singularity and on its meaning (Ahmed and Stacey 3). For that reason, I consider phenomena of the body, in connection with the world, that allow for the flow of sensation and affection between the subject and the object-world: these are phenomena that precisely interrogate the limits and boundaries of the body, such as the skin. Through tactile encounters, bodies and the world engage in a meaningful relationship and challenge some poststructuralist accounts of "subjects without bodies" (Ahmed and Stacey 4). In what follows, I offer a reading into Waters's neo-Victorian fiction in the light of phenomenology and sensory studies.² To my knowledge, there has not been any in-depth analysis of Waters's novels from this combined perspective. Despite the fact that Rebecca Pohl mentioned Sarah Ahmed's theorisation in connection with Waters's *Affinity* (29-41), she did not expand on the fruitful relationship between Ahmed and Merleau-Ponty and its application to Waters's fiction.

Tipping the Velvet (1998) deals with gender issues, sexuality, and entertainment in late Victorian England. Whitstable is the setting for the first chapters, since the protagonist, Nancy Astley, lives and works in an oyster-parlour. Fascinated with music halls and entertainments, Nancy falls in love with Kitty Butler, a male-impersonator and singer and both begin to perform on the stage as a pair of mashers. When she is disappointed with Kitty and abandoned by her, Nancy, already in London, engages in a lesbian relationship with Diana, a wealthy woman who sexually exploits her and presents her to her "Saphic" friends, thus becoming her mistress. Finally, Nancy finds true love and a mature relationship in Florence, a lesbian and a socialist. Helen Davies aptly states that "[i]t has become a critical commonplace to note the influence of Judith Butler's theories of gender as performance on the music hall world of male impersonation as depicted in *Tipping*

² I have very briefly considered the relevance of the sense of touch in *Affinity* and in *Fin-
gersmith*, in "Traces and Vestiges of the Victorian Past in Contemporary Literature". *Neo-Victorian
Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*, edited by Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Su-
sanne Gruss. Routledge, 2014, pp. 111-122; and in Arias "Neo-Sensation Fiction, or 'Appealing to
the Nerves': Sensation and Perception in Neo-Victorian Fiction". *RSV - Rivista di Studi Vittoriani
(Journal of Victorian Studies)*. Guest editors: Mariaconcetta Costantini and Saverio Tomaiuolo, n.
40 (2015): 13-30.

the Velvet” (117). Even though it is hard to deny that Nan undergoes a process of development in which she uses her performing abilities to imitate and, later, move away from constricting scripts, some critics, like Davies, argue that Waters manifests some ambivalence about the liberating potential of “talking back to Judith Butler’s work” (Mitchell 9). However, Sarah Ahmed’s queer phenomenology opens up new ways of engaging with the body and sexual orientation, since it might offer “an approach to sexual orientation by rethinking how the bodily direction ‘toward’ objects shapes the surfaces of bodily and social space” (68). She contends that there exists a ‘contact zone’ of lesbian desire in which there are lines of connection between bodies. This involves a shift from the body to the field and the flow, in which affective relations and sensorial engagements predominate. In other words, there is a mutual constitution, an interweaving between self and the world, subject and object, whose separation is cancelled out in a space, known as the “field”, which, as mentioned before, Maurice Merleau-Ponty later developed into the “flesh” in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this work, Merleau-Ponty reflects on touch and “on forms of contact between bodies as well as between bodies and the world” (Ahmed 106). This can be seen in *Tipping the Velvet*, for example, when Florence is recounting her experience to Lilian, a young woman, who, after delivering a baby out of wedlock, had been thrown out by her landlady, and accepted as a member of the family by Florence and her brother, Ralph. Just the fact of living with them made their life different and transformed, precisely in the interweaving of subjects and objects:

‘Those were, I think, the happiest months of all my life. It was dazzling; I was dazzled with happiness. She changed the house — really changed it, I mean, not just its spirit. She had us strip the walls, and paint them. She made that rug.’ ... ‘It didn’t matter that we weren’t lovers; we were so close — closer than sisters. We slept upstairs, together. We read together. She taught me things” (395).

This connection between bodies, and between the bodies and the world in the ‘field’ that they construct, is potentially liberating for Florence (and for Lilian, too). However, it is in Waters’s *Affinity* where the concept of the ‘field’ acquires an added significance.

Affinity (1999) revolves around the trauma that Margaret Prior suffers, caused by the recent death of her father, as well as by her former lover’s decision to marry her brother. Recovering from a suicide attempt, Margaret, an upper class spinster, is given the opportunity to do charity work visiting the inmates of Millbank prison. Her encounter with Selina Dawes, a renowned spiritualist medium, convicted of fraud and assault, will turn her life upside down. Questions of gender and spiritualism, Victorian issues of control and surveillance, and historical veracity come to the fore in this neo-Victorian novel, which proves how lesbianism has been spectralised, following Terry Castle (60). The novel is written in diary form in which Margaret’s and Selina’s journal entries alternate. The story is set in 1874, but there are flashbacks to 1872 and 1873.

Clearly, *Affinity* portrays queer sexuality in a gothicised form. Critics such as Paulina Palmer have considered the queer gothic in Waters’s fiction. However,



Ahmed's concept of orientation offers another view upon queer sexuality, since in her terms "[p]henomenology helps us to consider how sexuality involves ways of inhabiting and being inhabited by space" (67). The spatial metaphor is particularly relevant in *Affinity*, whose spaces and places, namely Millbank prison (panopticon-like) and Margaret's home, dominated by the wardens and Margaret's mother respectively, attempt to exercise control upon those under the disciplinary gaze, whilst at the same time allowing for subversion within the boundaries of the space. Therefore, queer sexuality finds a diverted way to manifest itself, thus producing a contact zone for desire. The space for desire is mainly produced between Selina and Margaret and their meetings at Selina's cell, and this is recorded in Margaret's "journals of the heart", which she often rereads. In this sense, Rebecca Pohl argues that:

[i]t is through the repetition of a spatial practice [that sexuality is produced...[following Ahmed] Margaret makes out [a 'crooked passage'] on the pages of her diary [where she recorded her desire]... it is this re-reading, enabled by *turning* pages and moving backwards along the same path she has previously been moving forwards on, that makes the passage 'grow firmer'...and through this repetition the heart... becomes more solid, more 'material' in as much as it enhances the realness of the experience" (Pohl 33).

The 'realness of the experience', which turns their relationship into a more solid, tangible and material interaction, is perceived in the novel in the field produced by "the coming and going of the bodies that inhabit" that space (Ahmed 106). This is illustrated in bodies getting into contact, as happens when, for example, Vigers, Margaret's maid and, crucially, the mastermind of the plot to deceive her, assists Margaret in straightening her pins that are working loose: "[Vigers] held her tray against her hip a moment, and put her hand to my head—and it seemed the kindest gesture, suddenly, that anyone had ever shown me, anyone at all" (254). Margaret is deeply affected by this small gesture in which for once the distinction between these subjects becomes erased in the field of experience, through tactility.

Indeed, touch is a privileged sense in *Affinity*, a novel dealing with the fluid relationship between the visible (corporeal) world and the invisible (spiritual) world, and with the ways in which disembodied spirits become 'materialised' in carnal forms. I would like to centre on three instances of the relevance of touch in the novel, which prove how "[t]his model of touch shows how bodies reach other bodies, and how this 'reaching' is already felt on the surface of the skin" (Ahmed 107). Thus, the first scene describes the moment in which Margaret peruses Selina's belongings at Millbank prison; the second instance refers to the scene in which one sitter, Miss Isherwood, desires to develop her spirit powers and she has a private sitting with Selina and her spirit control, Peter Quick. Lastly, I will explain Margaret's description of the plaster cast of Peter Quick's hand when she visits the library and meeting rooms of the British National Association of Spiritualists as a case of haptics.

The entry dated 28 November 1874 marks Margaret's visit to the 'Own-Clothes Room', the prison's storeroom, whose walls "are arranged...in the shape of a hexagon; and they are lined entirely, from floor to ceiling, with shelves, that are



filled with boxes” (235). The prisoners’ belongings are kept in boxes that have plates with their names on them. Margaret looks for Selina’s box, to see “something of hers, something of her—some thing, anything, that would explain her to me, bring her nearer” (237). This idea of apprehending a subject through her objects in a sensorial way flattens out the dichotomy between subject and object, and underlines the flow of sensations and emotions established between the perceiver and the perceived world. In this case, the sense of touch will be crucial, especially when Margaret touches Selina’s objects (“I touched and lifted and turned them all” [239]), and her hair. Here Selina’s hair functions as a metonymic element, replacing her for a part of her body: “I put my fingers to it. It felt heavy, and dry...I had made her vivid to me; it had made her real” (239). Galia Ofek in her *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2009) has discussed the Victorian fascination with hair and hair artefacts, not only in literature but also in culture. Margaret’s tactile encounter with Selina’s hair could be considered an example of fetishisation, as in the case of “hair memorabilia... seen as an objectification of human relationships, emotions and memories... It may be said to objectify people, not only their sentiments, as it turns the body parts into material tokens” (Ofek 51). However, Selina’s hair is and is not a “material token”, as the hair bears significant meaning in itself for Margaret, and this in-between status facilitates the flow of emotions through the tactile experience, and contributes to the erasure of the distinction between subjects/objects in a “midway” encounter, following Merleau-Ponty. In fact, later on, Selina uses her mesmerising powers over Margaret to make her believe that there is no separation between them: “your flesh comes creeping to mine’...I felt the tug of her, then. I felt the lure of her, the grasp of her” (276). It seems that the demarcation between their bodies has been erased, thus allowing for the emergence of a sensorial materiality. This is particularly illustrated in the nature of the skin, “a permeable boundary that permits congress between inside and outside” (Cohen 65). Touch is conducted through the skin that “becomes a site of possibility in which the nature of the encounter is established through the process of ‘touching’, one body *in relation* to another” (Castañeda 234).

Attentiveness to the skin is necessary in *Affinity*, where personal interaction is established through the sense of touch. One such instance is the scene in which Selina and ‘Peter Quick’ help Miss Isherwood to achieve her ‘development’ in spiritual terms. This occurs after a sitting in the dark room where Selina had held a séance in the presence of Miss Isherwood. She claims that on that occasion “[Peter] touched her upon her face & hands & she can still feel his fingers there” (260). In their private séance the sense of touch underlines how the subjects perceive their interaction with the world, dissolving the boundaries of the skin and opening up the possibility of encountering the other, thus collapsing outside and inside:

Then Peter said ‘Now you see my medium unclothed. That is how the spirit appears when the body has been taken from it. Put your hand upon her, Miss Isherwood. Is she hot?’ Miss Isherwood said I was very hot. Peter said ‘That is because her spirit is very near the surface of her flesh. You must also become hot.’ She said ‘Indeed I feel very hot.’ (262)



The whole scene, which reveals how tactile encounters materialise in the subject's interaction with the other, remains ambiguous as regards Miss Isherwood's willingness to engage in that tactile experience. Therefore, the skin does not always guarantee the possibility of pleasure in the actual moment of the tactile encounter. Nevertheless, there exists an interpenetration between the external world and inside in touching, as opposed to vision. William A. Cohen argues that "[b]y contrast with visual apprehension, which accentuates distance, hierarchy, and difference, the proximate senses [i.e. touch], which physically incorporate the outside world into the subject, occur on the sensitive, inscribing surface of the body" (75). Granted that vision and sight predominate in *Affinity*, because of the coercive power exerted by the gaze (mainly in Millbank prison and in Margaret's home), as mentioned before, it is also true that even in a scene where sight is privileged, it acquires a haptic quality. Haptics derives from the Greek *hapticos*, meaning tactile, used by Aristotle to refer to tactile sensations in both *De Anima* and *De Sensu et Sensibilibus*. This way, vision assumes tactile characteristics such as proximity and nearness, and shifts its disembodied quality in bringing subjects and objects in contact, into the world (Cohen 17).

On 23 October 1874 Margaret records her visit to the library and reading room of the British National Association of Spiritualists. Once there, she contemplates the display of plaster casts and waxen moulds of faces and fingers, feet and arms, which constituted the proof of the veracity of the mediums in materialising spirits' disembodied forms, according to the spiritualist belief. One mould attracts Margaret's attention in particular:

Here, however, was the grossest thing of all. It was the mould of a hand, the hand of a man—a hand of wax, yet hardly a hand as the word has meaning, more some awful tumescence—five bloated fingers and a swollen, vein-ridged wrist, that glistened, where the gas-light caught it, as if moist... 'Hand of Spirit-Control 'Peter Quick', it said. 'Materialised by Miss Selina Dawes' (130).

The description of Peter's hand emphasises the closeness of the object to the perceiving subject, to the extent of bridging the gap between them. Then, Margaret trembles and feels dizzy, being affected by a visual apprehension that has acquired a tactile quality. In haptics, subjects and objects engage in a mutual relationship where there is fluidity between them.

Undoubtedly, Waters's *Fingersmith* offers a convincing description of the importance of touch from a phenomenological point of view. In this novel, Waters draws on sensation novelists like Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. There are also Dickensian motifs and elements as critics have aptly noted. In the opening chapter of the novel, Sue Trinder, an orphan and a petty thief living under the protection of Mrs Sucksby, narrates how Gentleman concocted a plan to deceive an innocent heiress, Maud Lilly, and make her believe that he had the intention of marrying her. Sue must become lady's maid and chaperone to Gentleman and Maud in his seduction plot at Briar, where Maud lives a life of seclusion with her uncle, Christopher Lilly, a collector of pornographic books and treatises. As one reviewer



stated about the novel: “This is the plot, ostensibly. Yet the plot of the novel must run deeper” (Mullan). Indeed, the plot offers multiple deceptions to the reader, since it is “founded upon a double first-person narration split between the novel’s two principal protagonists, Sue Trinder and Maud Lilly” (Gamble 43). Despite the emphasis on doubling and duality in the novel, there is ample space for the collapse of those dualisms in the encounters between subjects and objects, where the sense of touch is particularly privileged. Arguably, “words...act as vehicles for authentic knowledge” in a “distinctively queer context” (Gamble 54), when the secret of both girls’ true identity is revealed in the letter written by Sue’s real mother, thus dismantling the sense of dualism that presides over the novel. However, the sense of touch also flattens out the distance between perceiving subjects and the world, as well as allowing for the interaction between subjects in a field where queer orientation is made possible. The growing attachment between Sue and Maud is enacted through the sense of touch from the very beginning of their mistress-maid relationship:

‘Your hands, Susan, are hard...and yet your touch is gentle.’

She reached and put her fingers quickly upon mine, as she said this; and I rather shuddered to feel the kid-skin on them—for she had changed out of her silk gloves, only to button another white pair back on. Then she took her hands away and tucked her arms beneath the blanket. I pulled the blanket perfectly smooth. (84)

As happened in *Affinity*, the sense of touch conceptualises the encounters between the characters and their perceiving world, and “in the act of ‘feeling’ the other’s particularity, establishes a relation in and through alterity” (Castañeda 234). Scenes with an emphasis on tactile experience proliferate in an attempt to present the relation between subject and the world “less in terms of abstract distance than proximate contact”, as in Victorian materialist writing (Cohen 25).

Inevitably, this concept of subjects and objects as mutually constituted through the sense of touch cancels out “[t]he conflict between the human body of the writer/reader and the ‘body’ of the physical book... [which lies] at the heart of Waters’s novel” (Miller). Christopher Lilly treats his books as objects, as well as objectifies her niece, Maud, as much as the female body has been largely objectified in pornographic material. She touches the books, under her uncle’s instruction, with gloved hands, which impedes any proximity or interaction between subjects and objects. When on one occasion she is ordered to take off her gloves, she does as requested, and “shudder[s] to touch the surfaces of common things” (198), keeping herself at a distance from the object-world, not establishing any embodied encounter. As Victoria Mills states, “Waters’s use of books as a metaphor for the female body is interesting as it draws on a nineteenth-century discourse of book collecting, which largely excludes women as desiring subjects” (145).

Nevertheless, this binary dualism, objects as opposed to subjects, also collapses when Maud and Sue succeed in subverting Christopher Lilly’s objectifying notion of touch by establishing a phenomenological notion of touch in which interior and exterior, thoughts and emotions become intertwined. This involves “the transition from the limitations of the pornographic material book to the more open



potentialities of the erotic text” (Miller). At the end of the novel Sue watches Maud composing pornographic texts herself, as she states: “I am still what he made me. I shall always be that” (546). She earns her living by writing pornography, taking the pen and thus becoming an authoress, claiming ownership of the topic that once objectified her, thus turning it into lesbian erotica, which is in itself a moot aspect in lesbian literature and culture (Palmer 90). What remains clear is that Maud no longer wears her gloves and both she and Sue become texts to be mutually read and decoded through sensory perception: “I didn’t need to say [I love you], anyway: she could read the words in my face. Her colour changed, her gaze grew clearer. She put a hand across her eyes... I quickly reached and stopped her wrist...” (*Fingersmith* 547). This tactile encounter illustrates the collapse of the binaries that sustained Christopher Lilly’s world, and the encounter with the other through the sense of touch.

In conclusion, as I hope to have demonstrated, Sarah Waters’s neo-Victorian novels show a particular interest in queer orientations through the sense of touch and tactile encounters. Arguably, Waters is proposing a ‘slantwise’ line, a ‘border’, which involves a phenomenological orientation towards other bodies, producing her own genealogical line of (neo-)Victorian lesbianism. In looking back to the Victorian past, these novels look in a different way to that past because “[l]ooking back is what keeps open the possibility of going astray. This glance also means an openness to the future, as the imperfect translation of what is behind us”, following Sara Ahmed (178). In fact, paying attention to the overflow of the Victorian past into the present through sensorial engagement, from the point of view of phenomenology and tactility, illustrates the affective interaction between the Victorian past and today’s culture, in which a reassessment of materiality is deemed necessary in the light of the relevance of social media and virtual human interaction.

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