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A Lesbian Eroticism of Style in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, Emma Donoghue's *Hood*, and Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*

Aurora Lucien
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School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics

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Signature: Aurora Lucien

Print Name: Aurora Lucien

Date: 25/9/20

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Abstract

Lesbian literary criticism has twin genealogies in both lesbian-feminism and literary criticism. Building on existing criticism, I argue that, because of the competing scholarly imperatives in these academic specialisations, the relationship between lesbian eroticism and literary style in lesbian criticism has had a fraught history with important consequences for close readings of lesbian fiction in the present. As scholars have argued, the influence of poststructuralist criticism on lesbian literary criticism has led to most of the criticism on postmodern lesbian literature analysing the anti-binarism of structure: the transgression, subversion, and exceeding of heteronorms through authorial strategies of manipulating genre, narrative voice, irony, fragmented subjectivity, or intertextuality. Additionally, because of the centrality of what Bonnie Zimmerman terms “inclusive” understandings of lesbian eroticism in lesbian literary criticism and critical theory, lesbian eroticism is understood as a very broad set of representations in which sex scenes are de-prioritised or not considered necessary. I argue that critics often analyse the *fact* of lesbian sex scenes being transgressive, subversive, or excessive, but that it is rarer to see a lesbian critic produce a close reading of a lesbian sex scene. I argue that the works of literary criticism on the erotic lesbian novels of Jeanette Winterson, Emma Donoghue, and Sarah Waters form case studies evidencing these claims. As influential canonical postmodern erotic lesbian novels, Winterson’s *Written on the Body*, Donoghue’s *Hood*, and Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* are mostly analysed for lesbian eroticism via devices of anti-binarism and structure, but not aspects of style such as register, rhyme, syntax and morphology, among others.

This thesis begins with a literature review and literary history which introduces the issue of the relationship between lesbian eroticism and literary style in lesbian literary criticism. The three subsequent textual analysis chapters form case studies arguing that the criticism of these novels has overlooked the aesthetic significance of a lesbian eroticism of style. These chapters demonstrate how this form of reading can generate new readings by drawing attention to important qualities of the texts that have been overlooked thus far. Since studies of lesbian eroticism and literary style in lesbian literature have both formed important separate critical approaches in lesbian literary criticism, an analysis that examines a lesbian eroticism of style in Winterson’s, Donoghue’s, and Waters’ influential novels provides an important contribution to the field.

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Thesis

Preface

24 November 2016: Joan Nestle at The Hare Hole

On 24 November 2016, the pioneering American author and editor of sex-positive erotic lesbian fiction, Joan Nestle, gave a talk at Hares & Hyenas, Melbourne's LGBTIQA+ bookstore in Fitzroy. The Hare Hole, as the bookstore-turned-venue is luridly named for its evening events, is lined with shelves containing: respectable mainstream gay memoir; salacious lesbian crime fiction; gay men's erotic skin-flick photography mags; coming-out and coming-of-age how-to's; cutting-edge contemporary IVF guides; and entertainment, information, turn-ons, and provocations for people of diverse genders and sexualities.

The audience, of which I was a member, was squeezed into folding chairs filling the packed bookstore from the window-front to the stage containing a chair and a lone microphone. The walls advertised events including the wonderfully staccato-named homo PO-PO-MO-CO, or homosexual post-postmodern comedy, and reverberated the happy ruckus of pre-show audience goodwill. The audience included: a middle-aged feminist academic who enthused about the rise of no-nonsense feminist U.S. Democratic senator Elizabeth Warren; silver-haired gay male couples who seemed to be out for date-night; a student at the "bitter end" of her doctoral dissertation who is also a cabaret drag-king in Adelaide; and a recently transitioned trans butch bro, a former librarian and spray-paint street artist, whose preferred pronouns include "a lusty wolf-whistle."

Nestle is a founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York, the world's largest collection of lesbian cultural material, which began as a small collection in one corner of Nestle's Manhattan flat, a flat the burgeoning collection eventually "consumed" before it was re-homed in a brownstone run by a collective of lesbian-feminist volunteers. Nestle is one of the pioneering sex-positive lesbian-feminist activists and authors, and she has dedicated her career and her life to writing, editing, collating, and archiving work by and about lesbians and the complexity and diversity of their erotic lives. Her talk was inspiring: equal parts passion, humour, and righteous fury at injustice. She fondly recounted "baby butches" playing on the Brooklyn shoreline in the 1960s competing to throw garbage cans, and she urged us to remember the importance of lesbian and feminist histories. A self-identified femme Jewish lesbian feminist, she located lesbian eroticism at the centre of lesbian activist, cultural, and historical projects. She recalled a comment from a Jewish member of the Lesbian Herstory roundtable of 1979, on reading the infamous (and sometimes contemporarily

maligned) tragic lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* before entering a concentration camp: “I wanted to live long enough to kiss a woman.” “It is up to us,” Nestle told the audience, “the queer historians, to give life,” and to “find a way to fight violence against women without sacrificing women’s erotic complexity.”

Occurring only weeks after the election of Donald Trump as the U.S President, Nestle’s talk was one example of a broader recognition in leftist politics and cultural criticism that signals a significant social change. In recent decades, the Anglophone cultural and intellectual spheres have seen massive technological change. Globalisation and neoliberal capitalism have hollowed out the middle class of the Global North, accelerated in the fallout since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and the global COVID-19 crisis we are living through in 2020. The successes of the feminist movement attracted backlash in the rise of the conservative right-wing political class across the Global North since the early 1980s. Decades of severe budget cuts to the arts and cultural industries and the Humanities have been part of deliberate right-wing conservative strategies of defunding and delegitimatising queer and feminist activism and intellectual thought. We have seen the collapse of journalism, music selling, and publishing in the arts and cultural industries.

But feminism endures, and lesbian culture endures. The mainstreaming, tolerance, and affirmation of (albeit restricted) forms of LGBTIQ+ culture in the space of only a few decades in the Anglophone world has been remarkable. The same era has dramatically increased access to online public spaces for publishing, criticism, and theory. And despite shoestring budgets and the decline of the Humanities as centres of culture in the Anglophone world, urban literary cultures are strong and expanding and LGBTIQ+ literary cultures are part of that expansion. That Brooklynite Joan Nestle could publish her first work of lesbian literature, *A Restricted Country*, in 1979 and thirty-eight years later fill Melbourne bookstore Hares & Hyenas twice in 2017 is testament to the ongoing appeal of lesbian literature, which I would suggest makes things happen in the world, moves audiences and makes space in the world for explorations of desire between women. Lesbian literature still appeals to many audiences, filling up bookstores and performance venues through speaking events, and still has a place in libraries and bookshelves, cafés and curricula and also in print, e-readers, audiobooks, and TV and film adaptations. Lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory endure in different forms, with critics drawing on intellectual traditions from Women’s Studies and Gender Studies, feminist literary criticism, Lesbian Studies, and queer theory to ask new questions about what the signifier *lesbian* does in literary and cultural production, intellectual theorisation, and activist movements.

Introduction

LGBTIQA+ Studies¹ Now: Reassessing Poststructuralism and Postmodernism

In her talk, Joan Nestle commented on the ironies of Donald Trump's election as U.S. President at the very time of the seeming breakthroughs in LGBTIQA+ activism: "We thought we were all so postmodern, so ironic." What her talk (as outlined in the Preface) also gestured to is the ongoing reassessment of the practices of literature, literary criticism, and critical theory in identity-based (or critique-of-identity-based) theorisation after the rise and fall of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Criticism in these areas is engaging in a debate proceeding from a kind of exhaustion with the long over-examined preferred objects of poststructuralist criticism, and particularly the methodologies of "suspicious reading": that is close readings of diverse texts analysing the ways in which they can be demonstrated to subvert, transgress, or exceed normativities (Felski, *Limits* 2–3). Marxist ideological critique and psychoanalytic criticism became "metalanguages" for critical theory in the 1980s and shaped the methods of interpretation that rose to prominence in poststructuralist criticism. As discourses, they have been argued to possess a "depth model of truth" (Best and Marcus 10), with the role of the critic being "wresting truths from the hidden depths of resisting texts" (Best and Marcus 13), or exposing the flawed workings of normativities or binary thought, as in Derrida's critiques of presence. This methodology had then been presented, often implicitly, as the most appropriately political response of intellectuals to diffuse forms of power which interpellate and produce subjects in modernity.² Much analytical and theoretical work in feminist, lesbian, and queer criticism since the mid-1980s has involved

¹ On terminology: Following Robyn Wiegman (*Object Lessons* 305n7), I define *queer theory* as the interdisciplinary study of anti-heteronormativity with some connection still to minority genders and sexualities, especially as derived from close readings of English literature by Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and their successors. I use the term *LGBTIQA+ Studies* for the interdisciplinary study of minority genders and sexualities derived from academic Gay and Lesbian Studies. While I acknowledge criticisms that the umbrella term *queer* has sometimes had a tendency to elide differences and specificity, I use the terms *LGBTIQA+ Literary Studies* and *Queer Literary Studies* to name the field at the confluence of LGBTIQA+ Studies, feminist literary criticism, and Literary Studies, and which includes lesbian literary criticism, the primary sub-field this thesis works within.

² The argument that diffuse forms of power produce subjects in modernity derives from Michel Foucault's critical works, and LGBTIQA+ Studies is influenced by (and founded by!) scholarly applications of his works *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (1976, English translation 1978) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975). The argument that discourses interpellate the subject in modernity derives from the work of Louis Althusser via its application in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993).

demonstrating the ways in which creative texts, including fiction, can be understood to subvert, transgress, or exceed heteronorms, with the methodologies of close reading in Gay and Lesbian Studies and Queer Literary Studies informed by their genealogies in lesbian-feminist, sexual difference, psychoanalytic, poststructuralist and deconstructionist critical theory. Academic works of feminist, lesbian, and queer criticism—arguing for the ways in which texts can be demonstrated to subvert, transgress and exceed heteronorms—had a powerful influence on the methodologies of close reading in LGBTIQA+ Studies. The argument calling for the analysis of the transgression or subversion of heteronorms is central to many of the texts that become the foundational texts of queer theory, including Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (1976, English translation 1978); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990); Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993); and Michael Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1991). This argument in its influential forms in queer theory also derives from Judith Butler’s readings of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser, and J. L. Austin; as well as lesbian-feminist criticism by Adrienne Rich (“Compulsory Heterosexuality”), Monique Wittig (*The Lesbian Body* and *The Straight Mind*), Marilyn Frye (“Lesbian ‘Sex’”), and Gayle Rubin (“Thinking Sex”); psychoanalytic criticism by Teresa de Lauretis, Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, and Lee Edelman; and works of sexual difference criticism by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Simone de Beauvoir. These critics are all early proponents of arguments emphasising the transgression of heteronorms in LGBTIQA+ Studies.

Literary critics are reassessing the utility of these poststructuralist methods in analysing literature of the past and present. As scholars of gender and sexuality studies, lesbian literary critics and critical theorists have long juggled the competing claims in the contested politics of representation between identitarian thought (including issues of identification, accuracy, representability, referentiality, and affirmation) and antinormative thought (including anti-identitarian, anti-binary, anti-essentialist, anti-realist, postmodernist and poststructuralist discourses). Although I will argue for a reassessment of the utility of some lesbian critical traditions, I do not intend to claim the primacy of any of the problematic binarised terms in identity-based literary criticism and critical theory historically such as form/content, style/substance, formalism/political theory, aesthetics/politics, signifier/signified, identity/practice, or theory/activism. Poststructuralism has long since emphasised the matrix of relationships between all these terms, and the insufficiency of binary thought. Nevertheless, in identity-based criticism today, there is a growing recognition that particular literary texts and critical methodologies have been dominant, and that the task of the critic today includes a reassessment of these. As literary critics and critical theorists move on to other approaches—digital humanities, post-humanism in the Anthropocene, and systems theory, to name

but a few—some of the most promising and invigorating critical theory of recent years has belonged to what are broadly named the ethical, affective, and/or descriptive turns in criticism, concerned with texts and methods its practitioners understand as being overlooked in favour of prominent “ideological styles of reading” (Felski, *Uses* 6). The essays theorising these new approaches include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Paranoid and Reparative Reading” (1997); Bruno Latour’s “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern” (2004); Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’ “Surface Reading” (2005/2009); Marjorie Levinson’s “What Is New Formalism?” (2007); Rita Felski’s *Uses of Literature* (2008) and *The Limits of Critique* (2015); Heather Love’s “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn” (2010); and Eileen Joy’s “Weird Reading” (2013). Some of the prominent critics of the ethical and descriptive turns derive their approaches from LGBTIQA+ Studies and feminist criticism (Felski, Sedgwick) and some are specifically based in lesbian literature (Love, Marcus, Joy). Recent works in lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory have participated in this reassessment of the fields, arguing for renewed attention to the methods of criticism outside the familiar theoretical approaches of high poststructuralism, such as analysing the transgression and subversion of heteronorms. This work has included theorising modes of reading sensitive to the formal and literary qualities of fiction (Best and Marcus, Levinson, Love, Sedgwick); aesthetic affects and effects including recognition, enchantment, and pleasure (Bennett, Felski), and an invigorating syncretism of old and new theories, low and high culture, and modernisms pre-, post-, and beyond.

Research Questions

In this thesis, I apply the linguistically informed close reading methodologies of stylistics to analyse the ways in which literary devices construct what I term a lesbian eroticism of style in works of 1990s erotic lesbian literary fiction in English: Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*, Emma Donoghue’s *Hood*, and Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet*. The methodology is positioned at the convergence of several overlapping critical fields: lesbian literary criticism, Queer Literary Studies, feminist literary criticism, and stylistics within formalist literary criticism. While these fields are very broad, the work of this thesis is quite specific. Although I draw on methodologies and scholarly work from these several fields, this thesis is located primarily in lesbian literary criticism. Through close reading, I analyse the aesthetic strategies and discursive consequences of lesbian eroticism portrayed through literary style in contemporary canonical lesbian literary fiction. (I define and contextualise my use of the terms *aesthetic strategies* or *aesthetic functions* in the Chapter 1 methodology on close reading in stylistics.)

This thesis poses the following four research questions:

1. Following the “descriptive turn” in Queer Literary Studies, what significant features of the text in terms of lesbian representation can a critic identify and analyse beyond the transgression, subversion and exceeding of heteronorms? This question considers methodological alternatives to political readings.
2. What can non-political close readings of lesbian eroticism, particularly sex scenes, contribute to lesbian literary criticism? This question assesses the significance of representations of eroticism in lesbian literary criticism.
3. How do literary devices operating simultaneously across the levels of the literary language in these novels construct a lesbian eroticism of style? This question examines the relationship between literary style and eroticism in fiction.
4. How can the aesthetic strategies at work in this lesbian eroticism of style be contextualised in the 1990s-era queer postmodern “lesbian romance/anti-romance” genre (Andermahr, “Reinventing”)? This question historicises and contextualises the primary texts within lesbian literature.

Significance of the Three Novels Analysed

Winterson’s and Waters’ lesbian novels are central to the canon of contemporary lesbian literary fiction. Although Donoghue’s lesbian novels are less well-known and have received less critical attention, they are also considered to belong to that canon. All three of the novels analysed in this thesis won the two most prestigious book awards for lesbian fiction in English, the Lambda Award for Lesbian Fiction (U.S.) and the Stonewall Book Award (U.K.). Winterson’s and Waters’ works are popular, acclaimed by book reviewers, studied in university literature courses, have been adapted for television, and have received serious and sometimes voluminous scholarly attention; *Written on the Body* and *Tipping the Velvet* are canonical and comprehensively studied (as surveyed by Andermahr, “Winterson” and Mitchell, “The Popular and Critical Reception”). I analyse them because there are important aspects of the aesthetic strategies of these novels that have been influential in lesbian representation yet are underexamined in the existing criticism, that is, the qualities of the “lesbian eroticism of style” I will analyse. *Hood* is a much lesser-known novel. I analyse it because its aesthetic strategies make unique contributions to shaping lesbian

representation through use of the “lesbian eroticism of style.” Much of what is central to the discursive effects of this novel has yet to be articulated by critics; in my analysis I also provide the first full scholarly literature review of *Hood* criticism. Scholars and critics sometimes talk about the meanings of the sex writing of these three authors together. Emma Parker does so when she situates the explicit sexual representation of *Written on the Body*, *Hood*, and *Tipping the Velvet* within 1990s lesbian fiction in her chapter “Contemporary Lesbian Fiction: Into the Twenty-First Century” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature* (2015). The three novels share a commitment to exploring the significance and complexity of lesbian sexual practice for their protagonists. Additionally, the three novels are joined by a common thematic thread: the combination of exuberant explicit lesbian sexual representation bound up with discourses of betrayal, mourning, and loss, all represented through highly eroticised poetic prose. I have selected the three novels that, to my mind, most effectively foreground explicit lesbian eroticism and literary style, the quality of their work which book reviewers characterise as Winterson’s “lyrically eloquent” “erotic” style (Flanagan; R. Harris); Donoghue’s “jaunty, juicy style” (Brownrigg); Waters’ “lush prose and rich evocation of sexual awakening” (Perry). Because of the celebrated quality of the novels, and because of their canonicity, what I name the lesbian eroticism of style in these novels has had a significant influence in shaping lesbian representation.

Theoretical Framework: Descriptive Criticism, Lesbian Literary Criticism, Feminist Stylistics

To analyse a lesbian eroticism of style in these novels, I draw upon three bodies of criticism: recent descriptive criticism, lesbian literary criticism, and feminist stylistics.

From “descriptive” criticism (Love, “Close”) in *Queer Literary Studies*, I cite the critique of the dominance of poststructuralist methods of close reading. Scholars of this movement argue that “suspicious reading” methods with their genealogies in the writings of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud led to a methodological orthodoxy in which the most important work of the literary critic involved unveiling the encoded ideologies of a literary text, with that criticism understood as a form of political labour (Best and Marcus; Felski, *Limits, Uses*; Sedgwick, “Paranoid”). In its forms in *Queer Literary Studies*, queer poststructuralist critical theory proposed the idea that the necessary political labour of the literary critic involved demonstrating the ways in which the text was *queer* or could *be queered*. This usually involved demonstrating the anti-binarism of the text, or of the critic’s reading of it, and the ways in which the text is transgressive, subversive, and excessive of normativities of gender, sexuality, race, nation, citizenship and more (Felski, *Limits*).

Descriptive criticism is a dissenting strand of criticism in Queer Literary Studies that critiques the methodological dominance of these influential suspicious interpretive methods. This strand of criticism explores what various proposed forms of alternative non-suspicious or non-antibinarist readings could look like. Scholars of this critical movement have advocated for paying renewed attention to linguistic and literary devices for the ways in which they invoke meaning across texts (Best and Marcus), as well as examining descriptive (adjectival) prose as an important component of fiction that has been tended to be overlooked in favour of narration (Love, “Close”). These critics have produced valuable foundational work analysing the relationship between eroticism and literary style, arguing that interpretative methods emphasising transgression overlook the sensuality of the text (Felski, *Uses*; Sedgwick, “Paranoid”). Contemporary syncretic reading methods can help critics understand the richness, diversity, and complexity of the aesthetic strategies at work in LGBTIQ+ literature.

My close reading methodology derives from stylistics as practised in literary criticism, with genealogies in Linguistics, structuralism, and New Criticism. Stylistics is itself a broad, interdisciplinary specialisation, and stylistics close readings can be put to many uses. My application of stylistics methods to examine lesbian representation in a broadly feminist practice of literary criticism is influenced by the work of feminist stylistics scholars Katie Wales, who edited the collection *Feminist Linguistics in Literary Criticism* in 1994, and Sara Mills, who published *Feminist Stylistics* in 1995. Their work emerged from their frustrations with the limited methodological strategies being used in stylistics and feminist literary criticism at the time. Stylistics, they argued, had developed useful and verifiable systems for analysing the effects of linguistic devices, but the sub-field had ignored, omitted, or mis-handled questions of gender. At the same time, feminist literary criticism had laudably brought questions of gender and power in knowledge systems into the academy, but feminist close readings were being conducted without the advantageous standards of logic and evidence that stylistics offered to formalist critics. As Wales argued:

One of the major problems in feminist criticism is that a great deal is said about style and language and gender, but often in broad generalizations. A linguistic-stylistic approach aims to clarify the issues, and test generalizations with concrete evidence from analyses. (ix)

Feminist stylistics has its own history and evolution, and interdisciplinary practitioners such as those publishing in Wales’ collection have often analysed a diversity of cultural texts, including pop song lyrics, Shakespearean drama, and advertising. The examination of these diverse textual objects

is a point of difference from my analysis, as mine centres on the qualities of literary language and my examples/case studies are thus all drawn from canonical literary fiction.

Some of these analyses in feminist stylistics would themselves benefit from a reappraisal of poststructuralist methods like that taking place in descriptive criticism. Mills, for example, published her text *Feminist Stylistics* in 1995, during the peak of queer postmodern poststructuralist analyses in the field of Queer Literary Studies of the kind that produced many analyses of the transgression and subversion of heteronorms in Winterson's novels. Addressing the social conservatism of her discipline of Linguistics, Mills justifies her practices of feminist stylistics by arguing for the importance of unveiling hidden ideologies of gendered power in language, which is an ideological close reading methodology—and thus that methodological imperative is part of the hegemony that I am critiquing. Feminist stylistics is a bridge between formalist, linguistically informed textual analysis in Linguistics and politically motivated feminist literary criticism, and that quality of bridging these two fields is where I locate feminist stylistics' influence on my research.

It is useful to recognise the advantages but also the limitations of the critical traditions upon which I draw. From some bodies of criticism, I cite the influential critiques and imperatives but not necessarily the methodologies (such as Heather Love's anti-close-reading in descriptive criticism), while from others I apply the flexible methodologies but not necessarily the political imperatives (such as feminist stylistics). Like many critics in Literary Studies today, I combine several different strands of criticism to make a productive syncretic methodology, and I recognise the limits of these methods and use them to supplement each other.

Analysing Lesbian Eroticism

Examining the relationship between literary style and lesbian representation in lesbian literature remains one of the central endeavours of lesbian literary criticism. Analysing and theorising the evolving forms of lesbian eroticism, understood broadly as romantic or sexual desire/practice between women, forms a significant part of the work of lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory in the academy. This thesis draws on specific understandings of lesbian eroticism in the history of lesbian literary criticism. For all the diversity of the different movements conceptualising lesbian eroticism in lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory, I find many of them unsuitable for an analysis of a lesbian eroticism of style, which I will explain. My analyses diverge

from some of the extant criticism in terms of the definitions of eroticism and the ways in which critics apply these definitions to examine literary texts.

The major movements in lesbian criticism and critical theory—lesbian-feminism, sex-positive lesbian criticism,³ psychoanalytic criticism, and queer poststructuralist criticism—have all used broad definitions of *lesbian* and *eroticism* in their analyses (what Zimmerman calls “inclusive” definitions). There are complex social, political, intellectual, and institutional reasons for this, and a fuller account of these conceptualisations is included in my Chapter 1 literature review and literary history. Almost every major articulation of lesbian eroticism in lesbian critical theory that I have encountered argues that lesbian eroticism is everything in excess of genital sexuality between women (as is argued in Faderman, *Surpassing* 17-18; Frye 305; Grosz; Halberstam, “Review”; Rich; Zimmerman, “What”). Genital sexuality certainly isn’t *everything* in eroticism; how very dull that would be, as the inclusive critics rightly state. I argue, however, that literary representations of embodied, genital sexual practice between women are important, as is argued by Atkins and Stimpson: more important to the aesthetic strategies of contemporary lesbian fiction than has perhaps been acknowledged. Detailed, sustained representations of sexual desire/practice between women—including sex scenes—are not being analysed through close readings the way that many other qualities of the texts are in lesbian literary criticism. Critics are not often producing close readings of sex scenes. When this material *is* analysed, it is almost exclusively read politically, for the ways in which it transgresses and subverts heteronorms, in a form of ideological critique common to lesbian criticism since poststructuralism (as evidenced in my literature reviews of the criticism on Winterson’s, Donoghue’s and Waters’ novels).

³ *Sex-positivity* as a term is commonly retroactively applied (as by Carol Queen) to one position in the acrimonious feminist debates dating from the early 1980s named the feminist “Sex Wars,” in which feminists calling themselves *anti-pornography*, *anti-violence*, or *radical feminists* debated opposing feminists calling themselves *sex radicals*, *pro-sex*, *anti-prudes*, or *libertarian feminists* over issues such as sex work, pornography, or sadomasochism (Ferguson 107, 109; Swedberg 602–3; Tong 122). However, *sex-positive* as a term and *sex-positivity* as the philosophy behind it are now much broader than the localised partisanship of the Sex Wars. The belief informing my methodology—that complex, ambivalent, explicit sex in literature is significant, meaningful, and a critical object worthy of celebration and elucidation—clearly derives from the sex-positive, or “libertarian,” feminist tradition. In using the term *sex-positive* throughout this thesis, I do acknowledge its ideological load, which I detail in Chapter 1 when I situate the feminist Sex Wars in the history of lesbian literary criticism, but I do not intend my use of the term to be a shot across the bow of the opposition in this feminist debate. In line with my framework throughout this thesis that prioritises aesthetic arguments over political ones, my use of the term *sex-positive literature/criticism* is intended to stand primarily as a signifier of genre and aesthetic genealogy.

I take a different view. I contend that sex scenes have aesthetic functions in these novels, far more than the somewhat restrictive frameworks of the existing criticism have acknowledged. In this thesis, I argue that a non-suspicious close reading strategy, drawing on the linguistically informed methodologies of stylistics, can productively examine aspects of lesbian eroticism and literary style which remain prominent in the influential, discourse-shaping aesthetic strategies of these novels.

Main Claims of Thesis

This thesis makes several claims, some of which expand upon existing scholarly arguments and some of which are original. These claims are summarised below from the broadest and most abstract to most specific. The claims are made and evidenced in this Introduction and the Chapter 1 literature review and literary history, structured so that by the end of Chapter 1, the gap in the extant literary criticism is identified, articulated and contextualised. The introductions to the three chapters of close readings demonstrate that the extant criticism on these three novels form instances of the larger phenomenon that I have identified. The three textual analysis chapters are case studies in how the trajectories and competing imperatives of lesbian literary criticism have caused scholars to overlook the significance of the language of sex scenes. My close readings then address this scholarly lacuna by analysing what critics overlook in these texts; and by showing what happens when exactly this is examined.

The six major claims of this thesis are summarised as follows:

Lesbian literary criticism has twin genealogies in both lesbian-feminism and literary criticism. Building on existing criticism, I argue that, because of the competing scholarly imperatives in these sub-fields, the relationship between lesbian eroticism and literary style in lesbian criticism has had a fraught history with important consequences for close readings of contemporary lesbian fiction.

The first generation of professional lesbian literary critics combined their graduate training in English Literature with their lesbian-feminist interest in lesbian literature historically—they looked for the lesbian in the literary. I argue that this has meant that most of the criticism on literary style in lesbian literary criticism is on works of canonical high Modernism, particularly by Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf.

As scholars have demonstrated, the influence of poststructuralist criticism on lesbian literary criticism has led to most of the criticism on postmodern lesbian literature analysing the anti-

binarism of structure: the transgression, subversion, and exceeding of heteronorms by strategically manipulating genre, narrative voice, irony, fragmented subjectivity, or intertextuality.

Because of the centrality of what Bonnie Zimmerman terms “inclusive” understandings of lesbian eroticism in lesbian literary criticism and critical theory, lesbian eroticism is understood as a very broad set of representations in which sex scenes are de-prioritised or not considered necessary. I argue that critics often analyse the *fact* of lesbian sex scenes being transgressive, subversive, or excessive, but that it is rarer to see a lesbian critic produce a close reading of a lesbian sex scene.

The works of literary criticism on the erotic lesbian novels of Winterson, Donoghue, and Waters form case studies evidencing these claims, as I demonstrate in my introductions to the close reading Chapters 2–4. As influential canonical postmodern erotic lesbian novels, Winterson’s *Written on the Body*, Donoghue’s *Hood*, and Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* are mostly analysed for lesbian eroticism via devices of anti-binarism and structure, but not aspects of style such as register, rhyme, syntax, and morphology, among others.

Since studies of lesbian eroticism and literary style in lesbian literature have both formed important separate critical approaches in lesbian literary criticism, an analysis that examines a lesbian eroticism of style in Winterson’s, Donoghue’s, and Waters’ influential novels provides an important contribution to the field.

This thesis begins with a literature review and literary history which introduces the issue of the relationship between lesbian eroticism and literary style in lesbian literary criticism. The three subsequent textual analysis chapters form case studies arguing that the criticism of these novels has overlooked the aesthetic significance of a lesbian eroticism of style. These chapters demonstrate how this form of reading can generate new readings by drawing attention to important qualities of the texts that have been overlooked thus far.

Thesis Structure

This structure of this thesis is modelled on influential works of descriptive criticism. The notable works of this strand of criticism during its most prominent years (2005–2015) are often structured to begin with a critique of the hegemony of “suspicious reading” methods in Literary Studies, followed by a literature review that is also an original literary history tracing the consequences of poststructuralist methods for the author’s particular areas of literary representation. These critics

then propose alternative forms of close reading drawing on interdisciplinary methodologies, then provide applications of this theorising via original close readings that demonstrate the breadth of what critics can find by doing these kinds of analyses. This thesis is modelled on that structure, and particularly on Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature* (2008).

There are four chapters in this thesis. Chapter 1 provides a literature review and original literary history, which introduces the issue of the relationship between lesbian eroticism and literary style in lesbian literary fiction. This discussion is foundational in establishing the four major claims of this thesis. The chapter does so by starting with the earliest historical imperatives of the sub-field that are relevant to my argument, moving from broadest and earliest material to the most recent and most specific. It begins with a brief account of the major schools of thought on lesbian eroticism in lesbian literary criticism and critical theory: lesbian-feminist, sex-positive, and lesbian "alterity" criticism. I then highlight the contentious status of the importance of genital sexual practice in lesbian eroticism as argued in the sub-field. I provide a brief history of the fraught relationship between literary style and lesbian eroticism in lesbian literary criticism, and finish by characterising the genre and literary movement that the three primary texts of this thesis have been situated within: 1990s-era queer postmodern lesbian fiction and the lesbian romance/anti-romance genre.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 begin with introductions which contextualise each novel within the genre and demonstrate how the extant criticism of each novel forms instances of the larger methodological hegemonies in lesbian literary criticism detailed in Chapter 1. The textual analysis chapters provide case studies arguing that the criticism of these novels has overlooked the aesthetic significance of a lesbian eroticism of style, demonstrating how this form of reading can improve some of the existing readings and how it can generate new readings of important qualities of the texts that have been overlooked. The close reading chapters analyse the construction of a lesbian eroticism of style through literary devices such as connotation, figurative language (metonymy, metaphor and synecdoche), morphology, paragraphing, register, sound-patterning, syntax and tense.

Chapter 2 analyses a lesbian eroticism of style in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, arguing that this aspect of the work has been overlooked in favour of anti-binarist queer-theory-informed readings and generalised close reading for "imagery." The chapter demonstrates how extant readings may be supplemented and even contradicted by more rigorous stylistics-informed readings more fully attending to the aesthetic effects of style.

Chapter 3 analyses a lesbian eroticism of style in Emma Donoghue's *Hood*, including providing the first full scholarly literature review of *Hood* criticism. In this chapter, I argue that a comparative approach informed by stylistics methodologies can allow critics to identify and compare the differences *within* and *between* sex scenes to analyse how these scenes contribute to the characterisation, narrative, themes, forms and discursive qualities that comprise the totality of the novel as an aesthetic object.

Chapter 4 argues that the lesbian eroticism of style present in the three major sex scenes in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* is integral to the aesthetic functions of the novel at every level of the text, and that a close reading methodology that takes sex scenes seriously can show us how these aesthetic features operate.

The Conclusion of this thesis reiterates the significance of the arguments that have been evidenced throughout and proposes potential future applications of the critical approach I express as attending to a lesbian eroticism of style.

Chapter 1: Literature Review and Literary History

The Introduction to this thesis briefly delineated the historical, socio-political and theoretical contexts of my research and provided the research questions and methodology. This chapter comprises a literature review and literary history. I historicise the trajectories of lesbian literary criticism, arguing that, by the late 1990s, the three novels discussed in this thesis were analysed almost exclusively through a gender politics lens: for the transgression and subversion of heteronorms. Consequently, I suggest that critics overlooked the aesthetic functions of the lesbian eroticism of literary style in each text. This literature review argues for and provides evidence of the major claims of this thesis in preparation for the three subsequent textual analysis chapters which form case studies instantiating this broader historical intellectual phenomenon I am tracing.

The arguments presented in Chapter 1 are built on the foundational works of Anglophone lesbian literary criticism. Part of the contribution of this thesis to the sub-field lies in my interpretation of these texts and their imperatives. I track a crucial but overlooked professional and disciplinary anxiety that has had important methodological consequences. This chapter identifies a gap in the scholarly literature that this historical trajectory has produced, and the three close reading chapters which follow argue for attending to the lesbian eroticism of style in the novels by Winterson, Donoghue, and Waters in order to supplement this absence and to provide a close reading methodology that can be applied more generally in lesbian literary criticism into the future.

This chapter begins at the broadest conceptual level of lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory, providing a brief outline of the major schools of thought on lesbian eroticism in lesbian literary criticism and critical theory: lesbian-feminist, sex-positive, and lesbian “alterity” criticism. I then analyse the contentious status of genital sexual practice in lesbian eroticism. I provide a brief history of the fraught relationship between literary style and lesbian eroticism in lesbian literary criticism, and finish by detailing the genre—the lesbian romance/anti-romance genre—and literary movement—1990s-era queer postmodern lesbian fiction—within which the three primary texts of this thesis have generally been located.

Lesbian Eroticism in Lesbian Literary Criticism and Critical Theory

Sex in lesbian fiction matters to readers, critics, and theorists. As Dawn Atkins notes in her introduction to a special issue of *Journal of Lesbian Studies* on lesbian sexual practice in 1999, “Sexual practices are often at the core of lesbian sexual identities, communities and politics” (2).

Analyses of diverse representations of sexual desire, sexual practice, and eroticism have been prominent for several decades in the fields of Women's Studies and Gender Studies, LGBTIQ+ Studies, feminist criticism, and queer theory. The role of these important and evolving analyses with sex as their critical object is also being reappraised in literary criticism and critical theory after the rise and fall of poststructuralism and the long ascent of queer theory in Sexuality Studies. This thesis analyses works of popular contemporary erotic lesbian literary fiction in order to identify the ways in which sex matters in these works and to ask how discourses of lesbian literary eroticism are being re-written in contemporary lesbian fiction.

Both *lesbian* and *eroticism* have long been contested terms in lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory; however, these contestations have also powered the evolution of the sub-field. The terms have generally been conceptualised as having fairly broad and inclusive definitions, as lesbian critics⁴ have recognised the importance of acknowledging the historically and culturally contingent status of sexual identities, desires, and practices. Put very simply, the interdisciplinary field of Lesbian Studies examines desire between women, drawing on disciplines across the Humanities and Social Sciences. The sub-field of lesbian literary criticism draws on feminist literary criticism and LGBTIQ+ Studies and is the academic discipline dedicated to identifying, collating, anthologising, canonising, analysing, and theorising works of literature with significant lesbian content, lesbian themes, or historical or cultural importance for lesbian readers or lesbian scholars. Lesbian critical theory analyses and theorises lesbian texts, asking questions about the philosophical, theoretical, and political significance of lesbian representation, often producing close readings of lesbian literature. Based on my readings of the influential texts of lesbian literary criticism, my definition of *lesbian literature* is:

⁴ *Lesbian critic* is not used in this thesis as a statement about a scholar's sexuality; rather, it denotes their scholarly disciplinary affiliation. Although it was common in the lesbian-feminism movement of the 1960s and 1970s for activists to declare their sexuality as lesbian, this is not considered necessary in lesbian literary criticism, which is the academic specialisation studying lesbian representation in literature. However, it is still often the case that scholars of lesbian literary criticism do identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer women, due to the common practice in academia since the social justice movements of the 1960s of minoritised subjects becoming the subjects and objects of knowledge made about them. In line with the conventional usage of these terms in much lesbian criticism, I use the hyphenated term *lesbian-feminist* to refer to proponents of the lesbian-feminist political theory of lesbianism (discussed later in this thesis), and the unhyphenated term *lesbian feminist* to indicate critics and activists of lesbian criticism or critical theory who are also feminists.

Literary texts with significant representations or discourses of romantic desire/practice, sexual desire/practice, or love between women; significant lesbian characters or themes; or texts with significant relevance to lesbian authors, readers, critics, or audiences.

I define *lesbian eroticism* in lesbian literature as significant representations or discourses of romantic desire/practice, or sexual desire/practice between women in literature. This definition is designed to include desire between women that does not adhere to the sex/gender binaries or modern taxonomies of sexuality, and includes lesbian, bisexual, asexual, transgender, or queer women. The definition is based on my readings of the works of the “anthologising tradition” (my term) in academic lesbian literary criticism: the central, influential, canon-forming works whose debates about the existence and the qualities of lesbian literature contemporarily and historically have produced the canon of lesbian literature through historical and archival work.⁵ My term *academic lesbian literary criticism* names the work of the critics with postgraduate training in English Literature who compiled the canon of lesbian literature in English from Jeanette Foster (1958) on, and who applied theoretical and historical frameworks to their compiled anthologies. By contrast, my term *amateur lesbian literary criticism* names people involved in discussions of the meaning and significance of lesbian literature without professional or academic experience in literary criticism. My primary use of these terms is to make clear the distinction between amateur and academic forms of lesbian literary criticism in the mid-to-late-twentieth century, because the changing priorities of these forms is central to my historical argument about the place of style in the sub-field.

The contentiousness of claiming pre-mid-twentieth-century works as belonging to lesbian literature has been part of the definitional debate present in lesbian literary criticism for many decades. Those critics who have claimed pre-Gay-Liberation texts written before the 1960s for the canon of lesbian

⁵ Major works of the anthologising tradition include: Jeanette Foster, *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1958); Barbara Grier et al, *The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography* (1967); Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981); Catharine Stimpson, *Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English* (1981); Bonnie Zimmerman, *What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism* (1981); Marilyn Farwell, *Toward a Definition of the Lesbian Literary Imagination* (1988); Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction, 1969–1989* (1990); Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993); Emma Donoghue, *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture, 1668–1801* (1993); Lillian Faderman, *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (1994); Terry Castle, *The Literature of Lesbianism* (2003); Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women 1778–1928*; and Emma Donoghue, *Inseparable: Desire Between Women in Literature* (2010).

literature have done so by including love and desire between women in previous eras in their definition of *lesbian*. Lesbian literary scholars have recognised the historically specific taxonomic privileging of identity in sexual knowledges in modernity (as articulated by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*), as well as the powerful regulatory mechanisms policing women's sexuality and femininity. As a result, influential works of lesbian literary criticism have endorsed an openness to examining representations of a wide spectrum of woman-centred emotions, including love, friendship, and affection, with or without sexual desire, under the rubric of *lesbian literature*. Lesbian literary critics have often used alternative terminology to name desire and love between women outside of the overdetermined identity *lesbian* in late-twentieth-century Anglophone and European gender and sexuality studies. Some critics have used terms perceived as more "careful" than *lesbian* such as *lesbian-like* or *proto-lesbian*; some have used terms "broader" than *lesbian* such as *female homoeroticism*, *same-sex eroticism*, or *queer*; and some have used historically specific terms such as *romantic friendship*, *Sapphist*, *lesbian-feminist*, or *queer* (Donoghue, *Inseparable* 207n5). These debates about definitions are important because the positions claimed are an index of a scholar's ideological and theoretical framework, their choice of objects, and their disciplinary imperatives. The debates about lesbian definition are important to my argument because an implicit criterion of the question *What is the definition of lesbian in lesbian literature?* is *How much does genital sexual practice matter?* The consensus response in much of lesbian criticism is *Not much*, which has consequences that I will discuss.

The history of lesbian eroticism in lesbian literature is inextricable from the history of lesbian identity and the history of feminism, so the influential surveys of lesbian literature offer compelling histories of these phenomena. It is likely that there have always been women who have loved and desired other women, and representations of this desire are present throughout Western literature and mythology. However, the category *lesbian*, like all categories, exists in a sign-system founded on difference, and it took until the mid-twentieth century for *lesbian literature* to be recognised as a set of texts sharing a difference considered culturally important, and to be seen as an object of study worthy of research funding, publication and re-printing, archiving, and academic inquiry. The history of lesbian identity, and lesbian literature, is characterised by complex, ambiguous discursive changes that would damage, thwart and punish particular kinds of women's same-gender desire, while nevertheless facilitating discursive practices that would become part of the trajectory towards public acceptance, affirmation, and celebration of lesbian identity and history in the late-twentieth century. The history of lesbian literature includes discursive and major literary traditions collated by the lesbian literary critics of the "anthologising tradition." These critics trace the history of lesbian literature through major discursive movements including: the ancient Greek poet Sappho of Lesbos

(seventh century BCE); romantic friendship (late-eighteenth century); sexology (mid-nineteenth century); Freudian psychoanalysis (early-twentieth century); literary Modernism (early-twentieth century); and lesbian pulp fiction (1930s to 1970s).

Lesbian eroticism has been analysed and theorised many times and in different ways in lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory, with critics asking what eroticism is between women, what its qualities are, and how it is represented—what it does in literature, thought, and theory. Critics have asked how lesbian eroticism can be contextualised historically and culturally, and what the aesthetic, historical, cultural, and political significance of lesbian eroticism is for lesbian representation, lesbian intellectual thought, and lesbian activism. There are several major strands of thought about lesbian eroticism as the critical object of lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory, and each has put different emphases on different qualities of lesbian eroticism including sexual identity, romantic desire, and sexual practice. For the purposes of this thesis, I delineate these major strands of thought based on the theory or movement with which they are most closely aligned. Broadly, these traditions include the lesbian-feminist political theory of lesbianism; the literary-historical “anthologising tradition” in lesbian literary criticism; sex-positive lesbian criticism; and what I name lesbian “alterity” criticism, including works of psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, postmodern and queer critical theory. There is much overlap between these traditions and they often occur concurrently, and critics have used these traditions to inform sophisticated and engaging analyses of lesbian eroticism in a diversity of texts and bodies of criticism.

While I do not wish to discount any of these traditions of lesbian criticism, I do argue for the utility of different *emphases* than those that have been prominent recently. It is my reappraisal of the relative utility of these different theoretical traditions that forms the major significant argument of this thesis. I argue that lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory have been over-reliant on some of these forms of thought and methodologies, and as a result have tended to overlook what I argue are significant aspects of lesbian eroticism in contemporary lesbian literature—the qualities I name a “lesbian eroticism of style”—present in both overlooked emerging-canonical texts and overlooked *aspects* of canonical texts. I argue that the dominance of poststructuralist and postmodernist methodologies in lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory has caused critics to overlook important forms and aspects of lesbian eroticism that can be productively analysed using methodologies from sex-positive lesbian criticism. In what follows, I will briefly historicise and contextualise these major traditions and their competing claims about lesbian eroticism in order to contextualise the arguments of this thesis.

Lesbian-Feminist, Sex-Positive, and Lesbian “Alterity” Criticism

Lesbian eroticism as the object of lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory has its origins in the sexual revolution and Women’s Liberation movements of the 1960s in the United States, Western Europe, the United Kingdom and the wider Anglophone world. Critics and historians Ann Snitow, Ann Barr, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson in their influential edited collection of sex-positive lesbian criticism *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (1983) trace the history of attitudes to sex in the women’s movements from the nineteenth century on, arguing that this history was complex and involved both progressivism and conservatism (21–24). The editors trace the history of sex in feminism from early socialist writers on sexuality in the late-eighteenth century to early-nineteenth-century “radical artisans” who practised “systematic contraception” (14) and to late-nineteenth-century advocates of agnosticism, contraception, divorce reform and communitarianism. Early-twentieth-century changes in sexual politics and sexual knowledge led young U.S. leftists influenced by psychoanalysis and sexology to become more receptive to discourses on sexual freedom, spurring the socialist birth control movement of the 1910s and 1920s in the U.S. and U.K. The subsequent conservative backlash against the gains of socialism and feminism led to the “nadir of sexual conservatism in the 1950s” (13–19), which became the status quo against which the sexual revolution, student activism, and the civil rights movements of the 1960s railed.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1953, paperback re-issued 1961) was one of the most prominent theoretical texts of the Women’s Liberation movement in the early 1960s. Snitow et al. argue that Beauvoir “insisted that sexual autonomy, although difficult and painful for women to achieve, was still a fundamental project for them: she saw the erotic as an intervention of human liberty, a perception that made it possible for her, well ahead of her time, to view lesbianism as a choice for freedom” (26). Snitow et al. contrast Beauvoir’s stance with that of Betty Friedan, whose *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) scorned homosexuality and argued that women with excessive eroticism and desire should swap that existence for “meaningful work” (26). Early feminist critical theory texts that moved the “presumption” of heterosexuality towards wider discussions of women’s sexual pleasure, some of which included lesbianism, were Anne Koedt’s “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” (1969), a feminist reading of Masters and Johnson’s findings in sexology, and Mary Jane Sherfey’s *The Nature and Evolution of Female Sexual Response* (1973), which expanded the possibilities of “female-controlled sexuality” and sexual pleasure that could bring “an affirmation of identity and power.” These works also included Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, which “saw sexual autonomy as a prerequisite for sexual freedom itself,” and Betty Dodson’s 1974 work

on masturbation (Snitow et al. 29). These early feminist writers argued for the importance of sexual freedom in relation to sexual identities and identification and they would form the early works in what would come to be named the sex-positive feminist movement, of which the sex-positive lesbian literature analysed in this thesis is a part.

Lesbian Eroticism in Lesbian-Feminism

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, lesbian-feminist ideology came to prominence. Lesbian activists, students and critics were drawn from the lesbian community, including the Daughters of Bilitis, founded in 1955 in San Francisco, the first lesbian rights organisation in the U.S. Lesbian-feminists came from Gay Liberation before and after the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and the rise of annual Pride Marches to commemorate the riots and gather LGBT activists, and from “all sectors” of the Women’s Liberation movement, particularly lesbians in the National Organisation for Women (Snitow et al. 29–30). *Lesbian-feminism* names a specific historical phenomenon: the “synthesis of feminist ideas with the lesbian sexual possibility that described lesbianism as a feminist political choice” (45). Lesbians who were also feminists held a diversity of ideas and affiliations, and although movements like lesbian-feminism were particularly prominent, there was always debate among lesbian feminists about which parts of the movements were most useful, which political alliances could best support lesbian lives, and which forms of lesbian thinking best seemed to support lesbian identities and practices. Theorisations of lesbian identity and sexual practice were thus at times particularly fraught.

Historians of sex-positive lesbian criticism note that although lesbian-feminism initially included the Women’s Liberation imperative of “women’s right to be sexual,” some subsequent forms of feminist and lesbian-feminist thought including cultural feminism and separatist feminism would come to promote a “desexualized image of lesbianism” (Snitow et al. 29). When some feminists started claiming that lesbianism was the ideal political choice for feminists, lesbians in the women’s movement sometimes received it as straight women opting-in to something perceived as risky and thrilling without the dangers in which lesbians permanently lived, or as straight women cynically trying to garner political support, as when Ti-Grace Atkinson announced that “Feminism is the theory, but lesbianism is the practice” to the Daughters of Bilitis, to which she did not belong (Snitow et al. 30). Gayle Rubin argued in 1981 that the promotion of that claim “has led to the belief that lesbianism is only justified politically insofar as it is feminist. . . It has prevented the lesbian movement from asserting that our lust for women is justified whether or not it derives from feminist political ideology. It has generated a lesbian politic that seems ashamed of lesbian desire”

(“Leather” 214). Rita Mae Brown, author of one of the earliest affirmative works of lesbian fiction, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), accused the National Organization of Women of homophobia against lesbian members in 1969, and most of its overtly lesbian members were purged from the organisation in 1969–1971. These members connected with radical feminist consciousness-raising groups (Snitow et al. 32) and produced “The Woman-Identified Woman,” the first manifesto of lesbian-feminism. The text articulated lesbianism as “the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion,” and “sought to identify lesbians with all women by redefining lesbianism as the quintessential feminism” (Snitow et al. 32), with *lesbian* becoming “synecdochal of the category feminist within the popular imagination” (Roof 50).

The lesbian-feminist political theory of lesbianism argued that sufficiently women-centred and women-directed affinities held by women would qualify as lesbian. This was an understanding of *lesbian* conceived as a political identification in some of the influential works of lesbian-feminist criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, perhaps most notably in “The Woman-Identified Woman” manifesto and in Adrienne Rich’s articulation of the *lesbian continuum* in her influential essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980). Rich chose the term *lesbian existence* to mean “the historical presence of lesbians” and the self-creation of the identity term, with the broader concept of the lesbian continuum including the continuity in women’s lives of women-centred experiences and “not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (Rich 648). Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” is one of the earliest works laying the groundwork for the critique of heteronormativity that would become so important to queer theory. The pioneering Black lesbian-feminist critic and author Audre Lorde’s manifesto “Uses of the Erotic” (1978) is another influential critical text of this body of criticism. It is a powerful and influential work of Black lesbian-feminist criticism which predates and anticipates the foundational works of Sexuality Studies, which would come to argue that sexuality is not a minor somewhat-shameful aspect of life exiled to the privacy of the bedroom, but is a critical object intimately involved in systematic inequalities of race, nationality, citizenship, capital and power (as would be argued by Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, Gayle Rubin and others). Lorde emphasises a broadening of the concept of *eroticism* to include bodily sensuality such as experiences of music and dancing, conceptualising *eroticism* as being “the sharing of joy,” “physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual,” with “erotically satisfying experiences” including “dancing, building a book-case, writing a poem, examining an idea” (56–57). She writes, “And yes, there is a hierarchy. There is a difference between painting a back fence and writing a poem, but only one of quantity. And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a

woman I love” (58). Her formulation explicitly cites the tradition of the “Woman-Identified Woman” and expands women’s *eroticism* to become so broad as to become, like the *lesbian continuum*, synonymic with Lorde’s Black lesbian feminism, with no necessary place or attention to sexual practice between women. This lesbian-feminist political discourse brought significant advantages to lesbian activists and critics, including successfully challenging homophobia in the women’s movement and providing a surer place in feminism for sexual autonomy from men (Snitow et al. 33–34). The discourse, while advantageous in some ways, nevertheless desexualised lesbianism in ways that were explicitly refuted by subsequent sex-positive lesbian criticism and parts of the “anthologising tradition” in lesbian literary criticism.

In the late 1970s, the backlash against the abortion rights campaigns of the feminist movement and their success in the U.S. court case *Roe v. Wade* (1973) saw the emergence of the Right-to-Life movement (Snitow et al. 35–36) as well as the wider conservative movement of the New Right and a conservative backlash against progressive discourses of sex, which pressured liberal feminists like (the admittedly rather homophobic) Betty Friedan into disavowing lesbianism and sexually-explicit feminism (Snitow et al. 35–36). Those advocating “cultural feminism” campaigned to combat forms of misogynist violence through the creation of rape crisis centres and women’s domestic violence shelters, but the anti-pornography movement that was allied with these campaigns criticised sexual representation via a binarist understanding of male eroticism as “violent and lustful” and female eroticism as “tender and gentle” (Snitow et al. 38). These discourses became the so-called feminist “Sex Wars” of the 1980s and into the 1990s: a long series of debates over issues such as sadomasochism, sex work, representations of explicit sex, and pornography. “Radical” feminists argued that these practices collude in women’s oppression and exploitation (Ferguson 107; Swedberg 602). “Libertarian” feminists argued that the liberatory or oppressive potential of these practices cannot be determined in advance, and that in the absence of specific conditions of exploitation, such as poverty or coercion, these practices can be empowering and pleasurable for women as well as expressions of their agency (Ferguson 109; Swedberg 603; Tong 122).⁶ The

⁶ At the time of the Sex Wars debates the terms for the opposing positions included *anti-pornography*, *anti-violence*, and *radical feminists* on one side, and *sex radicals*, *pro-sex*, *anti-prudes*, or *libertarian feminists* on the other. It is difficult to name positions in these debates without the names themselves being inherently ideological, much like other partisan feminist political positions like *pro-life* and *pro-choice*: How can one be anti-life? Or anti-choice? How can one be pro-violence or anti-sex? The least ideologically loaded terms I have encountered for positions in the Sex Wars are *radical* and *libertarian*, and those are the terms used by some of the more reflective and less explicitly partisan writing of the time, such as *Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists* by Ann Ferguson et al. published in *Signs* in 1984. However, as I stated in the introduction, *sex-positive* as a term and *sex-positivity* as a philosophy have

debates of the “Sex Wars” informed the emerging literary movement of sex-positive lesbian literature in the 1980s and 1990s, in which the primary texts of this thesis are commonly situated.

Lesbian Eroticism in Sex-Positive Lesbian Literature and Criticism

Sex-positive lesbian literature and criticism comprises a set of texts beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s by lesbian feminist critics who refuted the conservatism of the New Right and the perceived stultifying reactionary version of women’s eroticism proposed by critics of “cultural feminism” and “radical” feminism including the anti-pornography movement. Instead, proponents emphasised “sexual variety and pleasure” (Snitow et al. 38), including sexually explicit lesbian material and eroticised gender identities and sexual practices include butch/femme; kink and bondage, domination, and sadomasochism (BDSM).⁷ Central to sex-positive lesbian criticism are the works presented at, and in dialogue with, the controversial 1982 Barnard conference *Pleasure and Danger*. This event’s influence on lesbian eroticism in lesbian literary criticism and critical theory continue to this day, evidenced by the 2016 special issue of the prominent feminist journal *Signs*, which reflected on the legacy of the conference. Conference organiser and sociologist Carol Vance’s keynote argued that female sexuality contains a tension between *pleasure* and *danger*, with historical and anthropological examples, and Vance’s position was designed to shift feminism to facilitate explicit dialogues about women’s sexual pleasure (Echols 11). Cultures of lesbian sexual experimentation arose post-Barnard, particularly in lesbian sex/erotic magazines *Bad Attitude* and in *On Our Backs*, whose title parodies the radical feminist newspaper *off our backs* (Echols 11). Lesbian eroticism for the readers of works like *On Our Backs* grew to include a diversity of “roles and desires” visible in a 1991 personal advertisement, equal parts exasperation and game, claiming,

broader cultural meanings now than strictly denoting a position in the feminist Sex Wars. My use of the term *sex-positive literature/criticism* is intended, as a literary critic, to stand primarily as a signifier of genre and genealogy; an aesthetic category.

⁷ Major texts of sex-positive lesbian criticism include Ann Barr Snitow et al., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (1983); Carole S. Vance, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (1984); Feminist Review Collective, *Sexuality: A Reader* (1987); Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (1987); Susie Bright, *Susie Sexpert’s Lesbian Sex World* (1990) and *SexWise* (1995); Laura Kipnis, *Ecstasy Unlimited* (1993) and *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (1999); Pat Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (1994) among many other works; Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (1995); and Amber L. Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (2000).

“I don’t understand butch/femme but will do anything [infamous bisexual sex educator] Susie Bright says” (Lamos 26).

As Alice Echols notes in her 2016 reflections on the cultural consequences of the Barnard conference: “The new prominence of sexuality in lesbian studies shifted attention from romantic friendships to unambiguously sexual same-sex liaisons and in the process provided a critical bridge to the development of queer studies” (16). The women’s movement had long considered gay men and lesbians to be very different, especially in terms of sexual practice, but the Barnard conference shifted the terms and facilitated the opening of a conversation about the pleasures *of* danger when it is not always external, such as “the internalized shame of queer desire” (16), a critical object which would become central to both the psychoanalytic and anti-social strands of queer theory from the 1990s onward. Sex-positive lesbian feminist and anthropologist Gayle Rubin’s Barnard paper “Thinking Sex” is considered one of the founding texts of queer theory, as it argues for the reassessment, de-pathologising and removal of moral judgement from a host of sexual practices outside the “charmed circle” of sexual practices that are coercively privileged. These “outer limits” sexual practices are considered bad, abnormal, and unnatural, including sex that is commercial, in groups, casual, cross-generational, pornographic, involving manufactured objects, sadomasochistic, unmarried, promiscuous, or non-procreative (Rubin, “Thinking” 153). Gays and lesbians united after the conference in ways including the infamous protests by ACT-UP and Queer Nation that sparked the wider “queer” intervention and cultural movement in the decades since, and feminist “sex radicals” were some of the first—and the few—to refuse to pathologise gay male sexual practices during the AIDS epidemic (Echols 17). Reflecting on the cultural consequences of Barnard, Echols recalls those “heady times for feminist sex radicals,” when Gender Studies classes came to include Vance and Rubin as well as anti-pornography critics Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. “Feminist-inspired notions of sexual transgression began to penetrate the mainstream,” as in Madonna’s 1992 video “Erotica,” with its genderqueer cast drawn from the pages of works like *On Our Backs* (Echols 18). But the consequences of Barnard were a complicated legacy, which would include a useful growing scepticism of state regulation of sexuality (Echols 18), but also anti-pornography feminists colluding with right-wing conservatives to oppose “sexual expressiveness” as *danger* had come to mean. Even in 2017, the notion of *danger* is still very prominent in feminist activism, academia, and culture, but sexual expressiveness and fulfilment are too, visible in such cultural practices as Slut Walks and hook-up culture (Echols 19).

The late 1980s and early-to-mid-1990s was the “heyday” for the field of Lesbian Studies (Doan, *Lesbian Studies* 22–23), and the period 1988–1996 is arguably the peak of lesbian literary criticism

and critical theory publications, with at least 24 major publications in that era.⁸ Reflecting on the legacy of her influential edited collection *The Lesbian Postmodern* (1994), the lesbian literary critic Laura Doan wrote in 2007 that although the “mad clamor by publishers” for work on lesbian theory has slowed, scholarship on lesbianism continues to be produced in the larger field of Gay and Lesbian Studies or Sexuality Studies or in individual academic disciplines including Gender Studies, Sociology, History, Literary Studies, Visual Arts, and Psychology. Doan wryly illustrated a publishers’ “politics of location” demonstrated in her finding an edited volume of hers on the history of sexuality shrink-wrapped in the “Intimacy” section of a bookstore (“Lesbian Studies” 22–23). Doan notes that the common “collision model” of the entwined histories of Lesbian Studies, Women’s Studies, and queer theory does not do justice to the useful work that scholars, theorists and teachers produced by drawing on these contiguous and porous academic specialisations (“Lesbian Studies” 21). As Doan notes, Lesbian Studies grappled with the tensions between “politics” understood as necessary material changes in lives and “theory” as undermining self-understandings based in identity. Some lesbian-feminists criticised the way in which “humanist assumptions” in the precarious, quasi-respectable, academic field of Lesbian Studies were attacked by the anti-foundationalist, anti-humanist, antinormative, and anti-identitarian emerging critiques of queer theory (“Lesbian Studies” 24). But Lesbian Studies and queer theory have always shared sophisticated work and interconnections. There has always been a pro-men, pro-gay-men,

⁸ Lesbian literary criticism and critical theory texts published at the height of Lesbian Studies close to the era 1988–1996 include (in chronological order): Margaret Cruikshank, *Lesbian Studies: Present and Future* (1982); Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow, *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions* (1990); Judith Roof, *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (1990); Elaine Hobby and Chris White, *What Lesbians Do in Books* (1991); Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (1991); Joseph Bristow, *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing* (1992); Sally Munt, *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings* (1992); Elizabeth Meese, *(Sem)erotics: Theorizing Lesbian : Writing* (1992); Henry Abelow, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1993); Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Lesbian Writing: Dreams, Desire, Difference* (1993); Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope, *Sexual Practice/Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism* (1993); Laura Doan, *The Lesbian Postmodern* (1994); Tamsin Wilton, *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda* (1995); George E. Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman, *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature* (1995); Karla Jay, *Lesbian Erotics* (1995); Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn, *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism* (1995); Suzanne Raitt, *Volcanoes and Pearl Divers: Essays in Lesbian Feminist Studies* (1995); Marilyn R. Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (1996); Bonnie Zimmerman and Toni McNaron, *The New Lesbian Studies: Into the Twenty-First Century* (1996); Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (1996); Gabriele Griffin and Sonya Andermahr, *Straight Studies Modified: Lesbian Interventions in the Academy* (1997); Dorothy Allison et al., “On Contemporary Lesbian Literature in the United States: A Symposium” (1997); Kathleen Martindale, *Un/Popular Culture: Lesbian Writing After the Sex Wars* (1997); and Elaine Hutton, *Beyond Sex and Romance?: The Politics of Contemporary Lesbian Fiction* (1998).

affirmative, anti-essentialist, sex-positive strand of lesbian-feminism (Wiegman 103, 129) whose proponents would later align with, and help found, queer theory, including scholars like Gayle Rubin and Judith [Jack] Halberstam.⁹ As the lesbian critic Linda Garber has argued, it was never a choice of either/or Lesbian Studies or queer theory; it is not that one field is “smarter or more sophisticated than the other, but that either taken alone leaves great patches of the theoretical canvas bare” (Garber qtd in Doan, “Lesbian Studies” 25). While acknowledging the insufficiency of binary thinking in the classic tensions structuring Lesbian Studies such as politics/theory and identity/antinormativity, it is nevertheless important to recognise that the influential lesbian “alterity” body of criticism, which I define below, was formed in large part by poststructuralist and postmodernist theories of lesbian eroticism from 1990s-era Lesbian Studies and queer theory. These theories have informed the dominant theoretical framework and conceptualisation of lesbian eroticism in lesbian literature from the 1990s onwards. The limits of these modes of thinking have significant consequences for scholars producing close readings of lesbian literary texts in that area, as I will argue, and has consequences for analysis of the literary texts examined in this thesis.

Lesbian Eroticism in Lesbian “Alterity” Criticism

Alongside the theorisations of lesbian eroticism in lesbian-feminist and sex-positive lesbian criticism, the other major body of lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory on lesbian eroticism is what I term lesbian “alterity” criticism, including works of psychoanalytic, postmodernist, poststructuralist, and queer lesbian criticism. These different strands of this very large body of work have divergent genealogies and applications, but this criticism shares an understanding of lesbian subjectivity or lesbian eroticism as being primarily and significantly about the transgression, subversion and exceeding of heteronorms and of binary structures of sex, gender, and sexuality.

In *Lesbian Utopics* (1994), the prominent New Zealand/Aotearoa/Australian queer theorist and lesbian critical theorist Annamarie Jagose traces the history of lesbian “alterity” criticism in debates

⁹ At the time of the publication of *The Lesbian Postmodern* in 1994, Jack Halberstam was publishing under the name Judith Halberstam. He now identifies as a transgender man and publishes under the name Jack Halberstam, so I will refer to him by his chosen name subsequently in this thesis, with both names included in the Works Cited list, because I am required by academic convention to list the exact name under which an author published a text. But I also have a professional and moral obligation as a scholar of Gender Studies to refer to transgender people by their preferred name and pronoun, and will do so for Jack Halberstam wherever I can. Pat [Patrick] Califia also now identifies as a trans man but I have only cited his publications where he published as Pat Califia in the 1990s; no amendments are necessary.

spanning the 1980s. Jagose analyses the various intellectuals who have posited the lesbian as “elsewhere,” meaning as disruptive of “culturally dominant understandings of gender and sexuality” (1). Jagose names as “utopic” this liberatory conceptualisation of theorisations of lesbian subjectivity, conferring on it the qualities of excess, alterity, and exteriority (2). Articulations of this position include those by feminist theorists Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and particularly Monique Wittig, who made the claim that was influential in the debate throughout the 1980s, that “Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (man and woman), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically” (“One Is Not Born a Woman” 23 qtd in Jagose 6). Jagose’s text is explicitly deconstructive and poststructuralist, demonstrating that works of lesbian “alterity” criticism adhere to the logics of what Foucault critiqued as the “repressive hypothesis,” with the *lesbian* in this criticism “mistakenly dramatized as only prohibited and not simultaneously produced; as only forbidden and not, by the operation of that same mechanism, enabled” (Jagose 3) by discursive and cultural structures.

Jagose’s text works as a critique and deconstruction of some of the influential utopic articulations of lesbian alterity, but Jagose’s critique itself nevertheless functions as an example of a counter-discourse that became, by the end of the 1990s, by far the most dominant and hegemonic mode of poststructuralist thought, particularly in queer theory. Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s influential works argued that there is no space outside discourse from which to critique mechanisms of power, that subjectivity is always-already a performance of norms within normativity under conditions of compulsion and constraint (the Butlerian theory of gender performativity), and that “resistance, like power, is multiple, unstable” (Jagose 4). Subsequent poststructuralist texts in this tradition argue, often implicitly, that the transgression and subversion of normativity is the greatest possibility for combatting logocentric symbolic violences like gender normativity. By extension, demonstrating the deconstruction of the unravelling logics of logocentric and binarist thought is implicitly endorsed as the most sophisticated and valuable form of criticism. This imperative facilitated the forms of interpretation local to Gender and Sexuality Studies and queer theory that became powerfully dominant by the early-1990s and which continue in present-day criticism. “Suspicious reading” in Literary Studies is defined by Rita Felski as “a diverse range of practices that are often grouped under the rubric of critique: symptomatic reading, ideology critique, Foucauldian historicism, various techniques of scanning texts for signs of transgression or resistance. These practices combine, in differing ways, an attitude of vigilance, detachment, wariness (*suspicion*) with identifiable conventions of commentary (*hermeneutics*)” (*Limits* 2–3; emphasis in original).

The psychoanalytic strand of lesbian “alterity” criticism offers a different conceptualisation of lesbian eroticism, but it has the effect of eliding representations of genital sexuality of the kind prominent in sex-positive lesbian literature and which publications like *On Our Backs* had to carve out a discursive space to be able to represent. The psychoanalytic understanding of *eroticism* leads to a broad understanding of desire in which embodied desire or genital sexual practice has no particular importance. In an attempt to refute phallogentric discourses insisting that only penile, penetrative genital sexuality counts as sexual practice, psychoanalytic lesbian theories tend to metaphorise sexual practice as the site of power struggles *between* subjects and *within* the subject. Psychoanalytic criticism in queer theory tends to understand sexual practice as the endless process of desire, fetishising different objects to replace a fundamental lack. Or alternatively, it articulates and celebrates only the forms of sexual practice that display negative affective ambiguities and portray sexual practice as a form of self-shattering or the erosion of the sovereign subject. Lauren Berlant explains psychoanalytic conceptualisations of desire in her entry “Desire” in *Critical Terms for the Study of Gender* (2014), historicising it as an object and arguing that the utopic championing of *jouissance* as the thing that exceeds and undoes systems of gender/sexuality derives from psychoanalytically-informed social-justice-inspired intellectual movements. Berlant states that there is a debate in psychoanalysis about what desire is, but that it is a drive to want something that is understood as allowing the subject to move from self-directed to other-directed desire, but which always exceeds the object and its ability to satisfy (72). Much of the attention in psychoanalytic criticism, like Berlant’s, is on the ways in which desire undoes any coherence of categories or understandings of the self, and suggests that desire is always ambivalent, wanting to possess/destroy, and is always about loss and replacement/substitution of objects. Although Berlant’s more recent work has argued for a renewed attention to sex as the object of criticism in queer theory (as in *Desire/Love* [2012] or *Sex, or the Unbearable* [2014]), her work, like much psychoanalytic criticism in lesbian criticism and queer theory, nevertheless elides the presence of denotative genital sexual practice, which can make it unsuitable for an analysis of the qualities of literary representations of sexual practice in lesbian literature.

Another prominent strand of criticism on lesbian eroticism in lesbian alterity criticism is the body of work which has as its core argument the idea that lesbian writing *is* lesbian eroticism, in forms of experimental, high-theory, deconstructivist, poststructuralist lesbian criticism. I refer to this strand of lesbian “alterity” criticism as “lesbian (sem)erotics,” after the title of Elizabeth A. Meese’s contributing work, *(Sem)erotics: Theorizing Lesbian : Writing*. The spaces either side of the colon are intentional in Meese’s text: she is transgressing punctuation conventions to suggest a radical

permeability between the concepts of *lesbian* and *writing*; her brackets in the title form a pun suggesting the inextricability of *lesbian erotics* and *lesbian semiotics*. I use Meese's punning title to refer to this body of criticism that theorises the inextricability of the concepts of *lesbian erotics/semiotics* and *lesbian sexuality/textuality*. Meese's text comprises a deconstructive reading of classic works of Modernist lesbian literature by Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf. Meese combines deconstructionist theory (Derrida), psychoanalytic theory (Cixous, Felman, Wittig) and poststructuralist literary theory (Barthes) to argue for a broad definition and understanding of lesbian eroticism in lesbian writing as deriving from writing itself. For example, she writes that: "(Sem)erotics concerns the physical appreciation or response to the textual, when the sexual and the textual fuse in synonymy—what Susie Bright calls "one-handed reading" (86). She goes further in suggesting that the text itself is an erotic object: "How does the lesbian viewer/reader (inter)penetrate the scene/seen? How does a text become a physical/sexual event? According to Felman, sex epitomizes the radicality of the convergence of [the] constative and performative . . ." (87). This strand of lesbian alterity criticism is still present in successor texts. In 2015, *Los Angeles Review of Books* published a series called "No Crisis," a series of critical texts discussing issues important to literary criticism and critical theory in the twenty-first century. Kathryn Bond Stockton published the piece "Reading as Kissing, Sex With Ideas: 'Lesbian' Barebacking?" *Barebacking* is a term from gay male subculture referring to deliberately having unprotected sex for the thrill of risking transmitting or receiving HIV. The subject became popular in queer theory on the publication of a study of barebacking in 2009 (Stockton). Stockton's essay is very much a work of the lesbian (sem)erotics strand of lesbian "alterity" criticism, with much eroticised barebacking language mixed in. The final paragraph sums it up:

Fight it though you might—close your lips to it—the signifier "lesbian" is what I've made you kiss. It is now a stranger I have made your lover, since the word "lesbian," I have suggested, stands for how words are a bold, estranging force, breeding and birthing meanings inside us. Our contact, yours and mine, does remain immaculate, for our bodies touch each other only through the dildo. But I'd like to think that, surely for a time, when you contemplate the words or ideas surrounding "reading" or "lesbian" or "kissing," you will think liquidly but no less precisely with my words inside you. Whichever words remain. Whatever dildos spread.

While these are undoubtedly interesting experimental critical/creative works, the texts of lesbian (sem)erotics criticism are not particularly useful for my own approach to an understanding of a lesbian eroticism of style in contemporary lesbian texts, as will become clearer below.

Lesbian Eroticism: Everything in Excess of Genital Sexual Practice

For all the diversity of the different bodies of criticism on lesbian eroticism, a great many of them are, for my purposes in this thesis, unsuitable for an analysis of a lesbian eroticism of style. This is due to the ways in which these critics apply their definitions of eroticism which, in turn, informs their own close reading practices.

I have used the word *broad* or *inclusive* several times to characterise various forms of lesbian eroticism in lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory. Lesbian-feminism used a broad, inclusive definition of *lesbian* to conceptualise phenomena like the *lesbian continuum*, making *lesbian* so capacious as to make the desire/practice of genital sexuality between women into a minority of practices within what was understood as *lesbian*, with *lesbian* becoming synonymous with *feminist*. Sex-positive lesbian criticism does offer ways of valuing explicit erotic works of lesbian literature, but the focus on the sexual practices of BDSM has sometimes also tended to deprioritise genital sexuality between women, as I will detail. For example, Jack Halberstam in his essay in Doan's edited collection *The Lesbian Postmodern* (1994) claims that "what we have known as 'lesbian sex' (sex between two genetic females acting as women) may be a marginal practice among many other sexual practices in the lesbian community" ("F2M" 225). The psychoanalytic body of criticism addressing lesbian eroticism uses a very broad definition of *eroticism*, because psychoanalytic criticism, as Berlant's entries in *Critical Terms for the Study of Gender* demonstrate, metaphorise sex and eroticism as a way of talking about relations between subjects, subjectivity, and the world, with no necessary place for sexual practice in these discussions. Elizabeth Grosz in "Refiguring Lesbian Desire" in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, while critiquing some of the psychoanalytic definitions of desire, explicitly uses an inclusive definition of eroticism, to refute what she sees as phallocentric understandings of what sexual practice is. Grosz writes:

I would also like to avoid models ["of lesbian theory and of characterizations of lesbian desire"] that privilege genitality over other forms of sexuality. While it is clear that genitality remains a major site of intensity, in a phallic model it is the only true sexuality. I would like to use a model or framework in which sexual relationships are contiguous with and a part of other relationships—those of the writer to pen and paper, of the body-builder to weights, of the bureaucrat to files. The bedroom is no more the privileged site of sexuality than any other space; sexuality and desire are part of the intensity and passion of life itself. (77)

Grosz's conceptualisation is very much in the same tradition as Meese's *(Sem)erotics*, although Grosz is working closer to psychoanalysis and Meese to deconstruction. This kind of broad definition of *eroticism*—as a backlash against the imposition of genital- and penetrative-only theorisations of sexual practice in phallogentric and patriarchal sexual knowledges—is very prominent in writing on lesbian eroticism in lesbian critical theory. Colleen Lamos in *The Lesbian Postmodern* cites a notable example by Marilyn Frye, with echoes of Monique Wittig:

As recently as 1990 Marilyn Frye announced, remarkably, that “‘sex’ is an inappropriate term for what lesbians do”; lesbians don’t “have sex,” because that is a “phallic concept” implying coitus (“Lesbian ‘Sex,’” 305). Indeed, “lesbian ‘sex’” . . . is utterly *inarticulable*”; lesbians lack an appropriate language for their bodily experience, “which is not in any way phallogentric” (Lamos 311–12).

Other works in this vein include Karla Jay’s edited collection *Lesbian Erotics* (1996), in which Jay argues, like Frye, that “lesbian sex has been mostly ‘inarticulate’ and ‘prelinguistic’” (Jay qtd in Halberstam, Review 1032). Some works of lesbian critical theory have argued against strands of lesbian “alterity” criticism for its statements about lesbian eroticism as utopically unspeakable. But even these critiques refute its unspeakability by arguing that lesbian eroticism has been spoken a lot, yet the examples provided are the kink-, BDSM-, or psychoanalysis-derived forms of lesbian eroticism from sex-positive lesbian criticism. This includes when Halberstam critiques Frye and Jay by claiming that they ignore a “whole tradition of sexual vocabularies constructed by various communities of lesbian perverts including S/M communities and butches and femmes” (Review 1032). It also includes when Robyn Wiegman critiques a tendency in recent queer theory to discard lesbian eroticism as an object no longer transgressive/excessive enough (as Wiegman argues is being claimed by Janet Halley), by stating: “Surely lesbians have cultivated the kind of pleasures that the queer theoretic seeks—self-annihilation, eroticized domination and subordination, and a host of sex-positive identifications . . . there is no reason for us to exile . . . the pro-sex, antipornography, S and M girls and bois and their perversely anticoupled and coupled perversities” (Wiegman 129–30).

Why, then, is lesbian “alterity” criticism so significant for an analysis of a lesbian eroticism of style in contemporary canonical and emerging-canonical lesbian literature? Because the dominance of poststructuralist and deconstructive reading methodologies has focussed critical attention for so long on the transgressive and subversive qualities of lesbian literature. Existing postmodernist

works of lesbian literature are analysed repeatedly for the ways in which they transgress and subvert heteronorms. The *aspects* and *sections* of postmodern and contemporary texts of lesbian literature that do not fit the argument are neglected; and in more marginal emerging-canonical works of lesbian literature, these same methodologies analysing transgression are some of the first and most prominent frameworks to be applied—at the cost of other productive methodologies applied to different objects. At this moment in criticism, when the utility of ideological and political interpretive methods is being challenged in LGBTIQ+ Studies and elsewhere in the Humanities (Felski, *Limits* 2–3), it is worth asking what else critics might find in lesbian literature if they used alternative methodologies and asked different questions of a critical object as important to the history of the field as lesbian eroticism.

Almost every major articulation of lesbian eroticism in lesbian critical theory that I have encountered argues that genital sexual practice between women has no necessary or essential place in definitions or understandings of lesbian eroticism. This is understandable; lesbian critics had to do a phenomenal amount of conceptual, philosophical, critical, and political work to be able to make space in academia for lesbian theorising and for the analysis of diverse and evolving lesbian desire and lesbian sexual practice.

As a telling example, editor Dawn Atkins invited submissions for a 1999 special issue of *Journal of Lesbian Studies* on lesbian sexual practice—discovering to her exasperation that half the submissions did not mention the topic at all. Reflecting on why that might have happened, Atkins notes that the (mainstream) gay and lesbian rights movements successfully “adopt[ed] a minority model for sexual orientation,” “an effective way of arguing for inclusion—but only by downplaying sexual behaviour” (Atkins 3). This strategy was intended to refute two powerful stereotypes, “that homosexuality is ‘just about sex’ and . . . the idea of contagion . . . and the related stigmatization of AIDS” (Atkins 3–4). As homosexuals and women, lesbians are burdened with the minoritarian legacies of markedness; the paradoxical stereotypes that women have either a voracious hypersexuality¹⁰ or no sexuality at all.¹¹ Conceptualisations of lesbian eroticism have had to juggle

¹⁰ There is an entire tradition in lesbian literature historically which Faderman names “Carnivorous Flowers: The Literature of Exotic and Evil Lesbians” (*Chloe* 293). Or as lesbian critic Emma Donoghue’s undergraduate student once put it, “in the nineteenth century, most lesbians were vampires.” (Donoghue, *Inseparable* 14)

¹¹ See Wiegman’s critiques that the lesbian “has been reduced, unsexed, domesticated, uglified, and abjected by forces too numerous to list, including those of feminism and queer theory” (103), or see the innumerable online articles asking, “How do lesbians have sex?”

the competing claims of identity-affirming and identity-dismantling discourses over the last several decades, as well as restrictive, contradictory understandings of lesbian desire outside of lesbian criticism.

Although I have appraised many of the definitions of lesbian eroticism in lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory as being broad and inclusive, it is important also to acknowledge that there are a few notable limits to these definitions, often involving a rejection by academic lesbian literary critics of what they saw as the excessively inclusive political definition of lesbianism in lesbian-feminism. For example, although Adrienne Rich approvingly cites Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973) as demonstrating the *lesbian continuum* in contrast to "shallow or sensational 'lesbian scenes' in recent commercial fiction" ("Compulsory Heterosexuality" 656)—endorsing an earlier appraisal by the pioneering Black lesbian-feminist critic Barbara Smith in 1979—the categorisation of *Sula* as a text of lesbian literature is disputed by lesbian critics Bonnie Zimmerman ("What Has Never Been" 459) and Lillian Faderman (*Chloe* xiv; "What Is Lesbian Literature?" 53). Although lesbian literary critics of the central canonical works of lesbian criticism have argued for a broadening of the definition of *lesbian* to include desire between women historically, they have also insisted that lesbian desire be understood as containing *some* form of embodied desire, carnality, or lust. As Dawn Atkins states:

While some lesbian theorists have articulated a view of lesbian that stands on feminist solidarity, others have felt that this approach has denied the history of a specifically lesbian sexuality (Nestle 1987, Califia 1994). And while having sex with a woman may not define who is a lesbian, certainly sexual practices have been at the heart of the controversies over who is *not* a lesbian. As the scholarship and personal histories of the contributors to this collection document, sexual practices are often at the core of lesbian sexual identities, communities and politics. (Atkins 2; emphasis in original)

What Zimmerman in 1981 named the "inclusive" position ("What" 456) has been championed by Adrienne Rich ("Compulsory Heterosexuality," 1981) and Lillian Faderman (*Surpassing* 17–18, 142, 1981). The position that we could, following Stimpson, name the "exclusive" position—insisting on the importance of sexual desire or sexual practice defining lesbian desire—has been taken by critics including Catherine Stimpson (*Zero Degree Deviancy* 364, 1981), Joan Nestle (*A*

Restricted Country, 1987), Pat Califia (*Public Sex*, 1994), and Dawn Atkins (“Lesbian Sex Scandals,” 1999), as Atkins observes (1–2).

I argue in this thesis that literary representations of genital sexual practice between women are more important than has perhaps been acknowledged in a sub-field populated by many influential inclusive understandings of lesbian eroticism. I suggest instead that genital sexual practice in lesbian eroticism matters as an object in lesbian criticism historically and today, and crucially, the *form* of lesbian erotic representation is important. In the following section, I articulate the second significant element of my analyses and contextualise this element in lesbian literary criticism: a lesbian eroticism *of style*, with my own arguments and their genealogies following.

Methodology: Literary Style in Literary Criticism

It is important to contextualise the methodology of my close readings of the selected texts in the history of close reading practices. In an essay in a special edition of the *Association of Departments of English Bulletin* in 2010, Jonathan Culler reflected on the legacy of close reading methodologies, defining close reading as “attention to how meaning is produced or conveyed, to what sorts of literary and rhetorical strategies and techniques are deployed to achieve what the reader takes to be the effects of the work or passage” which “involves poetics as much as hermeneutics” (22). He adds that it “enjoins looking at rather than through the language of the text and thinking about how it is functioning, finding it puzzling” (22). Close reading remains one of the central methodologies in literary criticism despite profound changes in the discipline over the last 50 years (Felski, *Uses*).

Close reading attending to the features of “the work itself” is a methodology from Anglo-American New Criticism, which was the dominant school of literary theory in British and American literary criticism in the 1950s and 1960s (Baldick, “New Criticism”), and the methodology is also influenced by I. A. Richards’ “practical criticism” and the Cambridge School, and Russian formalism (Baldick, “Criticism”). Some literary critics also apply methods derived from Linguistics, which is the scientific study of language. At the border of the disciplines of literary criticism and linguistics, and belonging to both, is the sub-discipline of literary linguistics most often named stylistics.

Close Reading Using the Methodologies of Stylistics

Stylistics is the close reading methodology I use to analyse representation in lesbian literature in this thesis. While close reading includes methodologies derived from different schools of literary criticism with different emphases, stylistics offers a set of approaches that can analyse the functions and consequences of linguistic devices in a particularly systematic and coherent way.

Methodologies in stylistics have the advantage that, when applied competently, they are “rigorous, retrievable, and replicable” (Simpson 5). The methods are based on structured frameworks of linguistic production and comprehension often derived from structuralism and Linguistics (rigorous). They are argued using consensus-defined linguistic terms with a shared metalanguage and logical arguments (retrievable). And the methods can be verified and tested, in the same text or others (replicable).

Throughout this thesis, I use variations on the term *aesthetic functions* to name the role of form in shaping meaning in a text as interpreted by literary critics. I use variations of the term like *aesthetic effects, features, functions, significance, or strategies*. “Aesthetic functions” is the term I use for the causative relationship that is investigated when critics, particularly formalist critics, ask implicitly during close reading, “What is this feature of the language of the text doing as a device of representation? How does that shape the meaning of the work as I interpret it through my chosen framework?” Close reading of the specificities of literary language for the “functions” of style in a text is a formalist methodology. Paul Simpson justifies stylistics methodologies being used to produce textual interpretations focussing on language because “the various forms, patterns and levels that constitute linguistic structure are an important index of the function of the text” (Simpson 2). He adds that “contemporary stylistics ultimately looks towards language as discourse: that is, towards a text’s status as discourse, a writer’s deployment of discourse strategies and towards the way a text ‘means’ as a function of language in context” (Simpson 8).

Stylistics offers methodologies that can account for the crucial discursive effects of many linguistic devices at different levels of language. The levels of language as expressed in Linguistics are not discrete; they represent “multiple and simultaneous linguistic operations in the planning and production of an utterance” (Simpson 5), but their delineation facilitates particularly rigorous analyses of the discursive functions of language at these levels. Linguistics distinguishes between levels of language including “the sound of spoken language” (phonetics); the “shape of language on the page” (graphology); “words and their constituent structures” (morphology); the “way words combine to form phrases and sentences” (syntax); vocabulary (lexicology); the “meaning of words”

(semantics); and the “meaning of language in context” (discourse analysis). In a conceptualisation of linguistic units hierarchised by size (the “rank scale”), grammatical units include the morpheme, word, phrase, clause, and sentence (Simpson 10), as well as the placement of grammatical units in the passage and paragraph.

Stylistics understands “style” to be the sum of an author’s individual creative decisions and that style/structure and form/content are not posited as binaries. Stylistics recognises that a critic cannot make a segregation or a binary distinction between structure and style, because these terms naming different clusters of components across the levels of language in Linguistics are, of course, inextricable, “multiple and simultaneous linguistic operations” (Simpson 5). But structure and content rather than style and form have been emphasised in poststructuralist and postmodernist literary theories, so I suggest that style and form are being neglected in the poststructuralist criticism on postmodernist lesbian literature. Recent scholarly discussions about what criticism in the Humanities might entail after the rise and fall of poststructuralism include valuable conversations about the aesthetic effects of style—including methodologies like “surface reading,” “descriptive criticism,” and Felski’s notion of “the possibility of being seduced by a style” (*Uses* 63). Marjorie Levinson in her survey essay in *PMLA* “What Is New Formalism?” (2007) makes the argument that, historically, New Historicist contextualist literary theories eclipsed formalist literary theories like New Criticism’s close reading but that renewed attention is being paid to linguistic devices of style.

In my analyses, I find it useful to differentiate between the qualities of what I have called devices of structure (genre, irony, address, point of view, narrative) and devices of style (figurative language, connotation, syntax, sound-patterning including rhyme and the prosody of prose) because this differentiation helps to illustrate that structures have been favoured over style in the existing criticism, a tendency that I argue has led to a critical neglect of style.

Relationship Between Literary Style and Lesbian Eroticism in Lesbian Literary Criticism

It is important to recognise that there is no such thing as *the* lesbian aesthetic. There is no distinct lesbian aesthetic or style: some lesbian literature was experimental, avant-garde or modernist; and some was linear and conventional, even when published in the same era (Faderman, *Chloe* xiii). There are only *lesbian aesthetics* in the plural; diverse, historically and culturally situated explorations of the relationship between lesbian representation and literary form.

Because of the centrality of the methodology of close reading to the sub-fields of lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory, much of this criticism and theory produces close readings of the relationship between the literary specificities of a work of lesbian literature (form) and representations therein of desire between women (lesbian eroticism). Producing close readings of lesbian literature for the ways in which the specificities of form have been used to portray lesbian existence is certainly the central work of the major anthologies of lesbian literature. Beginning with Jeanette Foster's self-published work *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1958), the earliest academic lesbian literary critics in the 1960s combined their knowledge of English Literature and the literary theories of New Criticism with the pressing imperatives of second-wave feminist activism. They undertook the painstaking historical, analytical and archival work of asking how lesbian literature could be understood in the discipline of Literary Studies and what lesbian literature might have looked like in eras earlier than their own. The canon of lesbian literature in English that their debates constructed largely drew on the received canon of English high literature from the late-eighteenth century to the end of literary Modernism in the 1950s.

Literary style is one of the valuable qualities that book reviewers, critics, and scholars praise literary fiction for possessing, but it is a criterion that is not always made explicit in the genre of close reading analyses. It is surprisingly rare to find academic lesbian literary critics commenting about the *literariness* of the lesbian literature that they have collated in the major anthologies; I argue this is because of the dominance of literary-aesthetic over political criteria for canonical lesbian literature since the rise of its study. The question of the value assigned to style, literariness, or aesthetics in lesbian literary criticism has often been a vexed one. There have been several major, sometimes contradictory, often co-existing movements that have influenced the ways that critics of lesbian literature have understood the relationship between literary style and lesbian representation. The earliest lesbian literary critics followed the imperatives of literary theory in New Criticism, the method of close reading centring on the formal qualities of the text in accounts of the text's meaning. They also adopted the priorities of second-wave feminist and lesbian-feminist activism, drawing attention to the woman-affirming, anti-patriarchal qualities of the text in accounts of women's writing. They focused, too, on an important aspect of literary history: recognising long genealogies of literary influence with complicated connections to the cultural and political movements of the time. Successive lesbian literary critics have often followed the imperatives of poststructuralist queer theory: demonstrating the antinormative qualities of lesbian texts which destabilise meaning via the transgression, subversion, and exceeding of heteronorms. Critics have, in addition, applied deconstructionist critical theory, demonstrating the qualities of lesbian texts which unravel the faulty logics of binarist, logocentric Western thought. Lesbian Studies critics

have also valued recognising and interpreting the many artistic achievements and the evolution of lesbian representation as interpreted by lesbian authors, readers, audiences, and critics. Several of these goals contradict each other; indeed, many of the debates in lesbian literary criticism and lesbian critical theory take place at the points at which these contradictions occur. Nevertheless, lesbian critics have often subscribed to several of these movements at once, creating critical positions that are complex, sophisticated, and evolving, and surprisingly amicable given the high drama of some of these discourses; often it comes down to using the right approaches for the right job.

Reading a text like Terry Castle's *The Literature of Lesbianism* (2003), it may appear that lesbian literature has been present and prominent throughout English literary history. As I stated earlier, lesbian sexuality in the history of Anglophone culture has been both hypervisible *and* invisible, sometimes alternately, and sometimes concurrently. This understanding is very much a recent position in lesbian literary criticism; earlier texts sometimes traced a trajectory for lesbian representation from invisibility to visibility, but subsequent critical texts do sometimes tend to narrate this fact of earlier scholarship to demonstrate the superiority of later historicised accounts. While I agree with present-day lesbian literary critics that the much-maligned visibility/invisibility binary is an insufficient conceptualisation of lesbian history (Tongson 285), I also think that an historical account of lesbian literature should contain an acknowledgement of how difficult lesbian literature was to publish before lesbian-feminism. It was clearly *felt* as an invisibility by many lesbian readers and critics, even if the full historical account is more complicated than that. This historically perceived invisibility of lesbian representation had two important consequences for my argument: the dominance of the canon of English high literature in forming the canon of lesbian literature and the fraught status of literariness in lesbian literature. The shift from amateur to academic lesbian literary criticism was a shift from largely political to aesthetic and theorised appraisals of lesbian literature, which I will demonstrate.

Lesbian Representation Through Literary Style in Lesbian Literary Criticism

Lesbian literary criticism derives from both lesbian-feminism and graduate English literary criticism, and the relationship between lesbian representation and literary form has often been a vexed one. The different methodologies and priorities in lesbian literary criticism historically have important consequences for my analyses of a lesbian eroticism of style in contemporary lesbian fiction, as I will explain. There are many notable publications, debates, and historical moments in lesbian literary criticism; this literary history by necessity contains only a selection of key points of

reference. These points have been chosen to illuminate the trajectories I am tracking in the sub-field and the significance for an analysis of lesbian representation through literary style.

The historical moments I include are pre-Foster lesbian literary criticism; Jeanette Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1958); amateur lesbian literary criticism in lesbian-feminism; Barbara Grier's *The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography* (1967/1975); the professionalisation and institutionalisation of lesbian literary criticism in the 1970s; and the shift in lesbian aesthetics between Lillian Faderman's *Chloe Plus Olivia* (1994) and Terry Castle's *The Literature of Lesbianism* (2003) as appraised by Karen Tongson's "Lesbian Aesthetics, Aestheticizing Lesbianism" (2005).

Pre-Foster Lesbian Literary Criticism

There were certainly discussions about lesbians *in* literature among literary critics before the publication of Jeanette Foster's 1958 work *Sex Variant Women in Literature* ostensibly "inaugurating" the specialisation of academic lesbian literary criticism. Lesbian literature held an important place in literate, middle-class Anglophone lesbian cultures historically. Following post-Enlightenment neoclassicism, the works of Sappho of Lesbos were rediscovered and claimed as important poetical works of antiquity in the nineteenth century, while paradoxically Sappho had been installed as the symbolic precursor of denigrated contemporary sexual practices amongst women, whose practitioners were named *Sapphists*, *lesbians* (from *Lesbos*¹²), or *tribades* or *fricatrices* referring to the sexual practice of tribadism, or rubbing genitals (Vicinus). Lesbian historians acknowledge that literate lesbian women historically knew of lesbian literature and spoke about it with each other. For example, Ann Lister's encoded diaries naming, numbering, and detailing her sexual conquests (decoded and published in 1988 and 1992 by Helena Whitbread) have gained her a reputation as a notorious gentlemanly upper-class lesbian rake of the eighteenth century. Lister "asked a friend if she had read the Sixth Satire of Juvenal to ascertain her knowledge of lesbian sexuality" (Vicinus 245n5). This demonstrates that lesbian literary criticism in the academy has continuity with several centuries of pre-academic discussion of lesbian literature among interested readers, critics, and intellectuals.

¹² Although now very common, the term *lesbian* is still contentious. In 2008, three inhabitants of the Island of Lesbos brought a case before the Greek courts trying to ban the organisation Homosexual and Lesbian Community of Greece (and by extension, the wider population) from using the word *lesbian* to name homosexual women, lest the outraged minority of Lesbian Islanders be tarnished by such an association. They lost. (Pink News)

The literary salons of the early-twentieth century among the Bloomsbury group in London, including Virginia Woolf, and the Parisian literary circles of Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and Natalie Barney, involved discussions of lesbians in literature. Woolf hints at this in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) when she imagines a female novelist of the future writing of the fact that “sometimes women do like women” and that this hypothetical woman writer “would be able to write to examine what Woolf believed to be hitherto unexplored territory: It would be possible for her to write about women’s relationships with each other” (Faderman, *Chloe* viii). Lillian Faderman’s influential work *Chloe Plus Olivia* (1994), the first substantial anthology of lesbian literature, takes its name from Woolf’s essay, and collates “not only the works Woolf predicted would someday be written but also those works about female-female relationships that preceded her and that her era had forgotten or lacked the knowledge to decode” (viii). Lesbian literary critics have paid particular attention to the processes of anthologising, canonising, pedagogy and transmission by which works of literature remain present and alive to a culture, and these concerns are present in the inaugural text of lesbian literary criticism, which set its course for many years to come.

Jeanette Foster’s *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1958)

Lesbian literary criticism as an academic approach begins with the 1958 publication of Jeanette Foster’s survey *Sex Variant Women in Literature*. Lesbian literature had not been understood as a *category* before the publication of Foster’s text and its revival in lesbian-feminism in the 1960s. Foster was an archivist and librarian with an undergraduate degree in Chemistry and a doctorate in Library Science. She worked as a librarian for four years at the special library of the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University (1948–1952; Foster vii). The institute was directed by the sexologist Alfred Kinsey, who is famous for his studies of sexuality, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), as well as the “Kinsey Scale” he developed, which sees human sexuality as a spectrum with homosexuality and heterosexuality at either end. The term *sex variant* from Foster’s title is taken from *Sex Variants* (1950), written by her colleague George W. Henry, and it was part of a taxonomy of gender and sexualities in the field of sexology: lesbianism was understood as a form of gender inversion, with a lesbian being a woman displaying supposedly masculine traits such as desire for women and wearing men’s clothes.

Foster’s 1958 text was produced with the goal of collating representations of variant women from English “belles-lettres” (canonical English high literature) because Foster considered the popular

literary works of previous centuries—“what has been written and read for pleasure” (11)—to be a fitting index of historical attitudes to lesbianism. Foster’s qualifications in Library Science meant that she was particularly sensitive to the problems of archival and transmission in the creation of a lesbian literary tradition. Acknowledging the difficulty of tracing lesbian literature historically, she stated:

Book reviews sometimes offer helpful leads, but variant [i.e. lesbian] works are all too often ignored altogether, or are treated with such squeamishness or caution as to obscure their sexual significance. (15)

And:

Another difficulty is gaining access to titles of which record has been found. No class of printed matter except outright pornography has suffered more critical neglect, exclusion from libraries, or omission from collected works than variant belles-lettres. Even items by recognized masters, such as Henry James’s *The Bostonians* and Maupassant’s “Paul’s Mistress,” have been omitted from inclusive editions issued by reputable publishers. When owned by libraries such titles are often catalogued obscurely, or impounded in special collections almost inaccessible to the public, or they have been “lost”—most probably stolen—and not replaced. (15)

Foster’s comments point to the necessity of the processes of canonisation, collation, criticism and pedagogy which ensure the continued life and cultural transmission of texts considered worthy objects of study. There is also a hint there about the kind of agency that lesbian readers were showing in accessing and retaining the scant texts they could find—by stealing the books their community valued. These processes are among the reasons that a historical narrative of lesbian literature is so complex; lesbianism was both visible and erased, it was possible and prohibited. Its texts were legible but encoded, published but not re-printed, contiguous to but with limited access to their predecessors, generational without being collated or historicised, sold on the street without being speakable in public, shared and transmitted amongst closeted communities at the margins of culture and publishing, but surviving in public in pockets of tolerance.

Foster’s work itself suffered from the “critical neglect” that she identified in earlier works of lesbian literature. *Sex Variant Women in Literature* was self-published in 1958 after being rejected by a university press due to its subject matter and had disappeared into obscurity. A similar fate had

befallen many texts now considered part of canonical lesbian literature. In the introductions to the major anthologies of lesbian literature, critics reveal that very little lesbian literature was known or available to any non-specialist audience before the 1970s. Lesbian literary critics have stated:

Male homosexual literature has a past and a present. Lesbians, in contrast, are silent—just as all women, at all levels, are silent. If you have read the poems of Sappho, Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*, the poems of Sylvia Plath and Anaïs Nin, *La batarde* by Violette Leduc, you have read everything. (Monique Wittig, 1973, qtd in Faderman, *Chloe* 441)

We are certainly not as badly off as we were in the early seventies when the only lesbian novels in print were *The Well of Loneliness*, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah*. However, texts published prior to 1970 are still difficult to find, and even *The Well of Loneliness* is intermittently available at the whim of publishers. (Zimmerman, "What" 467)

As an undergraduate in college [in the early 1960s] I was an English literature major, but the only time I learned about a lesbian book was in an Abnormal Psych class, where *The Well of Loneliness* was mentioned. As a graduate student, although I read Emily Dickinson, Sara Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, Virginia Woolf, Carson McCullers, Elizabeth Bishop, and even Sappho, I never had a professor who mentioned the word "lesbian" or acknowledged that love between women had ever been a subject of literary focus. In 1967 I received a Ph.D. in English without the slightest notion that lesbian literature had a rich history and that many of the writers I admired—in fact almost all of those few women writers who were studied in graduate school—had contributed to that history. (Faderman, *Chloe* vii)

The historical examples of lesbian literature that lesbian critics have provided—rumours of Marie Antoinette's lesbianism; underground pornographic texts of the eighteenth century; Anne Lister's encoded diaries—often did not go through the processes by which texts remain alive to a culture. Even when published, the texts of lesbian literature historically were mostly not re-printed, collated, anthologised, taught, critically reviewed and discussed, available in public or university libraries, or otherwise circulated or transmitted. The texts that *were* survived only at the cost of encoding or erasing their explorations of lesbian desire. As Blanche Wiesen Cook writes of the lesbian publishing tradition in 1928 around Woolf and her peers: "The variety of lesbian literature coexisted with the vigorous denial of lesbianism in general and the unending differences in manner and style among lesbian woman in particular" (719). Cook notes the poor reception of lesbian-themed

material produced at the time: Woolf's *Orlando* was dismissed in most circles; Djuna Barnes' *Ladies Almanack* disappeared after its print run until 1972; and nothing Gertrude Stein wrote about loving women was published before her death (718–19). *The Well of Loneliness*, for all that its lesbian subjectivity is characterised by a problematic, pathologised self-hatred, for several decades after its publication was the most famous, and sometimes the *only* text of lesbian literature known to lesbian readers (Cook 719), albeit because the book was banned then became associated with the worst stereotypes of lesbian existence: butches, tears, despair.

But one must be careful in tracing the history of lesbian literary criticism, because lesbian literature has a very complex relationship to visibility. There is a common apocryphal tale of Queen Victoria's ministers desiring to make lesbianism illegal in 1885, coming up against the Queen's bafflement but being unwilling to explain to her what occurs sexually between women. But this story is false; as Emma Donoghue notes, the story is a "popular urban myth [dating from 1977] that allows us to feel more knowledgeable and daring than our nineteenth-century ancestors" (*Inseparable* 5–6). It is certainly true, however, that in 1921 an attempt in the British House of Lords to add lesbianism to the legislation outlawing male homosexuality was defeated, for fears that the ban would teach women a vice about which they knew nothing (8). The history of lesbian literature and lesbian literary criticism in Anglophone culture is characterised by complex discursive and cultural shifts, with lesbian representation vacillating between absence, invisibility, visibility, and hypervisibility—sometimes often occupying several of these statuses at once.

The question of literary and aesthetic merit is a vexed one in the study of lesbian literature, and the role of aesthetic merit in the production of the lesbian literary canon changes significantly across the history of lesbian criticism. Foster made several comments on the literary qualities of lesbian fiction:

To conclude the business of definition, the word *literature* has, of course, two common meanings: belles-lettres, and factual material relative to a given subject. Here it is used in the former, or, more accurately, not in the latter sense; that is, the impressive bulk of scientific writing on sex variance will receive only cursory attention, to provide background for the matter of primary interest. This latter comprises mainly fiction, drama and poetry, and might best be termed simple *imaginative writing*, since many works to be discussed can boast but little belletristic worth. Even such inferior items, however, are important in reflecting attitudes and providing quantitative evidence of interest. (13)

It is important to note that Foster was already making judgements about the “belletristic worth” of the lesbian literary canon in its inaugurating text. The claim that lesbian literature is characterised by a lack of style or poor literary merit surfaces throughout the critical texts on lesbian literature from Foster (1958) to Tongson (2005). At the inaugural moment of lesbian literary criticism, lesbian literature was considered a body of work chosen largely from representations of same-gender desire and love between women as collated from the received canon of English high literature. However, the scarcity of transmitted lesbian material and the conceptual apparatus of Foster’s text means that any lesbian material she could find, of any literary quality, qualified for inclusion, although Foster very obviously privileges literary fiction and identifiably lesbian-authored literature from the English canon in her discussions. This approach to questions of lesbian definition, canon formation, and literary merit would change with the rise of lesbian-feminism in the 1960s, and again after its decline.

Lesbian Literature in Lesbian-Feminism

Lesbian-feminism was a movement within, and to an extent a break-away from, parts of the second-wave feminist movement. It arose from the perceived neglect of lesbian identities, issues, and representation in second-wave feminism, as well as from outright homophobia against lesbians, and the ostensible eclipsing of lesbian issues in Gay Liberation. Like second-wave feminism more widely, lesbian-feminism was both a civil rights movement and a cultural movement, and in its cultural aspect involved creative, experimental, radical, artistic re-imaginings of what the possibilities might be for women in art, culture, and activism. It was strongly but not exclusively aligned with the strand of second-wave feminism known as “radical feminism,” and this kind of lesbian-feminism was separatist, essentialist, and privileged lesbianism as a feminist political act. Radical feminism would also often oppose practices such as sex work; bondage, domination, and sadomasochism (BDSM); and pornography as exploitation or violence against women during the Sex Wars debates. Lesbian-feminists famously argued that “feminism is the theory, and lesbianism is the practice” (Snitow et al. 30), meaning that lesbian relationships, and emotional and sexual practices were, in a society characterised by patriarchal oppression, inherently liberatory political practices of feminist solidarity and the affirmation of women. Both lesbian-feminists and radical feminists were critical of conventions of femininity as well as notions of gender equality—the more extreme strands of these movements argued that equality with men was impossible, and that women ought to form their own communities, societies, spaces and organisations free from the oppression they saw as inherent to relations between men and women. However, lesbian-feminism, like

second-wave feminism more widely, also comprised several diverse approaches, with very different ideologies and priorities.

Lesbian-feminism is the historical moment when the disciplinary category of lesbian literature begins. The invisible modifier behind the question *What is the history of lesbian literature?* is “What was there before lesbian-feminism?” It is during the era of lesbian-feminism that this question began to be asked, which is why lesbian literature exists in a unique and unusual state compared to other bodies of literature: its origins are simultaneously ancient and modern; it is founded on interpretive practices that retroactively narrate and claim a long and ancient history for a woman’s identity that did not exist as a marker of difference until the eighteenth century (romantic friendship)—or the nineteenth century (sexology)—or the early-twentieth century (Modernism)—or the late-twentieth century (Gay Liberation), depending on a scholar’s view. The prominent scholars of lesbian literature whose names I have cited were all young scholars during lesbian-feminism; most of them did or do consider themselves lesbian-feminists.

Lesbian-feminism expanded the possibilities of women’s lives together and their lives with men in the world, their social arrangements, political structures and activist pursuits. It creatively reimagined the inherited mythologies and cultural products of the Western world. Lesbian-feminists founded presses, publishers, reading groups, and fields of intellectual enquiry and literary criticism, which gave lesbian authors, readers, audiences, critics and activists the cultural space, legitimacy, and resources they needed to create lesbian art and lesbian literature. Lesbian-feminism as a movement may be said to end in the infighting and fragmenting of second-wave feminism during the Sex Wars over issues such as representations of explicit sex and pornography, sadomasochism, and sex work (Ferguson 107; Swedberg 602) and with the move from gay and lesbian to queer identities and activism in the 1980s. However, many of the scholars and activists involved in lesbian-feminism would remain active in the succeeding eras of third-wave feminism and queer theory and activism from the late 1980s on.

Early works of lesbian literary criticism include the discussions about lesbians in literature in *The Ladder* (1956–1970), the publication of the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian rights organization in the U.S., founded in San Francisco in 1955. Many of the discussions about lesbian representation published in *The Ladder* were works of lesbian literary criticism, albeit of an amateur, pre-institutionalised form. Many of the second-wave feminist “consciousness-raising” groups included discussions of literary works, and these too were an important tradition of mid-twentieth-century amateur lesbian literary criticism.

Barbara Grier's *The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography* (1967)

One of the successors of Foster's text, Barbara Grier's *The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography* (1967) forms a kind of hinge text between what I name amateur and academic lesbian literary criticism; between the political readings of lesbian-feminist reading groups and the aesthetic readings of lesbian literary critics. It is a foundational text along with Foster's (1958) for the subsequent anthologies that follow, but still noticeably appraised the quality of lesbian representation according to pre-academic lesbian-feminist political criteria in 1967. *The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography* was published by lesbian feminist critics Gene Damon (pseudonym of Barbara Grier), Jan Watson and Robin Jordan in 1967, with a heavily revised second edition in 1975, at the height of lesbian-feminism, which is the version I have consulted. The text is notable for what Zimmerman ("What" 456) named the "inclusive" political definition of lesbianism characteristic of lesbian-feminism: *Lesbian* and *Lesbianism* go undefined but capitalised and seem to include *sex variance* as a sub-set of *Lesbian*. This relation between the groups is the inverse of Foster's sexological definition which considered desire between women to be a sub-form of sexual inversion. The lesbian critical tradition which followed continued subsuming the spectrum of women's same-gender desire under the term "lesbianism," albeit with an increasing self-awareness of the definitional problem in the lesbian critical literature from the 1980s on. The introduction to the 1967 edition details what has changed from the previous edition, and the changes are important ones for tracing the evolution of lesbian literature as a category. The changing meanings of the term *trash* in lesbian literary criticism notably forms an instance of this larger evolution, as I will demonstrate.

The 1967 text and its 1975 edition both codified the many thousands of texts listed according to a two-part coding system. Each text is judged by the substantiality and the quality of its lesbian representation. The substantiality codes are A (major lesbian themes or action); B (minor); C ("latent, repressed Lesbianism or characters who can be so interpreted"); or T for trash, meaning poor quality of lesbian representation, exemplified by what lesbian-feminists saw as the largely exploitative male-authored tradition of lesbian pulp fiction. An asterisk system from * (least quality) to *** (greatest quality) creates tiers within A, B, or C by which to more subtly judge the quality of lesbian representation. The criteria for judgment are explicitly political instead of aesthetic in this text; the term *trash* is used to mean falling short of lesbian-feminist affirmative imperatives. Grier et al. state:

The asterisk system, in itself, has nothing do with the “literary” quality of the material, only with the quality of the Lesbian material in the work in question. (5)

In her 1990 text on lesbian-feminist literature and criticism, Zimmerman states:

While the lesbian community has developed alternative standards of *content*—standards based upon honesty and fidelity to the range of lesbian lives—it has yet to redefine artistic quality. Instead, the community holds to a leveling imperative which can lead to “trashing,” the lack of support for, or outright condemnation of, expertise. . . . Reviewers may avoid serious criticism in favor of sisterly support, except when political values are in question. When Joanna Russ, for example, demolished the embarrassingly bad fantasy novel, *Retreat*, she herself was attacked by other writers for failing in sisterhood. (*Safe* 18–19; emphasis in original)

The political imperatives of lesbian-feminism informed its practices of literary criticism. The affirmation of grassroots, communal, anti-hierarchical, amateur, self-produced, testimonial texts of lesbian representation was strongly privileged over judgments based on qualities of literary or aesthetic merit. Like Foster, the authors in the first edition of the text included as many texts of lesbian representation as they could find; by 1975, however, the great increase in available lesbian-feminist literature, combined with the lesbian-feminist position critical of salacious male-authored lesbian texts, prompted the authors to remove almost all the “Trash” in the 1975 edition, numbering three thousand entries (Grier 4). The term *trash* in contemporary literary culture now means a text lacking in aesthetic or literary merit, especially a mass-market or popular text in a highly feminised genre. Karla Jay relays an anecdote of Valerie Miner’s while scorning commercial lesbian genre fiction as *lesbian trash* in 1990:

[Miner states] “A few years ago I was standing in Giovanni’s Room bookstore in Philadelphia when a young woman entered and asked the manager, ‘Do you have any good new lesbian trash?’ ‘No,’ the clerk said, then nodded to me by way of introduction, ‘but you might want to read Valerie Miner’s new book. It’s a very good lesbian novel.’ The young dyke eyed me suspiciously, nodded semipolitely, and disappeared toward the back of the bookshop.” Even when poorly written, lamely edited, and intellectually unscintillating, dyke trash, along with spirituality and 12-step books, keeps many feminist bookstores alive. When lesbians aren’t two-stepping, they’re often 12-stepping. (Jay 71)

The shifting meaning of the term *trash* and the scorning of commercial fiction are instances of the evolution of lesbian literary criticism from the amateur to the intellectual in the 1970s.

Professionalisation and Institutionalisation of Lesbian Literary Criticism in the 1970s

In the mid-to-late-1970s, lesbian critical theory and lesbian literary criticism began to evolve from their earlier incarnations in the explicitly amateur, non-professional, often politically motivated works of literature and criticism produced during lesbian-feminism, becoming institutionalised in academia. As a result, the work lesbian criticism produced, and the imperatives by which it was driven, changed from the broadly political to focus more on the literary and aesthetic. I do not use the term *evolved* to be derogatory; the trajectories towards professionalisation and institutionalisation followed by lesbian-feminism, second-wave feminism and Gay Liberation do not mean that what came earlier was less useful or relevant. Instead, it was necessarily produced at the margins and fringes of mainstream culture and publishing and was imbued with the political imperatives borne of the hostile environment of its reception—the structural sexism, misogyny, and homophobia which these movements critiqued.¹³

The founding of the Women’s Caucus of the Modern Languages Association in the U.S. in 1969 and the Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the MLA in 1974 demonstrate the increased professionalisation of the critical specialisations of feminist literary criticism and gay and lesbian literary criticism. With the institutionalisation and professionalisation of lesbian criticism and lesbian literature in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the standard by which texts were judged for inclusion in the canon of lesbian literature shifted towards the literary and aesthetic. The professional critics who by that time

¹³ Robyn Wiegman elucidates this trajectory of identity-based disciplines as moving from their “pre-institutional” form, so political movements like second-wave feminism, to their “inaugural value” form: identitarian subjects becoming the object *and subjects* of knowledge made about them and critiquing the Western humanist model in modernity which had disallowed that agency. These movements then cross the threshold into “internal critique,” the form of an “identity knowledge” as it diverges from within academia (117–18). Wiegman theorises in detail this common trajectory of “identity knowledges” in academia with the explicit purpose of critiquing the common claim in recent identity-based disciplines that the modern version of the field is *necessarily* sophisticated, inclusive, anti-essentialist, and anti-universalising in ways which its precursor formation failed to be. Wiegman traces the “transferential idealism” involved in the “progress narrative” within identity-based disciplines, as for example in the evolution of Women’s Studies into Gender Studies, by which the switch to *gender* can potentially host all the theories, practices, and political desires its proponents ask of it and not disappoint or fail in the way that *women* and *feminism* did in their ostensible exclusion, essentialism, or universalising (40). Wiegman incisively demonstrates that this trajectory is common to identity-based disciplines, including Gender Studies, LGBTIQ+ Studies, American Studies, Whiteness Studies, and Ethnic Studies.

were teaching, collating, reviewing, and anthologising lesbian literature were lesbian-feminists trained in the disciplinary and discursive practices of graduate English literature.

1980–1981 saw the publication of Blanche Wiesen Cook’s “‘Women Alone Stir My Imagination’: Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition”; Stimpson’s “Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English,” Faderman’s *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, and Zimmerman’s “What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism,” with publications from 1980 onwards tending towards the professional anthologising, historicising, and collating of canonical English literature with lesbian relevance of the kind that now constitutes lesbian literary criticism. These critical texts, and the critical texts since, have argued for a set of highly influential, frequently cited texts of exceptional literary and aesthetic merit or historical importance depicting love and desire between women: the scholarly debates and consensus form the canon of lesbian literature in English. What my study of their critical texts has revealed is that lesbian critics have compiled a lesbian literary canon by looking for the “lesbian” texts of English high literature (what I term finding the lesbian in the literary), and the “literary” texts of lesbian fiction (finding the literary in the lesbian).

But lesbian literary critics rarely comment on the fact that the lesbian literature they compile in anthologies is almost exclusively canonical English literature, and in particular the texts of high Modernism (as collated in the anthologising works of Foster; Grier; Faderman, *Surpassing*, *Chloe*; Castle; Miller; Donoghue, *Inseparable*). There is a rare instance of this acknowledgement in the opening paragraph of Faderman’s *Chloe Plus Olivia* (1994). Faderman’s work is particularly useful for making explicit *anxieties* about the perceived poor quality of lesbian (i.e. lesbian-feminist) literature in lesbian criticism in the 1980s and 1990s. Faderman criticised the aesthetic qualities of much openly lesbian literature, stating:

Such works, however, are less than satisfying. In the earliest lesbian novels, such as *The Well of Loneliness*, and their subsequent emulations, there seems to be an inverse correlation between a writer’s ability to deal subtly and artistically with a subject and the specificity of her treatment of the lesbian theme. (50)

Lesbian novels frequently suffered, and continued to suffer through the 1980s . . . from the limitations and distractions of their polemical concerns. . . . More often than not, style, subtlety, and complexity in the openly lesbian novel were sacrificed to those ends. (51)

Faderman reflects on her younger self as an “intellectual snob” rejecting lesbian pulp fiction: “I wanted ‘real literature,’ the kind I read in my English classes, to comment on the lifestyle I had just recently discovered with such enthusiasm, to reveal me to myself, to acknowledge the lesbian to the world” (*Chloe*, vii). Who were the “few women writers who were studied in graduate school” whom she so admired, and came to learn were part of lesbian literary history? “Emily Dickinson, Sara Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, Virginia Woolf, Carson McCullers, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sappho” (vii), among the texts of canonical English high literature which still dominate discussions in lesbian literary criticism. Karla Jay confessed something similar:

I must confess that I didn’t read lesbian pulps by Ann Bannon, Valerie Taylor, and other writers, as many of my contemporaries did. I was a literary snob, and my images of lesbians came primarily from *Ladies of Llangollen*, Djuna Barnes, Baudelaire’s *Damned Women*, Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, Colette’s *Pure and Impure*, and Swinburne’s *Sapphics*. (70)

There is, in fact, significant lesbian “cringelit” criticism (my term) about just how bad lesbian literature was and has been, from E.J. Levy’s “Why Is Lesbian Fiction So Bad?” (1996) to the online social-reading site LibraryThing’s forum “Lesbian Fiction: The Good, The Bad, and the Really Really Bad” (2006–2012). Levy’s article is particularly useful for an understanding of lesbian literature in the 1990s because it highlights the importance to lesbian writers, readers, and scholars of lesbian sexual practice represented well through literary style:

Despite this audience for lesbian literature, the perception remains among many straight and queer readers that there is little high quality lesbian fiction available. Bonnie Zimmerman, in her survey of contemporary U.S. lesbian fiction, *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction, 1969–1989* (Beacon Press 1990), notes that “ever increasing numbers criticize the literature for being naive and unsatisfying in both form and content,” a criticism that’s “originating within the [lesbian] community itself.” In the course of her research, Zimmerman found that “over and over again the first question asked me about this book has been, ‘are you going to point out how bad this literature is?’” Julia Penelope, in an essay published in *The Women’s Review of Books* in April, 1986, asks a similar question of lesbian fiction: “Why do I usually feel ‘ripped off’ somehow, as though I expected something from a book that the writer didn’t, and couldn’t, give to me? What do I want that I’m not getting?”

She continues:

These limitations are perhaps nowhere more evident than in representations of desire. To quote Zimmerman again, “Descriptions of lovemaking draw with predictable regularity upon dead metaphors or the overdone clichés”; where figurative language is used, “the metaphors and descriptive phrases are vague, generalized, detached, and repetitive.” In an analysis of three passages in Katherine [Forrest]’s *Curious Wine*, Zimmerman notes that “the word ‘soft’ is used twenty-five times, ‘warm’ seventeen times, ‘gentle’ eleven, ‘tender’ eight, ‘caress’ and ‘pleasure’ thirteen times each.” At the more literal end of the spectrum are “explicit, nonmetaphoric descriptions of lovemaking,” that rob sex and eroticism of their rich connotative and associative qualities. “Lesbian writers,” Zimmerman concludes “have created a repetitive and often formulaic language for writing about sex . . . [and] fall short in their depictions of intense passion and desire.”

Being liberated from the sweaty fumbling machinations of a lesbian eroticism of *poor* style is one of the primary reasons, I suggest, that the publication by Jeanette Winterson and Sarah Waters of their novels *Written on the Body* (1992) and *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) were such influential moments in the evolution of lesbian literature in the 1990s; contemporary lesbian *high* literature had arrived, with important consequences detailed in the later sections of this thesis. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a shift in the question of the relationship between lesbian representation, inclusive definitions, and literary aesthetics that is expertly theorised by Karen Tongson in a 2005 publication.

Karen Tongson’s “Lesbian Aesthetics, Aestheticizing Lesbianism” (2005)

Karen Tongson, introducing a 2005 special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Literature* in an essay named “Lesbian Aesthetics, Aestheticizing Lesbianism,” draws the *lesbian* and *aesthetic* together when stating that the issue will address the “relationships among literary forms and lesbian modes of identification, self-articulation, and fantasy” (282). Tongson notes that aestheticism has been “encoded and historicized as a constitutive aspect of male homosexuality” (281), while lesbianism has been considered somehow unstylish. “Do literary genealogies from the same era exist for the stylish gay gent’s purportedly style-challenged Sapphic sister?” Historicising the question, she argues that while lesbian criticism finally gained a toehold in academia in the 1990s, it was concurrently challenged by queer theory’s critique of identity and foundationalism. She traces a trajectory in Lesbian Studies, a form of inclusive lesbian aesthetics, in which works of literary history explicitly segregating historical works whose lesbianism is contentious (such as Faderman’s

Chloe Plus Olivia, 1994) gave way to a more expansive definition of *lesbian literature* that includes many works with same-sex practice, desire, or fantasy between women (as in Castle's *The Literature of Lesbianism*, 2003). Acknowledging the pressures of competing disciplinary imperatives, Tongson explains this shift: "Caught between a disciplinary ethos of literary historicism and the post-structuralist reinvention of identitarian subjects, literary scholars began to account for a range of lesbian effects and affects not always linked to verifiably lesbian bodies or even lesbian practices" (283). Tongson notes that unsatisfying "lesbian visibility" debates have given way to several recent works arguing for *lesbian* to be less of a noun/identity/ontology and more of an adjective/practice/topos/discourse (285). The shift is a useful one for scholars who want to analyse the perceived lesbian qualities of pre-Gay-Liberation texts, but the shift itself, like earlier broad definitions, again positions sexual material in lesbian fiction as deprioritised or unnecessary.

The essay expresses a positive but ambivalent relationship to literary style. Of the journal issue's collection of essays, Tongson argues that the authors, "by approaching their essays with different methodological orientations—do more than simply rehearse formalist readings" (286). I sense an anxiety there, the suggestion of an understanding of formalist readings as potentially stultifying. There is a kind of unease that reading for form in canonical literature is not valuable enough. She is quick to add that the work contributes to Queer Studies: "The contributors to this volume do not simply provide an addendum to an expansive archive of scholarly work on literary lesbianism or nineteenth-century aesthetics and sexuality . . . Each essay anticipates, engages with, and contributes to larger areas of inquiry that consume, perplex, and inspire scholars in the interdisciplinary field of contemporary queer and gender studies" (286). But there is also a critique of the orthodox queer methodological imperative to transgression/subversion. Tongson writes that an author in the volume "opts out of the usual conclusions about what" a critical object represents, which are usually "either a transgression from or a complicity with normative social and aesthetic values" (289).

Most of the essay is enthusiastic and appreciative of reading for form. Tongson argues that much work has been done on "the literary history of lesbian culture and female friendship in nineteenth-century Britain and America," but that "the formal and aesthetic nuances precariously and evasively linked to lesbian and non-normative queer female identities continue to require elaboration, interpretive examination, and intellectual provocation" (282). Despite the ambivalences—or perhaps *because* of them—Tongson's essay contributes to an account of the trajectory I have been tracing in lesbian literary criticism, that uneasy but necessary status of literary style in lesbian literature. Her essay appraises a historical moment in the evolution of the sub-field when the

imperative to transgression has reached saturation point, when *lesbian* is as much a discourse as a noun, and when questions of form “in this cultural moment of the “post-‘lesbian-postmodern’” (Doan, *Lesbian Studies* 25) are being re-examined. Style matters in lesbian literature, and lesbian critics in the present are doing the work of shaping our understanding of how it matters.

Subsequent work in Queer Literary Studies has been taking up this call. Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, the editors of the *ASAP/Journal* “Queer Form” special issue (2016), argue for the need to consider how the concepts of *queer* and *form* influence each other without defaulting to the methodology of analysing transgression. They argue: “This special issue pairs the words “queer” and “form” as a provocation to think the ways in which form is not (or not only) something to resist and transgress in the quest for a greater queer freedom. . . . *Form informs queerness*, and queerness is best understood as a series of *relations* to form, relations not limited to binary and adversarial models of resistance and opposition” (228; emphasis in original). They state that their methodology will “simultaneously reach back to early queer literary scholarship engaged with structuralism and aesthetics and reach through and around¹⁴ contemporary queer theory” (227) in order to “strive to think the queer as enmeshed within—and indeed, activated and enabled by—the structures of aesthetic form, social inequality, and conceptual categorization within which the work of engaged artists takes shape” (228).

Engaged with these kinds of scholarly conversations about what non-suspicious methods might offer critics, my own analysis reaches back to formalist literary criticism, employing methodologies of close reading literary style via stylistics, and applying these methodologies to lesbian erotic representation in canonical postmodern lesbian fiction.

The Significance of These Trajectories in Lesbian Literary Criticism

There is an important consequence of the institutionalisation of lesbian literary criticism, of the centrality of the anthologies of lesbian literature by prominent lesbian literary critics with their

¹⁴ A “reach around” is also a slang term for a handjob performed on a cock from behind (Urban Dictionary, “Reach Around”), in an amusing and fitting example of the way that even unintentional literary devices like slang figures of speech create rich layers of meaning between texts, subjects, and objects. The idea of “Queer Form” yearning towards an engagement with earlier formalisms by giving queer theory a reach-around is the kind of dirty intellectual erotic transference that has always so titillated queer theory.

degrees in New Criticism's methodologies and their preferred approach of finding the lesbian in the literary, analysing works of the traditional canon of English high literature for encoded and sometimes only tangential lesbian desire, themes, and so forth. This is the consequence of privileging the stylists of literary Modernism in the lesbian literary canon. These prominent tendencies are not universal, of course, but they are certainly strong tendencies. Many of the central lesbian critics spend a *lot* of time talking about the lesbianism of lesbian literature, and very little time talking about the *literariness* of it. In other words: in lesbian literary criticism, most analyses of style, literariness, or aesthetics examine Modernism; and most analyses of postmodern and contemporary lesbian literature comprise poststructuralist political readings of the transgression of heteronorms via devices of structure, genre, or ideology.

The most significant consequence of this disciplinary trajectory for my arguments is a dearth of lesbian literary criticism analysing lesbian eroticism *and* literary style *in* postmodern and contemporary lesbian literature. The criticism on central canonical postmodern lesbian authors Jeanette Winterson and Sarah Waters exemplifies this phenomenon, with analyses of the transgression, subversion and exceeding of heteronorms (the queer lesbian alterity mode) being the dominant form of criticism of these works. This criticism forms a case-study of this wider phenomenon in lesbian literary criticism. But this methodology is applied not *only* to these works—in fact, this dominant mode is so powerful that even new works of lesbian fiction after postmodernism continue to be analysed using these approaches, as I suggest when discussing potential future applications of my methodology in the Conclusion to this thesis.

I am, to my knowledge, the first scholar to identify this disciplinary trend in lesbian literary criticism and apply it to a case study of queer postmodern lesbian literature and so this argument forms part of the original contribution of my thesis. Founded upon my readings of the significant works of lesbian literary criticism, tracing the shifting relationship between lesbian representation and literary style—from Foster (1958) to Grier (1968) to Faderman (1994) to Tongson (2005)—is an innovative contribution to lesbian literary criticism of my analysis. My thesis thus contributes both an original account of these methodological trajectories and original close readings of contemporary literary works, examining the ways in which they employ a lesbian eroticism of style.

A Lesbian Eroticism of Style in This Thesis

While I acknowledge the significance of all these traditions of thought and theory about the relationship between lesbian eroticism and literary style, my own analysis diverges from many of

these accounts. Put simply, I argue that lesbian sex scenes in contemporary erotic lesbian literature are important for an understanding of the evolution of lesbian eroticism in lesbian representation, and prominent linguistic devices of literary style are an inextricable component of lesbian representation. While I certainly agree that genital sexual practice is not *everything* in lesbian eroticism, I think it is far more significant than broad understandings of lesbian eroticism have acknowledged. There are critics who have argued for analyses of lesbian erotic texts outside of the familiar objects of transgression and subversion (Halberstam, Review of *Lesbian Erotics*) and critics who argue for the importance of embodied sexual desire in lesbian representation (Atkins; Califia; Nestle; Stimpson). There have been critics who argue for paying attention to lesbian texts even if they are accessible or conventional and not exclusively experimental or transgressive (Farwell; Halberstam, Review of *Lesbian Erotics*) and critics who argue for valuing and paying attention to literary style in lesbian texts (Faderman, *Chloe*). But the critics making each of these arguments tend to be scattered across the history of lesbian criticism; there is no lesbian critic making these arguments together and making them about these influential 1990s texts now.

This, then, is what my analysis does.

Following Rita Felski, at the historical moment of a reassessment of the objects and methods of poststructuralism, I argue that it is worth reassessing aspects of literature that have been overlooked in “ideological” forms of criticism, which have emphasised how power inequalities adjudicated in other forums are present in literature (*Uses* 4–6). Jack Halberstam notes, in his critique of the lesbian alterity text *Lesbian Erotics* (1997) with its “familiar but somewhat suspect model of sexual transgression,” that “the relation between sex and transgression . . . is far from clear” and that critics do not need to claim “inherent naughtiness” in order to justify “the necessity of an analysis of lesbian erotics.” Instead, he suggests that lesbian critics could claim that “the sites and forms of lesbian sexuality have become in recent years much more visible and that queer lesbian theory needs to bring itself up to date” (Review 1032). Like Robyn Wiegman, I argue that works in the tradition of sex-positive lesbian criticism remain useful and sophisticated representations and examinations of lesbian desire, even after the mainstreaming of certain kinds of lesbian representation over the last several decades (129–30) and for reasons other than transgression and subversion. Following Dawn Atkins, I argue that it “impoverishes our theories of identity when their connection to actual sexual practices is lost” (3). Like Atkins, I argue that lesbian sexual practice matters in lesbian representation, because “sexual practices are often at the core of lesbian sexual identities, communities and politics” (2). Like critics of sex-positive lesbian criticism, I argue that the specificity of lesbian sexual practice and forms of lesbian eroticism in lesbian

representation matter and that they demonstrate the ongoing richness, diversity, and complexity of lesbian eroticism in lesbian discourses and lesbian literature. Like Karen Tongson, I argue that “the formal and aesthetic nuances precariously and evasively linked to lesbian and non-normative queer female identities continue to require elaboration, interpretive examination, and intellectual provocation” (282).

There have been notable critiques of the hesitancy of literary critics to take sexually explicit material seriously, especially in the fields of feminist literary criticism, Queer Literary Studies, and Cultural Studies. But part of what has emerged in these fields is a new orthodoxy. Erotic material in literary texts is highly valuable in this critical mode, but *only* to the extent to which reading or analysing this material can be demonstrated to transgress and subvert heteronorms, particularly through the application of poststructuralist queer theory. Lisa Ruddick notes the championing of transgression and subversion in queer-theory-informed literary criticism in graduate English departments, arguing that “our profession often speaks affirmatively of sex when it either ‘shatters’ a person or violates social norms” (80). Sex writing is “often looked down upon . . . by the literary establishment” (Cueto) as belonging to the too-libidinal genres of erotica and romance, often shunned from the academy—except where a critic can argue for the transgressive political valuing of sex in literature as political labour, as in feminist Reader-Response or Cultural Studies criticism in the tradition of Janice Radway. In close reading literary criticism, texts that are too popular, or too easy, or too sexy, risk failing the criteria of our carefully crafted professionalism. So scholars compensate for the perceived riskiness of this material by calling upon the citational authority of respectable, orthodox methodologies: performatively securing critical authority and the “heroic” self-understanding of literary criticism as political labour (as scholars of descriptive criticism Best and Marcus argued in 2005/2009 and Love argued in 2010).

The argument of this thesis is that critics largely do not produce close reading textual analyses of sex scenes in lesbian fiction. There are complex reasons for this, which my literary history has detailed. And it runs right up to the present day, informed by phenomena such as the sub-field’s implicit masculinism visible in the distinction between “serious” literary fiction containing (some) erotic material and the implicitly scorned feminised genres of erotica and commercial romance fiction. An example of this was provided in a session I attended at the Melbourne Writers Festival on 8 September 2019, whose theme was *When We Talk About Love*. The session was *A Swelling in His Loins*, discussing sex scenes in romance novels. Daniel de Lorne, a writer of gay male romance fiction spoke about a rigid—so to speak—publishers’ convention: romance novels are allowed to have *one* major sex scene and *one* smaller subsequent sex scene and that is all. Any more than that

is frowned upon and will be edited out. *Even* in the gay male romance genre, a genre which explicitly exists to supply the demand for sexual representation and erotic material, any more than one-and-a-bit substantial sex scenes is considered—what? Too salacious, too libidinal, too self-serving? Gratuitous, about gratifying the reader instead of teasing, denying, withholding from them, or challenging them? If this is how sex scenes are treated in commercial romance, how are they to fare any better in serious literary fiction, with all the baggage and anxieties that professionalisation and canonisation and seriousness bring?

Sex writing is also hard to do well, so there is a question of how much *worthy* sex writing there is to analyse. The balance between concrete and abstract description, between specificity and generality, between action and feeling, is difficult to achieve successfully. Emma Cueto argues that anxieties about the place of sex writing in literary fiction lead authors to over-abstract or feel that they need to over-invest sex writing with metaphorical or symbolic meaning—a phenomenon which she argues instrumentalises sex writing and diminishes explorations of “sex as its own subject” and leads to nominations for the annual Bad Sex in Fiction Award.¹⁵ There are also several awards for “good” sex writing in fiction: *Salon*’s Good Sex Awards which ran for one year in 2011 and *Erotic Review*’s Good Sex in Fiction Award, launched in 2016. And there was *Literary Hub*’s 2016 Tournament of Literary Sex Writing, an elimination tournament in which Winterson’s iconic “starfish” passage from *Written on the Body* beat Annie Proulx in the first round; beat Jean Genet in the quarter-finals; beat Philip Roth in the semi-finals; then lost to James Baldwin in the Grand Final (Literary Hub). This passage has been acknowledged as having exceptional “good sex writing” and part of that is due to the workings of literary style. I analyse this and further erotic passages in the novel in Chapter 2.

So when there is what is considered by critics to be “good” sex writing—literary, complex, sophisticated—it matters, but only if critics pay attention to it. Nowhere is the need greater for an analysis of lesbian eroticism in lesbian discourses in the aftermath of poststructuralism, “in this cultural moment of the “post-‘lesbian-postmodern’” (Doan, *Lesbian Studies* 25), than in the criticism on the iconic canonical works of postmodern contemporary lesbian literary fiction by Jeanette Winterson and Sarah Waters.

¹⁵ The Bad Sex in Fiction Award was established by editors at the *Literary Review* in 1993 and the award statuette is a “semi-abstract trophy representing sex in the 1950s” depicting a naked woman draped over a book (BBC). John Updike rightly received his Lifetime Achievement Award for Bad Sex in Fiction in 2008.

30 August 2015: Sarah Waters at the Melbourne Writers Festival

At the 2015 Melbourne Writers Festival event I attended on Sarah Waters' sixth novel *The Paying Guests*, the audience comments addressed to Waters were dominated by readers expressing their delight at the stylish lesbian literary eroticism in her texts. A young audience member spoke of her gratitude for Waters' sensual and realistic depictions of "queer flirtations, and queer lust, the love affair" depicted "so authentically," representations which "make queer women everywhere feel seen and represented which is a rare thing." A woman several decades her senior spoke about how "as a lesbian" she enjoyed the fact that lesbianism is out and everywhere in Waters' novels.

Waters identified the cultural and historical contexts of the writing of *Tipping the Velvet*, published in 1998. Waters began writing the novel in 1995, feeling "very at home in this kind of lesbian and gay world of London." Waters highlighted an earlier period in which sex had felt "fraught for lesbians to talk about," an anxiety about exploitative masculinist consumption of representations of lesbian desire (deriving, I suggest, from lesbian-feminist criticisms of masculinist culture), but which Waters saw as having changed by the mid-1990s into "a very sex-positive time" with sex shops, lipstick, and lesbian bars, and so Waters set out to write a "frank and fun kind of novel about sexual pleasure."

The Socio-Political Context of 1990s-era Lesbian Literature

The period 1989-1996 was arguably the height of lesbian cultural and academic production in the progressive urban centres of the Anglophone world, including in Australia, the U.K., and the U.S. Lesbian-feminist activism, cultural production and publishing had continued since the 1970s; the feminist "Sex Wars" had produced, by the end of the 1980s, a strong sex-positive feminist cultural/intellectual movement; and the genocidal inaction of the U.S. government in response to the AIDS crisis had radicalised parts of the Gay Liberation movement, producing the various movements under the rubric of "queer": queer theory, queer identity, queering the canon, queering the academy. Second-wave feminism fragmented but continued into third-wave feminism. The gay and lesbian rights movement had earned increasing visibility and laboriously achieved some improvements in the lives of gays and lesbians in legislative, medical, political, and cultural spheres. Gay Liberation had evolved into the gay and lesbian rights movement, which had evolved to become the LGB then the LGBT movement. As is common in the evolution of social justice movements, the trajectory towards mainstreaming increasingly caused fragmentation in the movements; and the emergence of *queer* as an activist signifier was part of the backlash against the

perceived conservatism (and what would later come to be named “homonormativity”) of the mainstream LGBT rights movement. Lesbian Studies had evolved from its “pre-institutional” form, an activist movement informing and being brought into the academy, to its “inaugural value” form, in which a political movement enters the academy and minoritised people become the objects *and* subjects of the knowledge made about them. The field then evolved into the “internal critique” phase, the form of an “identity knowledge” when internal dissent causes the new academic field to fragment but also evolve in a new direction (Wiegman 117–18). Wiegman’s influential theorising in *Object Lessons* (2012) of this historical trajectory common to “identity knowledges” is explicitly intended by her to counter the retrospective shunning of lesbian criticism as not transgressive enough by parts of antinormative queer theory or Queer Studies (Wiegman 103). Lesbian culture was receiving more and more attention and was just beginning to go mainstream, and intellectual and creative work at the convergence of lesbian, feminist, and queer studies was increasingly popular, prominent, and diverse.

Sex-positive lesbian criticism from the early 1980s combined with writers and critics working in literary postmodernism, as well as queer-theory-informed lesbian erotic discourses, to produce the canon of 1980s- and 1990s-era queer lesbian literary postmodern fiction. Literary movements both extend and challenge what came before: the lesbian anti-romance genre arose from critiques of the imperative to “positive” representations and the perceived de-sexualising of lesbian eroticism in lesbian-feminism. However, scholars have demonstrated that the influence of lesbian-feminism is evident even in the backlash form of the anti-romance genre. The legacies of lesbian-feminism in the lesbian anti-romance are visible in the “privileged narrative space” lesbian desire occupies; the naturalising of young and lifelong lesbian desire; and women’s independence from men and from compulsory heterosexuality (Andermahr, “Re-inventing” 85). The lesbian anti-romance genre included portrayals of promiscuity, power inequalities, objectification of lovers, cynicism towards romance (Andermahr 93) and complex, explicit representations of lesbian sexual practice. Sex-positive lesbian literature of the 1990s often combined elements of the lesbian romance and lesbian anti-romance genres, as well as creative applications of postmodern literary practices produced in the growing lesbian urban cultures of the Anglophone world. Iconic works of postmodern, sex-positive erotic lesbian literary fiction of this era include Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion* (1987); Dorothy Allison’s *Trash* (1988); Sarah Schulman’s *After Delores* (1988); Pat Califia’s *Macho Sluts* (1988); Mary Fallon’s *Working Hot* (1989); Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1992), Dorothy Porter’s *The Monkey’s Mask* (1994); Emma Donoghue’s *Stir Fry* (1994) and *Hood* (1995); Jeanette Winterson’s *Gut Symmetries* (1997); and Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Fingersmith* (2002).

**Analysing Canonical Postmodern Lesbian Literature for a Lesbian Eroticism of Style:
Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992), Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1994) and Sarah
Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998)**

There are many works of literary criticism on the now-canonical novels of lesbian literature by Winterson and Waters: approximately 89 essays on *Written on the Body* (1992) and 51 essays on *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), based on my research in the ProQuest Literature Online database including the MLAIB and ABELL databases. The majority of the criticism on *Written on the Body* belongs to the tradition celebrating this novel as an exemplary postmodern lesbian text in so far as it “explodes the binary” (Doan, “Jeanette” 147), i.e. depicts the transgression and subversion of heteronorms of gender and sexuality, as argued in at least 15 readings. This is the primary argument made by critics employing queer theory, and I argue that the demonstration of texts’ subversion of heteronorms by critics remains the hegemonic methodological practice in Queer Literary Studies.

As postmodern erotic lesbian novels, *Written on the Body* and *Tipping the Velvet* have mostly been analysed for lesbian eroticism via devices of anti-binarism and structure. There is very little substantial literary criticism on *Hood* (three essays and 15 further brief mentions) but what there is conforms to this pattern too. These texts contain features of lesbian eroticism that have been neglected as critical objects. Such erotic features include certain common aspects of style including rhyme, connotation, figurative language, register, address, and syntax; and sections of the texts including explicit sex scenes and descriptive passages with less-prominent contributions to narrative (devices of plot) or narration (devices of address).

There are reasons why the erotic lesbian novels of Jeanette Winterson and Sarah Waters were and are so highly acclaimed, emerging from a context of historical anxieties about the generally poor quality of lesbian sex writing (as lesbian cringelit criticism suggests). Central to the critical acclaim for these two novelists is the endorsement, especially among book reviewers, of Waters and Winterson as having written some of the best, most stylist lesbian eroticism and sex scenes in lesbian literature, as detailed in my textual analyses chapters’ literature reviews. What I name a lesbian eroticism of style in their novels has been deeply valuable to lesbian critics, readers, and scholars, and the methods, components, and aesthetic consequences of that erotic style deserves full analytical attention with the most incisive methodologies available to close reading critics.

Having argued for the necessity of this mode of reading via a literary history following the trajectory of the fraught relationship between lesbian eroticism and literary style in lesbian literary

criticism, the next chapter of this thesis is the first of three chapters to provide original close reading analysis. Chapter 2 argues that critical approaches to Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* form a case study of this larger trajectory I have been articulating, and therefore that an analysis of a lesbian eroticism of style can illuminate a powerful but heretofore underarticulated quality of the aesthetic strategies of the text.

Chapter 2: Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992)

Written on the Body is arguably the most influential and canonical work of postmodern erotic lesbian fiction, having been published just before the peak of Lesbian Studies in the mid-1990s. I am situating the novel as a case-study of the dominant interpretive practices in lesbian literary criticism since the novel's publication. Although there is a large body of criticism on both the lesbian eroticism of the novel and the inventive uses of literary language, analysis of the novel has been conducted largely according to the methodologies and priorities of the major traditions of lesbian criticism and theory that I summarised in the Introduction to this thesis: poststructuralist anti-binarism from queer theory and lesbian postmodernism; lesbian-feminism; and psychoanalysis. As a work of postmodern erotic lesbian literary fiction, *Written on the Body* is frequently analysed for lesbian eroticism via literary devices of anti-binarism and structure but not often aspects of style such as register, rhyme, syntax and morphology, among others. In this chapter, I argue that literary devices construct a lesbian eroticism of style that is crucial to the aesthetic functions of *Written on the Body*.

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the author and the novel. I then provide a literature review of the reception of the novel and literary style and lesbian eroticism in the book reviews. Book reviews are particularly important in the literature reviews for my three textual analysis chapters. Appraising the qualities of literary style is prominent in the genre of the book review in a way that it is not necessarily in feminist literary criticism's more political readings. A literature review of the criticism of *Written on the Body* follows, with emphasis on the scholarly discussions in queer and lesbian literary criticism, narrowing down to the four essays in the existing criticism that are of greatest relevance to my analysis. My original close readings of a lesbian eroticism of style in *Written on the Body* form the rest of this chapter.

Jeanette Winterson is one of the most prominent British writers of the late-twentieth century. She is considered to belong to a generation of influential British authors of this time producing stylish postmodern literary fiction, with her peers including Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis and Angela Carter. She is one of the most well-known authors of contemporary women's literature in English, with others in this area including Irish-Canadian writer Emma Donoghue, Welsh writer Sarah Waters, and Scottish writer Ali Smith. Winterson's debut novel *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) received critical acclaim and became an international bestseller, and her subsequent novels *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) were also well received by reviewers and literary critics.

Written on the Body (1992) is Winterson's fourth novel, and it is an account of an extramarital affair recounted by a narrator with no stated name, gender, race or age, and includes sustained reflections on the body of the narrator's married lover Louise, who is diagnosed with cancer. Winterson's is a characteristically postmodern text, with features including an unreliable narrator; a narrative voice that shifts between first-, second- and third-person; and metafictional and self-referential statements on the writing of desire. The novel also contains elements of the playful and absurd, frequent and foregrounded intertextuality and hybrid literary genres, and various kinds of structural irony. The major themes of *Written on the Body* include exploring discourses for representing desire and the body and the subjective experience of desire as both self-creating and self-destructive. It also explores the fluidity of identity and practice in understandings of gender and sexuality, and bodily experience including the violent, abject, pathological, and sensual.

Written on the Body would become a central canonical text of the erotic lesbian literary postmodern movement of the early-to-mid 1990s and belongs to the genre of the lesbian romance/anti-romance novel (Andermahr, "Reinventing" 93). As a work of the erotic lesbian literary postmodern of the early 1990s, *Written on the Body* demonstrates the influence of several prominent critical and artistic discourses. These discourses include the centrality of diverse forms of eroticism, substantial explicit sex scenes and sexual desire for a woman characteristic of sex-positive lesbian literature. Visible also is the anti-binarism, fluidity of ontology/epistemology and the transgression and subversion of heteronorms derived from poststructuralist queer theory. The tone is one of cynical irony that mocks the conventions of romantic discourses and the perceived seriousness of earlier feminisms, and complex eroticism including eroticism based in power inequalities and negative affects like possession, as part of the postmodern lesbian anti-romance. But the more traditional lesbian romance genre is present too in the classic narrative arc of seducing a woman away from a man, and the sincerity and exultation of love for women. As for Winterson's style, the novel contains her signature discursive blend of lyrical neo-Romanticism valorising love, desire, and sensuality, the sublime, and the transcendence of art; and her neo-Modernism: interiority, fragmented narrative; subjectivity as performance; and the transcendence of art and critiques of such.

While *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and *The Passion* (1987) received critical acclaim and were celebrated for their lesbian and feminist qualities, *Written on the Body* divided book reviewers, who praised the quality of the poetic style in parts, but often criticised the novel as melodramatic, derivative, and over-written (Andermahr, "Winterson" 1–2). Based on my readings, there were nine

positive reviews, seventeen negative reviews, and seven mixed or ambivalent reviews in major periodicals. Negative reviews perceived the eroticism as overdone and unpersuasive, “like a slightly humid house that I was pleased enough to leave” (Flanagan). Reviewers who spoke positively of the eroticism affirmed it as “stirring” (Gambotto) and a “deep sensual plunge” (Glyde), with one reviewer claiming, “I do not know of a more genuinely erotic writer” (Flanagan). Negative verdicts on the literary style suggested it to be description “with dithyrambic Wintersonian intensity that is often quite hard to take” (Curtis) and “verg[ing] on parody” or “increasingly indigestible” (Gertler). It is notable, however, that many of the negative reviews speak positively about the sensuality of literary style that was perceived to nevertheless not redeem the failings of the book, with many critics expressing a variation of the appraisal that Frucht articulated as “lovely but unsatisfying.” It was the literary style that received the most positive responses, with the language celebrated as *beautiful* (Frucht; R. Harris); *erotic* (Updike); *lyrical* (R. Harris; Koeppel; Mabe); *poetic* (Frucht; Scott; Updike; Walter); *rich* (Doris; Frucht); *sensual* (Glyde); *startling* (Rusnak); *stunning* (Koeppel); and *tender* (Regan). These are the same terms that reviewers used to enthuse over the erotic prose style in *Tipping the Velvet*, as I will detail in Chapter 5, and it demonstrates an affinity among works possessing this prominent and acclaimed quality of the eroticism of literary style.

Contrary to the largely ambivalent or negative reception by book reviewers, the academic reception of *Written on the Body* has been large, diverse, theoretically sophisticated and often approving. There are 67 works of criticism with a significant examination of the text beyond minor mentions and this body of criticism treats the novel as a complex avant-garde text displaying cutting-edge queer critical theory subverting norms of gender, genre, and sexuality. The early works of criticism (1996–2002) discuss the novel as exemplary of the lesbian postmodern, with later works (2002–2011) emphasising its expression of queer theoretical understandings of antinormative gender and sexuality. As Andermahr states (“Winterson” 4), the academic reception can be roughly divided by theoretical approach into two groups: those examining gender and sexuality (feminism, lesbian-feminism, queer theory) and those examining genre (postmodernism, poststructuralism). Reception of the text within the framework of queer theory combines both approaches and is often considered the dominant paradigm (4). As Andermahr further demonstrates (7), *Written on the Body* has been also been productively analysed in other strands of the criticism through frameworks such as: psychoanalysis including the Kristevan abject (Ellam; Gustar; Minguic; Nunn); the first-person narrative voice in Narratology (Kauer; Lanser); Bakhtin’s grotesque and carnival (Armitt, “Storytelling”; Bratton); and the Modernist aesthetic tradition (Onega). The criticism on *Written on the Body* includes two essay collections (Andermahr, *Jeanette Winterson*; Grice and Woods) and two survey essays outlining the major trends of the criticism (Andermahr, “Winterson”; Makinen

and Tredell). The two survey works form the foundation of the literature review which follows, although I will be focussing on the discussion around lesbian sexuality as represented through literary style with reference to my own readings of the articles examining this issue.

Within the criticism examining questions of lesbian sexuality and representation, the feminist and lesbian-feminist responses to Winterson's early work including *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* was often initially positive (Andermahr, "Winterson" 4–5). However, some lesbian-feminist scholars increasingly criticised Winterson's novels as promoting an individualist, genderless, apolitical feminism divorced from the radical critiques of lesbian-feminism and not woman-centred enough, with *Written on the Body* being considered the worst offender among her novels (Duncker; Pearce, "Emotional," *Feminism*, "Written"; Wingfield). Nevertheless, there existed a prominent strand of lesbian-feminist criticism which positively assessed Winterson's work in *Written on the Body* for reasons including its postmodern queer representation understood as performing the political labour of transgressing and subverting heteronorms of gender and sexuality (Doan, "Sexing"; Farwell "Postmodern"; Lindenmeyer; Moore; Nunn; Roof). It was also commended from a lesbian-feminist perspective for its perceived affinity with psychoanalytic theory and French feminist criticism from the works of Kristeva and Cixous (Stowers) and its world-building and mythology (Moore).

But the majority of the criticism on *Written on the Body* belongs to the tradition celebrating *Written on the Body* as an exemplary postmodern lesbian text in so far as it "explodes the binary" (Doan, "Sexing" 147)—depicting the transgression and subversion of heteronorms of gender and sexuality (as argued by Berry; Bradway; Detloff; Diamant; Doan, "Sexing"; Ellam; Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell; Fåhraeus; Farwell, "Postmodern"; Haslett; Kauer; Kim; Lanser; Lindenmeyer; Nunn; MacPherson; Moore; Stowers). This is also the primary argument made by critics employing queer theory. I argue that this notable tendency provides evidence of my claim that critics demonstrating texts' subversion of heteronorms remains the dominant methodological practice in Queer Literary Studies, as I argued in the Chapter 1 literature review. Although critics employing postmodern lesbian theory and queer theory share this central impulse, queer theory analyses of *Written on the Body* have tended to de-emphasise the lesbian representation and lesbian literary genealogy of this text. Compare, for example, Bradway's argument (187) that *Written on the Body* is queer because the novel is excessive, not because it contains potentially lesbian material, with Haines-Wright and Kyle's argument that the text's depiction of gender fluidity is indebted to Woolf's *Orlando*.

There is an enormous volume of criticism on *Written on the Body*, and most of it has addressed, in major or minor analyses, at least one of three prominent qualities of Winterson's novel: the

eroticism, the literary language, and the perceived lesbian content of the themes or intertextuality. In prefacing my own analysis, I acknowledge the voluminous analytical work that has been conducted on this influential text that has been so rewarding for several waves of literary critics interested in sexuality and textuality in Winterson's work. My analysis is not the first to argue that the convergence of lesbianism, eroticism, and literary style in the novel is a crucial site for understanding the aesthetic strategies and intellectual significance of the novel for literary critics. There have been several notable critical essays that have addressed what I have named a lesbian eroticism of style in *Written on the Body*, with the authors sometimes producing partial or brief versions of the analysis I will undertake. The presence of these kinds of analyses attending to literary style gestures usefully to the potential of this kind of analysis for expanding scholarly understanding of these qualities of Winterson's text. I use the term *formalist* to name the analysis of style performed by these critics. Stylistics is the specific critical tradition from which I derive my methodologies and my formalist training, but it is only one of several different traditions of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary criticism covered by the umbrella term *formalism*. What formalists share is the methodology of attending to the aesthetic functions of literary language. The importance of the aesthetic strategies of the novel is emphasised in the partially formalist analyses of Christy Burns' "Fantastic Language" (1996), Brian Finney's "Bonded by Language" (2002), Susann Cokal's "Expression in a Diffuse Landscape" (2004), and Sonya Andermahr's "Reinventing the Romance" (2007).

The novel is not merely a potentially lesbian text that instantiates the political labour of subversion, or that fails to perform and breaks the heart of our antinormative disciplines, but a work participating in the lesbian literary tradition it both continues and critiques (Andermahr, "Reinventing"), representing and enacting a sensual eroticism through literary style (Burns; Cokal). Burns argues that Winterson's use of language in *Written on the Body* revitalises language and makes what is "fantastical" about the work as much about language as about genre. Some critics prioritising aesthetics in their analyses of *Written on the Body* argue for the importance of the "sexual and linguistic specificity" of the text as part of erotic lesbian discourses (Andermahr, "Reinventing" 94–95), whereas others feel that the aesthetic qualities of the novel have been overshadowed by the "politics of the lesbian subject" (Finney 23). I argue in this thesis that lesbian discourses are a crucial part of the aesthetic qualities of the novel, but I do agree with Finney's appraisal that lesbian critics sometimes misapprehend the text in particular ways, either criticising the novel for failing to achieve lesbian-feminist political ideals, or praising the work for its perceived lesbianism, but only to the extent that it can be demonstrated to enact postmodern lesbian politics successfully (Finney 24). In this way, we can see that the criticism on the novel instantiates

my claim that these political readings from lesbian-feminism or queer-postmodern lesbian criticism have been the prevailing methodologies applied to queer lesbian texts through the 1990s. As Burns demonstrates, Winterson's lyrical prose in *Written on the Body* has important stylistic features central to the depictions of eroticism in the novel. Critics using formalist methods have identified the prominence of sound-patterning in the novel, its "tonally metonymic effects" and the "repetition of sounds" in "puns, rhythm, lyricism" (Burns 280–1) and the significance of these sonic features of the language, which portray metonymically the narrator's erotic experiences through deploying a sensuality of the text (my term). Metonymically, the part—description, narration, memory—stands in for the whole: erotic experience. The intimacy between *sensate* adjectival prose and *sensual* experience has been rightly identified as one of the central aesthetic strategies of the novel (Burns). The highly evocative and erotic "Special Senses" section of the novel has been identified as the narrator "build[ing] an erotics of intimacy," "overlapping metaphors of such senses and eroticizing the memory" (Burns 297). The journal *Style* is arguably the peak journal for formalist literary criticism in English, and the most explicitly formalist of the four essays in this literature review is Cokal's essay published therein. The article identifies the components of Winterson's lyricism, including "extensive use of figuration, measured rhythm, and judicious alliteration," as forms of figurative language characteristic of poetry more often than prose, a "self-consciously dense and imagistic narrative style" "offer[ing] figuration along with a seemingly endless pileup of words, images, and clauses" (Cokal 17). Andermahr argues that literary devices in *Written on the Body* are used to create a specifically lesbian eroticism through imagery—including lesbian intertextuality and defamiliarization—combining to refuse misogynist and masculinist symbolic traditions and to promote a lesbian eroticism of pleasure and desire (94–95). Although Andermahr composes a brief close reading of the lesbian erotics of smell, emphasising the "sexual and linguistic specificity" of this representation, she leaves the opportunity open for a more detailed close analysis and it is on this analytic expansion that my own approach to the text will focus.

Critics have noted the strong intertextuality between Winterson's medico-poetic section and Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* as the writing of both authors "works to inspire desire by use of pace, parallel structure, and associative series. Both writers drive at their topics with short, wrenching phrases, and both map language over the body" (Burns 299). The lovers in *Written on the Body* seek a sincere and original language for love without clichés, which Cokal identifies as "the language of Winterson's lyrical style" (22). Winterson's aesthetic strategies attempt to "reinvigorate language" and succeed in part stylistically through short phrases including clichés, whose repetition pushes towards deeper meanings, unlike in their deployment in advertisements (Burns 303). The absence of quotation marks and commas has been argued to portray "breathlessly"

the urgency of the narrator's emotion and the elision of punctuation has been identified as part of a metafictional questioning of "how words mean" in a language for love (Cokal 25; emphasis in the original). Following Cokal, I argue that devices of style such as syntax, punctuation, and elision have central places in the aesthetic strategies of the novel and its revived language for love.

And that language has had powerful effects. There is a notable afterlife to *Written on the Body* and Winterson's other novels, a kind of growing recognition that the language possesses something special. As I stated in Chapter 1, the starfish passage from *Written on the Body* made it to the grand final of *Literary Hub*'s 2016 Tournament of Literary Sex Writing. In a glowing review of the novel, Antonella Gambotto compared another recent novel's offering to Winterson's starfish passage, claiming of the competitor: "Quite nice, but not remotely as stirring as the gifted Winterson's . . . Oh, special stuff indeed." The starfish passage is analysed by two of the four critics in this formalist strand of the criticism. It has been argued as bestowing aesthetic complexity on anatomical simplicity in an argument of Finney's that I will critique. Alternately, it has been read as centring a lesbian eroticism of orality towards the female lover, drawing intertextually on erotic lesbian discourses, in an argument of Andermahr's that I will affirm and expand upon.

This partially formalist strand of *Written on the Body* criticism (Andermahr; Burns; Cokal; Finney) examining the lesbian eroticism of the novel via its vehicle in literary language is, surprisingly, something of a marginal strand of the criticism. This is partly a function of age, as the four essays I have cited have had decreasing numbers of citations from oldest (1996) to most recent (2007). While there has been a steady production of several essays on *Written on the Body* published every year since 1994, with peaks in 1998 and 2007–2008, the publication pace has slowed. Burns' analysis of the relationship between lesbian eroticism and literary style, and her identification of the specifics of the linguistic devices involved, has been largely neglected in subsequent Winterson criticism in favour of her arguments about intertextuality with Wittig and the fantasy/realism divide. The formalist qualities of Finney's analysis are largely overlooked when he is cited by other critics, who tend to cite him affirming his refusal to fix the gender of the ambiguously gendered narrator or to bolster their argument that the narrator's gender is anti-binarist to categories of sexuality. Cokal's is the most specialised and detailed work of formalist literary criticism on *Written on the Body*, but as with the other essays cited in this literature review, this strand of the criticism remains quite marginal, and Andermahr has had no significant citations in the body of criticism on *Written on the Body*. Formalist analyses like these have been somewhat uncommon since poststructuralist-historicist methodologies eclipsed structuralist-formalist ones, but movements in literary criticism

such as “descriptive” criticism and recent works like the “Queer Form” special journal issue demonstrate an increasing interest in these methodologies.

I examine a lesbian eroticism of style that is prominent in the explicit sex scenes and fantasised body imagery of the celebrated “Special Senses” section of the novel, but which is also present earlier and later in the work in a diversity of literary devices, which have received less attention in the criticism. The major textual objects of my stylistics analyses are the aesthetic strategies creating a lesbian eroticism in four areas: eroticising violence; orality and digitality towards/between women; subjective experiences of time and colour; and satirical synecdoche.

Close Readings

My argument is that the lesbian eroticism in the eroticised violence in the novel is more complicated than the sometimes-opposing scholarly positions have acknowledged. Finney has argued that the novel eroticises mutuality and reciprocity in apparent contradistinction to masculinist heteronormative narratives of penetration and plunder of the body of the beloved, an argument that is also made by subsequent critics (Harvey 338; Lindenmeyer 56; Weder 12–14). Other critics, in contrast, criticised its eroticised violence as belonging to violent masculinist discourses of domination (Fåhraeus 91–92; Maioli 145). I argue that the lesbian eroticism of the violence in the book is more mutual and generous than the critiques of masculinism have claimed but is also more possessive and crueller than Finney has argued, and that it has notable internal rhetorical shifts and self-critiques. A stylistics-informed close reading can track these moments when the discourse shifts and one of the alternating discourses is emphasised, ironised, contradicted, or is given the significant concluding words.

Finney’s analysis examines the language of colonisation and exploration in passages such as the following:

Louise, in this single bed, between these garish sheets, I will find a map as likely as any treasure hunt. I will explore you and mine you and you will redraw me according to your will. We shall cross one another’s boundaries and makes ourselves one nation. (20)

Of these sections, Finney argues:

The lover's exploration of the total person constituting the loved one (not just her body) is given substance by analogy to earlier explorers of new-found lands. . . . Where the trope differs from the explorations of early travelers is in the lack of exploitation. This form of love is not conquest but mutual discovery. "I was lost in my own navigation," says the narrator (17). Winterson seems to want to differentiate this love from the stereotypical heterosexual version where penetration of the interior and possession of the gold mined there is the norm . . . Where Donne turns the loved one into a conquest ("O my America, my new found land, / My kingdom, safelist when with one man manned" "Elegy 19"), Winterson celebrates reciprocity: "I had no dreams to possess you [. . .]" (52). (28)

Finney reads the language of travel positively and argues that Winterson avoids the exploitation of colonisation through the inclusion of the language of reciprocity, and several other critics have made the same claim (Harvey 338; Lindenmeyer 56; Weder 12–14). While the narrator does state that they did not intend possession, it is worth questioning why Finney is taking the narrator at their ¹⁶word in these moments, seduced perhaps, or at least convinced, by the sincerity of the neo-Romantic lyrical discourse in the second-person addressed to Louise, forgetting the fact that the narrator is considered frequently and explicitly unreliable elsewhere in the text.

The narrator's race, like their gender identity, is unstated in the novel, and the narrator never comments on race, except to exoticise and eroticise an ex-boyfriend "Carlo," a "dark exciting thing" who "smelled of fir cones" (143), or to eroticise the "milk-white" skin of the beloved. A racialised identity whose race is invisible, which involves exoticising and eroticising "darkness" in lovers, has the qualities of whiteness.

¹⁶ Arguably the most celebrated (and analysed) aesthetic device of the novel is that of the ambiguously gendered narrator. How to speak of this narrator without using gendered pronouns in English is an issue for literary critics. Some critics decided to refer to the narrator as *he* or *she*. Some used the narrator's intertextual self-identifications as proper nouns, such as *Lothario* or *Don Juan*. Some used androgynous pronouns of the time, such as *S/he*. I use the gender-neutral pronoun *their*. I acknowledge that it is somewhat anachronistic to do so, because the use of *their* as a gender-neutral pronoun had not yet been incorporated into mainstream discourses at the time of the novel's publication in 1992. But as I argue in a later footnote about my use of the term *cisgender*, I have a professional and moral duty as a scholar of Gender Studies to use the most appropriate gendered terms for gender-diverse people (and characters), because to use older or outdated terms is considered offensive and a form of linguistic/symbolic violence. As the publishers of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary noted when naming *they* their 2019 Word of the Year (Merriam-Webster), prominent scholarly referencing style guides like those published by the APA (Lee) and MLA (MLA Style Center) now recommend using the singular *they* (not *his or her*) to refer to a person with an unknown or a non-binary gender (Lee).

Consider excerpts like these:

Louise, your nakedness was too complete for me, who had not learned the extent of your fingers. How could I cover this land? Did Columbus feel like this on sighting the Americas? I had no dreams to possess you but I wanted you to possess me. (52)

My eyes are brown, they have fluttered across your body like butterflies. I have flown the distance of your body from side to side of your ivory coast. I know the forests where I can rest and feed. I have mapped you with my naked eye and stored you out of sight. The millions of cells that make up your tissues are plotted on my retina. Night flying I know exactly where I am. Your body is my landing strip. (117)

The question here is whether the narrator can innocently cite the language of African or American colonisation and have the depicted desire be understood as unproblematically mutual and non-objectifying, as Finney argues. I argue that they cannot. In fact, I think that the language of colonisation does more than the narrator bargains for. These kinds of excerpts conjure the body of the lover as the object of the colonialist gaze and bring connotations of eroticised subordination, ownership and possession—even when disavowed—and suggest the scrambling of navigational equipment and epistemological disempowerment via re-writings of cartography. Present here is the eroticisation of risk, self-effacement, obsession, and inequalities of power characteristic of the lesbian anti-romance, and, in the face of these discursive qualities, it is not persuasive to claim that the eroticism is that of romantic exploration, but rather, exploitation.

There are certainly passages in which the narrator maintains that their relationship with Louise is something that holds but does not trap, like the following:

Louise and I were held by a single loop of love. The cord passing round our bodies had no sharp twists or sinister turns. Our wrists were not tied and there was no noose about our necks. . . . I don't want to be your sport nor you to be mine. I don't want to punch you for the pleasure of it, tangling the clear lines that bind us, forcing you to your knees, dragging you up again. The public face of a life in chaos. I want the hoop around our hearts to be a guide not a terror. I don't want to pull you tighter than you can bear. I don't want the lines to slacken either, the thread paying out over the side, enough rope to hang ourselves. (87–88)

This is the kind of relationality that Finney argues portrays a non-exploitative, non-destructive mutuality. But these sections are repeatedly contradicted elsewhere in the novel, when the narrator recognises their own desperation and the emotional and sometimes physical violence of the pair's desire for each other, as for example when imagining the lover's shoulder-blades as razors pointed at them (131). It is present, too, in their statements that they injured each other emotionally; accidentally physically at the ice-lake (132); or intentionally, sexually, for their pleasure. This is apparent in the later sections of the novel, particularly in a passage often overlooked by critics, which eroticises mutual masochism with Louise as the active and agential partner:

[Louise] "Will you be true to me?"

[Narrator] "With all my heart."

I took her hand and put it underneath my T-shirt. She took my nipple and squeezed it between finger and thumb.

"And with all your flesh?"

"You're hurting me Louise."

Passion is not well bred. Her fingers bit their spot. She would have bound me to her with ropes and had us lie face to face unable to move but move on each other, unable to feel but feel each other. She would have deprived us of all senses bar the sense of touch and smell. In a blind, deaf and dumb world we could conclude our passion infinitely. To end would be to begin again. Only she, only me. She was jealous but so was I. She was brute with love but so was I. We were patient enough to count the hairs on each other's heads, too impatient to get undressed. Neither of us had the upper hand, we wore matching wounds. She was my twin and I lost her. Skin is waterproof but my skin was not waterproof against Louise. She flooded me and she has not drained away. I am still wading through her, she beats upon my doors and threatens my innermost safety. I have no gondola at the gate and the tide is still rising. Swim for it, don't be afraid. I am afraid. (162–63)

Louise ironises the narrator's discourse in this moment in a syntactical device used throughout the novel as a form of critique: the repetition with inversion. The narrator's gesture of romantic cliché is slipped into the sexual register by Louise, with the clichéd, faithful romantic sign of hand-on-heart replaced with the twist of a nipple and a twist of syntax: "And with all your flesh?" The narrator's affect is not easily read in this passage, so it is not clear if the moment is consensual; the use of *passion* to denote Louise's act suggests that it is remembered favourably by the narrator. While the language of twinning in the sentences after does suggest a mutuality of the kind claimed by Finney and other critics (Lindenmeyer 56; Weder 11), it is an ambivalent representation when

what is shared is consensual masochism and passion but also some of the narrator's own worst qualities: impatience, jealousy, brutality "in love." The narrator's citation of the language of mutuality is a complex one throughout the novel, and while often spoken in the sincere, neo-Romantic lyrical register, the eroticising of violence is nevertheless often ironised and critiqued.

Complicating the narrator's account of the mutuality of the eroticised violence are the sections that involve voyeurism and stalking. There are two occasions when the narrator examines Louise without her knowledge: once when Louise invites them over and the pair sleep together for the first time, and once when the narrator waits to hear from Louise if she will leave Elgin, her husband. The language the narrator uses is hungry and obsessive, with a self-awareness and shame at the desperation. Waiting to enter Louise's house, the narrator states:

I stood lurking outside with my collar turned up, hiding to get a better view. I thought, if she calls the police, it's only what I deserve. . . . It was easy for me to get in, the door was unlocked. I felt like a thief with a bagful of stolen glances. . . . The compulsion to steal something is ridiculous, intense. (49–50)

Waiting three days for a message from Louise, at Louise's request, the narrator expresses their impatience and frustration:

Could I fall any lower?

The answer was yes. I spent the whole night prowling outside Louise's house like a private dick. I watched the lights going off at some windows, on at others. Was she in his bed? What did that have to do with me? I ran a schizophrenic dialogue with myself through the hours of darkness and into the small hours, so called because the heart shrivels up to the size of a pea and there is no hope left in it. (95)

The narrator's tone, with its flippancy, sarcasm, and self-aware shame, tends to quickly subsume their depiction of their own desperation, obsession, and stalking in either the careless arrogance of the fantastical, anti-realist sections recounting their ex-lovers—all of which, the reader learns, are stories/memories spoken to amuse Louise—or in the transcendental lover's discourse. Just because the narrator states, in the sincere-toned neo-Romantic discourse addressed to Louise, that they never intended possession does not mean that a critic ought to take them at their word. They are unreliable, self-pitying, and twice recall attacking their past girlfriends. While a reading of a non-exploitative and non-destructive mutual eroticism such as Finney's account is possible based on the

neo-Romantic lover's discourse, the eroticising of violence in the novel is more contradictory than either the lesbian-feminist dismissals or Finney's endorsement of mutuality have acknowledged.

This complex eroticising of violence is also notably present in the medical-poetic contiguous unnamed passages I will refer to as "The Lining of the Mouth" and "The Cranial Cavity." In "The Lining of the Mouth" (117–18) the narrator states:

TISSUES, SUCH AS THE LINING OF THE MOUTH, CAN BE SEEN WITH THE NAKED EYE, BUT THE MILLIONS OF CELLS WHICH MAKE UP THE TISSUES ARE SO SMALL THAT THEY CAN ONLY BE SEEN WITH THE AID OF A MICROSCOPE.

The naked eye. How many times have I enjoyed you with my lascivious naked eye. I have seen you unclothed, bent to wash, the curve of your back, the concurve of your belly. I have had you beneath me for examination, seen the scars between your thighs where you fell on barbed wire. You look as if an animal has clawed you, run its steel nails through your skin, leaving harsh marks of ownership.

My eyes are brown, they have fluttered across your body like butterflies. I have flown the distance of your body from side to side of your ivory coast. I know the forests where I can rest and feed. I have mapped you with my naked eye and stored you out of sight. The millions of cells that make up your tissues are plotted on my retina. Night flying I know exactly where I am. Your body is my landing strip.

The lining of your mouth I know through tongue and spit. Its ridges, valleys, the corrugated roof, the fortress of teeth. The glossy smoothness of the inside of your upper lip is interrupted by a rough swirl where you were hurt once. The tissues of the mouth and anus heal faster than any others but they leave signs for those who care to look. I care to look. There's a story trapped inside your mouth. A crashed car and a smashed windscreen. The only witness is the scar, jagged like a duelling scar where the skin still shows the stitches.

My naked eye counts your teeth including the fillings. The incisors, canines, the molars and premolars. Thirty-two in all. Thirty-one in your case. After sex you tiger-tear your food, let your mouth run over with grease. Sometimes it's me you bite, leaving shallow wounds in my shoulders. Do you want to stripe me to match your own? I wear the wounds

as a badge of honour. The moulds of your teeth are easy to see under my shirt but the L that tattoos me on the inside is not visible to the naked eye. (117–18; capitalisation in original)¹⁷

Central to the eroticisation of violence in this section is sound-patterning, which is a set of prominent linguistic devices that formalist criticism pays attention to, and which includes assonance, alliteration and other rhyme.

As English letters often do not reflect the pronunciation of a word, I will use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), allowing a visual representation of similar sounds between words:

My eyes are brown, they have fluttered across your body like butterflies.
I have flown the distance of your body from side to side of your ivory coast.
I know the forests where I can rest and feed.
I have mapped you with my naked eye and stored you out of sight. (117)

mæz æz v: bræʊn, ðæi hæv flʌtəd əkrɔs jo: bɒdi læk bʌtə flaɪs.
æ hæv fl ɔʊn ðə dɪstəns ɔv jo: bɒdi flɔm sæd tə sæd ɔv jo: ævəri kəʊst.
æ nəʊ ðə fɔrɛsts we: æ kən ɹest ənd fi:d.
æ hæv mæpt ju: wi θ mæ nəɪkəd æ ænd stɔ:d ju æʊt ɔv s æt.

What becomes immediately apparent in this passage is the density of repeated sounds, which I have highlighted in different colours. When book reviewers and critics speak of the “poetic” or “lyrical” qualities of the novel, part of what they are identifying is the frequency and prominence of sound-patterning devices. The sentences in this passage are not written one under the other in the way I have written them here, but once I arrange them this way, one can see the syntactic similarity that hangs these sentences together more like the lines of poem than like conventional prose. There are at least two instances of chiasmus here (Brogan and Halsall 183), a repetition with inversion, an ABBA pattern, within the terms “fluttered body, butterflies” and “forests, rest and feed.” These devices perform a sensuality of the text, communicating through form the narrator’s eroticising of the lover’s body, with metaphors for the lover’s body as land: visually gratifying, nourishing,

¹⁷ These capitalised sections are quotes from (fictional) medical textbooks on cancer that the narrator is citing and responding to.

mysterious, and enticing exploration. This is a citation of the white colonialist gaze as part of the complex eroticisation of violence characteristic of the lesbian anti-romance.

One of the advantages of using stylistics as a close reading methodology is having the ability to analyse linguistic devices at work simultaneously across different levels of the language. Later in this same section of the text, a prominent linguistic device for the eroticisation of violence emerges at the level of the morpheme. Authors can exploit the qualities of literary language to create ugliness or harshness in language. The relationship between beauty or ugliness and linguistic devices is tautological and reciprocal: as speakers of a language we choose sounds that are ugly to us to name things we hate, and the sounds attached to things to we hate come to sound ugly to us. Some syllables come to share connotations over time: phonaesthemes (Adams 909). Consider the following sentences in IPA:

There's a story trapped inside your mouth.

A crashed car and a smashed windscreen.

The only witness is the scar, jagged like a duelling scar where the skin still shows the stitches.

ðe:z ə sto:ri tɹæptɪnsɪd jo: mæʊθ.

ə kɹæft kɹ: ænd ə smæft wɪnskri:n.

ði ənli wɪtnəs ɪz ðə skɹ:, dzæɡəd læk ə dʒo:liŋ skɹ: we: ðə skɪn stɪl ʃəʊz ðə stɪtʃəz.

This passage is a cluster of harsh sounds expressing severe violence to the body. “Asht” (indicated in pink) is a phonaestheme of sharp, sudden, often violent movement in English: consider *crashed*, *smashed*, *gashed*, *splashed*—and even *pashed*, an Australian slang term exploiting the connotative harshness and awkwardness of the phonaestheme to scorn a rambunctious style of kissing. This passage is dense with phonaesthemes of violence: *crashed*, *smashed*, *scar*, *jagged*, *skin*, *stitches*. The device of cacophony, deliberating using harsh sounds (Bishop 158), evokes connotatively the violence that is being denoted in the words’ meanings. In this passage, Winterson mobilises the dissonant qualities of English phonaesthemes of violence to evoke an all-encompassing fascination and erotic exploration of the body of the lover beyond the pretty and clean to the otherwise ugly, abject or taboo. This style conveys the material history of the lover’s body, the narrator’s desire to understand the violence consuming the cancerous body of the beloved, and the consuming violence of erotic desire itself.

Trapped in an obsessive memorialising in the lover's absence, the narrator uses the present perfect tense to self-consciously conjure memories of the lost lover with a recognition of the obsessive secreting-away of the hoarded memories: "I have mapped you with my naked eye and stored you out of sight." The phrase *out of sight* in English is frequently succeeded by the phrase *out of mind*, expressing scorn at a fickle lover so quickly forgetting an absent beloved. Its echo here is ironic as the phrase is being used to represent a state of absence that is nevertheless hyper-present. The anxious secreting of memories foreshadows the later emergence of the narrator's articulated self-awareness of the desperation of that position: "I'm living on my memories like a cheap has-been" (124). *Has-been* in the narrator's later claim derides the pathetic present hoarding of past erotic glories. This eroticisation of violence in these excerpts involves a sex-positive and sadomasochistic discourse refusing the abjecting of the cancerous body. The discourse eroticises the damage and the violence of the beloved's embodied history, a paralleling of literal and symbolic violences in which the violence of the scar is bound up with the narrator's self-awareness at the desperation and hunger of their desire, citing the colonialist mastery of "I have mapped you" and the secretiveness of "stored you out of sight." A darkness of desire that is eroticised, not abjected, denied or refused is highly characteristic of the lesbian anti-romance (Andermahr, "Reinventing" 92–93).

The eroticising of sex with the lover in these sections is portrayed as risky, thrilling, and violent in symbolic and literal ways, but in ways which explore the pleasure of losing oneself with a female lover, and care for the lover's pleasure, even when sexual practice involves force. And this is the difference, I argue, between representations of sex-positive lesbian literature eroticising consensual force in sex between women and more problematic masculinist discourses in which losing oneself with a female lover is experienced as emasculating, threatening, selfish, or self-centred. Some scholars were highly critical of the perceived masculinism and violence of the eroticism in *Written on the Body* (Lindenmeyer 56; Weder 12–14), but these critiques do not well capture the balance of the eroticism being portrayed.

While my analyses do clearly endorse the articulations of complex and darker pleasures from sex-positive lesbian criticism in understanding the eroticised violence of the novel, it is also worth noting the limits of eroticised violence in the text, and these are apparent in the passages in the section "The Cranial Cavity" (119–20):

FOR DESCRIPTIVE PURPOSES THE HUMAN BODY IS SEPARATED INTO CAVITIES. THE CRANIAL CAVITY CONTAINS THE BRAIN. ITS BOUNDARIES ARE FORMED BY THE BONES OF THE SKULL.

Let me penetrate you. I am the archaeologist of tombs. I would devote my life to marking your passageways, the entrances and exits of that impressive mausoleum, your body. How tight and secret are the funnels and wells of youth and health. A wriggling finger can hardly detect the start of an ante-chamber, much less push through to the wide aqueous halls that hide womb, gut and brain.

In the old or ill, the nostrils flare, the eye sockets make deep pools of request. The mouth slackens, the teeth fall from their first line of defence. Even the ears enlarge like trumpets. The body is making way for worms.

As I embalm you in my memory, the first thing I shall do is to hook out your brain through your accommodating orifices. Now that I have lost you I cannot allow you to develop, you must be a photograph not a poem. You must be rid of life as I am rid of life. We shall sink together you and I, down, down into the dark voids where once the vital organs were.

I have always admired your head. The strong front of your forehead and the long crown. Your skull is slightly bulbous at the back, giving way to a deep drop at the nape of the neck. I have abseiled your head without fear. I have held your head in my hands, taken it, soothed the resistance, and held back my desire to probe under the skin to the seat of you. In that hollow is where you exist. There the world is made and identified according to your omnivorous taxonomy. It's a strange combination of mortality and swank, the all-seeing, all-knowing brain, mistress of so much, capable of tricks and feats. Spoon-bending and higher mathematics. The hard-bounded space hides the vulnerable self.

I can't enter you in clothes that won't show the stains, my hands full of tools to record and analyse. If I come to you with a torch and a notebook, a medical diagram and a cloth to mop up the mess, I'll have you bagged neat and tidy. I'll store you in plastic like chicken livers. Womb, gut, brain, neatly labelled and returned. Is that how to know another human being?

I know how your hair tumbles from its chignon and washes your shoulders in light. I know the calcium of your cheekbones. I know the weapon of your jaw. I have held your head in my hands but I have never held you. Not you in your spaces, spirit, electrons of life.

"Explore me," you said and I collected my ropes, flasks and maps, expecting to be back home soon. I dropped into the mass of you and I cannot find the way out. Sometimes I

think I'm free, coughed up like Jonah from the whale, but then I turn a corner and recognise myself again. Myself in your skin, myself lodged in your bones, myself floating in the cavities that decorate every surgeon's wall. That is how I know you. You are what I know.
(119–20)

The language of mummification exploits the paradox of preservation: that preservation destroys life, destroys the original to acquire immortality. The narrator pores over memories that become more real than reality, the photograph replacing the person. This discourse also has an increased self-awareness and internalised shame at the desperation of the preservation, and a kind of furious mutual destruction and refusal of life without the beloved, taking out their grief on her memory. Nevertheless, the narrator's discourse then retreats from the anger of that mutual destruction to an eroticised, romanticised mutuality *in* destruction.

The connotations are of mastery and sport in penetrating, mapping, and traversing the lover. They are masculinist metaphors, with “let me penetrate you” joining the earlier “private dick.” But at the moment of peak arrogance—“I'll have you bagged neat and tidy”—the narrator switches rhetorically to mock, through analogy, their own instrumentalism of exploration. It sounds very adventurous indeed to go tomb raiding, but chicken livers in labelled baggies in the freezer connotes instrumentalism as scrimping, banality and thrift, pettily and pedantically ontologising the trivial. The section then shifts again into a deep rhetorical question transcending the pettiness of labels into larger questions about anatomies, taxonomies, and ontologies. Note the syntactical repetition:

Is that **how** to **know** another human being?

I know **how** your hair tumbles . . .

The linguistic devices of syntactic repetition with semantic inversion, and assonance with chiasmus, repeat the sounds of the phrase questioning the arrogant, instrumentalist medical taxonomising and ontologising of the body—but repeated in reverse order and with a different meaning. This is the device of anadiplosis, the “hinge,” traditionally used to create a climax or lead to a conclusion (Brogan, “Anadiplosis” 69). I argue that this device forms the hinge-point at which the insufficiency of the medical language is critiqued and gives way to the neo-Romantic discourse. This is part of what is so effective about the use of chiasmus (an ABBA pattern) as a literary and rhetorical device; the repetition with inversion can turn discourses on themselves and ironise them to critique their assumptions and effects.

The narrator's privileged mode of knowing is romantic, sensual, and impressionistic in the hair tumbling from its chignon and the shoulders bathed in light. But they are still critiquing the medical discourse of anatomical mastery and adding more of the sublime discourse of the overwhelming unknowability of the lover. The narrator increasingly complicates and problematises the discourse of exploration with comments about how their mastery was undone by their experience of desire making them vulnerable and desperate and how the majesty of the body of the beloved confounds taxonomies. The narrator is recognising the hubristic arrogance of their past and present attempts at mastery of the lover's body: "expecting to be back home soon . . . I cannot find the way out." Finally, they acknowledge the vulnerability and humility of being lost in memory and in experience in the body of the beloved. Although they cite their earlier, unwise appraisal of their emotional autonomy, the language that follows is not resentful. The connotations of mutual destruction which began the section have given way to a more self-effacing, romantic discourse and new wisdom of the narrator's vulnerability: "You are what I know." The readings of the eroticised violence in the existing criticism have tended to appraise the aesthetic effects one way or the other: either as masculinist anti-feminism, as by lesbian-feminist critics, or as eroticised mutuality and reciprocity, as Finney does. The contradictions and the shifting of eroticism in the novel, particularly within sections, has not yet been articulated in all its complexity in the criticism of the novel, but my analysis begins this work.

In one of the most-cited partially formalist works of criticism on *Written on the Body* attending to the relationship between literary language and eroticism in the novel, Finney explicitly rebukes what he sees as the tendency in criticism on the novel for scholars to contort their arguments in such a way as to settle on the gender of the ambiguously gendered narrator and declare the narrator a woman, thereby claiming the novel's participation in lesbian literary representation. Finney argues for the importance of language in the aesthetic strategies of the novel, which he argues have been eclipsed by the "politics of the lesbian subject" (23). Expanding on this claim, Finney argues (24) that lesbian criticism on *Written on the Body* was often very critical of Winterson's oeuvre after *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), and that *Written on the Body* was criticised as either failing to adhere to lesbian-feminist political ideals (Doan, "Sexing" 147; Duncker 85; Munt) or celebrated, but only for the ways in which it enacts particular—postmodern, poststructuralist, queer, anti-binary—lesbian politics successfully (Duncker; Gilmore; Nunn; Stevens; Stowers). I agree with Finney that the critical response to the novel has been dominated by instrumentalist claims for the political utility of *Written on the Body* in exemplifying poststructuralist lesbian critical theory, with critics repeatedly finding the appropriately queer anti-binarist uses of language they went looking for. But *contra* Finney, I argue that attending to the use of literary language in the work still

necessitates an account of its crucial role in lesbian representation in the novel—in the citation and construction of lesbian erotic discourses.

It is useful here to apply the close reading methodologies of stylistics, because the specificity of the use of figurative language in the novel is central to the celebrated aesthetic effects. A stylistics analysis can track the subtle discursive shifts operating simultaneously at different levels of the literary language, noting the ways in which discourses are alternated, subordinated, or prioritised. Christy Burns, in her essay in *Style* which deploys the most prominently formalist methodologies in *Written on the Body* criticism, argues of metonymy that Winterson “heightens language’s tonally metonymic effects (puns, rhythm, lyricism) while shifting desire away from the referential form of metonymic displacement encouraged in advertising and the media” (280–81). My analysis builds on Burns’ identification of the importance of metonymy in the figurative language of the text: the novel is, in fact, deploying metaphor and metonymy simultaneously in a sustained literary strategy across the novel. While Burns largely paraphrases the erotic discourses she summarises and analyses, I argue that there is a diversity of linguistic devices within the sound-patterning and figurative language that gives these representations their prominent lesbian eroticism. My analysis examines how these literary devices operate and what the aesthetic effects are.

The major forms of figurative language in English include metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche. Figurative language has internal components, and these components are very important for the analysis I will be undertake. Metaphor involves making a symbolic relation between the object being represented and the symbol being cited. There are three parts to a metaphor as conceptualised by I. A. Richards: the object (*tenor*); what it is being compared to (*vehicle*); and the qualities they have in common (*ground*; Martin, “Metaphor” 760). There is a necessary distance between the two things being compared for metaphor to function. Indeed, the cognitive dissonance and the conceptual reach that the reader is required to undergo is what lends metaphor its powers of defamiliarisation and the revivifying of language. It pushes the boundaries of representation, making surprising connections and avoiding cliché; metaphors are a way of expanding the resources of language. Metonymy involves a closer relationship between the object being described and the qualities being cited; metonymy is a substitution “on the basis of some material, causal, or conceptual relation” such as substituting cause for effect or vice versa (Martin, “Metonymy” 783). Synecdoche is a specific form of metonymy involving a part substituted for a whole (Martin, “Synecdoche” 1261–62).

The medico-poetic central section of the novel contains a series of eroticised, romanticised memorialisations by the narrator, who is eroticising the body of the lover. Central to the sustained literary device of simultaneous metonymy and metaphor in the novel is the eroticisation of performing oral or digital sex with a woman lover. The narrator states:

She arches her body like a cat on a stretch. She nuzzles her cunt into my face like a filly at the gate. She smells of the sea. She smells of rockpools when I was a child. She keeps a starfish in there. I crouch down to taste the salt, to run my fingers around the rim. She opens and shuts like a sea anemone. She's refilled each day with fresh tides of longing. (73)

This starfish passage is analysed by Finney and Andermahr. In a discussion of the citation of the different discourses in *Written on the Body*, such as those of physics and anatomy, Finney argues that in this passage “the sheer functionality of the female lover’s sexual opening here acquires the beauty of a delicate marine flower responding to overwhelming tidal flows of desire” (26). This is an unfortunately reductive reading; both the vulva and marine life have far more complexity and agency than Finney is ascribing to them here. Andermahr’s is a more incisive and detailed account of the aesthetic qualities of the section; she argues that literary devices are used to create a specifically lesbian eroticism through

register switching; defamiliarization; lesbian intertextuality; and reclaiming the “abject.” . . . Despite the conventional oceanic imagery, there is an audacity to the language; the techniques of register switching and juxtaposition—cats, fillies, starfish—work to defamiliarize or “make strange” what have become clichéd images of female sexuality. (“Winterson” 94)

Andermahr then additionally cites a later passage in “The Special Senses” to argue that the section

references intertextually a specifically lesbian set of sexual practices and cultural meanings by connoting oral rather than penetrative sex; using the register of smell rather than sight (connected in Freudian theory with a female rather than a male economy); and reversing, eroticizing and reclaiming the usually abject connotations of the unwashed female genitalia of misogynist scatology. (“Winterson” 95)

Andermahr’s account does identify more accurately than Finney’s the aesthetic strategy of the section, and her attention to the linguistic specificity of the scene and the lesbian and genital

specificity are useful insights upon which my own account expands. I argue, however, that her mild critique of the apparent banality or cliché of the sea imagery overlooks the central role of the sea imagery in the strategies constructing a lesbian eroticism through eroticising orality and vulval/vaginal genitality, as I will explain. Furthermore, Andermahr cites “Freudian theory” to argue that the prioritising of smell over sight is part of lesbian “sexual practices and cultural meanings,” but there are some potentially more appropriate sources to cite in order to make this argument, which my analysis below suggests.

Central to the eroticism of this passage is sound-patterning. Below is what this passage looks like with the sound-patterning represented in different colours and with the sentences separated to aid in visualising the syntactical repetition:

She arches her body like a cat on a stretch.

She nuzzles her cunt into my face like a filly at the gate.

She smells of the sea.

She smells of rockpools when I was a child.

She keeps a starfish in there.

I crouch down to taste the salt, to run my fingers around the rim.

She opens and shuts like a sea anemone.

She’s refilled each day with fresh tides of longing. (73)

This is one of the densest passages of sound-patterning in the novel; there is, in fact, no meaning-bearing word (nouns, verbs, adjectives) without at least one form of rhyme. A word like *starfish* contains sounds which are echoing with at least four other sounds. The sound-patterning involves tight combinations of paired assonance (nuzzles/cunt; face/gate; crouch/down; sea/anemone), as well as consonance and alliteration with chiasmus (cunt/face/filly/gate; filly/rim/refilled).

Syntactical repetition and rhyme combine with richly connotative, evocative description to lend this passage the qualities of poetry. Additionally, the dense sound-patterning of this passage emerges from less-rhymed prose and returns to the same. Unlike the medico-poetic sections, which are substantially rhymed and in a lyrical register, this passage acquires some of its extraordinary phonic richness through the unusually high density of literary devices. In fact, sex scenes and eroticised passages are some of the most highly populated collections of poetic literary devices across all the

novels analysed in this thesis. The presence of this sound-patterning and its amenability to lesbian literary eroticism is one of the foundational findings of this thesis.

Sound-patterning, syntax, and connotation combine with the device of metonymy/metaphor in this passage to extraordinary effect. But the sea imagery that Andermahr dismisses as “conventional” is actually central to the lesbian erotic discourse being constructed. Andermahr has elsewhere observed that Winterson’s depictions of love and desire are “characterized by a strategy of simultaneous universalization and particularization” (“*Lover’s*” 82), identifying the mechanism I argue is at work in the metonymy/metaphor device. Through metonymy, the narrator eroticises the sensual specificities of performing oral sex on a lover’s vulva.

Female sexuality and the vulva/vagina have been represented in Anglophone poetic metaphors by flowers, forests, shells, closed spaces, butterflies, and caves (Frownfelter 42–43). But there is also a disheartening, misogynistic metaphorical tradition in modern Anglophone culture claiming that the vagina smells, and tastes, like fish, and that this ought to be an object of disgust. As obstetrician-gynaecologist Lissa Rankin writes: “With vagina nicknames such as ‘fish taco,’ ‘crotch mackerel,’ ‘cod canal,’ ‘fish factory,’ ‘fuzzy lap flounder,’ ‘tuna town,’ and ‘raw oyster,’ it’s no wonder we worry about how we smell” (Rankin). This misogynist metaphorical tradition also derides lesbian oral sex practices, by way of a set of lesbian fish jokes, such as the slang phrase “sweating like a blind lesbian at a fish market” (Urban Dictionary, “Sweating”). But contemporary women writers are refusing and refuting the misogynistic force of this metaphorical tradition by creating their own metaphorical depictions of vulval/vaginal sensuality, and by reclaiming it for pleasure. As the narrator states in *The Vagina Monologues*’ “My Angry Vagina”:

They’re trying to clean it up, make it smell like bathroom spray or a garden. All those douche sprays—floral, berry, rain. I don’t want my pussy to smell like rain. All cleaned up like washing a fish after you cook it. Want to *taste* the fish. That’s why I ordered it. (Ensler 70–71)

In Winterson’s passage, an anemone is, through metonymy, the lover’s vulva: wet, salty, swollen, tender, hidden and emerging flesh. Through metaphor, the lover’s vulva is symbolised by an anemone: beautiful, and part of an ecosystem inspiring awe. This does not deny the metaphorical tradition equating the qualities of the vagina with fishiness, it occupies that tradition, re-citing it outside of misogynistic discourse as a depiction of oral pleasure. The “conventional” sea imagery here is central to the “specifically lesbian set of sexual practices and cultural meanings” that

Andermahr aptly identifies as operating in this passage. This device is also central to *Written on the Body*'s successor¹⁸ text in the canon of sex-positive erotic lesbian literary fiction, Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), which constructs an eroticism of orality and digitality between women in the consumption of oysters as part of a lesbian eroticism of style—on which I elaborate in Chapter 4.

The narrator's eroticising of the yeast smell of the lover's vulva is another device of metonymy/metaphor. The narrator states in the passage on smell (136):

THE NOSE: THE SENSE OF SMELL IN HUMAN BEINGS IS GENERALLY LESS ACUTE THAN IN OTHER ANIMALS.

The smells of my lover's body are still strong in my nostrils. The yeast smell of her sex. The rich fermenting undertow of rising bread. My lover is a kitchen cooking partridge. I shall visit her gamey low-roofed den and feed from her. Three days without washing and she is well-hung and high. Her skirts reel back from her body, her scent is a hoop about her thighs.

From beyond the front door my nose is twitching, I can smell her coming down the hall towards me. She is a perfumier of sandalwood and hops. I want to uncork her. I want to push my head against the open wall of her loins. She is firm and ripe, a dark compound of sweet cattle straw and Madonna of the Incense. She is frankincense and myrrh, bitter cousin smells of death and faith.

When she bleeds the smells I know change colour. There is iron in her soul on those days. She smells like a gun.

My lover is cocked and ready to fire. She has the scent of her prey on her. She consumes me when she comes in thin white smoke smelling of saltpetre. Shot against her all I want are the last wreaths of her desire that carry from the base of her to what doctors like to call the olfactory nerves. (136)

This passage is unique in the medico-poetic section for the capitalised opening medical discourse to be immediately and explicitly refuted instead of expanded upon and subtly critiqued. The narrator

¹⁸ For the purposes of my argument in this thesis, I use the term *successor text* to highlight the powerful influence of Winterson's *Written on the Body* on the cultural context, writing, and reception of Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*. Disidentifying with the claim that her fictions are *sui generis*, Waters has stated "there are writers like Jeanette Winterson, a lot of her early novels had a historical element, and she was a great role model for me. I didn't really feel like I was doing anything new" (Waters, "Sarah Waters" [interview]).

quotes the fictional medical textbook declaring the paucity of the human sense of smell, only to follow this quotation with a powerful testament to the subtlety and variation of the smells of the lover's body. In this way, the narrator is critiquing the medicalised discourse once more. Paying attention to the lover's body is what lends this passage its extraordinary aesthetic effects. The passage is a powerfully aestheticised, eroticised set of the smells denoting and connoting the vulva/vagina. The lover is not being compared to just any food in order to construct an eroticism of orality; it is the yeasty quality that is important in this section. The narrator explicitly states, "The yeast smell of her sex," with later and earlier descriptions constructing the metonymy/metaphor for the lover's genitalia:

Well, here I am at half past four with fruit bread and a cup of tea and instead of taking hold of myself I can only think of taking hold of Louise. It's the food that's doing it. There could not be a more unromantic moment than this and yet the yeasty smell of raisins and rye is exciting me more than any Playboy banana. (39)

The smells of my lover's body are still strong in my nostrils.

The yeast smell of her sex.

The rich fermenting undertow of rising bread. (136)

Rising bread is, through metonymy, the lover's vulva: wet, rising, yeasty. Through metaphor, the lover's vulva is symbolised by rising bread: nourishing, nutritious, connoting comfort, wholesomeness, homeliness, and—in Christian symbolism—holiness. The acts that this passage depicts are still explicit, contentious, and cloaked in misogynistic and masculinist taboos in mainstream Anglophone culture. It matters that the metaphors used are not fetishising, abjecting, sanitising, or purifying the material, as they could have been in the hands of another author. It matters that the metaphor for the delicious-tasting object is not chocolate, for instance, because the vulval metonymy is a function of the yeastiness, but also because bread in Anglophone culture is the central nourishing staple food of home, and in Christian mythology it has connotations of goodness and wholesomeness. Attaching these qualities to explicit, aestheticised lesbian sexual practice via metonymy/metaphor is an important strategy for "reversing, eroticizing and reclaiming the usually abject connotations of the unwashed female genitalia of misogynist scatology" (Andermahr, "Reinventing" 95).

As with the other medico-poetic sections, "Smell" has a shift in register at the hinge point when the discourse of smell gives way to a discourse of eroticised violence or risk: "she smells like a gun."

The section is intertextual, citing the romantic legend of Napoleon asking his Empress Josephine not to wash for days before his return. It cites the orgasm/death discourse of masculinist heterosexual culture, in which orgasm is conceptualised as *le petit mort*, but by contrast, this citation brings these discourses into lesbian erotic discourse: the metaphor of “the lover as a danger to the self” becomes part of the intimate self-effacement of bringing the *lover* to orgasm entwined with the pleasure of eroticised risk characteristic of sex-positive lesbian erotic culture. As other critics have noted, the eroticising of smell is intertextual with Djuna Barnes’ canonical Modernist lesbian novel *Nightwood* (1936). Eroticising—not abjecting—the menstruating female lover and a woman’s unwashed genitalia is a hallmark of erotic lesbian discourses (Andermahr, Reinventing” 94–95).

Across the text, the sex depicted is significantly oral and digital. The section on taste predictably contains a significant eroticising of orality (137):

TASTE: THERE ARE FOUR FUNDAMENTAL SENSATIONS OF TASTE: SWEET
SOUR BITTER AND SALT.

My lover is an olive tree whose roots grow by the sea. Her fruit is pungent and green. It is my joy to get at the stone of her. The little stone of her hard by the tongue. Her thick-fleshed salt-veined swaddle stone.

Who eats an olive without first puncturing the swaddle? The waited moment when the teeth shoot a strong burst of clear juice that has in it the weight of the land, the vicissitudes of the weather, even the first name of the olive keeper.

The sun is in your mouth. The burst of an olive is breaking of a bright sky. The hot days when the rains come. Eat the day where the sand burned the soles of your feet before the thunderstorm brought up your skin in bubbles of rain.

Our private grove is heavy with fruit. I shall worm you to the stone, the rough swaddle stone. (137)

Other critics have noted the clitoral imagery of this section (Harvey 341–42)—reading it politically, of course—but I argue that the fluidity imagery is also important. The narrator eroticises performing

oral sex on the lover's vulva in this section and so highlights the centrality of wetness to cisgender¹⁹ female arousal. Indeed, wetness as eroticised object is central to several of the influential texts of contemporary erotic lesbian literary fiction and is part of a metonymic lesbian literary symbolism. For example, during production of cult-classic film *Bound* (1996), regularly voted one of the greatest lesbian films of all time (British Film Institute), the directors consulted the pioneering bisexual feminist sex educator Susie Bright in order to compose the lesbian sex scenes in the film. Bright told the directors that a symbolic element and feature of female sexuality is that it is wet instead of hard, and of the role of hands as lesbian sexual organs, so the seduction scenes include slow shots of water dripping over the butch lesbian character's straining hands as she retrieves a strategically "lost" earring from her neighbour's sink. Water symbolism connotating cisgender women's sexual arousal is prominent across erotic feminist fiction by Angela Carter ("The Tiger's Bride"); Dorothy Allison (*Trash*); and Dorothy Porter in *The Monkey's Mask*: "Wet: what jellies my legs? / what flash-floods my cunt?" (42). It is the central symbolic device of Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* with its lesbian eroticism in the eating of oysters. As in these intertexts, and across the other sections of *Written on the Body*, the figurative language here is metonymic and metaphoric. An olive is, through metonymy, the lover's clitoris: small, dense, salty, swollen flesh wet with clear liquid pleasurable to taste. Through metaphor, the lover's clitoris is symbolised by an olive: pleasant to taste, nourishing, connoting familiarity, wholesomeness and homeliness with an Anglophone romanticising of traditional Mediterranean farming and cuisine.

¹⁹ A cisgender woman is a woman who was assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) and whose gender identification agrees with that assignment. I acknowledge that the term *cisgender* in its usage in 2020 in Gender and Sexuality Studies would not have been applied to terms for the female lover or her genital configuration at the time of the publication of the three novels in this thesis. An important consequence of transgender teaching, criticism and theory over the intervening years has been that scholars can no longer ignorantly (nor innocently) essentialise the relationship between the category *woman* and people possessing vulvas/vaginas. When referring to representations of genitality, I have been careful to use the terms *vulva/vagina* when genitality is being discussed, because this is inclusive of transgender women who have vulvas/vaginas. When discussing symbolic or cultural traditions, I have been careful to use the term *women* or *female sexuality* to include the people who are part of those traditions (including cisgender women, transgender women, intersex people and nonbinary femmes) who have diverse genital configurations. I have a professional and a moral obligation to avoid cissexist language, which is why I have chosen to somewhat anachronistically use the term *cisgender female wetness/orgasm/arousal* when I am specifically referring to a representation of genitality of a person who was assigned-female-at-birth (or AFAB, in terminology from trans and gender-diverse criticism). The nomenclature is not perfect, but where possible I have enacted my professional duty to respect the self-identifications and dignity of trans people, and people with vulvas/vaginas who do not identify as women, by using language as specific, inclusive, and non-essentialist as I can.

As in the other medico-poetic sections, there is a density of sound-patterning eroticising the olive symbolism, particularly in the sounds of *swaddle stone*:

The little stone of her hard by the tongue.

Her thick-fleshed salt-veined swaddle stone.

I shall worm you to the stone, the rough swaddle stone.

Swaddle stone is an original term of Winterson's (I think) and is being used as a compound noun. *Swaddle* in English is more commonly a verb for wrapping something up tightly in fabric, usually babies, and more rarely means the cloth involved in swaddling something. What does *swaddle stone* do in this section? It amplifies the aesthetic effects of this section sonically, metonymically, and connotatively. *Salt-veined swaddle stone* contains assonance, consonance, and alliteration which aestheticises the sounds of the phrase. The unusual addition of *swaddle* fosters the metonymic imagery of the lover's clitoris, because unlike an olive, the clitoris is not bare, but is swaddled by salty, fleshy folds, as Harvey notes of this symbolism (341–42). Connotatively, *swaddle* lends *swaddle stones* the qualities of tight-layered hiddenness.

And what of *I shall worm you to the stone*? *Worm* used as a transitive verb in English is almost always negative, implying unfair or unearned entrance, as in *He wormed his way into that job*. Its use here is provocative; *I shall worm you* is brazen and presumptive and suggests violence. The connotations of the worm in the fruit suggests both the living, penetrated organic nature of the ripening fruit, but also the spoiled, rotten, decaying fruit with the worm as the unwelcome index of decay. As elsewhere in the medico-poetic sections, there is a juxtaposition and an alternating of the neo-Romantic discourse of welcome, fruitfulness, pleasure, and bounty, with the necrophiliac violence of penetration, rotting, and decay of the lesbian anti-romance. Forms of violence are again being eroticised to depict the urgency of sex: bruises, pressed bone. While *I shall worm you to the stone* sounds sexually cocky and dominant, it also brings with it connotations of decay that the narrator cannot quite escape, even in memorialising.

The medico-poetic section of the text has received much scholarly attention, but my analysis aims to additionally contribute an account of the eroticism of the novel that is earlier and later than that section. There is a kind of accretive, sustained eroticism in literary devices throughout the novel: one of these is in the representation of sexual tension via syntax. The narrator recalls an occasion

early in the book when they turn up unannounced at Louise and her husband's house and have tea with Louise:

In the kitchen Louise gave me a drink and a chaste kiss on the cheek. It would have been chaste if she'd taken her lips away at once, but instead she offered the obligatory peck and moved her lips imperceptibly over the spot. It took twice as long as it should have done, which was still no time at all. Unless it's your cheek. Unless you're already thinking that way and wondering if someone else is thinking that way too. She gave no sign. I gave no sign. We sat and talked and listened to music and I didn't notice the dark or the lateness of the hour or the bottle now empty or my stomach now empty. The phone rang, obscenely loud, we both jumped. (30)

Winterson combines syntactic repetition at the level of the sentence with a blankness of emotion and an absence then an excess of plot to depict a long, silent moment in which two not-yet lovers are acutely feeling the thickness of their unspoken desire. The syntactic repetition depicts both the subjective experience of the length of the intense moment—a single tense moment takes seven sentences to articulate—and the narrator's nagging, looping anxiety. Consider the syntactic repetition (in purple) and the sparseness of descriptive language (in red):

In the kitchen Louise gave me a drink and a **chaste** kiss on the cheek.
It would have been **chaste** if she'd taken her lips away at once, but instead she offered the **obligatory** peck and moved her lips **imperceptibly** over the spot.
It took twice as long as it should have done, which was still no time at all.
Unless it's your cheek.
Unless you're already **thinking that way** and wondering if someone else is **thinking that way** too.
She gave no sign.
I gave no sign.

A prose passage which sharply increases the amount of the syntactic repetition compared to the passages before and after draws attention to the pattern of the language as a linguistic object (Brogan, "Sound" 1176). Symploce is the name for when beginning-of-line or end-of-line repetition is used alternately (Brogan, "Anaphora" 73), as it is here. This is a form of parallelism, structures which enhance the meaning of the clauses while drawing attention to the larger sequence. The meaning of the passage derives from its being heavily ironic, both syntactically and semantically, as

I will explain. Because of the anxiety of the narrator's burgeoning sexual tension, all four of the sparse descriptive terms they employ gesture immediately to their antonyms. The inclusion of *chaste* in the *chaste kiss* (instead of simply *the kiss*) indicates that the kiss is anything but chaste, as the next sentence expands upon. It is the satirical bite of the term *obligatory peck* that gestures to the narrator's anxiety about the possible presence of its inverse: the optional, and therefore adulterous, kiss. And *imperceptibly* suggests both the smallness of the forensically analysed micro-pause as well as its being paradoxically perceived for seven sentences by the narrator, the reader, and possibly Louise, making it a *hyperperceptible* kiss. These devices are an optimal form for depicting the tense, erotically charged moments of sexual tension between prospective lovers: moments of high-stakes physical intimacy feel like they last forever, and yet the pleasure of the potential lover's company causes hours spent with them to feel like they passed in a flash, which is represented syntactically in the subsequent phrases:

We sat **and** talked **and** listened to music **and** I didn't notice the dark **or** the
lateness of the hour **or** the bottle now empty **or** my stomach now empty.

The repetition of the conjunctions *and* and *or* and a long sentence depicts in form how much gets done and how little time it feels like it takes for the narrator, as well as their surprise at their own realisation of how late it is; that the wine is drunk; how hungry they are. It is an example of simultaneous repetition of conjunctions (Brogan and Halsall, "Polysyndeton" 968) and lack of conjunctions or punctuation between *bottle* and *now empty* (Preminger et al., "Asyndeton" 105). Adding conjunctions and removing punctuation in this context lends the passage a sense of urgency, breathlessness, hyper-fullness, and rush—a function of ellipsis (Preminger et al., "Asyndeton" 105). The sound-patterning represents mimetically great activity in a short amount of time and a feeling of having rushed. A subtle change of tense in the sentence also expresses the then-unnoticed passage of time and linguistically enacts for the reader the narrator's subjective experience of passed time sneaking up on them, from the simple past tense ("We sat") with a swing around at the end of the sentence to the present tense with its sudden awareness of lateness and hunger: "my stomach now empty."

The final sentence of this excerpt invokes the narrator's fear as the illusion of their somehow-illicit, private-feeling hours together is shattered by the interruption of the ringing phone. Its sonic quality of being *obscenely* loud anthropomorphises the ring and reveals the narrator's greatest fear in that moment: their own obscenity in the potentially adulterous kiss revealed through the shock of their interruption by the call, intrusive and unwelcome, metonymic of the caller Jacqueline and her claim

on the narrator's fidelity. Winterson's novel is filled with these sustained, erotically charged moments before and after the sexual relationship to convey the whole set of erotic experiences it involves. This passage portrays via an eroticism of style the burgeoning anxiety of desires craving reciprocity and the creeping illicitness of an increasingly adulterous intimacy.

After the scene in Louise's kitchen, the narrator accepts Louise's request to accompany her to the opera, and the scene is a prominent example of figurative language constructing an eroticism of style in the depiction of the narrator's desire for Louise.

The narrator states:

During the interval of *The Marriage of Figaro* I realised how often other people looked at Louise. On every side we were battered by sequins, dazed with gold. The women wore their jewellery like medals. A husband here, a divorce there, they were a palimpsest of love-affairs. The chokers, the brooch, the rings, the tiara, the studded watch that couldn't possibly tell the time to anyone without a magnifying glass. The bracelets, the ankle-chains, the veil hung with seed pearls and the earrings that far outnumbered the ears. All these jewels were escorted by amply cut grey suits and dashing spotted ties. The ties twitched when Louise walked by and the suits pulled themselves in a little. The jewels glinted their own warning at Louise's bare throat. She wore a simple dress of moss green silk, a pair of jade earrings, and a wedding ring. (31–32)

Linguistically, the passage is highly unusual; it is dense with nouns, and the sparse verbs are largely militaristic. Whereas in the metonymy/metaphor of the medico-poetic sections, the figurative language is used to dramatically increase the beauty, eroticism and sensuality of the narrator's experiences of the lover's body, in this scene, figurative language is used reductively as part of a satire of hetero- and monogamy-normative conquest culture. The device that is so prominent here is synecdoche, which substitutes a part for the whole (Martin, "Synecdoche" 1261). The excessive listing of excessive jewellery is indexical in this culture of women's triumphs in monogamous possession of rich men. The sparse verbs conveying the effect of the jewellery are violent and militaristic, which is amplified by the militarism of the simile which follows: "The women wore their jewellery like medals." The language of militarism connotes the materialism and possessiveness of the aging wives and divorcees steeped in monogamy-normative romantic culture. The brutality of the militaristic verbs, however, gestures to the unspoken source of the jewellery. These are the two sources listed, marital gift and divorce trophy, as well as the third, the source of

the nonverbal warning that Louise receives: jewellery for the mistress having an affair, or jewellery as compensation for the suffering wife.

The device of synecdoche de-humanises the crowd and robs the attendees of their individuality and subjectivity, which can be contextualised as part of the narrator's disgust at the conventions of heteronormativity, monogamy, and matrimony. To the narrator, these people in their sad roles are replaceable units in a prison of conventions. The men represented synecdochically are not even classified as men, just wearers of the suits and ties that the decorated veterans of this erotic battlefield "were escorted by," with the subtle use of the passive voice stripping them of agency. There is a further critique of heteronormative conventions in the descriptive language for the men. The men are fat, negatively connoting the saggy excess of boring, sex-less, marital life for the narrator, a fatphobic critique which will reach its apotheosis in the figure of Gail Right later in the novel. It cites the fat-shaming concept in heteronormative culture of "letting yourself go" in long-term relationships and losing erotic interest and sex appeal, which is why Louise's powerful beauty causes them to "pull themselves in a little"; an anxious tic to minimise fat appearance. In another tic, their "ties twitched," responding to Louise's desirability to heterosexual men, their clothes indexical of their arousal. The adjective *dashingly* in *dashingly spotted ties* is heavily ironic; unlike the many variations of the dress, for example, the tie is one of the few parts of the traditional men's suit in Anglophone culture that has the opportunity to display attitude, idiosyncrasy or personality, so the ironic deployment of *dashingly* mocks the feebleness of the ostensible attempt at individuality and flair that is still so solidly, stodgily conventional.

Louise's bare throat has at least five meanings, including her vulnerability to attack by jealous wives as punishment for attracting their husbands' attention, as in the bare throat of a predator's prey. The bare throat also signifies her difference from the wives attending, connoting that she might be erotically available for an affair in eschewing her possession of/by a rich husband. It displays her erotic worth in her powerful beauty instead of exaggerating and over-compensating jewellery on aging divorcees. It demonstrates her lack of trophies from exes, indexical of her refusal of the possessive materialist monogamy-normative culture of the wives. And her erotic appeal to the narrator is signalled, their attention drawn to her bare neck, a common erogenous zone. Figurative language is used for diverse and sometimes opposing effects in the novel. Metaphor/metonymy is often used for humanising, eroticising and aestheticising the lover's body. But synecdoche is here used to de-humanise what the narrator sees as the replaceable fools trapped inside the prison of marital conventions. Louise's qualities, by contrast, heighten her erotic appeal

for the narrator. The diverse uses of these linguistic devices are a testament to the complex aesthetic strategies at work in Winterson's text.

Another figurative device in the novel exploits the dissonance in denotative sameness and connotative difference. Along with the use of irony to invoke antonymy in the scene in Louise's kitchen, Winterson elsewhere exploits the subtle connotative differences between synonyms in English as part of eroticising the narrator's subjective sensual experiences of the world in the epicentre of a romance. Following the starfish passage, and following the first time the narrator sleeps with Louise, the narrator states:

The sun won't stay behind the blind. The room is flooded with light that makes sine waves on the carpet. The carpet that looked so respectable in the showroom has a harem red to it now. I was told it was burgundy. (73)

The presence of their sexual practice gives the red colour of the carpet erotic connotations for the narrator as part of a sustained anti-realist device whereby their subjective experience of sexual practice creates a hyper-eroticism in the world around them. This is visible in the frequent use of the pathetic fallacy (Burris 888), such as when the new lovers are happy and having sex a lot—"Wettest June on record" (20)—or when the narrator acquiesces to their sad erotic life with the misogynist caricature that is Gail Right: "Driest June on record" (150). The device of the eroticised synonyms for red is notable because it is echoed by the same device in the sex scenes in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, as I illustrate in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that linguistic devices are used to construct a lesbian eroticism of style in *Written on the Body* in four areas: eroticising violence; orality and digitality towards/between women via metaphor/metonymy; subjective experiences of time and colour; and satirical synecdoche.

What my analysis demonstrates is that this work of canonical postmodern queer lesbian literature has been read largely politically or ideologically for the ways in which it enacts the transgression and subversion of heteronorms. Poststructuralist readings for the transgression of heteronorms were some of the most frequently applied methodologies to Winterson's oeuvre on the publication of *Written on the Body* and afterwards, as my own wider reading of the criticism of her novels has

revealed. This claim has begun to be made in the criticism on Winterson's novels: for example, Tyler Bradway argues that the hegemony of interpretive methods with transgression/subversion as the favoured objects of queer theory has led to Winterson's works being read exclusively for these qualities, or being abandoned as objects of analysis as they come to include more "positive affects," as Winterson's later work has (Bradway 185–86). Bradway contends that he wants to "recover queer cultural forms" like Winterson's that have been overlooked because of being considered not sufficiently political within queer critique understood as subversion (187). However, Bradway's critique stumbles when he tries to use critiques of ideological readings from descriptive criticism (187) in order to argue that Winterson's depictions of love are actually appropriate objects for a political queer reading in ways that have not yet been articulated (191). His attempt shows that one cannot critique queer theory's methodologies while retaining its value system; it is not easy to give up the authority of these methodologies.

Of course, it is worth recognising that it is impossible to produce an entirely non-political interpretation in feminist literary criticism—the approach is founded on the common understandings that women's lives matter, women's representation matters, and women's writing matters, and these are political values. But although it has political qualities, a novel is not a political treatise. In prioritising analysis of the political functions of *Written on the Body*, literary critics have overlooked the aesthetic functions of literary style. Sex scenes or erotic material in erotic literary fiction are not merely ornamental or libidinal; they do the work of characterisation and are an integral part of the novel's erotic discourses and aesthetic practices. If literary critics heed the call made by scholars of descriptive criticism to attend to interpretive modes outside of the orthodoxies of poststructuralism, they will relinquish the authority that political readings for transgression have conferred. Syncretic readings incorporating the approaches of formalist literary criticism may provide new insight into new and old texts.

In the next chapter of this thesis, I argue that Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1995) is a successor text to Winterson's in sex-positive lesbian literature and that it extends the contrasting erotic and elegiac discourses of *Written on the Body* to portray the narrator's conflicting experiences of grieving an unfaithful partner in the context of closeted Catholic life in mid-1990s Dublin. Donoghue is a rising-star of the Anglo-Irish literary sphere, but *Hood* remains largely overlooked—I produce the first full literature review of *Hood* criticism. As I demonstrate in the chapter, the novel's explicit and voluminous erotic material is central to *Hood*'s aesthetic effects; the novel does what it does by virtue of a lesbian eroticism of style.

Chapter 3: Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1995)

This chapter analyses how literary devices construct a lesbian eroticism of style in Emma Donoghue's second novel, *Hood* (1995), which won the Stonewall Book Award for LGBT fiction in 1997. Emma Donoghue is a diasporic Irish writer living in Canada. She is considered one of the canonical authors of 1990s-era and contemporary Anglophone lesbian literary fiction alongside peers including Jeanette Winterson, Sarah Waters, Ali Smith, Dionne Brand, and Ann-Marie MacDonald (Parker 204). Donoghue's first published novel was *Stir-Fry* (1994), a semi-autobiographical lesbian *Bildungsroman* set at an Irish university, which was shortlisted for the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction.

Hood is set in Dublin, depicting seven days in the life of Pen (Penelope) O'Grady following the death of her long-time lover Cara Wall in a car crash. Pen and Cara were lovers on and off for thirteen years beginning in high school, and Pen's account of the days after Cara's death is interspersed with her memories of their relationship. Pen lives with Cara and Cara's father in his house and teaches children at a Catholic convent-school. The central drama of the novel involves her negotiating the processes of mourning when her widowhood goes unrecognised due to her status as a closeted lesbian. Cara's estranged older sister, Kate Wall, returns from the U.S. for the funeral and her presence complicates Pen's experiences: Pen is monogamous and had struggled with Cara's infidelities throughout their relationship, but Kate was Pen's first high school crush, so Pen is forced to confront the duplicity and hypocrisy of her own desires for Kate after the loss of Cara.²⁰

The novel is a work of realist erotic lesbian literary fiction focalised through Pen as first-person narrator-protagonist. Although the novel is about loss, mourning, and death, Pen's narratorial style is frequently ironic and sarcastic, casting a humorous and critical eye on conventions such as Catholic Confession and burial rites; the authoritarian nuns of the convent-school at which she works; and the earnestness of early-1990s lesbian-feminist dogma. The book has been contextualised within contemporary Irish women's literature as upending the conventions of

²⁰ I use the word *infidelities* throughout this chapter to name Cara's other sexual relationships outside her primary relationship with Pen. The women are actually in a partially negotiated non-monogamous relationship with an uneasy implicit agreement that neither will ask for or provide details of Cara's lovers. But Pen is monogamous, psychologically and in practice, so Cara's taking other lovers causes Pen jealousy, insecurity and suffering in their "codependent" relationship (Parker) throughout the novel. Pen experiences Cara's taking other lovers as betrayals, so I term them infidelities. Pen herself also uses the word late in the novel (274).

traditionalist Irish Catholic culture and as a successor to the works of Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien (Ukić Košta 61–62). And the novel has been contextualised within early-1990s elegiac AIDS-era Anglophone lesbian literature portraying the complexities of grief and mourning alongside explicit lesbian sexual practice in the tradition of Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992) and Sarah Schulman's 1989 novel *After Delores* (Donoghue, "A Conversation" 11; Parker 212).

Criticisms of the novel by book reviewers included opinions that the literary style relied too heavily on cliché (Brownrigg; Wallace) and that the narrative was slow (Joughin) or formulaic (Scott). But reviews were generally positive, praising the intimate and moving representation of bereavement (Hook; Platt); honest and vivid characterisation (Brownrigg; Oloizia); and the witty and frequently comedic tone (Platt; Traugott; Wallace).

Hood is an overlooked early novel by a prominent contemporary lesbian author whose more recent works are receiving increasing attention in the mainstream. The dearth of criticism on *Hood* reflects the novel's overlooked status. There are 18 works of published literary criticism analysing *Hood* in some capacity, but only seven of these works contain analyses longer than half a page. These seven works are still quite brief; only three of them are more than a few pages long. There is also very little citational connection between texts in the *Hood* criticism. Of the 18 published texts, only three of them cite any other scholars on *Hood*, so there is significant repetition in the material chosen for analysis and the theoretical frameworks. The most substantial of these somewhat sparse citations is Abigail Palko's 2016 book section, which cites six other *Hood* scholars, notably due to Palko's book being published from her PhD thesis.

My thesis contributes the first full scholarly bibliography and literature review of *Hood* criticism.²¹ The theoretical frameworks and approaches used to analyse *Hood* in the critical texts largely

²¹ There are 18 works of *Hood* criticism, including 11 minor works with less than one page of material and with only generalised summarising or re-description (Jeffers; Mahony; Mulvihill; G. O'Brien; Parker; Patten; Peach; St. Peter; Ukić Košta; Van Marle; Wingfield). There are seven major works of *Hood* criticism, three of which are mostly not relevant for my analysis (Clewell; K. O'Brien; Young), leaving four major texts of *Hood* criticism relevant to the argument of this thesis (Palko; Palmer; Pelan; Quinn).

This is in stark opposition to the 67 works of criticism on *Written on the Body* and the hundreds of articles and theses on Winterson's wider oeuvre. This dearth of *Hood* criticism and citational scholarly conversation on the novel is partly a problem of access: the ProQuest Literature Online database, incorporating the MLAIB and ABELL bibliographies, lists only two of these texts on *Hood*. A further eight of the texts were found in the publisher's peritextual material at the back of the 2011 re-print edition, and the remaining nine were identified through the

correspond to the major traditions theorising and analysing lesbian eroticism that I summarised in this thesis's introduction: poststructuralist queer theory (Jeffers; Parker; Pelan; Quinn); psychoanalytic criticism (Clewell; Palko); genre criticism (Palmer; Pelan); and lesbian-feminism (Wingfield). The major elements of the novel analysed in *Hood* criticism are the transgression and subversion of heteronorms (Jeffers; Parker; Patten; Pelan; Quinn Ukić Košta; Van Marle; Young); the politics of lesbian representation (Clewell; Jeffers; Quinn; Van Marle; Wingfield; Young) and Irish literary tropes (K. O'Brien; Patten; Pelan; Van Marle). It also includes readings of contra-misogynist "rehabilitation" of menstrual eroticism (Parker; Quinn); clitoral hood eroticism (Clewell; Parker; Quinn); Catholic culture (Quinn; Ukić Košta); intertextuality with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Pelan; Quinn; Van Marle) and Homer's *The Odyssey* (Pelan); Gothic genre conventions (Palmer); the psychology of mourning (Clewell); and mother-daughter relationships (Palko). My literature review traces the analysis of lesbian eroticism and literary style in *Hood* criticism, focussing on the four most relevant texts, with reference to some of the more minor works where appropriate.

The issue of reviewer and critic anxiety over erotic material in lesbian fiction has important consequences for criticism of explicit lesbian texts including *Hood*. Because my analysis focusses on the relationship between lesbian eroticism and literary style, it is worth attending to the ways in which these components were received by book reviewers. Negative book reviews characterised the lesbian representation as archaic (Brownrigg); only of interest to a niche market (Brownrigg; Joughin); and "chic" or cynical and fashionable (Brownrigg). Positive reviews praised the universality of its love story (Wallace); insight into lesbian life (Oloizia); "jaunty, juicy style" (Brownrigg); and the "courageously upfront treatment of lesbian sexuality" (Wallace). Negative reviews of the literary style appraised it as reliant on cliché (Brownrigg; Wallace); overblown (Wallace); formulaic (Joughin); or excessively quotidian (Steinberg). However, a larger number of positive judgements of the literary style were made, noting Donoghue's stylish writing (Hagestadt); clarity (Wallace); confidence and "occasional sustaining descriptive flashes of a born writer" (Lockerbie); naming Donoghue a "terrific writer" (Orleans) or stating that "when she gets it right, Donoghue's style is a joy" (Wallace).

relatively recent privilege of access to Google Scholar and some creative Boolean searching. But this lack of scholarly attention is also a result of the novel having been overlooked critically and undersold commercially, although I think this will change with Donoghue's increasing prominence in the mainstream literary sphere.

It is worth recognising at the outset of a discussion on the lesbian eroticism of *Hood* the extent to which the critical reception of the novel divulges an anxiety about it. This is visible in book reviews, which express exasperation at the apparent growing prominence of lesbian novels (Joughin) or the minoritarian nature of lesbian representation (Brownrigg; Joughin). One reviewer claimed that the novel was “all well and good for Donoghue’s readers who specifically want to read about lesbians,” criticising the “compulsion to explain that lesbians have earth-shattering sex,” which the reviewer understood as “risk[ing] alienating the general reader” (Joughin), by which I assume she meant a straight reader determined to remain unruffled. Many of the reviews and the minor works of *Hood* criticism respond to the explicit and graphic lesbian sexual representation of the book by honestly acknowledging their own or other people’s shock at the material, as in this critic’s quote from 2014: “Pen’s sexual fantasies, vivid descriptions of masturbation and love making with Cara are certainly the most controversial parts of this book that still manage to defy Irish Catholic morality at the turn of the century” (Ukić Košta 60). There is also a particular kind of performative nonchalance among some reviewers uncomfortable with the explicit lesbian material, an implicit compensatory unflappability.²² This attitude is visible in the argument that Donoghue’s “dull” representation of lesbian sex was necessary for lesbian readers ten years ago (in 1985) but presumably not “now” (1995) when “the 15 minutes [of lesbian ‘chic’] are just about up” (Brownrigg). Despite Brownrigg’s prediction, erotic lesbian fiction is, of course, still being written.

This anxiety around the lesbian eroticism of *Hood* is evidenced even nine years later, rather crudely, in a copy of Paulina Palmer’s *Lesbian Gothic* (2004) I borrowed from Monash University. The book has been vandalised over the author’s close reading of a lesbian eroticism of style (87):

²² I have noticed this performative nonchalance in reviews of other explicit lesbian fiction as well, a kind of *I’m-not-shocked-even-if-less-sophisticated-readers-might-be* attitude.

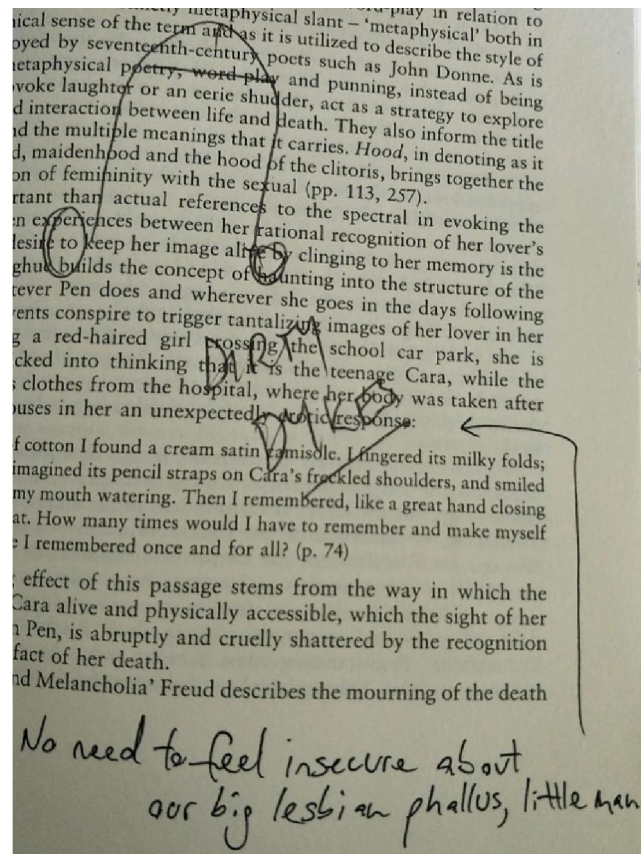


Fig. 1. Vandalised page of *Lesbian Gothic*

The sexual material of this novel unnerves people, from reviewers to critics to publishers to vandals. I count 25 erotic mentions in the novel, including 13 erotic moments and seven explicit sex scenes over 16 pages—and there is only one close reading of lesbian eroticism in the extant criticism that is partially formalist (Palmer).

The 2011 reprint of *Hood* is accompanied by the publisher's epitext, including a brief piece of literary criticism on Pen's characterisation; an interview with Donoghue about *Hood*; and a set of discussion questions. The voluminous graphic lesbian sex is mentioned only once in each section, and the manner of these mentions is telling. In the section on Pen's characterisation, the sex scenes are appraised politically in terms of their laudable openness about women's bodies and sexuality and their resistance to the "othering" of lesbians in wider Irish society in favour of lesbian assimilation ("A Closer Look" 6). In the interview, the question is posed to Donoghue about Pen and Cara's "very intimate sexual life": "Was it difficult to write the sex scenes and integrate them into the plot?" as if the sex scenes are an indulgence that need to be redeemed by being safely located in the real literary business of plot-forwarding. Donoghue answers: "Readers are sometimes surprised that certain of my books have lots of sex and others have almost none. . . . *Hood* is about the loss of a lover, so it seemed to call for a detailed and authentic evocation of exactly what has been lost: the suddenly truncated history of two hearts and two bodies" ("A Conversation" 10). This

quotation is later selectively cited by a *Hood* scholar in order to de-emphasise the erotic material of the novel, and as I will later detail. Of the publisher's suggested discussion questions, only one refers to the erotic material, inviting potential critics to contextualise the novel within "current debates about women's sexuality"; in other words, a political reading.

The overlooking of literary style in favour of political arguments in poststructuralist-informed queer and feminist literary criticism, which as I have shown, is visible in the Winterson and Waters criticism, is even more pronounced in the criticism on *Hood*. Critics, largely, do not know what to do with sex scenes, so they either skip them or read them in the safest and most orthodox methodologies of political critique, neutralising that unacknowledged professional anxiety around the perceived too-sexy or too-subjective erotic material.

As I ask of all the novels analysed in this thesis, why would there be such significant erotic material—*significant* in terms of both volume and impact—if it were not crucial to meaning? What might a literary critic find if they took the sex scenes and larger erotic material of these novels seriously, as seriously as critics take the other components of meaning? How does the erotic material operate not as a political argument, but as a part of a literary text? How does the style constructing the erotic material of this novel contribute to characterisation, narrative, pacing, imagery, and sensuality in the wider creation of meaning? To take the material of sex scenes seriously in literary criticism, a scholar requires competencies in analysing both lesbian fist-fucking *and* linguistic formalism.²³ My analysis aims to demonstrate what critical work at the convergence of these competencies can illuminate.

Donoghue has been seen as having "got away with a lot more, a lot sooner in the mainstream" because of having the way paved for her by the celebrated lesbian works of writers like Winterson (Wingfield 69). The lesbian relationship is not everything in this novel, nor in the other novels in this thesis, but it is prominent enough in this literary tradition to remain a worthy object of analysis.

²³ As well as being a delightfully alliterative phrase, this is also a sincere critique. There has never been a comparative critical analysis of the meaning of the lesbian fist-fucking scenes in Sarah Waters' oeuvre and very few mentions of the aesthetic functions of these scenes, despite there being at least three such scenes in three novels with vastly different meanings in context—an absence my Waters chapter will address. Emma Parker argues that Waters "reclaims sex for lesbians" in her explicit erotic texts, and notes that the fist-fucking scene was excised from the TV adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet* in 2002 (Parker 207). Sex scenes are often skipped in literary criticism and are the first thing cut from adaptations due to censorship laws distinguishing art from pornography.

As Emma Parker notes, contextualising *Hood* in *Contemporary Lesbian Fiction: Into the Twenty-First Century* (2015), explicit, embodied eroticism has been important in sex-positive lesbian fiction—affectionately named “the graphic Sapphic”—since the 1980s (Parker 207). Works like Sarah Schulman’s *After Delores* (1988) and Pat Califia’s *Macho Sluts* (1988) were understood to relinquish the “shells, waves, petals and other natural things” (Martindale 122) in order to portray a more “violent carnality” (Parker 207). As Parker notes, the naturalist imagery of pastoral lesbian-feminist literature of the 1970s was not simply replaced by more violent erotic representation; instead, erotic lesbian fiction of the 1990s incorporated the naturalist imagery historically used to represent female sexuality and the vulva/vagina within a contemporary literary tradition attending to the darker parts of lesbian erotic life, as my close reading chapters detail. And critics have argued that claiming the category of lesbian fiction matters. Claiming *lesbian* challenges the argument that lesbian literature is of poor aesthetic quality, contra-“cringelit” criticism, as I named it in Chapter 1, that lesbian fiction is “no good.” It also reclaims the term *lesbian*; and it resists the mainstreaming or “delesbianization” of lesbian literature “that arguably underpins its increasing acceptability and popularity since the late 1980s” (Parker 205). Parker subtly critiques the “diminishing lesbian presence” in the later works of authors like Winterson, Donoghue, and Smith. She argues that it is notable that Donoghue’s novel *Slammerkin* (2000), her “breakthrough” novel which won the 2002 Ferro-Grumley Award for Lesbian Fiction, and her “most successful” novel *Room* (2010), have no lesbian content (O’Neill; Parker 206).

Scholars have rightly noted that the reception of Donoghue’s work has been influenced by the backlash against feminism and against explicit lesbian representation (Wingfield 69). One *Hood* critic cites Rosalind Coward’s anxiety about books with too much sex or “sex as knowledge” failing to contextualise sex in wider discourses. Linden Peach argues:

No other subject has pushed as hard at the boundaries of the cultural construction of women and female sexuality as same-sex relationships. But writings about same-sex relationships push back further boundaries, too—of desire, history, family, community and even nation. Of course, this is what happens in the texts with the most sophisticated conceptual reach. In others, the sexuality is the primary interest and the work crosses over into erotic, sensational fiction. The literary critic Rosalind Coward’s concern with texts that emphasize “sex as knowledge” is that there is a danger, as in the erotic, sensation novel, that they “may well obscure the fact that sex is implicated in society as a whole.” (44–45)

It is worth noting, however, that although Peach published this claim in 2007, the citation from Coward is from 1984—the height of the Sex Wars and the fear that lesbian writing would not be taken seriously if it had too much sex. This is exactly the anxiety about the relationship between literary quality or aesthetic merit and explicit lesbian sex representation that I trace in Chapter 1 of this thesis; it is the anxiety at the heart of lesbian “cringelit” criticism. Critics making this point in the bodies of criticism on Winterson, Donoghue, and Waters are usually arguing that these authors laudably overcome the risk of collapsing into titillation or sensationalism characteristic of the spurned genres of lesbian fiction historically: exploitative male-authored pulp in the 1950s and 1960s; earnest lesbian-feminist political allegories of the 1970s and 1980s; commercial romance fiction; or erotica. Emma Parker argues:

While the term “lesbian” becomes increasingly complex, contested, and indeterminate around the millennium, by describing their work as “lesbian,” authors [such as Sarah Waters] challenge the view that gay literature is no good, partly a legacy of 1950s lesbian pulp fiction. (205)

Despite the presence of so much sex, the works of Winterson, Donoghue and Waters are usually deemed to qualify as quality lesbian fiction. In this thesis, I apply formalist literary criticism to analyse the earlier, “most” lesbian, most erotic works of these now-acclaimed authors in order to avoid their earlier works being overlooked for being too lesbian, too erotic or too juvenile in favour of the sophisticated literary historical fictions that they subsequently wrote. Sex and style are meaningful in their earlier erotic lesbian novels, and worth attending to as crucial elements in a history of sex-positive lesbian literature.

The *fact* of the explicit lesbian sex scenes in *Hood* is frequently commented upon as a political strategy for the transgression and subversion of conservative Irish Catholic culture (Patten; Quinn) and for opposing the force of closetedness (Van Marle 124). Where scholars refer to particular representations, their interpretations almost exclusively take place in the generalised mode of close reading involving re-description of characterisation or plot, with the occasional mention of “imagery” gesturing to the work of figurative language. The criticism of this novel thus forms an instance of the wider phenomenon I identified in the Introduction to this thesis: the dearth of formalist approaches and the privileging of political arguments among critics of women’s and queer literature has led to voluminous now-orthodox readings of transgression and subversion and chronic overlooking of wider aesthetic functions like those of literary style. Of the 18 works of *Hood* criticism, there is only one I can classify as a partially formalist close reading attending to the

lesbian eroticism *and* the qualities of the literary language. While the Winterson and Waters criticism includes analyses by several of the major critics of contemporary lesbian fiction, in the *Hood* criticism the only such critic is Paulina Palmer, and it is no coincidence that hers is the most formalist of the readings. The prominent scholars of lesbian literary fiction of the last 25 years tend to apply their New-Criticism-informed training in close reading *and* analysis of lesbian eroticism across lesbian texts, so when their essays form part of the criticism on Winterson, Donoghue, or Waters, they are usually among the critics working closest to my critical objective of analysing a lesbian eroticism of style.²⁴

There is very little close reading analysis of the details of the sex scenes and wider erotic material of the novel in the extant criticism, but there is some. Those analyses that interpret the erotic material focus mostly on two representations: the hood eroticism and the longer menstrual sex scene it is part of. The menstrual sex scene is interpreted politically as an antinormative gesture refusing the misogynist scatologising of menstruation (Clewell 140; Parker 207; Quinn 158). The hood imagery has been read as representing Pen's experience of mourning her lost lesbian lover while being in the closet. The various *hoods* are portrayed as simultaneously veiling and unveiling, protecting and exposing, and complexly eroticised: Catholic school uniform hood, clitoral hood, maidenhood, widowhood (Parker 211; Quinn 158–59). Several other erotic moments in the text have been briefly read for their characterisation in useful ways. The presence of anger and aggression in Pen's complex and conflicted desire for Cara has been noted: "In shifting emotions of endearment, Pen lays accusation, anger, graphic body descriptions onto intimate revelations of Cara's personal faults" (K. O'Brien 59). The darkness of that eroticism has been read as part of portraying the "emotional complexity of lesbian lives" (211–12) in the tradition of the lesbian romance/anti-romance genre.

As with the criticism on the lesbian eroticism, the critical commentary on the literary style of Donoghue's text is relatively sparse. Critics have sometimes, albeit very briefly, argued that Donoghue's emphasis is on the literary qualities of the text, not its political activism (Van Marle 123) and that Donoghue valued style in her own readings of earlier lesbian fiction (Quinn 147). Colm Tóibín includes Emma Donoghue among contemporary women authors of Irish fiction who

²⁴ These critics include Sonya Andermahr, Marilyn Farwell, Susan Lanser, Kaye Mitchell, and Paulina Palmer, who all published partially formalist analyses of Waters' or Winterson's novels and have also often edited the essay collections on these authors.

move away from the “formally conservative” quality of Irish fiction (Pelan 118). The sensuality of the text has been noted in Pen’s descriptions of food and sex with Cara (Quinn 158) and Pelan notes “the author’s construction of [Pen] as a sensualist in the style of Molly Bloom” (11).

Paulina Palmer, in what I appraise as the only formalist analysis of *Hood*, reads several of the erotic moments of the novel as examples of psychological hauntings. She notes how the narrative qualities suit the representation of mourning: a seven-day narrative, a single narrator, few location changes, and the claustrophobic tone (85). She reads the line “I woke wet, my body straining to her ghostly wrist” as an example of Pen’s being haunted by Cara’s absence (87). A scene in which Pen mistakes a red-headed girl for Cara is read as Pen’s mind being tricked (87). The “disturbing” passage about fondling Cara’s clothes—with the line “I fingered its milky folds” that so offended our local vandal of Palmer’s text—is analysed as producing its disturbing effect through “shattering” the eroticism of the clothes in the renewed knowledge of Cara’s death (87). Palmer analyses how “the use of word play and punning that characterizes the novel’s narrative style” creates a “macabre wit” which she classifies as metaphysical, both philosophically and in the tradition of seventeenth-century poets like John Donne (87). Palmer briefly re-describes the scene where Pen tries to masturbate but ends up accidentally imagining Cara’s rotting fingers as representing the conflict in Pen between keeping hold of Cara and giving her up by juxtaposing the states that exemplify the Bakhtinian grotesque: the body as sexual object and as corpse (88). However, Palmer’s decontextualisation of the “milky folds” passage has caused her to err in her interpretation. The clothes are not Cara’s, they are her sister Kate’s, and this fundamentally alters an analysis of the eroticism of the scene, since it would need to include an analysis of Cara’s distance from Pen; Pen’s assumptions about Cara’s apparent lifestyle indexed in her ill-suited and normatively femme clothes; and Pen’s ongoing attraction to Kate complicating the monogamist worldview she hypocritically subscribes to—which Pen does admit, late in the novel. My analysis examines these issues.

There is, however, one critic producing something close to an analysis of a lesbian eroticism of style in Donoghue’s work—but not on *Hood*. Linden Peach published a brilliant short close reading of Donoghue’s first novel, *Stir-Fry*, arguing that that language is central to the eroticism and desire of Donoghue’s deceptively simple realist prose. Peach argues that Donoghue’s prose is “more subtle and complex than might at first appear,” deftly analysing a passage depicting an unremarkable evening moment between dorm-room housemates that is nevertheless thick with meaning and unspoken desire, with Peach reading simple prose for characterisation, identity liminality, and vulval eroticism (51). Peach later constructs a close reading of the language of sexual practice in other works of Irish fiction (134). As a critic, she takes sex scenes seriously and

comparatively, both within the scene and between scenes. This kind of analysis is what I argue can be expanded and informed by stylistics to examine the functions of a lesbian eroticism of style in the voluminous erotic scenes of *Hood*.

The tone of *Hood* is elegiac, mournful, and claustrophobic (Palmer), but also ironic and witty and in places, joyful. The novel is mostly realist, juxtaposing the upheaval of Pen's mourning with the banality of her closeted life as she goes to work, makes funeral arrangements, interacts with Cara's father and sister, and feels her feelings to their depths. Pen is sensitive to grammar and sometimes acknowledges the subjectiveness and the deficiencies of her narration to the fictional reader (Baldick, "Naratee") who is also sometimes herself (243). I classify *Hood* as only "mostly" realist because there are moments of the novel that are metafictional or fantastical, particularly in the emotionally charged figurative language of erotic material and sex scenes.

The lesbian eroticism of *Hood* is prominent, explicit, complex, and often piercingly juxtaposed with the conservatism of Irish Catholic culture or the unsexy material of mourning. The nine sex scenes of *Hood* form a narrative arc that introduces increasingly more complex and ambivalent characterisations of Pen and Cara. These scenes form explorations of Pen's mourning in the present, often balanced uncomfortably with eroticised memories and her reconciliation across the book with the juxtaposed banality and cruelties of their "codependent" relationship (Parker).

Close Readings

Pen's narrative begins on the Sunday that she learns of Cara's death. The convent-roof scene is the first of the erotic scenes and forms the final sentences of the Sunday chapter; it recounts the moment that they first became lovers. I have quoted from the scene before and after in the passage below because the context of the sex scenes in the novel matters. Pen has woken from a period-drama nightmare of Cara being taken away from her by a menace whose face she cannot bear to see (26). In desperation, needing to sleep, Pen narrates that she is drawing upon her memory of the day they first became lovers like a charm to ward off the recognition of their end. Pen narrates:

The edge of the pillow wrapped round my eyes, I reached for an image of something warm and real, to clear the shreds of that costume-drama nightmare out of my head. A memory of our beginning, maybe, to ward off our end.

Sun and skin were the things that brought us together in the first place. Not a Greek island but our own island of concrete and iron, floating above Dublin. This was a film so old

and re-run I couldn't tell fact from fiction. It was a memory I saved for when I really needed it, in case I wore it out. (28)

Cara takes Pen to the convent-school roof to do some drawing. The two girls are alone, and Cara has been lamenting the loss, over the summer holidays, of a female teacher she has a crush on:

“You don't understand,” Cara tells me. “If I didn't love Mrs Mew I'd be nothing. I'm just a haze of iron filings round her magnet.”

Cara takes my hand, shyly. It's not something we tend to do. “You have the second-nicest eyes in the world.”

“Why, thank you kindly, ma'am.”

“I wish, Pen. I dunno, I'd like to smile at you. I haven't given you a real smile in ages.”

The faint lips are opening as if to go on explaining, and I kiss them. They are so much softer and less frightening than I expected. I kiss them again, because she hasn't said no.

Then Cara does the most extraordinary thing. She opens the top three buttons of her blouse, picks up my hand and puts it in. She has always claimed to be flat, but under the hot sheen of fabric something is pointing into my palm. I have no idea what to do.

Her eyes are white with surprise.

Experimentally, I curve one finger down, and her eyes narrow, and her mouth slides as if to say something. I kiss the dry lips again. The bell for end of lunch goes, ten times in all. This is the signal for breaking the spell, gathering our possessions and wits, going back to the real world. Neither of us moves.

I suck soft air into my mouth. This rooftop is no longer attached; it has become our flying carpet, nine miles above the convent, sailing nearer to the sun. Cara is pulling up her hem. She is so near I can hear her breathe. She is cradled in my hot skirt. I would do anything for this girl. I will make her smile, make merry, make up for it all. (30–31)

MONDAY

I woke wet, my body straining to her ghostly wrist. (35)

In a classic trope of the lesbian romance genre, what facilitates the girls' burgeoning eroticism is their bonding over desire for another. Pen's compassion and her frustration at Cara's suffering over

her schoolgirl crush on Mrs Mew motivates her to try to ease Cara's burden. Pen surprises herself by kissing Cara and so enacts the trope of *what-you-want-was-here-all-along*, and she is surprised again by Cara's escalation of their erotic practice. Pen later claims: "Having fallen for Cara in the context of her infatuation with someone else, I could hardly have expected this to be a conventional relationship. Mrs Mew . . . was the key, the catalyst, the flagpole on which we hung out our days" (214). Of course, as Pen may not know, finding the way to lesbian desire through the proxy of desire for another is a conventional structure in the lesbian *Bildungsroman*. The same trope is present in Waters' novels in the lesbian romance/anti-romance. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Kitty finds Nan dressing as a boy for the stage and she overcomes the restraints of their unspoken desire and their internalised homophobia through the illusion of desire for another: Kitty states, "What a handsome boy, I can't resist him" and then kisses Nan for the first time. In *Fingersmith*, Maud fraudulently performs ignorance of marital sexual practice to compel the frustrated Sue into enacting the tropes of *practising-for-boys* and *I'll-show-you-how-it's-done*. The tropes of the lesbian romance genre in these novels show the ways that young queer women characters use and misuse their lesbian knowledge/ignorance to facilitate lesbian desire.

Pen often speaks about the qualities of her narration and how her accounts are influenced by her mood, by nostalgia, and by the warping effects of subjective memory.²⁵ Pen acknowledges her narration as a performative ritual of denial, to begin at the start of their erotic relationship in order to "ward off our end" (28). The memory is precious to her, and she articulates it as a powerful recollection she must ration lest the forces of repetition and banality debase its worth. In prefiguring the narration as performative and possibly laced with invention, Pen also opens up space for the fantastical element that emerges in the final sentences. Notably, it is the surprise and wonder of Pen's experience of her emergent lesbian eroticism that *makes* the language fantastical. There is magic imagery in the bell whose toll, like Cinderella's at the ball, is "the signal for breaking the spell," connoting Pen's feelings of wonder but also her fears that this is too good to be true and might be rescinded outside these magical moments. There is an unusual literary device in the phrase "gathering our possessions and wits": *zeugma*, a pun in which a single verb takes one concrete and one abstract object (Brogan, "Zeugma" 1383). The device creates an awkwardness in syntax that has historically often been used comically. Here it suggests how very far from the respectable real

²⁵ Pen's acknowledgement of her unreliability as a narrator contradicts Quinn's claim that Donoghue must be critical in the same ways as Pen because Pen's account is "a first-person narrative whose narrator is consistently endorsed" (106). Quinn's somewhat simplistic interpretation of the authorial/narratorial relationship was briefly critiqued in the extant criticism by Clewell, who implied it was a misstep "in an otherwise perceptive reading" (178).

world below the girls have gone or the scatter-brained sensation of Pen's being suddenly hot for this girl with a host of raw feelings: trepidation, anxiety, adventurousness, and thrill. Gathering their possessions and wits after such an encounter would make an ungainly armful indeed, that ungainliness reflected in Pen's syntax. There is a notable upswing in the density of rhyme and syntactic repetition in the final sentences:

She is so near I can hear her breathe.

She is cradled in my hot skirt.

I would do anything for this girl.

I will make her smile, make merry, make up for it all.

As I argue of all the novels in this thesis, sound-patterning brings a sensuality to the literary text which is especially apt for depictions of eroticism. Sound-patterning triggers language into being considered an object of aesthetic contemplation; it imitates sonically what is being represented; it embodies the mood or emotions of a passage; and it creates connections between words (Brogan, "Sound" 1176). These are some of the functions of sound-patterning: eroticised poetic prose activates them simultaneously. Pen's final statements in the scene also abstract away from the actions of sex to the feelings of sex at a moment, we can presume, that would have the most action thus far. There is a subtle change of tense here from the present *I can* to the conditional *I would* to the simple future *I will*, with the pubescent Pen's thoughts spooling from the present to a future blooming with this girl. Donoghue's sex scenes cleave closer to the concrete and specific as part of her realist mode than Winterson's, but Donoghue's realism is ramped up into more fantastical moments by the crescendos of eroticism.

The figure depicting the convent as a flying carpet is a notable and rare instance of metaphor in the novel. Donoghue's most common device of figurative language is simile, which explicitly states the symbolic connection between made using *as* or *like*. Simile requires the reader to make a smaller cognitive leap because the comparison is made explicit; metaphor requires a larger cognitive shift because the comparison is implicit, making the reader work harder. The distinction matters because the type of figurative language used has consequences in the wider aesthetic strategy of a novel, as I argued of the simultaneous metaphor/metonymy devices in *Written on the Body*, and a comparison with Winterson's novel is useful here. The figurative language in the erotic scenes of Winterson's neo-Romantic novel is lush, exuberant, bawdy, and sensual, and she uses fantastic elements and metaphor to portray the outrageousness of the narrator's subjective experiences of sexual desire and practice. The figurative language in the erotic scenes of *Hood*, by contrast, is simpler and more

restrained, with the frequent use of simile facilitating connotative transfer within the limits of a mostly realist mode. Fantastical elements and soaring metaphor are rarer, but this relative scarcity means that instances of these devices are more prominent and significant. Donoghue's novel at this moment on the convent roof is strongly intertextual with Winterson's, particularly in two passages. The first is when *Written on the Body*'s narrator climbs to the highest bedroom of Louise's house when they first become lovers, ascending like Rapunzel's suitors, ascending a twisting staircase to a tower that becomes more and more mythical, "where birds beat against the windows and the sky was an offering" (51). The second passage is in the final paragraph of the novel, when Louise returns and for the narrator, "the walls are exploding" and "moon and stars are magnified in this room" (190). Both scenes use bombastic and dramatic language to portray the narrator's outrageous, exuberant eroticism at the moment of the starting or the re-starting of an erotic relationship. This is exactly the function of the fantastic language emerging from more realist prose in Donoghue's scene. The metaphor of the rooftop as flying carpet is intertextual with *The Arabian Nights* (Casey 223) and connotes a temporary but magical experience of radical freedom from what is below: the homophobic moral judgement of a Catholic convent-school and wider Irish Catholic culture. This distance from the world below is also a function of the synecdoche which, like Winterson's, dehumanises the other people and emphasises the lovers' psychological, cultural, and sexual otherness: "For a while we sit against the warmth of the wall, peering over our elbows at the world we have escaped from. Black-habited ants inch along the front drive; red jumpers loll and chase across the back lawn" (29).

And consider the line, *I woke wet, my body straining to her ghostly wrist*. Paulina Palmer in *Lesbian Gothic* (87) reads the line as an example of Pen's being haunted by Cara's absence, as part of a wider aesthetic strategy deploying Gothic tropes in *Hood*. The line does have that aesthetic function, but there are qualities of style involved that do this and more. The alliteration and series of staccato monosyllables in *I woke wet* makes this a rhythmically punchy kind of opening to the line. A reader might expect the narrative to have moved on from the remembered sex scene into the real life of Pen's Monday morning; the surprising presence of eroticism matches the narrator's shock at being wrenched out of her erotic dreams into the sad reality of her lonely wetness in Cara's absence. The punchy opening words are followed by a pause produced by the comma, an emergent rhythm is then produced by alternating stresses in the clause that follows: *my **body straining to her ghostly wrist***. The alternating stresses give this line a subtle kind of galloping rhythm; it is, in fact, a line in iambic pentameter meter. It is an instance of rhythm emerging from unmetered prose for aesthetic effect. Rhythm deployed in sex scenes contributes to the sensuality of language; the mimetic function of sound-patterning (Brogan, "Sound" 1176) in which linguistic form matches

Pen's movements in these moments. The galloping of the iambs may also mirror Pen's potentially feeling the pulses of the cisgender female orgasm, whose rhythm is closer to the crescendo of a ringing bell than, shall we say, the pop of a champagne-cork oft dramatised elsewhere. Iambic pentameter is also perhaps the most well-known metre in English to non-specialists because of its history of being taught in the works of Shakespeare. Even students of high school English who can name no other metre know iambic pentameter, so a line in this metre triggers that expectation of aestheticised language: a function of sound-patterning (Brogan, "Sound" 1176).

The starkness of this line alone on the page amplifies the bold opening words and the emergent rhythm, but these concrete qualities of the line also have a loneliness to them, locating Pen in a liminal place between the eroticism of her dreaming and emptiness of her waking bed. *Straining to her ghostly wrist* is a lesbian eroticism of digitality between women but *ghostly* lends a creepy Gothic otherness to what ought to be most familiar and intimate to Pen: her lover's wrist. *Straining* also has some semantic ambiguity that opens up multiple readings here. *Straining* denotes the muscle motions of Pen's sexual practice, whether in her dream or awake or both. But *straining to* also has the meaning of straining *towards* something that is maddeningly out of reach, where *straining to(wards) her ghostly wrist* could connote Pen's desperation to secure the touch that will no longer come. And *straining* also has the meaning of struggling against restraint to the point of injuring oneself, which is, on an emotional level, what Pen is doing: She is dreaming of Cara's presence to refuse Cara's absence only to torture herself anew with the woken realisation of Cara's death. Compared to a hypothetical synonym such as *arching*, *straining* is an ambiguous, ambivalent verb whose transitivity and negative connotations facilitate these multiple readings of eroticised struggle and suffering. It is uniquely suited to a depiction of complex, dark eroticism infused with mourning. Many of Donoghue's word-choices are like this and attending to style can help identify the work that literary devices are doing in the aesthetic strategies of this text.

In the next sex scene of the novel, a minor one, Pen remembers lounging in a hammock with Cara upon a yellow cushion:

On the grass lay a cushion I made years ago of dirty yellow brocade from an old jacket of my mother's. I knew I should take it inside and wash it, but it looked so well against the grass that I left it there.

I remembered that cushion from a few summers back. Cara and I in the hammock after mass, limbs entwined under a shifting blanket of Sunday supplements. I had stuck a row of buttercups between her toes. My hand was a daredevil mouse, scrabbling between

layers of newsprint, creeping under her hem of Indian gauze. Cara's hiss of protest trailed off, and her head sagged back on the yellow cushion. "Lie still," I whispered, "you've got a touch of the sun." The huge scent of her clouded around us, filling the garden. I remembered the swallowing up of my thumb, and that look of hers, like fury, like astonishment. (75)

The lovers are literally wrapped in conventions of conservatism and respectability: the post-Mass rest; the Sunday newspaper; buttercups. But Pen's words are an ironic citation of an Anglophone discourse of caretaking and frailty, the rich yellow of the cushion Cara reclines on and her buttercupped toes in the sunshine all *a touch of the sun* while touched by her punning lover. The imperative mood of *Lie still* is softened by its being whispered, a citation of the care-giving figure, but it retains the erotic thrill of a command, albeit for the purpose of her lover's pleasure, making it an instance of what in BDSM culture is called *service topping* (Kinkly, "Service Top"). Desire in this passage is marked by intensity, but not emotions we would generally think of as positive—the intensity of Cara's look "like fury, like astonishment"; the eroticised narrative of Cara's resistance subsiding, submitting. Pen's description focuses on her experience of pleasuring her lover evoked through the dissonance of synaesthesia ("huge scent") and hyperbole ("filling the garden"). Pen's awe at the "swallowing up" of her thumb portrays lesbian sex, like in *Written on the Body*, as a neo-Romantic sublime.

A significant part of any erotic lesbian novel is flirtation: the erotically charged non-sexual interactions between queer women before and after they become lovers. These interactions often form the bulk of the erotic material in lesbian fiction of several genres. In some lesbian fiction, this is because of the labour of overcoming external or internalised homophobia in homophobic cultures or times, as in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) or Shamim Sarif's *The World Unseen* (2001). In other lesbian fiction, it is because the journey from unacknowledged lesbian desire to explicit lesbian sexual practice is the central transformation of the novel, as in the lesbian *Bildungsroman*, or because the temptation to enact lesbian desire illicitly is the engine powering all that drama, as in *Written on the Body*. Like the wider erotic material, flirtation, too, is generally overlooked in literary criticism on lesbian fiction—except where it displays transgression or subversion.²⁶ But authors make time and space for flirtations between women in erotic lesbian

²⁶ As, for example, in "Textual Temptation: The Poetics of Flirtation in the Works of Eight 20th-Century Women Writers," a 1999 PhD thesis by Gladys Eileen Haunton that argues via Lacanian theory that the flirtation in Jeanette Winterson's *Art and Lies* "demonstrates the political dimension of textual flirtation by focusing its deconstructive power on social as well as textual practices" (Haunton ii). The author celebrates female resistance to patriarchal

fiction and these scenes are part of the aesthetic strategies of novels in this genre. At Sarah Waters' Melbourne Writers Festival appearance in 2015, the audience Q&A was dominated by queer women expressing their pleasure and gratitude for Waters' representations. One audience member commented: "Your books make queer women everywhere feel seen and represented which is just really, a rare thing . . . Something I think queer women appreciate is the way you do queer sort of flirtations, and queer lust, the love affair, so authentically." The audience member went on to ask: "Is there something about the way queer women sort of, charm each other, or are attracted to one another, the sort of queer attraction, that's different to the way heterosexual romance happens? And what is it that you're capturing so well there?" Water replied that she "often take[s] on a genre and write[s] it with emotional realism," even in a "crazy Victorian melodrama" like *Fingersmith*. Reflecting on her composition of flirtations between women, she stated:

I'll tell you what makes a difference—Society is organised around heterosexual attraction and so, I was very conscious, for example, that getting Francis and Lillian together [in *The Paying Guests*] basically had to go a much longer, slower process than I anticipated. . . . It just had to be a much more tentative thing. Had to be built up layer by layer by layer, do you know what I mean? So I don't know if that's something intrinsic about lesbian desire, but I think that the cultural limits that are placed on women—even *straight* women's desire—[inaudible] So it's all a bit more fraught, which from a novelist's point of view is very interesting, sort of doing that painstaking charting of their growing intimacy. First, as friends, but then as something—at what point does it tip over? (Waters, "Paying")

The *friends-become-lovers* trope is common in the lesbian romance genre; indeed, it is part of the central erotic drama of *Written on the Body*, *Hood*, *Tipping the Velvet*, and *Fingersmith*. Flirtations in the erotic novel can be between friends or between acquaintances or strangers and the trope changes the *kind* of flirting involved. *Hood*'s opening erotic scene is Pen's memory of the day that her friend became her lover but there is a scene of a different type of flirtation further on in the book. Pen narrates her flirtation with a woman in the Alternative Bookshop (91–94). This flirtation scene has been briefly analysed in a close reading in the existing criticism. Pen's highlighting of the woman's "BY THE WAY, I'M A DYKE" badge is read as an instance of the postmodern reclamation of injurious terms via Althusserian/Butlerian performativity:

constructs of language and representation through the formal qualities of the "flirtatious" text, somehow always selected from now-canonical avant-garde or experimental texts. I see no-one rushing to claim the mainstream commercial lesbian romance novel as politically subversive.

A seemingly insignificant label turns out to be a strong surprise attack on heterosexuality; the badge disassembles even Pen's ability to react. The statement "BY THE WAY, I'M A DYKE" reappropriates the injurious terms by which this woman and others are "hailed" very much along Butler's line of parody and repetition. (Jeffers 429)

Yes, it does. But what does the language of the scene contribute to characterisation, to themes, to the construction of eroticism, to the novel's exploration of infidelity and mourning? What aesthetic functions does the scene have in the wider strategies of the text?

Pen acknowledges that her mood has the power to alter her memory. The memory is a positive one, it is about the optimism of attraction, so she remembers it as a spring day whether it was one or not. The scene begins with a curious construction of time: "The air **smells** green **that** afternoon." This articulation draws the reader's attention through an unusual tense. It is the product of a syntactical contradiction combining the present-tense "The air **smells** green this afternoon" and the past-tense "The air smelled green **that** afternoon." The paradox of memory is that it is simultaneously of the past and experienced in the present. Pen acknowledges to the fictional reader (Baldick, "Naratee") the liminal space of her narration, her twist of syntax incorporating the paradox of memory in both content and form.

Lesbian texts eroticise the signs by which queer women identify and seduce each other. The woman is browsing in Women's Studies, the field notorious for its voluminous queers. Pen often articulates her experiences of desire through negative affects, as I will also argue of later sex scenes, so staggering over this stranger she is given what she perceives as a "devastating" grin. *Devastating* as it is commonly used in this phrase connotes *powerful* but with an undertow of *destructive*: destructive of Pen's defences, her carefully constructed composure. To the closeted Pen, to be so brazenly out about one's sexuality as the BY THE WAY, I'M A DYKE badge is unsettling and powerfully attractive. In the trope common to romance fiction, Pen's awkwardness is indexical of her desire: she apologises profusely and seeing the woman's badge makes her blush. The woman compliments Pen's waistcoat, a lesbian eroticising of dapper masculine suits common to Anglophone lesbian culture (Duguay 30). But Pen displays her internalised homophobia in her fear of wearing a waistcoat too masculine, with Radclyffe Hall's name indexical of the qualities of her character Stephen Gordon and everything Pen fears being pegged as: butch, self-loathing, unacceptably *identifiably* lesbian. All awkwardness, Pen chokes on her quiche and the woman hands Pen her own glass, a gesture of compassion and of intimacy with a hint of shared orality. Pen

is seduced against her better (internalised) judgement and pushed beyond her closeted comfort levels by the brazen outness of this girl, her nonchalance, her charisma, her confidence, “leaning back till her wooden chair rests against the wall” like every boy heart-throb in twentieth-century cinema. On the paper-thin pretence of commissioning a similar waistcoat, and ostensibly absent anything less tender to write on, the woman writes her number on the back of Pen’s hand, Pen’s desire present again in her anxiety that she “must look a right egg” and that she might “get the tickles” as the woman moves towards her wrist, an eroticised digital intimacy between women characteristic of lesbian erotic discourses. Desire thick in her throat, Pen tells the woman “hoarsely” that she doesn’t know her name; Day opens her shirt to display her ink at the convergence of throat and shoulder, angling that erogenous zone at Pen in a move flirtatiously unnecessary for a one-syllable name.²⁷

The boat necklace is one of the few figurative devices sustained across the novel; it represents Pen’s relationship to desire, and often her desire for Cara; the reader learns in this scene that the necklace was a gift from Cara on their first anniversary. In this scene in the bookshop, when Pen is thinking about pursuing another woman, her skin beneath the boat necklace is “slippery and sweet” connoting cis women’s arousal (*slippery*) and sensual oral pleasure (*sweet*). The possibility of infidelity is lost to Pen with Day’s fading digits, but Pen comes to experience that accident as relief. The bookshop scene can easily be overlooked by a critic, or the I’M A DYKE badge alone excised to support an argument, but the scene is an extended representation of flirtation between women with style eroticising language as part of the novel’s wider aesthetic strategies.

In the next erotic scene in the novel, Pen ponders the juxtaposition in Cara’s corporeal control as sexual top or bottom:

I watched her playing football with a crowd from college once, and she wasn’t clumsy at all. At high speed there seemed to be enough room for all her limbs. Oh, and Cara was never clumsy when making love to me. The stress was not on the *me* there—no doubt she was

²⁷ In urban Anglophone cultures, many young queer women have tattoos to express bodily autonomy and sovereignty in defiance of heteronormative upbringings and cultures (see Turner Carney’s “Why Do So Many Lesbians Have Tattoos?”) or because they signify belonging to lesbian culture (see Duguay 116 or Mandanas’ “Cat Whistling Your Queerness to Other Closeted Queer Ladies”). Tattoos are often located in voluntarily disclosable tender places and invite touch and conversations about embodied aesthetics and pleasures, which is why queer women talk about their tattoos to flirt with each other.

equally graceful when in bed with other people—but the *to*. As long as Cara was running the show, moving, teasing, adjusting, parting, lifting her knees over me, she was as graceful as an acrobat. But as soon as she was being made love to—keeping with these crude distinctions for a minute—she lost all control. Bliss dissolved her brain. She might throw out an arm and smash an alarm clock off a table, or hit her head off the headboard, and she was so anaesthetized by pleasure that she didn't care. I learned to clear a little space around us if I had intentions. I told her she might brain herself entirely one of these times, and she laughed lopsidedly, and said, "What a way to go." (123)

Pen often highlights syntactical and grammatical ambiguity in her own account: "The stress was not on the *me* there." She also includes a subtle critique of the top/bottom distinction in sexuality theory as a "crude distinction" somewhat inapplicable to lesbian sex: "But as soon as she was being made love to—keeping with these crude distinctions for a minute—she lost all control." There is also some characterisation here, because Pen's representation of Cara's losing herself and losing her control in pleasure contrasts with Pen, who is less spontaneous.²⁸

The next major erotic scene of the novel is the bath scene (124–26). The first time that I read this scene, I did not realise until Pen flags it that it is a speechless bath scene between the lovers. It is quite an extraordinary example of a lesbian eroticism of style because descriptive language carries the full eroticism of this scene in the absence of dialogue. It is also a good example of Donoghue's deceptively simple realist prose, what Peach has elsewhere identified as "more subtle and complex than might at first appear," and which can be productively read, as Peach does for *Stir-Fry* (51), for characterisation, identity, eroticism, and relationships. Cara lies back in Pen's arms and dozes as they take a bath together in this wordless scene. What does the reader learn from this scene? Cara is more of a hedonist than Pen, losing herself to sleep and sensation, whereas Pen is more intellectual, reading a heavy book to relax. Pen recognises that aging is changing her skin, but she does so without judgement or fear, conveying it in the verb *softening* that is neutral with a hint of positivity, soft things being pleasant to touch. Pen is careful, frugal, and completionist, concentrating on preserving the last flakes of her chocolate bar for their consumption. She is generous and values Cara's pleasure, fairly distributing chocolate crumbs despite Cara's dozing by rights forfeiting her claim to half the crumbs. In the long-term intimacy between Cara and Pen, affection and eroticism are co-constitutive. Cara sucks Pen's fingers and kisses Pen's nipple, erotic moves enacted

²⁸ Pen later narrates hesitantly deciding to walk barefoot through mud on a walk with Cara's sister Kate. Pen anticipates Cara's objections goading Pen for her trepidation (105–06).

affectionately, or affectionate moves with a hint of eroticism, with Pen acknowledging that she is “past telling” the difference. Memories of their life together suffuse the most minor of experiences for Pen; falling water evokes a waterfall they climbed once together, and Pen remembers Cara’s erotic competencies with her dextrous toes. Pen enjoys the slow pleasures of bathing Cara, showing her care through attending to Cara’s topographies; care figured as the ritual to banish the spectre of breast cancer. But there is a cheekiness to Pen infusing her desire and her affection, erotically teasing Cara with a stream of water focused on her nipple, the twist of Cara’s mouth hitching a smile or tipping over into annoyance and the playful riposte of Cara’s slapping at Pen’s nose. The scene is a depiction of eroticism without (necessarily) sexual practice, an overlaying of affectionate, tender, intimate touch of erogenous zones received ambivalently, Pen’s teasing of Cara’s nipple rebuffed. The scene cites the classic kind of erotic discourse of teasing a lover’s nipple into hardening but re-cited in a representation of the pleasures of familiar intimacies beyond want or need of words in long-term relationships.

In the next major sex scene of the novel, Pen is dreaming during a nap she takes after coming home from Cara’s funeral (152–53). Paulina Palmer briefly analyses the scene when she argues that Pen “sensuously comments” on touching Cara’s skin only to have her dream “brutally disrupted by the image of her rotting body” when she awakes (88). That sensuousness that Palmer identifies in the language of this passage is a function of sound-patterning, which becomes more prominent in the opening paragraph of this sex scene. Here are some of the instances of consonance and assonance:

In my dream I am face-down on this bed, leaning up on my elbows. My white chest is bright with sweat, scattered with hairs and crumbs and bits of red thread from my shirt. Cara’s mouth comes angling round my neck to reach my mouth; she kisses, bites my lips, pauses to take a bit of fluff out of her mouth and laughs throatily. Then her face disappears, and she is at my back again, tracing my spine with a rasping tongue till I flinch over and over, chewing on my shoulders to make them squirm. (152)

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tracing my spine with a rasping tongue till I flinch over and over, chewing on my shoulders to make them squirm.

Sound-patterning sensualises language, which is why it is so frequently used to portray sex in lesbian fiction. Highlighted in purple are the words containing syllables rhyming with parts of Cara's name, her name echoing sonically with her actions in this erotic scene.

"I can't come this way," I hiss. And then of course I roar like a woman in labour (into three pillows, so the sound won't carry down to Mr Wall's room) and I do, I do, I do. (153)

Pen's complaint *I can't come this way* fronts two sentences that begin and end with a string of monosyllables cleaved by a long parenthetical phrase that is then truncated by the abruptness of *I do, I do, I do*. The opening and closing words have in common that they express a demanding libidinal force galloping impatiently towards climax with little room for linguistic subtlety or higher-order thought. But the internal parenthetical phrase represents a co-present higher-order thought about preserving decorum and maintaining the fiction of the closet. The phrase is dropped uneasily into a passage of furious sexual action and is, like the pillow-muffler, annoyingly necessary but overcome in time for the orgasmic release at the end of the two sentences. The awkwardness of the crammed syntax of the parenthetical phrase performs linguistically Pen's experience of crudely cobbling the intrusive higher-order thought into intense libidinal experiences. Critics have noted Donoghue's "construction of [Pen] as a sensualist in the style of Molly Bloom" (Pelan 11): the three lots of *I do* echo the traditional Christian marriage vows; Molly Bloom's *yes I said yes I will yes* at the close of Joyce's *Ulysses*; the rhythmic peal of the cisgender female orgasm; as well as that bastion of Anglophone literary culture, ABBA's 1975 single *I do, I do, I do, I do, I do*.

Afterwards Cara lies flat and heavy, growing into me like a sod of grass. "Sometimes I fancy others more," she whispers to the back of my ear, "but you take me farther."

I bend my arm and reach behind to find her hip, her fuzz, the folds I have so often frisked for secrets. She leans up on her knees to make room for me. This is what I imagine parachuting to be like: as the white silk of her skin rushes through my fingers, she flaps open and we are saved. (153)

Cara's comparison uses syntactical repetition to amplify Pen's superiority. *Fancy more* is a somewhat weak verb construction with its vague immeasurability but *sometimes I fancy others*

more is still potentially quite insulting. Yet the phrase is exceeded by its syntactical twin, the verb phrase *take farther* forming an apples-and-oranges comparison that recognises Pen's unique contribution, *take farther* bringing its connotations of superior transport over impressive distance. The reader does not learn what Pen thinks of Cara's bringing up her infidelities in this moment of vulnerability, but what Pen does is revealing. *The folds I have so often frisked for secrets* connotes treasure-hunting by the adventurous lesbian lover but *frisked* also includes the more negative meaning of being searched against one's will, as by the police, for what is being hidden. This connotation is amplified through the addition of *secrets*, with *frisked for secrets* suggesting Pen's sexual exploration of Cara's desires but also her paranoid surveillance for evidence of Cara's undisclosed infidelities.

The parachuting simile does something similar. The idea that the lovers are falling together and only Pen's experience of pleasuring Cara can save them hints at the darker side of their relationship. There is something wrong with it: Cara is repeatedly inconsiderate and unfaithful, and Pen is emotionally injured and resentful. That Pen feels that she *needs* to sleep with Cara for them to be "saved" from the situation—temporarily reassured that she is not at risk of losing Cara to better lovers—demonstrates Pen hastily papering-over the flaws in their relationship and the emotional and psychological risk they are both in. Pen is trying to eroticise the safety of the parachute, but her simile drags in the negative connotations of the danger and risk that pleasuring Cara wards against. Pen is accomplished at rationalising Cara's betrayals, but she cannot quite escape the injury she claims has been averted. Of course, one reaches for a parachute at the moment of greatest danger, and it is telling that Pen's response to Cara's words is to reach for her parachute to acquire that safety and to foreclose the need for an answer in words that might reveal her ambivalences. Pen's reaching for Cara may express her reciprocal desire, but it also shuts Cara up about her infidelities. Ending on the words *we are saved* has such symbolic weight, a powerfully Christian phrase here blasphemously repurposed with the lover's body as spiritual nourishment for the lesbian apostate. With parallels in *Written on the Body*, the phrase *we are saved* cites religious doctrine for blasphemous sex-positive reasons; both writers cite traditional Christian discourses of salvation to depict the spiritual nourishment of transcendent lesbian sex with the beloved. Both authors in their aesthetic strategies dramatise the struggle between comfort and risk with a complex eroticising of both, often in the same expression—exploring that tension between *pleasure* and *danger* so central to the lesbian romance/anti-romance genre and to sex-positive lesbian criticism more widely since Barnard '82 and beyond.

There are three masturbation sex scenes in the novel forming a sustained narrative of Pen's shifting erotic practices. I will analyse the three scenes comparatively as a chronological series because they demonstrate a crucial evolution in Pen's characterisation and overcoming her grief from unsuccessful erotic practice to satisfaction. The three scenes are Pen's initial, failed masturbation attempt after Cara's funeral on Wednesday (163–64); her interrupted masturbation attempt to fantasies of Cara's sister Kate on Friday afternoon (241–43); and Pen's masturbation in the bath to memories of menstrual oral sex with Cara on Friday night (253–59).

As I stated earlier in this chapter, those analyses that interpret the erotic material of the novel focus mostly on two representations: the hood eroticism and the longer menstrual sex scene it is part of. The hood imagery has been read as representing Pen's experience of mourning her lost lesbian lover while being in the closet. In my opinion, the hood eroticism has been analysed sufficiently in the extant criticism, so my analyses will focus elsewhere. The menstrual sex scene is interpreted largely politically as an antinormative gesture refusing the misogynist scatologising of menstruation (Clewell 140; Parker 207; Quinn 158) or as evidencing Pen's disavowed maternal drives (Palko). The failed masturbation scenes are briefly mentioned in the extant criticism for being among "the most emotionally wrenching scenes of [Pen's] private mourning" (Clewell 140). My analysis examines what I argue critics have overlooked in the masturbation and menstruation sex scenes, including the work of the discursive qualities of a lesbian eroticism of style. In the case of two particular critics, I appraise their analyses as being somewhat flawed interpretations based on selective citations bordering on being misinterpretations, as I will explain.

In the first of Pen's masturbation scenes, she tries to masturbate to a memory of Cara's fingers inside her but is interrupted by the thought of those fingers rotting and she falls asleep to a disturbing fairy tale nightmare (163–64). The two sections of this scene, the masturbation attempt and the subsequent dream, are intertextual with *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Hansel and Gretel*, both of which are re-cited in a darkly erotic lesbian discourse.

Oh, Cara, what long fingers you have!

All the better to fill you with, my dear. (163)

Pen's narration slips into a rare instance of free indirect discourse, a collapsing of third- and first-person point of view. This porousness of narrative person allows Pen to occupy the memory of the

scripted pleasures of Little Red's eroticised false innocence, playfully admiring the length of Cara's assets; a lesbian eroticism of digitality.²⁹

What bothered me now was the thought of those fingers beginning to putrefy in the cemetery. Dead fingers inside me, so cold I couldn't heat them up. ("Let's find somewhere cosy to put them," I used to joke on winter nights, "I guarantee they'll get warm.") (163–64)

Pen as narrator sometimes tries to enter erotic discourses but finds that the decaying organic body of the beloved is pressing itself in on her thoughts in these moments. As I argued of the line *I shall worm you to the stone* from *Written on the Body*, there is a juxtaposition and an alternating of the neo-Romantic discourse of welcome, pleasure, and bounty, with the lesbian anti-romance and necrophiliac violence of penetration, rotting, and decay. Devices of punctuation and quoted direct discourse mark the distance between Pen-in-the-present and the warmth and eagerness of her desire for Cara in winters past.

But the eroticism does not end with Pen's aborted masturbation attempt and instead continues in her dream. The dream is a perversion of *Hansel and Gretel* with Pen in the subject position of the hungry child.

How long has this cottage been standing empty?
Maybe she hasn't been here in years.
Maybe one day she never came back from the woods.
How am I to be fought, taught, held in thrall, if the cottage is empty?
I reach out to bang the wall, but my hand goes right through gingerbread softened to slime.
Horror comes soundless from my mouth.
I claw my way out, the roof caving in behind me.
The wood is utterly dark. (165)

²⁹ As Susie Bright says of her construction of a lesbian eroticism of digitality in her work as a consultant on *Bound*: "The other key idea was to eroticize the women's hands whenever they were flirting or making love with each other. 'A lesbian's hands are her cock, they're the hard-on of the movie, that's what you want to follow,' I said, like some veteran pornographer." (Bright 159)

What is unique to Pen's re-citation is that her fear is not the return of the witch but her absence. Pen uses syntactic repetition (visible above where I have written the sentences one under the other) and a tight sequence of consonance and assonance (*fought, taught, held in thrall*) to sharpen the sound of these words and to connect them sonically and semantically. Pen as this childlike figure is craving the presence of one who is simultaneously an attacker (*fought*); a teacher or disciplinarian (*taught*); and a master or an obsession (*in thrall*). Her feelings for this figure—affectionate, fearful, and erotic—and the horror of her having evacuated a home that now rots create a dark lesbian erotic discourse from the violence and eroticism of Anglophone fairy tales in the tradition of Angela Carter³⁰ and gothic feminist literature, as well as what Palmer names the *lesbian gothic*.³¹

In the second of this series of three sex scenes, Pen tries to masturbate to a fantasy but finds herself fantasising about Cara's sister Kate, a guest in her house for the funeral (241–43). Pen finds herself self-consciously analysing her own unenthusiastic desire to masturbate, recognising it as an instrumentalist need for release but also recognising her own hesitancy to make herself vulnerable. She feels like she is betraying Cara, as if Cara has exclusive rights to Pen's sexuality, which makes sense within Pen's value system in which she often eroticises monogamy normativity and struggles with Cara's breaches of it.³²

Pen has a humorous recognition of the scriptedness and narrativised nature of sexual fantasy, so when she is in a hurry, she wills her fantasy to speed through the opening details in favour of the express menu. Pen has a moment of hostess anxiety when she feels guilty about fantasising about a guest downstairs and its transgression of hospitality etiquette. Kate is vacuuming, making her presence a loud, intrusive, unavoidable sound for the struggling Pen; vacuuming is also one of the central feminised domestic arts of maintaining decorum in Anglophone culture, of exactly the kind of etiquette that Pen is now breaching so bawdily. The shade of Kate has a dark sexual energy that

³⁰ The under- and indeed over-tones of paedophilia, incest, bestiality and cannibalism are all common to the Anglophone fairy tale and folk tale traditions—bizarrely sanitised for children in recent centuries—which Carter's oeuvre exploited.

³¹ In a brief re-descriptive close reading, Paulina Palmer argues that Donoghue's juxtaposition of the lover's body and the corpse exemplify the deployment of the Bakhtinian grotesque within the tradition that Palmer aptly names the *lesbian gothic* in her eponymous 1999 text (88).

³² As in the fraught eroticising of Cara's infidelities in a later sex scene in which Pen claims: "If I am not to be her only lover, then I need to be convinced that I'm the best." (273)

Pen's awkwardly trying to cobble Cara's face onto only exacerbates, with the image of Cara's red hair plonked on top of Kate's dark roots like a bad dye job fading fast. These details do the work of characterisation. As a closeted lesbian, Pen is used to making compromises, circumscribing her own desires to remain unexposed. As a middle-class lapsed Catholic and monogamist, she feels guilty for breaching hospitality etiquette and for breaching her sexual exclusivity with Cara. But she balances these directives with a hefty dose of scepticism and prioritises her erotic satisfaction.

I could hear the woman vacuuming downstairs, for god's sake, quite unaware.

But the Kate looking into my head was not unaware of anything.

She began what she was doing again, moving faster, pushing me farther. (242)

Transgression—against whose theoretical overemphasis I so often caution—is worth noting for my arguments on the occasions when it is implicated in desire. Pen experiences Kate's obliviousness to the effects of shade-Kate as initially producing guilt, but shade-Kate eroticises that guilt and works harder. In this way, Pen's fantasy of Kate exploits real-Kate's ignorance to make her machinations, for Pen, just that little bit more erotic. As in other texts of the lesbian romance/anti-romance, particularly Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith*, the paradox is that ignorance of lesbian desire can be as productive as lesbian knowledge.

She shook [her hair] back and looked at me, then her breath was against my ear, murmuring honeyed insults.

You know who I am, she whispered.

I was the first, a year before my little sister.

I was the very first to make you wet. (242–43)

Murmuring honeyed insults uses surprise antinomy—the usual phrase is *honeyed words*—to create a novel paradoxical phrase portraying the dark and complex eroticism whereby shade Kate's words are both cruel and alluring for Pen.

Her hair kept changing colour, as I squeezed my eyes tighter shut.

The red slipped away, darkened to black, curls flashing yellow and grey and purple, then reverting to brown.

Damn her for doing this to me without even knowing it.

The dark phantom hair irritated my eyelids, stuck to my cheeks, tangled in my mouth. (243)

Pen's self-willed fantasy is slipping further awry, by the end of the sentence *tangled in my mouth* evoking a dark, creepy eroticism increasingly drawing on television horror tropes: the choking hair of the "Stringy-Haired Ghost Girl" and the unspecified malignancy of the "Eerie Pale-Skinned Brunette" (TVTropes.org).

I'd have used anyone or anything to get that feeling of release,
lift-off like a jet plane dipping upwards, breaking the skin of cloud. (243)

The rhythm of the sentences changes as Pen approaches climax, with an increase in the number of stressed syllables and Pen cranks up the rhyme (**anyone / anything / feeling / release / lift-off / dipping**). As in the convent-roof sex scene, Pen as narrator abstracts away from the details of sex into simile when her action is most intense. *Dipping* means *dipping into* cloud but *dipping upwards* also forms a paradox when *dipping* can mean lowering or dropping. Her jet plane simile leads into the metaphor *breaking the skin of cloud*. Pen is expressing her *need* in these moments, not her actions, so she speaks in the past unreal conditional tense about what she had yearned for and she had aspired to become, like her simile, a machine of powerful erotic momentum. *Break the skin* is not a positive phrase, connoting as it does wounding or injury.

I couldn't do it. My flesh was shrinking, getting sore now. My clumsy arm was losing circulation. My mind was wandering, chasing two sisters. I sat up. I tried again, pressing harder.

A gentle knock on the door. Fuck her, fuck her, what did she want now? "Just a minute," I called, shrill. I leaped up, straightened my shirt, and grabbed a towel to wrap around my damp hand. With the other I opened the door. It wasn't Kate at all, but her father, wearing a red and black diamond tie. "I'm off so," he said almost gaily.

"Sorry?"

"I'm dining with a colleague from the Wotherby; I believe I mentioned it?"

"Oh. Yes."

"I won't be late."

Why did he have to reassure me about his movements? I didn't care if the man stayed out all night. My body was cold and flat now. (243)

Pen narrates losing her arousal, her frustration as her conflicted erotic mind and her thwarted body betray her deep ambivalence: about her exclusivity with Cara she breached by desiring Kate; about her desire to come, figured as life-giving in a later scene, when she nevertheless feels her loyalty

pulled towards her lover in the grave. To my knowledge, it is relatively rare to see a representation of a cisgender woman's experience of losing arousal in a work of explicit lesbian literature, especially when complicated by a character's experiencing a combination of ambivalence, desperation, desire for oblivion, grief, and disloyalty. This facet of the erotic discourse of the novel is one of the reasons that I concur with Peach's assessment that Donoghue's realist prose is "more subtle and complex than might at first appear" (51). "Fuck her, fuck her," Pen exclaims, exasperated at the audacity of the real Kate's knock in interrupting Pen's fantasy of fucking her. Mr. Wall appears, "almost gaily" claiming "I'm off" to a Pen who is anything but, the tension of the erotic discourse breaking into farce.

The third in this sequence of masturbation sex scenes, and by far the most commented-upon sex scene in the novel in the extant criticism, is the bath menstruation sex scene (253–59). It is the most analysed erotic section in the criticism on *Hood*, having been interpreted in the extant criticism as politically engaging in the "rehabilitation of menstrual blood" (Quinn 158); demonstrating the relief of Pen's exemption from social norms (Clewell 140); emphasising the importance of clitoral pleasure in the hood eroticism (Quinn 158–59); and evidencing Pen's fixation on the cisgender female reproductive system and motherhood more widely (Palko). The scene can certainly be read as having some of these effects. But this erotic scene is six pages long and full of shifts and contradictions, is that really all that we as critics have to say about it, that it subverts some taboos? I argue that the critical reception of this scene demonstrates how much the details and the content of sex scenes are overlooked in scholars' applications of political approaches. Why would there be *so many* pages of sex scenes, here and elsewhere, if they were not important to meaning? My reading of this scene attends to the details and accretive meanings of the scene and also directly contradicts several of the extant readings, which I argue selectively cite and misinterpret the scene to satisfy their arguments, as I will explain. Clewell argues, of the series of three masturbation scenes:

In one of the most emotionally wrenching scenes of her private mourning, Pen struggles to find a reprieve from grief through masturbatory pleasure. After several failed attempts to reach a "blessed lull," Pen finally achieves orgasm by remembering a particular experience of clitoral sex with Cara. She describes a sexual climax prompted by recalling her menstruating lover having once marked the bereaved narrator as her own: "Keeping time with my own memory, I came to meet myself" (259).

Clewell's account glosses over Pen's two "failed" masturbation attempts as failures en route to a success, overlooking the internal qualities and narratives of these scenes, which I analysed. This

consequence of a plot-centred and re-descriptive mode of close reading is, I argue, one of the significant losses in reading for plot and politics over the slow workings of style, or the “slow reading” that has been advocated from Nietzsche to I. A. Richards and beyond (Kingsley). What matters about the first two sex scenes in the series of three is the content of these “failures,” not just that they lead to a success. I do agree with Clewell that the line “Keeping time with my own memory, I came to meet myself” is worth noting for Pen’s eroticising being possessed by Cara, and my account argues for the wider importance of that line in Pen’s desires and the contribution of literary style to that eroticising. Clewell continues:

Through these sexualized acts of mourning, acts she privately regards as “only natural, mother earth’s rhythms” (192), Donoghue’s narrator finds in silence a pleasurable exemption from social legislation and regulatory norms, from cultural conventions that threaten to stigmatize her bereavement as a form of guilty pleasure. (140)

Unfortunately, Clewell has selectively cited Pen’s opinion about her grief and “mother earth’s rhythms” to the point of inverting its meaning. Pen’s fuller narration is this:

The sunflower girl [on the bus] turned her head to look, then stared forward again. Older than I thought, very dark lashes; her hair curved round her ear as if a hand had pushed it back. She looked like she was following a tune in her head. Freckles stood out sharply on her pale forehead. She had one of those snub noses you laugh at but want to take between your lips.

I shut my eyes. Would you just look at me: my lover one day in the grave and I was fancying others already. Roll up, roll up, blondes, brunettes, we’ve got the lot, all aboard on the Big Dipper of serial monogamy. They said it was healthy. Life went on, it was only natural, mother earth’s rhythms would always jog you along. Eventually I would forget: Cara, which one was that, I’d ask myself; did she have grey eyes and red hair, or was it the other way round?

And there was Cara in the window of the bus paused beside ours, her features chaste and distant behind the scratched glass. I blinked. Don’t panic. Hallucinations are only to be expected.

Suddenly I felt that uneasiness in my teeth that meant I was going to be sick. I bent over, hanging my head a few inches from my knees. People were looking at me. I didn’t want it to go on, this cosmic cavalcade; I didn’t want to hurt and heal and survive like any animal. If this love thing was to be repeated over and over, how could the words stay fresh

or even halfway sincere? How could I wrench any of it back from Cara and give it to someone else, with it all still reeking of the grave? No, I couldn't wait just three more stops. Coffee, raspberry tart, pain-au-chocolat, grapefruit juice and coconut macaroon were going to splatter all over somebody's shoes. I lunged for the pole, pressed the button, kept my teeth clamped shut.

Only when the bus had chugged away in a haze of exhaust fumes did I let myself throw up over a wall. (191–92)

Pen is not opining on masturbation when she states, “it was only natural, mother earth's rhythms.” Instead, she is feeling self-reflexive disgust at her desire for another woman. She is disgusted at the re-emergence of her erotic desire and experiences it as a betrayal of the singularity of her desire for Cara. Pen is sarcastically citing the unscrupulous levity of mainstream discourses of serial monogamy, with a hefty dose of scepticism for New Age eco-spiritualism of the early 1990s. She is *critiquing* that discourse, not affirming it. A close reading reveals that she is not speaking in her usual narratorial voice because these words are an extension of the previous sentence which is spoken in indirect discourse. The subsequent “mother earth” statement is either an extension of indirect discourse or an instance of free indirect discourse. In this case, overlooking style has led a critic to misinterpret the ironic juxtaposing of narrative voices that devices of style made possible.

Clewell further claims that “Donoghue's narrator finds in silence a pleasurable exemption from social legislation and regulatory norms, from cultural conventions that threaten to stigmatize her bereavement as a form of guilty pleasure” (140). It is slightly unclear to me what Clewell is claiming here. I read her as arguing that Pen's masturbation to memories of Cara, while remaining closeted in the conservative Catholic culture outside, allows her to transgress and subvert cultural norms about appropriate forms of sexual practice, usually not including lesbian menstrual eroticism; or appropriate forms of widows' mourning, usually not including masturbation to memories of the dead lover. The problem that I see with this kind of reading for transgression and subversion is that it interprets Pen's motivations according to the anticipated taboos of the figure Wolfgang Iser terms the “implied reader” (Baldick, “Implied Reader”) instead of attending to the evidence of Pen's motivations according to herself as fictional author. The critics who argue that this scene refuses misogynist scatologies of menstruation (Clewell; Parker; Quinn) are treating this scene didactically as a teachable moment for the implied reader. However, Pen holds no taboos around menstruation, nor around masturbating for what she calls “obliteration” or relief. Pen thoroughly enjoys menstrual oral sex and so does Cara, who boasts of having acquired her “red wings” with Pen when they were seventeen. Cara's hesitation in this scene, the reason she says with her “rough voice” “I'm still

bleeding,” is not that she or Pen hold menstruation taboos, but because the women have been reading safer sex information for queer women in the era of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1990s. They have been cautioned against menstrual oral sex because they refuse to discuss Cara’s sexual practices with polyamorous partners or have Cara checked for STIs due to Pen’s jealousy about Cara’s multiple lovers. When critics argue that representations of lesbian menstrual oral sex transgress misogynist scatologising of the menstruating body, that is true. But to claim that of this scene is not, I argue, accurate in the fuller sense. The *fact* of having menstrual oral sex is not significant for Pen and Cara; it is something enjoyable and routine for them. What Pen is eroticising in this scene is her struggle to maintain her self-restraint after the two have decided to abstain from menstrual oral sex due to the risk of the transmission of AIDS, as I will highlight in my own reading below. Critics who argue that the fact of having menstrual oral sex is significant in this scene are imposing an anticipated transgression in the mind of the implied reader, but in doing so they are misinterpreting the significance of this scene for the fictional author/narrator, Pen. Attending to literary devices, like the operations of the narrative structure of the text, allows a critic to construct interpretations based on a wider range of evidence and so provide a fuller account of the aesthetic strategies of the text.

Alongside the analysis by Clewell and the brief claims of menstrual transgression by Parker and Quinn, Palko’s psychoanalytically informed essay on *Hood* is the other work of extant criticism interpreting this scene. It is also the essay that I most thoroughly critique. Palko’s essay is notable among the works of *Hood* criticism for citing six other *Hood* scholars. Palko argues that the extant criticism tends to analyse the novel as a lesbian mourning novel or a lesbian *Bildungsroman* while overlooking other relationships in the novel (she claims this of Casey; Clewell; Jeffers; Quinn; K. O’Brien; Pelan). Palko draws attention to the trend of over-emphasising the erotic relationship in criticism on lesbian fiction, a trend which Donoghue has herself critiqued in an interview that Palko cites (168). This is a valid criticism of the sub-field and a valid counterargument to my own critical objects and emphases in this thesis. Sex is not *everything* in lesbian fiction of this era, but it is nevertheless meaningful and significant in novels like *Hood* and in sex-positive lesbian fiction more widely. Palko’s central argument involves de-prioritising and de-emphasising the erotic relationship at the centre of *Hood* in order to argue that Donoghue’s construction of forms of the mother-daughter bond is “more significant than the lover-lover bond” in the novel (169) because of being traumatically closeted about her sexuality to her mother. This claim is certainly debatable. Pen lives most of her adult life and most of the novel with little concern for her mother. She is closeted as a lesbian to the prominent beloved father figure in her life, her de facto father-in-law with whom she lives and with whom she interacts throughout the novel, but this fact does not serve Palko’s

argument and so is not presented in it. Wingfield, the critic Palko cites to support this claim of de-prioritised eroticism, herself downplays the importance of the eroticism, implicitly criticising the “many attempts at portraying erotic lesbian sex—pages and pages” as vacuous or excessive in order to endorse purist lesbian-feminist political imperatives of solidarity between women (Wingfield 71). Additionally, in a similar manner to Clewell, Palko twice selectively cites and de-contextualises two statements about the importance of the eroticism in the novel in order to strip the statements of that meaning and present her own de-eroticising arguments. Firstly, Palko argues that Pen’s negotiation of her relationships with Kate, Cara’s most recent lover Jo, and Pen’s mother are what allows her to move towards accepting that she is “more alive than [she] could bear” (Palko 171). The fuller quote from the novel is this:

How many months and years did I have to bleed on my own now? How many spoonfuls of blood could the body lose before the river of it would sweep me up to Cara, before I felt her mouth on me again?

I shut my eyes tight, heaved on to my side and composed myself for sleep. I was throbbing; it shook the bed. I was more alive than I could bear. (259)

That line is the concluding sentence in a six-page menstrual sex scene, which is the final of a sequence of three masturbation sex scenes. Pen is lying “throbbing” in a post-orgasmic state: the line is part of the *centring* of the erotic material in the aesthetic strategies of the novel, with orgasm figured as an index of overwhelming aliveness. Palko has de-contextualised that line in order to make it serve her argument prioritising the non-erotic relationships in Pen’s life.

Palko’s second selective citation is in her quoting of Donoghue’s interview in the publisher’s epitext. Palko states:

In an interview accompanying the 2011 reissue of *Hood*, Donoghue characterizes the novel as “about the loss of a lover, so it seemed to call for a detailed and authentic evocation of exactly what has been lost: the suddenly truncated history of two hearts and two bodies” (“A Conversation” 10). Undergirding this elegiac mourning of “exactly what has been lost” is an ever-present awareness of another bodily sundering, Pen’s separation from her mother. (178)

As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, the writer was asked about the difficulty of writing about Pen and Cara’s “very intimate sexual life.” The interviewer asked Donoghue whether it was

difficult to write the sex scenes and integrate them into the plot, as if the sex scenes are an indulgence that need to be compensated for. Donoghue answers: “Readers are sometimes surprised that certain of my books have lots of sex and others have almost none. . . . *Hood* is about the loss of a lover, so it seemed to call for a detailed and authentic evocation of exactly what has been lost: the suddenly truncated history of two hearts and two bodies” (“A Conversation” 10). Shorn of the interviewer’s question asking why is there so much graphic lesbian sex in the novel, and with the early parts of Donoghue’s answer about the large amount of sex in the book removed, Palko has used the de-contextualised quote to emphasise the elegiac qualities of the novel as a “truncated history of” two *abstracted* bodies, which she argues can now be taken to mean the “ever-present awareness” of the absence of the biological mother.

Palko goes on to claim that the menstrual sex scene shows Pen’s fascination with the cisgender female reproductive system, and therefore, (potential) motherhood—an unfortunately essentialising and reductive psychoanalytically informed argument that is contradicted several times throughout the text. Pen is frequently disgusted by or apathetic towards children, including her students at the convent-school, and she recalls a memory of her mother’s that she identifies with:

My mother once said the worst thing about having children was that when she went into the cubicle of a public toilet, we would begin to snivel, and while she was struggling with her zip she would see these little hands come under the door, and would get an overpowering urge to stamp on them. I could understand that, but I could also understand the kind of based neediness that motivated Gavin and me to put our hands under the door. (215)

The eroticisation of menstruation in sex-positive lesbian discourses has no necessary connection with motherhood, especially in *Hood* with a lesbian and a bisexual woman both of whom do not have or want children. Pen feels deeply ambivalent about children, even hostile to them, including to her own past self through her mother’s memory. Palko is arguing that menstruation = fertility = motherhood, so the menstrual sex scene is *actually* about maternity: a biologically essentialist argument that is unfortunately common to psychoanalytic literary criticism and which is not supported by the wider evidence of Pen’s narration throughout the novel. Palko asks, of the “renunciation of maternity” in *Hood*: “If the lesbian daughter cannot become a mother, how will the lesbian story continue?” (181). By continuing the non-biological, anti-essentialist tradition of sex-positive lesbian literature in which maternity is not necessary for evolution or resolution.

The claims of the four critics who analyse the menstrual sex scene are certainly some of the claims I most thoroughly critique in the extant criticism, but these critics are right to gesture to the importance of the scene. The convergence of sex and style matters because style has semiotic and aesthetic functions and attending to style can allow critics to analyse the fullness of the text's aesthetic strategies. Here is what such an analysis can find.

“‘The curse has come upon me,’ cried the Lady of Shalott,” as Cara used to groan into her pillow. That explained some of the rattiness and even the unreasonable lust. PMT always acted on me like the flower from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, making me pine for the next person I laid eyes on. (253)

Pen understands herself and the world, her desire, by literary allusion.

I liked to squeeze my stomach muscles until my belly-button was emptied of water; I would pause a second, then dip my back and flood the whole landscape again. (253)

Pen attends to the small, sensual joys of life, and despite demonstrating some internalised fatphobia in the novel on occasion, she regularly prioritises her body's hungers and pleasures.

Baths on my own would take less getting used to than bed on my own. Baths offered reliable bliss, no matter who was in them. I was briefly troubled by a memory of a picnic bath I'd shared with Cara a summer or two ago; a peach had fallen in and bobbed along beside us, cooking slowly, until I'd wiped it on the towel and bit in, spilling the hot juice, and Cara had leaned over to lick the drops from my throat. Well, never mind. There would be peaches next summer. They would still taste like peaches, or almost the same. (253)

Pen's use of the phrase *briefly troubled* to appraise this unexpected memory speaks to the ambivalence that she feels about her eroticised memories of Cara, which are wanted for their relief but cruel in their rekindling of that feeling of connection that has been lost. Peaches, being pink, smooth and with fuzzy hairs, juicy, sweet, and pleasurable to taste, are one of the fruits most frequently used to connote the vulva in Anglophone erotic culture.³³

³³ See, for example, the *Huffington Post* article “How Peaches Became a Pop Culture ‘Fetish’” (Frank) or the debate at the *Vice* article “What's the Best Vagina Emoji?” (Alptraum).

Or the whole GogMagogamy business, as she used to call it in moments of flippancy. (254)

Cara's mocking monogamy by calling it *GogMagogamy* is an allusion to either folklore or religion. Gogmagog was a legendary giant in Celtic mythology (Monaghan 221). Gog and Magog in the Hebrew Bible are a prophesised nation who are enemies of God's people; in Christianity, they are Satan's allies against God at the end of the Millennium in the Book of Revelation. Cara is using mythical Gothic hyperbole to mock the powerful status of monogamy. It is also intertextual with Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, in which "Gog" appears heretically "conflating and confounding" Christian theology "in the spirit of Joyce's prolific displays of the endless fecundity of linguistic corruption" (Franke 644).

And Cara would murmur yes, oh yes. Here I am now, she'd say. It's all so clear and simple. You're the only one. I'm yours. We were meant to be together. And other such preciously anticipated clichés. (254)

In the style of the narrator of *Written on the Body*, Pen provides a build-up of clichés for monogamy-normative romantic love, but, unlike Winterson's narrator, Pen is doing so to fantasise the pleasure of receiving these clichés sincerely to satisfy what Parker has identified as her co-dependence.

My hand reached down through the skin of water to comb out my curls and open me up to the water. A clot, silky between finger and thumb. It looked like a baked raspberry, leaking two or three little jewels which fell and went floating on separate eddies. I leaned my elbow on my padded ribs and held the cluster of blood up to the light. Women who slept with men, it occurred to me, felt enormous gratitude or grief when the blood came down, depending on what they were wanting. Kate took a pill every day of her life to make sure the cycles kept spinning safely. I opened my fingers, the chips of ruby clinging to their tips. For me this month, it was a proof of something similar, of life surviving in this separate, single body of mine, whether or not I asked it to. (254–55)

Pen is considering the layers of meaning that menstrual blood has for women: gratitude for not being pregnant; grief for not being pregnant; or for Pen, an ambivalent index of her unasked-for ongoing life without Cara. She understands Kate's taking the contraceptive pill as making sure the cycles kept spinning "safely": without unwanted pregnancy, implicitly figured as a danger or risk. In each of these hypothesised responses, Pen is centring the reproductive autonomy and wishes of

women, including their strategies for and relief at remaining not pregnant. In the following passage, Pen explicitly refutes the heteronormative biological essentialism of mainstream discourses inciting aging childless women to panic about their dwindling fertility; hardly equating menstruation with biological motherhood as Palko has claimed.

So this was my first bleeding with Cara not in the world. I waited to register the thought, trying the pain on for size. This blood was the sound of a body clock ticking in my ear, not telling me the shortness of life, like the magazines say it does for childless women, but tolling its length. Life in this unnatural century being generally longer than any one passion or journey, so that even when the story for which you seem to have been born is told, the body clicks on, telling you that you're alive, you're alone, you're alive, you're alone, and you cannot have one without the other. The choice of dead and together not being available to you, because if you ran after the one you love into death, like a squalling child, she might easily be angry and say, you're always following me, give me space to miss you in, back off a bit, all right? If I stayed here, not in this bath but in this rapidly cooling life, if I stayed here and lived out however many years were allotted to me, then surely by the time I got to heaven Cara would be impatient to sweep me off my feet? (255)

Two of the most common cross-language onomatopoeic sounds are those of a clock ticking and a bell ringing, transcribed in English as *tick-tock* and *ding-dong*.³⁴ The morphemes comprising *tick-tock* and *ding-dong* are diffused through the verbs of sound in this passage—*clock*, *clicks*, *ticking*, *telling*, *tolling*, *told*—performing sonically and connotatively the machinic declaration of the passage of time. The passage employs overlapping literary devices of sound-patterning: polyptoton, onomatopoeia, homophony, and rhyme.³⁵ The connective and mimetic functions of sound-

³⁴ The sounds of *tick-tock* in English are very similar in 43 other world languages and likewise with the sounds of *ding-dong* in English and 22 other world languages, present in this passage in *clicks/clock* and *ticking/tolling/told*.

(Wikipedia, “Cross-Linguistic Onomatopoeias”; this is the only source I could find that lists all 43 world examples for *tick-tock* and 22 for *ding-dong*, but this Wikipedia page is contributed to by linguists and cited as an authority by other linguists, as for example at english.stackexchange.com/questions/72177/onomatopoeia-across-languages)

³⁵ Polyptoton involves repeating different forms of the same word: in this passage, *telling/told* (Brogan & Halsall, “Polyptoton” 968). Onomatopoeia uses words to imitate the sounds that they name (Brogan, “Onomatopoeia” 860–62). Homophonous words sound the same but have different meanings (*toll[ed]/told*). Notable forms of rhyme entwined in this passage include frame rhyme (*clicks/clock*); assonance (*clicks/ticking*); and reverse rhyme (*tolling/told*; Brogan, “Rhyme” 1054). There is also a rarer form of rhyme in “eye rhyme”: words that share letters but not sounds, and so

patterning draw terms together through similar sounds and when the terms are semantically or connotatively disparate, the effect can be very powerful. The sonic and syntactical repetition peaks in the hammering phrase “you’re alive, you’re alone, you’re alive, you’re alone,” using the repetition of sound to amplify the divergence of meaning between *alive* and *alone*; the cruelty of the incessant pulse of life taunting one who is alive with nothing to live for.

What Cara liked best was the taste of me bleeding. She got her red wings—don’t ask me where she picked up the phrase, very Air Force—when we were seventeen or so. In her vegetarian phase, I figured it was her primary source of iron.

Blood could be dangerous. About two years ago we started reading those articles on safe sex seriously rather than skimming over them; the first I remembered was a piece in Cara’s newsletter, about how little the scientists had bothered to discover about woman-to-woman transmission. We had decided that, rather than having Cara take a test, we’d make our practices safe from now on. (I suggested this because I didn’t want to hear exactly what risks she had taken, or was planning to take, with which people.) In fact, the biggest change we made was to stop sharing a toothbrush. (256)

Cara came home with a free dental dam from a club once; it was made of such thick latex that we got the giggles and ripped eye-holes in it for a Zorba mask. Instead of barrier methods—the phrase always sounded to me like strategic nuclear defence—we agreed to give up the taste of blood. For a while Cara sulked, like a vampire denied her prey. We felt fearful and ignorant, like schoolgirls all over again, only this time there was no book of secrets to borrow from our mothers’ shelves. We were a little angry with each other, and very angry with whoever was failing to tell us just what we were risking. Thinking about it now, I suspected that avoiding blood was more of a token sacrifice in this long Lent. It was as if we were saying, we’re not so arrogant that we think we’re absolutely safe, so in the meantime, death, here is something we will leave to you, a small thing, but the most intimate. (256–57)

Much like her wider narration, Pen’s thoughts about lesbian safer sex practices alternate between respecting, eroticising, railing against, and lampooning expectations. Pen remembers Cara’s pleasure taken in menstrual eroticism and acknowledges the influence of lesbian erotic culture (“red wings”). The fear of AIDS casts its shadow over Pen and Cara, and Pen’s rage is directed at what

“rhyme” to the eye, not the ear, present in *alive/alone* sharing the internal letters of *tick-tock* and *ding-dong* (Brogan, “Eye Rhyme” 399).

queer historians have referred to as the genocidal inaction of governments in researching transmission risks and prevention for the queer community, Pen's account highlighting the absence of consideration of queer women in public health responses of the time. There is a real anger in Pen's words about knowledge of lesbian sexual practice traversing access/denial, safety/danger, and knowledge/ignorance, and this anger is mixed with a complex eroticisation. Pen and Cara are "very angry with whoever was failing to tell us just what we were risking." In the publisher's epitextual material, Donoghue has spoken about the way that she understands her novel as being related to the elegiac AIDS novel form.³⁶ This contextualises Pen's anger at safer sex practices necessitating the denial of favoured intimacies, feeling "fearful and ignorant." But Pen considers herself Cara to be "angry at each other" as well for complex reasons. Cara's infidelities are the reason that there is a potential STI transmission risk between them. But Pen's jealous and insecure monogamy-normative refusal to hear the details of Cara's sexual practices is the reason that they are unwilling to have Cara tested or talk about her practices, so the two opt for denying themselves the most high-risk sexual act. Pen acknowledges the relatively minor safety gain of this decision (a "token sacrifice"), citing the self-denial of Catholic culture in alluding to their true motives ("this long Lent"). But the "long Lent" is ambiguous. It could be the spectre of the AIDS epidemic, the background of constant fear and the impossibility of regaining sexual ignorance/innocence. But it could also be the monogamist Pen's acquiescence to Cara's non-monogamy; Pen suffering (both *hurting from* and *enduring*) Cara's infidelities for the sake of maintaining their long-term relationship. Pen suggests in a subsequent sex scene that it is the "occasional bloodletting of Cara's infidelities" (274) that might facilitate their long-term erotic desire: a complex eroticism of infidelity.

When I shut my eyes now, I was hovering over Cara, an inch from her cherry-red clitoris.

The hood of the clitoris was not a hood to take off, only to push back. In fact, the whole thing was a series of folds and layers, a magical Pass the Parcel in which the gift was not inside the wrappings, but was the wrappings. If you touched the glans directly it would be too sharp, like a blow. It was touching it indirectly, through and with the hood, that felt so astonishing. Like an endearment in a mundane sentence, or a cherry on a rockbun, the

³⁶ "*Hood* strikes me as having a lot in common with elegaic AIDS fiction of the 1990s. Not that lesbians were losing each other to an illness in great numbers, but we did share gay men's sense of loss, damage, anger, isolation, and invisibility—and a bereavement premise lets you shape all those dark emotions into a strong story." ("A Conversation" 11)

combination was all. It was not the bald revelation that thrilled me, but the moment of revealing; not the veil or the bare body, but the movement of unveiling.

I rolled over until my forehead was pressed into a cool part of the pillow. The quilt was heavy on my back.

Even if I had had any basis for comparison, I think Cara's clitoris would have seemed to me to be the most beautiful thing. I remembered one time when not licking her turned me on even more than licking her could. Perverse and Catholic, no doubt, but just calling up the memory of it softened and hardened me. (254)

The hood imagery has been read in the extant criticism as representing Pen's experience of mourning her lost lesbian lover while being in the closet (Parker 211; Quinn 158–59). Being the name of the text and the epigraph, it is arguably the most prominent device using literary style to construct lesbian eroticism in the novel, and so has been noted by critics using the common generalised forms of close reading that partially attends to figurative language using the broad term *imagery* (Patten; Quinn 147). Several critics have cited Pen's passage about the clitoral hood, attending to the eroticism, but I argue that it is also worth attending to the statements on style. The "endearment in a mundane sentence" advocates patterns being made then broken for stylistic effect: the mechanism at the heart of all devices of literary style. Pen's phrase is one of the keys that notifies the reader that they are engaging with a narrator for whom literary style matters. Donoghue's realist style, alternately funny, sarcastic, mournful, and sincere, is sparser than the lush literary decadence of a work like *Written on the Body*, but this means that literary devices of simile or rhyme stand out more when they occur. It is very often these ratcheted-up moments in style that my analysis traces.

Pen as narrator explicitly connects devices of literary style with lesbian eroticism. Hiddenness, secretiveness, intimacies, wrappings and contexts, withholdings, the tease: these are what Pen eroticises. The phrase "just calling up the memory of it softened and hardened me" uses syntactical repetition of the *-nd* syllable and the murmuring *m* sounds of *memory* and *me* combined with antonymy to perform this concept of eroticism as the flair that stands out only by being contextualised in the ordinary. Opposites held intimately and the eroticism of the tightness of that hold; the unveiling, the moment between closed and open, hidden and exposed. *Softened and hardened* eroticises these liminal moments but also conveys both anatomically and psychically Pen's experience of cisgender female arousal. The memory *softens* her psychically when it exposes her to the vulnerability of inhabiting that memory of desire, but it also triggers her wetness, as when we say that butter softens in a pan. The memory *hardens* her psychically when it amplifies the

power of her desire, but it also denotes her stiffening clitoral erectile tissue—that so rarely in literature has its erectile qualities portrayed! The memory also *hardens* her in that it is of eroticised, Catholicised self-restraint, remembering a moment she struggled to, as the phrase goes, “harden her heart” against the desire she most craved. *Perverse and Catholic* at the beginning of the phrase is Pen pre-emptively casting the criticism she anticipates receiving for getting off on the kinky pleasures of self-denial. But the syntax of her sentence overwhelms this opening in a recognition of the power of these erotic feelings, whose mere memory defuses the anxiety of the anticipated external scrutiny: “Perverse and Catholic, no doubt, *but* just calling up the *memory* of it softened and hardened me” (emphasis mine). Aroused, vulnerable, tender, hungering, mournful and needy; existing in all these contradictions at the physical, psychic and linguistic levels: softened and hardened.

I cannot see Cara’s expression, but her voice is rough. “I’m still bleeding.”

“I know,” I tell her. “I can smell it.” I let out a sigh; it blows back her coppery curls, tickling her, so she laughs under her breath and leans forward, her spine curled. Hair falls round her face, obscuring it. Her legs spread wider, for balance, and as I strain to focus my eyes I can see a drop of blood blossom between them. I remember the risk, but right now I want to be so close that anything carried in her veins will be carried in mine too. I am so tempted; I suspect that if I did, she wouldn’t have the heart to stop me. (258)

Pen eroticises the risk of contagion—not like gay male barebacking culture³⁷—but more like eroticising closeness or the erosion of the self/other boundary. Pen expresses her temptation, appraising the erosion of self-discipline and self-denial as well as a thought of going after the risky fuck anyway.

³⁷ The gay male sexual practice of eroticising the practice of intentionally courting transmission of the HIV virus is currently something of a fashionable critical object of queer theory for its perceived edginess. See Tim Dean’s *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (2009) or the special issue of *Sexualities* “Bareback sex and queer theory across three national contexts” (2015). Kathryn Bond Stockton adapts the discourse to explore lesbian sexuality/textuality in her experimental creative non-fiction essay “‘Lesbian’ Barebacking?” (2015) in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, very much in the style of what I name the lesbian (sem)erotics tradition of lesbian criticism. One of my criticisms of that tradition is that critics are so busy arguing that lesbian textuality *is* lesbian eroticism that there is no prominent or even necessary presence of analyses of lesbian sex scenes in that genre, as Elizabeth Meese’s *Lesbian (Sem)erotics : Theorizing Lesbian : Writing* (1992) exemplifies with its readings of canonical European Modernist lesbian literature.

The drop glints in her curls like a hidden ruby. I breathe in loudly so she can hear me smell her. Ginger and mackerel and chocolate cake and the ring of metal, that's what she smells like. I laugh out loud because she smells so damn good. I want to arch my neck and take the drop between my lips like nectar. (258)

As Parker notes, the naturalist erotic imagery of “shells, waves, petals and other natural things” (Martindale 122) in pastoral lesbian-feminist literature of the 1970s was not *replaced* by more violent erotic representation (Parker 207); instead, erotic lesbian fiction of the 1990s incorporated the naturalist imagery historically used to represent female sexuality and the vulva/vagina *within* a contemporary literary tradition attending to the darker parts of lesbian erotic life. Donoghue's similes for the lesbian lover's body are of fruit, treasure, and combined fishy/fruit/spicy/sweet qualities, much like the poetic sections of *Written on the Body*. The spread of figurative devices stays close to the specificity of the menstruating lover's vulva through devices closer to the metonymy of Winterson's novel—the smell like mackerel; the iron of menstrual blood—while simultaneously connoting cultural pleasures more like the metaphors of *Written on the Body*: the tastiness of chocolate cake; the evocative spiciness of ginger. What is eroticised is a performative radical embrace of the lover. Critics are right to note the aspect of this mode which defies scatologising misogynist taboos that abject menstrual blood, but there is more to it. Pen's eroticising defies the paranoid, self-denying imperative of lesbian safer sex discourses in the shadow of the AIDS epidemic. She also defies her own anxieties and jealousies about Cara's unarticulated infidelities with other lovers, because Pen and Cara's intimacy in these moments overcomes for Pen all these forces of abjection.

I want to find her out with the tip of my tongue, going straight to where, though she might expect it, the sensation will startle her most. The reliable surprise of the body saying, oh, that, oh yes that indeed, please that, I had forgotten quite how sweet that was. She will hurl her head back, and only my arms will anchor her to the bed. The delicate folds will spread wide as I shut my eyes and burrow into the red; they will keep my whole face warm. I want to take Cara into my mouth so that no danger can find her, no monster can terrorize her, where there is no lack or draught or hollow, nothing but heat and pressure and the safety of knowing every drop of you is wanted.

Pen uses antonymy to create a paradox, the “reliable surprise” for Cara of the pleasure of Pen's embrace that is both unique to the moment and evokes countless moments past. Winterson uses the same device to invoke the simultaneous familiarity/novelty of the lover as the narrator ponders “An

ordinary miracle, your body changing under my hands. And yet, how to believe in the obvious surprise?” (124). Pen’s mind races before her, possibilities reflected in her tense as she dashes from the observing present (*She smells so damn good*) to the desiring present (*I want to find her out*) to the fantasised future (*She will throw her head back*) then back to the desiring present (*I want to take Cara into my mouth*), all of which in the present of Pen’s narration recall these moments from the past. It is an unusual rhetorical mode to use negated negative states to indicate peak pleasures. Pen raises the spectre of pain, fear, torment, lack, danger, cold, and abandonment in order to figure sex with the lover as the antonym to them all—as safety in the knowledge of non-abandonment and non-abjection above all. The long run-on clauses push towards this certainty, the peak upon which the passage ends.

And because she knows right well that I want all that, the wanting is enough.
I contract inside with a slow shudder.

The rising tension of restrained desire is interrupted in the opening line of the next paragraph by a series of monosyllabic words:

And because **she knows right well that I want all that**, the wanting is enough.

The stresses of line resemble iambic feet,³⁸ crystallised in the decisive beat of the final words.

And because she **knows** right **well** that I **want** all **that**, the **wanting** is **enough**.

It is an instance of rhythm emerging from unmetred prose, giving the line a kind of sonic punchiness. The iambs, the monosyllables, the emergent rhythm captures attention and portrays a galloping momentum, the moment that Pen and Cara’s tenuous self-restraint breaks after the climactic moment of Pen’s radical embrace of the non-abjected pleasures of the menstruating lover’s vulva. Pen’s vaginal clench indexes her arousal, a meta-recognition of eroticism: Pen’s recognition of *Cara’s* recognition of Pen’s non-abjecting embrace. Despite obeying the self-denial imperative, Pen knows that her demonstrating *wanting* to have that full-risk sex is “enough.”

³⁸ This is the device of isochrony, the regular perceived timing of beats. In stress-timed languages like English, unstressed syllables are frequently shortened or lengthened in the mind of the reader to make the stressed syllables in a line appear regular. For example, *I saw the **man** at the **depot** **today*** scans with roughly the same four perceived beats as *I saw the **manager** at the **depository** **today***.

I hover below her, murmuring breath into her as if I am praying. At last Cara growls like a big cat and leans back to sit on my chest. She rubs herself up and down, skidding and slipping, her wrists in my fists, her growl rising. The breath is almost knocked out of my lungs as she grinds on my ribs, daubs me like a furious painter, marks me for her own.

In another parallel with *Written on the Body*, Pen blasphemously cites Christian discourse with lesbian sex with the lover implicitly consecrated as the holiest of acts. The few sentences representing the most sexual action have several instances of sound-patterning:

I hover below her, murmuring breath into her as if I am praying. At last Cara growls like a big cat and leans back to sit on my chest. She rubs herself up and down, skidding and slipping, her wrists in my fists, her growl rising. The breath is almost knocked out of my lungs as she grinds on my ribs, daubs me like a furious painter, marks me for her own.

As with the other sex scenes I analyse in this thesis, the moments of greatest sexual momentum are portrayed through the mimetic function of sound-patterning in ways which enact in form the furious rhythm of intense sex. The monogamist Pen affirms an eroticism of possession in being marked by her lover.

Keeping time with my own memory, I came to meet myself.

This sentence being set off in its own paragraph gives it a finality, amplified by the rhythmic iambs of the last clause. A twist of tense wrenches the reader into Pen's present: *keeping time, I came*. But the sentence also exploits the semantic ambiguity of both *came* and *meet*:

I came to meet myself

I orgasmed	in sync with my memory of orgasming
I orgasmed	to feel like my past self again
I arrived in thought	to feel like my past self again

These three readings of the line comprise a spectrum from the most literal or denotative to the most psychological or connotative. The syntax of the single-sentence paragraph and the punchiness of the

iambics makes the phrase stand out and amplifies the multiple readings of ambiguous meaning. In prose that is more realist, more restrained, less figurative than something like Winterson's lush exuberance—right down to the fact that Donoghue's similes make smaller cognitive leaps than Winterson's metaphor and metonymy—these moments of heightened literary language stand out.

My other hand closed over the boat resting in the hollow of my throat. It was no ocean-crossing caravel tonight, but a mutinous hulk riding low in the waves, its great wheel spinning unattended, its long ropes twitching like scars. Still, I held on.

The status of the boat necklace is a notable figurative device throughout the novel. Its qualities in this scene are that it is *mutinous*, *unattended*, implying that it is unsteered, unwelcome. It is pulling her mind with some violence (*ropes twitching like scars*) in a direction she does not wish to go. I argue that the boat represents Pen and Cara traversing their raging sexual desire and all its problems. Pen's desire for Cara in this scene is *mutinous*: it is threatening to undo her, to make the memories too real, the loss too painful, the impossibility of surviving the severing of that embodied life. The boat is *unattended*: Pen feels the welling of her desire for Cara, but it is impossible, unrequited in the present, only a memory.

I was throbbing; it shook the bed.

I was more alive than I could bear.

The powerful concluding phrases use syntactic parallelism and an instance of paired consonance and assonance (*shook/bed/could/bear*) to draw a parallel between sexual energy and life. But the life-giving qualities of sexual release are tormenting Pen, who began her masturbation that night seeking oblivion. She is reminded in those final moments before sleeping that sexual energy is intensely alive, cruelly reminding her of her aliveness's distance from the dead Cara, a distance which the fleeting psychological intimacies of memory had bridged illusorily then burst, returned to chasm once more.

Conclusion

The lesbian eroticism of style present in the sex scenes and wider erotic material of *Hood* is a crucial part of the aesthetic functions of the novel. Sex scenes contribute to the characterisation, narrative, themes, forms and discursive qualities that comprise the totality of the novel as an aesthetic object. A comparative approach informed by stylistics methodologies enables a reading

that identifies and compares the differences within and between sex scenes, as I have demonstrated in my close readings in this chapter. I hope with my analysis to have shown some of the linguistic and aesthetic complexities of this heretofore underexamined work of contemporary lesbian fiction.

Hood is a successor³⁹ text to *Written on the Body*: it displays this influence in the elegiac discourse of mourning and in the explicit erotic discourse memorialising desire in the lover's absence.

Tipping the Velvet is another successor text in this tradition, but it takes up the exuberant, luxuriating bawdy discourse of *Written on the Body*. *Tipping the Velvet* was written in 1994, in the iconic mid-1990s sex-positive queer London subculture (Waters, "Paying") that *Written on the Body* had helped create in the literary sphere. In the next chapter, I analyse the three major sex scenes of *Tipping the Velvet*, demonstrating the powerful slow workings of a lesbian eroticism of style in Waters' novel.

³⁹ I term *Hood* a successor text to *Written on the Body* to highlight the discursive and stylistic influences, but also because Donoghue has explicitly stated that Winterson's early novels showed her the possibilities of the "high literary" lesbian novel in terms of "powerful" prose style, intelligence, complexity, playfulness, and eroticism (Donoghue, "At Last").

Chapter 4: Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998)

In this chapter, I argue that *Tipping the Velvet*'s celebrated sex scenes have essential aesthetic functions of style that have been overlooked in the voluminous political criticism on the work that have eclipsed other modes of investigating the novel. I do this by deploying a close reading methodology, paying attention to the figurative devices in the three major sex scenes of the novel. The explicit sex scenes were a source of anxiety for book reviewers, with some critics expressing a fear that the book skirted the edge of pornography instead of being worthy literary fiction: I identify and contextualise these reviewers' opinions as an instance of the anxiety I have been tracking across the history of lesbian literary criticism, which I then follow by my own close readings showing that the sexual material of the novel is not peripheral to the book's serious literary qualities, but a central part of them.

Sarah Waters is a Welsh writer living in London. She is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed writers of lesbian literature in English and she is credited with popularising the genre of lesbian historical fiction, particularly in her neo-Victorian trilogy comprising *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002). She is frequently compared with Jeanette Winterson, who was the pre-eminent author of contemporary lesbian literary fiction at the time of Waters' debut in 1998.⁴⁰ Waters' peers in late-1990s and early-2000s lesbian literary fiction in English include Jeanette Winterson, Emma Donoghue, and Ali Smith. Waters' first novel was *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), which won the most prestigious award for lesbian fiction, the Lambda Literary Award. The novel was a loose lesbian adaptation of Chris Hunt's gay historical novel *Street Lavender* (1988).⁴¹ *Tipping the Velvet* is a picaresque neo-Victorian lesbian historical *Bildungsroman*, perhaps most memorably and economically classified by its author as a "lesbo Victorian romp" (Waters, "Desire"). The novel is a successor text to Winterson's *Written on the*

⁴⁰ However, Waters herself has criticised what she saw as the "lazy journalism" in making that parallel immediately and repeatedly ("Desire"), rightly arguing that their works are rather different, as Waters considers Winterson to be part of a Modernist tradition that Waters disidentifies with (Armitt, "Interview" 121).

⁴¹ Very few reviewers seemed to know this because they hailed the novel as being *sui generis*. This claim may account for the frustration that comes through in Waters' rather saltily suggesting that the reviewer who compared her to Winterson might not know any other contemporary lesbian authors (Armitt, "Interview" 121). Waters wrote her doctoral thesis on gay and lesbian historical fiction and has said in interviews that the novel is a lesbian version of *Street Lavender*, so she contextualises her own work within that tradition of gay and lesbian historical fiction.

Body, and like Winterson's earlier novel, the prominent eroticism has been read largely politically. Queer and feminist political readings have dominated the critical conversation, and the remaining readings of the eroticism in the novel align with the major traditions of lesbian criticism I have detailed earlier. As with *Written on the Body* and *Hood*, the criticism on the novel forms a case-study of the trend I am tracking in lesbian literary criticism—leaving the opportunity open for a reading of a lesbian eroticism of style to illuminate some prominent but underexamined qualities of the work, and that is what this chapter does.

Tipping the Velvet is set in Whitstable and London in the late 1880s. It is narrated by Nancy Astley, a working-class girl who works shucking oysters in her family's restaurant in the southern England town of Whitstable. Nancy falls in love with a male impersonator, Kitty Butler, and moves to London with Kitty, soon joining her onstage in a male impersonation double-act as well as becoming her lover. But Kitty is a closeted lesbian, and Nancy has her heart broken by Kitty and leaves her, passing for a boy on the streets on London and working as a renter, giving handjobs⁴² and fellatio for pay. She is propositioned by a rich, enigmatic, and dominating lesbian widow named Diana and becomes Diana's live-in "tart." Diana becomes increasingly abusive and eventually throws Nancy out onto the street. Out of desperation, Nancy seeks out Florence Banner, a socialist organiser, and moves in with Florence and her brother and baby as their temporary housekeeper, becoming Florence's lover. The book closes with Nancy choosing the honesty and dignity of her life with Florence over the closeted and selfish passions of her past.

The novel is a picaresque postmodern neo-Victorian lesbian historical *Bildungsroman* focalised by Nancy as first-person narrator. Nancy narrates her story in three parts: her life with Kitty, with Diana, and with Florence. Nancy's narration is passionate and exuberant, obsessive in her first love, then maudlin in her heartbreak, with a dark edge to her sexuality that comes to replace her shattered naivety, her performance background fuelling the selfish lusts of her destructive relationship with Diana. Nancy as narrator is in turn scornful, impatient, and adoring. The novel's influences are visible in the neo-Romantic lesbian discourse it shares with Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah*

⁴² In my estimate, this is the non-phrasal term for this sex act that is potentially the most appropriate for academic discourse. To my knowledge, there is no English term for hand sex performed on a penis with the equivalent formality of a term like *fellatio* and with the necessary specificity of a term like *fingering*, which retains its specificity to hand sex performed on a vulva and its formality by being a shortened form of the more brusque *finger-fucking*. The language of naming sexual acts and the potential incongruity with the formality of academic English register is a fascinating topic, but one for another time—and someone else's thesis.

(1969) and Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992) and the rollicking (queer) *Bildungsroman* qualities it shares with Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), Chris Hunt's *Street Lavender* (1988), and Winterson's *The Passion* (1988). The novel has been contextualised within 1990s-era sex-positive erotic lesbian literary fiction and it portrays complex and dark sexuality characteristic of the lesbian romance/anti-romance (Andermahr) and so belongs alongside works such as Mary Fallon's *Working Hot* (1989), Donoghue's *Hood* (1994), Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* (1994), Sarah Schulman's *After Delores* (1998), and Michelle Tea's *Valencia* (2000). Despite being a postmodern work of historiographic metafiction, the novel is known for its "psychological realism" (Ciocia, *Queer*) or "emotional realism" (Waters, "Paying") in its depiction of flawed, complex characters transcending the crude characterisation for which the genre of the sensation novel was known (Ciocia, *Queer*).

My argument focuses on the relationship between lesbian eroticism and literary style, and it is in book reviews—not academic criticism—that that relationship is most commented upon. There were only approximately eleven reviews of *Tipping the Velvet* in British and international periodicals upon its release in 1998 (compared with 39 reviews for *Fingersmith* four years later). Of the eleven reviews, nine were positive, one was mixed, and one was negative. Book reviewers praised the sensuality and sensual detail; the literary style; the qualities of the literary fiction genre; audience appeal; lesbian eroticism; characterisation; tone; plot and pacing. As one might expect in response to such a celebrated libidinous text, reviewer responses slipped effusively between the sensuality of the prose, the sensuality of the depicted eroticism, and the sensuality of the book review being written. Appraising the novel, reviewers use a common set of terms: *extravagantly upholstered*, *dazzling*, *garish*, *lavish*, *lush*, *lushly drawn*, *naughty*, *perfumed*, *plush*, *raunchy*, *rich*, *sassy*, *sensual*, *sensuous*, *sensuously evoked*, *sexy*, *sinewy*, *sumptuously described*. Responding to the qualities of the prose, reviewers spoke of *boldly rendered*, *confidence*, *elegance*, *inviting*, *lavish*, *lush prose*, *lushly drawn*, *lusty*, *plush*, *rich descriptive voice*, *rich evocation*, *richly embroidered*, *roguishly lilting prose*, *stylistic invention*, *sumptuous as a symphony*. The language of the reviews themselves uses prominent phonaesthemes of sensuality to convey in form the sensuality of the words they recall: the sounds of the liquid *l* as in the reviewer's claim that Waters is "limning libidinous interludes" (Steel); the slinkiness of the *s* and *sh* sounds; the evocative *v* so suggestive of intimate places; and words like *sensuousness* or *lasciviousness* which deploy them all at once. When reviewers fill their reviews of *Written on the Body* and *Tipping the Velvet* with words like *lavish*, *lush*, *lascivious*, *licentious*, and *sensual* to appraise the erotic prose, these packages of *s*, *l*, and *v* sounds connote sexual practice in English because *sl-* is a prominent English phonaestheme of

movement without friction (Hashim) and “suggestive of salivation” (Firth 184–85), and *l-* connotes liquidity:

Recently I had cause to check the thesaurus for synonyms for “unchaste, wanton.” Is it a coincidence that so many of these words began with “l”—*licentious, lascivious, loose, lubricous, lecherous, libidinous, lustful, lickerish* and *lewd*, to name a few? Somehow this luscious, liquidy l-sound seems well suited to convey the sense of wantonness. Words commonly group this way, sharing both meaning and a vague resemblance of sound. So the sounds we use to stand for things might start off being arbitrary, but over time the arbitrariness often falls away. (Nordquist)

Linguists have identified a set of the most common phonaesthemes in English (Liu et al.), including *sl-* (*slouch, slick, slime*) connoting frictionless movement and *se...ce* (*sensuous, celebrants*) connoting a soft tactile relationship, perhaps most notably in the phrase *Cellar door*, which has been praised for its euphonic beauty in English from J. R. R. Tolkien to *Donnie Darko* (Barrett; Smith 65). But the *sl-* sound connoting sensuality in a positive way draws upon only some of its motion/liquidity qualities. There is also a set of *sl-* phonaesthemes that are pejoratives of liquidity (Appleyard; Banjar; Firth 184): *slick* (insincere), *slight* (insult), *slither/slink* (cowardice), *slobber, sludge*. These two major connotations of the *sl-* phonaestheme converge in misogynist pejorative terms for women who are perceived as wanting too much of the sensual liquidity these phonaesthemes connote: *slit, slut, slag, sleaze*. Authors of sex-positive lesbian literature exploit these sonic qualities of language to construct a lesbian eroticism of style that reviewers received as so *lasciviously lush*.

Highlighting this sensual quality of the literary language, reviewers draw from the language of the tactile textual arts (*extravagantly upholstered, plush, richly embroidered*); the visual arts (*boldly rendered, lushly drawn, painterly scenes*) or poetry. There are only a handful of reviewer comments about the lesbian eroticism that are not already included in the list above of enthusiastic ejaculations over the sensuality, but the comments specific to the eroticism are of the same style: “an erotic and absorbing story” (Seymour); a “page-turning, bodice-ripping and heart-tugging story” (Malinowitz); and “searing” (Cooke) or “exceptional” eroticism (Malinowitz). “Waters is as adept at limning libidinous interludes as she is at crafting an absorbing narrative” (Steel).

However, as with my readings of the criticism of the other texts in this dissertation, it is important to attend to the notable strand of anxiety about lesbian sex writing that is visible in the reviews.

Popular lesbian literary fiction cannot win: to be taken seriously by literary critics, it needs to have sophistication, up-front gender politics, and not too much sex. To be bought by readers, it needs to have page-turner qualities and not too little sex. To qualify as literary, it needs to have eroticism that is meaningful, layered, and complex. To satisfy those looking for promised titillation, it needs explicit and voluminous sex. For those who want a sensation novel, it needs to be outrageous and excessive. For those who want high-quality lesbian representation, it needs to be restrained, plausible, psychologically realist (Ciocia, *Queer*) and compelling. A novel can fail to be a successful work of popular lesbian literary fiction by failing any one of these impossibly contradictory criteria. *Tipping the Velvet* meets all of them. The ways in which it is perceived as a failure by reviewers reveals much about the impossible expectations and deep anxieties about the relationship between sex and style in lesbian literary fiction as the genre became part of mainstream literature in the 1990s.

Reviewers express a kind of relief that the novel's sophistication and literary quality ostensibly rescue it from becoming poorer aesthetic fare. For example, "It is the confidence and elegance of Waters's writing that saves the novel from descending into a pornographic romp" (Seymour). Reviewers do not always name the genres into which the novel is threatening to slide as Seymour does here with "pornographic romp," but we can surmise that they are the genres considered to have not enough literary quality and too much sex (erotica/pornography), too much romance (commercial romance genre fiction) or too much earnest lesbian politics (lesbian-feminist fiction). One example of such comments is this: "Because it features several love affairs between women, some will characterize this as a lesbian novel. To be sure, in this book, the love that dare not speak its name almost never shuts up. But 'Tipping the Velvet' is a **more** expansive, adventuresome book" (Graham; emphasis mine). Stylistics can help us trace the subtleties of literary language in fiction, and in this case, it can also help us reveal a reviewer's implicit criticism. Graham has used half a comparative clause, implicitly letting his earlier object complete it. "*Velvet* is a **more** expansive, adventuresome book"—**than** the lesbian novel, or what Graham understands the lesbian novel to be. And what are the qualities of the Grahamian lesbian novel from which *Velvet* is reprieved? Narrowness and conservatism or traditionalism, one can assume. In a similar vein, Seymour provides the dubious backhanded compliment, "If lesbian fiction is to reach a larger audience—as much, though far from all, of it deserves to do—Waters is just the person to carry the banner." Reviewers rushed to insist that Waters' novel is so much more than *just* a work of lesbian fiction, a trend which Kaye Mitchell notes with a hint of sarcasm in her introduction to the anthology of Waters essays: "As her reputation and readership have grown, Waters' major achievement—in the eyes of newspaper critics, anyway—has been to transcend whatever narrow

generic boundaries and markets may have been assigned to her at the outset, and her subsequent novels have received subtler readings and near-universal acclaim” (1).

Emergent in this trend of reviewers disidentifying the novel as lesbian fiction is the same anxiety about the relationship between the quality (and quantity) of lesbian sex and literary merit that I have been tracking through lesbian literary criticism historically and among the reception to the 1990s crew. Of course, being not too lesbian and not too not-lesbian is an outrageously impossible double-bind expected of minoritised representation. But the impossibility of satisfying contradictory simultaneous minoritising and universalising imperatives expected of each work of lesbian representation appraised in commercial book reviewing in the late-1990s British newspaper market had perhaps not occurred to these book reviewers.

Gratuitous sex, unsurprisingly, was the object of some of the more derisive comments among the reviews, as in those of Graham and Seymour, but it was also the object of a negative review for the opposite reason: not the plethora thereof, but the paucity. Don Kavanagh, writing for *The Manawatu Standard* in New Zealand, claimed of the sex writing:

Vaunted as a picaresque lesbian novel, the cover carries a sticker restricting sale to those over the age of 18. I fear this is a bit of a cheat as it promises far more bawdy delights within that [*sic*] it actually delivers. In fact, the average Judith Krantz⁴³ blockbuster is more explicit in its descriptions of the sexual act and, as Ms Waters restricts the heroine, Nan King, to a mere two or three sexuals [*sic*] interludes, the hype overshadows the story. . . . It all sounds much dirtier than it actually is and, if I had bought the book for its smutty content, I would be seeking a refund.

Kavanagh complains that *Tipping the Velvet* only has “two or three” sex scenes and the representation is not explicit enough. There are three major sex scenes and the writing is descriptive, metaphorical, metonymical, and symbolic at a length that far exceeds the strictly denotative sex of the scenes. My argument in this thesis is that the sex scenes in lesbian literary fiction are central to the aesthetic functions of the work. They contribute to characterisation, symbolism, themes, and the strategies of form. I concede Kavanagh’s point that the novel only has

⁴³ Judith Krantz wrote popular romance novels considered to have disappointing sex scenes, with the greatest intensity of the works lying in their depictions of shopping, not sex (Horwell). To accuse an erotic novel of failing to exceed Krantz’s standards for sexual explicitness is grim indeed.

three sex scenes and they are mostly comprised of symbolic prose. But as Kavanagh has flagrantly failed to notice, that is the point, as my own close readings will show.

As in *Written on the Body* and *Hood*, the theoretical approaches and frameworks used to analyse *Tipping the Velvet* largely correspond to the major strands of lesbian literary criticism which I outlined in the introduction. There are 51 essays and two anthologies of criticism on *Tipping the Velvet*. The two survey essays on the criticism introducing the anthologies by Mitchell and Jones and O'Callaghan categorise the broad schools of criticism in different ways. Based on their categories, I broadly categorise the schools of criticism as: queer minority genders and sexualities (27 essays); historical fiction and neo-Victorian genre criticism (14 essays); queer antinormativity (12 essays); women's writing traditions (14 essays); place criticism (9 essays); and class criticism (4 essays). The major theoretical frameworks being used in analysis are: feminist criticism (23 essays); poststructuralist queer theory (19 essays); genre criticism (17 essays); postmodernist lesbian literary criticism (11 essays); lesbian-feminism (7 essays); place criticism (4 essays); structuralism (3 essays); and psychoanalysis (3 essays).

Critics, like reviewers, have also raised the issue of the voluminous sex scenes:

The novel is primarily concerned with Nancy's romantic and sexual adventures, and Waters's explorations of the workings of sexual appetite are often explicitly, and sometimes graphically, represented. **Nonetheless**, Waters is also deft with her use of metaphor. (Dennis; emphasis mine)

There is nothing remotely spectral or unreal about lesbian sex here, which is wholly of the flesh. This literal materialisation arguably **accounts for** Waters' explicit and extended sexual representations. (Kohlke 9; emphasis mine).

Dennis' and Kohlke's arguments demonstrate in the scholarship the same anxiety around the explicit sex that Graham did in the reviews, using grammatical forms that position the explicit sex as something to be compensated for and overcome by the quality of the writing.

Why is there so much sex? The answer, from most critics, is politics. The sensual imagery of the novel has been read by critics politically—"sexsationalist politics" (Kohlke 9)—as anachronistic queer historiography: compensating for the silencing of queer history by writing queer sexual practice into history (Dennis; K. Harris 207–08). The lesbian eroticism and sexual practice have

been read almost exclusively politically as exemplifying lesbian-feminist, feminist or queer principles of challenging heteronormativity (as argued by Davies, “Such”; Dennis; K. Harris; Kohlke; Koolen; Madsen; O’Callaghan, “Equivocal,” “Gender,” “Grisley,” “Lesbo,” “Victorian”; Wood). The moments in the novel that have attracted the most scholarly attention are those which exemplify Butlerian gender performativity in queer theory such as the gender fluidity of the oyster or Nan identifying with the hyphenated “*fe-male* lodger” or the linguistic slippage of the word *queer* in Waters’ historiographic neo-Victorianism (as argued by Bishton, “Subverting”; Davies, “Such”; Dennis; Jeremiah; King; O’Callaghan, “Equivocal,” “Lesbo”; C. A. Wilson; Wood).

The object of my analysis, the lesbian eroticism presented through literary style in the novel, is touched upon by five substantial essays and three brief essays, with further minor mentions occasionally throughout the criticism. There are a few broadly formalist readings of the novel among the criticism. As with *Written on the Body* and *Hood*, the most common of these is the generalised close reading analysing “imagery” or “symbolism,” sometimes specified to be metaphor or metonymy (Dennis; O’Callaghan, “Equivocal” 31, “Introduction,” “Lesbo,”) or allusion (Yates) or occasional analysis of devices of structure and narrative like prolepsis, but not usually devices of style. There are several productive readings of specific literary devices constructing lesbian eroticism. The oyster/pearl imagery has been read as metonymic of the vulva and a metaphor for “lesbian sexual discourse” (Dennis; O’Callaghan, “Equivocal” 31, “Lesbo”). However, the readings remain almost exclusively political. The oyster imagery has been read politically as an instance of implicitly lesbian-feminist eroticism (Koolen) or of monogamist coupled lesbian sameness (Dennis). The second of the three major sex scenes, the strap-on dildo sex scene, has been read as a challenge to phallocentrism (Madsen 88; O’Callaghan, “Lesbo” 71, “Victorian” 128). The third major sex scene, lesbian fisting with Florence, is only mentioned by one critic, and that is to argue that “Waters establishes a radical approach to the representation of lesbian sex in fiction” by representing the taboo of fisting (O’Callaghan, “Lesbo” 63). One critic did argue for the need to “move beyond conceptualising the subversive” in applying queer theory to the novel—but only to allow for feminist political readings instead (Davies qtd in Jones and O’Callaghan 9). The criticism reading the sex scenes politically is largely uncited by later essays, except for Koolen’s and O’Callaghan’s political readings.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ There are no peer-reviewed citations of Dennis, K. Harris, or Madsen, six citations of Koolen, and four citations of O’Callaghan, “Equivocal.” However, three of Koolen’s six citations are by the same critic in different essays. Although the claim is made that “Claire O’Callaghan’s study of the image of pearls in Waters’s work has been referenced several times by contributors in this collection [*Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*] and has quickly become a central

There are compelling reasons why critics have read the sex scenes of *Tipping the Velvet* politically. One of them is, as I argue throughout this thesis, the privileging of political readings in lesbian, queer and feminist literary criticism over the last several decades. But another reading is the ease and the richness of the text in offering itself to political readings: it is a cornucopia. Critics have themselves noted this, arguing that “Waters is ahead of us in the games she knows we want to play with her works, laying out before us in fictional form the pre-existing theoretical concepts for which she knows we are searching” (Armitt, “Teasing” 30). Political readings are useful and add to our knowledge of the hypothesised political functions of literature, but what is frustrating about the hegemony of this form of interpretation in the Waters criticism is that critics are so busy arguing for all the reasons that the novel works like a political statement that they overlook the many other ways that it works like a novel. To use my articulation of the narrowness of address that I used in the *Hood* chapter: to interpret the novel politically is to endlessly hypothesise a didactic function at the level of what Wolfgang Iser terms the implied reader (Iser qtd. in Baldick, “Implied Reader”) and spend most of one’s time arguing about that effect. It is risky in contemporary lesbian, feminist and queer literary criticism to give up the authority of political readings, because political readings are considered inherently valuable as forms of political labour doing (social) justice to literary objects (Love, “Close”; Wiegman). But what do political methodologies undervalue? What do political readings overlook? What are the aesthetic qualities of the text and how might we value sexual material differently if we carefully analyse its language? These are the questions I address with my readings, which argue for the aesthetic importance of the lesbian eroticism depicted through literary style.

There are three major sex scenes, one for each of Nancy’s significant lovers: Kitty (98–106), Diana (228–44), and Florence (426–29). As Kavanagh laments, there are only three sex scenes and they are mostly metaphorical—but unbeknownst to him, that is precisely the point. Each scene is preceded by several pages of extended erotic material beyond the strictly denotative sex between the characters, and each sex scene, taken as a whole with that erotic lead-in material, is a substantial, significant, carefully crafted scene within the aesthetics of the novel contributing to

argument when discussing female desire in the novels,” it is worth noting that two of the four peer-reviewed citations of O’Callaghan’s essays are her citing herself in subsequent essays; two of them are in the book she co-edited; and the claim itself is made in an Afterword she co-wrote in the book she co-edited, all of which may compromise claims of her citational legacy.

characterisation, interiority, foreshadowing, intersubjectivity, symbolism, tone and meaning. Sex matters, as I hope to demonstrate in the following analyses.

Close Readings

The First Major Sex Scene: Kitty (98–106)

Two critics briefly mention the first sex scene with Kitty. Jeanette King argues that Nan's and Kitty's attitudes to the frozen river Thames represent their attitudes to their lesbian desire (148). In an exclusively political reading, O'Callaghan ("Lesbo") argues that all the explicit sex scenes in the novel depict through high-quality sex writing "a range of orgasmic experiences" which refute heteronorms like the eliding of lesbian sex in literature (63) and the Freudian myth of the vaginal orgasm (64). Yes, the sex scenes do that. But *why* is this sex scene here in the novel, now? Why are there nine pages of eroticism comprising the expanded sex scene before the two pages that include denotative sex? How does sexual representation operate aesthetically?

The extended sex scene begins at a moment when Kitty and Nan (as Kitty nicknames her) are drunk at a party (97–99). Kitty gets jealous and speaks spitefully to Nan. Nan responds:

"I won't have you call me a flirt!" I said as she tugged at me. "How could you call me one? How could you? Oh! If you just knew—" I put my hand to the back of my collar; her fingers followed my own, her face came close. Seeing it, I felt all at once quite dazed. I thought I had become her sister, as she wanted. I thought I had my queer desires cribbed and chilled and chastened. Now I knew only that her arm was about me, her hand on mine, her breath hot upon my cheek. I grasped her—not the better to push her away, but in order to hold her nearer. Gradually we ceased our wrestling and grew still, our breaths ragged, our hearts thudding. Her eyes were round and dark as jet; I felt her fingers leave my hand and move against my neck.

Then all at once there came a blast of noise from the passageway beyond, and the sound of footsteps. Kitty started in my arms as if a pistol had been fired, and took a half-dozen steps, very rapidly, away. (98–99)

They are so close, but their desire is stifled, transmuted by drink into jealousy and hostility, their inhibitions down. Kitty, with her internalised homophobia and paranoia, is always the first to recognise how compromising their displays of affection are, so she is the first to jump and step away. Even these first moments of intimacy in this scene display significant aspects of the novel's

characterisation, foreshadowing Kitty's being the one to betray her love for Nan by taking her manager Walter as a "beard."⁴⁵

Following their drunken scuffle that turns erotic, the girls leave the party and are driving home when they stop at Lambeth Bridge to witness the Thames freezing over. Hidden from their driver, they kiss, then are driven home and have sex for the first time. The material from the party scuffle onwards (99–106) forms the extended eroticism of their first sex scene, much longer than the strictly denotative sex of the last two pages (104–06) and just as important. Flirtations, seductions, coming up against and mounting and surmounting inhibitions, risk-taking, intimacy and connection fill this extended eroticism and form the fullness of the lesbian eroticism of style as an aesthetic strategy. I argue that this broader erotic material comprises the slippery thing identified as "good" sex writing that Waters is regarded as having produced (O'Callaghan, "Lesbo" 64).

The aesthetics of such writing is displayed in this section of Waters' novel. Nancy narrates:

It was two o'clock or later before we started on our journey home; and then we sat, on different seats, in silence . . . and I still drunk, still dazed, still desperately stirred, but still uncertain. (100)

With the prominent alliteration, consonance and assonance in colour:

and I still drunk, still dazed, still desperately stirred, but still uncertain.

Throughout the text, sound-patterning and syntactic repetition emerge at moments of heightened sensuality, when Nan is feeling and expressing the strength of her conflicting feelings of desire, fear, wonder, and frustration. Prose sentences can easily get lost in a longer paragraph; Waters often uses heightened rhyme at the close of paragraphs of extended eroticism, which is a syntactical device which hangs the phrases in the mind like the lines of a poem. This placement closing a paragraph emphasises the line but also amplifies its qualities of suggestion or tease. As every successful sex writer knows, the strategy of tantalising, teasing about more eroticism to come is central to constructing erotic discourses and central to the friction necessary to sex itself.

⁴⁵ A term of gay subcultural slang when a closeted gay person takes a different-gendered partner in order to pass as straight and so lower the risk of being outed. A beard is, for a gay man, something that makes him seem less gay. (Urban Dictionary, "Beard")

It was a bitterly cold and beautiful night—perfectly quiet, once we had left the clamour of the party behind us, and still. The roads were foggy, and thick with ice: every so often I felt the wheels of our carriage slide a little, and caught the sound of the horse’s slithering, uncertain step, and the driver’s gentle curses. (100–01)

An example of the pathetic fallacy (Burris 888), eroticised discourse imbues the environment around the two women as sensual, slippery, risky, mysterious, sharing the qualities of the desire which Nan feels between them. The horse’s step is *slithering*—not a term usually associated with a horse’s step—and *uncertain*, these notable sibilant hisses again lending these phonaesthemes’ connotations of frictionless movement to the words.

The Thames was freezing over.

I looked from the river to Kitty, and from Kitty to the bridge on which we stood. There was no one near us save our driver—and he had the collar of his cape about his ears, and was busy with his pipe and his tobacco-pouch. I looked at the river again—at that extraordinary, ordinary transformation, that easy submission to the urgings of a natural law, that was yet so rare and so unsettling.

It seemed a little miracle, done just for Kitty and me.

“How cold it must be!” I said softly. “Imagine if the whole river froze over, if it was frozen right down from here to Richmond. Would you walk across it?”

Kitty shivered, and shook her head. “The ice would break,” she said. “We would sink and drown; or else be stranded and die of the cold!”

I had expected her to smile, not make me a serious answer. I saw us floating down the Thames, out to sea—past Whitstable, perhaps—on a piece of ice no bigger than a pancake. (101–02)

Nan’s observation and appreciation of the frozen river is a metaphor for their desire (King 148). Nan’s adjectives for the river convey her affirmation and naturalisation of her own desire as *extraordinary, ordinary, natural, rare, unsettling*. The words *extraordinary, ordinary* echo Nan’s earlier narration when she spontaneously ponders an antonymic construction contrasting *queer* with *ordinary* in the moment she first realises that she is in love with Kitty: “I thought, how queer it is!—and yet, how very ordinary: *I am in love with you*” (33; emphasis in original). There are echoes with the erotic paradoxes used to depict union with the lover in Winterson’s and Donoghue’s

novels, the “ordinary miracle” or “obvious surprise” of *Written on the Body* or the “reliable surprise” of *Hood*.

This description of a natural phenomenon is not just a metaphor for unacknowledged desire but is also indexical of their different characters shown in their differing responses to the river. For Nan, the frozen river is a miracle; an object of wonder. But for Kitty, the river is risky and to be feared, mirroring her fears about openly embracing their lesbian desire (King 148); she fears death or exile—professional, social, or financial. Nan, by contrast, pursues the image of their exile, floating away together, and is undisturbed, so we learn of her courage and innocent fidelity to their love even in the face of a hostile society. These are the aesthetic effects of this passage, which is easily overlooked by instrumentalist political readings of the transgression or subversion of other parts of the text.

The horse took a step, and its bridle jangled; the drive gave a cough. Still we gazed at the river, silent and unmoving—and both of us, finally, rather grave.

At last Kitty gave a whisper. “Ain’t it queer,” she said. (102)

There is a slip of register here, a subtle one. Kitty is being honest, vulnerable, so her voice has dropped in humility or awe at the presence of this powerful mysterious thing—the river or desire—and in that moment she has lost the elegance of her performance persona and reverted to her working-class Kentish dialect.

I took her hand. Her fingers, I could feel, were stiff and cold inside her glove. I placed the hand against my cheek; it did not warm it. With my eyes all the time on the water below I pulled at the button at her wrist, then drew the mitten from her, and held her fingers against my lips to warm them with my breath.

I sighed, gently, against her knuckles; then turned the hand, and breathed upon her palm. There was no sound at all save the unfamiliar lapping and creaking of the frozen river. Then, “Nan,” she said, very low. (102)

The river is *lapping*, a word that has obvious sexual connotations. What finally erodes Kitty’s resistance to enacting her desire for Nan is the feel of Nan’s mouth on Kitty’s hand.

Orality/digitality is central to the lesbian eroticism of style in erotic lesbian texts because, as Susie Bright famously advised the directors of *Bound*, a lesbian’s sexual organs are her mouth and her hands (Bright 158–59). Nan is ignorant, innocent, naive about this prominent kinetic mode of

lesbian eroticism and is touching Kitty to warm her; had she realised that she was seducing Kitty—and tipping into that forbidden realm of unsisterly desire Nan had already learned to hide from Kitty—she may have refrained. In this way, it echoes the infamous oyster-eating scene in which Nan feeds Kitty an oyster in front of Nan’s family, with Nan ignorant of the lesbian eroticism of which Kitty is all too aware. It is Nan’s naivety about lesbian eroticism that facilitates her lesbian eroticism and that Kitty responds to in both scenes. This ambivalence, the way in which lesbian desire is facilitated by lesbian ignorance *and* lesbian knowledge, is a key tension across Waters’ novels.

I looked at her, her hand still held to my mouth and my breath still damp upon her fingers. Her face was raised to mine, and her gaze dark and strange and thick, **like** the water below. (emphasis mine)

At this point, the prose breaks from metaphor into the more explicit simile which may actually indicate Nan’s increasing awareness of the effect she is having in stoking Kitty’s desire.

I felt her body stiff against my own—felt the pounding, very rapid, where we joined at the breast; **and the** pulse **and the** heat **and the** cleaving, where we pressed together at the hips. . . .

We sat side by side. She put her hands to my face again, and I shivered, so that my jaws jumped beneath her fingers. But she didn’t kiss me again: rather, she leaned against me with her face upon my neck, so that her mouth was out of reach of mine, but hot against the skin below my ear. Her hand, that was still bare of its glove and white with cold, she slid into the gap at the front of my jacket; her knee she laid heavily against my own. When the brougham swayed I felt her lips, her fingers, her thigh come **ever more** heavy, **ever more** hot, **ever more** close upon me, until I longed to squirm beneath the pressing of her, and cry out. But she gave me no word, no kiss or caress; and in my awe and my innocence I only sat steady, as she seemed to wish. (102–03; emphasis mine)

As in my reading of the sexual tension between the lovers in *Written on the Body*, the repetition of conjunctions portrays in stylistic form Nancy’s impatience, her urgency and the escalating intimacy of Kitty’s body so close to hers.

Back at the house and naked in bed together, Nancy narrates:

Once her naked limbs began to strain against my own, however, I felt suddenly shy, suddenly awed. I leaned away from her. “May I really—touch you?” I whispered. She gave again a nervous laugh, and tilted her face against the pillow.

“Oh Nan,” she said, “I think I shall die if you don’t!”

Tentatively, then, I raised my hand, and dipped my fingers into her hair. I touched her face—her brow, that curved; her cheek, that was freckled; her lip, her chin, her throat, her collar-bone, her shoulder . . . Here, shy again, I let my hand linger—until, with her face still tilted from my own and her eyes hard shut, she took my wrist and gently led my fingers to her breasts. When I touched her here she sighed, and turned; and after a minute or two she seized my wrist again, and moved it lower.

Here she was wet, and smooth as velvet. I had never, of course, touched anyone like this before—except, sometimes, myself; but it was as if I touched myself now, for the slippery hand which stroked her seemed to stroke me: I felt my drawers grow damp and warm, my own hips jerk as hers did. Soon I ceased my gentle strokings and began to rub her, rather hard. “Oh!” she said very softly; then, as I rubbed faster, she said “Oh!” again. Then, “Oh, oh, oh!”: a volley of “Oh!”s, low and fast and breathy. She bucked, and the bed gave an answering creak; her own hands began to chafe distractedly at the flesh of my shoulders. There seemed no motion, no rhythm, in all the world, but that which I had set up, between her legs, with one wet fingertip.

At last she gasped, and stiffened, then plucked my hand away and fell back, heavy and slack. I pressed her to me, and for a moment we lay together quite still. (105)

Nancy does not know the names for the female genitals, and she is shy, so her specificity diverts into the euphemistic *lower* and *here*. It is the first time she has had sex with another woman, so she is surprised by and marvels at responses like getting wet from pleasuring her lover.

Kitty will not let Nan turn on the light when they return home, and her face is tilted away from Nan’s when she answers Nancy’s consent question in the affirmative—or gestures in the affirmative, because she does not articulate it. Kitty again has her face turned away when she moves Nan’s hands to her breast and her vulva. Kitty cannot articulate her desire because she is alienated from it, a function of her closetedness and internalised homophobia. While other critics have identified Kitty’s internalised homophobia when she tells Nan with horror about “career toms” or out lesbians (Dennis; Jeremiah; King), my analysis demonstrates that Kitty’s internalised homophobia is present earlier in the text and is woven through the sexual material and metaphors.

There is a later moment, after they have had sex, when Nancy is watching Kitty re-dress and is struck by an almost painful feeling of overwhelming affection and love. Nan as narrator again uses metaphors that give away more than she realises, more than she intends, more than she is even aware of herself in that moment:

For the second time that day I lay and watched her wash, and pull on stockings and a skirt, through lazy eyes.

As I did so, I put a hand to my breast. There was a dull movement there, a kind of pulling or folding, or melting, exactly as if my chest were the hot, soft wall of a candle, falling in upon a burning wick. I gave a sigh, Kitty heard, and saw my stricken face, and came to me; then she moved my hand away and placed her lips, very softly, over my heart.

I was eighteen, and knew nothing. I thought, at that moment, that I would die of love for her. (117)

Nan as narrator is using the metaphor of the candle wall collapsing from the heat to convey the intensity of her love. But the candle burns through something finite, and when it collapses and the walls are gone, it falls apart and burns out for lack of sustenance. Nan's articulation furthers characterisation in what it includes, simile and metaphor, but also in what it lacks: the unnamed genitalia indexical of her ignorance portrays Nan's naivety, despite her narrating bitterly from the future.

And there was nothing you would not do, I thought, nothing you would not sacrifice, to keep your heart's desire once you had been given it. I knew that Kitty and I felt just the same—only, of course, about different things.

I should have remembered this, later. (72)

I must learn to love Kitty as Kitty loved me; or never be able to love her at all.

And [never being able to love Kitty], I knew, would be terrible. (78)

. . . like a fool with a daisy-stalk, endlessly exclaiming over the same last browning petal.
(106)

I was eighteen, and knew nothing. (117)

The shift from the naivety of her younger self to the bitterness of her experienced self often emerges in the final sentences of a passage, that syntactical device that hangs the words in the reader's mind and foreshadows the trauma to come.

The Second Major Sex Scene: Diana (228–44)

The second of the three major sex scenes is the strap-on dildo sex scene with Diana. The extended eroticism of the scene is 18 pages long (228–45) with the sex being six pages at the end. The sex scene is analysed at length by O'Callaghan ("Lesbo") and mentioned by a further four critics. O'Callaghan argues that Waters' explicit sex scenes are a radical act in the politics of representation because the scenes represent taboos including masturbation and fisting and counteract the historical making invisible of lesbian sex. She argues that sex scenes enact the politically progressive poststructuralist imperative to represent lesbian sexual experience, like gender, as "multiple and fluid" through high-quality sex writing ("Lesbo" 64). Of the dildo sex, O'Callaghan argues that the dildo materialises theories of the lesbian phallus displacing masculinism and that "its effects give voice to lesbian sexual pleasures" ("Lesbo" 71, "Victorian" 128). Other critics have mentioned moments in the scene. For example, it has been argued that the dildo challenges phallocentrism⁴⁶ (Madsen 88). Others have noted Nan's arousal at the thought of Diana's clandestine voyeurism (Koolen 384) and Nan's understanding of Diana's arousing her as metamorphosis (King 151). Three of the critics analyse the same line: Nan's narration that the pair are "playing whore and trick so well. . . like from a handbook of tartery." The line has been read as a queer critique of heteronormativity (Davies, "Sexual" 120); Diana's owning Nan rather than partnering with her (King 151); and a combined queer celebration and lesbian-feminist critique of eroticised power inequalities (Koolen). Like O'Callaghan, all four of the other critics cite the extended sex scene in queer or feminist political readings arguing that the scene critiques heteronormativity (Davies,

⁴⁶ This is arguably the most common interpretation of representations of dildoes in contemporary lesbian literary criticism because of the influence of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic lesbian critical theory, as for example in Colleen Lamos's essay "Taking on the Phallus" within Karla Jay's edited collection *Lesbian Erotics* (1995). Lamos argues: "The dildo exemplifies [Judith Butler's] concept of lesbian sexuality as a "subversive repetition" of heterosexual norms, for the dildo both imitates and undercuts the phallicism of the penis, discrediting phallic power while simultaneously, and paradoxically, assuming such power for itself. Applying Butler's theoretical model, and drawing on post-Lacanian feminist psychoanalysis, I argue that the dildo undermines the authority of the penis, demystifying the latter's phallicism through its simulation of the penis. . . . Although lesbian sex advice manuals at times deny the dildo's phallicism or try to naturalize it as somehow feminine, I claim instead that that dildo opens up the possibility of sexual practices beyond the limits of conventional gender (male/female) and sexual (hetero/homosexual) identities." (102)

“Sexual”; King; Koolen; Madsen). The scene does critique heteronormativity. And it is political. And queer. And feminist. And lesbian-feminist. But what else might be at work in this 18-page extended sex scene?

It matters for my argument which parts of the sex scene are being talked about by critics. As I argued in Chapter 3 on *Hood*, in the era of political readings in feminist and queer literary criticism, critics tend to apply a generalised close reading methodology that reads for “imagery” or themes and privileges speech and narration over description. A close reading methodology derived from stylistics can allow us to see the breadth of meaning-making that is produced by literary devices. Sex writing is not merely ornamental or libidinal in this novel—as so many reviewers and critics seem to fear—and *all* the material of this sex scene has aesthetic functions.

Nancy narrates:

And there was a curious quality to the city that night, that seemed all of a piece with the costume I had chosen. The air was cool and unnaturally clear, so that colours—the red of a painted lip, the blue of a sandwich-man’s boards, the violet and the green and the yellow of a flower-girl’s tray—seemed to leap out of the gloom. It was just as if the city were a monstrous carpet to which a giant hand had applied the beater, to make all glow again. Infected by the mood I had sensed even in my Green Street chamber, people had, like me, put on their finest. Girls in gay dresses walked the pavements in long, intimidating lines, or spooned with their bowler-hatted beaux on steps and benches. Boys stood drinking at the doors of public-houses, their pomaded heads gleaming, in the gas-light, like silk. The moon hung low above the roofs of Soho, pink and bright and swollen as a Chinese lantern. One or two stars winked viciously alongside it. (229)

The “pathetic fallacy” (Burris 888) characteristic of the Dickensian mode operates in the depiction of the hot night amplifying the sensual qualities of the street and its people: lipstick, service girls’ offerings, intimidating girls, cavorting straight couples, boys’ gleaming silken heads, the moon “pink and bright and swollen” like aroused flesh and the stars “winked viciously” with connotations of the theatrical, sexual, erotic, sensual, and violent—exactly the qualities of the sex scene to follow.

Consider excerpts of Nancy’s narration:

A brougham had driven slowly by, then stopped; and then, like me, it had lingered. No one had got out of it, no one had got in. The driver had a high collar shadowing his face, and had never moved his gaze from his horse—but there had been a certain twitching of the lace at the dark carriage windows, that let me know that I was being observed, carefully, from within.

The carriage, however, with its taciturn driver and bashful occupant, had at last jerked into life and pulled away. (229–30)

Even on these quieter routes, however, the traffic seemed unusually heavy—unusually, and puzzlingly, for though few carts and hansoms seemed actually to pass me, the low clatter of wheels and hooves formed a continuous accompaniment to my own slow footfalls. At last, at the entrance to a dim and silent mews, I understood why; for here I paused to tie my lace and, as I stooped, looked casually behind me. There was a carriage moving slowly towards me out of the gloom, a private carriage with a particular, well-greased rumble I now knew for the one that had pursued me all the way from Soho, and a hunched and muffled driver I thought I recognised. It was the brougham that had waited near me in St James's Square. Its shy master, who had watched while I had posed beneath a lamp-post and strolled the pavement with my fingers at my crotch, evidently fancied another look. (231)

I quickened my step, and made to move past, head down.

But as I drew level with the rear wheel I heard the soft click of a latch undone: the door swung silently open, blocking my path. From the shadows beyond the doorframe drifted a thread of blue tobacco smoke; I heard a breath, a rustle. Now I must either retrace my steps and cross behind the vehicle, or squeeze between the swinging door and the wall on my left—and catch a glimpse, perhaps, of its enigmatic occupant. (232)

“Can I offer you a ride?”

Her voice was rich and rather haughty, and somehow arresting. It made me stammer. I said: “That, that’s very kind of you, madam”—I sounded like a mincing shop-boy refusing a tip—but I’m not five minutes from home, and I shall get there all the quicker if you’ll let me say good-night, and pass on my way.” (232)

She said, “You are, perhaps, on your way home from a costume ball?” Her voice had a new, slightly arrogant drawl to it. (235)

I glanced at the woman at my side. She wore a dress or cloak of some sombre, heavy material, indistinguishable from the dark upholstery of the carriage's interior; her face and gloved hands, illuminated by the regular gleam of passing street-lamps, their surface fantastically marbled by the shadow of the drapes, seemed to float, pale as water-lilies, in a pool of gloom. (234)

I said, "You have watched me before—before tonight!"

She answered: "Well, it is rather marvellous what one may catch, from one's carriage, if one is quick and keen and patient. One may follow one's quarry like a hound with a fox—and all the time the fox not know itself pursued—might think itself only about its little private business: lifting its tail, arching its eye, wiping its lips . . . I might have had you, dear, a dozen times: but oh! as I said, why spoil the chase!" (236)

Diana is first represented metonymically by the effect of her dominance on her objectified driver. He is in a "high collar shadowing his face" and his gaze never leaves his horse: shadowy menacing non-visibility, non-identity, and obedience are all qualities she demands of her servants. The carriage comes "moving slowly towards me out of the gloom" with a "particular well-greased rumble" connoting maintenance and wealth but also a roving appetite and habituated experience. Nancy narrates that she is "intrigued" by the "enigmatic" occupant after the door opens to block her path: responding to restraint, to being blocked, with a sexualised intrigue, is characteristic of submissive pleasures in BDSM culture (Fenn). Diana's voice is "rich and rather haughty, and somehow arresting" and produces a stammer in Nancy, who is normally so cocky. Nancy has met someone who can match her drama and theatricality and exceed her in mystery. Diana is indistinguishable from her expensive possessions, and her face and gloved hands are "fantastically marbled" by the passing lamplight and they "seemed to float . . . in a pool of gloom"—beyond human, somehow, emerging demon-like from her blue tobacco smoke. Diana's voice takes on a "new, slightly arrogant drawl" betraying her character, unlike the faux-innocent tones of her earlier inviting speech. Diana speaks of her pleasure at delaying their meeting, having pursued Nancy "like a hound with a fox": delayed gratification and the chase as control mechanisms are characteristic of dominant pleasures in kink culture.

"And besides," I added pertly, "it's you who's the tease: I saw you in St James's Square, watching me. Why didn't you stop me then, if you wanted—*company*—so badly?"

“And spoil the fun with hastening it? Why, the wait was half the pleasure!” As she said it she raised the fingers of her other hand—her left hand—to my cheek. The gloves, I thought, were rather damp about the tips; and they were scented with a scent that made me draw back in confusion and surprise. (236)

The smell of wetness on the fingers is a rare and powerful device of lesbian eroticism in Waters’ novels and it indexes not merely desire but the complex, competing feelings that are produced in the character. There are three moments in which it appears in Waters’ novels. One of these moments is when Sue catches the smell of her fingers after the only time she has sex with Maud in *Fingersmith*. Having fallen for Maud and believing that she is going to betray the mistress she now has complex feelings for, she narrates: “My lip was dry, too, and I brought up my hand, to touch it. Then I took the hand away. It smelt of her. The smell made me shiver, inside . . . I shivered again, remembering. I put the tip of one finger to my tongue. It tasted sharp—like vinegar, like blood. Like money” (142). Like the figurative devices of *Written on the Body*, this device is simultaneously metonymy, metaphor, and simile. Metonymically, the sharpness of the smell is the unmistakable acidic tang of the vulva. Metaphorically, the sharpness is the cruelty of Sue’s plot with Gentleman to swindle Maud out of her fortune, but unbeknownst to Sue, the sharpness is also of Maud’s cruelty, her sacrificing Sue for her own freedom—blood, money.

But the first two of these three moments in Waters’ novels are in *Tipping the Velvet*. The first is when Kitty kisses Nan’s hand and the fishy scent of the oyster liquor on her hands solicits Kitty’s lesbian desire for the first time (33). This moment is about the surprising gentleness in Kitty’s drag king masculinity and her attraction to Nan’s simplicity: where Nan assumes the most abject reaction and is ashamed of her oyster girl smell (“Like a herring!”), Kitty chooses the most generous reaction and helps Nan see the best in herself, a little bit of her own magic (“like a mermaid”). The second of these moments in Waters’ novels is this moment, with the smell of Diana’s gloves. Diana uses the smell to evidence to Nancy her voyeuristic pleasures; it is an index of the truth of her lesbian desire that cuts through Nancy’s hesitation or disbelief. Displaying the scent so brashly indexes Diana’s sexual boldness as well as her attitude to her possessions and her workers’ service: careless of the gloves’ high value, deliberately relishing the sexualised labour of her lesbian servants in cleaning the evidence of her debauchery off her fine clothes. Each of these three moments is meaningful in different ways, and a comparative analysis that takes the material of sex scenes seriously can draw out these meaningful differences.

“Tonight—what was it, decided me at last? Perhaps it was the uniform; perhaps the moon . . .” And she turned her face to the carriage window, where the moon showed—higher and smaller than before, but still quite pink, as if ashamed to look upon the wicked world to which it was compelled to lend its light. (236)

It is the uniform, or perhaps the moon, to which Diana ascribes her motivation to reveal her voyeuristic self to Nancy that night and Nancy’s narration returns to the pathetic fallacy but the moon has changed in her estimation from low, pink, bright and swollen to small and high and “still quite pink, as if ashamed to look upon the wicked world to which it was compelled to lend its light” (236)—the moon’s atrophied sexual swagger a metaphor for Nancy’s own, her bluster exposed as her artifice is pierced by this powerful new partner in performance.

Consider the rising menace in Nancy’s narration, when Diana takes Nancy to her mansion:

Her dark eyes gleamed, with invitation or perhaps with challenge. . . . I felt a prick, now, not of desire, but of fear: her face, lit from beneath by the smoking lamp, seemed all at once macabre, grotesque. I wondered at this lady’s tastes, and how they might have decked the room that lay behind this unspeaking door, in this silent house, with its curious, incurious servants. There might be ropes, there might be knives. There might be a heap of girls in suits—their pomaded heads all neat, their necks all bloody. (238)

“It’s Miss Nancy King, and you might at least offer me a cigarette, I think.”

She smiled, and came to me, and placed her own fag, half-smoked and damp at the end, between my lips. I caught the reek of it on her breath, together with the faint spice of the wine that she had swallowed.

“*If you were King of Pleasure,*” she said, “*and I were Queen of Pain . . .*” Then, in a different tone: “You’re very handsome, Miss King.” (239; ellipses in original)

I never thought to ask what happened to the beggar in the tale, once the five hundred days came to an end. (250)

Nancy is suddenly fearful of being at the door of Diana’s bedroom, having passed through the shadowy house, and she alludes to the Bluebeard folk tale and the inhumanness of Diana’s face and her potential tastes. Diana is quoting a line from Swinburne’s poem “A Match” (1866), in which a masculine speaker regales a feminine addressee about their complementarity and fantasised

situations where they would be decadently sexual together. But the original reads, *If you were the Queen of Pleasure, and I were the King of Pain*, so Diana has inverted the genders to make herself, the speaker, Queen of Pain—foreshadowing the violent eroticism of her desires.

The eroticism of the scene and Nancy's situation is powered by a unique relationship between eroticism and twinned knowledge/ignorance. Nancy's ignorance of lesbian sexual discourse is what facilitates her lesbian eroticism several times across the novel. As, for example, when Nan feeds Kitty the oyster in front of her family, oblivious to the oral/digital lesbian eroticism of which Kitty is aware (48). Or when Nancy accidentally uses a lesbian sexual pun in front of Florence and is intrigued by Florence's "knowing looks" and her being nonplussed by women in trousers flirting with women (417). There are three allusions in this erotic scene with Diana: to the tale of Bluebeard, Swinburne, and Persian folktales. Nancy knows enough erotic literature to fear the Bluebeard treatment for herself, but she lacks Diana's knowledge of Swinburne and so overlooks the threat in Diana's installing herself as the subject of the line, the *Queen of Pain*, which foreshadows her cruel and violent tastes and the damage she will cause. Nancy is the (drag) *King* thinking only of *Pleasure* and does not think to ask the beggar's fate, although she narrates this naivety with a bitterness that haunts the line concluding the chapter, *I never thought to ask what happened to the beggar in the tale, once the five hundred days came to an end*. Diana wields her knowledge of lesbian sexual discourse against Nancy, as when she pulls the rolled cravat from Nancy's trouser bulge and "looked absurdly like a stage magician . . . and, of course, she was too clever not to know it: one dark eyebrow lifted, and her lip gave its ironical curl, and she whispered, 'Presto!'" (240). Diana knows how Nancy's beggar's trajectory will end—with her cast back onto the streets—and she elides that knowledge when she stokes Nancy's selfish pleasure. Diana's wielding her knowledge of lesbian erotic discourse is materialised when she strikes Nancy across the face with a medical textbook on homosexuality, perhaps one of the early works of sexology.

Heather Love argues that a renewed attention to description in Literary Studies can show us alternative methods in which the highest value is not transgression, subversion, or demystification and its heroic critic ("Close" 374, 381–83). By "description" Love means both schools of criticism like formalism and symbolism as a literary technique in fiction. But descriptive criticism has not always been welcomed, with one critic referring to its practices in book history as the "New Boredom" (Kastan qtd. in Love, "Close" 382). And adjectival/adverbial prose used as a literary device has fared little better. Love explains: "Description has had a mostly poor reputation in literary studies, where it has been seen as inferior to narration" and that it has been considered "either an extraneous ornament or a dangerous indulgence" and "necessarily subordinate to the key

activity of interpretation” (381). *Ornament* and *indulgence*, one might note, have the negative connotations of sensual or sexual excess, of language that dares to have too much style. But these terms have positive connotations too, of gratification and the erotic. The following analysis aims to illustrate the usefulness of descriptive criticism.

After being taken home and given champagne and special cigarettes, Diana has commanded Nancy to undress, handed her a key, and directed her to a locked trunk. Nan narrates:

The room next door was smaller than the parlour, but quite as rich, and just as dim and hot. On one side there was a screen, with a commode behind it; on the other stood a japanned press, its surface hard and black and glossy, like a beetle’s back. At the bottom of the bed there was, as she had promised, a trunk: a handsome, antique chest made of some desiccated, perfumed wood—rosewood, I think—with four claw feet and corners of brass, and elaborate carvings on its sides and lid which the dull glow of the fire threw into exaggerated relief. I knelt before it, placed the key into the lock; and felt the shifting, as I turned it, of some deep interior spring.

A movement in the corner of the room made me turn my head. There was a cheval-glass there, big as a door, and I saw myself reflected in it: pale and wide-eyed, breathless and curious, but for all that an unlikely Pandora, with my scarlet jacket and my saucy cap, my crop and my bare bare bum. In the next room all was hushed and still. (241)

There is marked internal variation in the kinds of descriptive prose this passage includes. The paragraph observing the trunk has many instances of alliteration, consonance, and assonance, and I have marked below in bold some of the most prominent examples to allow the density of these devices to become apparent:

The room next **door** was **smaller** than the **parlour**, but quite as **rich**, and just as **dim** and **hot**. **On** one **side** there was a **screen**, with a commode **behind** it; on the other stood a japanned **press**, its **surface** hard and **black** and glossy, like a **beetle’s back**. At the **bottom** of the **bed** there was, as she had promised, a trunk: a **handsome**, **antique chest** made of some **desiccated**, perfumed **wood**—**rosewood**, I think—with **four** **claw feet** and **corners of brass**, and **elaborate carvings** on its sides and lid which the dull glow of the **fire** threw into exaggerated **relief**. I knelt before it, placed the **key** into the **lock**; and felt the **shifting**, as I turned it, of some **deep interior spring**.

This kind of heightened literary language draws attention to the sensual qualities of the objects observed, but it is also a discursive marker indicating to the reader that this language is to be understood as having poetic qualities as an aesthetic object (Brogan, "Sound" 1176). The adjectives in this passage are value-laden for richness and the sensual. There are three sets of adjectives in contiguous pairs—*handsome/antique*, *desiccated/perfumed*, and *deep/interior*—and there are *five* adjectives enhancing reader perception of the chest. The excess of adjectival language here is mimetic of the material excess of the objects they represent and indicates sustained attention to sensual objects. Nan's account is filled with wonder, and the awe of the poor for the trappings of wealth. In this situation, Nan is intimidated, excited, intrigued, and aroused, and for this reason she experiences the richness, and the aestheticised, eroticised, sensual qualities of the objects around her. This is characteristic of erotic literature, this kind of sustained eroticisation of scenes, objects, and perception in excess of sex scenes, and the aestheticisation of the language itself as a vehicle for the eroticism of the text.

Though the language is largely descriptive, the closing sentences of this passage contains a strong figurative element, emphasised by its syntactical position as paragraph final, a visual device which hangs the words in the mind in a syntactical effect not seen in paragraph-central phrases. "The shifting, as I turned it, of some deep interior spring" is strongly symbolic, a metaphor for the awakening of her arousal and a turning point in her journey to sexual experience and self-discovery. It is the predominantly descriptive nature of the passage preceding which allows the symbolism of this line to be foregrounded.

The language reaches a notable density of adjectives when Nan looks at herself in the mirror:

There was a cheval-glass there, big as a door, and I saw myself reflected in it: pale and wide-eyed, breathless and curious, but for all that an unlikely Pandora, with my scarlet jacket and my saucy cap, my crop and my bare bare bum. (241)

Considered in a sequence, we see a progression here from connotations of fear to arousal and eroticism—*pale* connotes fear; *wide-eyed* connotes fear but with curiosity or innocence also; *breathless* connotes urgency or arousal, and *curious* has shed the connotations of fear towards sexual adventure. Sexual adventurousness is, of course, the secondary meaning of *scarlet* in English, which would be lost in an ostensible synonym with the same referent such as *maroon* or *red*; and *saucy* is the sexualised quality of a person, hence the cap is synecdochic of its wearer.

Bare bare bum is unusual for being almost grammatically incorrect. It is a repetition with no pause, no comma separating the adjectives unlike every other adjectival pair. What is its function? There is a rhythmic, song-song quality to this phrase, an effect of syntax, which is amplified by the alliteration of *bare bare bum*, evoking “Baa Baa Black Sheep” for a reader of English familiar with traditional nursery rhymes. And *bum* is a childlike slang term whose use strongly contradicts the elegance of the register of the adjectives preceding. This slip of diction into the crudeness of *bare bare bum* demonstrates that Nan is out-of-place in this lush, wealthy interior, and it speaks to her vulnerability in that moment—awestruck, in a form of intimidation by wealth, with a contrasting nakedness denoting sexual vulnerability. It is the excitement and risk of the moment that Nan’s narration reveals here.

I turned to the trunk again, and lifted its lid. Inside was a jumble of bottles and scarves, of cords and packets and yellow-bound books. I didn’t pause to gaze upon these objects then, however; indeed, I hardly registered them at all. For on the top of the jumble, on a square of velvet, lay the queerest, lewdest thing I ever saw.

It was a kind of harness, made of leather: belt-like, and yet not quite a belt, for though it had one wide strap with buckles on it, two narrower, shorter bands were fastened to this and they, too, were buckled. For one alarming moment I thought it might be a horse’s bridle; then I saw what the straps and the buckles supported. It was a cylinder of leather, rather longer than the length of my hand and about as fat, in width, as I could grip. One end was rounded and slightly enlarged, the other fixed firm to a flattened base; to this, by hoops of brass, the belt and the narrower bands were all also fastened.

It was, in short, a dildo. I had never seen one before; I did not, at that time, know that such things existed and had names. For all I knew of it, this might be an original, that the lady had fashioned to a pattern of her own.

Perhaps Eve thought the same, when she saw her first apple.

Even so, it didn’t stop her knowing what the apple was for . . . (241–42; ellipses in original)

Nan as a first-person narrator withholds the name of this object for an entire paragraph. What the reader receives is her observations from her position of naivety, curiosity, and arousal. How does a dildo look to someone who has never seen one? How would they perceive it? Perhaps, something like this. It does something to the reading of this scene, having this gradual revealing of the contours and characteristics of the object before its name. Nan’s account is part of the

Bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story being narrated from a position of maturity and wisdom, but focalised in this excerpt through a naive stage in her development. What the withholding of its name allows for the reader is a slow unveiling, an accretive composition of this object with all the wonder and strangeness that Nan is feeling in that moment—an examination, an attention, a sustained proximity to a strange object, which would be lost if the object were named first, and which is possible here through description.

I struggled for a moment or two over the placing of the straps, and the **tightening** of the buckles. The brass **bit** into the **white flesh** of my hip, but the leather was wonderfully **supple** and **warm**. I glanced again towards the looking-glass. The base of the phallus was a darker wedge upon my own triangular shield of hair, and its lowest tip nudged me in a most **insinuating** way. From this base the dildo itself **obscenely sprang**—not straight out, but at a **cunning angle**, so that when I looked down at it I saw first its bulbous head, gleaming in the red glow of the fire and split by a near-invisible seam of tiny, ivory stitches. (242)

A sexual, sensual register has overtaken words of every word-class: *Tightening, bit, supple, warm, insinuating, obscenely, sprang/cunning angle, bulbous head, gleaming, split, seam.*

The **brass bit** into the **white** flesh of my **hip**, but the leather was **wonderfully supple** and **warm**.

The rhyme increases again, strapping sound-patterning sensuality to the signifiers.

Finally she pulled away, and seized my wrists.

“Not yet,” she said. “Not yet, not yet!” (243)

Diana’s exclamation to Nancy is also *not yet* to the reader, since sustaining the force of sexual tension through delayed gratification is central to the genre conventions of erotic fiction.

With my hands still clasped in hers she led me to one of the straight-backed chairs and sat me on it, the dildo all the while straining from my lap, rude and rigid as a skittle.

The sounds comprising the words representing the dildo here—*straining, rude, rigid, skittle*—are part of a set of phonaesthemes suggesting harshness, brutality, or strenuousness to a reader of English, like words such as *scrape, strike, stricken, screech*. These phonaesthemes of the *sticking-*

out-ness quality of the dildo are the same phonaesthemes of harshness used to depict the scars of violence being attended to in *Written on the Body* when the narrator says *jagged like a duelling scar where the skin still shows the stitches*. Harshness and violence are sometimes part of a lesbian eroticism of style: in Winterson's novel, narrating the eroticised attention to the fullness of the lover's body with its scars from past violences. In *Tipping the Velvet*, devices of style at the level of the morpheme are used to depict the dildo's bravado and its outrageousness in that room.

Soon her breaths became moans, then cries; soon my own voice joined hers, for the dildo that serviced her also pleased me—her motions bringing it with an ever faster, ever harder pressure against just that part of me that cared for pressure best. I had one brief moment of self-consciousness, when I saw myself as from a distance, straddled by a stranger in an unknown house, buckled inside that monstrous instrument, panting with pleasure and sweating with lust. Then in another moment I could think nothing, only shudder; and the pleasure—mine and hers—found its aching, arching crisis, and was spent. (243)

The rhythmic stresses of this passage serve the mimetic function of sound-patterning (Brogan, "Sound" 1176), enacting through form the furious momentum and staccato thrusts of strap-on dildo sex. The metrical stresses of this passage begin mixed, until a uniformity crystallises in the sequence *ever faster ever harder pressure* in a trochaic rhythm (*dum-da, dum-da, dum-da*). The rhythm is installed but immediately reversed in a see-sawing transition into the iambic gallop of *just that part of me that cared for pressure best*. The long sequence of monosyllables maintains the same rhythm with twice as many words, making the line sound staccato, crammed, and rushed. The galloping rhythm of iambic feet echo the human heartbeat—and a woman can feel the pounding bloodrush of her heartbeat in her vagina being pounded. These intricate devices of syntax and morphology enact in form the acceleration and furious momentum of the sex that forms the content.

I had one brief moment of self-consciousness, when I saw myself as from a distance,
straddled by a stranger in an unknown house, buckled inside that monstrous instrument,
panting with pleasure and sweating with lust.

In contrast, then, the next sentence is long, and eloquent, and takes its time. It depicts a moment of self-reflection and even dissociation, and the length and over-elegance of its language extends that reflective moment in the mind of the reader, like a slow-motion image of this character watching

herself. The furious momentum, a long, interjected moment of elongated self-reflection, then a brief return to a rising stress, and it peters into silence.⁴⁷

I am not reading the dildo in this scene as a symbol for the possibility of the lesbian phallus or symptomatic of a political stance. Instead I ask, what is *this* dildo representation doing here, how does that connect with the sexual material that surrounds it, and how does that compare with other sex scenes? The critics who have argued that this dildo sex scene critiques heteronormativity—again hypothesising a didactic function at the level of the implied reader—are overlooking meaning-making at the other levels of the text. When this scene is read comparatively against a later dildo sex scene, this liberatory interpretation of queer women’s empowerment in instrumentalising the dildo for female pleasure is explicitly contradicted by the text at the level of the fictional narrator. Critics who read the *fact* of the dildo sex scene as politically progressive are overlooking how the details of the dildo sex scene are not.

Excerpts of the second dildo sex scene provide a contrast to the first:

She [Zena] pushed the blanket back, and squinted at her quim. “To think of me with a cock! What an idea!”

“What an idea? Oh, Zena, I should love to see you with one! I should love—” I sat up. “Zena, I should love to see you in Diana’s dildo!”

“That thing? She’s made you filthy! I should die with shame, before I ever tried such a thing!” Her lashes fluttered.

I said, “You are blushing! You’ve fancied it, haven’t you? You’ve fancied a bit of that kind of sport—don’t tell me you haven’t!”

“Really, a girl like me!” But she was redder than ever, and would not gaze at me. I caught hold of her hand, and pulled her up.

“Come on,” I said. “You have got me all hot for it. Diana will never know.” (321)

Here, it was the work of a moment to open the bureau’s secret drawer, then take the key to the rosewood trunk, and open that. Zena looked on, all the time casting fearful glances towards the door. When she saw the dildo, however, she coloured again, but seemed

⁴⁷ In the BBC adaptation, the descriptive prose is gone, but the music functions like the syntax does—a vehicle in sound for the furious momentum, acceleration, rising intensity, clutter and rush and clamour, and a climax that collapses into silence.

unable to tear her eyes from it. I felt a drunken surge of power and pride. “Stand up,” I said—I sounded almost like Diana. “Stand up, and fasten the buckles.” (322)

We stumbled to the bed and fell, crosswise, upon the satin. My head hung from it—the blood rushed to my cheek and made it ache—but now Zena had the shaft inside me and, as she began to wriggle and thrust, I found myself compelled to lift my mouth and kiss her.

As I did so, I heard a noise, quite distinct, above the shuddering of the bed-posts and the pounding of the pulse inside my ears. I let my head fall, and opened my eyes. The door of the room was open, and it was full of ladies’ faces. And the face, pale with fury, at the centre of them all, was Diana’s. . . . One of the ladies at Diana’s side said, “She has a prick, after all!” And Diana answered: “That prick is mine. These little sluts have stolen it!”

Her voice was thick—with drunkenness, perhaps; but also, I think, with shock. I looked again at the wide and spilling box, that she was so vain and jealous of, and felt a worm of satisfaction wriggle within me. . . . And the sight of Diana, in my old place, made me smile.

It was the smile, I think, which deranged her at last. (322–23)

As the later scene shows, the presence of the dildo in the novel is not about reclaiming a phallus for female pleasure. It is *Diana’s* “Monsieur Dildo,” and its use is about enacting Diana’s dominating, controlling, cocky persona that she inhabits when commanding her submissive partner to fuck her with it. Nancy, enthralled in the first scene, is aware of Diana’s eroticised power inequality only enough to be hot for it, and does not yet realise the dark, controlling eroticism she has submitted to. How could she? She is ignorant of Diana’s expert allusions to lesbian erotic discourses and so fails to realise how they foreshadow her abuse. Taking the later scene as a comparison, there is a transgression present that can be identified here, but it is not the fact of a woman wearing a strap-on cock for another woman’s pleasure, as critics have argued of the first scene—it is about Nancy’s reckless rebellion against Diana’s dominance by co-opting her favourite toy. She who commands the submissive partner to fuck her with the strap-on cock has the power that Diana has invested the ritual with, and Nancy transgresses Diana’s hierarchical power by claiming it for herself, but Nancy discovers just how costly that stolen taste of Diana’s power will be, for it is her last. Comparison with this later dildo scene complicates a reading of the first scene, and it shows how much more can be learned from the text if sex scenes are taken comparatively in their details and read seriously.

There is a similar moment of a critic's potential misinterpretation in a prominent self-reflective moment in a subsequent chapter in which Nancy comments on her adoption of explicit eroticised sexual language. Claire O'Callaghan analyses Nancy's narration:

One of the words that Nancy considers during her sexual *bildung* is "cunt," a term that Emma Parker notes, "is considered the most distasteful word in the English language. 'Cunt' is widely regarded as a vulgar and coarse term of abuse, one more offensive than equivalent words for the penis" (322). In the novel, Nancy comments that she had "never thought to use [such words] with Kitty. I had not *fucked* her, we had not frigged; we had only ever kissed and trembled. It was not a *quim* or a *cunt* she had between her legs" (*TTV* 267). Nancy affirms Parker's statement by commenting that the use of such "lewd words shocked ... me even as I said them" (*TTV* 267). Yet following a tradition of feminist writing led by Germaine Greer, Eve Ensler, Ingo Muscio, and more recently Caitlan Moran, Waters reclaims such language by reveling in the lasciviousness of such debased terms. ("Lesbo" 71–72)

O'Callaghan argues for the political importance of sexually explicit lesbian representation in "celebrating sexuality through language" and re-appropriating exploitative patriarchal pornographic discourses in the service of women's pleasure (71). O'Callaghan contextualises what she sees as Waters' strategy of feminist reclamation within the feminist writing of Germaine Greer and Eve Ensler "by reveling in the lasciviousness of such debased terms" (71–72). While I agree with O'Callaghan's claims that sexual language is important in explicit lesbian fiction, O'Callaghan's reading is still selectively reading the *fact of* the narrator's positive mention of explicit sexual language to argue for its political utility. The problem with this argument is that this selective quotation has de-contextualised what Nancy's narration is doing in the passage. In her lauding of feminist subversion, this critic has overlooked that structural devices of irony and the unreliable narrator actually lend this passage an opposing meaning in context.

The fuller text of the passage is:

And every jerk, every slaver, made Diana more complacent.

"How vain I am, of my little hoard!" she would say, as we lay smoking in the soiled sheets of her bed. She might be clad in nothing but a corset and a pair of purple gloves; I would have the dildo about me, perhaps with a rope of pearls wound round it. She would reach to the foot of the bed, and run her hand across the gaping box, and laugh. "Of all the

gifts I've given you," she said once, "this is the finest, isn't it, isn't it? Where in London would you find its like?"

"Nowhere!" I answered. "You're the boldest bitch in the city!"

"I am!"

"You're the boldest bitch, with the cleverest quim. If fucking were a country—well, fuck me, you'd be its queen . . . !"

These were the words which, pricked on by my mistress, I used now—lewd words which shocked and stirred me even as I said them. I had never thought to use them with Kitty. I had not *fucked* her, we had not frigged; we had only ever kissed and trembled. It was not a *quim* or a *cunt* she had between her legs—indeed, in all our nights together, I don't believe we ever gave a name to it [*sic*] all . . .

Only let her see me *now*, I thought, as I lay beside Diana, making the necklace of pearls more secure about the dildo; and Diana herself would reach to stroke her box again, and then lean and stroke me.

"Only see what I'm mistress of!" she would say with a sigh. "Only see—only see what I own!" (267; emphasis in original)

"Only let her see me *now*," Nancy narrates. Nancy is pleased with herself in this scene, and so is Diana, but it is far from being a politically feminist depiction of women's pleasure. Nancy's pleasure in her self-reflection in this scene is hollow and blustery: it is based in the deep pain of her betrayal by Kitty and her throwing herself into an exploitative, controlling and abusive relationship with Diana in order to excise the part of herself that is still heartbroken. That fucking Diana is lust without care or love is what attracts Nancy to it, and the phrase "only let her see me *now*" betrays that she is still deeply wounded by Kitty and is herself exploiting Diana as a "revenge fuck" against Kitty (Urban Dictionary, "Revenge Lay"). While Nancy is unpersuasively narrating her performative nonchalance at the careless slut she has relished becoming since Kitty's betrayal, she also fails to notice Diana's menacing possessiveness and objectification of herself in Diana's cock as just another one of Diana's toys, there to stoke her sexual ego, to be manipulated then discarded. Nancy lets herself be remade in the image Diana wants of her, becoming selfish, narcissistic, judgemental, resentful and cruel at Diana's side. So Nancy's claims about the sexualised language she has picked up from Diana are not a politically expedient feminist message. Instead, the irony of this narration, the divergence that the device of irony opens up between meaning at the level of the fictional narrator and the implied author, displays for the reader Nancy's glib self-aggrandising obliviousness of Diana's encroaching abuse. As I argued in Chapter 3 of *Hood*, the imperative to read politically for transgression or subversion in feminist literary criticism has resulted in some

selective citations of material that mis-interprets the complex meanings of lesbian desire in these novels, sometimes going as far as to invert meaning. Close readings which analyse the subtle workings of structure and style can allow critics to analyse the complex and ambivalent meanings of erotic material in lesbian texts.

The Third Major Sex Scene: Florence (425–30)

The final of the three major lesbian sex scenes in *Tipping the Velvet* portrays the first time Nancy has sex with the socialist activist Florence, with whom she has lived for a year, serving as housekeeper to Florence, Florence's brother Ralph, and their adopted baby son, Cyril.

The sex scene with Florence is notable for being a depiction of lesbian fisting. Fisting has been present in explicit sex-positive lesbian fiction since the 1980s—perhaps most memorably in Pat Califia's *Macho Sluts* (1988)—and this sex act is still present in erotic lesbian literary fiction today.⁴⁸ Outside of sex-positive lesbian fiction, however, fisting is still considered transgressive. It is less common to find a critic who will explain *why* fisting is considered transgressive, but it is often implied that it derives from a combination of its non-reproductive status; its perception as rough, extreme, or hardcore (Dickson); or scatological taboos when specifically gay men's anal fisting is discussed (Kemp qtd. in de Maupassant).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ For example, Riese, editor of *Autostraddle*, arguably the most prominent lesbian pop culture website in the Anglophone cultural world, tweeted in January 2019 asking for the best sex scenes in lesbian literary fiction (Riese). The results became the article "33 Literary Books With Great Lesbian Sex Inside Them," which included fisting in excerpts from Lidia Yuknavitch's *Chronology of Water: A Memoir* (2011) and Andrea Lowler's *Paul Takes the Form Of a Mortal Girl* (2017).

⁴⁹ Recounting David Halperin's influential arguments in queer theory, Claudia Schippert states that he argued that "some aspects of sadomasochism and in particular the sexual practice of [anal] fisting generate means of resistance despite being indulged in *not* for the sake of politics, but purely for the sake of pleasure, i.e. in the absence of intentions to produce political resistance or specifically queer meaning" (Halperin, *Saint Foucault* 85–91, paraphrased in Schippert). In a chapter of *Object Lessons* (2012) which contributed to the turn away from antinormativity in queer theory in the 2010s, Robyn Wiegman argued that queer theory that tried to theorise "queer sex" was endlessly escalating its favoured objects' transgressiveness, because no "queer sex" was ever queer enough to satisfy the political demands of queer theory's imperative to antinormativity. Wiegman writes: "Fist-fucking, BDSM, polyamory, sex with friends, erotic vomiting, stone femininity. What kind of critical attention can avoid the slide into analytic normativity that description and referentiality entail?" (341).

This sex scene with Florence is mentioned only once and briefly in the extant criticism, in O’Callaghan’s “Lesbo” essay (2013). I have quoted O’Callaghan’s essay often in my previous readings in this chapter because it is arguably the essay which attends to the multiple meanings of the sex scenes in *Tipping the Velvet* in greatest detail and has some of the most apt contextualisation within sex-positive lesbian criticism. O’Callaghan argues of the sex scenes, including the scene with Florence:

Waters establishes a radical approach to the representation of lesbian sex in fiction not only because she represents taboos surrounding lesbian sexuality (such as the novel’s references to masturbation and a scene depicting lesbian fisting) but also because she writes about sex in a manner different to her literary antecedents. . . . Nancy’s sexual encounters express a plethora of erotic interactions with women, . . . [including] Nancy’s politicized sexual awakening with feminist activist Florence Banner, who teaches Nancy about a broad range of lesbian sexual expressions. In such scenes, Waters avoids “bad writing about good sex”—that is, according to *Literary Review*’s Bad Sex Award, “poorly written, redundant or crude passages of a sexual nature”—by depicting sexual fulfillment as a range of orgasmic experiences . . . [including] the more intricately described climax of sexual exploration between Florence and Nancy . . . While Waters does not claim to purport the “truth” of lesbian sexuality, the novel expands the representation of images of lesbian sex in literature, showing that like gender, sexual experience is both multiple and fluid, and it encompasses a range of fulfillments. (64)

O’Callaghan is right to draw attention to the importance of style in Waters’ writing—it is part of the elusive object we talk about as critics when we talk about “good sex writing.” But O’Callaghan’s justifications for praising the perceived high quality of Waters’ sex writing are almost exclusively political. O’Callaghan is arguing that the sex scenes of *Tipping the Velvet* may be considered “good” sex writing because they meet the favoured criteria of poststructuralist-informed feminist literary criticism: transgression, diversity, multiplicity, and fluidity. This presence of lesbian fisting and its perceived transgressiveness claimed by O’Callaghan has overshadowed the other qualities of the scene and, I argue, actually inverted the meaning of the fisting when read in context. The fisting in this scene is not about transgression or taboo; it is about familiarity and comfort. Analysing this sex scene comparatively allows these qualities to be recognised. In my earlier chapter on *Hood*, I argued that the critics’ claim that the menstruation sex scene is taboo failed to acknowledge that menstrual sex was in no way taboo for the character/narrator and was in fact a common and favoured sex act for that couple. As a result, the critical refrain that the menstruation sex scene is

transgressive can be seen as hypothesising a didactic function at the level of the implied reader, even when that reading is contradicted at the level of the fictional narrator and implied author. I argue that a similar function is happening in this sex scene with Florence. Nancy narrates:

And then, as if through some occult power of its own, the space between our lips seemed to grow small, and then to vanish; and we were kissing. She lifted her hand to touch the corner of my mouth; and then her fingers came between our pressing lips—they tasted, still, of sugar. And then I began to shake so hard I had to clench my fists and say to myself, “Stop shaking, can’t you? She’ll think you’ve never been kissed before, at all!”

When I raised my hands to her, however, I found that she was shaking just as badly; and when, after a moment, I moved my fingers from her throat to the swell of her breasts, she twitched like a fish—then smiled, and leaned closer to me. “Press me harder!” she said. (428–29)

Nancy’s first foray into sex with Florence beyond kissing her is met with happiness, pleasure, and explicit enthusiastic consent. In this way, it differs markedly from the first sex scene with Kitty, in which Kitty’s response to Nancy’s touch is to remain in the dark, her face turned away, and to move Nancy’s hand to her breasts (105). Kitty accedes to Nancy’s touch, unable to articulate her desire from within her internalised homophobia and closetedness. By contrast, Florence asks for what she wants boldly in the imperative mood—*Press me harder!*

We fell back together upon the bed, then—it shifted another inch across the carpet, on its wheels—and I undid the buttons of her shirt and pressed my face to her bosom, and sucked at one of her nipples, through the cotton of her chemise, till the nipple grew hard and she began to stiffen and pant. She put her hands to my head again, and lifted me to where she could kiss me; I lay and moved upon her, and felt her move beneath me, felt her breasts against my own, till I knew I should come, or faint—but then she turned me, and raised my skirt, and put her hand between my legs, and stroked so slowly, so lightly, so teasingly, I hoped I might never come at all . . .

At last, I felt her hand settle at the very wettest part of me, and she breathed against my ear. “Do you care for it,” she murmured then, “inside?” The question was such a gentle, such a gallant one, I almost wept. “Oh!” I said, again she kissed me; and after a moment I felt her move within me, first with one finger, then with two, I guessed, then three . . . At last, after a second’s pressure, she had her hand in me up to the wrist. I think I called out—I

think I shivered and panted and called out, to feel the subtle twisting of her fist, the curling and uncurling of her sweet fingers, beneath my womb . . .

When I reached my crisis I felt a gush, and found that I had wet her arm, with my spendings, from fingertip to elbow—and that she had come, out of a kind of sympathy, and lay weak and heavy against me, with her own skirts damp. She drew her hand free—making me shiver anew—and I seized it and held it, and pulled her face to me and kissed her; and then we lay very quietly with our limbs pressed together until, like cooling engines, we ceased our pulsings and grew still. (429; ellipses in original)

In the first sex scene with Kitty, Nancy is topping Kitty for Kitty's sexual pleasure: service topping. In the second sex scene with Diana, Nancy is allowing herself to be used for Diana's sexual pleasure: submissive bottoming. This moment, in which Florence asks if Nancy would like to be penetrated, is the first time in the three major sex scenes that Nancy's partner has considered Nancy's needs, preferences, or consent. What follows is far from the extreme and hardcore reputation of fisting—it is arguably one of the gentlest fisting scenes in lesbian fiction. The sex act portrays a moment of radical vulnerability, trust and intimacy between Nancy and Florence.

Even more telling is what Nancy understands her memory of the moment to mean a few pages later, and what she uses it to do. The morning after their first sex scene, Nancy wakes to find that Florence is pensive, realising from their time at a lesbian bar the night before that she knows so little of Nancy's past. Nancy, out of desperation, had found her place as housekeeper with Florence through lying about being a victim of domestic violence by a perverted male partner. So when Nancy is considering telling the truth of her story to Florence, she knows that these revelations might cost her safety, community, home, adopted family, and the woman she has come to love. She narrates:

Should I tell my story—the story I had kept so close, so long? I saw her hand upon the sheet and, as my stomach gave another slide, I remembered again her fingers, easing me open, and her fist inside me, slowly turning . . . I took a breath. “Have you ever,” I said, “been to Whitstable . . . ?” (430; ellipses in original).

Nancy uses the memory of Florence fisting her the night before to decide to tell Florence the truth, knowing that, in doing so, she risks losing everything. In this way, Nancy consciously draws upon her own sexual narrative to evidence to herself (and, of course, to the reader) the trust that she has in Florence and her radical vulnerability that Florence met with such care. In other words, the

qualities of the fisting sex scene with Florence are used by the narrator at a crucial turning-point in the novel's representation of herself, her self-understanding, and her relationship. This fisting sex is not transgressive to the narrator or her sexual partner; although a barrier is being overcome, it is not society's taboo around fisting's perceived brutality: rather, it is the final fall of Nancy's self-protection mechanisms, allowing herself to be radically vulnerable to a lover again. The specificity of this fisting sex scene is crucial to the evolving characterisation of the novel, and a non-political and comparative reading of style can allow us to attend to how that is operating.

Conclusion

As I have shown, there is a steady stream of essays published on Sarah Waters' works, including *Tipping the Velvet*, in which readings according to the priorities and methodologies of queer theory predominate. These essays have their critics hunting for and finding what Wiegman has called the "good" objects of queer theory (113) in anti-binarist articulations of gender and sexuality. As Chapter 1 explains, there are compelling historical reasons why the "politics of the lesbian subject" was such an important analytical framework in the 1990s. These reasons include the idea that politicised lesbian literature and criticism resisted the assimilatory pressures on lesbian subcultures as they became mainstream (Jay), what Sarah Schulman calls the "gentrification of the mind"; they also counter the historical eliding of lesbian desire and lesbian culture (O'Callaghan, "Lesbo" 64). But Finney's claim that the "politics of the lesbian subject" has overshadowed the aesthetic qualities of the novel in the criticism (23) of *Written of the Body* is also true of *Tipping the Velvet*: While there was frenzied production of such political readings at the time of *Tipping the Velvet*'s publication, that production continues to this day, with Waters' wider oeuvre, like Winterson's, still read every year for heretofore overlooked forms of transgression and subversion. As Waters noted humorously of the reception of *The Little Stranger* (2009), her only book containing no lesbians:

People went to great lengths to read that book as lesbian *somehow*. . . . Somebody identified Carol as a lesbian, somebody said we have Dr Farraday who's the male narrator, he must be a lesbian because of the way he fancies Carol, because he fixates on her—she's got thick ankles—and somebody else said the *house* is the lesbian. It was [almost like] Where's Wally again. "There's gotta be a lesbian in there somewhere." (Waters, "Paying"; emphasis in speech)

By pointing out the farcical nature of such readings, Waters is critiquing those who are determined to assign political values in their literary criticism. Literary critics who respond to Waters' criticism

can, instead, take up Finney's critique and attend to the aesthetic qualities of such novels. Close reading for the workings of style using syncretic formalist methodologies is one way of providing insight into the complex aesthetic qualities of new and old texts. The lesbian eroticism of style present in the three major sex scenes of *Tipping the Velvet* is integral to the aesthetic functions of the novel at every level of the text; a close reading that takes the sex scenes seriously shows us how.

In the following Conclusion of this thesis, I summarise the original findings of my analyses reading for a lesbian eroticism of literary style and I articulate the significance of these findings for lesbian literary criticism and gesture to potential future applications of this new syncretic methodology of close reading.

Thesis Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that the qualities I call a lesbian eroticism of style contribute to the aesthetic functions of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, Emma Donoghue's *Hood*, and Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*. In the literature review in Chapter 1, I summarised the historical trajectory of lesbian literary criticism that has had several important historical consequences for the reception of sex-positive lesbian literature of the 1990s. I have argued that one of these consequences is the dominance of poststructuralist-informed textual analysis of the transgression and subversion of heteronorms of gender and sexuality in lesbian literature. I traced the deep anxiety among reviewers, critics, and theorists with the presence of explicit lesbian sex scenes in works of popular lesbian literary fiction, and the unstated belief that the literary qualities of a serious erotic novel must somehow redeem its graphic lesbian sex scenes, as if aesthetic quality compensated for the novel's borrowings from the implicitly subordinated feminised genres of erotica or commercial romance fiction. These consequences that I have historicised and articulated are the product of lesbian literary criticism's rocky path both through the academy in the late-twentieth century and emerging from the values, priorities and ideologies of the public lesbian-feminism movement.

In the thesis' subsequent chapters I have shown how these ideologies and methodologies have caused the aesthetic functions of a lesbian eroticism of style to be largely overlooked in the extant criticism on the novels of Winterson, Donoghue, and Waters. In Chapter 2, I argue that the relatively marginal formalist strand of criticism on *Written on the Body* opens the possibility for readings that more fully analyse the aesthetic functions of style in the novel. Winterson is a prose stylist and a critic of prose stylists, understanding herself to be in the tradition of Virginia Woolf (Morian 14); yet critical interpretations analysing the aesthetic functions of style in her novels remain marginal compared to the number of political readings of the feminist, queer, lesbian and antinormative political meanings of her works. If a reappraisal of the value of such political readings of Winterson's work is due—as is claimed by recent critics such as Tyler Bradway (2015)—then stylistics can help us assess Winterson's influential work with fresh eyes.

In Chapter 3, I argue that Donoghue's second novel *Hood* is comprised of deceptively simple prose that is "more subtle and complex than might at first appear" (Peach 51). Tackling the question of the significance of the lengthy sex scenes, I offer counter-readings to the few critical essays that analyse these scenes. I argue that the extant criticism on these scenes at times actually *misinterprets* the novel when the qualities of style are overlooked in favour of a political analysis of

transgression. What I have found is an erotic discourse that is far more complex, ironic, and meaningful than had been heretofore recognised. In a week after the death of her lover, the narrator wrestles with her conflicting feelings of loss, desire, anger, jealousy, spitefulness and hypocrisy in a series of nine sex scenes building to a cathartic emotional resolution. Where the extant criticism had, for example, glossed some of the earlier of the nine scenes as “several failed attempts” on the way to the resolution she “finally achieves,” I showed how the accretive details of style contribute to the arc of characterisation in the novel as much as any of the figurative or transgressive elements that have been analysed before.

In Chapter 4, I argue that Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* has much more to its aesthetic functions than readings of the text through a political lens have recognised. Close reading for a lesbian eroticism of style has allowed me to analyse the workings of style within and between sex scenes; I demonstrate in my readings that aspects of the text previously considered transgressive or liberatory by virtue of their very presence are, rather, complex, ambivalent and contradictory agents of meaning, as is the case of representations of dildo sex. As I have argued, critics of Waters’ text have overlooked the significance of sections that are not transgressive, and the aspects of perceived transgressive textual elements that do not so easily fit the narrative of liberation, as is the case of the representation of gentle fisting. Sex scenes are much more than merely ornamental or libidinal; they do the work of characterisation. More than that: in literary fiction, as in poetry, as Marshall McLuhan put it, the medium is the message (McLuhan 7). The lesbian eroticism of style powers the aesthetic functions of these novels at every linguistic and structural level of the text simultaneously; a syncretic formalist methodology allows us to understand how.

My readings of the criticism of the novels have shown that critics are in the process of reappraising critical methodologies after the long dominance of poststructuralist methods informed by queer theory in Queer Literary Studies, but that its values are still predominant in the discipline. I have argued that this is visible in Bradway’s argument: he wants to “recover queer cultural forms” in Winterson’s texts that have been overlooked for failing to be subversive enough according to queer political critique. He applies critiques of queer theory’s emphasis on subversion from descriptive criticism (187), and aspires to attend to those aspects that the methodology of reading for subversion is leaving out, but finally argues that Winterson’s neo-Romantic discourse of love in her recent work is politically queer enough in the right ways (191).

I have demonstrated that a similar move is visible in the criticism on *Tipping the Velvet*. For example, Helen Davies has argued for the need to “move beyond conceptualising the subversive” in

analytical approaches to the novel informed by queer theory—only to argue for feminist political readings instead (Davies qtd in Jones and O’Callaghan 9). My reading of the criticism of subsequent works by Winterson, Donoghue, and Waters shows that they are still interpreted for the “politics of the lesbian subject” (Finney 23), regardless of how it may strain plausibility or utility. This was perhaps most memorably exemplified in Waters recounting (to laughter) at the Melbourne Writers Festival how her only novel with no lesbians was nevertheless read for lesbianism, with a scholar claiming that the house itself might be the lesbian (Waters, “Paying”). My analysis allows scholars to see how ideological methodologies at the macro level of lesbian literary criticism have produced an oversaturation of political readings at the micro level on explicit lesbian novels.

On the other hand, noting the “diminishing lesbian presence” in the later works of authors like Winterson, Waters, and Ali Smith, Emma Parker argues that it is telling that both Donoghue’s novel *Slammerkin* (2000), her “breakthrough” novel which won the 2002 Ferro-Grumley Award for Lesbian Fiction, and her “most successful” novel *Room* (2010), have no lesbian content (O’Neill; Parker 206). My application of formalist methodologies to analyse the earlier, most lesbian, most erotic works of these now-acclaimed authors is also a move to insist that their earlier works should have the aesthetic value of the explicit lesbian representation acknowledged, and not implicitly subordinated by being considered early steps en route to the later production of serious literary historical fictions, as Parker suggests has happened (Parker 206).

As practitioners of feminist stylistics have argued, a “linguistic-stylistic approach aims to clarify the issues, and test generalizations with concrete evidence from analyses” (Wales ix). This is what my readings have done, using formalist analytical methods to challenge or expand claims made by other critics in each of my three chapters of textual analysis. Sometimes I provide linguistic evidence, fleshing out another critic’s identification of a device of language. At other times I argue that the representation is more ambivalent and internally contradictory than had been acknowledged, with the fullness of a stylistics-informed account illuminating the relationships within and between discourses that produces their complexity. I sometimes contradict other critics’ arguments; this is the case with the few extant readings of *Hood*. My readings, in contrast, show how attention to style produces more fully informed readings of passages in context. Sex and style are meaningful in the early erotic lesbian novels of these authors and are worth attending to as crucial elements in a history of sex-positive lesbian literature.

It is not to these novels alone that this methodology may be productively applied. New works, as well as old, benefit from a broadening of interpretive methodologies in Queer Literary Studies and

feminist literary criticism. To do that, and to take up the call to reassess the utility of familiar methodologies in what Laura Doan names “this cultural moment of the “post-‘lesbian-postmodern’” (*Lesbian Studies* 25), it is useful to “simultaneously reach back to early queer literary scholarship engaged with structuralism and aesthetics and reach through and around contemporary queer theory” (Amin et al. 227). As Jack Halberstam argued in 1997, critics do not need to claim an “inherent naughtiness” in order to justify “the necessity of an analysis of lesbian erotics.” They can instead claim that “the sites and forms of lesbian sexuality have become in recent years much more visible and that queer lesbian theory needs to bring itself up to date” (Review 1032). As my methodology has shown, this “updating” may occur by attending to the aesthetic functions of literary style.

This imperative is particularly important in the criticism in which political interpretation has crowded out questions of aesthetics and style. The canon of lesbian literature is changing, as is evident in emerging canonical lesbian literature that includes recent works by women of colour such as Shamim Sarif and Chinelo Okparanta. Okparanta won the Lambda Award for Lesbian Fiction for the short-story collection *Happiness, Like Water* (2013) and again for the novel *Under the Udala Trees* (2015). Sarif’s *I Can’t Think Straight* is ranked #16 on the Goodreads “Best Lesbian Fiction” list, with 72 votes, and she is the third-highest ranked woman-of-colour writer after Malinda Lo and Alice Walker (Goodreads).

There are only a few works of literary criticism on Sarif’s and Okparanta’s novels: three essays on *The World Unseen* (2001); one article on *I Can’t Think Straight* (2008); and no full-length essays on *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), although the novel is briefly mentioned in four papers on different authors in the Proquest Literature Online database including the MLAIB and ABELL databases. The criticism tends to analyse the novels in terms of characterisation in the common generalised kind of close reading for themes. Discussions of sexuality in these works are limited to analyses situating the texts within the movements for homosexual civil rights in Nigeria or South Africa or queer-theory-informed works that demonstrate the ways in which the novels subvert or transgress heteronorms. As recent “queers of colour” critique argues, for writers of colour producing works in Queer Studies, rather than writing texts in which aesthetic and literary strategies are inextricable from content, their critical reception reads them as “all content, no form” (Amin et al. 235). As contemporary lesbian novels by women of colour, Sarif’s and Okparanta’s novels are mostly analysed for content about the oppressions of norms of gender and sexuality in representations of women of colour or analysed for the anti-binarism of structure. A syncretic

formalist methodology like the one I have used in this thesis can attend to the lesbian eroticism of style that is crucial to the aesthetic functions of these erotic novels.

Present-day movements in Literary Studies are expanding the analytical methods available to critics. My practice of comparing differences in the appraisals of literary fiction made by book reviewers, academic literary critics, and amateur critics historically and on contemporary social reading sites like Goodreads and Library Thing is a productive methodology that can offer fresh insights into the shifting historical value of literature and modern reading practices. Promising work in this direction has been theorised by prominent mixed-methods scholars like Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, as for example in their essay “Using Mixed Methods Research to Investigate Contemporary Cultures of Reading” (2012).

This thesis demonstrates how lesbian literary criticism can move beyond analysing and theorising the political towards accounting for a fuller range of aesthetic effects instead. Feminist stylistics remains a minority practice in the fields of Literary Studies, Linguistics, and Gender Studies, and its evidence-based methodologies analysing the relationship between gender and sexuality and language could be put to greater use in these fields. By contrast, “descriptive criticism” such as Felski’s work in *Uses of Literature* has a greater prominence in Queer Literary Studies than methodologies like feminist stylistics. But it is not easy to take a methodology as abstruse as stylistics and apply it to an object like the sensuality of prose; done poorly, descriptive criticism that relinquishes political readings in favour of attending to formal specificity risks slipping into the “New Boredom” (Kastan qtd. in Love, “Close” 382). In my analysis, I hope to have shown a way of applying the principles of descriptive criticism in ways that do not atrophy the qualities that inspire literary criticism in the first place: rigour, wonder, the enlightening and enriching effects on the mind and on the critical conversation. Literary criticism has qualities of both an art and a science (Rothman); my application of feminist stylistics and descriptive criticism bridges these qualities to offer the rigour, logic, and evidentiary practices of linguistics without sacrificing the attention to the richness and depth of meaning in literary texts that careful close reading produces.

That much maligned and still contentious concept *lesbian* “modifies whatever it brushes up against,” enacting its modifications “both infinitesimal and drastic” on concepts like “aesthetics” and “literature” (Tongson 285). As Parker argues in “Contemporary Lesbian Fiction” in 2015, “while the term ‘lesbian’ becomes increasingly complex, contested, and indeterminate around the millennium,” there are also compelling reasons for claiming and valuing the contentious term *lesbian* in contemporary lesbian literature that relate to aesthetic quality. Valuing explicit lesbian

literary fiction challenges the old anxiety that lesbian literature is of poor aesthetic quality, and it “resists the delesbianization or ‘gentrification’ of lesbian literature that arguably underpins its increasing acceptability and popularity since the late 1980s” (Parker 205). Despite hasty claims that “the 15 minutes” of lesbian chic “are just about up” (Brownrigg), increasingly visible lesbian pop culture interacts with lesbian literary culture and introduces new readers to new and old lesbian texts every day. We as readers will continue to ask questions of lesbian literature and lesbian literary criticism as the priorities of our cultures change, finding in them that “inexhaustible” store of meaning (Solnit 72) that allows texts to surprise, challenge, affirm and elude us anew with every reading.

Our worlds are reimagined and remade through a lesbian eroticism of style. This thesis’ final word is given to Joan Nestle, who has been arguing this passionately and eloquently for decades. She wrote in 1987:

Erotic writing is as much a documentary as a biographical display. Fantasies, the markings of the erotic imagination, fill in the earth beneath the movement of great social forces: they tell deep tales of endurance and reclamation. They are a people’s most private historical territory. This is why I always wince when a gay activist says we are more than our sexuality, or when Lesbian culture celebrants downplay lust and desire, seduction and fulfillment. If we are the people who call down history from its heights in marble assembly halls, if we put desire into history, if we document how a collective erotic imagination questions and modifies monolithic societal structures like gender, if we change the notion of woman as self-chosen victim by our public stances and private styles, then surely no apologies are due. Being a sexual people is our gift to the world. (*A Restricted Country*, 10)

Erotic lesbian literary fiction documents, fantasises, provokes, entertains, inspires, challenges, and enlightens. Attending to the lesbian eroticism of style allows us to see how this is so.

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