

Queering the City:  
Queer *Flânerie* in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* and Sarah  
Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*

Joni Schers  
4079671  
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Supervisor: Dr. Barnita Bagchi  
Second Reader: Dr. Mia You  
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## Abstract

This paper contributes to the discussion of queer *flânerie* in literature; a subject that is still underexplored in academic debate. Taking cues from earlier research in the field of queer *flânerie*, in addition to an extensive exploration of the subject in two works of queer literature, Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* and Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, this paper will illuminate the different ways in which the originally male social construct of the Baudelarian *flâneur* can and has to be transformed to fit queer protagonists. This paper will make use of Judith Butler's queer theory on performativity to explain how gender performance is an important aspect of queer *flânerie*, as it can both limit and aid the queer subject's freedom on the streets. The paper will also explore queer *flânerie* as a mental activity. In addition, the city will be viewed, in my analysis of the novels, and analyzed as a social construct, in line with theories by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. The characters analyzed in this paper reject a heteronormative lifestyle and through their wanderings, create a queer space of living.

**Key Words:** *Flânerie*, *Flâneur*, Queer *Flânerie*, Judith Butler, Sarah Waters, Djuna Barnes, Queer theory, Henri Lefebvre, Gender performance.

For as long as I can remember, this has been one of my favorite feelings. To be alone in public, wandering at night, or lying close to the earth, anonymous, invisible, floating. To be “a man of the crowd,” or, conversely, alone with Nature or your God. To make your claim on public space even as you feel yourself disappearing into its largesse, into its sublimity. To practice for death by feeling empty, but somehow still alive.

– Maggie Nelson, *The Red Parts*

**Table of Contents**

Introduction	5
Chapter I: Retracing the <i>Flâneur</i> 's Footsteps	8
1.1. Baudelaire and Benjamin	8
1.2 The <i>Flâneuse</i> : Redefining a Concept	11
1.3. Queer <i>Flânerie</i> : Crossing Boundaries	13
1.4. <i>Flânerie</i> and the City	15
Chapter II: "Out into the Night": Djuna Barnes' <i>Nightwood</i>	17
2.1 Transgressing Binaries	17
2.2 Unraveling the Heteronormative Nuclear Family	21
2.3 Physical and Metaphysical Wandering	22
Chapter III: Sarah Waters' <i>Tipping the Velvet</i>	31
3.1 Sarah Waters and Neo-Victorianism: Rewriting History	31
3.2 Performativity and Spatiality	33
3.3 The City as Stage	34
3.4 Returning the Gaze	39
Conclusion	45
Works Cited	50

## Introduction

My interest in queer<sup>1</sup> *flânerie* was sparked during my internship at *Savannah Bay*, an independent bookstore in Utrecht specialized in LGBTQ literature, in 2018. As part of my internship, I organized an event called *Queering the City of Literature*, where three queer authors wrote a short text about what it meant for them to move through the city as a queer body. These texts were divided into fragments, which were eventually spread through the city of Utrecht by the authors and the visitors of the event. Visitors were asked to take photographs of the fragments in the city, and these were later published in a zine. The visitors thus engaged with literature and *flânerie* in an interactive way, by seeing the texts through the lens of the city and vice versa.

Especially in light of the MA program Literature Today, which aims to evaluate recent developments in literature and situate these from a historical perspective, my interest was sparked even more after the event and I decided to explore it in literature. Although the academic debate about queer *flânerie* has been growing steadily, many of the existing researches do not focus on literature. For instance, David James Prickett's interesting study explores "the gendering and sexing of geography and leisure" and argues that *flânerie* was never limited to heterosexuality (157). Researches such as his open up new ways of thinking about *flânerie* outside of a heteronormative system. However, his research focuses solely on social reality and my main interest lies in fiction.

Moreover, most of the existing researches focus on queer *flânerie* in private spaces, such as gay bars. Although it could be argued that a gay bar is a public space because it is a meeting point for queer people, I see it as a semi-private space for the same reason. They mostly exclude straight people and the queer *flâneurs* walk the streets with these bars as their

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'queer' does not have a fixed definition. For the purposes of this thesis, 'queer' is regarded as a term to describe people whose sexuality and gender are fluid and cannot be reduced to a reductive form. This idea is best described by Galvin in *Queer Poetics* (1999): "[T]hose who reside in the 'margins' perceive differences [in sexuality] along the lines of a

destination. For this research I was interested in queer *flâneurs* who walked the public streets of the cities without a clear destination in mind, thus having similar liberties as the Baudelarian *flâneur* in that regard. However, I will also examine *flânerie* as a mental activity through the character of Matthew O'Connor in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*.

I have chosen Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936) and Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) for my research, as these novels clearly portray queer *flâneurs* and the authors have created a space for these characters to exist within the pages of their novels. Moreover, the characters walk the public streets of the city, often without a clear goal or destination in mind, which, to me, was an important aspect, because, as I have mentioned earlier, I aim to investigate clear *flânerie* in public spaces.

In the case of Djuna Barnes, I will be analyzing a novel from the early twentieth century, combining historic elements with recent developments in queer theory. I will look into two queer *flâneurs*, Robin Vote, who represents the physical wanderings of the *flâneur*, and Doctor Matthew O'Connor, who can be seen as a *flâneur* in the way he thinks and comments upon Robin's wanderings. Sarah Waters' novel is situated in the Victorian past and enables her to re-imagine this past and provide queer women with the voice they did not have at the time. I analyze the character of Nancy Astley – Nan King – who walks the streets of London as a cross-dresser and, through these wanderings, comes to terms with her gender identity.

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the discussion of queer *flânerie* in literature, a still underdeveloped area of research, by focusing on queer characters in the public sphere. I intend to show that the originally male social construct of *flânerie* can be appropriated to fit queer groups of people and that the act of strolling enables the characters to learn more about their identities. Moreover, in the case of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, I will consider the act of *flânerie* not just as a physical occupation, but as a mental activity as well.

The thesis is compiled of three chapters. In the first chapter I will shed light on the figure of the *flâneur* and analyze how the academic debate about the figure has changed over the years, to include more inclusive ways of thinking about a construct that, for a long time, has been regarded as excluding women and people who do not live heteronormative lifestyle. This chapter will also introduce queer theory by Judith Butler and further explain the importance of regarding the city as a social construct, in line with thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau.

In Chapter II, I will analyze Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* and the *flânerie* acted out by two characters: Robin Vote and Matthew O'Connor. I will use Butler's theory on performativity to explain how the novel questions a heteronormative lifestyle and how the two characters – through their physical and mental wanderings – reject this lifestyle and stay true to their identities. Lefebvre's theorization of the social construction of space is also important to analyze how the city is not a fixed entity, but a different experience for different people walking its streets. Chapter III will focus on Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* and I will analyze queer *flânerie* through the novel's protagonist, Nancy Astley. Especially in this novel, Butler's theory on performativity is of great importance as the notion of performance on stage, an important element that the novel discusses, blends into gender performance on the streets, and the city becomes a stage onto which the protagonist comes to terms with her true gender identity. Finally, the conclusion will bring the previous chapters together and will offer suggestions for further research.

## Chapter I: Retracing the *Flâneur*'s Footsteps

Throughout the years, the character of the *flâneur* has undergone many changes. Whereas the Baudelarian *flâneur* could only be male, over the years scholars have investigated the possibility of a *flâneuse*, and more recently, have opened up the discussion of queer *flânerie*. This chapter will shed some light on these developments.

### 1.1 Baudelaire and Benjamin

The *flâneur* had been a common figure in French literature and art since the nineteenth century, but it was Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) who brought the figure alive for academic debate in the second half of the twentieth century by analyzing Charles Baudelaire's poetry.

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) described the figure of the *flâneur* from an aesthetic point of view. In his 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life" – in praise of the Dutch illustrator and painter Constantin Guys (1802-1892) – he pictures Guys as "*a man of the world*" (7, emphasis in original) – an "eternal convalescent" who always, like a child, sees the world "in a state of newness" (8). The Baudelarian *flâneur*'s passion is "to be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world" (9). He remains incognito in the crowd, while he notices every passing moment and transforms it into art.

Although Baudelaire inexorably discusses the *flâneur* in relation to the city, he emphasizes the *artistic* value of the figure as someone who is capable of "painting ... manners of the present" (Baudelaire 1) and his essay urges artists to use a rational and historical theory of beauty, in contrast to the academic theory of an unique and absolute beauty. This is the *flâneur*'s search for "modernity" (13); the "ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (13). In other words, beauty is always of a double composition for Baudelaire: it has an eternal element –



the soul of art – which is intangible and difficult to determine, and a circumstantial element, which emanates from the artwork's age, its contemporariness, and its fashions.

Although Baudelaire predominantly described the aesthetic side of the *flâneur*, this was exactly what according to Walter Benjamin revealed a considerable amount of information on the culture and time the former was living in. As Jennings argues, for Benjamin, “Baudelaire’s greatness consisted precisely in his *representativeness*: in the manner in which his poetry – often against its express intent – laid open the structure and mechanisms of his age” (1). This enabled Benjamin to perceive of Baudelaire as one of the great predecessors of modern life and it engendered his lifelong fascination with the poet and helped him shape his theories on modernity.

Benjamin had studied Baudelaire’s poetry for many years<sup>2</sup>, but it was not until the late 1920s that he started engaging with the latter’s views on the *flâneur*. During this time, Benjamin started working on *The Arcades Project (Das Passagen-Werk)*, written between 1927 and 1940. It was an unfinished study consisting of multiple writings on 19th-century French city life. The emergence of the *flâneur* coincided with great changes in society – that of modern capitalism and industrialization (Dreyer and McDowall 31). Benjamin argued that the arcades, which came into being “in the decade and half after 1822” (Benjamin 30), were the domain of the *flâneur* because they engendered a desire for consumer capitalism, which drove the masses to the streets. These arcades, which were lined with luxury shops on both sides, typically consisted of corridors with panels of marble that “extend[ed] through whole blocks of buildings” (Benjamin 30). They were typically covered with a glass ceiling which

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<sup>2</sup> He started translating his poems as early as 1914 (Jennings 2) and often gave lectures on the French poet (Jennings 3).

enabled consumers to shop in all weather conditions. Moreover, these ceilings provided a natural light that engendered the feeling that consumers were walking the city streets<sup>3</sup>.

Before the emergence of the arcades, city streets were not a safe place for mindless strolling because of the many vehicles that also occupied these streets (Dreyer and McDowall 31). Although the arcades (and later shopping malls) drove people to the streets, Benjamin also realized that people were now driven by mass-consumption and that, thus, the nature of the *flâneur* as someone who roams the streets aimlessly was in jeopardy. However, in this new consumer society, the true *flâneur* becomes a consumer, not of goods, but of impressions.

In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1940), Benjamin describes the *flâneur* as a product of the metropolis, a “city dweller” who “discovers in the crowd what fascinates him” (185). He comments on the contradictory nature of Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, as a figure who is part of the crowd while he simultaneously stands apart from it. As Mazlish argues, “[Baudelaire] wished both fusion and apartness, and ended up extolling an anti-modernism at the core of his modernism” (48). In other words, Baudelaire’s *flâneur* is only an emblem of modernity by the way he *rejects* this modernity; he repudiates the industrialization and “the rationalization of everyday life” (Dumas qtd. in Elkin, “Radical”) by observing society instead of actively participating in it. What makes Benjamin’s *flâneur* different from Baudelaire’s, is that the former observes more historical limits when it comes to walking the cities. Wolff explains Benjamin’s view:

Neither London nor Berlin offers precisely the conditions of involvement/non-involvement in which the Parisian *flâneur* flourishes; nor does the Paris of a slightly later period, when a ‘network of controls’ has made escape into anonymity impossible. (40)

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin provides two main reasons for the emergence of the arcades: the growing textile trade during the first half of the nineteenth century (30) and the emergence of iron construction, which architects saw as an opportunity for a revival of classical Greek architecture (31).

Contrariwise, Baudelaire argues that the increase in Parisian boulevards helped decrease class divisions and became “the site of the modern gaze, the ambit of the *flâneur*<sup>4</sup>” (Wolff 40).

### 1.2 The *Flâneuse*: Redefining a Concept

The act of *flânerie* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a masculine endeavor. As an emblem of a free-roaming spirit, it by definition excluded women, for they did not have the same freedom as men during this time. Women’s access to the streets was severely limited by their confinement within domestic borders (Wolff 41). Moreover, the *flâneur* was able to walk the streets aimlessly, not having to attend to daily affairs. Women, however, walked the streets to work or to shop for groceries, thus never without aim. Nevertheless, several scholars have investigated the possibility of a female *flâneur*, the *flâneuse*<sup>5</sup>, and have reached various conclusions about what she could have looked like.

According to Janet Wolff, the *flâneuse* is beyond the bounds of possibility. She argues that “[t]he central figure of the *flâneur* in the literature of modernity can only be male” (37), because past theories of the *flâneur* have only focused on the modern in relation to the public sphere, from which women were by and large excluded. She notes that Baudelaire did

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<sup>4</sup> Baudelaire and Benjamin were not the only great thinkers discussing modernity, *flânerie* and/or urbanization. Georg Simmel, for instance, also contributed many essays to the psychology of urban life and in his book-length study *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), he compared individuals’ psychology in rural life to that of big city-dwellers. Éric Hazan and Michel de Certeau have also contributed greatly to discussions on the acts of walking in urban space. The French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre also contributed to the discussion with his theories on the social construction of space and the right to the city. In his book *The Production of Space* (1991) he argued that “the tension between global integration and territorial redifferentiation leads to a general explosion of spaces in which the relationships among all geographical scales are rearranged and reterritorialised continuously” (Erdi-Lelandais 7). In other words, capitalism has also taken over urban space and Lefebvre urges for a reclamation of the city by the people who built it: its citizens.

<sup>5</sup> Although ‘*flâneur*’ is a generic term, it cannot be seen apart from its patriarchal connotations. In my opinion, speaking of a ‘female *flâneur*’ automatically underlines its impossibility, for it inextricably implies a comparison according to these male standards. ‘*Flâneuse*’ is a neologism, and, contrariwise, implies a re-envisioning of the concept as a whole.

mention female city-dwellers, but they took the form of prostitutes, lesbians, or murder victims (41) and these only included women from the lower- and working classes (Dreyer and McDowall 30). Indeed, Dreyer and McDowall's research into female *flânerie* approaches the character from these scenarios, as prostitutes and subjects of the male gaze. They argue that "[t]he feminisation of consumerism, especially shopping, ensures the continual dominance of the patriarchal gaze" and "[w]omen's identity is thereby reduced to erotic commodity, an object to be appraised and purchased (36). These women literally became part of the new consumer society, as they were consumed by males, either sexually or visually. Likewise, Griselda Pollock denies the existence of the *flâneuse* by focusing on the traditional patriarchal notions of modernity. She describes modernity in relation to the city as

a response in a mythic or ideological form to the new complexities of a social existence passed amongst strangers in an atmosphere of intensified nervous and psychic stimulation, in a world ruled by money and commodity exchange, stressed by competition and formative of an intensified individuality. (qtd. in Tseng 232)

These accounts of modernity imply a fixed patriarchal experience of modernity.

It is clear that the *flâneuse* could not be a mere female duplicate of the *flâneur*, but as recent scholars such as Lauren Elkin and Rebecca Solnit have argued, it is detrimental to stop trying to insert the *flâneuse* in an impossible masculine box and compare her to her male counterpart. Elkin argues, "Perhaps the answer is not to attempt to make a woman fit a masculine concept, but to redefine the concept itself" ("Tribute").

The *flâneuse*'s main task is to turn "flânerie into a testimony" (Elkin, "Tribute"). To explain her point, Elkin uses the example of the journalist Martha Gellhorn who started observing and participating in the city life of Madrid to report on the Spanish Civil War ("Tribute"). She was much like Baudelaire's *flâneur* as she both observed and participated in the crowd. She had turned the transitory into an art that would last, namely in journalistic

pieces. Elkin argues, “It’s the centre of cities where women have been empowered, by plunging into the heart of them, and walking where they’re not meant to. Walking where other people (men) walk without eliciting comment. That is the transgressive act” (*Flâneuse*, 20).

Such an approach opens up more positive accounts of the *flâneuse*. Tseng, in discussing Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), for instance, praises Woolf for shedding light on the modernist public sphere as well as the private. The reader of the novel perceives the city through feminine eyes. “Woolf’s representation of London subversively fractures the elitist metropolitan subjectivity of modernism and highlights the *flâneuse*’s perception and hitherto obscured scenes of domestic space” (Tseng 238). Elizabeth Dalloway aimlessly wanders the “formerly taboo zones” (Tseng 238) of London, imagining for herself a future in public service. This view of the *flâneuse* is in line with Elkin’s earlier notion of women walking the streets “where they’re not meant to”.

### 2.3 Queer *Flânerie*: Crossing Boundaries

Although the *flâneuse* is a hotly debated topic and studies regarding this figure are still increasing, a recent, and still scarcely researched, trend in scholarly debate is the discussion of queer *flânerie*. For a social construct that is so heavily dependent on notions of gender, it is interesting to investigate what *flânerie* comes to mean when these notions of gender are rendered fluid. Edmund White, a well-known gay writer, in his book *The Flâneur* (2001) argues that the *flâneur*’s queerness is exactly what drives him to walk the streets. He argues that “[t]o be gay and cruise is perhaps an extension of the *flâneur*’s very essence, or at least its most successful application” (White 145). This *flânerie* also turns into a political act as White “recovers the presence of gay writers, artists, and politicians at every turn of his stroll” (Chisholm 179). Dianne Chisholm’s book-length study on queer subcultural space

investigates the queer gaze as a different way of seeing urban space through several autobiographical accounts of queer writers, but in pitching gay and lesbian writers against each other, she fails to create an inclusive space for both. David James Prickett explores “the gendering and sexing of geography and leisure” and argues that *flânerie* was never limited to heterosexuality (157).

However fruitful these researches are, they tend to be occupied with social reality, as opposed to its fictive counterpart. Alla Ivanchikova has also noticed this trend, and I am grateful for her research into queer *flânerie* in contemporary fiction. However, she does not, in my opinion, devote enough attention to notions of performativity – as researched by queer scholars such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. These notions seem particularly important to fully understand what it means to move through urban space as a queer body, as not just the act of walking alone, but especially walking as a queer body in a political context, is a *performance*.

Especially Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which the scholar argues that gender is a performance rather than a biologically given fact, will be of great importance to the following study, as it proves that notions of gender are fluid and complicate the act of *flânerie* in both *Nightwood* and *Tipping the Velvet*. Especially in *Nightwood*, we will see that Djuna Barnes constantly questions and criticizes the heteronormative notions of gender and the nuclear family. Butler argues that gender is “a changeable and revisable reality” (xxiii); and that drag serves as an example that “‘reality’ is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be” (xxiii-xxiv), notions that are foregrounded in both works that are to be discussed in the following chapters. In *Nightwood*, doctor Matthew O’Connor often dresses up as a woman and identifies himself as a woman. Yet, simultaneously, he also describes himself occasionally in male terms. Similarly, in *Tipping the Velvet*, Nan Astley performs in cross-dressing and throughout the novel, identifies both as male and female. What does it mean

when these gendered bodies walk the streets of the city? What are the implications of these performed acts of gender for the characters' freedom on the streets? These are questions that I aim to answer in this paper.

#### 2.4 *Flânerie* and the City

To be able to discuss *flânerie*, it is important to pay as much attention to the city as to the characters, for the city streets are the natural habitat of the *flâneur*. Just like Judith Butler argues that gender is a social construct, so does the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, in his *The Production of Space* (1974), argue that space socially constructed as well.

Lefebvre challenged the strictly geometrical view of space as an empty area. On the contrary, “(social) space is a (social) product” and in order to understand the sociological dimension of space and time, it is fundamental to disengage from traditional views of space that considered it as something immaterial, as a pure concept a priori. (Pettersson 22)

What is important to take away from this, is that the city is not a fixed entity and its borders change for every person walking its streets. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau also highlights the subjective nature of space and notes that the city itself can be seen as a “text” (93). He argues

The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it ... The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other. (De Certeau 93)

This notion of space as a social construct is important in both novels to be discussed. Especially Waters pays much attention to this theatricality of the city, as the characters' performances do not only take place at the theater, but are extended to the city, and the streets become a stage for the protagonist to perform her gender identity. That the city is not a fixed entity becomes clear when Nan engages in cross-dressing and the city shows her two different faces, depending on whether she walks the streets as a man or a woman.

It is clear that theories of *flânerie* have become more inclusive of women and queer people when scholars started to realize that the old patriarchal definitions had to be transformed to include these groups. In the following chapters, I will discuss queer *flânerie* in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936) and Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) through the lens of performativity and the notion of the city as a social construct.



## Chapter II: “Out into the Night”: Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood*

Watch the hurry of people who work for their rent, and somehow there creeps into your heart a mad desire to place your foot on the earth and claim it as yours by the inalienable right of birth.

– Djuna Barnes, ‘Who’s the Last Squatter? (1913)’ (qtd. in Edwards 15)

Djuna Barnes’ best-known modernist work, *Nightwood*, was published in 1936. The novel’s main setting is Paris and through the inner lives of the work’s various characters and their wanderings, the reader dives into the heart of the city, with its boundaries, and more often than not, the crossing of these with its resulting anxieties.

### 2.1 Transgressing Binaries

As Horner and Zlosnik argue, “In *Nightwood* ... we see the modern city through the eyes of the unconventional, the marginalised, the abjected” (82). Julia Kristeva argues that because the abjected subject no longer expels, but *is* expelled from society, the very borders become an “object” (4): “It is ... not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). These borders form the site of transgression. As Pettersson argues, “borders represent a fluid space that is open for both literal and figurative displacement in the sense that it invites for the subversion of restrictions and the appropriation of space” (49).

Throughout the novel, Barnes is occupied with the dissolution of “hierarchical binaries” (Rohman 58), such as human/beast, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and Christianity/Judaism. As will become clear from the following analysis, most of *Nightwood*’s characters, but most importantly Robin Vote and Doctor Matthew O’Connor, are abjected subjects as they challenge traditional notions of sexuality and conventional family life<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of (cultural) abjection in the novel goes much further than the above-mentioned factors. *Nightwood* also heavily concerns itself with the subject of race, origin, and religion,

Although the novel is psychology-driven and not plot-driven, a brief overview of the plot seems in order before diving into my analysis. The novel opens with an introduction of Felix “Baron” Volkbein, who, just like his father had done before him, pretends to have aristocratic blood, but “reek[s]” of “falsification” (Barnes 10). Felix meets Robin Vote, the novel’s central character, through Doctor Matthew O’Connor (whose medical credentials are also a scam) and the two get married, but Robin leaves him after their son Guido is born. Subsequently, Robin meets Nora Flood at the circus and the two live passionately together for a while, but Robin also leaves her. The latter eventually dates Jenny Petherbridge, a woman who “defiled the very meaning of personality in her passion to be a person” (Barnes 61), but leaves her as well and in the novel’s climactic ending, ends up at a chapel in Nora’s hometown in America. All three of Robin’s former lovers try to come to terms with her departure through conversations with Doctor Matthew.

Djuna Barnes’ novel can be said to “offer a literary and poetic imagination that speculates and adumbrates rather than comprehends and offers solutions” (Jonsson 19-20). It dives into the subjectivity of its characters without the desire to dominate or restrain them in any way. The novel emphasizes the impossibility of fully understanding another person and highlights the fact that history, knowledge, and truth are socially constructed. The novel opts “for a new way of relating the subject to the world, a relation that offers resistance to the common inscription of alienation and individualism ascribed to the narration of modernism” (Jonsson 38). As Davidson notes, “Barnes’s novel is the antithesis of the modernist interior monologue that attempts to render some subterranean, unchanging bottom nature or core personality” (215). This becomes especially clear when realizing that the character of Doctor Matthew serves as a tool for other characters to understand themselves and others. In this way, the novel constantly questions “the already said or written” (Jonsson 24) and never

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but for the purposes of this study, I will limit myself to discussing sexuality and the notion of a traditional nuclear family.

offers solutions.

The novel is an example of “obscene modernism” (Chisholm, *Obscene* 170), that is, the reader is “directed to construe modernist transgression, favorably or unfavorably, as outlawed sexual representation” (Chisholm, *Obscene* 168). What makes *Nightwood* different from other obscene modernist novels<sup>7</sup>, however, is that Barnes’ exploration of sexuality is implicit. Although it is clear that Nora Flood and Robin Vote (and later Robin and Jenny Petherbridge) are romantically involved, just as it is clear that Doctor Matthew engages in transvestism, these topics are never explicitly addressed or commented upon. Emily Coleman, Barnes’ friend wrote to T.S. Eliot after sending the manuscript, “Can you read that and not see that something new has been said about the very heart of sex? – going beyond sex, to that world where there is no marriage or giving in marriage – *where no modern writer ever goes?*” (Qtd. in Chisholm, *Obscene* 171). As Heise argues, Barnes “keeps the city’s sexual mysteries mysterious in order to make them ‘real,’ shielding her marginalized neighborhood from the modern city’s fatal exposures” (305).

The time in which the novel was written is significant when it comes to the discussion of sexuality. In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that the incorporation of the word ‘homosexual’ in Euro-American discourse in the last third of the nineteenth century, led, at the turn of the century, to

world-mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable to a homo- or hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence. It was this new development that left no space in the culture exempt from the potent incoherences of homo/heterosexual definition. (2)

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<sup>7</sup> Such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* which engage overtly with questions of sexuality.

Just as Sedgwick argues that binary oppositions such as homo-/heterosexual and masculine/feminine should be considered as being part of a spectrum rather than opposite axes – as one opposition needs the other in order to exist (*Epistemology* 30) – so aims Barnes to undo these binary oppositions in *Nightwood*.

*Nightwood* does not discuss or analyze the difficulties of a growing queer culture, and most “obscenities” are veiled behind elegant, poetic and archaic language. In his preface to the novel, Eliot says that *Nightwood* will “primarily” attract “readers of poetry” because Barnes’ “prose has the prose rhythm that is prose style, and the musical pattern which is not that of verse” (Eliot *xviii*). Nowhere does he comment upon the novel’s implicit themes of sexuality. This use of archaic language and implicit sexuality is of crucial importance to understanding how Djuna Barnes rewrote a history that could include these minorities without highlighting their difficulties. While it is true that by obscuring these realities behind a veil of poetic language (Chisholm, *Obscene* 175), she prevented prosecution or a ban on the novel (as, for instance, the ban on James Joyce’s *Ulysses*), she also created an environment where these minorities could just be. As Galvin explains,

Unlike many of her modernist contemporaries, Djuna Barnes involved herself with the ‘reclamation’ of archaic vocabularies, styles, and forms. One effect of this is that Barnes is rewriting literary history; but this time, lesbian existence is included, and that changes everything. To speak of lesbians necessitates a ‘twisting’ of conventional literary forms, just as lesbian existence must undermine conventional values in order to emerge. (87)

In *Nightwood*, Barnes “imagines an erotic decrepitude beyond good and evil” (Chisholm, *Obscene* 186) and it is this rewriting of queer history without any sense of condemnation that makes Barnes’ novel different from other modernist novels that have tackled the same topics.

## 2.1 Unraveling the Heteronormative Nuclear Family

As Horner and Zlosnik argue, *Nightwood* “seeks to strip away the patina of cultural idealisation from ‘the family’ in order to reveal its power dynamics as inherently exploitative and destructive” (80). Barnes implicitly opens up the discussion about sexuality by offering varying alternatives to the traditional nuclear family of the modern period<sup>8</sup> (Horner and Zlosnik 79-80). After giving birth to her son Guido, Robin leaves both her husband Felix and her newborn baby, thus rejecting traditional marriage and motherhood. Moreover, Felix married Robin, so she “might bear sons who would recognize and honour the past” (Barnes 40). The fact that Guido is an ill and weak child – “mentally deficient, and emotionally excessive, an addict to death” (Barnes 96) – questions the traditional notions of family life and serves as a response to modern notions of sexuality, particularly “chromosomal sex,” which “is biologically necessary to species survival, tending toward the individually immanent, the socially immutable, the given” (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 29).

In addition, apart from Guido, there is another portrayal of a child in *Nightwood*, represented by Nora and Robin’s doll, “the inanimate progeny of a couple unable to procreate” (Musselman 109). As Nora explains to Doctor Matthew, “We give death to child when we give it a doll – it’s the effigy and the shroud; when a woman gives it to a woman, it is the life they cannot have” (Barnes 128). While Robin tells Nora the doll is their “child” (Barnes 133), in a moment of anger she “pick[s] up the doll and hurl[s] it to the floor” (Barnes 133) – recalling the moment she had been in the exact same position with her son Guido – suggesting that the constraints of living a conventional life can be suffocating.

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<sup>8</sup> Davidson takes this analysis a step further by performing a biofuturist reading of the novel, arguing that Doctor Matthew is a pregnant male; not overtly, but by his recurring desires to reproduce and carry a child. “[F]or no matter what I may be doing, in my heart is the wish for children and knitting. God, I never asked better than to boil some good man’s potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar” (Barnes (82). Davidson argues, “The figure of the pregnant male could be seen as a camera obscura on modernity’s anxieties over violated biology and traditional nature” (212).

### 2.3 Physical and Metaphysical Wandering

In *Nightwood*, Robin Vote and Doctor Matthew O'Connor embody both the physical and metaphysical wanderings of the *flâneur* (Horner and Zlosnik 86). The novel “anatomizes the underbelly of capitalist geography through a narrative that maps sexual practices in the city’s unofficial spaces of pleasure – pissoirs, slums, seaports – where the rhetoric of unequal socialspatial relations is redeployed in the service of erotic talk” (Heise 288). As Heise argues,

*Nightwood* imagine[s] urban space from the perspective of the marginalized neighborhoods that were targeted by municipal authorities, police, urban planners, and real estate developers. ... [U]rban planning initiated new methods of special and social control to produce what Michel de Certeau calls a “planned and readable city.”

Against the panoptic, abstract, implicitly (and at times explicitly) heterosexual spatiality of urban planners – the City Practical architects in New York in the 1910s and Georges-Eugène Haussman in Paris in the 1850s – Barnes’s was a secretive city of queer desire and pleasure. Her work underscores the erotic possibilities of a territorial politics where the sexualized and gendered nature of urban space is foregrounded, and where the relays between bodies and architectures create frictions that rub the city’s dominant powers the wrong way. (288)

One of the tools of the City Practical movement for “managing urban growth and controlling unwanted populations” was zoning, which compartmentalized the city in a way that grouped people who “did not meet normative prescriptions of sexual or racial personhood” (Heise 290-91). This way of spatially controlling the population enabled a “policed space for forms of sociability that did not meet strict heteronormative parameters” (Heise 292). Thus, sexuality is bound up with spatiality. The creation of this queer subculture is what De Certeau

calls the resisting of an “urban discourse” in which “rational organizations must thus repress all the physical, mental, and political pollutions that would compromise it” (94).

What makes Barnes’ able to transgress these prescribed borders is to have Robin Vote wander the streets, without pinpointing her exact location. She often takes to the streets in moments she feels trapped within heteronormative confounds. When she was pregnant with Guido, she “took to going out; wandering the countryside; to train travel, to other cities, alone and engrossed. Once, not having returned for three days, and Felix nearly beside himself with terror, she walked in late at night and said that she had been half-way to Berlin” (41) Then, after the birth, she “took to wandering again, to intermittent travel from which she came back hours, days later, disinterested” (43). Yet, her precise locations remain a mystery. During these walks, “[h]er thoughts were in themselves a form of locomotion” (54), which is emblematic of the *flâneur*. The *flâneur* lives in a state of isolation, as he or she is unhappy with and alienated from the capitalist consumer society.

In the case of *Nightwood*, it is a deep unhappiness with “an ethics in which the human (male) heterosexual takes presendence over the woman, the homosexual, and the animal” (Jonsson 41). It is this state of “anomie” which “precludes creativity but induces meditation and dreaming” (Horner and Zlosnik 87). Especially doctor Matthew embodies this dreamlike state of the *flâneur*, by his identification with the night, which in the novel symbolizes the unconscious. It is through his meditations on the night that he tries to uncover the psychic lives of the other characters. Additionally, it is through his musings on the night and his ventures into Paris’ nightlife that he is able to preserve “the unofficial histories of Paris that were endangered by Haussmann and map contemporary Paris’s queer underworld, where intimate practices are quarantined to hidden locales in the late hours of the night” (Heise 306-307). When Nora visits him and asks, “tell me everything you know about the night” (71), the doctor’s musings that follow can be seen as a critique on Paris’ urban planning. He tells Nora

that although the city is compartmentalized in different areas, “the day and the night are related by their division” and that “[t]he very constitution of twilight is a fabulous reconstruction of fear, fear bottom-out and wrong side up” (72). The monologues that follow “anatomize for Nora the city and its bodies as part of a bristling critique of the modern fetish for order, legibility, and hygiene. The modern urban economy will not tolerate the contradictions it generates, the coexistence of pleasure and pain, beauty and deformity” (Heise 312-13). As Doctor Matthew muses,

Let a man lay himself down in the Great Bed [of the night] and his ‘identity’ is no longer his own, his ‘trust’ is not with him, and his ‘willingness’ is turned over and is of another permission. His distress is wild and anonymous. He sleeps in a Town of Darkness, member of a secret brotherhood. He neither knows himself nor his outriders, he berserks a fearful dimension and dismounts, miraculously, in bed! (72-73)

In this passage, Matthew instills fear in Nora because he cannot portray the night, or a homosexual community, as something “definable” (Herring 180). As Herring argues, “self-discovery” in the Barnesian night “becomes a joke, since the obliterating night dissolves the personality, which becomes an untrustworthy other within the unknowable self” (181). Again, Barnes critiques the categorization of queer identity.

As has become clear from the previous analysis, Doctor Matthew does not take to wandering as Robin does, and he is even described as always circling the same square in Paris:

Close to the church of St Sulpice, around the corner in the rue Servandoni, lived the doctor. His small slouching figure was a feature of the Place. To the proprietor of the Café de la Mairie du VI<sup>e</sup> he was almost a son. This relatively small square, through



which tram lines ran in several directions, bounded on the one side by the church and on the other by the court, was the doctor's 'city'. (26)

Whereas Robin feels nowhere at home, Matthew, in contrast, is described as a 'feature' of the place and even a 'son'. Instead of physical wanderings, his "mind is so rich that it is always wandering" (Barnes 93). Although Benjamin described the *flâneur* initially as a figure roaming the streets, he later amended this definition by arguing that the figure "is the man at the window rather than the man in the crowd" (Edwards 9), thus suggesting that the *flâneur* can observe the people from an "interior space" (Edwards 9) as well as from the streets. Doctor O'Connor's 'window' is constituted by what the other characters tell him and how he processes that information in his mind, as well as by his metaphysical wanderings through the past.

The earlier-mentioned conversation between Nora and Matthew on the night can be seen as a "verbal slumming tour" through the city and its past where Nora and the reader are led "into a contemporary queer underworld where bodily pleasure and bodily fluids are exchanged, where hyperstimulation aggregates the social body, joining strangers in sexual contact" (Heise 313). Matthew asks Nora to think about the night "now, in other times, in foreign countries – in Paris" (73) and accompanies her on a metaphysical tour through queer histories, to explain to her that "the nights of one period are not the nights of another" (Barnes 73). He thus returns queer history to Nora's conscience.

Robin Vote and Matthew O'Connor complement each other and must be seen in unison. To fully understand the act of *flânerie* in the novel, it is crucial to first analyze in which ways these characters complement each other. Throughout *Nightwood*, both characters are described by a vocabulary from the animal world. Robin's room in Paris is "a jungle trapped in a drawing room" (31), her bed "surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly oversung by the notes of unseen birds" (30). She is described as

“beast turning human” (33), carrying “the quality of the ‘way back’ as animals do” (36), with her “flesh ... the texture of plant life” (31). Doctor Matthew calls her something “outside of the ‘human type’ – a wild thing caught in a woman’s skin” (131). In the novel’s final climactic scene, Robin is performing a strange ritual with Nora’s dog, “dashing about her” and “barking” (153). She “offers access to whatever aspects of ourselves we might ordinarily repress” by embodying “the unconscious and the instinctual” (Kaivola qtd. in Rohman 67). Robin is an animal/human hybrid and Barnes disrupts both these categories by insisting that Robin’s animality is part of her identity.

Likewise, in his musings on the night, Doctor O’Connor also makes abundant use of animal metaphors. He describes sleep as “the slain white bull” (72). He argues, “Though some go into the night as a spoon breaks easy water, others go head foremost against a new connivance; their horns make a dry crying, like the wings of the locust, late come to their shedding” (73). Moreover, his general demeanor is reminiscent of an animal, as he carries his hands like “a dog who is walking on his hind legs” (29).

Another similarity is that Robin is described as masculine, “a tall girl with the body of a boy” (34), with a “low” voice (34) and “broad shoulders” (41), and O’Connor as feminine, with a “maddened woman’s” voice (14) who feels like a “bride” whenever he hears music (29). Moreover, both characters engage in transvestism. When he visits Robin with Felix, the latter sees the doctor – who believes himself to be unobserved – spraying himself with Robin’s perfume, “dusting his darkly bristled chin with a puff, and drawing a line of rouge across his lips, his upper lip compressed on his lower, in order to have it seem that their sudden embellishment was a visitation of nature” (32). Likewise, when Nora visits the doctor in his room, she finds him wearing make-up, dressed in a “woman’s flannel nightgown,” wearing a “wig with long pendant curls that touched his shoulders” (Barnes 71). Matthew, whose narration often merges with the omniscient narrator’s, uses his authority as a male and

a doctor to speak, while on the other hand he is portrayed as a feminine gynecologist. “Barnes creates a biting parody of the figure of the sexologist whose aim is to define the nature of female inversion” (Harris 233).

Although Robin’s transvestism is not as often described as the doctor’s, Nora informs the doctor that she would sometimes find Robin wearing “boy’s clothes” (133).

Barnes questions the notions of sexuality and gender, in a similar way as Judith Butler has done years later in her work *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler argues that gender is a “changeable and revisable reality” (xxiii) and that “the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (9-10). Although the doctor was biologically born male, he feels that his gender is female. He calls himself “the Old Woman who lives in the closet” (124), the “other woman that God forgot” (129), and “a lady in no need of insults” (137). The doctor’s criticism toward a normative heterosexual and heteronormative identity becomes clear when he says, “[P]ray to the good God, she will keep you. Personally I call her ‘she’ because of the way she made me; it somehow balances the mistake” (135). Matthew questions the traditional notion of gender being defined by sex, by stating that God could also have been a woman.

Whereas Robin only utters a few words in the entire novel, Doctor O’Connor is constantly talking and aims to provide meaning to the characters, as well as the reader, by “tell[ing] the story of the world to the world” (145), mostly in regard to Robin’s wanderings. Robin’s silence is a critique on language and the signifying meaning of words. Even in the few moments she speaks, she stresses the inability of language to signify meaning and create an identity. This can be seen as Barnes’ criticism on compartmentalizing identities and space. As Heise argues,

Barnes's underworld bodies are palimpsests that bear traces of the historical and material exclusions that isolate them in debased urban geographies. Reading the queer body against the grain, as a critique of urban political economy, she represents that body as a site of resistance to a modern madness for order and sexual normativity. (308)

When Robin returns with Nora after having left Felix and her baby, she “was unable or unwilling to give an account of herself” (44). Likewise, when Robin meets Nora at the circus, one of the lions in the ring turns to Robin and bows down in front of her, causing such an emotional response in Robin that she tells Nora to “get out of here!” (49). However, all she mentions about the incident is that she wants to leave, “[b]ut it was all she said; she did not explain where she wished to be” (49). She is reduced to an image; “a stop the mind makes between uncertainties” (Barnes 100). As Rohman argues,

The Word as stabilizer of identity comes in for consistent abuse, particularly through the immoderate speeches of Dr. Matthew O'Connor and the various linguistic refusals of Robin Vote. Robin embodies nonidentity as an authentic form of being, and her silence is a marker of this value system. She refuses to categorize her gender or her sexuality, and by the novel's end she is unwilling to conform to a human identity that denies her own animal being. Robin ultimately transgresses the symbolic as a limit upon her phenomenality. Through Robin's character, Barnes troubles the very terms of human subjectivity by thinking about identity outside the conditions set by its symbolic economies. (58)

In terms of sexuality, Sedgwick argues, “‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially

constitutes it" (*Epistemology* 3). Robin's conscious silence is also characterized by 'fits and starts' as any attempt to signify her leads to violent outbursts on her part.

Throughout *Nightwood*, there is a constant struggle between signifier and signified. In the chapter "Go Down, Matthew," the ability of language to offer meaning finally collapses as his speech becomes more disoriented. He says, "Haven't I eaten a book too? Like the angel and prophets? And wasn't it a bitter book to eat?" (115). This seems a direct response to Nora who "believed the word" (46). Ultimately, Matthew tells Nora that "Life is not to be told ... it will not tell itself" (116-17) and he comes to the conclusion that he has "not only lived [his] life for nothing, but [he's] told it for nothing" (149). What is interesting, though, is that the doctor embodies his own criticism. He reaches the conclusion that language is not to be trusted, and accuses Nora of "hav[ing] dressed the unknowable in garments of the known" (Barnes 123) However, this is quite literally what he does when he dresses up in a nightgown (Chisholm 76-77). As Chisholm argues,

He cannot enact a radical refusal of false identities and instead replaces one gendered identification with his desire for an exaggerated version of another. Matthew wants to be Woman, and Woman is certainly something for which we have words. The text implies that Matthew's profound desire to be barefoot and pregnant does not liberate him from the edicts of a heteronormative system but, rather, tethers him more brutally to gendered modes of being that are constrained by the insidious binary boy-girl. (77)

Matthew, ultimately, becomes the embodiment of what the novel as a whole is trying to resist.

This alienation from the self, each other, and society is important in understanding these two characters as *flâneurs*. As Horner and Zlosnik argue, "The city becomes emblematic of urban modernity and the flâneur becomes generally symbolic of an alienated modern consciousness" (87). Robin's escape takes the form of reckless *flânerie*, finding life on the streets "more dignifying than the demoralization of domesticity" (Chisholm 183),

while the doctor provides his alienated commentary on her wanderings, ultimately disassociating himself from language and the world.

### Chapter III: Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*

Unlike *Nightwood*, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) is plot-driven. The novel is set in Victorian England during the 1890s and centers around 18-year-old Nancy Astley who lives with her family in Whitstable, Kent as a an oyster girl. The fact that Nancy is an oyster-girl already foreshadows the novel's theme of gender performance. Nancy's father explains the oyster to Kitty as follows, "[f]or 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!" (49) As the novel unfolds, Nancy turns into a masher, a homeless person, a cross-dresser and a renter boy. All of these experiences are shaped by the time she walks the streets of London, which will eventually shape her gender identity.

#### 3.1 Sarah Waters and Neo-Victorianism: Rewriting History

Much like Djuna Barnes did in *Nightwood*, Waters generates a space in her novels where queer existence is allowed to proliferate. Whereas Barnes was concerned with dissolving boundaries as a modernist writer for queer groups to exist without judgment, Waters rewrites history to include marginalized queer groups. Waters' works generally have a neo-Victorian setting and they have significantly increased the popularity of historical fiction in recent years (Mitchell 20). As Pettersson explains, "[s]traddling history and fiction, the past and the present, neo-Victorianism is a hybrid genre that conceives a literary space in-between, namely the Victorian period and our own" (197). Thus, historical fiction is not just about "historical accuracy or authenticity" (Mitchell 20), but it revises a historical past and fills in gaps in knowledge by using imagination. De Groot argues,

The historical novelist [. . .] explores the dissonance between then and now, making the past both recognisable but simultaneously unfamiliar. Historical novelists concentrate on the gaps between known factual history and that which is lived to a

variety of purposes. The spaces scholars have no idea about – the gaps between verifiable fact – are the territory for the writer of fictional history. (qtd. in Mitchell 20) These ‘gaps’ allow Waters to bring queer existence to life, as she mingles historical facts with contemporary perspectives<sup>9</sup>. In an article for *the Guardian*, Waters writes,

*Tipping the Velvet* was never intended to be a work of historical realism. Instead, it offers a 1990s-flavoured lesbian Victorian London, complete with its own clubs, pubs and fashions ... The very patchiness of lesbian history ... invites or incites the lesbian historical novelist to pinch, to appropriate, to make stuff up. I wanted the novel not just to reflect that, but to reflect on it, to lay bare and revel in its own artificiality.

(Waters, *Electric* n. pag.)

Waters’ excessive use of the word ‘queer’ in *Tipping the Velvet* situates the novel both in the past and in the present, for it evokes past definitions of the word, as well as contemporary meanings (Koolen 374). When Nan writes to her sister about her love for Kitty, the latter replies, “I can never be happy while your friendship with that woman is so wrong and queer” (134). This ambiguous use of the word may invoke past meanings, such as “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric” (Koolen 374-75), but it also hints at the contemporary use of the word, implying “same-sex desire and sexual deviancy” (Koolen 375).

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<sup>9</sup> In a sense, the reader adopts one of the main characteristics of the Baudelarian *flâneur*, namely that of becoming an observer, because Neo-Victorian literature centers around theatricality. As Pettersson argues, “[t]his consists in an enactment of the past that situates the reader in the position of a spectator to observe the staging of contemporary issues on the neo-Victorian scene” (13). As Neil adds, “just as the audience in the music hall is subjected to a simultaneous ‘doublereading’ of the transvestite, so too is the reader of neo-Victorian literature involved in the double-reading of history. While the neo-Victorian text references, (re)visions, or is influenced by the Victorian era and the longer nineteenth century, it is also concerned with the ideological debates in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries” (qtd. in Pettersson (304).



### 3.2 Performativity and Spatiality

Another way in which Waters mingles past and present, is by incorporating contemporary notions of gender and performativity into the novel. *Tipping the Velvet's* publication “coincided with the rise of queer theory within the academy” (Mitchell 22) – Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* was published in 1990 – and Butler’s notions of gender and performativity influenced Waters significantly, as is evidenced by the novel’s setting in theaters and the various dimensions of cross-dressing that are addressed.<sup>10</sup> Butler argues, “what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality” (xxiii), and it is the nature of this revisable reality that lies at the heart of *Tipping the Velvet*.

Although Butler’s theory did not cover any extended notions of spatiality, her theories could easily be applied to urban studies, as she argues that gender performance is a social construct, much like the ‘city’. As Nelson argues,

theorizing sexuality and gender as performative can transform static, pre-discursive notions of space and place. By drawing on Butler’s theory of performativity, [feminist geographers have] enhanced the theoretical scope of sexuality, place, space and identity. (qtd. in Pettersson 34)

The notion of theatricality is not only present in the descriptions of the characters’ lives on stage, but it extends to the city. As Pettersson argues, “the city is structured as a backdrop where performative spatial practice and theatrical representations of space invite for the representation of city life form entertainment on a metaphorical stage” (62). This was a result of the separation of the classes by the emergence of “streets and squares which represented the principles of ‘picturesque beauty’ by means of scenic effects” (Ackroyd qtd. in Pettersson 62). The resulting metropolitan slums “provided well-to-do philanthropic men and women

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<sup>10</sup> One can wonder if Kitty’s last name – Butler – is a coincidence.

with an actual and imagined location where, with the approval of society, they could challenge prevailing norms about class and gender relation and sexuality” (Koven *xviii*).

In *Tipping the Velvet*, this is exemplified by the character of Diana; a rich upper-class woman who drives around the slums of London to pick up renter boys. She brings Nan to her home and treats her as a sex object for which she is admired by her friends: “Diana’s wider circle of friends ... thought our union a fantastic one. I would sometimes see them look between us, then overhear their murmurs – ‘Diana’s *caprice*,’ they called me, as if I were an enthusiasm for a wonderful food, that a sensitive palate would tire of” (278).

### 3.3 The City as Stage

The city also functions as a stage for it can influence one’s gender identity and gender performance. Nan first performs her gender identity on stage in the music halls, but this performance soon transgresses to the city and the streets become her stage. After she has become a renter, Nan observes,

It might seem a curious kind of leap to make, from musical-hall masher to renter. In fact, the world of actors and artistes, and the gay world in which I now found myself working, are not so very different. Both have London as their proper country, the West End as their capital. Both are a curious mix of magic and necessity, glamour and sweat. Both have their types – their *ingénues* and *grandes dames*, their rising stars, their falling stars, their bill-toppers, their hacks... (203)

This is what makes Nan an interesting queer *flâneur* to analyze, as she walks the city as both man and woman, identifying with both genders at various moments in the novel, influenced by her surroundings. These various stages in her life – both inside and outside the theater, combined with her wanderings, provide her with a growing self-awareness and ultimately lead to a profound confidence in who she is as a person.

Henri Lefebvre, in his *The Production of Social Space* (1974), argues that space, just as gender, is socially constructed and not stable, or an entity devoid of essence<sup>11</sup>. The city is very much a breathing, changing character. He argues,

[S]pace is neither a mere “frame”, after the fashion of the frame of a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed to receive anything that is poured into it. Space is social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure. (Lefebvre 93-94)

De Certeau also speaks of the city as observed from above. The “Solar Eye” (92) that can observe the city from above becomes a “voyeur” (92) as he can observe the city from a distance. What De Certeau implies is that geographers and urban planners have this panoramic view of the city (place), while only the people who actually walk the city streets can truly understand the workings of the city, because their space “add[s] a social dimension to place” (Pettersson 27). He adds, “Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer” (95). Thus, the city is not a fixed entity, and is different for everybody walking its streets. The act of walking, according to De Certeau, is what constitutes the city and can be regarded as a kind of language:

[I]t has a triple "enunciative" function: it is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language); it is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language); and it implies relations among differentiated

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to establish the difference in meaning between place and space. Whereas place denotes a geographical area with politically determined borders, space is a “mental or psychological experience ... which is made meaningful through social practices” (Pettersson 26).

positions, that is, among pragmatic "contracts" in the form of movements (just as verbal enunciation is an "allocution," "posits another opposite" the speaker and puts contracts between interlocutors into action). It thus seems possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation. (97-98)

Walking as a form of speech act is important in understanding *flânerie* in *Tipping the Velvet*. Although the dichotomy of the private and public sphere – with the resulting restriction for women to claim space – was at its highest during the Victorian era, Sarah Waters' novel illustrates that the boundaries between these spaces are constantly challenged, appropriated, and crossed by women. This proves De Certeau's point that "[w]alking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it 'speaks'" (99). Political government does not constitute the experience of the city, but each individual is able to create its own experience. To be able to read Nancy as a *flâneuse*, it is important to "read her in terms of the gendered relationships that rested upon a dichotomous division of spheres together along with their object/subject relations" (Pettersson 106).

At the beginning of the novel, when Nancy describes her life in Whitstable as an "oyster-girl" (4), she describes herself as "a slender, white-faced, unremarkable-looking girl, with the sleeves of her dress rolled up to her elbows" (4). The small town is all she knows: "Whitstable was all the world to me, Astley's Parlour my own particular country" (4). This small town and her family make Nancy perform a female heteronormative gender identity. She describes herself as female, she wears feminine clothes, and even has "a kind of beau" (5), Freddy. Her parents and sister are relatively close-minded as they believe people from London and the theater are "rapid" and to be mistrusted (6). The fact that this is an unnatural performance for Nancy is already made clear early on in the novel when she mentions that "as a *girl*" (6, emphasis mine) she loved the smell of the oyster parlour "uncritically" (6), but that later she came to know it as "the smell essence not of pleasure, but of grief" (6).

In response to Nancy's love for the theater, her mother tells her she should be "on the stage" herself after which "she laughed" (7) immediately. Her laugh stems from a preconditioned idea that only feminine women can perform acts on stage and Nancy is "tall," "rather lean," with a "flat" chest, "dull" hair, and her eyes "an uncertain blue" (7). Nancy confirms this by saying, "girls like Alice were meant to dance upon a gilded stage, skirted in satin, hailed by cupids; and girls like me were made to sit in the gallery, dark and anonymous, and watch them" (8). This clearly shows how place and space are crucial to gender identity. Massey argues,

the limitation of women's mobility in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination. Moreover the two things – limitation on mobility in space, the attempted consignment/confinement to particular places on the one hand, and the limitation on identity on the other – have been crucially related. (qtd. in Pettersson 42)

When Nancy sees Kitty perform on stage for the first time she is immediately smitten and charmed by her features which are neither fully feminine, nor masculine:

She looked, I suppose, like a very pretty boy, for her face was a perfect oval, and her eyes were large and dark at the lashes, and her lips were rosy and full. Her figure, too, was boy-like and slender – yet rounded, vaguely but unmistakably, at the bosom, the stomach, and the hips, in a way no real boy's ever was; and her shoes ... had two-inch heels to them. But she strode like a boy, and stood like one, with her feet far apart and her hands thrust carelessly into her trouser pockets, and her head at an arrogant angle, at the very front of the stage; and when she sang, her voice was a boy's voice – sweet and terribly true. (13)

This instance awakens Nan's sexual desire as she realizes that the stage offers Kitty an opportunity to perform a gender that does not adhere to the typical patriarchal notions of

femininity. As Butler argues in relation to gender,

if gender is something that one becomes—but can never be—then gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort. (143)

Seeing Kitty on stage awakens Nancy to the notion of gender performativity, as she realizes that Kitty is neither strictly masculine nor feminine and that a signifying system exists in which she can be both.

After Nan leaves Walter and Kitty and starts roaming the streets, the city becomes her stage and her cross-dressing and renting become her performance. Ironically, she does not perceive it as such in the beginning:

My one regret was that, though I was daily giving such marvelous performances, they had no audience. I would gaze about me at the dim and dreary place in which my gentleman and I leaned panting, and wish the cobbles were a stage, the bricks a curtain, the scuttling rats a set of blazing footlights. 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. (206)

However, she starts dressing up in her male attire, so she is able to walk the streets freely, thus crossing the private/public dichotomy of the Victorian period. Butler argues that “the notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities” (174). This becomes clear when Nan starts cross-dressing too. Just like her performance on stage becomes more natural and better over time, so does her gender performance on the streets, as people no longer recognize her true gender:

The success of that first [renter] performance made me bold. I returned to Soho for another turn, and walked further; and then I went again, and again... I became quite a regular at the Berwick Street knocking-shop – the madam kept a room there for me, three days a week. She early on found out the purpose of my visits, of course – though, from a certain narrowing of her gaze when she dealt with me, I think she was never quite sure if I were a girl come to her house to pull on a pair of trousers, or a boy arrived to change out of his frock. Sometimes, I was not sure myself. (195)

### 3.4 Returning the Gaze

This also leads to a discussion of how Waters challenges the typical Baudelarian notion of the male gaze that is typical of the *flâneur*. The male gaze makes women the object of sexual desire, and is also a reason why many critics have denied the possibility of a *flâneuse* (Wolff 42, Tester 18). However, when Nan and Kitty's eyes meet for the first time, an instant feeling of mutual understanding and infatuation takes place:

[W]hen her song was finished she did not peer into the stalls for the handsomest girl, as she usually did. Instead, she took a step to her left, towards the box in which I sat. And then she took another. In a moment she had reached the corner of the stage, and stood facing me; she was so close I could see the glint of her collar-stud, the beat of her pulse in her throat, the pink at the corner of her eye. She stood there for what seemed to be a small eternity; then her arm came up, the flower flashed for a second in the beam of the lime – and my own hand, trembling, rose to catch it. ... She held my flustered gaze with her own more certain one, and made a little bow. (26)

Whereas the music hall was a place where, as a performer, you were gazed *at*, it was, during the Victorian period, also a heteronormative gaze. Women, generally, only went when they were chaperoned by their husbands. The fact that Kitty, as a cross-dresser, so overtly gazes at

another woman, and even gives her a rose, transgresses the boundaries of heteronormative space. As Pettersson argues,

Nan sees through her disguise and theatrical enactment because she recognises her own queer identity in Kitty as they ga(y)ze at each other. They create a fissure for a brief and private encounter of mutual recognition through the ga(y)ze, and consequently, their lesbian desire protrudes heteronormative space. (280-81)

More instances of this reversal of the gaze occur in *Tipping the Velvet*. In order to improve their act on stage, Kitty and Nan walk the streets of London to observe the men. Walter, their manager, urges them to “go about the city... and *study the men!* ... [c]atch their characters, their little habits, their mannerisms and gaits ... You must know it; and you must copy them, and make your audience know it in their turn” (83, emphasis in original). In this regard they appropriate the typical *flâneur* as described by Benjamin; a city dweller who “discovers in the crowd what fascinates him” (185). Although they ultimately observe the men for professional ends, their “moonlit criss-crossings of the city” (85) fill them with a sense of joy, as they learn “the ways and manners of the whole unruly city” (86).

After Nancy has left her life with Kitty behind, she starts roaming the streets of London, only to find that she is being harassed by men:

I was stared at and called after – and twice or thrice seized and stroked and pinched – by men. This, too, had not happened in my old life; perhaps, indeed, If I had had a baby or a bundle on me now, and was walking *purposefully* or with my gaze fixed low, they might have let me pass untroubled. But ... I walked fitfully, blinking at the traffic about me; and such a girl, I suppose, is a kind of invitation to sport and dalliance... (191)

Water highlights the earlier mentioned criticism by critics such as Wolff that women could not stroll aimlessly, an activity typical of the Baudelarian *flâneur*, without being harassed.



However, soon after this incident, she starts wearing her male attire and she finds that she can not only walk the streets without being harassed, she can also be the observer. One evening, she is sitting on her balcony wearing her “gentleman’s costume” (221) when she makes eye contact with young Florence, whom she will later live with. In this moment she describes herself as a typical *voyeur*:

At last my cigarette burned down, almost to my fingers, and I cast it into the street below. She caught the gesture: gave a start, then squinted at me, then grew stiff. Her confusion – despite the darkness, I could see from the tips of her ears that she flushed – disconcerted me, till I recollected my gentleman’s costume. She took me for some insolent *voyeur*! The thought gave me an odd mixture of shame and embarrassment and also, I must confess, *pleasure*. (221, my emphasis)

First, she is offended, as she realizes her position as a female subject. But when she is aware of her male appearance, she actually enjoys subverting the role of being an object of desire to being a spectator: “‘G’night, sweetheart,’ I said in a low, lazy tone. It was the kind of thing rough fellows of the street – costers and road-menders – said to passing ladies all the time. I don’t know why, just then, I thought to copy them” (221).

The classical role of male spectator and female object of desire is once more subverted when Nancy lives with Diana. The latter dresses Nancy up in the most expensive male costumes and calls her Neville. However, Nancy becomes nothing more than an “it” and a “creature” (273); an animalistic site of sexual desire and an object to look at. As she recounts her days with Diana, she says, [i]t seemed my fate to be dressed and fashioned and admired by others” (270) and her sole purpose is to “satisfy [Diana and her friends’] appetite” (273). She says,

they studied all my movements, all my parts. When I leaned to knock the ash from my cigarette, they blinked. When I ran a hand over the stubble at my hairline, they

coloured. When I parted my trouser-clad legs and showed the bulge there, Maria and Evelyn, as one, gave a shift in their chairs; and Dickie reached for her brandy glass and disposed of its contents with one savage swig. (275)

She often finds Diana “gazing” (268) at her and at some point she even describes herself as a work of art to be admired: “I looked not like myself at all, but like some living picture, a blond lord or angel whom a jealous artist had captured and transfixed behind the glass” (270).

Nan’s role as an object under Diana’s watch reaches its climax when the latter makes Nan perform a tableau vivant. She dresses up as the “Roman page Antinous,” wearing a “skimpy little toga ... with a Roman belt around it” (308). She quite literally becomes a Roman statue for Diana and her friends to be looked at. Moreover, Diana strips her of her toga, uncovering both her breasts and finally “Nan is ‘presented’ as Hermaphroditus” (Koolen 386).

This role-reversal is interesting because Diana is a feminine woman acting out the role of the Baudelarian *flâneur*, as a *woman*, while Nancy, “Neville”, King at this point in the novel almost resembles a male and is the object of the (feminine) gaze.

Nancy, as a male cross-dresser, has both been the *voyeur* and the object of the gaze. Waters thus seems to challenge the notion that women should, by definition, always be the mere objects of the male gaze without ever being able to return it. She aims to highlight the fact that women can also be “manipulators” of this male gaze (Pettersson 109).

What I have tried to show in this chapter is that in *Tipping the Velvet* Nancy mostly develops her subjectivity through her wanderings and the people and places she stumbles upon while walking. Her travels first bring her to the music hall where, with her life with Kitty, she comes to realize her sexuality and gender preference. However, the fact that she can only perform these two crucial aspects of her life in the public sphere eats away at her. The

public only approves of the act *because* it is a performance. The minute someone in the audience yells, “Girls? You call them girls? Why they’re nothing but a couple of – a couple of *toms!*” (140), the audience is disgusted by them and the act crumbles. Similarly, Kitty only feels comfortable with her cross-dressing and lesbian identity when she is on stage. The moment the act crumbles, she marries Walter and starts performing a heteronormative identity.

Nancy, on the other hand, takes to the streets and grows more comfortable with her identity. Although it is questionable whether renting can be seen as a positive development in her life, it does make her more comfortable with her gender identity and sexuality as she realizes she has no feelings for her male customers, while she simultaneously grows more comfortable with walking the street as a man, eventually blurring the boundaries between male and female, not just for her, but for the public as well.

While Kitty limited Nan’s personal development in the private sphere, Diana, in turn, limits it in the public one. Although Nan is at first elated that she has found another woman who is open about her sexuality and acceptant of her gender identity, she eventually realizes that she is confined to the private sphere of Diana’s circle. She rarely leaves Diana’s house and when she is allowed to leave, she has to be chaperoned by her.

Waters shows how the act of cross-dressing can eliminate the private/public dichotomy for women and can allow them to walk the streets almost as freely as men. However, she also shows its dangerous side by shedding light on the general hateful response of the public, as well as the dangers of upper class people exploiting renters from the working classes for their own pleasure.

Her wanderings finally lead her to Florence, a socialist who does not hide her lesbian identity. As Pettersson argues, “Florence introduces her to the lesbian subculture in the socialist movement and shows Nan that there are women who are openly queer. This makes

Nan realise that lesbianism is not a matter of relationship, but an identity” (298). This realization marks the Nan’s maturity in this *Bildungsroman* as she can finally live openly as a lesbian in a healthy atmosphere. She meets Florence’s friends at a gay bar, and they stare at her in admiration when they realize she used to be Nan King. As Koolen argues,

[w]hereas much of *Tipping the Velvet* complicates tendencies to celebrate “queer” and women-only spaces as safe and supportive, the community of toms that Nan finds near the end of the novel when she starts seeing Florence provides a more favorable depiction of the “lesbian” gaze by showing that it may be respectful and mutual ... The working-class “lesbian” gaze is depicted as desiring and respectful rather than exploitative. (390)

When other lesbians at the bar ask her to perform a song from her music hall days, she is at first frightened, because it reminds her of her days with Kitty as well as being exploited by Diana. However, she soon realizes that these women admire her and “celebrat[e] the homoerotic legacy that she left to women who experience same-sex desire and cross-gender identification” (Koolen 391).

## Conclusion

My attempt in this paper was to contribute to the academic discussion of queer *flânerie* in literature and to explore different ways in which the originally masculine social construct of *flânerie* can be appropriated to queer groups of people. As mentioned in the first chapter, a growing number of critics have already tried to do so by investigating the possibility of a *flâneuse* – the female version of the *flâneur*. Although Janet Wolff argues that the existence of a *flâneuse* is impossible because the act of *flânerie* was only accessible to males due to women's restriction in the public sphere – as up until the end of the 19th century, they were confined to the private sphere (Wolff 37) – she does mention the necessity of transforming the male concept, something which has been done by several other critics, such as Rebecca Solnit and Lauren Elkin. The latter, in her recent book *Flâneuse*, argues, “[p]erhaps the answer is not to attempt to make a woman fit a masculine concept, but to redefine the concept itself” (“Tribute”). She studies important figures such as Georg Sand and Agnès Varda, who took to the streets and observed.

Although these studies are significantly fruitful and have opened up new progressive ways of thinking about *flânerie*, they leave out a group of people who do not necessarily belong to each of these gendered – masculine or feminine – groups.

Although Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* and Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* differ significantly in style and time period they cover – *Nightwood* is a modernist novel set and written in the 1930s, while *Tipping the Velvet* is a Neo-Victorian novel set in the 1880s but written in the 1990s – they are very similar in the fact that both authors have found ways for queer people to have a voice.

In *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes is occupied with dissolving hierarchical binaries, such as male/female, Christianity/Judaism, and homosexuality/heterosexuality. She has achieved this by constantly challenging heteronormative ways of living, such as the question of the nuclear

family, which she constantly challenges by invoking queer relationships, such as the one between Nora and Robin, Robin and Jenny, but also the descriptions of the doll in these lesbian relationships, which questions the notion of lesbian motherhood.

What makes *Nightwood* significantly different from *Tipping the Velvet*, is that Barnes never directly comments upon sexuality. When reading the novel, it is clear that two characters engage in transvestism and that Matthew is gay, while Nora, Robin, and Jenny have lesbian relationships; however these topics are never brought to the foreground. It is as Heise argues, Barnes “keeps the city’s sexual mysteries mysterious in order to make them ‘real’ (305). Barnes believed that overexposure of the queer community would not represent an honest and respectable picture.

Waters, on the other hand, is very explicit in discussing sexuality and cross-dressing in her novel. The protagonist constantly reflects on her gender performance and gender identity and Waters does not shy away from discussing the social circumstances that shaped the characters’ sexualities and gender. For instance, she comments upon the rejection of lifestyles which are not heteronormative through Nancy’s sister’s non-acceptance of her lifestyle, as well as through Nancy’s life as a renter boy. She explains that women were not allowed to walk the streets like men did, and Nancy only finds freedom on the streets of London by cross-dressing as a boy.

Waters’ portrayal of queer *flânerie* in the novel is also more positive than Barnes’. Although Nancy has to prostitute her body in order to walk the streets, her wanderings eventually lead her to a group of queer friends that accept her for who she is, and she comes to term with her gender identity and no longer has to hide. In this regard, *Tipping the Velvet* can be seen as a Bildungsroman, for it follows Nancy’s journey into selfhood.

In *Nightwood*, such a closure is never reached and the feeling at the heart of the novel is one of alienation. Robin wanders the streets to escape heteronormative and patriarchal

notions of identity, but she always returns with more anxiety than when she left. Although the ending of the novel could be read as some form of closure, Robin running with the dog, and eventually “her hands beside her, her face tuned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees (153), but this closure is of an ambiguous nature. It seems like Robin accepts that animality and humanity can both exist in a person, thus dissolving one of the binaries the novel is concerned with, but it also signifies the undoing of language, of language as a signifier of meaning. Speech falls away in the final chapter of *Nightwood* and although there is some relief in the existence of the animal/human hybrid, the reader is also left with a general sense of anxiety that queer existence cannot exist within the realms of language.

Likewise, although Matthew O'Connor knows his true gender identity and often comments on how he should have been born a woman, his metaphysical wanderings eventually also lead to a dissolution of language and the self, and he ends up at a bar questioning his existence.

Whereas *flânerie* in *Tipping the Velvet* eventually leads to a positive outcome and life prospect for Nancy, the characters in *Nightwood* only walk themselves into more confusion about their identities and lives. Waters rewrote a history that included queer people and mapped out a solid identity for them, while Barnes, although she also provides a space for queer people to exist, highlights the fact that queer identity remains a topic that cannot be confined by language, which is her critique of the zoning and compartmentalizing of queer people in the early twentieth century.

While I have tried to cover as much ground as possible, I must concede there are limitations to my research. I have mostly discussed queer characters who are either homosexual, lesbian and/or engage in cross-dressing. This, of course, does not cover the immense spectrum of queer people and I can only hope that future academics will include

them in their research. An interesting angle to queer *flânerie*, for instance, could be to, instead of focusing on cross-dressers, to focus on transgender characters in contemporary literature instead. As Butler argues, “if we shift ... from drag to transsexuality, then it is no longer possible to derive a judgment about stable anatomy from the clothes that cover and articulate the body” (xxii), which will make the discussion of fluid gender identity even more interesting.

Another limitation to this paper is that I have grounded my research in queer theory, but I have not focused much on feminist theory due to the limitations in word count. However, it is often fruitful to combine feminist and queer theories, especially in books such as *Tipping the Velvet*, in which both come together. It challenges traditional notions of gender identity (queer theory), while it simultaneously discusses the role of women in society (feminist theory). It would be an interesting approach to combine these two when it comes to queer *flânerie*; to discover where both theories come together and where they clash.



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