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# SARAH WATERS'S VICTORIAN DOMESTIC SPACES; OR, THE LESBIANS IN THE ATTIC

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In November 2011, the contemporary, award-winning author Sarah Waters was among a plethora of celebrated writers who contributed to the Society of Authors' global Tweetathon to mark National Short Story Week. Waters provided an opening sentence (of no more than one hundred and forty characters) for one of the collaborative creative ventures between writers and tweeters. She wrote: 'My house is a jumpy house. Doors fly open. Windows shudder. There are sighs. Don't come calling! My house has something on its mind' (Waters, 'Ghost Story'). As her tweet indicates, Waters uses the evocative potential of domestic spatial boundaries to inspire the literary imagination. From this limited microblog to her larger (triple-decker) novels, spatiality is an important theme and prominent image across her writings. For instance, the suggestive potential of domestic spaces in her writing is given particular prominence in her most recent novel, *The Little Stranger* (2009), a text set in a country house in the 1940s which concerns the varied yet intimate relationship between socio-cultural status and public *and* private spaces. However, the connection between the personal and the spatial is also a prevalent feature of her earlier neo-Victorian novels—*Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002)—and, as this article will consider, domestic and private spaces are significant to her representation of sexuality.

Notably, in their seminal text, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century* (2010), Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn describe neo-Victorian fictions as those 'self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians' (4). Since the last decade of the twentieth century, authors in this flourishing genre have revisited the literary, artistic, socio-cultural and historical ideologies of the nineteenth century, re-imagining Victorian ideals in a plethora of new and creative guises. Waters is one of the most acclaimed authors in this field who is celebrated for her focus on women and female same-sex passions, and her writings have begun to receive substantive academic attention discussing the myriad ways in which she rewrites the Victorians. However, in considering the relevance of spatiality to her work, to date scholars have largely focused on Waters's representation of nineteenth-century spatial dynamics in

relation to gender, meaning that scant attention has been paid to space and its relationship to sexuality.<sup>1</sup> As such, there has yet to be consideration of Waters's re-visioning of the Victorian domestic sphere or home, a realm famed for its 'domestic environmentalism' (as Katherine Grier terms it) in which strict socio-cultural ideologies privileged heterosexual gender and sexual norms (6). This omission is important because one of neo-Victorianism's defining features is its investment in re-writing the significance of Victorian spaces, a notion perhaps best captured by Jean Rhys's prequel to *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), in which she reimagines the infamous Bertha Mason's relationship to space and how she came to be incarcerated at Thornfield Hall as the 'madwoman in the attic'.

Examining the relationship between sexuality and home spaces is important because 'there are no spaces that sit outside of sexual politics. Sex and space cannot be "decoupled"' (Johnson and Longhurst 3).<sup>2</sup> Importantly, cultural scholars have begun to define domestic space or home in both physical and conceptual terms (ibid 7). Home spaces are a private and secure location, a locus of identity, and an area where inhabitants can escape the disciplinary practices that regulate the body in the public sphere (ibid). But beyond the bricks and mortar, 'home' is also an idea or spatial imaginary that (simultaneously) denotes shelter, hearth, love, privacy, connectedness and abode amongst other characteristics (ibid).

Joanne Hollows points out that contemporary domestic culture is indebted to historical ideals of home space produced by the Victorians (15). In the nineteenth century, public space was viewed as the domain of men while women 'owned' a complimentary space in the domestic sphere, giving rise to the so called 'cult of domesticity' to provide 'moral, aesthetic and cultural stability' (Domash and Seage 7). Accordingly, for the Victorians, values and behaviours inculcated in the home were crucial to the formation and maintenance of heteropatriarchal gendered and sexual ideals (Bryden and Floyd 2). Such constructed behaviours not only placed pressure on women to conform to ideas of femininity but served to oppress them within the symbolic and physical realm of home (Bryden and Floyd 6–9). Memorably, Coventry Patmore's paragon of the 'Angel in the House' (1857) presents the archetype for this vision of women and the domestic. In Patmore's virginal ideal, the 'Angel's' sexual purity and instinctive capacity for 'sweet ordering', as John Ruskin put it (73–74), functioned 'to sanctify the home as a refuge for her menfolk from the trouble of the public life' (Furieux, 'Victorian Sexualities' 768). Patmore's vision serves only to reify heteropatriarchal gender and sexual norms. So how, then, do

Waters's contemporary, neo-Victorian re-writings of the Victorian domestic both challenge such domestically based heteropatriarchal imagery while re-creating the home as a queer space?

In considering Waters's (re)creations of the Victorian home in relation to sexuality, this article argues that the diverse domestic spaces featured in her neo-Victorian fictions enthusiastically debunk and attentively reimagine received views of women and Victorian domestic space as predicated on traditional Victorian, heteronormative ideals. I suggest that in creating stories of women and female same-sex desire situated *in* the home or alternative spaces that are reconfigured as *homely*, Waters departs from long-standing views of nineteenth-century domesticity underpinned by heterosexual moral imperatives and associated with restraint and prudery. Instead, through her re-invention of the Victorians, and echoing a broader shift in Victorian studies away from images of straitlaced Victorians, Waters recreates female sexuality as constituted in and by a plethora of vibrant, queer domestic spaces.<sup>3</sup> In analysing a selection of domestic spaces in her neo-Victorian fictions, this paper bring together lines of enquiry inspired by gender and sexual cultural theory *and* neo-Victorianism to show how Waters's thinking on home and domestic space both queers the Victorian home and produces innovative conceptions of domestic spatiality and neo-Victorian sexualities. In unfolding this reading, I begin first by exploring how Waters uses the neo-Victorian form to 'export' contemporary queer concerns surrounding lesbians and the concept of home to the Victorian past before then discussing how Waters rewrites particular Victorian domestic spaces. I conclude by exploring how Waters re-creates Victorian domesticity and the lived experience of lesbians in relation to home.

### **Critiquing the (straight) Victorian home**

As Bryden and Floyd indicate, Victorian discourses relating to home were powerfully influential in the development of heteronormative gender and sexual behaviours (2). In critiquing this ideology, Waters's writings show that for so-called nineteenth-century sexual 'deviants', home assumed 'very different and contradictory meanings' (Johnson and Longhurst 7). Johnson and Longhurst point out that for those, the concept of 'home' itself can be problematic, especially for queer subjects who 'share a house with heterosexuals' unsympathetic to non-heterosexual modes of gender and desire (*ibid*). Waters replays this tension in both *Tipping the Velvet* (1997) and *Affinity* (1998).

Importantly, Emily Jeremiah's influential description of *Tipping the Velvet* as a 'queer bildungsroman' emphasises its concern with lesbian sexual awakening and queer politics, and also captures how 'fledging' Nancy's departure from the proverbial 'nest' by following her gender and sexual adventures in *fin-de-siècle* London (135). From the outset, Waters connects Nancy's coming-of-age to domestic spatial dynamics. The novel opens in the setting of the happy, home cum workplace that is the Astley's oyster parlour, where Nancy reflects that, 'Whitstable was all the world to me, Astley's Parlour my own particular country' (4). This description associates home with nationalistic imagery through feelings of belonging being produced in and by domestic space. However, having developed a Sapphic predilection for the music-hall male impersonator, Kitty Butler, Nancy begins to leave the family home to watch Kitty perform at the Canterbury Palace of Varieties. It is within the apparently 'safe' confines of the (heteronormative) home, however, that Nancy is ridiculed for her persistent returns to the Palace. She receives 'a mild *tut tut*' from her family when 'I spoke, next day, of returning to the Palace' (16). Her sister Alice, 'laughed and declared I was mad: she wouldn't come with me for a glimpse of a girl in trousers' (16), while her mother, 'raised her head and...regarded me with a little puzzled frown' (18). Nancy's father, meanwhile, says, "'Well, we are told it is Kitty Butler.... If you ask me...I think there's a young chap in the orchestra pit what she's got her eye on' (19). Mr Astley's words foreground the suspicion with which Nancy's activities are treated and exposes the monitoring of sexual behaviours within the family home. His rationalisation of Nancy's seeming 'abandonment' of the family abode indicates how heterosexual behaviour is made intelligible and acceptable within domestic space in ways that homosexual desire is not, endorsing Miller's observation of homosexuality as a love that was 'domestically unspeakable' (221). Through this subtle commentary, then, Waters unravels the politics of heteronormativity at play within domestic boundaries and implicitly critiques the limitations placed on lesbians within the putative 'straight' domestic domain.

Similarly, in *Affinity*, which details the duplicitous relationship between Margaret Prior, a lonely, middle-class, 'lady-visitor' to London's Millbank Prison, and Selina Dawes, a disgraced spirit medium serving a prison sentence for 'fraud and assault' (27), Waters illustrates how nineteenth-century domesticity reinforced normative moral imperatives to ordain strict sexual mores. Waters achieves this by paralleling the Victorian middle-class home as analogous to a prison. With her 'plan of Millbank's buildings...pinned...on the wall', Margaret compares the sound of 'maids up the attic stairs [and] Cook[s]

slamming bolts' (30) to the 'steady *chink, chink* of metal' (10) she hears at Millbank. She likens her mother's surveillance of her behaviours as akin to the prison's matrons and the confinement that takes place at the prison (12–13, 21, 23–24, 29). Moreover, Mrs Prior's regulation of her daughter's diet, routine, and medicines (for hysteria) replicate nineteenth-century medical doctrine that pathologised non-normative female behaviours as sexually 'deviant' and criminal. Significantly, Margaret's perception of home as a sphere where gender is patrolled recalls Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's treatment of gender and imprisonment in their seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) in which, they argue, Victorian fictions use 'houses are primary symbols of female imprisonment' (85). Evoking this imagery, the location of Margaret's home on Cheyne Walk in Chelsea tellingly reveals this parallel; the word 'cheyne' rhymes with 'chain' which implies imprisonment. Through the location of home itself, Waters expands Gilbert and Gubar's literary metaphor to critique the oppression of gender *and* desire within domestic boundaries.

Waters also destabilises Victorian domestic sexual politics by showing how for lesbian subjects who have not 'come out' (to borrow a twentieth-century neologism), lesbians in—or returning to—the family home find their sexuality constrained. In a heteronormative setting where, as Michel Foucault observes, Victorian 'sexuality was carefully confined [in] the home', 'illegitimate sexualities' were 'outlawed' by the 'tripe edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence' (3–5). In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy's sister Alice exemplifies Foucault's point in her response to Nancy's self 'outing'. Nancy tells Alice that when she sees Kitty: 'it's like I am filling up, like a wine-glass when it's filled with wine' and "'makes [her] want to smile and weep, all once' (20). Nancy notes, however, that Alice responds by rolling 'away from me, and faced the wall' (21), an action that denies the existence of queer passions within the home and uses spatial boundaries to suggestively denote a defiant stance to same-sex passions.

Waters expresses similar sexual politics in *Affinity* when highlighting how the challenges faced by lesbians *in* the home are different to those faced by heterosexual women. Through Margaret, Waters dramatises the Victorian home as a particular space of enclosure for queer subjects; she uses spectrality as a metaphor to signify the abjection of lesbianism within the middle-class Victorian home. Importantly, In *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993), Terry Castle's famously conceptualised lesbianism in relation to spectrality, using ghostliness as a trope for female same-sex desire. Castle proposed that

in refusing ‘the symbolic emasculation that Western society demands of its female members’—heterosexuality—female same-sex passions are outlawed and rendered spectral (ibid). Accordingly, in *Affinity*, Waters’s representation of lesbian desire in the domestic sphere is, to borrow Castle’s words, ‘ghosted—or made to seem invisible’ because lesbianism ‘represents a threat to patriarchal protocol’ (4–5). Margaret captures something of this when speaking to Helen, her former love, in her bedroom, telling her, ‘Don’t go too near the bed! Don’t you know it is haunted by our old kisses? They’ll come and frighten you.’ (204). Margaret’s perception that lesbian desire infuses such objects reconfigures the bed as a queer object and lays the basis for her personal domestic space—the bedroom—to become an avowedly queer space, a notion I shall discuss more fully in the section below.

### **Contesting Victorian Domestic Space**

Returning to the Victorians, William Houghton observes that Ruskin memorably described the Victorian home in terms of spatial difference: ‘it was a place apart, a walled garden, in which certain virtues too easily crushed by modern life could be preserved, and certain desires of the heart too much thwarted to be filled’ (343). Ruskin’s ideal home was a refuge from ‘terror, doubt, and division’ (ibid). Unsurprisingly, his view of women in the domestic sphere as angels (in Patmore’s terms) endorses a stubborn view of Victorian women and domesticity that endorses sexual prudery. Here, the private realm—women’s space—was sacrosanct and heteropatriarchal morals reigned supreme. Importantly, following Foucault’s discursive rebuttal of the repressive hypothesis, which argued that far from being taboo, sex was spoken everywhere, approaches to the Victorians and their ideologies have begun to depart from outdated images of Victorian prudery to explore the fullness of sexual experience in the domestic sphere among other spaces. Through her neo-Victorian fictions, Waters connects the rethinking of female Victorian sexuality to spatiality. Indeed, most notably, Waters inventively reimagines queer sexualities in relation to specific domestic locations, those that historically have been central to heteronormative configurations of Victorian homes or which, through feminist literary studies, are invested with legacies that critique the cult of domesticity. As this section will explore, Waters’s recreation of lesbian sexuality in relation to Victorian parlours, attics and bedroom spaces eclectically recreates both outdated and prudish imagery of the

Victorians and the politics of public and private space as well as the sexual sanctity—as Ruskin saw it—of the domestic realm.

Thad Logan has eloquently argued that the parlour was *the* centre of the Victorian home and served as one of the most important rooms in the house. Parlours were spaces in which conflict about domesticity and personal relations were frequently played out while remaining a domestic ‘inner sanctum’ (Logan 27). However, the parlour was also a ‘site whose distinctive features were the subject of serious aesthetic debates’ (ibid). Here, not only was furniture gendered (as Logan indicates, the middle-class parlour was always furnished with lady’s and gentleman’s drawing-room chairs) but ‘one of the most distinctive features of the parlour...was the number of decorative objects found in them’, ornaments and decorative knick-knacks that revealed something of its inhabitants (34, 7). Logan’s observations of the parlour are of significance, for in *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters’s so-called ‘lesbo romp’ (see Waters, ‘Desire’), the parlour is a queer space that expresses the carnality of lesbian desire. This imagery is given prominence in the home of wealthy Sapphist Diana Lethaby. On Nancy’s first visit to Diana’s home named ‘Felicity Place’—felicity, of course, meaning happiness—Diana leads Nancy to the parlour where they have sex. Here, their animated passion begin on a ‘straight backed chair’, an image that reworks the gendering of chairs that Logan describes, but more importantly, the vivacity of their encounter is heightened by their use of one particular ‘ornament’—‘Monsieur Dildo’, Diana’s affectionately-named piece of sexual paraphernalia (243). While it would be an overstatement to suggest that Monsieur Dildo is an ornament in Diana’s parlour, the presence of this queer item foregrounds the eroticism of their sexual behaviour. Used by both Nancy and Diana, and later by Nancy and Diana’s maid, Zena, the dildo caters to the ‘tommish urges’ (244) of the women and ‘its effects give voice to lesbian sexual pleasures’ (O’Callaghan 71). The presence of this item in an otherwise normative domestic space, illustrates the way in which Waters uses lesbian desire to challenge the virtue of Victorian domesticity.

Similarly, in *Affinity*, the spiritualist séances held by Selina also rework the sanctum of the Victorian parlour and women’s roles within the domestic by converting the home into a subversively sexualised queer space. Unlike *Tipping the Velvet*, however, in which Diana’s home celebrates the abandonment of heteropatriarchal ideals, in *Affinity*, the parlour as a queer space represents sexual transgression. In contrast to Margaret, Selina’s juxtaposing narrative and life with Margaret’s maidservant Ruth undermines the heteronormative gendering of domestic spaces. Installed as a private medium at Mrs Brink’s home in



Sydenham, Selina and Ruth develop a passionate relationship and utilise spiritualism—the Victorian movement in which spirit mediums apparently communicated with the dead—to destabilise Victorian behaviours in the private realm. Crucially, upon her arrival at Mrs Brink's home, Selina identifies her parlour as 'quite a queer sort of room' (119). Selina's comment foregrounds the significance of the space itself, for it is here that Ruth 'walk[s] around the parlour' cross-dressed as the playful male spirit 'Peter Quick' encouraging women visitors at the séance to hold 'Peter's' hand and 'feel his whiskers' (218). In addition to their séances, Selina and Ruth also conduct private spiritualist sittings in the parlour, with scantily clad young women pressed between Selina and 'Peter' chanting the phrase 'May I be used' (261). Their decadent spiritualist practices and SandM games not only queer the Victorian parlour but make it a subversively sexualised queer space. The reworking of this space is significant because it is the privacy of the domestic realm (usually associated with domestic harmony) and its simultaneous ability to function as a semi-public space that enables the women to play out their passionate relationship and subversive sexual practices.

As well as the Victorian parlour, Waters also disturbs Victorian ideology concerning the bedroom. Foucault suggests that in the Victorian home, the bedroom was 'a single locus of sexuality' that functioned as a 'utilitarian and fertile' space (3). In other words, the bedroom is a realm where traditionally individuals sleep and have sex and, as such, for heterosexual couples bedrooms are domestic space associated with reproduction. Waters's representation of bedroom spaces departs from this image of the bedroom as a space 'reproductive futurity' (to borrow Lee Edelman's phrasing) (2). Instead, they register the carnality of lesbian desire and become spaces where sexually different practices are indulged and enjoyed. The shared 'digs' that Nancy and Kitty rent at Mrs Dendy's theatrical boarding home in *Tipping the Velvet*, for instance, is one such space. Likewise, Selina's prison cell cum bedroom at Millbank Prison, in which her queer relations with Margaret subvert the heteronormative ordering of the jail as Margaret sits with her 'foot against [Selina's] own—my own stern shoe against her sterner prison boot...just enough so that the leather might kiss' (287), is another albeit atypical example of Waters's sexualised queer bedroom. Margaret also notes that with the 'phantom[s] floating' (126) in her own bedroom, she 'haunt[s] this room' (289) and, as her passion for Selina grows, so too, as she says, does 'the house [become] changed to me' (304).

However, it is in *Fingersmith* (2002), Waters's third novel, that the Victorian bedroom assumes an explicit queer signification. *Fingersmith* tells the tale of the lonely heiress to Briar House, Maud Lilly, who falls in love with petty thief Susan Trinder, a fingersmith masquerading as a lady's maid. Since a young age, Maud has been groomed by her sadistic uncle, Christopher Lilly, as a secretary to his library of pornographic texts. As such, Maud's understanding of gender, sex and desire, particularly lesbianism, is informed by her exposure to such licentious materials. Her relationship with Sue calls into question her sexual education: 'may a lady taste the fingers of her maid? She may, in my uncle's books' (256).<sup>4</sup> Importantly, Uncle has his a symbol of heteropatriarchal power physically installed at Briar; a 'flat brass hand with a pointing finger, set into the dark floor-boards' (76). Eckart Voights-Virchow indicates that the finger confirms uncle as a representative of 'phallic rule, the rule of [the] father' (118). While this symbol casts a heterosexual shadow across Briar, Maud's rooms—her bedroom and maid servant's chamber that accompany it—are important queer spaces that counter heteropatriarchal governance and challenge the norms ascribed to Victorian lady's bedrooms that endorse heterosexual mores. Like Margaret's bedroom in *Affinity*, the emotion and sexual bonds between Maud and Sue reconfigure the dynamics of the room. Their passion is consummated through a role-play that queers the sexual act of consummation following marriage: Maud asks Sue to teach her 'what a wife must do on her wedding night' (281). Sue agrees and enacts what would be, in heterosexual practice, the role of the man thereby queering heteronormative sexual practice. The sexual act that unfolds, then, depicts women enjoying lesbian sex while 'pretending' to enact heterosexual passion, thus also making their sexual practice somewhat performative. As such, their passion appropriates heterosexual imagery and reworks the traditional domestic space—the marital bed—in which that encounter takes place. Notably, Sue gives voice to the effect of their passion in spatial terms: 'here is the curious thing...I felt her, through the walls of the house, like some blind crooks are said to be able to feel gold.... It was like—It's like you love her, I thought. It made a change in me.... Her rooms seemed changed' (136). Sue's comment suggests that lesbian passion instigates not only a shift between subjects but a shift in spatial dynamics that not only makes a house a home but the Victorian bedroom a queer sexual space.

Perhaps most significantly, in reworking the image of the Victorian bedroom, Waters also rewrites literary imagery of the attic space, a domestic realm associated with gendered confinement due to Bertha Rochester's legacy in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). In Brontë's

classic novel, Bertha is cruelly incarcerated at Thornfield Hall by her husband, the Byronic Mr Rochester who, soon after their marriage, discovers Bertha's psychiatric problems and so confines her to the attic at the Hall. The plotline of Brontë's text inspired the title of Gilbert and Gubar's aforementioned literary work—*The Madwoman in the Attic*. As suggested, Gilbert and Gubar view attic spaces as domestic places to contain women. In addition to *Jane Eyre*, the attic functions as a site of gender confinement in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Victorian novella, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) (although here the nursery bedroom to which the heroine is confined by her husband is not actually an attic space but has been misread as such).

In *Affinity*, Waters uses lesbian sexuality to rewrite the negativity ascribed to the attic space through a tradition of women's writings. In the novel, Ruth has her bedroom in the Prior's family attic and, having helped Selina escape from Millbank, it is Ruth's attic bedroom in which she hides. Here, the confinement of 'woman' functions not as a negative act of enforcement, rather, female confinement functions to create a place of safety. However, it is only after Selina's escape from Millbank is revealed that this fact becomes apparent as the traumatised Margaret comes to realise that her servant and Selina have defrauded her. Margaret's painful realisation is heightened by her recognition that the women had had sex in the room above her, an image denoted by the way that Margaret notes the bed sheets in the attic room to be 'twisted and bunched' and the women's gowns (Selina's prison wear and Ruth's service attire) 'lay tangled together like sleeping lovers' (341). By harbouring her lover in the Prior's family attic room *and* having sex with her in this typically negative domestic space, Ruth demonstrates how the Victorian home could not always be sacrosanct. Through the 'lesbians in the attic' then, Waters shows that such spaces are not limited as spaces of confinement on heteropatriarchal terms, but can be reworked as spaces of sexual freedom and female power.

### Other Queer Homely Spaces

Alison Hennegan indicates that queer bonds succeed because of alternative versions of domesticity (881). Surrogate families and spaces in which women spend time together away from the heteropatriarchal gaze are important in establishing queer spatiality that revises heteronormative configurations of domesticity. In this final section I want to move away from considering Waters's subversion and sexualisation of Victorian domestic spaces to concentrate instead on her

queering of Victorian domesticity and its significance to spatiality and sexual politics. To explore alternative domesticities, the term *homely* must be understood as encapsulating the sentiments of feeling and belonging that are central to a conceptual definition of home. Of course, one cannot write of homeliness without acknowledging Freud's discussion of the uncanny, his key psychoanalytic conceptualisation regarding repetitions of the same thing, in which he used the terms *heimlich*, meaning homely, to define that which is familiar, and *das unheimliche* to describe the opposite of the familiar. However, an important observation about Waters's recreations of Victorian domestic space as homely is that the construction of homeliness does not always take place in 'traditional' or familiar home-like domains. As this section will consider, alternative sites of domesticity—clubs, theatres and boathouses may be perceived, from a heterosexual point of view, as spaces of flight from conventional domesticity, a 'safe' space to which homosexuals flee as respite from homophobia. However, I suggest that from a queer perspective, in Waters's novels, such realms function in a more complex and sophisticated mode to create new Victorian domesticities.

In theorising such alternative spaces, Foucault's discussion of heterotopias provides an enabling framework for reading Waters's re-creation of Victorian domestic spaces. In 'Of Other Spaces' (1967) Foucault outlines the concept of heterotopias—real counter-sites for imaginary utopias, which are, in his view, spaces that 'do not exist' (24). He envisions heterotopic spaces functioning 'outside' normal places associated with normative conditions. In other words, heterotopias are spaces for 'deviation' or non-hegemonic behaviours and socialities. Foucault suggests six principles for heterotopic spaces: they are spaces in which individuals whose behaviours are considered deviant to the mean can be placed, they must have a clear and determined function, they can occupy a single space or space within a space, they signal a break with the convention of time (or the time in question), they are not freely accessible meaning that not everyone is 'eligible' to engage the space, and finally they function in relation to all other spaces. Significantly, Foucault identifies prisons and 'forbidden environments' as potentially heterotopic and, as I have suggested, Waters presents a range of such spaces in her fictions—Millbank, Diana's home, Briar, to name a few. However, in focusing on non-traditional domestic spheres, Waters shows how alternative domestic venues can function for queer subjects as heterotopias.

Returning to *Tipping the Velvet*, however, the theatre, a space that Foucault identifies as heterotopic, functions as one such place. In the

early scenes following Nancy's visits to Kitty at the Canterbury Palace, Kitty's dressing room reflects Foucault's theorizing concerning heterotopias. Having accepted Kitty's invitation to join her each night before and after her performance, Nancy 'makes home' in Kitty's dressing-room: 'mak[ing] tea for her [,] while the tea simmered I would wipe her little table, and empty her ashtrays, and dust down the glass' (38). Nancy characterises her behaviour as 'acts of love': 'these humble little ministrations, and of pleasure—even, perhaps, of a kind of self-pleasure, for it made me feel strange and hot and almost shameful to perform them' (38). While feminist scholars such as Betty Friedan have decried the historical consignment of women to the domestic sphere in the service of men, here Nancy's acts of 'homely' domesticity reconceptualise such gendered behaviour as queer because she performs them for 'woman' and not 'man', thus destabilising the boundaries on which such feminist criticism is predicated. Nancy emphasises the queerness of her behaviour in relation to space: 'the world, to me, seemed utterly transformed since Kitty Butler has stepped into it. It had been ordinary before...now it was full of queer electric spaces'— words that emphasise the shift in the gendering of space in heteropatriarchal terms as 'ordinary' in contrast to the sexualisation of place as a result of lesbian desire (38). That Nancy feels at home with Kitty such that she relocates to London with her suggests the power of alternative domesticities to enable queer renegotiations of home.

Although not readily classed as a neo-Victorian novel, Waters's fourth novel, *The Night Watch* (2006), provides an important intertextual parallel to alternative domestic space featured in Dickens's writings that illustrate a queer domestic heterotopia. *The Night Watch* charts the war stories of four subjects all of whom are queer because they defy, in one way or another, heteronormative modes of gender, sex and desire. At the heart of the plot is a complex lesbian romance and narrative of sexual betrayal in which the protagonist, the cross-dressing Kay Langrish, loses her beloved girlfriend, Helen Giniver, to Kay's former lover, Julia Standing. Importantly, in the novel, the houseboat belonging to Kay's friend Mickey provides a queer heterotopic space that functions during the war as a domestic social realm. Foucault sites boats as heterotopic spaces:

The boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea. [Boats are] the greatest reserve of the imagination, [a] heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without

boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates. (Foucault 27)

Significantly, houseboats provide an alternate site of home and domesticity in Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850). Holly Furneaux observes that, 'Young David Copperfield is perplexed by the design of both Peggotty's home and his adoptive family [,] fail[ing] to to recognise that the boat can qualify as a house or habitation' (50). For Furneaux, houseboats in Dickens's work present a queer domestic spatiality because they comfortably accommodate 'non-heterosexual and non-reproductive forms of bonding' (51). Reflecting this, Mickey's houseboat is central to the lives of the lesbian characters in Waters's novel. While the space may appear 'deviant' to the dominant social order, it is a space of community for the lesbian circle Kay frequents. In the 1944 section of the text, Waters depicts a party at Mickey's boat home. Here the women make gimlets, relax in their 'male' clothes, and discuss the politics of romance in wartime. What is significant about this scene is not just that Waters illustrates a happy social environment in which the women can be themselves away from the heteropatriarchal gaze, but that the importance of the queer spatiality itself in creating an alternative domestic space where this ambiance can occur is given prominence. Waters underlines the importance of location through the extended third-person commentary on the scene:

At six o' clock they heard the wireless starting up on the barge next door; they opened the doors, to listen to the news. Then a programme of dance-music came on; it was too cold to keep the doors open, but Mickey slid back a window so they could hear the music a little, mixed up with the buzz and spatter of passing engines, the bumping of the boats. The song was a slow one. Kay kept her arm on Helen's waist, still lightly stroking and smoothing it, while Mickey and Binkie chatted on. The heat from the stove, and the gin in her cocktail, had made her dozy. (Waters 262)

This lengthy description juxtaposes the actions of the women with attention to the setting itself. Unlike the 'Young David' in Dickens's text who fails, as Furneaux suggests, to register the feasibility of the houseboat as a legitimate alternative spatiality, Waters shows the queerness of the houseboat to specifically accommodate the sexual

‘difference’ of its guests. Waters signals the correlation between queer sexuality and queer spatiality through the parallel between the sexual overtones of the ‘bumping of the boats’ and Kay’s ‘stroking and smoothing’ of Helen’s body. As such, while Waters uses the houseboat to create a queer heterotopia, through this intertextual parallel to Dickens’s seminal text, she deconstructs the dominant images assigned to Victorian homes.

In conclusion, through the exploration of lesbian engagements with queer domestic spaces and the conception of home, Waters exposes how private dwellings can both structure sexual politics and yet how desire governs spatial imaginaries. In articulating a ‘love that was domestically unspeakable’ (Miller 221), Waters destabilises the dominance of the Victorian home as a strictly heterosexual realm to instead reconceptualise nineteenth-century domestic spaces as queer. In her neo-Victorian fictions, queer homes privilege lesbian desire to resist the erasure of lesbian subjectivity within normative spatial boundaries. By drawing attention to queer politics, Waters shows the heteropatriarchal Victorian home as problematic for lesbian subjects, highlighting the diverse ways in which sex and desire are curtailed in normative domestic boundaries. At the same time, through her re-visioning of Victorian domestic spaces and her portrayal of female same-sex passions, Waters challenges dominant images of Victorian women as merely ‘angels’ in the house, showing them instead to be passionate figures that—for good or bad—challenge outdated stereotypes of female sexuality. Finally, in broadening queer domestic spaces to those non-typically associated with home, Waters explores the heterotopic qualities presented by non-normative spaces for ‘non-normative’ gendered and sexual subjects. Home and domestic spaces in Waters’s fictions, then, are places where lesbian sexuality can be both monitored and abjected, celebrated and performed, dystopian and heterotopian. This article has begun to unravel the various ways in which domestic spaces function in Waters’s writing, but her fictions make many more domestic spaces available for analysis; to borrow Mona Domash’s words concerning the richness of ‘home’ for understanding the sexual and the spatial, ‘It’s just that we’ve barely begun to open the door and look inside’ (281).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the essays by Arias and Ciocia.

<sup>2</sup> Since Virginia Woolf’s plea for women to have ‘a room of their own’, domestic space has been read as gendered. Twentieth-century feminists such as Betty Friedan have popularly explored the enduring

characterisation of domestic space as a ‘woman’s place’. However, since the early 1990s gender and sexual scholars more broadly have developed a critical geography of sex and sexuality that highlights the complexity of sexual identities (encompassing gender) as performed, produced in, and oppressed by, spatiality. This body of criticism has usefully identified how space and place are heterosexualised, that is, as Judith Halberstam states, structured by normative routines governing heteronormative incarnations of gender, the primacy of the family, and ‘traditional’ familial structures (jobs, relationships, economies) (*In a Queer Time and Place* 1–2). Critics in this interdisciplinary terrain have begun to map the diverse ways in which queer conceptions of space challenge heteronormative spatial dynamics. However, while this invaluable body of work has produced rich understandings of gay men’s uses of space, lesbians constructions of, and engagements with, space have largely been overlooked, and none more so that lesbian conceptions of home and domesticity.

<sup>3</sup> See Furneaux (‘Victorian Sexualities’) as illustrative examples of newer readings of the Victorians.

<sup>4</sup> It is important that in challenging the heteropatriarchal ordering of domestic space at Briar, Maud’s final act before she escapes from the house is to destroy her uncle’s library. In the dead of night, Maud steals into the library with her heart ‘beating hardest, now’, takes one of the books and ‘then I lift the razor, grip it tight, [and] put the metal for the first time to the neat and naked paper’ (290).

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