Seeking Correspondence through Possessions: The Brontës' Lives and Stories in Deborah Lutz's *The Brontë Cabinet* (2015) and Catherine Lowell's *The Madwoman Upstairs* (2016)

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Abstract
This article offers an examination of biographical and literary approaches to rereading and rewriting the Brontës, particularly the way in which the figures of Charlotte Brontë and Jane Eyre rematerialise in contemporary fiction. It considers the way that this presence is figured through the material legacy of the Brontës, focusing on two recent works – Catherine Lowell's *The Madwoman Upstairs* (2016) and Deborah Lutz's *The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects* (2015). In Lowell's novel, Brontë relics represent an association with death and loss, the material object emptied out and carrying the aura of emptiness and grief. Conversely, in her biography, Lutz uses the same objects to summon a lived sense of the Brontës. The two texts, one non-fiction, the other a novel, are characterised by a fascination with the lives and works of the Brontës and an interplay between fanfiction and literary criticism relating to the context of their writing and biographies. Both books summon the ghosts of the Brontës through depiction of the sisters' possessions and their writing, as well as acts of writing in *Jane Eyre* (1847), in order to explore the individual stories the objects tell as well as the ones they conceal.

Keywords: Charlotte Brontë, possessions, fanfiction, *Jane Eyre*, Catherine Lowell, Deborah Lutz, neo-Victorian, reading, objects, writing desks.

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Charlotte Brontë's iconic work *Jane Eyre* (1847) has become so embedded in the contemporary imagination of the nineteenth century that many of the novel's motifs and themes have become almost synonymous with works that reference the Victorian period. This is true not only of the novel's content but also of the architecture of the novel itself, its plots, characters, structure and narrative style. The novel's apparently boundless influence means that, as Vanessa Zoltan notes in *On Eyre*, "even if you haven't read it, you've read or seen its inheritors, you've eaten its fruits, its DNA is *in* you" (Zoltan 2021:

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5:50-6:02, added emphasis). This very ubiquity means that recent contemporary works, both critical and fictional, that explicitly, rather than passively, engage with the work and legacy of the Brontës are drawn to concrete objects and the material legacy of the Brontës' writing and lives. It seems that summoning the Brontës by alluding to their work or referencing an object they handled or owned is in some way a signifier of authenticity and affective value. Inevitably, these objects have their own narratives. This article explores the intensely realised and imagined engagement with the work of the Brontës in two neo-Victorian texts. It considers the ghostly role of the Brontës' writing – manifested in quotation and allusion and in an exaggerated focus on their original manuscripts and writing materials. There has always been speculation on the possible fate of some of the Brontës' lost manuscripts and what further insight into their world they might offer.[1] Catherine Lowell's novel *The Madwoman Upstairs* (2016) explores the pernicious effect of a direct bloodline relationship on its central character and the terrible pressure of inheriting a legacy (which turns out to be an unpublished manuscript) from the Brontës, while Deborah Lutz's biography, *The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects* (2015), traces the lives of the Brontës through the objects they owned and venerated. Both works are characterised by a fascination with the lives and works of the Brontës and an acute awareness of the deep and generative interplay between fanfiction and literary criticism relating to the context of their writing and the stories of their lives. Both books summon, as so many others have done, the ghosts of the Brontës through their possessions and their writing. This article will focus on the writing and writing materials described in both these books in order to explore the nature of the Brontë histories and influence they inscribe.

1. Brontë Biography and Brontë Fiction

The conflation of biography and fiction in the reception of *Jane Eyre* was, it would seem, present from the work's first appearance. Following its publication, Elizabeth Gaskell writes in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), "The whole reading-world of England was in a ferment to discover the unknown author […] Conjecture as to the authorship ran about like wildfire" (Gaskell 1975: 325-326). Ever since the publication of Gaskell's *Life*, and even before then, the Brontës' lives and stories have remained a contested site of meaning and misreading. The iconic status of *Jane Eyre* as an apparently autobiographical text – it is of course subtitled as "An Autobiography" – is

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blurred with the real biography of its author, not least in the *Life*, which attempted to account for the novel's coarseness with a description of the Brontës' isolation and of the harsh environment in which they grew up.[2]

The blurring of the lives and works of the Brontës was first introduced to a broad readership by Gaskell, although it was also rife in contemporary reviews of their books. It has thus frequently resulted in a fixation on their material legacy as well as on their literary output. Visitors began to arrive in Haworth from the 1850s, hoping for a glimpse of Charlotte Brontë and a chance to hear her father preach. When Gaskell and her daughter Meta visited Patrick Brontë in 1860, they found him in his bedroom "sitting propped up in a clean nightgown", and he told them that he had so many applications for Charlotte's handwriting that "he was obliged to cut up her letters into strips of a line each" (Barker 1994: 819). Requests for anecdotes and souvenirs continued to besiege those who had known the Brontës; public interest in their lives continued to grow and the Brontë Society was founded in 1893, while the first Museum opened in 1895. This appetite for stories about the family, and for samples of the sisters' writing, both scraps of handwriting and lost manuscripts, rapidly became part of Brontë mythology. It led to the generation of forgeries, sold by the unscrupulous bibliophile T. J. Wise who bought manuscripts from both Charlotte's friend, Ellen Nussey, and her widower, Arthur Bell Nicholls, and broke them up and sold them on the open market, leading to the loss of many of the letters. He also split up manuscripts by Branwell Brontë and sold them as Charlotte's.[3] The hunger for work by the Brontës, for the possibility of an extension of their writing has also led to manifold rewritings of the siblings' novels and to the creation of works in which they feature as characters. Fanfiction of work by the Brontës, in particular *Jane Eyre*, which subtly or dramatically rework the storylines, revisit the characters, change the endings, or substantially alter the narrative and framing, has been produced in increasing volume since the novel's first publication.[4] Fanfiction thus answers a profound need to create an imaginative expansion and extension of the scope and reach of the Brontës' novels and lives.[5]

As Anne Jamison argues in *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World*, The Brontës, were themselves early proponents of fanfiction in their stories about the Duke of Wellington published in tiny home-made books that emulated *Blackwood's Magazine* (Jamison 2013: 33). Jamison points out that Jane Austen, the Brontës, George Eliot and William Makepeace Thackeray

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all began their writing lives with homages to beloved authors, a practice she compares to fanfiction:

> Is this the story of fanfiction, its path to legitimacy and respect? The literary apprenticeship of young novelists learning their future craft, cutting their teeth on the worlds of others, until they grow up and stand on their own two feet?" (Jamison 2013: 33)

While Jamison notes that "none of these earlier literary practices are *exactly* the equivalent of what we understand as fanfiction today", she argues that this is because "our understanding of the key relationships – those that exist variously among writer, written, reader, publisher, object published and source" have since altered (Jamison 2013: 35). She explores the idea that "what never disappears, is the writerly habit of writing from sources. Writers have always entered into and intervened in familiar stories and styles and collaborated on authorship through discussion or other forms of influence" (Jamison 2013: 35). According to Jamison, despite such eclectic sources and diverse authorship, credit in mainstream publishing is usually ascribed to a single author. Fanfiction too, in spite of its transparently collaborative processes, also continues that tradition. The difference is that fanfiction does not attempt to conceal its origins. Fanwriting and the neo-Victorian works considered in this essay thus display a marked equivalence. Both Lutz and Lowell dwell at length on the inspiration and influence of the Brontës' writing and lives in explorations that also bear all the hallmarks of a richly imagined and immersive neo-Victorianism.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is regarded as a foundational text for both fanfiction writers and neo-Victorian critics and for similar reasons. In his 'Foreword' to *Fic*, Lev Grossman describes how Rhys "spoke back to Brontë (Grossman 2013: xi), while Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, in *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty First Century*, describe Rhys's book as "a conscious articulation of the desire to re-write, re-vision and challenge the nineteenth century's assumptions and dominance" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 8). Both fanfiction and neo-Victorian narratives therefore offer the impossible but tantalising possibility of contradicting and arguing with the authors of the past – both those who

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wrote the books, like *Jane Eyre*, that continue to haunt us and those who represented and shaped Victorian attitudes and influence.

The conflation of biography and narrative in contemporary re-imaginings of the Brontës seems to exemplify the way in which the "security of coherent narrative structures and textual order as represented by the nineteenth century" might address the "contemporary fragmentation of narrative structure" in historical narratives (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 11). In a discussion of how to resolve the differences and similarities between the Victorians and contemporary readers, Valerie Traub posits that we will "neither find in the past a mirror image of ourselves nor that the past is so utterly alien that we will find nothing usable in its fragmentary traces" (Traub 2001: 262). The turn towards the biographies of the Victorian writers we constantly revisit suggests a different way of encountering these stories, the construction of a different way of experiencing that profound nostalgia that reading and rereading the Brontës seems always to summon. Lutz and Lowell figure this as a kind of haunting, a discovery of the self in the process of rereading texts that are dear to readers and to which they return, again and again. Lutz, for example, states that when reading the Brontë novels she feels "somehow, *known* by their heroines" (Lutz 2015: xx, original emphasis). Meanwhile Lowell's narrator, Samantha Whipple, describes her father's disappointment that "I would read a book and think of it only as a book rather than as a part of myself – something that I could live and breathe" (Lowell 2016: 151).

Biography thus constitutes a literary form that uncannily mirrors the life it reflects back. Its focus on a real, once living, subject ensures that it must frame a precise timeline with a beginning, middle and end which has material and literal links to identifiable objects and places. These exist in the world inhabited by the reader who can therefore travel to locations, see views and handle objects experienced by the biographical subject. In a sense then, the form embodies the reality of the world it attempts to capture, as well as that of its subject and author.

For Cora Kaplan, the resurgence of biography is closely allied to the return of focus on the subject, so that "the romantic ideology of the self" is once again claimed and owned by the "literary imagination" (Kaplan 2007: 50). In her view, theories of the 'death of the author' are countered by the deployment of authorial voice as a central narrative strategy for many

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Victorian writers with the result that "the threat has breathed new life into the idea of the author" (Kaplan 2007: 71). It is at this point that fanfiction and neo-Victorian critiques begin to part company. The fetishization of authorship is more usually jettisoned in fanfiction in favour of a collaborative fan approach to create new fandoms, alternate scenarios, pairings and textual worlds. Nevertheless, as we have seen, neo-Victorian texts also foreground their intertextuality and literary origins.

2. *The Madwoman Upstairs*

Catherine Lowell's novel *The Madwoman Upstairs* presents its heroine Samantha Whipple as an explicitly unreliable narrator who is also the last remaining descendant of the Brontës. She is sent to study literature at Oxford, by an eccentric will left by her father, ostensibly to search for a mysterious family inheritance described only as "The Warnings of Experience" (Lowell 2016: 18). The novel engages with the legacy of the Brontës in numerous ways, from its title, which references the character Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*, to its very last line, "But on this point, I think I have said sufficient" (Lowell 2016: 339), which repeats the last line of Anne Brontë's novel, *Agnes Grey* (1847). *The Madwoman Upstairs* explicitly places its heroine within the world of a Brontë novel, drawing on storylines, images, characters and landscapes associated with their work. It also summons the figures of the Brontës as real people whom she has viewed, throughout her childhood, as friends and confidantes. Her family relationship to them gives a proprietorial and authoritative tone to Samantha's accounts of the Brontës and gives a sense of authenticity to her recollections. Samantha doesn't just *feel* as though she knows the three writers, as so many writers and readers do. Due to her family connection to the Brontës she *believes* she knows them. Samantha describes the Brontës as family members with whom she shares a deeply strange and isolated childhood, with an absent mother and a stern and highly eccentric father. The novel continually incorporates excerpts and quotes from the Brontës' writing into the narrative, through the depictions of Samantha's English literature lessons and essays whilst in Oxford and the recollections of her eccentric close reading sessions with her late father. The quotations bring the prose and voice of the Brontës into vivid relief against the bizarre and puzzling mystery story in which the narrator finds herself.

From the beginning of the novel the reader is provided with copious clues that the narrator is in fact operating within the confines of a

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Brontë novel. Described as an orphan (her mother is still living but mostly absent) Samantha appears to be frozen in a state of grief and largely self-imposed isolation as a result of her father's death in a fire in his library. His demise references the death of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* as well as the fraught politics of what and how one reads, while also alluding to the suppressed narratives which *The Madwoman Upstairs* engages with. On the first page of the novel, as Samantha arrives at "Old College, Oxford", we see the heroine placed at the top of a tower "originally used to quarantine victims of plague" (Lowell 2016: 1). Inside her room, the walls are "covered in peeling red paint", and in the corner is, "a horrible painting of a woman, who, by the look of it, was halfway through drowning" (Lowell 2016: 1). This first scene, and in particular the portrait, offers multiple clues to the alert Brontë reader. The red room in which Jane Eyre was imprisoned as a child, the portrait of a drowning figure which Rochester sees amongst Jane's sketches, as well as the motif of the lonely, estranged and highly vulnerable foreign woman placed on the highest floor of the tower are all evocative of Charlotte Brontë's classic text. However, Lowell's novel also contains multiple clues about the ways in which this narrative will unfold, raising doubts as to whether her father's legacy, "The Warnings of Experience", a theme pursued throughout the book, will be "something tangible – a Brontë treasure" or "just another one of my father's esoteric lessons" (Lowell 2016: 23).

Throughout the novel Samantha, the last living relative of the Brontës, meets with curiosity and hostile speculation about her inheritance. She states that "public speculation about the Missing Brontë Estate had reached an all-time high in the last twenty years. Its mystery incited a dangerous curiosity within the strangely large world of Brontë fanatics" (Lowell 2016: 19). Her father's response to this attention was to "leave strange trinkets all over the house, so that in case any reporter did break and enter someday they would find lots of confusing story material" (Lowell 2016: 19). Her father however,

> cared only for the novels themselves […]. *These novels are alive and all the other books are dead he would say. Do you understand?* He used to give me lessons on them, reading from the worn copies as he made incomprehensible margin notes. I'm sure he knew something the rest of the world did not. But when I'd ask him what it was, all he'd say was,

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> *Sammy, I'm just trying to teach you how to read*. (Lowell 2016: 20, original italics)

Her father reads and rereads the Brontës' books with such intensity that they come alive, invested with his own life and context. References to the stories and lives of the Brontës in neo-Victorian novels and works of fanfiction is both a haunting and a lesson in reading. This reflects the way in which the act of reading, writing and talking about writing is a framing device deployed throughout *Jane Eyre*. Scenes such as the opening one, in which her cousin punishes Jane for reading his book, are used to frame character development and to galvanise the plot. Reading any book summons all the other books and authors previously encountered by both writer and reader. For Samantha, the journey to rediscover her lost connection with the Brontë novels and the lost manuscript is also a way to rediscover her childhood love of reading and a relationship with her father. Lowell is at pains to present divergent ways of reading, reflected in the discussions about books Samantha has with her father, who venerates the Brontë books as living entities. She is offered a very different approach to reading by her tutor, a Rochester and St. John Rivers-like figure, whose research focuses on "the structural and grammatical integrity of texts and contends that a perfect novel is proof of authorial invisibility" (Lowell 2016: 13). Samantha and her tutor clash about the way in which books they discuss should or should not be read for "literal truth" or "emotional truth" (Lowell 2016: 76). The debate echoes that between (post) structural theorists and postmodernists or neo-Victorian critics, as described by Kaplan, in the dialogue juxtaposing the invisible author and the affective potency of beloved authors such as the Brontës.

The reworking of the hidden narratives of Victorian texts is central to Kaplan's reading of *Jane Eyre*. In *Victoriana*, she argues that the novel remains a classic because "its themes and rhetoric have summoned up for generations of readers the powerful politics of affect at the heart of gender and modernity" (Kaplan 2007: 7). Kaplan considers *Jane Eyre* as a "mnemic symbol", that is "a memorial or narrative that embodies and elicits a buried psychic conflict which cannot be resolved in the present" (Kaplan 2007: 7).[6] The continued encounter with the mnemic influence of Charlotte Brontë's imagination and the force of her affective voice on readers has led not only to reconstructed narratives about her life and writing but also to painstaking attempts to render visible hidden and suppressed narratives

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contained within the original text. Virginia Woolf's anxiety about Brontë's affective voice and its persuasive force presages the concerns of critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who argue that Jane Eyre's intensely-realised subjectivity comes at the cost of other subjectivities and agencies, namely Bertha Mason and the 'Othered' and enslaved voices claimed and then suppressed by the narrator in her so-called "[a]utobiography".[7]

There are numerous "Eastern allusions" in *Jane Eyre* (Brontë 1999: 269), which serve as metaphors for the imagination and desire, and which are also linked to the materials of writing. In one of the novel's key scenes of suspense, the truth of Jane's identity is discovered by her cousin St. John Rivers, when he notices her signature on a rough piece of paper. Returning it to her he removes it from a "morocco pocket-book" and "held it close to my eyes; and I read, traced in Indian ink, in my own handwriting, the words 'JANE EYRE'" (Brontë 1999: 378, 381). The material of writing, paper, ink, pens and brushes carry emotional depth and resonance, revealing an intimacy between the writer and the reader that exposes their inner thoughts and desires. In *Jane Eyre*, the material of writing can thus summon people forth to the gaze of the reader. Where before they were not visible, or merely imagined, they are brought to life, rendered vividly and emphatically real. Significantly, Jane's transition from "governess, disconnected, poor, and plain" to "rich – quite an heiress" (Brontë 1999: 161, 381) is marked by the shift in her material representation from "chalk", in a portrait made early in the novel, to Indian ink (see Brontë 1999: 161), commonly used by Victorian writers.

These uneasy accounts of the power of this first-person narrative and its hold over the reader's imagination echo the "Victorian discourse on the dangers of indulgent novel reading", especially on "the woman reader" (Karl 2014a: 41). Rosa Karl argues that taboos surrounding such intense identification with the characters and places of fictional worlds have lost their hold precisely because of the "cultural practices of participatory fan culture" (Karl 2014a: 42). Karl, singles out Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* (2001) for discussion because of the way the novel immerses the narrator, a prolific and insatiable reader, into dynamic encounters with landscapes, scenes and characters that exist only in books. The reader navigates these worlds with such agency, and indeed authority, that key aspects of the author's imagined world can change significantly as a result. The territory is the same as that constructed by its writer but also not the same. In reading it the reader leaves

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it altered and subject to both the author's intent and their own. Ultimately this means that the reader is left free to construct "very different […] Brontës and *Jane Eyres*, as well as diverse neo-Victorian nineteenth centuries" (Karl 2014a: 45).

In seeking the real places connected to the landscapes of the books they love readers thus find themselves in the double bind of a wish to be immersed in the locations and scenes of a book driven by their profound love for the escape it offers while also longing to uncover the truth of its origins in the world of the author. This fusion of real and fictional historical sites which takes place in neo-Victorian fiction is the backdrop on which the reader projects the desire to belong in them as well as the sense of anguish that this is impossible. Karl notes that in this sense the work can be seen to function as a souvenir, with its "capacity to internalise something that is external. It allows us to participate personally in what is ontologically inaccessible" (Karl 2014a: 48). A copy of *Jane Eyre* thus functions as a portal into the past and its narratives, which the visiting reader is able to reconstruct and rewrite in order to reflect their own time and experience and to explore their connection with the Victorian narratives that shape their own life-story and understanding of it.

It seems that the intense longing invoked in readers by the beloved books written by Victorian authors begins to erode the critical distance and objectivity that a contemporary reader and critic might have brought to the encounter. Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss are distrustful of the desire by readers to reconnect with a past that is framed and constrained by the limits of the novels and subsequent biographies of long-dead authors. They point out that each time these distant imagined worlds are revisited the nuance and contextual subtlety of sketches and observations from long ago begin to fade. This summoning of a long-distant period of time risks a static reading and understanding of the repeated narrative, thus preventing a clear view of the contradictions and problems which permeate these original texts (see Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014b: 1). The reader's nostalgic desire to return – and hence for repetition – is triggered by this "dual relationship of continuity and difference (or revisitation) between 'then' and 'now'" (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014b: 4). Nevertheless, neo-Victorian texts "can offer powerful ways to work through traumatic traces of the past in British cultural memory", traces which can become more clearly delineated with each retelling (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014b: 12). This is certainly

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the case in Lowell's novel which, like many other neo-Victorian works that reference *Jane Eyre*, foregrounds the complex interplay of power, knowledge and identity that ultimately leads to loss of self-control and autonomy for Samantha, as it does for both Jane, and her alter-ego, Bertha.

In *The Madwoman Upstairs,* Lowell shows the opposing draw on Samantha to read books for the meanings they might generate and to read them in order to access the biographies and worlds of their authors. Lowell represents the obsession with finding traces of the Brontës' lives left in their writing and possessions in the sinister and rather pathetic figure of Sir John Barker. He is a former Cambridge professor, present curator of the Brontë Parsonage and Museum and also, in a final twist, the father of Samantha's tutor. It was he who coined the term "The Vast Brontë Estate" in an article accusing her father of "hoarding an enormous wealth of primary sources" (Lowell 2016: 34-35). Barker pursues Samantha throughout the novel in search of the material legacy of the Brontës that he believes she has inherited. Her father explains to Samantha that he is "a perfect example of a man who a) didn't know how to read and b) didn't know how to think" (Lowell 2016: 35). Barker echoes the real T. J. Wise and J.A. Symington, the infamous literary collectors and forgers, in his obsessive quest to acquire Brontë artefacts. Barker chooses to invest meaning, metaphoric and literal wealth in the material possessions of the Brontës rather than in their books. When Samantha visits him at the Parsonage Museum at the end of a long, fruitless quest to find her legacy and a sense of emotional connection and understanding for her father, she feels a "growing despair. Emily, Charlotte, and Anne had never seemed further away […]. This house was dead" (Lowell 2016: 262). When Samantha complains to Barker about the sterility of the museum, he answers "You read too many novels" (Lowell 2016: 263). The Parsonage and its collection of objects does not offer sanctuary or a link between Samantha, the reader, and her adoptive sisters; instead "the effort of resuscitating my relatives was exhausting. I had a feeling that Emily did not want to be awakened. Somewhere, I just knew, she was giving me the finger" (Lowell 2016: 260).

Lowell blurs the distinction between the lives and writing of the Brontës throughout this novel. There are a number of scenes that showcase this intentional elision. Samantha describes the extent to which, for her, the Brontës are real, in a scene that the reader understands to be impossible but

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compellingly recognisable. For Samantha the Brontës are literal family and friends following the death of her father:

> I still knew Charlotte, Emily, and Anne like no one should ever know anyone. I knew their shoe sizes and their height; I knew their stupid little secrets; I knew what they fought about and what they laughed about; I knew about the mole on Emily's right foot. Love always came with scars, and this was mine: the knowledge that the friends I knew best were those I had never actually met. (Lowell 2016: 21)

In Lowell's book, the Brontës' works are living, even sentient, "these novels are alive" (Lowell 2016: 20) and their affective histories appear to take precedence as a way of negotiating with the painful histories of both the reader and the writer. Brontë relics represent an association with death and loss, the material object emptied out and carrying the aura of emptiness and grief. One of the lessons of Samantha's search for the portentously named "Warnings of Experience" appears to be her discovery of how to read. In this neo-Victorian novel, becoming a good reader means being able to broker connections between the worlds of the authors you read and your own and to finding equilibrium between the two in so doing. Ultimately, it also involves accepting the absence that is bound into reading the work of a (dead) author and the compromised negotiation of biography and fiction implicit in writing oneself. At the close of the book, Samantha writes and publishes fiction, as her father and the Brontës did. As if to acknowledge this continued state of confusion and transgression between the two modes of writing, she produces "two long-form memoirs […] which lacked style and artistry and any semblance of a realistic ending" (Lowell 2016: 339).

The narrator thus self-reflexively frames the book as a "long memoir", which is also a fanfiction, paying homage to the Brontës and stepping into their shoes as she interweaves quotations, allusions and references to their lives and writing into her narrative. The novel frames this act of homage as both a compulsion and a desire, something which Samantha emphatically resists, in spite of her inclination to read and to write. The complex interconnections between the books the Brontës wrote and the books they read, the uncannily decaying manuscripts they inscribed and the ghostly

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haunting of their stories, is clear from the scene in which Samantha finally visits the parsonage. In the Brontës' playroom, the narrator finds

> a variety of mildewed books, whose varying states of dilapidation proved them to have been well used. Here were the authors and books that fashioned the Brontës' minds: Shelley, Byron. Sir Walter Scott. The Bible. To my displeasure, I did not find a single snoopworthy nook, cranny, attic or secret passageway, or even one loose floorboard. All I found was one quill, which was arranged just so on Emily's old desk, as though someone were going to come back looking for it. (Lowell 2016: 263)

In detailing Samantha's acerbic opinions of the Brontës' legacy and their material possessions that linger in the Parsonage, Lowell's book portrays the way in which Samantha, like Rhys, "spoke back" to the Brontës. Samantha exemplifies the complex and often ambivalent relationship which many other writers have expressed about the influence of the Brontës on their own writing and imagination. Samantha describes a number of her late father's lessons on the Brontës, which reflected his life's project of "deconstructing the Brontë novels" (Lowell 2016: 20). After his death she continues this work, spending "an inordinate amount of time researching the Brontës, re-creating their lives, trying to know them the way my father had – as relatives" (Lowell 2016: 20). It is an activity that, Samantha states, "came to nothing" (Lowell 2016: 20).

As if to compound this indifference, Samantha's obsession, by the time she begins her studies in Oxford, has turned to loathing. At the beginning of a chapter that gives an account of her father's lessons on Anne Brontë, she states that "*Agnes Grey* is, without question, the most boring book ever written" (Lowell 2016: 47). For Samantha,

> [r]eading the book leaves only a sense of gasping emptiness, and the disappointing feeling that Anne Brontë missed her opportunity to be truly great. The novel is about a woman who isn't allowed to speak her mind, and was written by a woman who also wasn't allowed to speak her mind. (Lowell 2016: 47)

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In spite of this, when her father's copy of *Agnes Grey* is delivered, without explanation, to her college room, she begins, at once, to read it for clues, evidence that might help her to decode her father's eccentric lessons or to offer a message from beyond the grave. The materiality of the book and all its associations with her childhood takes hold of her:

> This book – this ugly, jam-stained book – was an emblem of my childhood. It was Turkish coffee and burned pancakes. It was Shelley in the paddling pool, and the shadows of friends I once knew, conjured out of a dank, dusty literary graveyard. This book had belonged to my father. (Lowell 2016: 42)

In this moment, the fictional author thus meets the ghosts of real authors, metaphors for the memories of an invented childhood. The passage establishes a mirroring in which another loosely autobiographical work is the symbol of longing for the "shadows of friends" (Lowell 2016: 42) who are, in fact, long dead authors. The interplay between living, dead, real and fictional writers revealed in this encounter with a once cherished and coveted book establishes a visceral connection with the ghostly figures that haunt this work.

Ultimately, the search catalysed by this book leads to more mystery: there is no explanation, only another text to decipher and deconstruct. The search for the "Warnings of Experience" proves a search for a literal book, one which Samantha eventually finds hidden behind *The Governess*, the portrait which dominates her college room. The narrative also tracks the discovery and emergence of a metaphorical book, one of her "long-form memoirs", that records the search itself. The provenance of the book Samantha writes is, therefore, like the real novel she discovers, an unsettling mix of the hybridised real and fictional worlds she inhabits. The manuscript she discovers at the end of the novel, her inheritance, is "nothing but an old, dirty, disgusting, rotten old wad of paper with some illegible print inside" (Lowell 2016: 324), and ultimately neither she nor her tutor read it. It is revealed to be the diary, titled the *Warnings of Experience*, which is presented in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). This same journal is first encountered in Anne Brontë's book when it is thrown by its reclusive owner at the novel's intrusive and overly-curious narrator. The journey of discovery traced in *The Madwoman Upstairs* culminates in the revelation that

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the journal is, in fact, a literal object. Samantha's inheritance is, impossibly, Anne Brontë's journal, which Samantha discovers at the point of mental breakdown when her real and fictional worlds collide. The complex interplay between real objects and places referred to in the Brontë texts and objects exist only in the space of their fictions. This results in such a blurring that the two categories become indivisible, creating a world in which, as Samantha states in her final supervision, "the fiction is more real than reality" (Lowell 2016: 332).

3. The Alchemy of Desks

Deborah Lutz, in her biography, *The Brontë Cabinet*, uses the same objects which so repel Samantha Whipple at the Parsonage Museum to summon a lived sense of the Brontës. It is an approach which, as Claire Harman states in her shout line for the book, weaves "a kind of magic around the Brontës' possessions and evokes their lives, works, and legacies". Using the books explicitly as a mechanism by which she feels she comes to know the Brontës, Lutz echoes Samantha's intense sense of recognition and of being recognised by the Brontës' writing:

> There are few books I'd rather carry me late into the night than *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Villette*, few books whose worlds I'd rather crawl into and inhabit. I have even felt, somehow *known* by their heroines, as if they might recognise me when I enter their spheres. (Lutz 2015: xx, original emphasis)

The written word thus gives access to a sense of deep connection with the lost author; however, for Lutz this experience is deepened and extended by her contact with the material things possessed by the Brontës. Her profound sense of intimacy makes her want to come closer still: "So alive are these novels that I wish I could resurrect the Brontës themselves, their daily living and breathing, their material presence" (Lutz 2015: xx).

Lutz's project in this book, then, is to resurrect the Brontës in some form, to "call them back for a brief moment before the door shuts for good" (Lutz 2015: xxi). The Brontës' corporeal reality in the past, the traces of their bodies, their hands, become a highly charged way of reading both their lives and their texts. For Lutz, their writing is a "memento of the hand moving

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across the page" (Lutz 2015: 209). In particular Charlotte's letters offer their readers a "vivid sense of the page's talismanic qualities, sewing together those miniature books as a child. Handwriting and the autograph transmitted personality, perhaps a bit of the soul. The touch and warmth of the writer's skin could be carried in a letter" (Lutz 2015: 124).

In their 'Introduction' to *Victorian Afterlife* (2000), Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich note how Hilary Schor points to the link "between Victorian responses to physical and formal immateriality" and "contemporary concerns with the seemingly insubstantial yet historically haunted materials worked over by contemporary culture" (Sadoff & Kucich 2000: xxiv). Indeed, for Schor, the Victorian novel is itself already a haunted form:

> There is already something elegiac, nostalgic, and downright creepy about the novel; the act of writing is an act of mourning, but it is also a refusal to let nature take its course. The act of preservation at the heart of the novel is simply unnatural, its way of cataloguing, transforming, and resurrecting matter an intervention in the world it pretends merely to "show"; what better form than the Victorian novel for gathering, for interrogating, for estranging the forms of representation themselves? (Schor 2000: 240)

It is precisely such an approach to bridging the gap of longing brought about by this form of reading and writing history that Elodie Rousselot discusses in her introduction to *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction* (2014). She argues that the contemporary impulse to visit the past, seeking a haven for nostalgic urges driven by the present, and consequently to exoticise it, is "not without ethical risk" (Rousselot 2014: 7), since leading to the past's objectification as 'Other' and inferior. Hence Rousselot concludes that "the strangeness of the past – like that of the Orient – makes it simultaneously an object of allure and repulsion, fascination and rejection […]. [S]uch contradictory readings are in fact very revealing of the motives and preoccupations of the present" (Rousselot 2014: 8).

Lutz recognises these contradictions at the very heart of her project to bring the Brontës to life through their objects when she states that

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> using physical remains to retrieve history functions imperfectly, if at all. The attempt to treat such keepsakes as witnesses founders, turning them instead into poignant testimonials to the irretrievability of the past. All biographies and histories – including the one held right now by the reader – endeavour to cheat time, just as souvenirs do. (Lutz 2015: 73)

In her investigation of the totemic power of the material objects that once belonged to the Brontës, Lutz notes the connection that Victorians frequently made between objects and memory, the function of keepsakes such as locks of hair and hand-written letters as tangible links to people and the past.[8] In particular, she demonstrates how the body and its functions were present even in the paper they wrote on. Talking about the tiny books the Brontë children created from scraps of packaging and other salvaged paper, Lutz suggests this deep sense of connection felt by Victorians:

> The Brontës felt an intimacy with these closely handled books, made by their own limbs and clothed with materials familiar from the kitchen or parlour. This closeness of the body and the book was an ordinary feature of daily life in the nineteenth century, a relationship no longer obvious today. (Lutz 2015: 23)

Paper, made from rags which may once have covered bodies, became linings for drawers, packages, and finally the tiny books, made from scraps of packaging, on which the Brontës wrote their first stories. Such a link suggests a sense of the paper having a life in which they partook, one which was finite: "The Brontë children knew well that books and manuscripts couldn't last forever. As physical things, they were mortal" (Lutz 2015: 21).

Lutz's account of the Brontës' belongings and the ways in which they were used and understood in their time indicates the degree of intense connection felt with objects by their owners, as though the objects the siblings came into contact with could carry a physical trace of their bodies. Even their letters "might be linked to bodies because, for Charlotte and others of her time, they mattered as palpable things" (Lutz 2015: 127). In her analysis of these material remnants of the Brontës, Lutz explores the sense that such

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objects in the here and now, with clear provenance and a connection to the writer who made a work you hold dear, can come to feel haunted and haunting: "They speak of our need to believe that a life can be recalled through its material remnants, that not everything of that loved body's movement through time has been lost for good" (Lutz 2015: 252). The desire to resurrect the Brontës precisely evokes this sense of distance and alienation, but there is also a kind of uneasy intimacy with the lost bodies of the dead Brontës that, for example, summons Emily's belligerent ghost giving Samantha "the finger" as she tries to connect with her long dead relatives through their left-behind possessions at the Parsonage in Lowell's text. The overwhelming sense Lutz conveys that the Brontës' things "feel haunted in some way" (Lutz 2015: 186), can also bring about Kaplan's sense of drowning "in nostalgia, evoking a subjectivity that never was, writing a life as an elegy, a form of discursive mourning that creates its own loss" (Kaplan 2007: 62). Kate Mitchell's description of the work of neo-Victorian authors, who are "less concerned with making sense of the Victorian past, than with offering it as a cultural memory, to be re-membered, and imaginatively re-created, not revised or understood" (Mitchell 2010: 7), also applies to this discussion of Lutz's approach to biography. For Mitchell, "they remember the period not only in the usual sense, of recollecting it, but also in the sense that they re-embody, that is, re-member, or reconstruct it" (Mitchell 2010: 7). Lutz, like the neo-Victorian fiction writer described by Mitchell, appears haunted less by the past itself and more "by the desire for the act of historical recollection, the process of remembering" (Mitchell 2010: 8). Lutz's intense readings of the Brontës' haunted objects, while based on reasonably secure provenance, represent an attempt to know the past through fiction in which "the dis(re)membered pieces of the past are reconstituted in and by the text, and also in the reader's imagination" (Mitchell 2010: 7). Indeed, Lutz goes so far as to suggest that even objects with doubtful provenance that have been only posthumously associated with the Brontës carry a quality of "unruly longing" and signification, meaning that "our desire makes finitude fall away" (Lutz 2015: 254).

Writing in the Manchester Guardian in November 1904 in her first published article Virginia Woolf (then called Stephen) describes a visit to Haworth to see the home of the Brontës and the material objects they left behind. Encountering Charlotte's possessions in a glass case, Woolf presents herself as a novitiate writer visiting a shrine, the trip is a 'pilgrimage' (Woolf

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1986: 5), the objects 'relics' (Woolf 1986: 7) and her attitude 'reverent' (Woolf 1986: 7):

> the most touching case – so touching that one hardly feels reverent in one's gaze – is that which contains the little personal relics of the dead woman. The natural fate of such things is to die before the body that wore them, and because these, trifling and transient though they are, have survived, Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life, and one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer. Her shoes and her thin muslin dress have outlived her. (Woolf 1986: 7)

The objects possessed by the Brontës thus take on a signification that summons their presence once again, eclipsing their writing in the moment of encountering their belongings, things upon which their hands, their bodies, have left a tangible trace. As Lutz demonstrates, a fascination with sites and objects linked to the Brontës and anxiety about their authenticity has been prevalent ever since the sisters' identity was first revealed to the public. Describing the steady flood of visitors to Haworth and their search for memorabilia, keepsakes and the aura of the Brontës' lived world, Lutz points out that, "the Brontë story can bring a peculiar immortality to the things it brushes, even when not originally associated with it" (Lutz 2015: 254). In her essay, Amber Regis describes the impact that the opening of the Brontë Parsonage Museum was to have on tourism, the search for tangible connections to the Brontës at the place where they lived, and the collection of Brontë memorabilia (see Regis 2017: 117). Regis states that the opening of the museum in 1928, along with the opening of its archives, and access to the Brontës' home was a "landmark event", which, in part, led to the plethora of plays about the Brontës that followed (Regis 2017: 117). For Regis these biodramas suggest "a notable example of popular culture in dialogue with scholarship, heritage and tourism" (Regis 2017: 117). Increasingly, the reader's desire for a connection with the world of the Brontës is expressed not only by immersing themselves in the imagined spaces generated by their books, but in visits to the parsonage and landscape which these writers, and indeed the writers who followed them there, drew inspiration from. Each visit thus becomes a supplemental act of supplication and existential summoning of the presence of the dead writers and the world they literally inhabited. As

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Woolf states in her essay about the trip to their home, "Haworth and the Brontës are somehow inextricably mixed. Haworth expresses the Brontës; the Brontës express Haworth; they fit like a snail to its shell." (Woolf 1986: 5).

By the time Sophie Franklin writes about the experience of visiting sites with Brontë connections over a century later, she is explicitly placing herself in a continuum inhabited by herself and the Brontës. She becomes part of their tangible history by walking in the places their footsteps traced, haunting the places they inhabited. In *Charlotte Brontë Revisited: A View from the Twenty-First Century* (2016), Franklin argues that

> Maybe it is too far to say visiting and photographing famous sites are declarations of existence. But – to me, at least – it is a declaration of affinity, a way of stating without words my appreciation of and connection with the Brontës. By taking the time to learn about these locations, we are positioning ourselves in a timeline and, in a small way, we become part of the place's history. (Franklin 2016: 162)

Franklin's book, one of a significant number published on the bicentenary of Charlotte Brontë's birth, thus places its author in a spatial and temporal continuum. In expressing this sense of affinity, a conflation of readerly awe and critical engagement that Helen Deutsch terms "author love" (Deutsch 2005: 16-17), the reader constructs a real and imagined landscape for themselves, which they can revisit, thereby continually rewriting the Brontës' real and fictional worlds.[9]

Describing the complex ways in which readers encounter historical texts in Reading Historical Fiction (2013), Kate Mitchell and Nicola Parsons suggest that critical attention to the text displaces the reader in the process of creating historical meanings (Mitchell and Parsons 2013: 12). The meaning of a text thereby seeps beyond its borders and into the retellings, references and debates it generates; hence far from the past being encountered as a static form, they argue, neo-Victorian fiction offers historical text as witness (Mitchell and Parsons 2013: 12). It follows that fiction offers the "potential to animate – or vivify in phantasmic form – voices silenced by the historical record" (Mitchell and Parsons 2013: 12). By extension, the combination of a "silenced and incomplete historical record" with the "ghostly voices restored by contemporary historical fiction" constructs what they term "the reading

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subject" (Mitchell and Parsons 2013: 12). The reader in this conception appears as a hinge point between the unstable meanings and questionable solidity of historical fact and the ephemeral accounts and ventriloquisms summoned by a re-imagined and resurrected version of history. Such severings between original written text and contemporary re-readings, and the lengths to which a reader must go to pull them together, are fundamental to the two books under discussion. In Lutz's book, the Brontës become living authors once again as she reads the traces of their lives in the objects they owned and handled. In Lowell's novel, the Brontës are summoned repeatedly, but apparently vainly, by the strange, and somewhat inscrutable, even hollowed-out figure of the novel's narrator, Samantha.

Lutz's examination of the material legacy of the Brontës brings an emphatic awareness of the connection between their creative imaginations, the space and shape these objects took up in their lives, and the weight and meaning with which the siblings invested them. Lutz explores the ways in which the Brontës' desks, like those of many Victorians, are associated with secrets, both in their fiction and in their real lives. She traces numerous examples in their novels of the secrets held and discovered in writing slopes and the sense of violation associated with looking through another's desk without invitation. The Brontës' first publication resulted from Charlotte's discovery of Emily's poems whilst looking through her desk. Writing desks were private spaces, places to store and keep secrets, letters, and prized mementos as well as the paraphernalia of writing. Lutz's study of the desks the Brontës left behind and the objects inside them brings a strong sense of their physical presence and the degree to which the real and fictional lives of the Brontës merge there. It was Emily's desk that featured in the description of Samantha's visit to the parsonage, the abandoned quill she saw placed on it summoning the tangible reality of the Brontës, the space they inhabited and the objects they held (see Lowell 2016: 263). Lutz also expresses the sense that Emily can

> be felt in her desk box: in the hand-ruled pages found there, probably to guide the fair copies of her manuscripts; the blotting paper with ink stains; pieces of chalk browned with age; fragments of lace; an ivory seal; and an empty cardboard box that Emily marked with her initials: EJB. (Lutz 2015: 182)

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Charlotte's desk too, held the key to the letters and manuscripts that were composed on its ink-splashed velvet slope:

> Ink bottles sat in slots at the top of the opened desks, and one of Charlotte's still has dried ink crusted on the bottom. The brown-velvet writing slope, stained like Emily's with ink, is especially blackened on the upper right-hand corner, where Charlotte dipped her pen into the bottle, the ink having dripped as she moved the pen to the page. (Lutz 2015: 160)

Deborah Wynne observes a correlation between such left behind objects and the desire to revisit, reread, and even to rewrite the life of the Brontës. Wynne notes that by following in Charlotte's footsteps "pilgrims could 'read' another version of her life via place, space and the material world, a form of 'reading' that relied purely on affect rather than rational understanding" (Wynne 2017: 51). The material objects left by the Brontës, the traces of their hands in the lines of writing and splashes of ink thus become a means to map out their hidden domestic lives as well as their unrecorded thoughts, a way of penetrating the secret of their mysterious absent presence.

Contemporary critics and readers such as Susan L. Meyer and Spivak have observed yet another layer in the process of scratching ink into a blank page, as imagined by Lutz and explored in such detail by Charlotte Brontë in the scenes from *Jane Eyre* discussed earlier. Meyer argues that

> the eruption of the words 'Indian ink' into the novel suggests, at some level, Brontë's uneasiness about the East Indian colonialism to which England was turning in 1848, as well as about the West Indian colonies which were by then clearly becoming unprofitable after the abolition of slavery. (Meyer 1990: 268)

For Meyer this scene compounds the connections throughout the novel that are made between the imagination and desire, and also with distant countries via the objects acquired from them by trade, Empire, and exploitation. Jane's marginal and powerless position in the novel is frequently associated with slavery but Meyer demonstrates the way in which this equivalence comes under visible strain in a scene where Jane's signature in "Indian Ink" is drawn

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from a "morocco pocket-book" and reveals her to be an heiress, benefitting from her uncle's trade as a wine agent for Jamaica:

> In this way the novel connects the act of writing with colonialism. Specifically writing 'Jane Eyre,' creating one's own triumphant identity as a woman no longer oppressed by class or gender – or writing *Jane Eyre*, the fiction of a redistribution of wealth and power between men and women – depends on colonial 'ink'. (Meyer 1990: 267)

This reading of the role of writing in *Jane Eyre*, of the visceral encounters with the means of its production and the traces of its history in colonialism, is key to neo-Victorian retellings of this novel and their summoning of the figure of the Brontës into a refigured Victorian landscape that more explicitly accounts for such traces.

It is not only the (Indian) ink that would have had its provenance from distant places. It seems likely that Charlotte Brontë had a gutta percha pen "since nibs for one were also in her desk" (Lutz 2015: 175).[10] The desk itself was made of mahogany, a type of wood with such strong associations with Jamaica that, as Adam Bowett notes in his history of the English mahogany trade, the material was described as "Jamaica wood […] from the middle of the 18th century" (Bowett 1996: 14). According to Bowett, from 1700 to 1721, "the majority of importations were from Jamaica, establishing a pattern that was to continue for the next eighty years" (Bowett 1996: 16). In all likelihood then, the Brontës' desk boxes were made from mahogany that originated in Jamaica. Prized for the secret hiding places the boxes contained, the scene in which Jane Eyre unwittingly reveals her name to St. John traced on a slip of paper with "Indian Ink" seems to allude to this locking away of hidden desire. She herself has actually been trying to "discover the secret spring" of his confidence after she notices how he "locks every feeling and pang within" when he looks at her portrait of Rosamond (Brontë 1999: 376). Earlier in the novel, when Jane finally meets Bertha Mason, the secret kept hidden and locked away throughout the whole of the Thornfield section of the book, Rochester's first wife is discovered in a "secret inner cabinet" (Brontë 1999: 309). Given the nuanced and detailed relationship that Lutz maps out between the Brontës and their possessions and in particular with their desks, it seems likely that a kind of imaginative alchemy took place as Charlotte wrote *Jane*

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Eyre on her 'Jamaica wood' slope. Here, most powerfully, the reader encounters the combination of the real and the fictional figured in the writing materials she used and, especially, in the very desk on which *Jane Eyre* was created.

As Rousselot notes, the reconstruction of such a synergy, between the imagination of a long-dead author and the material objects they left behind, must reveal as much about the "motives and preoccupations of the present" (Rousselot 2014: 8) as such objects do about the past and the life in which they were formerly anchored. Charlotte Brontë's material possessions, as well as her life and manuscripts, may be rewritten and recast to reflect themes and narratives that originally lay hidden and disguised in her writing. The power and authority exercised by Brontë over the story, landscape and characters she created and controlled is thus paralleled in the work of those who continue to reread and rewrite her narratives and those of her characters according to their own contemporary influences and impulses. Meyer has shown that the autonomy achieved by Jane Eyre (and hence Charlotte Brontë) in writing is predicated on "colonial 'ink'" (Meyer 1990: 267). The freedom to write is thus founded on the slavery and exploitation of those who provide the writing materials, just as the conclusion of Jane Eyre's story is based upon an inheritance associated with slavery and a marriage dependent on the imprisonment and death of the Jamaican heiress, Bertha Rochester (see Meyer 1990: 267). In part, the rewriting of *Jane Eyre* follows a process that Meyer suggests was already taking place in Charlotte Bronte's original, which testifies to an "uneasiness about her own figurative tactics, about the way in which her use of racial signifier involves a brutal silencing" that "disrupts the utopian elements of the ending" (Meyer 1990: 266-267). It is not only the absence of the Brontës themselves that is mapped in these rewritings but also the absence of their imagined characters, their afterlives and hinterlands. It follows that each rewriting must conceal as many of the enigmas of its own time as it reveals about the context and secrets of the original. Deborah Lutz suggests a way to materially revisit the site of the writing, the instant at which Charlotte Bronte's Jamaican heiress sprung to life on a desk made from Jamaica wood. In contrast, Lowell offers a refiguring and recasting of the stories that came into being in those same moments. Lowell's narrator, Samantha, refigures the isolated heiress experiencing mental breakdown as the author, rather than the silenced figure of Bertha

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Rochester who inhabits the corridors and attics of *Jane Eyre*, but there are still other ghosts banished to the shadowy Gothic imagination of the book.

4. Conclusion: Possessing "The Vast Brontë Estate"

Any work that summons the material and narrative legacy of the Brontës invites the reader into the shadowy territory of a text which remains unquiet, ready to be disturbed once again by the context and reading history of its reader as well as its author(s). The overlap between fanfiction and neo-Victorian work discussed at the beginning of this article is especially evident in the two works under discussion. Lutz's critical engagement with the material world and legacy of the Brontës consciously blurs the role of reader and critic, fan and author. Lowell's deft narrative and intricate plot also conflate fiction and criticism in their complex engagement with the legacy of the Brontës and its influence upon present-day reading and acts of writing. Both works suggest a permeable text; there is seepage between the Brontës' writing and the readings by Lowell and Lutz. Throughout her book, Lowell figures Samantha's reading and writing as acts of resistance to the dominant male critics – her father, her tutor, the curator of the Brontë Parsonage Museum – who make various attempts at "*trying to teach [her] how to read*" (Lowell 2016: 20, original emphasis). It is a resistance that leads to the creation of a book of her own (both for Lowell and her fictional protagonist, Samantha). Lutz's desire to look through and around the writing of the Brontës, as she conducts her intensive investigation of the material objects they held and the writing they left behind, reveals the "jumbling of desk and body" (Lutz 2015: 165).

In both books, the Brontës are vividly imagined figures. These long-dead authors are summoned by Lutz, the biographer and critic, and Samantha, Lowell's narrator, in a sustained attempt to bridge the divide of time that separates them and to search for clues and revelations about the Brontës' lost world. This yearning to cross the divide that separates the reader from a beloved author resonates with Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss's argument that neo-Victorianism has become a means to account for "manifold overlaps and intersections, the continuities and breaches between 'us' and 'them'" (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014b: 1). The past thus becomes a site which can be revisited and shaped by those situated in the present moment of reading. It must always be a transaction that is unsettling, however. For Lowell's narrator, Samantha, the Brontës exist as living breathing entities

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only in their writing. The objects they left behind signify decay and loss. Lutz likewise finds in the belongings of the Brontës a mechanism with which to find herself returning to the "books whose worlds I'd rather crawl into and inhabit" (Lutz 2015: xx). The imagined figures of the Brontës she discovers in this process can appear ghostly and recalcitrant. For Lutz, a scrap of paper in Emily's desk "shines with meaning" and "illustrates the charmed life of these remnants, the sense that they hold stories" but there is no trace of the novel Emily may have been working on at the time of her death here in spite of Lutz's longing to find her way into it (Lutz 2015: 182). Inevitably, the stories revealed by the objects are frequently ones invented or imagined by Lutz, the objects summon only the trace and memory of their presence and lead back into the books with which Lutz began her pilgrimage.

Samantha's experience of an intimate connection to the Brontës in *The Madwoman Upstairs* repeats this experience of separation and mourning. She is buffeted and constrained by her connection to the Brontës and their literal and metaphorical legacy. Lutz's readings of the Brontës through their possessions is also deeply suggestive of a divide between the contemporary reader and the world of the Brontës. It brings into focus the stories of bereavement, loss and precarity carried by their possessions. The interactions with the Brontës' manuscripts and writing materials in these books echo those described in *Jane Eyre*. As we have seen, the venerated objects with which the Brontës wrote carry their own history of subjection and exploitation. Every rereading brings with it a shifting perception of the novels and the way they shape the reader. The resurrection of the "ghostly voices" (Mitchell and Parsons 2013: 12) of these works thus creates fresh disturbances and brings the trauma of repetition for its readers.

Notes

1. The fate of Emily Brontë's lost notebook is a central theme in Justine Picardie's novel *Daphne* (2007), an account of Daphne DuMaurier's fraught experience of researching the biography of Branwell Brontë.
2. The Brontës' isolated childhood and their 'bibliomania' has inspired a number of neo-Victorian fictions, including Pauline Clarke's *The Twelve and the Genii* (1962); Sheila Kohler's *Becoming Jane Eyre* (2009); Lena Coakley's *Worlds of Ink and Shadow: A Novel of the Brontës* (2016); Catherynne M. Valente's

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The Glass Town Game (2017); and S. R. Whitehead's *The Last Brontë: The Intimate Memoir of Arthur Bell Nicholls* (2017).

3. Wise's co-editor and collaborator J.A. Symington features in Justine Picardie's novel *Daphne* (2007) as the morally ambiguous gatekeeper of the Branwell Brontë manuscripts. In the novel his identification with the books and manuscripts in his collection is so total that he believes he is physically experiencing the decay and deterioration sustained by the badly stored Brontë papers. "Symington had felt the mildew rise from the pages and into his mouth, and now it was mouldering in his lungs, he knew it was taking a hold of him there, colonising his body, its tentacles spreading steadily, like they had done through the house" (Picardie 2007: 371).
4. For analysis of the influence of *Jane Eyre* and the many rewritings of the story see, for example, Patsy Stoneman's chapter, '*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* as popular currency' (Stoneman 1996; 216 – 223) and Armelle Parey's 'Introduction' to *Jane Eyre, Past and Present* (Parey 2006: 1– 8).
5. Examples of re-imagined versions of *Jane Eyre* include Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938); Elizabeth Taylor's *Palladian* (1946); Mary Stewart's *Nine Coaches Waiting* (1959); Patricia Park's *Re Jane: A Novel* (2015); Sara Collins' 2019 *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* (2019); Lauren Blackwood's 2021 *Within these Wicked Walls* (2021) and Rose Lerner's *The Wife Upstairs* (2021).
6. Rosa Karl goes further in her analysis of Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* (2001), a novel that plays with the intertextual movement of literary characters across books and worlds. Plot development is fluid and subject to change by the agency of the readers and characters who immerse themselves in books. Karl argues that "the critical history of *Jane Eyre* shows that the novel's extraordinary power to draw the reader in has fascinated and unnerved its audiences since its publication" (Karl 2014a: 40). She notes how George Henry Lewes, one of its earliest critics, described the way the novel "fastens itself upon your attention and will not leave you" (Lewes 1847: 691-692; Lewes qtd. in Karl 2014a: 40-41). Karl states that for many readers, the novel creates the effect of "being enchanted or even possessed" (Karl 2014a: 41). She also points out that Woolf too found herself carried away by the novel's powerful voice: despite initial scepticism about the book's "Victorian affect" (Karl 2014a: 41), and the belief that modern readers will find Brontë's "world of imagination […] antiquated, mid-Victorian and out of date", Woolf records how, in fact, readers find "doubt is swept clean from […their] minds" as they start to read *Jane Eyre* (Woolf 1916: 157).

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7. Since the publication of Spivak's influential essay, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' (1985), there have been numerous works engaging with the narrative strategies of *Jane Eyre* and how they influence the book's treatment of race and its suppression of otherness (see, e.g. Meyer 1990; Michie 1992; Perera 1991; and Sharpe 1993).
8. Within *The Brontë Cabinet*, Lutz discusses the significance of correspondence and handwriting for the chapter 'Fugitive Letters' and the collection and preservation of locks of hair in 'Death Made Material' (Lutz 2015 123-156 and185-210).
9. The enduring compulsion to visit the parsonage and the surrounding moors has resulted, as Franklin argues, to a linked desire for the reader-pilgrim to leave their own mark, whether ghostly or material (see Franklin 2016: 162). The Brontë Stones project, created by the writer Michael Stewart in partnership with the Bradford Literature Festival and various Brontë literature organisations, exemplifies this (see http://www.michael-stewart.org.uk/bronte-stones/. Work was commissioned from contemporary writers to be carved onto four stones that were then set in the landscape on a route that connected the birthplace of the Brontë family in Thornton and Haworth Parsonage. Stewart's latest book, *Walking the Invisible: Following in the Brontës' Footsteps* (2021), extends this profound sense of connection as it follows locations linked to the biographies of the Brontës, comparing the places then and now.
10. Gutta percha is a type of latex harvested from tree sap in the Malaysian archipelago.

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