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Contemporary Women's Writing

**From the effective to the affective: Postmemory in Emma
Donoghue's *The Sealed Letter***

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3 This article has a dual focus; to demonstrate the recent re-politicization of Linda Hutcheon's category of
4 historiographic metafiction through the extension of Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory to
5 lesbian novelists, arguing that this theoretical framework offers a lens through which we can understand
6 some recent trends in lesbian historical fiction. Focussing on Emma Donoghue's 2008 novel *The Sealed*
7 *Letter*, I argue that this text's responses to earlier lesbian historical fiction and to developments in LGBT
8 identities are illuminated by reading it as a highly political engagement with lesbian postmemory.
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For Peer Review

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3 “What does it mean to witness?” Emily Faithfull asks herself this as she testifies against her closest
4 friend, Helen Codrington, in the 1864 divorce case that saw Helen left without her children or any
5 means of support (Emma Donoghue, *The Sealed Letter* 360). Emily Faithfull (‘Fido’ in the novel) is
6 standing in the witness box as she thinks this, as confusion as to the meaning of what she thinks she
7 may (or may not) remember, and a desire to protect her friend from the consequences of what she
8 suspects to be the full truth, beset her. The novel mingles historical fact with fictional interventions,
9 using metafictional devices to highlight its own fictional status while simultaneously allowing a
10 modern reader a partial understanding, at least, of what it *might* have been like to have been these
11 women, in this time. The question of what it means to witness is also the one Donoghue sets herself,
12 and us: the issue of what we know, and how, is at the heart of this self-reflexive, teasing novel.

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26 Donoghue’s depiction of a woman whose emotional and sexual identity is as opaque to her as it is to
27 the modern reader, in a story where the truth of the situation is highly contested but also ultimately
28 unknowable, is indicative of ~~the issues salient to~~ the ways in which lesbian history has been used and
29 explored in recent lesbian historical fiction which this novel explores. It offers an unusual, innovative
30 and paradoxical solution to the writing of LGBTQ+ history. Donoghue’s text is an excellent example
31 of the way in which Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory – ‘memory’ of events that, while
32 crucial to an individual’s sense of identity, occurred outside their own lifetime – can be usefully
33 applied to lesbian historical fiction, particularly that written over the last decade, and can repoliticise
34 historiographic metafiction by drawing our attention to both the difficulties and the necessity of
35 writing lesbian historical narratives. Hirsch originally identified postmemory fictions as being by the
36 children of Holocaust survivors (Hirsch 22), but as Donoghue’s text shows, the scope of this model of
37 transmission can be broadened. Looking at the narrative techniques and thematic obsessions Hirsch
38 observes as marking the postmemory text, it becomes clear that these characteristics can be seen in
39 a far wider range of fictions dealing with past trauma. This article will argue that it is possible to
40 extend this model of transmission to include those who are not the literal children of a single
41 traumatised generation, as second generation Holocaust survivors are, but who inherit a more

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3 diffuse, but still problematic history which they have to find new ways to engage with – in this case,
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5 late 20th and early 21st century lesbian women seeking to reinscribe an opaque lesbian past.
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8 Generally, in postmemory fiction, the past is oppressively present; those born afterwards feel
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10 compelled to find their place in the narrative by re-narrating it. But the obverse can also be true, and
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12 Hirsch notes that some second generation Holocaust survivors, who grew up in families where the
13
14 Shoah was never discussed, found the combination of knowledge of the event with that silence
15
16 traumatising in itself. This is where the parallel with LGBTQ+ history is clearest; the problem is that
17
18 although the past – or the desire for it – still forms a significant part of both groups' identity, it is
19
20 essentially invisible; lesbians' attempts to find those stories, to find themselves in the archives, are
21
22 often frustrated. Thus both groups are troubledtormented by history, and the best way for both to
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24 meet their need to find their own place in the historical narrative, or to create some meaningful
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26 connection with the past, is to re-enter it imaginatively, reinscribing it for the current generation.
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35 The model of transmission between generations is useful here because this is, arguably, the first
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37 period where it has been possible to narrate lesbian history so openly. Taking *The Sealed Letter* as
38
39 my example, I will show that the type of self-conscious, reflexive historical fiction Donoghue writes
40
41 suggests that lesbians writing historical fiction now are in effect a 'second generation', inheriting not
42
43 the trauma of a preceding generation but the dual trauma caused by the relative silence where
44
45 lesbian history might, perhaps, have been, and the vicarious trauma of the knowledge of past
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47 oppression of the community. This 'second generation' seeks to reinscribe its place in a narrative
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49 that has elided them, but that also demonstrates the further potential of postmemory, beyond the
50
51 literal second generation. LGBTQ+ fiction is now in a position to present the 'happy ever after'
52
53 'greenwood' ending that E. M. Forster dared not publish in his lifetime. But authors such as
54
55 Donoghue, Sarah Waters and Beatrice Hitchman go beyond this, problematising and dramatizing the
56
57 historiographical and literary conventions they rely on, placing the project of recovery itself, and the
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3 desire for that recovery, at the centre of their work. Reading texts such as *The Sealed Letter* as
4 postmemory novels can help us to identify how lesbian historical fiction has developed the genre
5
6 Linda Hutcheon labelled historiographic metafiction, showing how the genre has evolved in the
7
8 years since Hutcheon coined the term (Hutcheon 5). This form – the fusion of the postmemory novel
9
10 and the historiographic novel - is a perfect vehicle for discussing and dramatising the specific
11
12 problems of writing about lesbian history prior to the advent of sexology and the codification of
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14 homosexuality in the late nineteenth century.
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19 Historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon notes, demonstrates a fascination with narrative,
20
21 particularly about the past. It tends, though, towards ontological scepticism, using historical
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23 narratives playfully and self-consciously, as Sarah Waters does – the characters in her first three
24
25 novels in particular are often ostentatiously playing with or trying out roles, and Waters also often
26
27 uses history in a self-consciously playful manner, as with her use of gay male history as a basis for
28
29 her depiction of Diana Lethaby's circle in *Tipping the Velvet*. Donoghue does something similar when
30
31 she mingles her reimagining of Fido's point of view with snippets of real historical texts. This is not
32
33 'real' lesbian history, we know; its deliberate and clear reworking of the record as a kind of 'wish-
34
35 fulfilment' fits historiographic metafiction's habit of highlighting its own constructed nature, so we
36
37 are're aware of the text as a text; both Waters and Donoghue enjoy 'breaking the frame' of the
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39 historical novel. Articulating post-memorial engagements through historiographic metafiction allows
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41 for the embodiment of postmemorial concerns, rather than the depiction of them, for the move
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43 from an 'effective' evocation of the past – one which stakes a claim for the existence of a queer past
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45 – for an affective one, which embodies these themes by creating an emotional connection between
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47 the reader and the past being depicted, at the same time as it reminds us that this past is partial,
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49 and imagined. The truth-seeking here is not done by the characters, as it is in Keen's 'romances of
50
51 the archives', but by the reader. The author's use of historiographic metafictional techniques to
52
53 create a puzzling, fractured narrative puts the reader into the position of the quester after truth. In a
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55 genre which is so concerned with 'touches across time' (Dinshaw 151), or the creation of a queer
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3 genealogy, the slipperiness of knowledge in historiographic metafiction reminds us of the dangers of
4 an overly simplistic assimilatory identification which elides the difference of the past and thus fails to
5 engage with it meaningfully.
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10 Marianne Hirsch characterises postmemory thus:
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13 ... postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational difference and from history by
14 deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory
15 precisely because its connection to the object or its source is mediated not through
16 recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. Postmemory characterises
17 the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth,
18 whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped
19 by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated (Hirsch 22).
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30 Postmemory fictions revolve around the trauma suffered by previous generations, usually the literal
31 parents', but focus not on them but on the effect that growing up in the shadow of a traumatic past
32 has on the next generation. They centre around a fascination with nature of narrative, recovering
33 lost stories, and enacting fragmentation, dramatising the impossibility and yet total necessity of
34 knowledge of events that are crucially important to the sense of identity of individuals within that
35 group. This results in members of the second generation trying to imaginatively re-enter that past to
36 create some kind of meaningful connection, or as meaningful as is possible; the texts often
37 dramatise the difficulty of achieving this at the same time as trying to do it. What texts such as *The*
38 *Sealed Letter* demonstrate is that these characteristics are not limited to texts that deal with
39 parental trauma, but that the concept of the second generation can be de-coupled from the parent-
40 child relationship. The expansion of the second generation away from the model of familial or
41 culturally mediated trauma transmitted from one literal generation to another allows us to see that
42 generational transmission need not be handed directly through families, or through one single
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3 generation. Contemporary lesbian authors can be seen as a second generation to a much longer
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5 history, from premodernity onwards.
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8 In Sarah Waters' 1996 article 'Wolfskins and Togas: Maude Mare's *The Green Scamander* and the
9
10 Lesbian Historical Novel', she notes an intense need amongst lesbian authors and readers for
11
12 representation, particularly of lesbians in the past. Waters points out that because of the need for
13
14 discretion, and the relative scarcity of historical documentation about lesbian lives, many lesbian
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16 writers, in trying to meet this need, have had recourse to gay male historical material which they
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18 adapt (Waters, 177). Waters herself famously rewrites historical evidence and the rules of genre in
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20 her re-envisioning of a possible lesbian past. This leads me to a central ontological issue in lesbian
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22 historical fiction; how (and if!) to avoid projecting an anachronistic, twenty-first century view of
23
24 sexuality when exploring the history of homosexuality. This, we should note, is the same dynamic
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26 that we find in historiographic metafiction. These texts tell us that the past is unknowable, beyond
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28 our grasp, that it invites excavation in order for us to understand it (and our identity in relation to it),
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30 but that it ultimately resists our attempts to contain it.
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39 **The Problem of 'Knowing' about Lesbian History**

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42 The question of how we should discuss lesbianism in previous ages, particularly before the advent of
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44 sexology in the late nineteenth century is much debated. There is disagreement about whether such
45
46 a discussion is even possible. Linda Garber, in an essay tellingly entitled "Necessity is the Invention of
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48 Lesbians", neatly describes the issue as being about what counts, and how to count it (Garber, 2011
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50 1). The question of defining who was a lesbian quickly became an issue as lesbian studies developed
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52 within the academy in the nineteen seventies. Adrienne Rich's definition in 'Compulsory
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54 Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' of lesbianism as "women-identified experience" dovetails
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56 with Lillian Faderman's description in *Surpassing the Love of Men* of such relationships as 'a
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3 relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed towards each
4 other' (Rich 217, Faderman 17). Faderman argued that she could not find any coherent, consistent
5 definition relating to gender presentation, sexual relationships and intense but non-sexual
6 relationships which allowed her to say, with any certainty, that there had been such a thing as a
7 stable lesbian identity in the pre-sexology era. Indeed, she found – as Donoghue investigates in *The*
8 *Sealed Letter* – that “the primary difference between romantic friendship and lesbian love” eluded
9 her entirely (Faderman, 17).¹ Though Faderman defends her ~~refusal~~ to take a definitive stand
10 strongly, it is ultimately unsatisfying to scholars (such as Donoghue) who prefer to see the
11 documentary evidence of romantic friendships between women in tandem with more sexually
12 explicit material which, while not necessarily aimed at women, arguably demonstrates the existence
13 of women whose primary sexual and emotional orientation was towards their own sex.

14
15 Faderman raises questions which remain fundamental to lesbian (and gay, bisexual, trans and queer)
16 readings of the past: how possible is it to avoid projecting our own identities onto the past,
17 anachronistically? How do we read the evidence that survives – presuming we can identify it with
18 any certainty? Who, what, and *when* are lesbians? Linda Garber takes issue with what she describes
19 as “The Foucauldian Orthodoxy”, the social constructivist approach which suggests that sexual acts
20 were seen as separate from an individual's continuous identity (Garber, 2005 35). Prior to the
21 development of a taxonomy of female homosexuality by nineteenth century sexologists, sexual acts
22 between women would not have led the women themselves to think of themselves as solely and
23 permanently “oriented” towards one gender over the other; these were discreet acts which had no
24 implications for a person's self-identification. Furthermore, Faderman argues, there is the question
25 of how much was known, or understood, of homosexuality before the codification of sexual

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¹ Current debates around trans and lesbian identities have drawn our attention to the fact that we may well have been conflating sexuality and gender in relation to individuals in the past; although Donoghue doesn't address this in *The Sealed Letter*, this issue is likely to become more prominent in fiction in the coming years, and further expand our understanding of identity in the past and the present.

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3 practises led by sexologists such as Westphal (whose 1870 paper Foucault viewed as having first
4 labelled homosexuality), Havelock Ellis and Magnus Hirschfeld. In *The Sealed Letter*, Harry, who is
5 divorcing Fido's friend Helen, has some understanding of female homosexuality (having come across
6 its male counterpart in the navy), but expresses doubt that his divorce lawyer will be able to
7 discredit Fido by implying she had a sexual relationship with his wife because he cannot believe that
8 "an English jury [will] understand a glancing allusion to this sort of vice" (296). Faderman argues that
9 the sheer invisibility of romantic relationships between women made it possible for these
10 relationships to exist under society's radar, as happens in *The Sealed Letter*, but she goes further
11 than Donoghue is happy to, by suggesting that these romantic relationships might not have been
12 seen as sexual by those in them, until sexology made this 'visible'. Donoghue's presentation of Fido's
13 knowledge and understanding of her own feelings amplifies the difficulty in knowing what it might
14 have been that made women see their relationships in certain ways. As I will show, though, Helen,
15 Harry's wife, suspects that Fido's innocence-after-the-fact of their sexual relationship is more to do
16 with her inability to acknowledge what it was, rather than being a result of conceiving of their
17 relationship in those terms being beyond her knowledge of human relations. Fido certainly does
18 seem to fit Faderman's description of a woman in a non-sexual romantic friendship and; she
19 certainly sees her and Helen's relationship in these clearly celibate terms. W;-what becomes obvious
20 at the end of the book is that this may not always have been the case. The question of how much
21 Fido actually knows, and understands, about her own feelings – how legible they are to her, a
22 woman, whose life and career are dominated by writing, editing and printing – is the central theme
23 of the book.

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By placing this ambiguity at the centre of the book, Donoghue avoids making what Annamarie
Jagose, discussing how we might read Miss Wade in *Little Dorrit*, calls a "perspectival error" (442). To
read Miss Wade as a lesbian in twentieth century terms, is, she argues, to impose an identity which
is "[the] effect of a later historical moment that not only produces modern taxonomies of sexuality
but constitutes us as their most thoroughly interpellated subjects" (442). In her monograph *Passions*

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3 *Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668 – 1801*, Donoghue takes issue (quite forcibly) with the
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5 idea that female homosexuality was simply inconceivable, and was not clearly recorded, before the
6
7 beginning of codification in 1869. She follows Terry Castle in arguing that “when it comes to lesbians
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9 ... many people have trouble seeing what’s in front of them” (2). Castle suggests that any difficulty in
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11 ‘seeing’ lesbians is indicative of society’s fear of the potential threat lesbianism poses to patriarchal
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13 institutions, rather than reflecting a category that simply did not exist prior to the appearance of the
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15 term ‘homosexuality’ in a 1869 pamphlet by Karoly Maria Kertbeny. Donoghue’s monograph argues
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17 along similar lines, offering historical examples that seem to point to a lesbian identity that was
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19 visible, even if only to a few: she points out, for example, that Anne Lister, visiting the ‘Ladies of
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21 Llangollen’ in 1821, writes that she doubts that their relationship is platonic. We know, as Donoghue
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23 points out, that Lister was well versed in the classics and that she used classical allusions to gauge
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25 sexual interest in other women. Thus, we can be reasonably certain that her use of the word
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27 platonic is at the very least similar to ours, and that her assessment of the ‘Ladies’ (amongst many
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29 other similar examples of apparently lesbian practices and identities in literature, court records and
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31 pornography of the period), shows that “there is a long standing Sapphic tradition of lesbian culture;
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33 this is not a twentieth century invention” (Donoghue, *Passions Between Women*, 74). Donoghue’s
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35 study seeks to demolish the social constructivist view that there is a datable shift between lesbian
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37 acts, or lesbian roles, and a stable lesbian identity, describing sexual relationships between women
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39 and women who do appear to identify as lesbian throughout the ‘long eighteenth century’. In
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41 rejecting Faderman’s caution, however, she is careful not to assert lesbian identities without
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43 recourse to detailed analyses of historical sources. She also does not go so far as to assert that
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45 complete clarity on this issue is possible (or even desirable), and in this her position is closer to that
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47 of Judith Bennett and Valerie Traub. Bennett, a medievalist, coined the term ‘lesbian-like’ to enable
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49 her to discuss women who appeared to be lesbian, either in emotional or sexual terms (Bennett, 1).
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51 However, her definition can exclude, or include, women on what can seem quite arbitrary grounds.
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53 Traub reminds us that [it is necessary to] “keep open the question of the relationship of present
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3 identities to past cultural formations – assuming neither that we will find in the past a mirror image
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5 of ourselves nor that the past is so utterly alien that we will find nothing usable in its fragmentary
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7 traces” (262).
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10 While there is clear disagreement about whether lesbianism existed in the past in a way that was
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12 broadly the same as it is now, or not, and how easily we can access evidence of this, both sides of
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14 this debate agree that there is much less historical evidence, much less of a traceable genealogy, for
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16 lesbians than there is either for heterosexuals or for gay men. Donoghue uses *The Sealed Letter* to
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18 dramatise these questions about what we can find in the archive, about the narratives we assemble
19
20 – or reassemble? – and how we use them. Donoghue is well aware of the danger of committing a
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22 “perspectival error” if we read women in the past as lesbian in an uninflected way; *The Sealed Letter*
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24 dramatises this danger, simultaneously defying the gaps in the historical record by inventing, while
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26 reinscribing them through Donoghue’s use of historiographical metafiction.
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35 **Postmemory and the repoliticisation of historiographical metafiction**

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37 “Imagine living in a city where there are no monuments, no buildings from before 1970, no
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39 proof that you had grandparents or parents, no history at all. Wouldn’t that make you feel
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41 like you were just a passing fad, that you could be blown away like leaves? ... for any
42
43 community to feel substantial and able to change without losing themselves, a history is
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45 absolutely crucial” (Lawlor ‘Emma Donoghue’s Historical Novels’)
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50 In this interview, Donoghue identifies the root of her desire to write lesbian historical novels, as a
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52 desire to reinscribe lost lesbian narratives, and create ive an affective history. By adopting a
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54 metafictional approach, her novels cheerfully admit that they cannot offer an *effective* history, ~~one~~
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56 allowing direct, ~~and~~ certain knowledge of the past, but can offer an affective one, ~~of one~~ which
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58 embodies the desire to connect with the past as well as the impossibility of doing so. Donoghue
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3 seeks to create and disseminate a variant of what Alison Landsberg would call a prosthetic memory,
4 that is, a memory that is culturally mediated to a wide range of people, none of whom have any
5 direct personal connection to that history (1). In her study of the development of historiographical
6 metafiction as a genre in the late nineties and early part of this century, Amy J. Elias updates and
7 expands Hutcheon's roster of authors and techniques, showing that the genre was adopted by a
8 variety of politically aware authors who used the techniques of historiographical metafiction to
9 demolish grand narratives and recover lost voices. This method, as she argues, is necessarily
10 paradoxical, and greatly expands the spectrum of ontological doubt we find in earlier examples of
11 the genre. Although the authors she discusses use the genre to dramatise the issues raised by
12 recovering fragmentary, lost, obscured or oppressed histories, they are – *because* of their political
13 engagement with the voices they are recovering – far less open to radical ontological subjectivity
14 than earlier forms of historiographical metafiction, while always acknowledging, and foregrounding,
15 Alan Robinson's observation that these texts are "shaped by their historical moment of production"
16 (121). The "present pasts", as Robinson calls them, created by these novels are always made in our
17 own image, but Robinson notes further that "[t]he history of sexuality highlights the epistemological
18 opacity of the past present and the difficulty of reconstructing the immanent perspective of
19 historical agents, in order to avoid presentism" (141). Texts which utilise historiographic
20 metafictional techniques in order to explore and embody postmemorial concerns are able to
21 sidestep this difficulty by foregrounding it, warning us against presentism while simultaneously
22 offering a fresh redemptive revisioning of the past of the sort identified by Dana Shiller.-
23
24 Marie-Luise ~~Me~~ Kohlke's article 'Into History through the Back Door: The Past Historic in *Nights at*
25 *the Circus* and *Affinity*' also notes that historiographical metafiction "may have exhausted its
26 transgressive possibilities and become problematic for writers such as Waters, disillusioned with a
27 postmodern tradition heavily criticised as ineffective in producing anticipated social and political
28 change"(156). Postmemory can restore some of the political impetus that Shiller identified in the
29 neo-Victorian form in 1997 to an evolved historiographical metafiction, using its playfulness to

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3 dramatised the inherent problems in writing out of a fragmentary record, but also insisting on the
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5 necessity of trying, while not being naive about the results.
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9 In the case of writers such as Donoghue and Waters, we can see that postmemory is a vitally
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11 important factor in understanding the political charge of contemporary lesbian fiction. Postmemory
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13 is a more appropriate term than prosthetic memory in relation to these texts because postmemory
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15 is a specifically generational type of memory that, in passing between generations, causes certain
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17 formal characteristics in the novel. The novels foreground issues of memory and of the possibility of
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19 recovering the past; they revolve around family secrets, and the reclaiming and rebuilding of lost,
20
21 incomplete, misremembered and suppressed stories. Most importantly, their drive to reconstruct
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23 fractured narratives, or, alternatively, to interrogate that ‘fracturedness’, is linked *directly* to the
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25 authors’ personal, affective relation to the events described, specifically to their ‘belatedness’, which
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27 is not the case with texts arising from prosthetic memory.
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31 Hirsch, who coined the term postmemory, notes that it is described it as being different from
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33 “memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection” (22). Prosthetic
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35 memory lacks both a specifically generational dimension – Landsberg argues that it can relate to any
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37 area of the past – and the personal connection that being passed from the previous generation
38
39 creates. While prosthetic memory can refer to culturally significant events, such as war, unlike
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41 postmemory it does not relate specifically to narratives that come to dominate the lives of those
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43 born afterwards. Donoghue’s work, especially *The Sealed Letter*, exemplifies this type of paradoxical
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45 use of the conventions of historiographical metafiction, where the political impetus of the text
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47 simultaneously informs its fragmentary narrative, and undermines the truth claims it appears to be
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49 making.
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55 *The Sealed Letter*, like many postmemory fictions, is a palimpsest of historical source material and
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57 fictional intervention. It is based on a real, notorious divorce case from 1864, *Codrington v*
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59 *Codrington*. Vice-Admiral Henry Codrington and his wife Helen had been unhappily married for some
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3 years before Codrington, Harry in the book, began to suspect that Helen had been having affairs.
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5 Helen's close friend, Emily Faithful, known as Fido, had lived with them from 1854 until 1857, when
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7 Harry asked her to leave. During this time the marriage had essentially collapsed. In the intervening
8
9 years, Fido had become a prominent feminist and publisher. When Helen was fighting the divorce
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11 (which would leave her penniless and without her children), she produced an affidavit from Fido
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13 stating that while she had lived with them, Harry had attempted to rape her. Fido disappeared
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15 before she could be summoned to testify, however, and Harry's lawyers produced a sealed letter in
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17 court in which, he alleged, he had made some notes about the reasons that he had finally asked Fido
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19 to leave in 1857. The contents of the letter were not revealed and are not known, but it was
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21 rumoured at the time that it accused Fido of having had an affair with Helen. The threat of having
22
23 this sealed letter opened in court seems to have frightened Fido into returning and appearing not for
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25 Helen but for Harry, withdrawing her accusation of rape and effectively ensuring that Helen lost her
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27 case.
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33 Donoghue takes the framework of these events as the basis of her novel, remaining faithful to much
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35 of the detail while inventing – sometimes quite extensively – elsewhere. Reading *The Sealed Letter*
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37 as a postmemory text illuminates the connections between the different types of fragmentation
38
39 Donoghue builds her text around. This demonstrates the potential to expand postmemory's
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41 temporal and generational range, and is also revealing of why certain trends in recent lesbian
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43 historical fiction are occurring; the effect of the shift of social boundaries has enabled a generation
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45 of gay women to write about their community in a way they could not have in the past, forming a
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47 distinct, non-literal generation. The genre, though small, is diversifying and becoming more self-
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49 critical as the pressure to represent a longed for (and thus generally idealised) past in a positive light
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51 lessens. Lesbian historical fiction is still essentially focussed on 'recovering' the lost archive, because
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53 of the psychological need for a genealogy, as Donoghue commented in the interview quoted above.
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57 But contemporary work in this genre is now confident enough to examine its own moorings, rather
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59 than simply asserting the existence of a lesbian past without allowing room for ambivalence or
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3 negativity. In *Tipping the Velvet* alone, Waters offers us emotionally and ethically complex
4 characters; her protagonist, Nan, is not a straightforward heroine, Kitty is self-centred, and Diana is
5 the type of ‘predatory lesbian’ you are unlikely to find in earlier lesbian fiction. In Jeanette
6 Winterson’s horror story *The Daylight Gate*, one of a seventeenth-century lesbian couple sells the
7 other to ‘The Dark Gentleman’ for wealth and power, while the 1920s lesbian couple in *The Paying*
8 *Guests* quite literally get away with (almost) murder, and watch as an innocent man is very nearly
9 convicted for their crime. Endings which deliver the lesbian equivalent of Austen’s marriage plots are
10 also no longer reliably supplied; *Affinity* ends with a lesbian elopement which is, for another lesbian
11 character, a tragedy; Kate Worsley’s *She Rises*, set in the 1740s, ends with the central couple
12 reunited and then separated again as the protagonist decides domesticity is not for her. In Jane
13 Alden’s *Across A Crowded Room*, the 1950s protagonist loses custody of her daughter; in *The Seven*
14 *Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, the now elderly Hugo reveals that her great love was a woman, but she
15 has died, leaving Hugo alone to confess an old secret before taking her life. Interestingly, while Fiona
16 Shaw’s novel *Tell It To The Bees* has a happy ending, with the couple making a life together with their
17 child, the 2018 film adaptation is much more sombre, with the characters realising that they cannot
18 stay together without losing too much. The genre has become more self reflexive. While it still
19 functions as a ‘recovery operation’, it is able to present not only a more nuanced version of a
20 possible past, but also to offer a critical reflection on this ‘recovery operation’ as it performs it.

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But contemporary work in this genre is now confident enough to examine its own moorings, rather than simply asserting the existence of a lesbian past without allowing room for ambivalence or negativity. In *Tipping the Velvet* alone, Waters offers us emotionally and ethically complex characters; her protagonist, Nan, is not a straightforward heroine, Kitty is over-cautious and self-centred, and Diana is the type of ‘predatory lesbian’ you are unlikely to find in earlier lesbian fiction. Endings which deliver the lesbian equivalent of Austen’s marriage plots are also no longer reliably supplied; *Affinity* ends with a lesbian elopement which is, for another lesbian character, a tragedy; Kate Worsley’s *She Rises* ends with the central couple reunited and then separated again as the

~~protagonist decides domesticity is not for her. The genre has become more self reflexive. While it still functions as a 'recovery operation', it is able to present not only a more nuanced version of a possible past, but also to offer a critical reflection on this 'recovery operation' as it performs it.~~

Building a narrative

Donoghue's use of a court case as the scaffolding of her plot allows her to foreground the process of recovering, or piecing together, a narrative. Each of her characters is engaged in putting fragments together to try to make a whole. But because she tells the story from each of the three main characters' point of view, using free indirect speech to ventriloquize them in a series of monologues, she can also foreground the dangers of narrative. The truth, insofar as Harry, Fido or Helen can discern it, seems different to each of them, and as the plot, and the case, develop, the reader sees their versions of the truth warp and twist.

As the case goes on, two competing stories are built from the fragmentary evidence gathered by the lawyers, and by Crocker, the spy watching Helen and her lover. Harry feels disoriented by the evidence Crocker gathers – there is too much material, and too much irrelevant detail. Hearing Crocker's reports on his wife's movements makes Harry feel as though he is "seeing his life through the wrong end of a telescope" (*The Sealed Letter* 133). The lawyers advance their cases, then adapt under attack, and counterattack; the story alters, and facts are either emphasised, elided, or made up, depending on their usefulness to one side or the other. To his distress, in order to explain how Harry did not notice the affairs he now accuses Helen of, his lawyer represents him being "such an upright character that he can barely comprehend duplicity in his fellow man, let alone the softer sex" (*The Sealed Letter* 299). While Bovill is trying to exculpate his client, Harry "wants to groan aloud. Some myopic Quixote; a feeble minded Christian soldier. Is it really vital to his case to strip him of every vestige of manliness?" (*The Sealed Letter* 299). While Harry is presented as being naive about Helen, this portrayal goes (in Harry's view) beyond suggesting naivety to emasculate him. Bovill continues with this approach, asking what husband could match the forbearance Harry

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3 showed Helen: “*I sound like a doormat, thinks Harry, head down. Or a eunuch*” (*The Sealed Letter*
4 298, italics original). Similarly, after her former friend Mrs Watson has lied to the court, and told
5 them that Helen confessed, in great detail, to a number of affairs, Helen’s lawyer Few suggests to
6 her that her best defence might be to claim that although she did tell Mrs Watson what she claims
7 she did, that it was fantasy. “...what if [we] were to present you as an unhappy woman whose fancy
8 has a tendency to run away with her? A woman who in fact has never gone further than the mildest
9 coquetting, but who in her dreams is entangled in the most lurid intrigues?” (*The Sealed Letter* 282).
10 Helen rightly points out that what they are suggesting is that she claims to be mad, which could lead
11 to her being incarcerated by Harry, so the idea is taken no further. Evidence is similarly
12 manipulated, ~~r-~~ packaged and repackaged according to need: a loving note from Helen to Harry from
13 1856 is produced to prove that they have not always been alienated, as Helen claims. Helen “has no
14 memory of writing this, but it doesn’t surprise her: is there a wife who can’t drum up an affectionate
15 note on occasion? ... she must have scribbled it to smooth Harry’s feathers after a petty squabble”
16 (*The Sealed Letter* 256). As she gives testimony, Fido is appalled by the way that the usual social
17 rules about truth and propriety are suspended in the court - “unspeakable things can all be spoken”,
18 something which holds a particular, if not wholly conscious, fear for her (*The Sealed Letter* 347). All
19 that matters, as Helen knows and the more naive Fido and Harry come to realise, is that one
20 argument triumphs over another.
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44 Donoghue’s process of recovery differs from the lawyers here; her reimagining of the past is based
45 on detailed and less partisan research (relatively speaking). She takes advantage of postmemory and
46 historiographic metafiction’s mingling of the creative and the critical to create parallels between the
47 events of the story and the broader context of lesbian historiography, placing the reader in an
48 affective relationship to the latter as we realise that, but t
49 the similarities between the events we see
50 unfold and the project of recovering a vanished lesbian history are not only marked, they are
51 deliberately emphasised.
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Construction and self-construction

As becomes obvious in the divorce case, the 'real stories' of the protagonists' lives are unreadable by others. Harry realises, during testimony about Helen's affairs in earlier years, that he will never fully understand Helen: "Even after all the evidence is presented, so much of his wife's hidden life will remain opaque to him" (*The Sealed Letter* 300). But Harry also feels he is losing his sense of who he is, as his image is worked on by Bovill and warped by the defence and the press:

Harry's learning to recognise his twisted image in a succession of cracked mirrors. When this whole thing is over, when the stacks of newspapers are wrappers for tea-leaves or turnip-peelings, which Harry Codrington will linger? The hero of a tragedy, the butt of a farce? The battle-coarsened rapist, or Old Pantalone, the dotard who wears the horns he deserves? (*The Sealed Letter* 304).

Harry's distress at the fragility of the image he has always had, and felt was solid, is not simply due to shame at the lack of dignity it incurs; the unpicking and reworking of his marriage by Bovill, and his realisation that very little was what he thought it was, leaves Harry feeling that it is "himself [he] seems to be divorcing. Will he ever get back that firm sense of who he is, like a pebble in his palm?" (*The Sealed Letter* 304). Harry is aware that knowledge, even self-knowledge, is less solid than he had thought. He becomes more and more painfully aware of narrative's power not just to misrepresent the truth, but to obliterate it.

Fido also falls prey to narrative revisionings, succumbing to false memory tactically planted by Helen, who persuades her that she remembers Harry coming into the bedroom she and Fido shared when they lived together, and trying to rape her. Fido does have a memory of seeing "a white figure, at the door" which, she says, Helen later told her "was Harry in his nightshirt" (*The Sealed Letter* 189). Helen's behaviour is calculated to convince Fido that what she actually 'remembers' is not seeing a shape, but Harry climbing into bed over Helen, attempting to rape Fido and only stopping when Fido

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3 awoke. Helen appears to think of this while she and Fido are being interviewed by her lawyer, in the
4 hope that Fido will be able to furnish details which will reflect badly on Harry. Fido resists Few's
5 attempt to read more into the little she says than she means: "[s]he won't be a party to this fantasy
6 of Harry as some vicious, arbitrary Nero" (*The Sealed Letter* 187). Helen begins her deception by
7 expressing surprise at Fido's mildness in relation to Harry and implies that he has done something
8 heinous to her; to protect her deception, though, she pretends to realise that Fido has no idea what
9 she means and cuts herself short. She then allows Fido to elicit the story from her, so Fido feels she
10 has forced its revelation. The implantation of the 'memory' is skilful; Helen reveals details slowly,
11 apparently reluctantly, and in stages, building from Fido's real memory of seeing Harry at the door,
12 to revealing that Harry had got into bed with them, then that he attacked Fido. Fido moves from
13 disbelief to acceptance very quickly, able to "see the new version, now, like a ghostly image
14 overlaying the old memory" (*The Sealed Letter* 190). The truth of what Harry did has been overlaid
15 entirely by a new narrative that seduces Fido precisely because Helen has told it in such a manner as
16 to convince her that she has recovered this memory herself, despite its implausibility. But as with
17 Fido's suppressed doubt about whether meeting Helen at the start of the book could have been
18 coincidental, Fido's love for Helen overrides her reservations; her desire to believe only dies when
19 she is faced with incontrovertible proof that Helen engineered the chance meeting. This offers a
20 model of the project of rediscovering a past which one desires, or which fits one's perception of
21 what reality 'should' be like; we see the construction of a new reality from a series of prompts and
22 fragments, and Fido's succumbing to the comfort of a disturbing but coherent narrative is offered as
23 a post-memorial trope, an affective mirror, or warning, to the reader desirous of a lesbian history
24 not to do the same.

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Many of the literary allusions in the text serve a similar purpose, and are part of the key affective strategy Donoghue employs, pulling the reader into a position analogous with the characters'. At the lawyer's behest, each of the characters find themselves playing allotted roles, over which they have little control. Unsurprisingly, all of them see aspects of their own experience, and the others', in

1
2
3 literary terms. Harry and Fido both compare Helen to the female protagonists of French novels;
4
5 Helen dismisses her sudden thought that Fido might not have fled from giving evidence but been
6
7 abducted by hired thugs for Harry by scolding herself that she is not in “a sensation novel” (*The*
8
9 *Sealed Letter* 257). Donoghue makes her characters extremely aware of literary forms and
10
11 precedents in relation to their lives, inviting the reader to draw parallels with her analogous process
12
13 of recovery and invention by highlighting the narrative tropes and models the characters think
14
15 through as they try to make sense of what is happening to them. They use both specific literary
16
17 allusions and more abstract tropes. As discussed above, Harry sees his image fracturing into a set of
18
19 literary clichés, such as Pantalone. Fido, thinking about the contrast between Helen’s glamorous
20
21 appearance and her own, thinks that they must look like “characters from quite different sorts of
22
23 book” (*The Sealed Letter* 15). Presenting this difference in terms of different types of narrative
24
25 reminds the reader, again, of the power of narrative in shaping how we see the world around us.
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31 The characters also compare themselves to a range of literary characters. When Harry realizes that
32
33 Helen is watching the court case from the public gallery, he sees that she “could hardly resist
34
35 watching her own terrible story re-enacted. Like Hamlet among the players” (*The Sealed Letter* 302).
36
37 When Fido finally has the sealed letter, at the end of the novel, she cannot decide whether to open
38
39 it or not, and describes herself bitterly as “some vacillating Macbeth” (*The Sealed Letter* 386). The
40
41 effect of these, and of the numerous other references to texts such as *Madame Bovary*, *Othello*,
42
43 *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Small House at Allingham* is, again, to heighten our awareness of the
44
45 text as a construction, or palimpsest, analogous to the palimpsest each of the characters is creating
46
47 and to a post-memorial reimagining of the past, where an individual’s experience is always layered
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49 in, or onto, others’, and is always constructed from fragmentary traces.-
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55 Some of the more indirect or specialised allusions serve to signal authorial self-consciousness. The
56
57 significance of Helen choosing *The Small House at Allingham* to “bore herself to sleep” is lost on her,
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59 but possibly not on the reader, who may recognise the irony of Helen choosing a book with a
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3 heroine whose flaws are not entirely dissimilar to her own. Helen has presumably missed the
4
5 similarity between Lilly Dale's rejection of her faithful but dull suitor, with her rejection of the
6
7 faithful but dull Harry and Fido; if she has recognised it, it is equally revealing that she chooses this
8
9 book not because it might prick her conscience, but because she finds Trollope's morality
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11
12 tedious enough to ease sleep.
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15 Having Fido quote an unidentified fragment from Tennyson's 'In Memoriam' to herself as she lies in
16
17 bed watching Helen sleep works in a similar way, alerting a reader familiar with the homoerotic
18
19 tradition in Victorian literature to potential sexual ambiguity. As Jack Kolb has argued, it is
20
21 impossible to deny the possibility of reading 'In Memoriam' as a same-sex love poem, although it is
22
23 undeniably ambiguous as to the exact nature and expression of that love (365). The sexual ambiguity
24
25 of Fido's gaze is also undeniable – the description of the sleeping Helen, given through Fido's eyes,
26
27 is certainly potentially erotic – the irony is, as with Helen's cheerful disregard of the parallel between
28
29 Lilly and herself, that the character is not fully, or perhaps not consciously, aware of the significance
30
31 of the text they are alluding to. The ambiguity of the same sex love in 'In Memoriam' may indeed be
32
33 behind Donoghue's use of Tennyson. This is emphatically not a novel which simply recovers a lost
34
35 gay past but one which, while making as complete an effort to do so as it can, is equally interested in
36
37 dramatising the limitations of its attempt. Another allusion that serves as a signal to the reader is
38
39 Helen's injunction to her daughters to "cling to each other like the [sisters] in 'Goblin Market'" (*The*
40
41 *Sealed Letter* 214). 'Goblin Market' occupies a similarly ambiguous place in the canon of Victorian
42
43 homoerotic writing; Gilbert and Gubar, amongst others, suggest that the poem serves not only as a
44
45 depiction of the power of sisterly (and more broadly, female) solidarity, but also of physical desire
46
47 between women. As in 'In Memoriam', the depiction of same sex love and desire is ambiguous. The
48
49 context of this allusion is key: Helen is highly unlikely to have the lesbian reading in mind when
50
51 talking to her children about how they must support each other now she cannot see them.
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53 Donoghue may mean us to wonder if she has it at the back of her mind; the next sentence is "there
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55 is no friend like a sister" (a quotation from the poem), and it is possible that the ambiguity of the
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3 love between the sisters in the poem has reminded her of Fido's love for her, which may help her to
4 win her children back. However, this is not the meaning that she intends her children to take, so the
5 allusion functions as a trap for the over-enthusiastic seeker of lesbian history. This self-reflexivity is
6 central to the political impact of the form, as Shiller argues; it foregrounds our desire for knowledge
7 of the past, and the fragmentariness of our knowledge, but without suggesting that this knowledge
8 is entirely unattainable. It is a 'red herring', dropped into the text as a recognisable signifier of
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lesbianism that we are forced to acknowledge has no significance in this particular 'recovery operation'.

The title of the novel also stands as a warning to the reader. The events of the plot, though based in history, could be from the plot of a sensation novel; having Helen explicitly chastise herself that "this isn't a sensation novel" only heightens our awareness that it does closely resemble one (*The Sealed Letter* 257). Harry, listening to his lawyer suggesting lines of argument to take about the moment that Harry realised that the reason Helen did not reply to a telegram because she had lied about where she was and never got it, echoes the lawyer's phrase "the occasion of the unanswered telegram" in his head: "*The Unanswered Telegram*: it sounds like a ghost story from one of the popular magazines" (*The Sealed Letter* 142, italics in original). By having Harry make this point, Donoghue draws attention to her own, very similar title. The reference to Poe's story 'The Purloined Letter' is implicit in the wording of the title, as well as the plot, and highlights the fact that this story is being cast in a literary form. This is particularly significant in a politicized historical fiction which has recuperating a suppressed past at its heart. Donoghue is reminding us throughout that author and reader must be careful not to be seduced by narrative. As Donoghue shows, by never fully revealing the nature of Helen and Fido's relationship, or the extent of Fido's understanding of her emotions, we can only ever recover a partial account of the past. The title of the text points us towards Donoghue's belief that although it is possible to recover a past as sealed or occluded as lesbian history, and identify the 'lesbian-like', it is not possible to claim total certainty.

Fragments

Donoghue's emphasis on fragments in the novel also furthers her exploration of the reconstitution of the past. Each successive chapter uses free indirect speech to ventriloquize each of the character's contradictory views of the same period. Donoghue switches between each of them, giving Fido seven chapters, Harry six and Helen five. Different typefaces break up the text, with letters in copperplate and chapter headings in gothic. The narration switches between free indirect speech and fragments of other forms, such as letters, the partial drafts of letters and Harry's biography of his father, showing how each character tries to control and make sense of their surroundings using language. Writing the biography gives Harry a sense of purpose and connection to the navy while he is on leave. Helen uses narrative to control both Harry and Fido, lying to them face-to-face and in letters. Fido, as a political campaigner and publisher, uses language for a living, but finds her control of it slipping as she is forced to confront the truth about Helen's affairs, and, ultimately, her feelings for her friend.

Fragments of writings by Fido's circle, or that would have had clear significance for her, are used as chapter headings. These do add atmospheric depth in their own right, as Donoghue selects them on the grounds of their relevance to the chapter they begin. These snippets from conduct books, pamphlets, poems and journal articles all form a kind of archive in their own right, one which gives us fragments of Fido's world. The full significance of some of these fragments would only be intelligible to a reader with an in-depth knowledge of the early women's suffrage movement, however, and Donoghue must be aware that only a tiny minority of her readers will have that level of knowledge. A number of the chapter headings concern same-sex relationships amongst women who formed part of Fido's work or social circle. Thus anyone familiar with Victorian lesbian history would recognise the context Donoghue places Fido in from the very first start of the book, which begins with a poem by Eliza Cook to Charlotte Cushman. Elizabeth Barratt Browning described Cushman as being in a 'female marriage' with Matilda (Max) Hayes, who was a friend and colleague

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3 of the historical Fido's in the Victoria Press. The placing of this love poem between women, before
4 even the contexts page, alerts all readers to the interpretation Donoghue will offer of Fido and
5 Helen's relationship, but to the historically informed, it offers a much stronger signal. But because so
6 few readers will recognise the origin (and thus full significance of the text) of these quotations, they
7 thus function in a similar way to the misleading quotation from 'Goblin Market', teasing us by
8 offering a 'clue' but simultaneously frustrating our desire for full understanding.
9

10
11 This is a novel constructed entirely of, and around, fragments. Donoghue builds on archival traces,
12 sometimes including them unchanged in the text – this is revealed in the afterword – and sometimes
13 altering them to suit her narrative (she concentrates series of events into shorter time frames, for
14 example). This process is itself analogous to the lawyers' building and rebutting the divorce case, and
15 also to the characters' genuine confusion as to what they can remember, what is significant and
16 what not.
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18
19 Donoghue does something similar with the character of Helen's old friend Mrs Watson, who Harry
20 turns to for help when he first suspects his wife of adultery. Mrs Watson, having been dropped by
21 Helen, is keen to confirm his suspicions and pushes him to divorce Helen, engaging a spy for him,
22 taking his daughters in when he leaves her, and suggesting that they blackmail Fido into returning by
23 threatening to accuse her of lesbianism. She pursues Helen's fall with a venom that makes us
24 wonder about her motivation, and Donoghue includes just enough detail to imply that she too might
25 have fallen in love with Helen before she was rejected. However, this story is about Helen and Fido,
26 not Mrs Watson, so her story, which might also shed light on Victorian lesbianism, is not told;
27 Donoghue creates an incomplete narrative that leaves the reader in a state of confusion.
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Uncertainty as to what they actually know about themselves and about each other affects all
characters, but most interesting is question of how much Fido consciously knows about the nature
of her feelings for Helen. The sexual nature of their relationship in the 1850s is only confirmed in the
last pages of the novel, and then only because Helen, rather brutally, demands money from Fido.

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2
3 Helen has been left penniless by the divorce, and comes to Fido for help as “[she] was the first
4 [person she broke her marriage vows with], after all” (*The Sealed Letter* 387) Fido’s response to
5 being faced, openly, with the sexual nature of her feelings for Helen is to find that language lets her
6
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10 down:

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13 “ It was ... not at all the same thing’. The silence stretches like a rope on the verge of
14 snapping. ‘if we’ve never spoken of it, it’s because words would only distort it. There are no’
15 ... she strains for breath. ‘The words don’t fit.’ Helen shrugs impatiently. (*The Sealed Letter*
16
17
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20 388)

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22
23 When no-one answers Helen’s letters, she says it is as though her words “seem to evaporate from
24 the page”, and that she has become “quite insubstantial, a woman of glass. An untouchable...” (*The*
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When no-one answers Helen’s letters, she says it is as though her words “seem to evaporate from the page”, and that she has become “quite insubstantial, a woman of glass. An untouchable...” (*The Sealed Letter* 217). This is a somewhat paradoxical and manipulative plea, as it is directed at Fido, in a letter, the apparent artlessness of which – it ends “[t]his will be my last attempt. If ever you loved me -” – takes advantage of the form she claims she cannot use. Helen has realised that if her words are not heard, she cannot manipulate, and has become powerless, or will if this final attempt fails. As Fido thought as she gave evidence in court, to speak words which are recorded is to witness, and without a witness visibility is impossible. The real Helen Codrington, Donoghue tells us in her concluding ‘Author’s Note’, did vanish – nothing is known of her life after the trial, even the date of her death is uncertain. The fictional Helen is quite right to think that she must speak, and be heard, to survive.

The final silence, which closes the book, comes from Harry, perhaps surprisingly, rather than Helen. The last sentence of the book, which describes Fido breaking the seal on Harry’s letter, and opening it, is “the page is blank” (*The Sealed Letter* 389). Paradoxically, of course, Donoghue’s pages are far from blank; this is a text which prevents Fido from slipping into the vacuum of memory she has – consciously or unconsciously – apparently taken refuge in. The text undoes and asserts itself simultaneously, frustrating a lesbian readership’s postmemorial desire for a knowable past, one in

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3 which they might see images of their contemporary selves, and reflects their desire for this effective,
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5 affective history back at them as it does so. The novel calls the attention of those looking to fiction
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7 to fill the 'empty [lesbian] archive', as Traub calls it, back to their own desire for this history; it defies
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9 the gaps in the historical record by writing into the silence, but, by using metafictional techniques to
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11 prevent the reader from accepting the story as 'the truth', gives historiographic metafiction a
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13 political recharge, drawing our attention to the gaps in the archive, and to our own desire for history
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15 – a move from the effective to the affective which shifts the grounds of our enquiries firmly back to
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17 ourselves. This story about witnessing refuses the reader tidy answers, leaving us with an
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19 assemblage of fragments which serves as a 'cautionary tale' rather than a sensation novel, warning
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21 the unwary seeker of a queer family tree of the temptations of seeing the past as a mirror of the
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23 present.
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