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## ‘Making it seem like it’s authentic’: the Faux-Victorian Novel as Cultural Memory in *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*

A forgotten past is encountered again in fantastic literature. The recounting of that past heals an occluded memory.

(Renate Lachmann ‘Cultural Memory and the Role of Literature’, 2004)

The spirit-medium’s proper home is neither this world nor the next, but that vague and debatable land which lies between them.

(Sarah Waters, *Affinity*, 1999)

If *Possession* asserts the ‘truth of the imagination’, then *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002) harness this truth to invent a genealogy of lesbian desire that exists only as shadows at the margins of Victorian literature and history. In contrast to *Waterland* and *Possession*, each of which constructs a contemporary frame for its representation of the Victorian period, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* are examples of faux-Victorian fiction; novels written in the Victorian tradition that refuse to self-reflexively mark their difference from it in the characteristically parodic mode of historiographic metafiction. These novels revive Victorian novelistic traditions, offering themselves as stylistic imitations of Victorian fiction. Yet what they imitate they also re-imagine and extend: What would the Victorian novel have looked like had it represented other voices? By depicting female homosexuality in the Victorian period, Waters ‘puts the weight of historical precedent behind lesbian existence’ (Kohlke, 2004: 65). However she uses the mnemonic power of literature to do it.

Rather than represent the process of constructing the past, highlighting the limits of historical representation whether in history or fiction,

Waters silently inserts her depiction of nineteenth-century female homosexuality into our cultural memory of Victorian fiction. In order to invent a genealogy of lesbian desire, Waters mobilises literary forms that were considered typically feminine; Victorian gothic and sensation fiction were each associated with women as readers, writers and characters. And each created a fantastic space where cultural anxieties, especially those pertaining to gender ideals and sexuality, could be creatively explored. Linked to the representation of transgressive women, and to the depiction of female sexuality, these genres are perhaps the most likely sites where a lesbian tradition could have been voiced or, in fact, may have been voiced in muted, displaced ways. Deploying the easily recognisable tropes of gothic and sensation fiction, and extending their field of representation to include the representation of female homosexuality, Waters' use of Victorian narrative strategies and generic conventions provides a structure within which her invented 'history' can be written, remembered, and communicated as cultural memory. In this way a genealogy of female homoeroticism is mapped on to our sense of Victorian literary and cultural history.

## I

The primary narrative strategy of the faux-Victorian novel is simulation; it imitates the stylistic and formal properties of the Victorian novel without overtly drawing attention to the temporal location of its production in the present through the use of distancing devices like contemporary frames (*Waterland* and *Possession*) or an intrusive, ironic narrator (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*). In contrast to the ironic distance that characterises historiographic metafiction the faux-Victorian novel silently imitates: it never draws attention to its status as 'fake'. Rather, it renders its own role in mediating Victorian fiction invisible, effacing its difference from its Victorian antecedent. Thus, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* might in part function, like *Possession*, as 'imaginary museums' in which readers can view, and remember, past texts (Steveker, 2009: 112), but their references to Victorian literature, such as Henry Mayhew's work on prisons, or Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's poetry, are always made diegetically, as reading material for the characters. As such, they serve to anchor the text in the Victorian present it represents rather than establish distance and difference. For the faux-Victorian novel, imitation becomes an 'authenticating strategy': we 'believe' or 'yield to' the image of the Victorian period it offers because we recognise it from Victorian fiction.<sup>1</sup>

In *Nostalgic Postmodernism* (2001), Christian Gutleben criticises the faux-Victorian novel as a nostalgic celebration of 'the Golden Age of the English novel', suggesting that its 'imitative frenzy cannot but suggest a lack of originality' (Gutleben, 2001: 84). Gutleben notes that '[t]he retrieval of a well-known world, albeit fictional, undeniably bestows pleasure, the pleasure of recognition deemed by Aristotle to be universal' (ibid.: 41), but he approaches this with suspicion, asking: 'What type of pleasure is the recreation of an exclusively Victorian world intended to provide? Whatever the answer, the element of nostalgia, of love of the past, of conservatism clearly cannot be excluded' (ibid.). In fact, Waters has said that her novels are, in part, 'a celebration of the Victorian novel itself' (Dennis, 2008: 46), which suggests this 'love of the past'. Like Byatt, Waters suggests her fascination with Victorian pastiche lies partly in sheer narrative pleasure in 'thrilling plots'. She contrasts these with the 'arid' fiction of the 1990s and suggests that the faux-Victorian novel 'allows for this ... celebration of narrativity, that other sorts of literature just weren't allowing' (ibid.: 46). Thus, while Waters' novels are informed by twentieth-century scholarship, her research is simultaneously the ghostly, absent presence within the novel, and the spirit medium, effacing itself to conjure an apparitional Victorian narrative. As Cora Kaplan observes, '[t]heory and literary criticism underpins these narratives as generic emphasis in settings, in themes: it does not parse the narrative for us, or cut it up into bite-sized lessons' (Kaplan, 2007: 114) in the characteristic style of the historiographic metafiction. Rather than creating ironic distance, Waters' novels are more 'earnest' (Ciocia, 2007: 4) in their use of Victorian literary styles. If Waters' novels do nostalgically evoke the golden age of the Victorian novel in their narrative style, this can be understood as a positive formulation that performs the critique Svetlana Boym identifies as 'off-modern', which 'confuses our sense of direction; it makes us explore sideshadows and back alleys rather than the straight road of progress' (Boym, 2001: xvii). Speaking with the voice of the Victorian novel enables Waters to cast its gaze upon people and practices it marginalised or silenced.

Asked in an interview about whether there is evidence of lesbian desire in the Victorian period, Waters replied: 'it's tricky. There isn't really much in the way of novels and stuff like that ... you have to look for evidence of lesbian life. You have to look at other sorts of things, like medical writing or diaries, letters, and poetry to a certain extent ...' (Waters, 2002). In an article with Laura Doan, Waters writes about the problem of historical invisibility for contemporary women who seek historical models of same-sex love: 'The suppression or absence

of lesbian activity from the historical record, on the other hand, has limited the constituency across which a lesbian genealogy might be traced, and made it difficult for women to imagine themselves as participants in an unbroken tradition of same-sex love' (Doan and Waters, 2000: 12–13). Doan and Waters discuss a number of contemporary lesbian historical novels that work toward inventing this genealogy, arguing that such texts exemplify the 'political charge of lesbian imagining' (ibid.: 15). Fiction, here, is far from being reserved for entertainment. The aim of these novels is not to accurately depict the past in deference to history's authoritative discourse, but rather to *invent* a past that links to the present: Lesbian imagining 'recruits the reader into a community of shared lesbian interests understood to extend across history, and across the border separating history from fiction'. Moreover, since evidence is scarce, 'it offers fantasy and wishful thinking as legitimate historiographical resources, necessary correctives or missing links to the impoverished lesbian archive. In this way, these novelists echo Monique Wittig's famous plea that we should "[m]ake an effort to remember, and failing that, invent"' (Doan and Waters, 2000: 15).

Understood this way, the contemporary lesbian historical novel is an act of memory in the present, in which the past is 'modified' and 're-described' (Bal, 1999, vii) through invention and imagination. Here, the needs of the present are firmly privileged since this project 'take[s] its authority from the imperatives of contemporary lesbian identities' (ibid.: 13). While they are not the subject of Doan and Waters' article, Waters' own novels participate in this politically charged imagining. *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* imagine how lesbian desire might have been experienced in the Victorian period. Each text also imagines the way such desire might have inhabited the interstices between official records and legitimised knowledge, and so remained invisible to these discourses. It is not, therefore, historical accuracy that Waters courts in her novels. Rather, proceeding through invention, she pursues the *illusion* of authenticity. Discussing her use of pastiche she suggests: 'Part of the thing of it is making it *seem like* it's authentic ... to imagine the sort of history that we can't really recover' (Waters, 2002, emphasis mine).

In order to achieve this semblance of authenticity, Waters turns to Victorian fiction. When describing her writing strategies, she emphasises not her research but the importance of immersing herself in Victorian literature, particularly the novels, to enable her to 'write in a form, in an idiom, that seems to me to belong to the period' (Dennis, 2008: 47). So effective is Waters' 'Victorian' voice that, writing about *Affinity* specifically, M. L. Kohlke suggests that because it gives voice to taboo areas of

Victorian culture, it 'seems to reflect Victorian reality more comprehensively and thus more authentically than "genuine" Victorian literature' (Kohlke, 2004: 156). However, Waters' novels do not enact history's 'obfuscation of its own narrativity' (Kohlke, 2004: 165) so much as revel in the voice of fiction, its power to invent, to materialise, and to communicate a truth of the imagination. This, of course, is the confidence trick of the faux-Victorian novel. By a fictional sleight of hand, it makes something imagined *seem* like something remembered. In *Affinity* the spirit medium, Selina Dawes, reveals some of her tricks for 'materialising' messages from the dead but teasingly asks: 'Did it make the spirits less true?' if she sometimes helped them seem visible (168).

## II

The faux-Victorian novel relies upon the mnemonic power of literature, and the mnemonic function of genre, to perform this sleight of hand. Victorian literature both forms part of the content of our cultural memory of the Victorians and functions as a medium of cultural memory (see Steveker, 2009: 107).<sup>2</sup> That is, we remember Victorian literature as part of the aesthetic production of Victorian culture, but when we read the literary texts themselves they inform the way we think about the Victorian world beyond the text and, in turn, shape the way that we remember it today. By eliding its difference from the Victorian novel, the faux-Victorian novel attempts to enter this memory of Victorian literature and culture in order to revise and extend it. Like all literary texts, it 'inscribes itself in a memory space into which earlier texts have inscribed themselves. It does not leave these earlier texts as it finds them but transforms them in absorbing them' (Lachmann, 2004: 172). That is, the faux-Victorian novel enters and absorbs the mnemonic space inscribed by Victorian fiction itself. Indeed, the extent to which it does this is indicated by the way in which Waters' novels have been dubbed 'Vic Lit', or "'Victorian" fictions' (Kaplan, 2007: 8, 110); they perform the Victorian and in the process both absorb and become absorbed by it, as though in the act of quotation the faux-Victorian novel becomes the thing itself. Renate Lachmann argues that this process of re-inscription, absorption and transformation occurs primarily through intertextual references 'to entire texts, to a textual paradigm, to a genre, to certain elements of a given text, to stylistic device, to narrative technique, to motifs, etc.' (ibid.: 173). For Lachmann, intertextuality is the memory of a text. By invoking Victorian literature Waters remembers – and re-members – this novelistic tradition *and* the extra-textual reality

with which we associate it. Moreover, as we shall see, in addition to 'remembering' Victorian literature more generally, Waters' novels also 'remember' Victorian gothic and sensation novels specifically, using the force of generic conventions to shape our response to what we read.

John Frow argues that the structuring effects of genre play an active role in the production of meaning: they 'shape and guide' our knowledge and, in fact, 'genres actively generate and shape knowledge of the world' (Frow, 2005: 10, 2). In contrast to *Possession*, in which Byatt announces her use of Romance, Waters' novels silently perform the generic conventions of gothic and sensation. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies gothic as a highly conventionalised genre: 'you know the important features of its *mise en scène*: an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society. You know about the trembling sensibility of the heroine and the impetuosity of her lover. You know about the tyrannical older man' (Sedgwick, 1986: 4). Her repetitious appeal to what we already 'know' suggests the way that the genre has worked its way into our cultural memory so that we bring to it certain expectations. Genres are mutable, and academic scholarship has splintered 'gothic' into various categories – 'imperial', 'female', 'postcolonial', 'lesbian', 'queer', 'feminist', 'postfeminist', and so on – in an attempt to account for its variety. Nonetheless, if gothic has dispersed in academia, it is still the case that readers (and perhaps many more film goers) identify particular texts and films as participating in the gothic because of their use of a set of tropes. To those identified by Sedgwick we could perhaps add the use of dark, eerie settings, the tight plotting of mysterious, possibly criminal events, the terror of entrapment and imprisonment, and sometimes the inclusion of supernatural elements that may or may not be explained rationally at the end. Gothic explores the underside of Enlightenment rationality, things that are too mysterious or too terrible to be explained and, as a result, depicts psychological discomfort and even disintegration (Botting, 2006).

Gothic and sensation, although usually distinguished from each other, do share traits in common and *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* draw on both.<sup>3</sup> Sensation fiction derives in part from gothic, reworking some of its tropes in a modern, urban setting. Waters borrows from the sensation novels of Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon her melodramatic and twisting plots, which revolve around a central secret that is not revealed until the end and, in light of which, the reader's knowledge of what came before is transformed. A 'generic hybrid', the sensation novel typically combined 'realism and melodrama, the journalistic and the fantastic, the domestic and the romantic or exotic' (Pykett, 1994: 4).

Described this way, the sensation novel begins to appear similar in form to historical fiction, though the sensation novel was always set in the reader's present. Gothic and sensation are each structured by a realism that is punctured at various moments by an excess characteristic of more fantastic modes. The traditional historical novel suppresses the fantastic, and yet its appearance in contemporary historical novels suggests its productive possibilities for historical recollection. Indeed, Lachmann suggests that by testing the bounds of realism and creating 'alternative worlds', the fantastic mode offers productive possibilities for writers seeking to give voice to vanished or silenced elements of the past:

That which had been silenced regains its voice, that which was made invisible recaptures its shape and that which was buried is disinterred. The fantastic thus operates as a mnemonic device that makes the forgotten or repressed reappear in the guise of an imagery by which the 'real' is connected with the unknown. (Lachmann, 2004: 173)

By staging a confrontation between the 'forgotten, unfamiliar and unseen', and the real (that is, 'an officially legitimated view of reality'), the fantastic displaces 'taken-for-granted categories of presence and representation' (ibid.: 173–4). In this way the fantastic mode embeds within itself a critique of official versions of historical reality, but this critique also, simultaneously, uses the aura of the 'real' attached to these versions to lend legitimacy to its representation of 'other', excluded elements. Waters' use of recognisable generic conventions that incorporate the fantastic mode provides a structure onto which we, as readers, map the unfamiliar image of Victorian lesbian desire. The generic structure makes it assimilable to our cultural memory of the Victorians. As Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning suggest, 'through narrative forms and genre patterns, previously pre-narrative and unformed experiences are symbolized, organized, and interpreted *and thereby become memorable*. Genres are a constitutive element of our memory' (Erll and Nünning, 2005: 274, emphasis mine).

A number of critics make links between gothic and queer narratives (see Fincher, 2007; Haggerty, 2006; Palmer, 1999).<sup>4</sup> In fact, Paulina Palmer attributes the appeal of gothic for writers and readers of lesbian fiction to 'its inscription of excess', as well as its 'strongly female focus, its ability to question mainstream versions of reality, and the fact that certain motifs associated with it (such as the double and "the unspeakable") lend themselves especially well to lesbian appropriation and recasting' (Palmer, 2004: 120). Similarly, writing about the male

homosexual gaze in gothic fiction of the Romantic period, Max Fincher connects the very narrative properties of gothic with a queer perspective:

the formal characteristics of Gothic writing, such as its Chinese-box narrative structures, its multiple narrators and interrupted stories, invite a circuitous reading attitude. Such a roundabout approach stands as a symbol of how we can read Gothic writing at the level of narrative as intimately related to the 'perverse' or 'wayward'. Gothic stories never follow a 'straight' course, a fact that in itself makes them queer. (Fincher, 2007: 4)

In *Affinity* the 'twisting passages' of Millbank (7) symbolise the 'twisting' of Margaret's thoughts (30) and, ultimately, the 'twistings' of her desire for Selina (251, 272). They are the circuitous, indirect and shadowy approach to materialising the voices, actions and subjectivities vanished or suppressed from the historical record; Waters' narratives do not take a 'straight' path either.

In *Affinity* Margaret's and Selina's diary entries are twisted together despite the fact that they do not share a temporal or spatial location. The diary form is often utilised in gothic fiction since its partial view builds narrative suspense. Although, as journals, they appear to promise interiority and authenticity, Selina's and Margaret's narratives are characterised by evasion and equivocation. In these journals, as in gothic narratives generally, 'ambivalence and uncertainty obscure single meaning' (Wolfreys, 2002: 3). In Margaret's case, her diary attempts to repress and contain her lesbian desire rather than express and reveal it. Indeed, this appears to be Margaret's intention for her journal, to hide her transgressive thoughts even from herself: 'I mean this writing not to turn me back upon my own thoughts, but to serve, like the chloral, to keep the thoughts from coming at all' (70). The twisting passages of Millbank are mirrored in the twisting of Margaret's heart and of the narrative itself; we learn about Margaret's past in snippets and inferences as she records them in her journal. The journal we read also partially reveals a prior journal, now burnt, which had her 'heart's blood in it' (70). The burnt journal is a spectral presence, the present mark of the absence, not only of itself but of the passion between Margaret and Helen that it recorded. As Sarah Parker observes, the burnt journal is the ghostly double of the one read (Parker, 2008: 9). Thus, despite her attempts to conceal it, Margaret's diary increasingly becomes the record of her transgression: 'Now I can see that my heart has crept across these pages, after all. I can see the crooked passage of it' (241).

The equivocations and evasions of Selina's diary are designed to conceal the truth about her reputed spiritualist powers and the uses to which she puts them. Waters' narrative maintains the ambiguity throughout until, in the final pages, we understand Selina to be a fraud and her circles an opportunity to explore her same-sex desires and, potentially, to defraud heiresses. And yet, even after she has defrauded Margaret and Ruth Vigers has been revealed as the 'naughty' Peter Quick, the characteristic slipperiness of Selina's narrative makes it difficult to 'read' her. Whereas Kohlke remains unsure about the extent of Selina's duplicity for example (Kohlke, 2004), Jenni Millbank suggests we feel 'sly admiration for her ingenuity' (Millbank, 2004: 166), and Jeanette King raises the possibility that Selina may have believed in her own powers, whether they were true or not, as a result of the pressure placed upon her by her benefactor, Mrs Brink (King, 2005: 89). Moreover, the text leaves open the possibility that Selina did have feelings for Margaret, but as Stephen speculates, 'fell foul of some sort of influence' (99), in the form of Ruth. Certainly, a passage from Selina's diary appears to suggest that Ruth is domineering and possibly coercive, even menacing, so that Selina cries (174–5). Ruth makes Selina pray 'May I be used' and proclaims 'my medium must do as she is bid' (261). Ruth's control may also extend to Selina's journal. Ruth is present as Selina writes some of the entries, suggesting that the diary may perform for Ruth rather than reveal Selina's interiority. Since Ruth also reads Margaret's journal, and passes information from it to Selina, Ruth passes in and out of the two diaries in a double sense, both as a figure barely glimpsed at the edge of the narrative frame (and yet ultimately the centre of it) and as the reader hovering at the edge of the page.

Victorian novels with multiple narrators typically explain how the various documents were compiled in their present form; they have a material presence within the world of the text. For example, Bram Stoker's gothic classic, *Dracula* (1897), explains that Mina compiled and typed the narrative (Stoker, 1993: 302) and, as we shall see, in *The Woman in White*, Hartright edits and arranges the various accounts (Collins, 1999: 9). However in *Affinity* the existence of these diaries cannot be accounted for diegetically. Lucie Armitt and Sarah Gamble observe that since Selina's journal is not physically present in the novel, in contrast to Margaret's which is kept in a drawer in her bedroom, 'it lacks a clear locus and sense of being in the possession of a named reader, [and therefore] it "floats" above the rest of the narrative, seemingly unshackled in space, despite being tied to time' (Armitt and Gamble, 2006: 154). Suggesting that when we step back, we realise

that only Ruth could be in possession of the journal they astutely ask: 'The question is, do we possess her reading, or does she possess ours?' (ibid.). This points to the fact that we, of course, are also the readers hovering at the edge of the page of each diary, and, in turn, raises the puzzling question, unaccounted for in the narrative, of *how* we come to read these diaries. As we have seen, Selina's diary is never physically accounted for and Margaret's, we discover, is burnt, down to its very last page (348). Within the novel itself, these texts leave no discernible trace; they, like the desire they record, exist only in Waters', and her readers', imagination.

What the novel suggests, then, is that Waters has materialised the diaries for us so that they may retrospectively inhabit and expand the Victorian literary tradition, materialising experiences rendered invisible by the historical record. In fact, this is dramatised for us in the novel. When Margaret Prior first visits Millbank Prison in her role as Lady Visitor, she casts off convention and, instead of reading to the prisoners from the Bible, determines that she will listen to the women tell their own stories (22). The response of one of the wardens indicates the extent of Margaret's subversiveness: 'She looked at me then and said nothing' (22). Indeed, the convict women share in this silence: they have all but lost the ability to tell their stories, stumbling over their words (39). Or, rather, the legal system has made them tell their stories, and has coopted and told their stories for them, so many times that they seem divorced from the women themselves: 'the telling has made a kind of story of it, realer than memory but meaning nothing. I wish I could tell her that I know what such a story feels like' (40). Margaret knows what this feels like because she has witnessed the rewriting of her passionate history with Helen into a heteronormative narrative allows Helen to pass as an ideal of Victorian womanhood:

'Helen attended Mr Prior's lectures,' [Mrs Prior] said, 'and, Margaret meeting her there, she was brought to the house. She was always a great guest of ours after that, and always a favourite with Mr. Prior. Of course, we did not know – did we Priscilla – that it was all on Stephen's account that she came here. – You must not blush, Helen dear!' (102)

It is significant, here, that Helen's blush becomes an ephemeral sign which we are asked to read in the light of two contestatory explanations, and that Margaret's agency, as well as her passion, is entirely written out. Her role in bringing Helen to the Prior's residence is written into

the passive voice and her relationship to Helen obscured in a patriarchal narrative of fatherly friendship with Mr Prior and heterosexual romance with Stephen. Reiterated enough times, it passes as truth, even to Margaret who is notably not asked to corroborate the fiction: 'I have heard the story told that way so many times, I am half-way to believing it myself' (103). Here, as for the women in the prison, memory is oppositional to history; indeed, history – the officially legitimated stories – replaces memory and comes to be seem more real. Waters offers her neo-Victorian novels as a means to reverse this trajectory, using fiction's power to imagine worlds as a means to reinvest these alternative, silenced memories with a sense of reality. Her fictions are a space inhabited by these memories; unreal, lacking the authority bestowed by the law and by History, but nonetheless imbued with meaning. Thus, Waters marginalises History from the outset of the novel when, meaning to create a history of Millbank such as her father might write, 'a book that was only a catalogue, a kind of list' (241), Margaret finds that her father's preoccupation with dates, statistics and, tellingly, with men and their concerns, is ill-fitted for telling the stories of the women whom she is to visit at Millbank, the lives of whom the masculine narratives of the legal and penal system have already sifted and classified: 'Villainous women, society has deemed them ...' (11). The women's memories, their own, displaced, versions of their stories, are excesses that masculinist history must excise for its 'straight' narrative.

Margaret herself describes her 'queer nature' that set her 'at odds with the world and all its ordinary rules' (315–16). As the 'all' here implies, Margaret's 'queerness' is not restricted to her sexuality. Margaret is an intelligent woman who enjoys research and intellectual pursuits. While her father was alive she could legitimately assist him but her intelligence now marks her as transgressive of feminine norms (Caroll, 2007: 6): 'But people, I said, do not want cleverness – not in women, at least ... it is only ladies like me that throw the whole system out and make it stagger' (209). The two years since her father's death have also marked her as a spinster, a category that, as Rachel Caroll notes, 'constructs Margaret's difference as heterosexual failure; the agency potentially at work in a refusal of gendered heterosexuality is rewritten as an inability to accept a natural destiny' (Caroll, 2007: 5). In the Reading Room at the British Museum Margaret realises that those 'who do not know me, call me "madam" now, I noticed, instead of "miss". I have turned in two years, from a girl into a spinster. There were many spinsters there to-day, I think – more certainly, than I remember. Perhaps, however, it is the same with spinsters as with ghosts; and one has to be of their ranks in

order to see them at all' (58). The categorising impulse that designates Margaret a failure within the heteronormative economy has no difficulty in naming the problem: Margaret is not simply an 'unmarried woman': she is a 'spinster'. It is the process of naming, or categorising Margaret's failure that renders her spectral.

In contrast, Margaret's lesbian desires resist categorisation and, as such, threaten her with spectrality of another order, that of the unnameable: 'we can see Margaret escaping "neat" definitions, defying categorisation; finding herself in an underworld of her own unnameableness' (Llewellyn, 1999: 210) since the narrative occurs, as we know from the dated diary entries, in 1873 and 1874, prior to the construction of homosexuality as an identity – distinct from homosexual acts or desire – in sexological discourses of the later nineteenth century (see Foucault, 1976). Terry Castle points to the silence surrounding the very existence of female homosexuality ascribed to the Victorian period, suggesting that 'behind such silence, one can detect an anxiety too severe to allow for articulation'. In literary representation, then, lesbian desire is displaced onto the figure of the ghost, the disembodied, decarnalised, 'apparitional lesbian' (Castle, 1993: 6). Yet the spectral metaphor which renders the lesbian immaterial becomes, in the hands of the lesbian writer, a means by which 'the lesbian body itself returns' (ibid.: 46–7). In *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* the spectral lesbian, while remaining spectral to the historical record, is given flesh in the world of the text.

*Affinity* is ambiguous about the extent of Margaret's knowledge about her own desire. On the one hand, presented with the knowledge that the Millbank women are sometimes given to 'palling-up' Margaret is 'disturbed ... to find that the term had *that* particular meaning and I hadn't known it' (67). On the other, although she does not recognise the term, she recognises the meaning behind it. Moreover, while we only gain glimpses of her prior relationship with Helen through apertures in Margaret's diary, she does record that she taunts Helen with the memory of their kisses which, she suggests, haunts her bed (204). Moreover, Helen responds by suggesting that she hadn't been brave enough 'not for what [Margaret] wanted' (ibid.), which seems to imply at the very least that Margaret had wanted Helen to resist marriage and children too and maintain some kind of passionate friendship with her. What is important here for the invention of a tradition of female homosexuality, however, is that Waters resists anachronistically attributing a lesbian identity, as we understand it today, to either Margaret or Selina. Rather, in the continuum she establishes between home, prison and séance, she constructs several spaces in which lesbian desire takes on

multiple and diverse forms and in which, as a result, female homosocial bonds are subjected to varying degrees of surveillance.

In *Affinity*, Millbank Prison, with its 'ghastly towers and yellow walls' (75) and its 'dreadful *clamour*' of gates 'swung on grinding hinges, and slammed and bolted' and even the empty passages that 'echo with the sounds of other gates, and other locks and bolts, distant and near' (10), rises out of the London pall with dramatic effect, a reworking of the eighteenth-century gothic castle that now houses a panoptic machine, and stands, moreover, in the middle of London. Nestled on the banks of the Thames, it can be seen from the top floor of Margaret's wealthy home in Chelsea (342). Its gothicism affects Margaret's nerves. Upon her first visit she notes that one must 'walk along a narrowing strip of gravel, and feel the walls on either side of one advancing' (8), and she is afraid that Mr Shillitoe is 'in league' with her mother, 'and means to keep me on the wards' (29). If this is our first glimpse of Margaret's incipient hysteria, it is also the first intimation of the continuum the novel constructs between home and domicile. Its two primary settings, the prison and the middle-class home, are constructed as sites governed by a pervasive, disciplinary panopticism which attempts, but ultimately fails, to police a series of socially constructed boundaries.

The boundary between prison and home is unstable and must be reiterated, insisted upon: 'Your place is here. Your place is here ... You are not Mrs Browning, Margaret – as much as you would like to be. You are not, in fact, Mrs Anybody. You are only *Miss Prior*. And your place – how often must I say it? – Your place is here, at your mother's side' (252). The prison seeps into the home via Margaret's thoughts (30), dreams (32) and the eagerness of dinner guests or sordid details of her prison visits (32, 97). The boundary between prison and domicile is permeated also by Ruth, who conducts a regular traffic of letters, objects and information between them. It is Margaret herself who performs the final collapse of the boundary between the two when, in Ruth's vacated room, 'a room that held *nothing*, like the cells at Millbank, a room that had made nothing a substance, a texture, or a scent' (341), she repeats or doubles the breaking out she has witnessed at Millbank, ripping sheets with her teeth, breaking the bowl and beating the jug, tearing clothes (342) in a frenzy of pain at Selina's duplicity. Moreover, the panopticism of Millbank is replicated in the surveillance of Margaret in her upper middle-class home, in what Jenni Millbank calls a 'continuum of imprisonment' (Millbank, 2004: 174). The watchful gaze permeates the novel, implicating Margaret (102) Helen (101) and Selina (117) and, in the clearest link to the disciplinary structures of

Millbank, Margaret's mother: 'careful as I have been – still and secret and silent as I have been in my high room – [Mother] has been watching me, as Miss Ridley watches, and Miss Haxby' (223). The continuum of imprisonment, from prison to domicile, is epitomised by Margaret's near slip, when she almost calls one of the matrons 'Mother' (267) and by her recurring vision of her own ongoing imprisonment, in which she sits beside her gaoler mother wearing the 'mud-brown dress' that is the Millbank uniform (274).

Having suggested a continuum between prison and middle-class home, the novel then links both to the spirit medium's séance. When Selina is in 'the darks' Margaret imitates her experience, crouching in the darkest corner of her closet, feeling her corset bind her tight: 'Then I knew where I was. I was with *her*, and close to her, so close ... I felt the cell about me, the jacket upon me. And yet I seemed to feel my eyes bound, too, with bands of silk. And at my throat there was a velvet collar' (257). Here, in her own home, Margaret feels as though she is in Selina's place in the prison and then, seamlessly, or simultaneously, also takes her place in the spirit medium's cabinet. The séance, like the prison, is 'a female world-within-a-(patriarchal)-world' (Millbank, 2004: 161) governed by its own rules and with its own cultural features. It is a site where the transgression of one set of boundaries – criminal/legal, this world/the next world – invites the transgression of other boundaries. The prison and the séance each emerge as transgressive of heterosexual boundaries or, more specifically, exist as spaces in-between heteronormative behaviour and its shadowy, unnamed and unnameable other. Waters has suggested in an interview that because it emphasised the spirit over the body, spiritualism 'offered gay members a different discourse of gender and sexuality' (qtd. in Parker, 2008: 10). Thus, the women who come to the sittings 'think kisses from Peter Quick don't count' (218) and Selina terrifies Margaret with the image of her father's spirit unclothed and sexless in the spirit world (210). A 'naughty' spirit, Peter Quick flirts with the women present while ignoring or mocking the men. Whereas the isolation of Millbank makes the women's 'palling-up' a necessarily disembodied practice, the flirtation in the séance and, even more, the private sittings, imbue spiritualism with a *frisson* of ambiguous sexual energy. The sittings are a space in which young women come to be 'developed'. They receive Peter's kisses and undress and embrace Selina, all the while ascribing to a doctrine of sexlessness in the spirit world. As Tatiana Kontou observes, this is, most of all, a theatrical space, in which Selina finds 'a way of expressing or, more accurately, *performing* her passion for Ruth' (Kontou, 2009: 195,

original emphasis). The novel suggests that the discourse of spiritualism may have provided Victorian women with both a space and a language with which to speak the unspeakable. The spiritualist notion of 'affinity' provides Margaret with words to identify and communicate her desire. Selina tells her that 'we are the same, you and I. We have been cut, two halves, from the same piece of shining matter. Oh, I could say, *I love you ...* But my spirit does not love yours – it is *entwined* with it. Our flesh does not love: our flesh is the same, and long to leap to itself. It must do that, or wither! *You are like me*' (275). She then adds a more carnal emphasis: 'Now you know why you are drawn to me – why your flesh comes creeping to mine, and what it comes for. Let it creep, Aurora. Let it come to me, let it creep' (276). Yet despite Selina's protestations against mere love, Margaret responds more conventionally: 'I love you, and I cannot give you up' (280).

As much as the novel maintains the dramatic tension, refusing to reveal Selina's fraudulence until the final pages, Margaret's dark ending is gothically prefigured at several places in the narrative, not least in Selina's claim 'you are like me'. Here Selina is only voicing what Margaret has believed she has felt, and even seen. Glimpsing Selina's plait of hair, placed on her own pillow by Ruth, Margaret is 'frozen in fright', believing that she is looking at herself. The doubling of Margaret and Selina portends Margaret's death, as an encounter with the gothic *doppelgänger* must. She awakens after this encounter with herself/Selina 'as one might wake from death, still gripped by darkness, still sucked at by the soil' (258). Again, after she has a vision of her doubled, future self as an ageing spinster with her querulous mother for company, Margaret recalls a story her father was told as a boy and repeated to her: 'invalids should not gaze at their own reflections, for fear their souls would fly into the glass and kill them' (202). Margaret is an invalid herself, dosed with chloral and laudanum for her 'nervous disorder'. Immediately after Selina has claimed their affinity – itself a doubling declaration – and Margaret has responded with her declaration of love, this image redoubles: 'then I saw her eye, and it was black, and my own face swam in it, pale as a pearl. And then, it was like Pa and the looking-glass. My soul left me – I felt it fly from me and lodge in her' (280). Selina becomes Margaret's mirror image here, but rather than reflect Margaret back to herself she subsumes her. Selina must devour Margaret to gain her own freedom, both literally, from Millbank, and figuratively, from English conventions. Margaret is the means by which she can flee to Italy and live the life Margaret wants for herself. Parker observes that while Margaret 'remains very much stuck inside the Gothic narrative,

Selina Dawes evolves beyond the traditional Gothic plot. Although she receives a realist explanation at the novel's conclusion, Selina seems still to elude the narrative itself; the personal account of her crime remains frustratingly ambiguous' (Parker, 2008: 10).

For this is invented, but not alternative, history. And this is not a narrative of liberation. Waters' fiction does not project a fairytale world of lesbian desire that managed to thrive despite the odds – unless we wish to locate this story with Selina and Ruth. Seeking to invent a tradition of lesbian desire, Waters does not flinch from the knowledge that for many, perhaps most Victorian women, this would have been a painful reality in a culture committed to its impossibility. Moreover, while lesbian desire is central to the novel, it is clearly positioned within a matrix of other constraints, particularly those of class and gender, which prove, for Margaret, insurmountable. *Affinity* gives us 'a Victorian dystopia: its narrative spirals downward into a fugue of depression along with its middle-class protagonist, portraying at every class level a female world of large and small tyrannies and injustices, where even the women who escape are bound together by forms of domination and submission' (Kaplan, 2007: 112).

Although she invents, rather than restores, Waters works within the knowledge we do have – that lesbian desire was hidden, silenced, perhaps violently excised, so that there is no trace – and replicates this in her novels. When Margaret burns her diary she performs the excision of lesbian desire from the record. Or, as Kohlke puts it, by dramatising Margaret's 'collusion in her own silencing as both historian and historical subject, *Affinity* enacts the moment when 'transgression is disciplined and silence re-imposed' (Kohlke, 2004: 162). The novel dramatises and embodies lesbian desire, giving it a fleshly form and portrays, too, its excision from the historical record, the reason for its invisibility.

While Selina and Ruth escape to Italy, Margaret realises her future lies in imprisonment, either within Millbank or within her life as a spinster, or at the bottom of the Thames. She chooses the Thames. As readers we accept this dramatic ending, have been schooled to half-expect it, according to the conventions of the gothic. Paradoxically, the fictional apparatus works to authenticate Margaret's sense of her options, as well as to legitimise her choice. With her diary burnt, she leaves behind only her letter to Helen, which explains her decision to run away with Selina, though without mentioning her name or naming her desire. Fittingly, this leap towards her double, which must also presage death, reads equally as a suicide note. Margaret's queer desire is written out of history and sinks without a trace.

### III

I have positioned *Affinity* largely in relation to gothic, though it should become clear in what follows that it also draws upon the sensation novel, a genre partly derived from gothic. Particularly, each of these genres was closely connected to representing transgressive women; women who did not conform to Victorian ideals of feminine domesticity, especially its governance of female sexuality. What was particularly shocking about the Victorian sensation novel was that it combined the transgressive elements of gothic romance with literary realism. This was the genre's defining feature: 'the violent yoking of romance and realism, traditionally the two contradictory modes of literary perception ... The sensation novel ... strains both modes to the limit, disrupting the accepted balance between them' (Hughes, 1980: 16). Like the Fens in *Waterland*, the depiction of Briar in *Fingersmith* shifts between fairytale and realism, signalling the blend of romance and realism. Gentleman first describes it with fairytale inexactness as 'a certain out-of-the-way sort of house, near a certain out-of-the-way kind of village, some miles from London' (23), then rather more dramatically as 'a damnable place: two hundred years old, and dark, and draughty, and mortgaged to the roof – which is leaky by the way' (24). It is Sue that speaks its more prosaic reality: 'They lived west of London, out Maidenhead-way, near a village named Marlow, and in a house they called Briar' (33). Yet, when Sue first sees Briar both the fairytale and the mundane vanish as it rises gothically, 'vast and straight and stark out of the woolly fog, with all its windows black or shuttered, and its walls with a dead kind of ivy clinging to them, and a couple of its chimneys sending up threads of a feeble-looking grey smoke' (57).

The conjunction of realism and romance was performed in the way sensation fiction drew upon the sensational journalism of the 1860s. In its use of newspaper descriptions of crimes and courtroom dramas for its complex plots, the genre, as I described above, was a hybrid of the documentary and the fantastic, of fact and fiction. This hybridity provoked particular anxiety because of the genre's representation of femininity. Women featured prominently in the genre as characters and as its authors and readers: 'Many, perhaps most, of the reviewers' objections to the genre, and their anxieties about it, derive from their perception of it as a form written by women, about women and, on the whole, for women', both in terms of the 'fast women it depicted and because of the kinds of female experience it portrayed' (Pykett, 1992: 32). One of the features that distinguishes it from gothic is its

representation of women as implicated in the crimes it portrays: 'For whatever reasons, the heroine of the sensation novel has become enmeshed in a sordid tangle of crime, blackmail, and seduction; she has become a participant, however unwilling, as well as merely a victim' (Hughes 1980: 44). Sensation novels, Pykett argues, 'transformed the representation of women' (Pykett, 1992: 32). Women in sensation novels were often not only 'improper' but downright criminal, as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's eponymous heroine, Lady Audley, exemplifies. The genre's depiction of transgressive, even criminal, women meant that it was charged with being paradoxically 'both characteristically feminine, and profoundly unfeminine, or even anti-feminine'. Since there was disbelief attached to its representation of women and women's experiences, a sense that here it violated reality, the genre was often seen as a failure of realism (ibid.: 33).

The devil was in the detail. As we saw in Chapter 4, critics objected to the way these novels depicted and dwelt upon bodily urges and sensations: 'the proliferation of sensuous detail and the detailed representation of physical sensation' (Pykett, 1992: 34). In particular, the sensation novel focused this detail on the female body, which it presented seductively, and on women's sexual response: 'In this respect sensation novels were doubly transgressive. They did not simply portray women as sexual beings; they also dwelt on the details of women's sexual response in a "very fleshly and unlovely record"' (ibid.: Pykett quotes Victorian novelist Margaret Oliphant). The sensation novel read women's bodies and '*produced a reading in the body*' (Pykett, 1992: 35). It acted on the nerves and replicated the desires it represented in the bodies of the women who read them. In fact, since women comprised much of the sensation novel's readership, Pykett argues that the effect of the highly sexualised narratives that invited the readers' gaze to linger on the female body is 'a representation of female sexuality as voyeuristic spectacle, which offered *both* male and female readers pleasurable images of female erotic power' (Pykett, 1992: 101, emphasis mine). In what follows I want to suggest that Waters harnesses the transgressive power of a genre associated with female flesh to re-embody the spectralised figure of the lesbian.

Like *Affinity*, *Fingersmith* performs the sensation novel's inscription of the domestic sphere as a site of danger characterised by threatened and actual incarceration, typical of urban gothic and sensation narratives. The novel draws heavily upon Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) in which a young heiress, Laura Fairlie, is robbed of her identity and wrongfully committed to an asylum by her husband. As Jenny

Bourne-Taylor argues, Collins' novel 'breaks down any stable division between the resonances of "home" and "asylum" as places of safety and danger' (Bourne-Taylor, 1988: 99). This permeable boundary is literally transgressed in *Fingersmith*, which doubles the asylum and the manor house, so each is a spectralised form of the other. Whereas Briar is rendered as a gothic stronghold, the asylum in which Sue is confined used to be 'an ordinary gentleman's house', with pictures on the walls, rugs on the floors. Upon realising that 'now it had been made over to madwomen' Sue finds that 'somehow the idea was worse and put me in more of creep than if the place had looked like a dungeon after all' (408). What Sue is yet to realise – or, at least, is yet to confide to the reader – is that her own home, at Lant Street, is also a place of danger. She has misinterpreted Mrs Sucksby's close care for her and her apparent refusal to 'put a price to' her (11). If Mrs Sucksby appears to be 'careful' (13) of Sue for seventeen years it is because she covets her fortune. Sue must neither marry nor come to harm, nor be charged with thieving and imprisoned. The fact of her imprisonment is made visible when Sue and Maud are switched, and Maud is actually incarcerated at Lant Street.

It is in Maud that home and asylum are most strongly linked since an asylum is her home until she is eleven. By the time her uncle claims her it has so shaped her understanding that she believes there must be lunatics hidden away at Briar (184). There are no lunatics, only cruel servants and Mr Lilly who is characterised by a kind of monomania, an obsessive single-mindedness about his Index of pornography. Maud links her uncle's 'cruel patience', and his perverse monomania, to that displayed by the women at the madhouse, observing that '[h]ad they been gentlemen and rich – instead of women – then perhaps they would have passed as scholars and commanded staffs' (194). Recognising that this 'dark' mania fills her uncle's house Maud says 'I cease struggling at all, and surrender myself to its viscid, circular currents' (194). Whipped, locked in the icehouse and psychologically tormented by her uncle and his staff, it is here, in her home at Briar, that she is transformed into a 'curiosity', discussed in 'the shady bookshops and publishers' houses in London and Paris' (224). Scratching a hole in the yellow paint that covers the windows of her uncle's study and peering out, Maud describes herself as 'like a curious wife at the keyhole of a cabinet of secrets. But I am inside the cabinet, and long to get out ...' (204, ellipsis in original).

This situation casts Maud as the archetypal gothic heroine, locked away with an oppressive, patriarchal figure who 'keeps her close' (25). Sue, encouraged by Gentleman, 'reads' her in this way throughout her first narrative: 'She was an infant, a chick, a pigeon that knew

nothing' (66). She reads her this way, and encourages the reader to do likewise, right up until the final line of the first part of the book when she addresses her own, and the reader's, mistake: 'You thought her a pigeon. Pigeon my arse. That bitch knew everything. She had been in on it from the start' (173). Addressing the reader in this way emphasises that we, too, have been reading Maud in terms of a set of narrative conventions. The discovery, as Maud begins her own narrative, that she is cruel, wilful and tormenting rather than docile and sweet shifts our terms of reference. Now Sue, because she is docile and sweet and easily led, switches places with Maud, literally and figuratively, to become the heroine locked away for convenience in a private asylum. In this doubling and switching of Sue and Maud, the passive, gothic heroine is transformed into the woman of sensation, victimised by an overbearing patriarchal figure but also criminally implicated herself. Both Sue and Maud are willing to dupe and incarcerate the other. Maud seeks freedom from her uncle's tyranny; Sue attempts to please her pseudo-mother, Mrs Sucksby. She, too, is responding to tyranny, though it differs in kind. In contrast to the conventional sensation novel, neither *Affinity* nor *Fingersmith* offers the example of ideal(ised) femininity as a moral compass to guide our responses to the heroines. All Waters' central female characters are flawed in ways that make it difficult to decide where and how to apportion blame.

While the three first-person narratives that make up the novel, communicated by characters within the story itself, make the narrative structure appear similar to that of *Affinity*, these, unlike diaries, are retrospective accounts of the novel's action. The suspense and mystery imparted in Sue's and Maud's narratives results not from the narrators' position in the middle of events as they unfold but rather from their position beyond the end of the novel's plot. They already know the whole story. Jenny Bourne-Taylor's observation about narrative construction in *The Woman of White* holds true for *Fingersmith*: 'each individual utterance gains meaning from the way it has been placed in the chain, which is presented as continual progression but is in reality a continual, contradictory process of reappropriation and redefinition' (Bourne-Taylor, 1988: 100). The very form of the sensation novel thus installs a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Cvetkovich, 1992: 72) and *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* embody the very process of reading for shadows that I attributed to the lesbian historical novelist, including Waters, above. As Waters immersed herself in Victorian literature she read it for the shadows at the margins of the page, hypothesising the possibility of a lesbian reader and/or writer. Waters comments that when she read a

lot of Victorian pornography while preparing to write her first neo-Victorian novel, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), she became curious about whether women secretly, invisibly produced or read it:

I was interested in thinking about what that might offer me, as a modern lesbian feminist writer; but also thinking about [it] historically, how pornography might have worked for the women who read it or the women who wrote it, the women who were involved in the business side of it, women in the sex industry. (Dennis, 2008: 43–4)

Since there is no evidence pointing toward any specific female-authored Victorian pornography this remains a matter to 'speculate about' (ibid.: 44); these imagined readers and writers remain spectral until Waters brings them to novelistic life.

Waters positions her own readers in this way, reading for shadows. We read Sue's carefully constructed account perhaps barely glimpsing the intensity of Maud's feelings for Sue. Upon reading Maud's account of the same events we necessarily revise our first reading in the light of new knowledge and a different perspective. Upon a second reading, we recognise intimations of Maud's feelings in Sue's narrative. Each narrative is quite coy, particularly when describing their sexual encounter. Each attributes more agency to the other woman (141–2; 282–3). Again, Waters is careful not to anachronistically attribute a lesbian identity to Maud and Sue. Maud suggests that her own recognition of desire comes when Gentleman recognises it within her: 'in his face I see how much I want her' (274). Whereas Mariaconcetta Costantini argues that Sue's and Maud's love story 'is opposed by a corrupted, hypocritical society' (Constantini, 2006: 18), a reasonable assumption about the representation of lesbian desire in a (faux)Victorian novel, it is rather more notable that they really meet with no resistance. Gentleman, who may be homoerotically inclined too, is only amused, or perhaps even mildly titillated (276, 277), provided this unexpected shift will not disrupt his plot. What Constantini describes as Waters' 'lesbian militancy' is difficult to detect in the novels themselves. She suggests that Waters' protagonists are rather too knowing about their lesbian identity. However, in *Fingersmith*, in which she has no lesbian models to follow, Sue struggles to recognise the nature of her feelings for Maud:

But, here was a curious thing. The more I tried to give up thinking of her, the more I said to myself, 'She's nothing to you', the harder I tried to pluck the idea of her out of my heart, the more she stayed

there ... It was as if there had come between us, without my knowing, a kind of thread. It pulled me to her, wherever she was. It was like – *It's like you love her*, I thought. (FS: 136)

Thus, at first Sue can only interpret her feelings for Maud through a heteronormative frame. When they make love, Maud colludes in this displacement, as they cast their sexual encounter in terms of her imminent wedding night and her feigned lack of sexual knowledge. Sue tells Maud that her body, which is responding to Sue's touch, 'wants Mr Rivers' (Gentleman). Maud, too, throughout her narrative, cannot interpret Sue's actions toward her. She thinks that Sue's diffidence indicates that she knows that Maud is plotting against her (279).

As our narrators, Sue and Maud are, like Margaret and Selina, 'at once reliable and unreliable' (Bourne-Taylor, 1992: 100). Indeed, in the sensation novel multiple narrators perform the same function as the diarist: 'suspense and excitement are generated and maintained by the way that the reader's view is limited at any one time to the perspective of each individual narrator whose testimonies are at once reliable and unreliable, and whose means of making sense of the world needs to be continually questioned' (Bourne-Taylor, 1992: 100). However, as I have suggested, their accounts are retrospective and so deliberately foreshadow and misinterpret events in a way that diary narratives cannot. When Sue describes her first meeting with Mr Lilly, she claims that 'to describe him as I saw him then, is to tell everything' (75) but of course her description of him, then, fails to 'tell' the most important aspect of Mr Lilly because it refuses to disclose the nature of his library. Indeed, Sue, particularly, addresses us as readers, drawing us in and around to her way of seeing things: 'You are waiting for me to begin my story. Perhaps I was waiting, then. But my story had already started – I was only like you, and didn't know it' (14). She provides clues throughout her narrative that this is part of a much more complicated plot: 'We were thinking of secrets. Real secrets, and snide. Too many to count. When I try now to sort out who knew what and who knew nothing, who knew everything and who was a fraud, I have to stop and give it up, it makes my head spin' (110). And throughout her narrative she repeats the phrase 'I thought' (130, 116, 175) to mark out the difference between her knowledge 'then' during the events themselves, and 'now', which is the temporal location of her writing.

This sense of multiple temporal locations as sites of different types of knowledge is complicated further in Maud's own narrative which,

in contrast to Sue's, uses present tense, though the account is clearly retrospective: 'I have said it was my uncles' custom, occasionally to invite interested gentlemen to the house, to take a supper with us and, later, hear me read. He does so now' (205). Maud's account creates the impression that she, and we, are in the midst of events. It also, perhaps, heightens our sense of her confusion when Gentleman takes her to Lant Street and she begins to understand the true author of the plot in which she had thought she had agency. We shrink, as she shrinks, from Mrs Sucksby as she 'wets her lips', and we struggle, as Maud struggles, to interpret Mrs Sucksby's gaze which is 'terribly close and eager' (312). The present tense adds to the immediacy of sensation, particularly at the moment when the secret of Maud's parentage is elliptically, but dramatically, revealed: 'all at once I see her face – the brown of her own eye, and her own pale cheek – and her lip, that is plump and must, I understand suddenly, must once have been plumper ... she wets her mouth. "Dear girl," she says. "My own, my own dear girl". She hesitates another moment; then speaks, at last' (392). Whereas Sue's narrative creates suspense by foreshadowing later knowledge, Maud's is dramatic and immediate. Like Margaret's and Selina's narratives, there is no explanation as to how we come to have these narratives, why Sue and Maud wrote them and for whom. Diegetically they do not exist. While this novel does not explore spiritualism as *Affinity* does, these narratives, too, appear as materialised spirits, conjured by Waters.

As I've suggested above, this contrasts with the preamble to *The Woman in White* which emphasises the inability of the legal and judicial system to detect and prosecute all crimes and offers the unfolding narrative as a pseudo-legal document in one such case. Moreover, in contrast to Laura Fairlie whose narrative does not number among the assembled accounts, though she is at the centre of the plot, Maud and Sue tell us the entire story in their own words. This is in part facilitated by the key difference between the Victorian and the neo-Victorian texts. The Victorian sensation novel is the proto-detective novel; a male figure such as Walter Hartright (*The Woman in White*) or Robert Audley (*Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)) typically becomes obsessed with disclosing secrets, righting wrongs and, ultimately, restoring (patriarchal) order with the zeal of the monomaniac. As the closest relative to both Sue and Maud (as Sue's biological uncle and Maud's guardian), Mr Lilly would conventionally be the most likely figure to adopt this role. However his monomania is directed elsewhere and he exhibits no interest at all

in recovering Maud. The detective figure is notably missing from this version of the sensation novel. There is no 'heart-right' man to pursue the truth and rectify wrongs on behalf of the heroines, demonstrating 'what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve' (Collins, 1999 (1860): 9).

I want to suggest that it is the very absence of the male protector/detective figure that *enables* Maud's and Sue's happy ending. With no man to act as father/brother/husband and pursue justice on their behalf (and indeed, no one to pursue justice against, since Mrs Sucksby and Gentleman are both dead), Maud and Sue are beyond the patriarchal gaze and, as such, are free to create a female space that exists outside the order provided by law. Significantly, when Sue returns to Briar at the end of the novel, the great clock which tolls regularly throughout the novel while Maud and Sue live there under the authority of Mr Lilly, has ceased to chime. Sue notes: 'It seemed quieter inside the walls, than it had been before – quieter, and queer' (538). The use of 'queer' here reinforces the idea that the clock had symbolised normative, patriarchal, masculinised time, as well as taking the measure of Mr Lilly's tyranny. In the absence of the chiming clock, the silence confirms Sue's impression that '[i]t seemed like a house not meant for people but for ghosts' (538). She is right. She moves through the house making 'no sound, and might have glided – as if *I* were ghost. The thought was queer' (540). Here the novel links lesbian desire to its apparitional status but construes this in a positive light. It is Sue's and Maud's very invisibility, their utter lack of men to act on their behalf and restore order, that enables them to reunite in the newly feminised space of Briar. If, as Pykett argues, the cottage beside the Thames in which Lady Audley finds herself exiled as punishment for her crimes at the end of *Lady Audley's Secret* is a world purged of the 'improper feminine of illegitimate desire, passion and French novels' (see Pykett, 1992: 105), then this sensational trajectory for the transgressive woman is rewritten at the end of *Fingersmith*. The Thameside cottage becomes a dilapidated Thameside mansion, and it, too, is a 'private feminized space'. However, in contrast to the cottage, it is a space in which the 'improper' feminine reigns, along with illegitimate desire, passion and French (though not only French) pornography. Whereas Victorian sensation novels tended to domesticate the improper feminine, in *Fingersmith* the improper feminine becomes the new domestic. And while the gothic space of the manor house is, in Briar's disintegration and its sense of being out-of-time, perhaps even *more* gothic, it has been reclaimed as a site for this tradition of lesbian desire. The novel closes upon Maud and Sue

having rejected their inheritance – and thus the model of reproductive heteronormativity on which it relies – in favour of earning their own income producing pornography. At this moment Sue and Maud literally embody the female readers of Victorian pornography that Waters had imagined as accessing and using pornography for the own ends. If we are to take the fact of Sue's authorship of two of the retrospective narratives seriously, then becoming a producer of pornography has taught Sue to read and write. This is particularly empowering because, earlier in the novel, her inability to do either contributes to her entrapment; she cannot discover that Maud is less innocent than she seems since she cannot discover the nature of Mr Lilly's books (69) and when locked in the asylum or inability to write exacerbates Dr Christie's impression that she is mad (430).

Waters has suggested that in *Fingersmith* she 'wanted to take all the classic scenarios and tropes of sensation fiction and to take a different path through them, pursuing lesbian attraction, and making them mean different things' (Waters, undated). She uses the generic structure of sensation fiction, associated with the depiction of 'improper' femininity to give flesh to the apparitional lesbian of the historical record and literary tradition. At the same time, she dramatises the very process by which lesbian desire becomes invisible to history and fiction. Diegetically, Sue and Maud are ghosts made flesh, their desire sensuously depicted. Extra-diegetically they are the invisible women whose lesbian desires can only be – and yet must be – conjectured.

Thus, Waters exploits the 'generic repertoires' (Wesseling, 1991: 18) of gothic and sensation as an authenticating strategy for her faux-Victorian fiction. Her use of popular Victorian genres that are associated with transgressive women – and transgressive representation of women's sexuality – creates a space in which a tradition of lesbian desire in the Victorian period can be invented. Perhaps paradoxically, given that the gothic is often associated with demonising transgressive sexuality, and the sensation novel with domesticating it, the play of difference and similarity (Jones, 2009: 129) between Victorian and neo-Victorian uses of these genres creates as a space in which Waters can sympathetically explore how lesbian desire might have been experienced prior to its essentialisation by late-Victorian medical discourse. In both *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*, offering no diegetic explanation for the existence of these first-person accounts of same-sex desire consolidates the sense that Waters offers her narratives as spectral additions to our cultural memory of the Victorian, transforming and extending it by focusing on invisible desires and practises. Her novels ventriloquise Victorian gothic

and sensation fiction, grafting the representation of lesbian experience onto their generic structure and transforming it, in order to make this invented history memorable. In this way, Waters' novels participate in the 'political charge' of lesbian imagining, inventing memory where none exists.