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La cueva como heterotopía neo-victoriana: *The Realm of Shells* (2006) de Sonia Overall y *Elijah's Mermaid* (2012) de Essie Fox

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Abstract: News of the discoveries of natural grottos filled the pages of newspapers and journals throughout the nineteenth century. Additionally, artificial grottos opened regularly for the entertainment of the public and were commonplace in the cultural and literary products of the period. In this article, I analyse neo-Victorian appropriations of nineteenth-century grottos as Foucauldian heterotopias through two case studies: Sonia Overall's *The Realm of Shells* (2006) and Essie Fox's *Elijah's Mermaid* (2012). Overall's and Fox's novels illustrate how the heterotopic features of the Victorian grotto are expanded in neo-Victorian fiction as counter-spaces of emplacement that enable heterochronic forms of resistance.
Keywords: grotto; heterotopia; Victorian; Neo-Victorian; Sonia Overall; Essie Fox.
Summary: The Grotto as neo-Victorian Heterotopia. Foucault's Heterotopology and the Neo-Victorian Grotto. Neo-Victorian Grottos in Sonia Overall's *The Realm of Shells* (2006) and Essie Fox's *Elijah's Mermaid* (2012). Conclusions.

Resumen: Descubrimientos de cuevas naturales coparon las páginas de la prensa del siglo diecinueve a la vez que se inauguraban grutas y cuevas artificiales para el entretenimiento de una sociedad que era testigo de cómo éstas se convertían en lugares comunes entre los productos culturales y literarios de su tiempo. En este artículo, analizamos la apropiación neo-victoriana de grutas y cuevas del siglo XIX como heterotopías foucauldianas a través de dos estudios de caso: *The Realm of Shells* (2006) de Sonia Overall y *Elijah's Mermaid* (2012) de Essie Fox. Las dos novelas

ilustran cómo los rasgos heterotópicos de la cueva victoriana son expandidos en la ficción neo-victoriana como contra-emplazamientos que permiten formas de resistencia heterocrónica.
Palabras clave: cuevas; heterotopía; victoriana; neo-victoriana; Sonia Overall; Essie Fox.

THE GROTTO AS NEO-VICTORIAN HETEROTOPIA

One of the most fashionable forms of entertainment among the upper classes in the mid-eighteenth century was to visit Alexander Pope's grotto in Twickenham. The public were drawn to this grotto until the late nineteenth century and newspapers report that visitors were able to inspect the attraction during the celebrations for the bicentenary of the birth of Pope ("The Provinces").[1] Nineteenth-century travellers to the spot reminisced about the golden days of the grotto, which soon grew to be seen as a shrine for worship by intellectuals. The reporter of a London trip in *Bell's Life in London* in 1824, for example, recalls one such visit as follows:

> We entered this famed subterraneous passage from the Thames, and found ourselves upon that spot where once sat in social and philosophic intercourse Swift and Atterbury, Pope and Bolingbroke, and the Nobles and wits who composed what is called the Augustan Age of English Literature. The charm of the association which this spot inspired recalled the men and events of Queen Anne's reign. ("Visit to Hampton Court")

Recurring images of Pope's grotto abound in the literature of the nineteenth century, both to praise and to denigrate the poet and as the epitome of poetic inspiration and romantic love.[2] Yet the grotto at Twickenham is but one of the many artificial caverns that captivated the Victorian imagination. Artificial grottos similar to Pope's opened regularly for the entertainment of the public, and reports of the discoveries of new

[1] In 1888, a performance of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was also held in the gardens of the Villa to entertain members of the "Irish party, half the Radical members, some Unionists and Conservatives, and a number of private persons" ("Midsummer Night's Dream at Pope's Villa").
[2] See, for example, George Colman, Thomas De Quincey, William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt.

natural grottos filled the pages of newspapers and journals throughout the century.[3] Eventually, grottos became an essential commodity in the nineteenth century for society as a whole.

Whether as part of the entertainment industry, recurring aesthetic concern or evidence of the thirst for conquest of a growing and powerful empire, the Victorian grotto may be read as one of the many cultural products that outlines the everyday life of the Victorians. As such, neo-Victorian literature, in its eagerness to excavate the past for its consumption in the present (Shiller; Gay et al.; Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*; Robinson; Boehm-Schnitzer and Gruss), could not ignore that the grotto was constructed as a space of visual, literary, and other cultural production throughout the nineteenth century.

At a 2015 international conference in Málaga, I first proposed the association of neo-Victorianism and Foucauldian heterotopias through the trope of the Victorian grotto (Monrós-Gaspar, "Of Grottos"). To date, only a limited number of articles, doctoral theses and book chapters have been published that link the two concepts (Ho; Scott; Costantini; Suwa; Esser *Re-calibrating*), and to my knowledge, none of these propose a methodological association of neo-Victorianism and heterotopic spaces as a theoretical concern. Fortunately, the fluid association between the two terms has deepened, and in 2022, Marie-Louise Kohlke and Akira Suwa, also participants at the 2015 conference, together with Elizabeth Ho co-edited the first special issue of *Humanities* devoted to the fruitful and ongoing symbiosis of the two critical concepts (Kohlke et al.). With articles that address the heterotopic nature of cemeteries, sites of heritage, postcolonial others, Young Adult fiction, the country house, the laboratory and the concept of darkness, the contributors to the journal explored Foucauldian "counter-sites" and proposed new sites of heterotopic encounters in neo-Victorian literature.

As Kohlke et al. argue in their introduction to the collection, "the fertile affinities revealed by considering heterotopia and neo-Victorianism in tandem, namely as cultural phenomena that facilitate new ways of thinking about the Long Nineteenth Century as defined by social spaces and their counter-structures or counter-emplacements" open up "a new archive of literary and cultural production" where "incongruous spaces for re-vision and contestation" abound (2). Given that one such type of space

[3] See, for example, the new grotto discovered in the southern side of the mountain of Pausillipo ("Antiquities").

is undoubtedly the Victorian grotto (Monrós-Gaspar, "La ninfa Eco"), far too little attention has been paid to a comprehensive analysis of this trope in neo-Victorian literature. Research on the subject has been mostly restricted to landscape phenomenology as exemplified in the work undertaken by Arias ("(Sub)Urban Landscapes") on Sonia Overall's *The Realm of Shells* (2006). This indicates a need to widen the corpus of research and critical approaches to map the cultural significance of grottos in neo-Victorian reimagining of the nineteenth century. To contribute to such a cartography, this study takes up Sonia Overall's *The Realm of Shells* (2006) and Essie Fox's *Elijah's Mermaid* (2012) as two central cases that generate new insights into the trope, exploring for the first time neo-Victorian appropriations of nineteenth-century grottos as Foucauldian heterotopias.

1. FOUCAULT'S HETEROTOPOLOGY AND THE NEO-VICTORIAN GROTTO

Foucault's ideas on heterotopology, as is well-known, were mostly developed at a lecture delivered on 14 March 1967 to the *Cercle d'études architecturales*. The transcription of the lecture was only published almost twenty years later in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* (October 1984) as '*Des espaces autres. Une conference inédite de Michel Foucault*' and first translated into English in 1986 (Dehaene and De Cauter 13).[4] In his lecture, Foucault identifies the external space as the space "in which we live…in which the erosion of our lives, of our time and our history occurs, the space that torments and consumes us" and is defined by diverse sets of relations (Foucault 16). Some such external spaces are capable of suspecting, neutralizing or inverting their relations with other sites (Foucault 17). As I discuss below, applying the theoretical principles that underpin the construction of such contesting counter-spaces of emplacement and identity allows us to analyse the use of the grotto in neo-Victorian fiction as an element of reconstruction and revision of the self; and also as a heterochronic space where the past merges with the present to challenge prescriptive relations and overcome traumatic experiences.

As I have argued elsewhere (Monrós-Gaspar, "Of Grottos"), the Victorian grotto can be read in Foucauldian terms as both a *heterotopia of*

[4] The translation consulted for this article was the revised and annotated translation by Lieven De Cauter and Michiel Dehaene published in 2008 under the title "Of Other Spaces".

crisis and a *heterotopia of compensation*. It may be considered the former because the grotto represents a sacred and forbidden place where individuals in transformation—in a state of crisis in relation to society—are concealed: for example, prophetic voices entranced by frenzied visions, magic beings between two worlds and young men and women on the brink of love.[5] Regarding the latter, Foucault explains that the role of a heterotopia of compensation is to "create another space, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is disorderly, ill construed and sketchy" (Foucault 21). Therefore, the Victorian grotto can function as a heterotopia of compensation in two contrasting ways. While it provides a real space of perfection where the voyeuristic male gaze can shape, mould and make use of an ideal woman, it also offers a space for female empowerment beyond the restrictions of Victorian England (Monrós-Gaspar, "Of Grottos"). The two texts considered in this article illustrate how the heterotopic features of the Victorian grotto are expanded in neo-Victorian fiction as cultural constructs that enable heterochronic forms of resistance.

In the second principle underpinning the concept of heterotopia, Foucault explains that,

> in the course of its history, a society can make a heterotopia that exists, and has not ceased to exist, function in a very different way; for each heterotopia…can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another. (Foucault 18)

As I demonstrate in the next section of this article, the Margate Shell Grotto fulfils various functions in the construction of the female protagonists' identities both in Overall's and Fox's novels. Memory and experience are the pillars that sustain the writers' historical reconstruction and contemporary appropriation of such functions, which coincides well with Mitchell's arguments that neo-Victorian fiction encourages us to

[5] Illustrations of such Victorian heterotopias abound. For example, Felicia Hemans invokes grotto fairies in her poems. In the introduction to her novel *The Last Man* (1826), Mary Shelley refers to her attempts to decipher the legacy of wisdom bequeathed by the Cumaean Sibyl in her cave. A grotto was the dwelling of a mysterious man in William Godwin's *Fleetwood; or, the New Man of Feeling* (1805). George Meredith stirred up memories from an idyllic landscape with grottos in *Diana of the Crossways* (1885). Disraeli's *Sybil; or The Two Nations* (1845) sets a hazardous escape route in a subterranean grotto.

"resist privileging history's non-fictional discourse" (4) in readings of the past and rely on the twentieth-century discourses of memory and non-academic forms of history to reinvent Victorian cultural products.

The multiple functions of the neo-Victorian grotto across time are also related to the sixth and final principle in Foucault's heterotopology, which relies on the idea that every heterotopia has a function in relation to the rest of the space. The neo-Victorian grotto is a site of concealment and transformation, but also of empowerment; thus, the grotto provides a counterpoint to the mainstream spaces of Victorian society that mould mainstream identities. As such, and in correlation with the fifth principle of Foucault's counter-spaces, which presupposes "a system of opening and closing that both isolates and makes them penetrable" (Foucault 21), the neo-Victorian grotto functions as a site of passage between temporalities but also between innocence and experience, submission, and empowerment. Ultimately, as exemplified in Overall's and Fox's novels, the grotto denotes a space where female minds and bodies are either constrained or challenged.

The third principle in Foucault's heterotopology sustains that "the heterotopia has the power to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 19), which he exemplifies with the space of the theatre, the cinema, or the garden. In the fourth principle, Foucault nourishes the idea that heterotopic spaces are open to heterochronisms where time is accumulated indefinitely, as in museums and libraries (Foucault 20). Historically, the intriguing life of artificial grottos began in the Hellenistic period, when grottos were built to honour water spirits (Jackson 4). Over time it became a custom to erect *nymphaeum*—temples and artificial grottos—around public fountains, Roman villas and gardens. During the sixteenth and through the eighteenth century, the tradition of artificial grottos occupied a place of honour in Italy. The practice then spread to England, where it remained in fashion until the late twentieth century (Jackson). Just as in the Foucauldian garden, the superimposed meanings of the grotto, from the Hellenistic period to the nineteenth century in Western culture, juxtapose in the same space two emplacements that might seem incompatible: sacred spaces of worship and ludic spaces of recreation. Additionally, the grotto overlays the present with fossilized reminiscences of the past: decorations of embedded minerals, shells and mosaics serve as a catalyst for reading the grotto as a neo-Victorian heterochronic space, where the echoes of the past coexist with the voices of the present. In the

section that follows, I support my claim that neo-Victorian grottos are best understood as Foucauldian heterotopias through two case studies that reveal the utility of the heterotopia as an analytical frame. The two selected novels re-write the nineteenth-century stories of Margate Shell Grotto to challenge the prescriptive social norms for women and restore their identities.

2. NEO-VICTORIAN GROTTOS IN SONIA OVERALL'S *THE REALM OF SHELLS* (2006) AND ESSIE FOX'S *ELIJAH'S MERMAID* (2012)

A mere two years before Queen Victoria ascended the throne, a legendary cavern in England was first discovered by a young boy, Joshua Newlove, during excavations for the foundations of a new school in Margate. From that moment on, the cavern was known as Margate Shell Grotto. It is said that when Joshua lowered his head into a hole in the ground, he emerged mesmerized by the shell tunnels he found there. With over four million shells and two thousand square feet of mosaic, the fascinating mystery surrounding the construction of the shell grotto still remains unresolved. This might explain why from 1838 until now, the grotto is one of the major local attractions in Margate (Haslam).

The discovery of the grotto was widely covered by the press of the time with illustrations of its tunnels and secret passages ("Links with the Past"). Provincial newspapers announced the opening of the mysterious grotto in 1838, highlighting its inscrutable aisles:

> The grotto...extends to a great distance under the hill, and is laid out in serpentine walks, alcoves, and passages of considerable extent, the sides being studded with shells, formed into elaborate and curious devices, and doubtless executed by torchlight. (*Kendal Mercury*)

Even though no conclusive evidence exists of the grotto's origins to date, some contemporary newspapers ventured to set its construction around the time of the "Saxon heptarchy" (*Kendal Mercury*). This increased the allure of the place to those inquisitive minds to history and to the recovery of the past in Victorian England. Much speculation surrounded the purpose of the chapels and tunnels of the grotto, which were believed to have been built as a place of worship. Conjectures reached the twentieth century with intellectuals championing both its ancient origin and modern construction alike ("Nota Bene").

In an intertextual and metatextual dialogue between the past and the present, both Sonia Overall and Essie Fox interrogate the Victorian penchant for grottos in *The Realm of Shells* (2006) and *Elijah's Mermaid* (2012), respectively. The two writers create a credible representation of the Margate grotto, interspersing historical veracity with fictive plots. As I shall contend next, Overall and Fox refigure the Victorian grotto through revisionist resignification of the trope to position women as central agents of the narrative. Both reshape past abuses of female minds and bodies into future processes of empowerment by reimagining Victorian grottos in revisited heterotopias.

Overall and Fox's approaches to the Victorian grotto in relation to female bodies may be discussed through various theoretical approaches to neo-Victorian fiction, such as trauma theory and notions of the trace.[6] Because, as Heilmann and Llewellyn put it, "Victorian sexuality and the way we re-imagine it . . . holds an irresistible appeal for the neo-Victorian imagination. The nature of our interest in the Victorian body arguably reveals less about the Victorians and more about our own preoccupations" (*Neo-Victorianism* 107). Due to practical constraints, this article cannot provide a full discussion of such theories as applied to the heterotopic space of the grotto in neo-Victorian fiction. Still, while the focus of the article remains on the analysis of the Foucauldian trope, I bring to light questions about the relationship between neo-Victorian appropriations of grottos and trauma that may be further explored in future publications.

In *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, Gutleben poses two questions that are central, Bowler and Cox argue, to the "neo-Victorian project" (Bowler and Cox 5) and have remained in neo-Victorian criticism since (Gay et al.; Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*; Robinson; Boehm-Schnitzer and Gruss). First, Gutleben questions whether the contemporary novel "sets out to rectify certain historical wrongs, to fight against specific prejudice and to subvert ideological and aesthetic commonplaces" (Gutleben 7). Then, Gutleben goes on to argue whether it simply "takes over a set of themes, of characters and of novelistic devices either because they appear as tokens of an unsurpassed art or because they perpetuate the immense success of the Golden Age of the British novel" (Gutleben 7). According to Renk, women writers' approach to the neo-Victorian project is revisionist when they address "the ways in which gender and sexuality

[6] See, for example, Arias ("Traces and Vestiges"), Onega and Ganteau (*Contemporary Trauma Narratives*), and Scott.

are constructed in the Victorian era" (3). The same argument permeates Maier and Ayres' edited volume on neo-Victorian representations of female madness. Therefore, even if neither Overall nor Fox defend an explicit feminist stance in their narratives,[7] the structure, plot, narrative voice and psychological depiction of the female characters in the two novels point to an intentional redefinition of female identities. For both Overall and Fox, the Margate grotto becomes—at very specific moments in the novels—the crime scene for the worst abuses. The sense of antiquity and exoticism occasionally associated with Victorian grottos wanes, and the once-fantastic pleasure domes are linked to anxiety and oppression. In a determined effort to overcome such abuses and re-define their identities, Frances and Pearl—the two heroines of the respective novels—contest and reinvent the space of the merciless grotto by recreating experiences that free their bodies through their own narratives. As such, they confirm the neo-Victorian premise that contemporary narratives remodel past social histories to "provide mechanisms of resilience" that restore wronged minds and bodies (Onega and Ganteau, "Introduction" 5).

Inspired by one of the display cases in Margate's grotto Museum,[8] Sonia Overall's *The Realm of Shells* was first published in 2006. The book is based on the discovery and exploitation of the site from the naive yet truthful eyes of the Newlove children. The narrative voice combines the internal monologue of a little girl—Frances Newlove, Joshua's sister and daughter of the schoolmaster who owned the ground—with the formal letter-writing of the seventy-year-old Frances who recalls the dark secrets of her infancy at the grotto from the perspective of the main female character. After biographical research into the real Newloves and the lives and customs of Margate residents in the 1830s, Overall recreates the characters who developed around the place from Frances's perspective. We therefore learn about their education, family, and social relations, including Captain Easter, the antagonist of the novel. The book, Overall claims, "is essentially a novel about place, about how a place can influence

[7] With regard to *The Realm of Shells*, Overall claims, "I didn't write the women in this book with any gender agenda. Having said that, it's impossible to ignore nineteenth-century attitudes towards women" (4).

[8] "In one of the display cases is a potted history of the shell grotto's 'discovery', in 1835, by Joshua Newlove . . . I read this, as most visitors do, before going into the grotto. It was a good story but it didn't mean much without seeing the place. Then I went into the chalk tunnel and saw the scale of the site and quality of the shell work. . . It was the central image for a story that unfolded over the next few months of research" (Overall 9).

and manipulate people. The grotto exerts a fascination on the book's characters, who all want a piece of it for themselves" (Overall 9).

The subjective relation of the characters with the place adds the factor of "interexperientiality" to Ricoeur's metaphor of the construction of new spatial structures. Ricoeur's association is founded on the idea that every new building "is inscribed in urban space like a narrative within a setting of intertextuality" (150). Overall expands the simile through a set of individual experiences—stories—which add to the objective, analytic and 'intertextual' construction of the place. This infrastructural approach to narrative-building holds because, as Koselleck argues, "there is no history which could be constituted independently of the experiences and expectations of active human agents" (257). For Koselleck, two concepts underpin chronologies of place: 'spaces of experience' and 'horizons of expectation.' The former are considered the present of the past, while the 'horizon of expectations' is the present of the future. If one should understand history as the dialogic tension between the two notions, the history of the Margate grotto as re-imagined by Overall is the history of the two presents retold and recalled by the two female narrators in the novel, the young and the adult Frances. By recreating her "horizon of expectations" and "spaces of experience" in the time frame of the narrative, Overall makes the readers witnesses of her own emplacement in and displacement from the enticing cave in various heterochronisms. As such, the grotto reveals "the power relations that still exist as haunting legacies in the present" (Kohlke et al. 2), thus proving to be an apt example of a Foucauldian heterotopia. Overall superimposes conceptions of time to refigure the grotto as a space where experiences and expectations meet to "rectify" the past (Gutleben 7).

Overall's neo-Victorian reappraisal of the trope serves as a tool of female empowerment only when understood in relation to time and the gesture of writing. Therefore, it is not only an example of literary healing, but it also demonstrates Heilmann and Llewellyn's ideas on women writers redressing "the past -a female past either outside of or silent within the male tradition" ("Hystorical" 142). As a *heterotopia of compensation*, Overall's Shell Grotto arouses the high expectations of the Newlove children who see in its secret chambers the space of illusion that exposes the strict instruction they received in the context of evangelical Christianity. As Overall explains, "The grotto responds to the motives and actions of the characters that explore it, being read by them accordingly as a magical space, a demonic realm or a *locus horridus*" (30). This recalls

the effects of Utilitarianism on the Dickensian Gradgrind children in *Hard Times* and the actions triggered after peeping through the grotto-like booth of the circus beyond the sensorial stance developed by critics (Arias, "(Sub)Urban Landscapes"). The dissolute behaviour that Overall allows in Shell Grotto interrogates Victorian attitudes towards education. As a *heterotopia of crisis*, Overall's grotto serves as the umbrella for the process of growth and transformation of the younger characters as well as for the corruption of the morale of the adults. Young Frances's disillusionment and unfulfilled expectations grow as Captain Easter's ambition for economic wealth is uncovered.

In contrast to the strong magnetism that the grotto exercises on the children at the beginning of the novel, the last letter written by the adult Frances in 1897 reads, "the place is nothing to me. I'm not interested in it any more" (Overall 325). Between 1835 and 1897—the time frame of the narrative—the grotto involves disparate moments in time where conjectures about its first builders, memories of its first discovery, and the set of experiences lived by the Newlove family intersperse to unfold the plot. They provide the adult Frances Newlove with the narrative frame in which to overcome her silenced encounter in the grotto.

Captain Easter's abuse of the young Frances is undisclosed by the narrative voice of the little girl who recalls the history of the Newloves at the grotto. The Captain's cruelty towards Fanny is stifled under the naked cries of "*No-oh-oh. No-oh-oh*" (Overall 61) and henceforth barely verbalized by her recurring address to the character as "*Hateful hateful*" (Overall 266). Only when Wales is working on the remodelling of the grotto and invites Fanny to see the shells does her interior voice dare to admit that the dark room in the shell is devilishly haunted by her memories of the past: "'Thank you for showing me' say I. He shrugs again, pointy. 'Don't you fret about that room, my girl' he says. 'It in't haunted.' It is though. Just not by anybody who is dead" (Overall 305).

Fanny's last chance to speak is through her last letter, where the adult Frances Schmidt responds to Mr. Goddard. The very last sentences in the letter culminate the sporadic efforts of the double narrator to excavate Fanny's memories: "there is still something I have to tell you, if you want to hear it. I swore once I'd never say, but that was all a long time ago. It can wait" (Overall 326). Correspondence between the schoolmaster's daughter and the real-life historian Algernon Goddard is filed in the archives of Canterbury Cathedral and served as a source of inspiration for Overall (Overall 10). Fanny's letter, therefore, acts as the archaeological

vestige that proves David Lowenthal's "mistrust of nostalgia" in contemporary reappraisals of the Victorian past. As Arias and Pulham argue with regard to Lowenthal's theories, "we no longer seek in the past a refuge of the present; instead, we excavate the past to expose its 'iniquities and indignities.'" (xiv). Frances' last letter accounts for her final excavation of her memories that attempt to denounce her silenced suffering. By asking the readers to fill in the gaps of such memories, Overall makes use of the voice of a postmodern narrative to expose and condemn the ignominy of the past.

Six years after the publication of *The Realm of Shells*, Essie Fox refigures the Victorian grotto in *Elijah's Mermaid* as a neo-Victorian heterotopia where female identities are moulded, contested, and (re)created through memory. *Elijah's Mermaid* opens when the infant of a young woman discovered dead by the Thames is found and brought to an exclusive brothel in London: Mrs Hibbert's *House of Mermaids*. Brought up under the name of Pearl, the girl is sold to Osborne Black—a patron of the brothel—at the auction of her maidenhood at the age of fourteen. The story of Pearl runs in parallel with that of the orphaned twins Lily and Elijah, who eventually meet the girl and form a bond that will mark their future personal, emotional and sexual development. Fox relies on neo-Victorian narratives with actual and invented nineteenth-century epigraphs, interpolated letters, tales, diaries and newspaper clippings to help her unfold the plot of the novel. Yet the narrative is mainly told from Pearl's and Lily's perspectives. This is a recurring trope in Fox's neo-Victorian novels, where stories are narrated from the viewpoint of two, often opposite, female subjectivities.

In the section "The Real Places Which Have Influenced the Settings for *Elijah's Mermaid*" appended to the novel, Fox declares that "The Grade I listed Margate Shell Grotto plays a relatively small part in *Elijah's Mermaid,* being the underground 'cave of shells' in which Pearl first poses in darkness for the artist Osborne Black. But it has a great significance in terms of what her life is about to become" (Fox 398). In no way insignificant to the plot of *Elijah's Mermaid*, the events that take place in the Margate Grotto are the turning point for various key elements in the plot of the novel. They develop Osborne Black's fanatical infatuation with Pearl and also influence the unfolding of Pearl's adult life.

Osborne Black is an artist obsessed with the painting of pale mermaids and forces Pearl to pose for him—first as his daughter and later his wife —for his paintings of mermaids. The first time that Pearl sits for Osborne

Black is in the Margate grotto, where "his vision grew too dark, before he was taken up with the madness of hiding his mermaid away from the world" (Fox 344). Pearl is a young adolescent, and her experience parallels an act of sexual initiation. Fox's narrative evidences the act of possession with the recurring phrase "You are my mermaid"—first stated in this passage and a returning motif throughout the novel. The physical and psychic pain that Pearl suffers from that very first act of abuse at the grotto haunts her memories of the place and is evoked in every subsequent space of reclusion that she endures. As a result, Dolphin House—Osborne Black's hall—and Chiswick House asylum become extensions of that first grotto of abuse and provide the foundations for the elaborate rhizomatic structure of spaces of concealment that build Pearl's identity.

Fox's conceptualization of the grotto as a symbol is more complex than Overall's as, far from being central and unique as an enchanting space of secrets and cruelty, it expands into an intricate chain of connections beginning at the House of Mermaids. In Fox's rhizomatic reinvention of the grotto, three caves are worth noting for the purpose of this article. The first is Margate Shell Grotto, which sparks the abuses that ensue. The next significant grotto is Osborne Black's own hall, where, triggered by his sick imagination, Black has built his "own world, modelled on a grotto" (Fox 190). In Black's grotto, his "secret realm" and "darkness" perpetuates the artists' possession of the muse that eventually ends in her seclusion in an asylum when the first signs of age and adult sexuality appear in her body (Fox 190).

The third relevant space in Fox's rewriting of the Victorian cave is the grotto built by the two siblings, Lily and Elijah, in Kingsland House. The children constructed the grotto with the shells sent by Frederick Hall. Pearl's first and last encounters with the Kingsland House grotto are sensorial experiences that reanimate her personal story of concealment.[9] When Pearl first visits Kingsland House as Black's wife, the stroll in the garden with Lily takes her to a stream, to the "sound of water" that she "paddles" until she finds "the spot where some shells still adhered to the damp mossed walls" (Fox 118)—the traces of the old grotto. She then recalls her story at Margate:

[9] See Arias ("(Sub)Urban Landscapes") for a thorough analysis of the grotto as a source for sensorial experiences in Sonia Overall's *The Realm of Shells.*

> 'You have your own grotto!' She smiled back through the dappling shadows until suddenly flinching, as if in pain. For a moment or two she bit down on her lip before letting out a lingering sigh, and then that guarded note in her voice when she murmured, 'Osborne must not see this place. He would only want to paint me here.' (Fox 118–19)

Pearl's recollection of her traumatic experiences through her senses illustrates the role of sensorial meanings in trauma narratives where, "unable to narrativize the traumatic experience in logical terms, the subject gives expression to his or her trauma by means of sensorial images instead of words" (Onega and Ganteau, "Introduction" 3). The second encounter with this grotto is at the end of the novel, when Pearl is about to give birth to Elijah's child. In a trance she finds the same stream and the old grotto:

> Where am I? Is this Margate? For a moment, I cannot think. My world is nothing but sensory touch, dampness and greyness and cold hard stones, and the glisten of shells beneath velvety moss, and the patterns they make—like stars, like moons.
> And then I remember. This is the grotto. I say, 'I am your mermaid.'
> Why does Elijah not reply? There is only the silver of tears in his eyes. There is only the glint of the gold on my hand when my wet fingers twine with his, turning and squeezing, gripping hard when he pulls me from darkness and into the light. (Fox 345–46)

In the two examples, the transcendence of Pearl's recollections of Margate is rekindled by the immanence of her sensorial experiences—by the material trace of the Kingsland House grotto. For Merleau-Ponty, immanence and transcendence form a co-constitutive paradox: "[i]mmanence, because the perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives; transcendence, because it always contains something more than what is actually given" (16). Considering Freud's premise that the "child is always father to the adult," the transcendence of the various grottos in Fox's narrative is always related to Pearl's first experiences at Margate. This illustrates Ricoeur's ideas of how external marks are adopted as "a basis and intermediary for the work of memory" (147).

Yet in Fox's novel, the external marks of the Kingsland House grotto not only revive disturbing memories of Pearl's past as a sexual object but also re-imagine the space of the grotto as a modern and female-centred heterotopia. Fox's revisitation of Margate Shell Grotto exemplifies neo-Victorian appropriations of the trope as a Foucauldian heterotopia: both as

a *heterotopia of crisis* and of *compensation*, it reveals a female character on the verge of adulthood at the same time that it recreates a palace of pleasure for the male artistic gaze that abuses his muse. Still, as the plot unfolds, Pearl's narrative voice deconstructs the grotto as a *heterotopia of compensation* where the hands of the male artist no longer mould an objectified Galatea. When she is giving birth to Angel and re-imagines Margate, the real-life experience supersedes the illusion of memory. The grotto becomes Pearl's palace of pleasure and perfection. Pearl manages to conceal it from the hands of Osborne Black and respond to the petrifaction of his models' minds and bodies by giving birth to a new life.

CONCLUSIONS

The two case studies considered for this article confirm how the Victorian grotto, both as an aesthetic trope and as a product of consumption, survives as a cultural commodity enmeshed in contexts that created meanings not only for its contemporaneous consumers but also for contemporary Victoriana enthusiasts. Neo-Victorian appropriations of the trope in fiction rely on a non-factual, yet historic-archaeological, excavation to unveil the micro-histories of memory and experience that helped to build such meanings. In their engagement with the Victorian age, Overall and Fox reinvent the grotto as a Foucauldian heterotopia that challenges and denounces the past abuses of history. The authors develop examples of the neo-Victorian grotto as a heterotopia of crisis and a heterotopia of compensation that adopt different functions depending on the culture that re-invents it. The neo-Victorian grotto described by Overall and Fox is a site of passage, of transition from pain to healing, from submission to empowerment, and stands in contrast to other mainstream emplacements that limit women's emancipation and autonomy. Finally, the grotto also reconciles various and seemingly conflicting spaces through sensorial memories in a process of healing where, in the case of Overall, the act of writing is imperative to authenticate Frances' version of the story and, in the case of Fox, the act of childbirth reconciles Pearl with her past experiences.

The micro-histories recovered by Overall and Fox revisit the nineteenth-century grotto as a neo-Victorian heterotopia where the static, enchanting and repressive site is revaluated as a fluid *place-as-event* that is constantly subject to change through social and material relations. As such, they evidence Massey's theories by which she reads any place as

"woven together out of ongoing stories" (131) and open up further analysis of the neo-Victorian grotto in other eminently spatial mediums such as theatre. Whether or not the fictional neo-Victorian grotto addressed in this article may find its corollaries in other neo-Victorian genres and media is still a question to be answered. Nonetheless, the porosity of the performing arts in the nineteenth century—which allow grottos to appear recurrently in ballet and opera but also in burlesque and pantomimes (Monrós-Gaspar, "La ninfa Eco")—together with the variety of genres in which the Victorian grotto is adapted, transformed, and transposed onstage at present expands the possibilities to new, and still unexplored, neo-Victorian heterotopic grottos.

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