

## Article

# Heterotopic Potential of Darkness: Exploration and Experimentation of Queer Space in Sarah Waters's Neo-Victorian Trilogy

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**Abstract:** This article argues that darkness contributes to the creation of, and expands the concept of, heterotopias. In Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian trilogy, consisting of *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002), her characters utilize darkness as their queer heterotopic space in order to call into question dominant heteronormative ideologies. Darkness plays an important role at the inception of the characters' romantic relationships by facilitating space that allows their non-normative feelings to be expressed, thereby bringing queer desire to the forefront of each narrative. Darkness is a critical factor that renders a space heterotopic, as it blurs the boundary between heteronormative and queer, hence allowing transgression of the characters within Waters's novels. Within queer heterotopic space created out of the darkness, there is a confluence of opposing values that enables the characters to examine the possibility of transcending heteronormativity and envisioning queer futures.

**Keywords:** Sarah Waters; heterotopia; darkness; queer spatiality; *Tipping the Velvet*; *Affinity*; *Fingersmith*



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## 1. Introduction

There are many instances in Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian novels where darkness plays a crucial role in articulating characters' queerness and their desires. As Elsa Adán Hernández notes, although the darkness suggests "explicit connotations of non-existence", "taken as a metaphor for lesbian invisibility, the apparent non-existence and marginalization [ . . . ], becomes an instrument of liberation" (Hernández 2020, p. 13). For Waters's lesbian characters, darkness facilitates their temporary escape from the everyday constraints and pressures of patriarchal and heteronormative society, allowing them to freely explore ways of displaying their queerness. While the metaphor of darkness tends to be placed in opposition to light, often with the latter given the superior status, Steven Burik argues that it is possible "to overcome the *hierarchy* of the two binary opposites and understand them in a more complementary fashion" (Burik 2019, p. 348, original emphasis). In his attempt to reaffirm the philosophical value of darkness, Burik points out that "where light may certainly help you see limits and demarcations", darkness allows us "to go beyond such artificial distinctions and see through the artificiality and provisionality of such limits and distinction-making" (Burik 2019, p. 369). Since darkness blurs, fragmentizes, and invalidates "limits and demarcations", it can expose the fabricated nature and contingent of boundaries. The presence of darkness in a place, therefore, transforms that place into something that can undo seemingly fixed boundaries and draw our attention to the relationality of space. Similarly, Doreen Massey argues that

the particularity of any place is [ . . . ] constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter-position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that 'beyond'. (Massey 1994, p. 5, original emphasis)

Rather than facilitating an oppositional relationship where queer space in Waters's novels is in absolute opposition to space governed by heteropatriarchal codes, darkness serves to break down the illusion that there are any rigidly set up boundaries between the two. By confusing boundaries, all-encompassing darkness functions as a tool to help reorganize our thoughts about how space is constructed and policed. In this article, I argue that darkness contributes to the creation of, and expands the concept of, heterotopia.

## 2. Heterotopic Darkness and Queerness

Heterotopia, a concept Michel Foucault first mentioned in the preface to *The Order of Things* (1966) and then elaborated on in a radio talk (1966) and his lecture to a group of architects (1967), invites us to acknowledge the potentiality of thinking differently about spaces that are 'different'. According to Foucault, heterotopia is "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1986, p. 24). Foucault argues that while utopias are only imaginary, and thus unattainable, heterotopias do exist as real sites. Foucault uses the metaphor of a mirror to show that heterotopia is both a reflection of reality and, since the image in the mirror diverges from the reflection by being inverted, a reminder of potential changes and contradictions within it. Therefore, heterotopia "exposes, reveals or recreates the 'real' spaces of society" (Palladino and Miller 2015, p. 5). Furthermore, Peter Johnson points out that "heterotopia not only contrasts with utopia, but actually undermines or unsettles it" (Johnson 2006, p. 82). While utopian imagination represents the yearning for the idealistic, dreamlike society, heterotopias do not always guarantee the fulfilment of those desires. There is always a sense of vulnerability—a sense that what can be achieved in heterotopias does not lead to ultimate happiness. As Johnson goes on to argue, heterotopias "hold no promise or space of liberation. With different degrees of relational intensity, heterotopias glitter and clash in their incongruous variety, illuminating a passage for our imagination" (Johnson 2006, p. 87). Similarly, for Kevin Hetherington, heterotopias "create a neutral space that establishes a mode of ordering out of an assemblage of the incongruous and different that seeks to represent and to order in line with ideas about the good" (Hetherington 1997, p. 141). Both Johnson and Hetherington use the word 'incongruous' to highlight the incoherent nature of heterotopic spaces. Heterotopias always remain part of reality, yet never fully controlled by the dominant power structure.

Since much critical attention has been paid to concrete, solidly established spaces (boarding schools, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and theaters, to name a few), the heterotopic potential of darkness has not been discussed so far. However, in Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian trilogy, consisting of *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002), darkness proves a critical factor that renders a space heterotopic. This is because darkness blurs the boundary between heteronormative and queer, hence allowing transgression of the characters within Waters's novels. Her characters utilize darkness as their queer heterotopic space in order to call into question dominant heteronormative ideologies. Darkness plays an important role at the inception of the characters' romantic relationships by facilitating spaces that allow their non-normative feelings to be expressed, thereby bringing queer desire to the forefront of each narrative. Within queer heterotopic space created out of the darkness, there is a confluence of opposing values that enables the characters to examine the possibility of transgressing heteronormativity and envisioning alternative queer futures. Instead of giving her queer characters an easy way out of their oppressive conditions, Waters's heterotopic spaces license the characters' continuous efforts to contest heteronormative codes within the system.

Queer studies, among many other disciplines, sees the concept of heterotopia as a valuable device for interrogating the heteronormative system. Using Foucault's idea of heterotopia as a starting point, Angela Jones conceptualizes queer heterotopias as "sites of empowerment", which "exist in opposition to heteronormative spaces and are spaces where individuals seek to disrupt heterosexist discourses" (Jones 2009, p. 2). Queer heterotopias'

relationality to heteronormative spaces that surround them is exactly what allows such sites the power to counter the dominant societal system. Darkness in Waters's neo-Victorian trilogy gives her characters a sense that they are temporarily liberated from their constraints, encouraging them to pursue their queer desires. Primarily, Waters's queer heterotopic spaces fall into one of the categories of heterotopia that Foucault calls "heterotopias of deviation", a type of heterotopia for "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm" (Foucault 1986, p. 25). Heterotopic spaces in Waters's novels are utilized or created by the queer characters—lesbians and/or those who do not fit in the category of 'normal' because of their norm-defying attitudes—to compensate for the restrictions imposed upon them by hegemonic society. However, the heterotopic spaces of Waters's queer characters can also be construed either as heterotopias "of illusion" or heterotopias "of compensation" (Foucault 1986, p. 27). The heterotopia of illusion functions "to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory" (Foucault 1986, p. 27). Heterotopias of compensation, on the other hand, "create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (Foucault 1986, p. 27). More often than not, spaces that are created by Waters's characters are the result of their impromptu actions, making them just as "messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (Foucault 1986, p. 27) as the spaces in which their queer desires have been suppressed. However, by revealing the constructed and/or fabricated nature of their surroundings, heterotopias of darkness in Waters's neo-Victorian novels make the characters' queer desire seem like a realistic possibility, facilitating opportunities of their transition from oppressed queer subjects to liberated ones.

Darkness creates more than a space of resistance that disrupts heteronormativity. It also allows for exploration of what is possible in order to satisfy the characters' queer desire. As Amanda Dennis contends, "heterotopia is related to [ . . . ] a crossing that enables exploration and experimentation" (Dennis 2017, p. 171). Dennis bases her argument on Bertrand Westphal's reading of Foucault's heterotopia, which he connects with the concept of transgression. Westphal calls heterotopia "a 'laboratory of the possible'", in which we serve as "the investigator of the integral space [that] sometimes occurs in the field of reality and sometimes outside of it" (Westphal 2011, p. 63). Johnson makes a similar point when he argues that "the concept of heterotopia is fruitful for the testing of boundaries, drawing new connections and upsetting established fields of study" (Johnson 2013, p. 800). Furthermore, in his discussion of utopia, Louis Marin mentions the utopic potential of the horizon that is comparable to heterotopia's function to be exploratory and experimental: "The limitless horizon is [ . . . ] where it seems possible to have a glimpse of the other side of the sky, a 'beyond-space' encountered through the poetic and rhetorical figure of the twilight, in terms of which a bridge seems to be established between the visible and the invisible" (Marin 1993, p. 407). The trope of the twilight, a composite of light and darkness, enables us to interrogate the present and envision the idealistic future. Darkness in Waters's novels is an essential part of the characters' exploration and experimentation of the possibility that they can establish a space hospitable to expressions of queer desire. What the characters experience in the darkness invites them to reassess the boundary between solid reality and pure imagination. Hence, darkness is used as a critical means to propel their queer relationships forward.

Metaphors of darkness are useful not just for the advancement of queer desire in Waters's neo-Victorian novels but also more generally for the neo-Victorian project of adapting and appropriating the past. As Louisa Hadley argues, the Victorians are "[c]lose enough for us to be aware that we have descended from them and yet far enough away for there to be significant differences in life-styles" (Hadley 2010, p. 7), possessing an inherent duality somewhat akin to heterotopias' simultaneous indefinite Otherness and localizable existence in reality. Neo-Victorian writers take advantage of this ambiguity to help us reformulate our knowledge of the Victorian period. In an interview with Kaye Mitchell, Waters comments on her first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, describing its aim as

to be more playful with history, to ‘parade’ history and to parade its own status as a historical fiction. I was very interested [ . . . ] in how of course we can’t reconstruct the past or capture the past, we can only reinvent it, so I wanted the novel to be very self-consciously a piece of lesbian historical fantasy (Mitchell 2013, p. 131) [.]

Waters is given freedom to adapt and appropriate the Victorian past because of the impossibility of fully capturing the past, much like how heterotopias can reflect but never wholly contain the reality of which they are part. Neo-Victorianism takes a playful attitude towards what cannot be known to us due to the lack of records or has been unexplored about the Victorian period—what has been left in ‘the dark’. As Jerome de Groot writes, “[l]esbian historical fiction might allow the creation of a new set of possibilities, outside of (or at least not defined by) patriarchal, heteronormative bounds and historiographic limits” (De Groot 2010, p. 151). The historiographic ‘darkness’ gives neo-Victorian writers an opportunity to be imaginative and explore new ways of dealing with the past, similar to how heterotopias invite new ways of reflecting on reality, not least through their links with “heterochrony” (Foucault 1986, p. 26). Put differently, darkness functions analogous to heterotopia’s enactment of “a sort of absolute break with [ . . . ] traditional time” (Foucault 1986, p. 26). Rather aptly, Foucault cites the cemetery as the prime example of “heterochrony”, since it “begins with [ . . . ] the loss of life” (Foucault 1986, p. 26), and hence descent into the eternal darkness of the grave.

In her neo-Victorian fiction, Waters makes use of darkness to produce space that eludes the heteronormative dichotomy. Focusing on the transgressive, experimental, and transformative nature of heterotopic darkness, this article examines the way Waters’s neo-Victorian trilogy serves to disrupt heteronormative conceptions of space.

### 3. “I Must Be Quite Invisible against Its Shadows”: Performance and Visibility in *Tipping the Velvet*

The theatrical space, the primary setting of *Tipping the Velvet*, is classified by Foucault as one of the examples of heterotopia, for it “consists of the combination of two different spaces: the real space of the audience and the virtual space of the scene” (De Cauter and Dehaene 2008, p. 93). The juxtaposition of these two spaces is what enables the protagonist Nan Astley<sup>1</sup> to discover and explore her queerness in the music hall environs. Nan attributes one of the reasons for her fascination with the theater to the effect created by the lighting, reflecting on her particular liking for seats in the gallery:

Here you knew yourself to be not just at a show but in a *theatre* [ . . . ] and you marvelled to see your neighbours’ faces, and to know your own to be like theirs—all queerly lit by the glow of the footlights, and damp at the lip, and with a grin upon it, like that of a demon at a hellish revue. (Waters 1998, p. 9, original emphasis)

What Nan describes here is the balance of light and darkness within the theater, which has a transformative effect on the audience as much as on the performers. The demonic feature assumed by the audience because of the lighting signifies transgression of boundaries between normal and abnormal, normative and queer, and suggests the theatrical space’s heterotopic potential to turn normativity on its head. The audience sit in the dark while the stage is lit up, which facilitates the audience’s engagement in non-normative desires and allows them to be projected onto the performers. The metaphorical use of light appears again when Nan becomes Kitty’s backstage assistant: her world “was full of queer electric spaces, that [Kitty] left ringing with music or glowing with light” (Waters 1998, p. 38). The interplay of light and darkness continually serves to reveal Nan’s queer desire and transform her world that has been hitherto organized by heteronormative codes. The theatrical world that is filled with darkness and light promises a new site that welcomes Nan’s non-normative sexuality, but at the same time, the light metaphor suggests that the sphere where Nan can openly express her queerness remains clearly demarcated: it is confined to the other space of the theater but cannot be pursued in the light outside it. Alone these lines, Jeanette King writes that “[t]he theatre [ . . . ] licenses the temporary

breaking of gender boundaries within its walls" (King 2005, p. 147)—"temporary" and "within its walls" being the operative words here. Transgressive acts in music halls are permitted only for the duration of the performances "as the only acceptable place for transvestism to be performed" (Neal 2011, p. 60), and the same applies to Nan's exploration of queerness as an audience member. Darkness, on the other hand, contributes to creating spaces that reveal the constructed nature of the demarcation between the norms accepted in the real world and those which are not.

The bedroom functions as another heterotopic space where Nan can secretly and temporarily explore her feelings towards Kitty, and as much is emphasized once again by Waters's metaphorical use of light and darkness. Nan's bedroom in her family home in Whitstable, which she shares with her sister Alice, is transformed into a heterotopia of compensation, because "in the darkness" she can "ease back the mantle of restraint that keeps [her] passion dimmed throughout the day, and let it glow a little" (Waters 1998, p. 41). The contrast between the dark bedroom and her passion that is likened to light shows that, within this heterotopic space, Nan's queerness is paradoxically both hidden and revealed. Furthermore, darkness plays a major role in encouraging Nan and Kitty to act on their mutual feelings. On their way back from a music hall to their rented rooms in a London boarding house, they get off the carriage to marvel at the frozen Thames, and kiss for the first time on the shadowy Embankment. As is the case with the theater and the bedroom, the scene exhibits the interplay of light and darkness by the description of "the lights of the Embankment" and how "a belt of amber beads dissolv[es] into the night" (Waters 1998, p. 101). Shortly after the first kiss, Kitty draws Nan "into the shadow of the carriage, where [they are] hidden from sight. Here [they] stepped together, and kissed again" (Waters 1998, p. 103). Although they are outside (i.e., in a public space), and there is a carriage driver nearby, the shadow creates a temporary hiding place for their exploration of queer feelings for one another. The use of the word "step" here is noteworthy, since it suggests the action of moving into a new realm, a heterotopic site created out of the darkness.

After this scene, the women continue to display their lesbian desire in their bedroom, a more private space that is conventionally reserved for the exhibition of sexuality: Gill Valentine thus writes of the assumption that "sexuality would appear to belong in the private space of the home" (Valentine 1997, p. 285). This applies to queer sexuality as well, as Claire O'Callaghan argues, noting that in Waters's novels, bedrooms "register the carnality of lesbian desire and become spaces where sexually different practices are indulged and enjoyed" (O'Callaghan 2014, p. 129). While agreeing with this assessment of Waters's queer spatial politics, I would stress the importance of darkness in transforming bedrooms into queer heterotopic sites. Once the carriage arrives at their boarding house, Kitty and Nan "stumble to the bedroom through the darkness" (Waters 1998, p. 104). Consequently, the darkness functions as a threshold into a queer heterotopic space, where they transgress heteronormative boundaries. Furthermore, once Nan becomes an integral part of Kitty's male-impersonating acts, their performance in music halls begin to have a lot in common with their expression of queer desire in the bedroom: "making love to Kitty—a thing done in passion, but always, too, in shadow and in silence [ . . . ] and posing at her side in a shaft of limelight [ . . . ] these things were not so very different" (Waters 1998, pp. 127–28). Light and darkness are contrasted here, which indicates that they are two sides of the same coin in terms of Nan's attempt to demonstrate her non-normative desire.

After Kitty's betrayal and desertion to wed their manager Walter Bliss, in a resort to a self-repressive heteronormative masquerade, Nan undertakes multiple attempts to find a place that embraces her queerness. During her quest, Nan's vision of happiness always remains predicated on her relationship with Kitty, thus reworking earlier tropes of darkness and light. In each encounter with female characters who impact Nan's journey of self-realization, darkness is employed strategically to reveal the trace of Kitty's (and the theater's) influence. As stated earlier, the darkened bedroom was the place where Nan secretly exhibited her non-normative desire towards Kitty, and also where Nan and Kitty initiated their queer relationship. Therefore, whenever Nan utilizes darkness in search

for a space to express her queer desire, her attempts are conditioned by her first lesbian relationship. At the same time, however, she tries to complicate the power relations by taking up a different position to her initial, passive one. Derek Hook links the concept of heterotopia with Foucault's other works on the structure of power, stressing the importance of regarding "*spatialization as a means of making meaning and power*" (Hook 2007, p. 205, original emphasis). Darkness creates sites where Nan attempts to impose new meanings on heterotopic spaces and renegotiate the queer power dynamics. Nan's first encounter with Florence Banner is highlighted by the way she uses darkness in order to conceal her identity: "The room behind me I had let darken; I guessed that, apart from the occasional dancing glow of my cigarette tip, I must be quite invisible against its shadows" (Waters 1998, p. 221). Being in darkness gives Nan an opportunity to control how she is perceived, allowing her to dictate the terms of her relationship with Florence. Shortly after this encounter, however, Nan's first meeting with Diana Lethaby disrupts these more liberated power dynamics, ironically also due to the effects of darkness. Nan's encounter with Diana takes place when Nan cross-dresses and walks the streets at night for solicitation. When Nan enters Diana's carriage, she cannot tell whether the person inside is a man or a woman: "all was dark; I saw only the vague outline of a shoulder, an arm, a knee, against the lighter square of the far window" (Waters 1998, p. 232). Darkness hides Diana's features, rendering her a mysterious figure. This puts her in a superior position, which foreshadows Nan's 'kept' status as Diana's closely controlled plaything. Darkness thus plays an essential part in Nan's first encounters with other queer women, not only licensing Nan's expression of queer desire but also working as a constant indication that space is always linked to the formation and renewal of power structures, from which queer relations too are not devoid.

#### 4. "I Wanted It Darker": Darkness and Queer Imagination in *Affinity*

Darkness abounds in the narrative of *Affinity*: in the prison, in the séance room, and even in the streets, each space is filled with the darkness that contributes to the narrative's sombre atmosphere. However, it is only after Margaret learns about Selina's past as a spirit medium at the British National Association of Spiritualist that darkness contributes to creating heterotopic space and stimulating her queer imagination. Upon visiting the Millbank prison, Margaret feels that "it is a darker and more bitter place now [ . . . ]. There is a darkness to the building too" (Waters 1999, p. 157). In *Affinity*, the darkness serves to create a network that binds the queer characters together. As Foucault argues, "our experience of the world is less that of long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (Foucault 1986, p. 22). Darkness transforms spaces into heterotopic sites which uphold and promote Margaret's queer imagination that there is "[t]he cord of darkness" (Waters 1999, p. 286) that unites her with Selina. As her bond with Selina develops—despite the fact that this bond turns out to be only imaginary, since Margaret is manipulated by Selina so that the latter and Margaret's maidservant Ruth Vigers can be reunited—Margaret associates the connection between Selina and herself with the darkness.

After Selina is placed in "the dark cell" (Waters 1999, p. 255), a room for isolation and punishment, Margaret tries to put herself in a similar situation. Seeking the darkest possible spot in her bedroom, she climbs into the closet so that she can suffer alongside Selina.

I found this room quite dark [ . . . ]. I thought, *It isn't dark enough!* I wanted it darker. *Where is it dark?* I saw the half-open door of my closet; even in there, however, there was a corner that seemed darker than the rest. [ . . . ] Then I knew where I was. I was with *her*, and close to her, so close [ . . . ]. I felt the cell about me, the jacket upon me—(Waters 1999, pp. 256–57, original emphasis)

Here, being in a closet—the literal play on the expression that means having one's desire rendered invisible by society—paradoxically highlights Margaret's queer desire. Margaret's obsession with the room's darkness emphasizes that the absence of light serves as a conduit that links Margaret to Selina on a psychological level, allowing her to be part of a virtual spatial network. For King, this scene is indicative of "[t]he full extent of

[Margaret's] identification with Selina", because "she feels she is with Selina, in the cell, but she is also re-enacting those moments Selina spent in a cupboard during her séances" (2005, p. 92). Margaret's attempt to recreate a séance-like situation for the purpose of feeling connected to Selina is a reminder that female spiritualists utilized darkness to interfere with patriarchal norms. In *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, Alex Owen demonstrates that "[w]ithin the séance, and in the name of spirit possession, women openly and flagrantly transgressed gender norms" (Owen 1989, p. 11). In a similar vein, Tatiana Kontou argues that "[s]piritualism [ . . . ] provides a sensuous, fantastical, erotic topography—a real and imaginary space in which gender norms are overturned and forbidden pleasures are enjoyed" (Kontou 2009, p. 186). In *Affinity*, Waters not only uses the séance to tamper with gender, but also with sexual norms through Ruth's performance as the spirit Peter Quick. By titillating female guests and emasculating male ones, Selina and Ruth create "a subversively sexualised queer space" (O'Callaghan 2014, p. 128). Margaret's action of confining herself in a closet is similar to Selina's séance in that in both cases the women use darkness to enact and explore their non-normative desires. Margaret's room is converted into a queer space filled with darkness, where she and Selina can be in close contact. Her fantasy of communicating with Selina in her cell is augmented by the presence of the darkness, which transforms Margaret's bedroom into a queer heterotopic site.

Margaret's attempt to psychologically connect with Selina, by entrapping herself in a dark closet, underscores the heterotopic nature of this space. One of the principles of heterotopia identified by Foucault is its capability of "juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces" (Foucault 1986, p. 25). Within the closet space, the past (Selina's séance) and the present (Selina at Millbank) are juxtaposed. Additionally, Margaret creates a situation similar to Selina's séance, and in this space where past and present overlap, she assumes the role of a spirit medium to voice her queer desire. Kathleen Renk argues that female neo-Victorian writers portray women as those who "demonstrate a 'will to possess' themselves and thereby embolden and energize themselves as artists, writers, rogues/gender outlaws, spiritualists, and travelers/adventurers" (Renk 2020, p. 2). For Renk, "women's sexual and creative eros (what could be called sexual and creative subjectivity)" is at the center of neo-Victorian fiction written by women, which simultaneously deals with gender and sexuality issues in the past and the present. In *Affinity*, Selina is the character who "has staged a theatrical display [ . . . ] as a way to seize power", in spite of the fact that Ruth serves as a puppet master figure both at the séances and in the deception practiced on Margaret and others to effect Selina's escape from prison (Renk 2020, p. 136). However illusory and manipulated Margaret's fantasy of a spiritual connection with Selina may be, the protagonist's action of entrapping herself in a closet constitutes her attempt to establish herself as a queer subject in queer heterotopic space. At the same time, Margaret's feeling of wearing a straitjacket herself and occupying an isolation cell clearly reveals her emotional link to the present incarcerated Selina. Margaret's imagination transforms her gown into a straitjacket when she realizes that "[her] gown had [her] gripped like a fist, so that the more [she] wiggled to undo it, the tighter it grew" (Waters 1999, p. 257). This description helps Margaret verbalize her sense of entrapment within the domestic sphere enforced by her authoritative mother's repressive heteronormative gender expectations. One of the elements of heterotopia that critics tend to dismiss, according to Johnson, is its imaginative quality: heterotopias are "spaces of, and for, the imagination" (Johnson 2013, p. 798). Margaret's room serves as a heterotopic space that helps her develop her queer imagination.

Margaret's bedroom has always been a potential heterotopic site since it has been the source of her imagination since her childhood. She and her siblings slept in the room she currently uses as her own, and it contains traces of that past: "There are still marks on the ceiling where a swing once hung, and still some of the nursery books upon my shelves" (Waters 1999, p. 126). It is possible to link this space to what Foucault says in a radio talk about children's imaginative play: "These counter-sites, these locally realised utopias, are

well recognised by children" (Foucault 2010; trans. and qtd. in Johnson 2013, p. 798).<sup>2</sup> In this radio talk, Foucault pays particular attention to the parent's bed where children can experiment with a variety of imaginary settings while their parents are away. In a similar way, Margaret's room works to invent "dream-like spaces that are firmly connected to and mirror the outside world" (Johnson 2013, p. 798). Margaret's world, both within her house and outside of it, is under constant surveillance by characters whose behaviors symbolize heteronormativity (chiefly, her mother and the matrons at Millbank). Her darkened room is the primary heterotopic place that represents her act of resistance and escape, because this is where Margaret's queer imagination is allowed to develop and expand.<sup>3</sup>

### 5. "[I]t Was like Kissing Darkness": Materializing Queer Bodies in *Fingersmith*

At the center of *Fingersmith*'s narrative lie Sue Trinder's and Maud Lilly's respective plans to deceive each other, which become fractured through their sexual interactions in the darkness. Sue's and Maud's romantic feelings toward each other fully materialize the night before Maud's and Gentleman's wedding. The country mansion of Briar is the site that represents the tyrannical patriarchal power of Maud's uncle Christopher Lilly, and Sue's and Maud's passionate expression of queer desire within its walls shows their defiance of the gender norms that have been imposed on them. Most importantly, their resistance to heteropatriarchal authority hinges on queering what darkness signifies at Briar. The permeating dark is at first a compelling characteristic associated with heteropatriarchal oppression within the estate. Sue describes the hall of Briar as "all dark and dim and shabby, as it was everywhere in that house" (Waters 2002, p. 74). Similarly, when Maud arrives at Briar for the first time as a child, she describes her experience of going "into a darkness that seems to lap at my buff gown", and when the door of the mansion closes behind her, "the dark at once grows deeper" (Waters 2002, p. 184). The way darkness literally and metaphorically overtakes Maud not only foreshadows the ordeals she goes through at Briar but also marks darkness as a key feature that symbolizes patriarchal violence. Furthermore, the way the house was built adds to the creation of the unsettling environment: "the walls in that house were all of dark oak panelling, very gloomy on the eye and very baffling, for the doors were set so pat in their frames, you could not spot them" (Waters 2002, pp. 71–72), apparently allowing no egress or escape. The darkness that fills Briar functions as a metaphor of patriarchal norms that entrap Maud, Sue, and others who live and work at the estate.

Furthermore, darkness helps establish the special system of opening and closing that Foucault lists as one of the principles of heterotopia: "the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place [ . . . ] the individual has to submit to rites and purifications" (Foucault 1986, p. 26). In *Fingersmith*, this system of opening and closing highlights the elements of performance and masquerade, as indicated by Sue's description of a hidden path at the back of her Lant Street house in London:

What there was, was a little covered passage and a small dark court. You might stand in that and think yourself baffled; there was a path, however, if you knew how to look. (Waters 2002, p. 10)

As in the case of the wainscoting in Briar, the Lant Street darkness blurs and even hides boundaries, and therefore there is a need to acknowledge and follow the pre-set 'script' to be permitted access into a certain place. In the case of Lant Street, a criminal establishment involved in illegal coining and fencing stolen goods, entry depends on prior knowledge of secret codes and knocks. In a similar vein, at Briar, everyone is required to behave as Uncle Lilly dictates: Sue feels that "[t]here might as well have been grooves laid for us in the floorboards; we might have glided on sticks" (Waters 2002, p. 108). This imagery of grooves reinforces the predeterminedness of all characters' actions based on their assigned gender roles.

Just like their actions and behaviors at Briar are dictated by Uncle Lilly, they also need to follow Gentleman's plot to deceive each other. This plot starts to fall through, however, when they go 'off-script' to gradually reveal their transgressive desires. Sue and

Maud play on and subvert the heterosexual discourse by ‘practicing’ or imitating what a heterosexual couple is supposed to do on their wedding night. Although at first Maud attempts to enact a common scene of pornographic literature with which she is familiar (“this is how it is done, in my uncle’s books: two girls, one wise and one unknowing” (Waters 2002, p. 281)), she soon realizes the difference between fiction and reality. Maud’s revised perception of relationships between women interrogates the conventional view that “love between women has been primarily a sexual phenomenon only in male fantasy literature” (Faderman 1981, p. 17). Sue and Maud depend on darkness to subvert the heteropatriarchal norms to which they are subjected and to create a heterotopic space to materialize their queer desire, thereby shifting what darkness represents at Briar.

The description of their sexual act involves references to darkness, which serves to invert the signification of darkness as heteropatriarchal oppression and violence. Sue says that kissing Maud is “like kissing darkness. As if the darkness had life, had a shape, had taste, was warm and glib” (Waters 2002, p. 141). She goes on to liken touching Maud’s body to “calling the heat and shape of her out of the darkness—as if the darkness was turning solid and growing quick, under my hand” (Waters 2002, p. 142). These expressions serve to reverse Terry Castle’s claim that lesbian desires are “obscured, disembodied, decarnalized” (Castle 1993, p. 34). Maud corroborates the potential of Sue’s action in materializing queer desire when she recounts the same event later in the novel: “[Sue’s] fingers [ . . . ] gather me, out of the darkness, out of my natural shape” (Waters 2002, p. 282). Darkness produces a sense of disorientation—both physically and figuratively—that helps set up a suitable space for Sue and Maud to undermine heteronormative values. Sara Ahmed observes the possibility of disorientation to queer traditional, thus heteronormative, life narratives: “queer lives are about the potentiality of not following certain conventional scripts of family [ . . . ] whereby ‘not following’ involves disorientation: it makes things oblique” (Ahmed 2006, pp. 177–78). Since Sue and Maud “cannot see” in the darkness, they “can only feel [ . . . ] and taste” each other (Waters 2002, p. 281), creating a space of queer sexual liberation where they indulge themselves in spontaneous exploration of, and experimentation with, their non-normative desire. The darkened bedroom functions as a heterotopia of deviance, allowing Sue and Maud to envision an alternative future that is at odds with what is expected of them in heteronormative society.<sup>4</sup>

Sue’s action of gathering Maud out of the darkness during their sexual act not only signifies Maud being released from her psychological entrapment but also the transformation of darkness and its re-evaluation into a liminal, heterotopic site. As well as the metaphorical use of darkness that is ready to consume her when she first arrives at Briar, Maud, as amanuensis to her pornographic bibliophile uncle, associates herself with the dark ink used to write entries for Uncle Lilly’s pornographic index and, at the end of the novel, for authoring her own pornographic works. When Sue and Maud are reunited at Briar, Sue notices that Maud’s “fingers [are] dark with smudges of ink” (Waters 2002, p. 541). Without gloves, which Uncle Lilly used to force her to wear at all times, Maud’s fingers are stained as if the queer heterotopic darkness has literally consumed her body. Also, Sue’s and Maud’s reunion takes place in the library, which, as Sue once described, was “a dark [room], like all the other rooms there. Its walls were panelled all over in an old black wood, and its floor [ . . . ] was also black” (Waters 2002, p. 65). When Sue enters the library at the end of the novel, however, she “saw [Maud] clearly, because of the light” (Waters 2002, p. 541), suggesting the transformation of its space that used to represent Uncle Lilly’s patriarchal authority into a heterotopia of deviance for Maud. For Foucault, libraries are “heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time [ . . . ] in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit” (Foucault 1986, p. 26). The accumulation of time within a heterotopic library space indicates that different values that are linked to specific time periods in the past are juxtaposed, and that the meaning of darkness for Sue and Maud is constantly renewed and re-evaluated. This heterotopic space allows Sue and Maud to continue to expand their queer imagination and examine possibilities of interrogating heteronormative values.

## 6. Conclusions: Heterotopias and Queer Imagination

In ‘Of Other Spaces’, Foucault conceives of heterotopias as spaces that “[draw] us out of ourselves” (Foucault 1986, p. 23). By encouraging and expanding the characters’ vision of their futures that is at odds with the dominant heteronormative system, heterotopic spaces in Waters’s neo-Victorian trilogy serves to “provide an escape route from power” (Johnson 2006, p. 86). In various kinds of darkness, the characters find space to express their queer desire toward one another, which in turn helps them realize that there might be possibilities of challenging heteronormative societal rules that have been dictating their way of life. Although darkness might produce heterotopic sites in a transitory timeframe and often only in precarious ways, it plays a critical part in invigorating the characters’ imagination about non-normative futures, otherwise unthinkable. Hilde Heynen advocates the temporary and ambiguous nature of heterotopias, calling them “constellations of the in-between, where assumed realities [ . . . ] are being mirrored and doubled, thus exposing the traces of what is repressed” (Heynen 2008, p. 322). In Waters’s neo-Victorian texts, heterotopic spaces created in darkness are neither fully functional sites of resistance nor sites of utopian idealism. Rather, Waters’s works highlight the fact that heterotopias remain an ambiguous mix of various, often contradictory, concepts.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Nan begins to use her stage name Nan King after she joins Kitty Butler’s male impersonating act.
- <sup>2</sup> Johnson translates and quotes *Les Corps Utopique, Les Hétérotopies* (2010), published in French, which includes Foucault’s 1966 radio talk. This book has not been translated into English.
- <sup>3</sup> Margaret’s last journal entry, written after the realization that “[t]here never was a cord of darkness, never a space in which [Margaret’s and Selina’s] spirits touched” (Waters 1999, p. 348) implies that she is going to commit suicide by throwing herself into the Thames. The Thames, serving as a watery grave for Margaret, constitutes a heterotopia of compensation, which ironically allows her to resist and escape further suffering. Andrew Davies’s 2008 adaptation ends with a scene where Margaret and Selina are reunited under water, identifying the Thames as a heterotopic space where Margaret’s queer imagination is preserved.
- <sup>4</sup> The darkness functions as a heterotopia of deviance earlier in the narrative when Sue listens in the dark as Gentleman rapes her former maid Agnes in the room next door. In this scene, however, the darkness exemplifies a space of sexual violation, not that of queer sexual liberation.

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