Loser Lesbians: Failure in *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*

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Prelude

1 Sarah Waters's work stirs me up; her novels and their filmic adaptations attract and repel me in nearly equal measure. I have engaged with them for over a decade now and each time I do so, I find myself wondering why works like *Affinity* (novel 1999, film 2008) and *Fingersmith* (novel 2002, film 2005) ooze aggression, duplicity, and violence while daringly – and admirably, I would suggest – inserting lesbians into an imagined version of the Victorian era that so completely denied their existence. I find both the narratives and their characters unruly, spiteful, and defiant – by which I mean to say I love them – and I am regularly confounded by their refusal to tell the story the liberal, progress-minded part of me wishes to hear. They present an authenticity – I would say 'truth,' but the pitfalls are too obvious and unavoidable – that resonates with, and disconcerts, me. This 'authenticity,' as I term Waters's frequently unflattering, unresolved, unappealing depiction of lesbians, routinely portrays them as cruel, conniving, crass individuals bent upon securing their own survival, furthering their social position and power, and eschewing loyalty for all others. This is not to say that I am some sunny-dispositioned academic seeking tales that deliver a narrative wherein sexual minorities band together in solidarity to form a community and combat the heteronormative hierarchy. If I am completely honest, though, I resent Waters slightly for resisting that impulse to improve so completely, though I admire her restraint. We get too much of Hollywood, Americanized 'happy endings' these days; especially since our lived experiences rarely resemble such frippery. Waters foils our expectations on the page and the screen; she forces us to interrogate our desires and leaves me, for one, feeling vaguely insecure.

2 I have long wanted to say something about Waters, though more frequently I wanted to shout them. I engaged in dialogues with an imagined Waters – much as I would with a lover who has angered me – wherein I demanded to know why her lesbians lie to one another to such cruel effect, why they perpetrate violence against one another. "Why do these lesbians have no fathers?" I imagined demanding of Waters should I ever meet her, and then following up with "does the Victorian world even matter here, aren't you just writing about the contemporary world cloaked in velvet gowns?" I read all the Waters-related articles and interviews wherein great thinkers analyze the neo-Victorian novel, their relation to Victorian criminal discourses (Gamble), intersubjectivity (Madsen), historiography (Boehm), and, of course, postmodernism (Costantini), and feminism (Kaplan), even ones that investigate the architecture of Milbank (Armitt and Gamble) – all excellent, enlightening – and yet not one of them quells the sick discomfort I frequently feel when I encounter Selina Dawes, Margaret Prior, Sue Trinder, and Maud Lilly, among others. As interesting and potentially satisfying academically as the aforementioned investigations prove, they still left me wanting an explanation for my visceral reaction. I wanted to understand my unwillingness to embrace the painful authenticity of Waters's construction of lesbianism. The answer, I argue, is that we must engage with Waters's narratives as ones of queer failure, rich with negative potential for scuttling normativity and dismantling schemas of queer progress.

Only Connect

3 My Waters problem started with E. M. Forster and found some resolution with J. Jack Halberstam, a queer crew to be certain. I intend this essay as both literary analysis, personal exploration, and a proposal for a mode of reading that embraces the inherent

negativity in Waters's authenticity. I originally embarked on this study imagining an analysis of the texts using Marilyn R. Farwell's theories about "spaces of sameness" as a frame for examining what I saw as a lesbian genealogy rooted in a violent matriarchy capable of fostering, but indifferent to sustaining, lesbian desire and sex. While I think the idea has merit, I also kept thinking of *Maurice* and Forster's insistence upon sending the titular character and his gamekeeper lover, Alec, into the Greenwood so that they might forge a life wherein their kind might be accepted and find fulfillment. I have published elsewhere about this ending and its role as a model of queer community formation, in addition to its ability to inspire subsequent authors who share a similar impulse to imagine a world which contains spaces for queer people to thrive. Forster's solution to Maurice and Alec's problem, however, I recalled, had unsettled me in a similar, if less academic, manner in my early 20s. I found it improbable and contrived; I later discovered that many critics level the same criticism at the novel. In addition, as a closeted queer kid at a tiny Midwestern liberal arts college in the mid-90s, I did not thrill at the assertion that I had to abandon all society in order to discover a place for myself. Years later, I wanted to connect Waters's insertion of lesbian narrative into her imagination of the Victorian era to Forster's project because I imagined each telling a version of the same story, the endgame of which was to forge an imagined space – intellectual, artistic, quasi-historical – for queer folks. The problem, as it turns out, is that both Forster's and Waters's narratives, despite their respective merits, present scenarios in which queer folks must either flee or commit criminal acts and endure/perpetrate physical and emotional violence to survive. At least I believed that was a problem; it turns out the problem was my own perspective and the lens of progress through which I was attempting to read.

4 Only a few pages into *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), J. Halberstam convinced me it was time to shift my frame of reference. Interrogating everything from animated films to the erotics of Nazi Germany, Halberstam forcefully argues that

> *The Queer Art of Failure* dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we currently live. In certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. (2)

Could it be, I wondered, that Waters's *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* might be better understood using such a principle? I had long fought my political, and admittedly emotional, response to these novels; a response that demanded a resolution of redemption, full of progress. I wanted a model that might provide some insight into how to improve the difficulties queer people face in the contemporary world, and baselessly I assumed that was what Waters wanted to deliver. No matter how I tried to 'spin' them, though, I ended up in a world that I found ugly and treacherous, not unlike the one I currently inhabit with antiqueer 'religious freedom' legislation and hate crimes like the mass shooting in Orlando adding up each day. And yet there is also something captivating in Waters's worlds (and perhaps my own, too). Indeed, I felt I was being held captive by a mode of representation that I consider significant, one that hearkens to earlier narrative traditions about lesbians wherein things end badly – from *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) to the salacious pulp novels of the 50s like *The Fear and the Guilt* (1954) – but that manages to establish, perhaps even promote, a formidable agency and perseverance absent from those earlier narratives wherein the characters appeared to receive retribution for their so-called aberrance. Waters's lesbians endure betrayal, violence, poverty, and loneliness, among other things, but they are not destroyed or perhaps even diminished, ultimately; their failure propels them forward defiantly. Prodding at the nature of failure, Halberstam asserts,

> Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (3)

Using Halberstam's assertion of failure as a potentially fertile state of being, I contend that *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*, through depictions of lesbians enduring interpersonal violence, dysfunctional (and illegitimate) families, and unstable and/or unsuccessful relationships, shoehorns lesbian existence into an era curiously silent on the subject without falling prey to the temptation to glorify, valorize, or redeem lesbianism after staking a space for them. In short, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* claim space for lesbians surviving, though not succeeding, in the Victorian era at a century's remove – valiantly proclaiming "We exist!" – while staunchly refusing to present prettified, politically efficacious tales of them as a unified, community-minded group who are victims of a world that will not acknowledge their existence, let alone accept them. Halberstam says it best when discussing masochism and passivity, but I think her words prove just as applicable to Waters's narratives:

> I refuse triumphalist accounts of gay, lesbian, and transgender history that necessarily reinvest in robust notions of success and succession. In order to inhabit the bleak territory of failure we sometimes have to write and acknowledge dark histories, histories within which the subject collaborates with rather than opposes oppressive regimes and dominant ideology. (23)

And so, ignoring the lust we have been taught to nurture for redemption, we must accept representation in the form it comes and quit squinting for, and/or reading in, redemption. We must stop contriving that with which we are presented.

Who's Your Daddy?

5 Waters's representation of families in both *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* defies our contemporary mania for positivity to great effect. Halberstam assures us that "Relieved of the obligation to keep smiling through chemotherapy or bankruptcy, the negative thinker can use the experience of failure to confront the gross inequalities of everyday life" (4). Indeed, Waters's world affords such an opportunity by refusing to offer any explanation or justification for the existence of lesbians, presenting families that would be appraised as 'broken' by virtually any standard today. Abusive mothers, non-existent fathers, and lecherous, abusive relatives unapologetically abound – no one proves trustworthy or stable in either novel – highlighting the meritlessness of our culture's long-standing fixation upon the so-called traditional family and refusing to offer an origin or causation narrative for lesbian existence.

6 While readers may fantasize about Margaret Prior's recently deceased father and the nature of her nuclear family while it remained intact, clues abound that the situation never resembled the picture of idyllic Victorian domesticity. Margaret, functioning as her father's helpmeet, appears to have taken on what would have been considered a masculine role in helping with his research and writing. In his absence, she seems at once aimless and yet more free to pursue her own desire. Her mother proves intent upon managing her unwieldy daughter with the aid of drugs: "Mother came, half an hour ago, to bring me my dose. I told her I should like to sit a little longer, that I wished she would leave the bottle with me so I might take it later—but no, she wouldn't do that. I am 'not quite well enough', she said. Not 'for that'. Not yet." (30). We also discover that Margaret has proven herself a failure – and a *de facto* criminal – by attempting to commit suicide. Finally, her family situation is further complicated by her failed romantic overtures with Helen, her love object and now sister-in-

law. We learn of this now-defunct relationship early on, which sets the tone for the dysfunctional but physically intact Prior household when Margaret's locket goes missing:

> I do not care if Ellis broke it, or if the dust-man's sweet-heart has it—she might keep the locket, though I had it from Pa. There are a thousand things, in this house, to remind me of my father. It is the curl of Helen's hair I am afraid for, that she cut from her own head and said I must keep, while she still loved me. I am only afraid of losing that—for God knows! I've lost so much of her already. (91)

The ideal middle-class Victorian family, Waters suggests through her characterization of Margaret, never existed – even if it appeared to – and while Margaret is miserable to the point of self-destruction, alienated among, but bound to, her relatives, her existence as a lesbian goes without question. If anything, her stern facial expressions and icy demeanor towards her entire family underlines for viewers that she feels little connection with any of them, including the father they repeatedly assert she cannot quit mourning. In fact, when Theophilus, her fiancé, suggests they might continue her father's scholarship as a mutual endeavor, she makes quite clear that she had worked on the projects during his lifetime only out of a sense of obligation and held no wish to continue doing so. Margaret understands the conventions of Victorian respectability and acquiescing to the patriarch, but upon his death she begins to edit the narrative to suit her own desires.

7 Sue Trinder's family exists outside Victorian respectability from the start. Throughout the course of the novel we learn that identity in this world is fluid and that Maud and Sue function somewhat interchangeably in a dizzying narrative wherein fathers appear not to exist and mothers are absent, dead, and/or masquerading as another. Something as simple as slipping on one's employer's elegant seafoam gown can erase one's identity, at least temporarily. In this world, one's mother easily becomes another's, as with Sue and Maud, and children function as capital we learn from Mrs. Sucksby, who declares, "I should like to farm infants" (14). Origins and root causes prove indiscoverable here; we cannot discern the

reasons for Sue's or Maud's desires or existence. Early on we encounter Sue's self-narrative about her own life:

> I liked to hear them say it. Who wouldn't? But the fact is—and I don't care who knows it, now—the fact is, I was not brave at all. For to be brave about a thing like that, you must first be sorry. And how could I be sorry, for someone I never knew? I supposed it was a pity my mother had ended up hanged; but, since she *was* hanged, I was glad it was for something game, like murdering a miser over his plate, and not for something very wicked, like throttling a child. (12)

For Sue and Maud both, mothers are failures, not the angelic matriarchs depicted by Coventry Patmore and so many others in the period. They are lunatics, criminals, and grifters. They show up on screen looking dirty, disheveled, and disgusting; they embody some nightmarish incarnation of maternal power. In this world, the family and its environs become the site of confusion, unknowing – such as Maud laboring tirelessly in her Uncle's library without realizing it is replete with pornography – and fear rather than the bastion of safety and moral rectitude so frequently cited as the Victorian achievement. Waters's worlds are chockablock with blind spots, which *Fingersmith* reminds us of frequently with moments like Maud's first encounter with the brass hand embedded on her uncle's library floor insisting that no one – except he, of course – pass further. Knowledge and information are strictly controlled in these narratives and no one can see clearly, not even viewers who are easily tripped up by the labyrinthine plot twists played out on the screen.

Girl Fight!

8 As if difficult and unstable family relationships were not enough for Waters's lesbian protagonists to contend with, they also face various forms of interpersonal violence – both physical and psychical – from their love objects. Facing the dissolution of her romantic attachment to Helen, her now sister-in-law, in *Affinity*, Margaret Prior decides to become a

"Lady Visitor" to Milbank, a prison for women inmates. Fulfilling what has become a somewhat clichéd role for the needy, wayward woman who seeks love from a prisoner, Margaret falls in love with Selina Dawes, an inmate convicted of fraud for her role as a spiritualist medium. The two hatch a plan to spring Selina from Millbank and abscond together, in an odd parody of the Forster plot of escape and renewal. Near the time of her escape, the relationship reaches its fever-pitch as Selena demands,

> 'Not sure? Look at your own fingers. Are you not sure, if they are yours? Look at any part of you—it might be me that you are looking at! 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*—that is a simple thing to say, the sort of thing your sister might say to her husband. I could say that in a prison letter, four times a year. But my spirit does not love yours—it is *entwined* with it. Our flesh does not love: our flesh is the same, and longs to leap to itself. It must do that, or wither! *You are like me*. You have felt what it's like, to leave your life, to leave your self—to shrug it from you, like a gown. They caught you, didn't they, before the self was quite cast off? They caught you, and they pulled you back—you didn't want to come.' (275)

While their love always comes across as obsessive, if not unhealthy – we witness Margaret cuddled up to Selina's prison-shorn ponytail as a surrogate for human contact – we ultimately learn that it is also a ruse, along the lines of the séances that got Dawes convicted. Selina, in cahoots with Vigers, Margaret's maid, swindles Margaret out of her personal wealth, wardrobe, and passage out of England. She goes so far as to steal her identity, running off with Vigers, her lover, in spiced-up Forsterian style, to live together, though not in the Greenwood. As the tale winds down, Margaret is left broken, a failure; yet, her life has meaning as she has thrown off middle-class Victorian respectability and defied social convention. She will not marry, nor will she be silenced. We watch her imagined drowning as she sinks the last remnants of her former self and marshals her strength to confront the world more aggressively. Her downfall leaves intact lesbian desire tinged with a strong strain of unrequited – not to mention self-destructive, perhaps even delusional – love, suggesting

that not even the noblest of emotions are free of the potential for failure. Vigers's final line to Selina, "'Remember,'… 'whose girl you are'" ends, though it does not settle, the narrative with its unnerving proclamation of ownership and domination – Vigers even insists on holding her cigarette to Selina's lips rather than acting autonomously – suggesting that their escape will prove solely physical and that jealousy and control issues will plague the relationship (352).

9 The relationship which coheres at the end of *Fingersmith* suggests a slightly better chance of survival, though it boasts as great a history of failure. Switched at birth for the purpose of pulling a long con, Maud and Sue engage in a shell game of deception and interpersonal violence that results in Sue's institutionalization at Maud and Gentleman's instigation, and Maud's captivity in Mrs. Sucksby's house, all in the service of attempting to capture the fortune of her Uncle, a bibliographer of pornography. About Maud we learn early on that "The bitch knew everything. She had been in on it from the start" (184). Through a mind-boggling series of twists and about-faces, Waters weaves a narrative wherein desire may exist as the sole point of authenticity even though self-interest and greed frequently overtake it. Even so, Sue repeatedly complicates our understanding of her desire, noting early on in an analysis of her response to Maud, "*It's like you love her,* I thought" (144). Her lack of certainty suggests a failure to conceive of herself as a lesbian or to trust her own feelings and her inner monologue further serves to complicate the nature of her feelings for Maud: "Kissing Maud, however, was not like kissing her. It was like kissing the darkness" (149). Safety does not exist in this world and sharing a sense of similarity, if not identity, fails to establish solidarity or common purpose. Feelings transpire as if from a distance, and are always regarded with suspicion, as though they might be masking darker,

more nefarious impulses. Even witnessing Maud's sham marriage to Gentleman, not realizing she was enabling her own commitment, Sue observes,

> I stood and held my poor, bent twig of honesty, and watched Maud standing at Gentleman's side, holding tight on to hers. I had kissed her. I had lain upon her. I had touched her with a sliding hand. I had called her a pearl. She had been kinder to me than anyone save Mrs Sucksby; and she had made me love her, when I meant only to ruin her. She was about to be married, and was frightened to death. And soon no-one would love her, ever again. (165)

Because the narrative unfolds through a series of flashbacks, it is difficult to know at this point whether Sue's final words – that no one would ever love Maud again – serve as a recollection of her thoughts at the time or as an assertion of her lack of love, if not a dearth of physical desire, for her.

10 For Maud's part, her goals are always fashioned by self-interest, it would seem. Her initial mission is to find a route out of her uncle's house, an uncle whom "For to Priapus and Venus he has devoted me, as other girls are apprenticed to the needle or the loom" (211), she establishes. Once she escapes with Gentleman, who amply demonstrates the irony of his nickname, she aids in the snare that institutionalizes Sue and becomes bate in the larger trap engineered by Mrs. Sucksby. Surviving a byzantine elaboration of plot twists, both women manage to free themselves and Maud retreats to Briar to write the pornography for which her uncle had apprenticed her – a failed move by any standard of the era both because of her sex and the nature of the profession. Once she makes her escape, though, she makes no effort to seek out Sue, enacting her earlier assertion that she "could not want a lover, more than…freedom" (253) and raising the specter of the possibility that her work as a pornographer – a potentially lucrative failure – holds greater importance to her than a love match. In fact, all evidence suggests that Maud's conception of love bends toward a kind of self-obsessed sadomasochism, most visible in their moments of physical intimacy which

always verge on violent. When defending her decision to use Maud she observes, "And so you see it is love—not scorn, not malice; only love—that makes me harm her" (302). While this assertion and her behavior throughout the novel certainly do not suggest a cuddly, Hallmark-sentimental relationship, her unconventional desire and willingness to inflict suffering upon her beloved represent a variety of love or obsession which few would laud although I suspect many have experienced. It proves difficult, I would suggest, to imagine the possibility of future safety and happiness – both in the relationship and in the larger world – because of the couple's history and their penchant for deception and violence a la Vigers and Selina. Nevertheless, we're left with an image of Maud writing her own sexuality, to which she gives Sue access: "Her silk skirts rose in a rush, then sank. She put the lamp upon the floor, spread the paper flat; and began to show me the words she had written" (582). While access of some variety exists between the women, danger lurks still with their fidelity focused on different marks and their self-interest carefully preserved.

11 The mistake in the cases of *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* is to read them as the 'triumphalist' accounts against which Halberstam inveighs. These are not great romances, nor fairytale endings; they are visually scrumptious in their excess and even decay. They depict various failures: pain-ridden, destructive romantic relationships; untrustworthy, manipulative families; and harsh, treacherous communities. It is only by 'failing' in this world, by remaining single or at least self-centered, by committing crimes and betrayals, by exploiting one's self and others (even of one's own kind), that lesbians may exist and stake claim to a space which previously denied their existence. The results are unconventional narratives of survival that are about as far away from a feel-good tale as one can get: we cannot easily admire the characters, their choices, nor their destinations. The key, however, is recognizing that engaging with a narrative with these goals in mind is the problem and it

colors our understanding of the message. Waters provides us with characters whose lives seem real – if historically unverifiable – because they confront profound disappointment, danger, and deception. Theirs are not the lives we would choose; they are ugly, frightening, and disorienting on the screen. These are not stories we laud as emancipatory or even flattering. Rather, they are a catalog of failures gathered to demonstrate the antinormative power of non-conformity, of the sometimes transformative power of unconventionality. Ultimately, they present marginalized people triumphant only in continuing to exist, in defying the pervasive message that they should not, especially with the methods they adopt. They are what Halberstam identifies as "marginalized subjects":

> Marginalized subjects in particular tend to be situated in an active relationship with the dilemma of betrayal, if only because normative models of citizenship situate the minoritarian subject as a kind of double agent, one who must be loyal to the nation but cannot fail to betray it. The queer and feminist dimensions of disloyalty and betrayal open onto a different kind of politics, a politics which, at various times […] comes to be associated with masochism, unbecoming, and negativity. (163-64)

In the end, it seems, masochism, unbecoming, and negativity, are all living and lively parts of contemporary queer experience, as we continue to bargain for equality – not daring to mention justice – and frequently witness the results as something far less redemptive or satisfying. Advances have been made, certainly – many cite same-sex marriage and civil unions in Western countries as the prime example of this – but we are still inundated with hatred, vitriol, and violence and this does not always just crop up from outside the queer community. One need only consider a case like that of now-convicted murdered Elliot Morales[1] to see strains of Waters's worlds resting palimpsestically over our century. And perhaps, in the end, what they have to teach us is that we continue on in – not in spite of – failure, violence, selfishness and to assert that, in the final analysis, that our world is

[1] See http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/10/nyregion/elliot-morales-convicted-of-hate-crime-murder-in-west-village-shooting.html?_r=0

predominantly otherwise, highlights the much larger failure at play here. Maybe it's not the Forsterian Greenwood filled with promise and potential that we need, but rather a Watersian mirror reflecting our failures to help us better recognize and interrogate ourselves.

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