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No Place like Home: Re-writing “Home” and Re-locating Lesbianism in Emma Donoghue’s *Stir-Fry* and *Hood*

By Emma Young¹

Abstract

This article considers contemporary novelist Emma Donoghue’s early novels, *Stir-Fry* (1994) and *Hood* (1995), and argues that these works contribute to a re-defining of the home space in relation to lesbian sexuality. I draw on theoretical arguments from the social sciences, feminist, gender and sexuality studies, and literary criticism to reveal how an inter-disciplinary approach to Donoghue’s novels illuminates a more nuanced interpretation of their depiction of home space that ensures a ‘home’ for lesbianism is (re)located. At the same time, Donoghue’s novels are revealed to posit their own theorising on home and sexuality. By focusing on objects—including the infamous queer closet, the threshold space of doors and the ‘woman’s’ kitchen—alongside depictions of lesbian relationships, this article interrogates the ways in which home spaces are (re)encoded, resulting in the naturalised heteronormativity of the home space being challenged.

Keywords: Lesbian, Home, Queer Theory.

Re-Defining ‘Home’

If, as popular and colloquial phrases have historically reminded us, ‘home is where the hearth is’ and ‘an Englishman’s castle is his home,’ then in the ‘home’ resides both a patriarchal and heteronormative assumption. After all, it is an ‘English’ ‘man’s’ castle that is a home, not a woman’s, suggesting that ownership of the home is defined by male dominance. Furthermore, the hearth is both a physical space in a house and a metaphor for familial relationships that emphasize how the heteronormative family - understood as a husband, his wife and their children - also delineate ‘home.’ Consequentially, these familial relationships, which promote heteronormativity through their marital and reproductive status, result in the home becoming synonymous with heterosexuality. Queer theorist Alan Sinfield recognises the association of home as constructed by - and furthering - heteronormativity when he asserts that ‘most of us [homosexuals] are born and/or socialised into (presumably) heterosexual families [and that] [w]e have to move away from them, at least to some degree; and into, if we are lucky, the culture of a minority community’ (103). However, in proposing that homosexuals need to *depart* a traditional, familial home space and move into an *alternative* ‘minority community’ that can accommodate their sexual identity, Sinfield’s assertion fails to proffer a means of moving beyond the confines of the heteronormative home and resolve tensions between queer identity and belonging. To re-address this, instead, I suggest re-defining the ‘queer home’ by utilising

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theorizations positioned in the social sciences as they provide an appropriate framework for exploring the novels of award-winning Irish-born, Canadian novelist Emma Donoghue, as she negotiates the tensions involved in lesbian homemaking in her early writings *Stir-Fry* (1994) and *Hood* (1995).

Although acknowledging the efficacy of Sinfield's remarks in highlighting the implications of sexuality in relation to the home, I believe they also raise questions about how we consider the hetero/homo binary in broader socio-cultural terms and suggest a need to reconsider the relationship between home and sexuality by challenging the conceptual understanding of home itself. Sinfield's perspective concurrently reveals the naturalised and socially invisible heteronormativity of the traditional home space but it also furthers the either/or binary of sexual 'normativity' by suggesting homosexuals have to move *out* of this 'normative' space into a lesser 'minority community,' suggestively *othering* themselves, to employ queer theory's terminology here. This paper's interrogation of the home space builds on the theorizations of David Bell *et al.*, whose work on gender, sexuality and place, suggests a 'need to understand the straightness of our streets as an artifact; to interrogate the presumed authentic heterosexual nature of everyday spaces' (32). The home is one such 'artifact.' Environmental scientist Roderick Lawrence, a specialist in urban ecology and housing, argues 'the concept of the home is ambiguous,' as a site of relative and not absolute definition, the home subsequently becomes a fluid location of multiple possibilities (*Deciphering* 53). This fluidity resonates with queer theory's view of identity, epitomised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's assertion that 'queer' is as an 'open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements [...] aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically' (*Tendencies* 8). Like identity then, the home is not a unified site or a solidly defined entity but a construction that can change over time.

A home is often formed within a house, but it is a term that is an interweaving of a physical location *alongside* the objects, feelings, memories and people that interact within this space. As Carol Werner *et al* argue, 'people and their environments are an integral and inseparable unit; they cannot be defined separately, and indeed are mutually defining' (2). If, as the work of these environmental psychologists suggests, the home is constructed over time through a dialectic relationship between individuals and a space filled with objects and memories, then the assumed 'heteronormativity' of the home can be re-assessed. In this case, it is social convention that establishes the home as a heteronormative sphere. Such theorizations of home open up definitions of the space and suggest that *any* relationship, regardless of sexual orientation, can contribute to the cultural construction of a home space. Furthermore, designating a space as 'home' occurs over time, which means that the possibility of reconstruction is ever-present as it is a concept imbued with a sense of partiality. Metaphorically speaking, the door is always open to an alternative definition of home and it can, in fact, be encoded homosexual as well as heterosexual. It is thus reclaimable, to *accommodate* a space for lesbians outside of heteropatriarchal parameters - it is this subverting of the heteronormative home that is the function of Donoghue's novels.

By recoding--or re-writing--the home to accommodate lesbian identity Donoghue's novels reveal the constructed nature of the heteronormative original and challenge its prevalence by depicting homosexuality as naturalised in the home, just as heterosexuality has historically been encoded socially and culturally invisible. Thus, in *Stir-Fry* and *Hood* the home becomes a queer locale. *Stir-Fry* is a modern day *bildungsroman* in that it traces the development of its protagonist Maria as she leaves her family home in the country to study at university in Dublin.

Maria unwittingly moves in with a lesbian couple, Jael and Ruth, and this traditional ‘coming-of-age’ *bildungsroman* becomes a ‘coming out’ novel. Donoghue’s second novel, *Hood*, recounts the story of Pen and Cara’s lesbian relationship via the medium of Pen’s memory following the death of Cara. The omniscient narrative is witness to all of Pen’s thoughts and feelings ensuring the reader become implicitly associated with the protagonist. These narratives depict two distinct home spaces respectively: the attic flat and the childhood family house, and the definition of these locations is central to Donoghue’s critique of the heteronormative home, as are the use of objects that reside within these spaces. The incorporation of the wardrobe, or closet, in both narratives typifies the self-conscious nature of Donoghue’s construction of homosexuality by integrating in the narrative an object used in everyday expression to denote homosexuality; that of ‘being in the closet.’ Both novels acknowledge the home as a traditionally conceived heteropatriarchal domain, but challenge Sinfield’s assertion that homosexuals need to move to a separate space outside of this home space. Moreover, in revising the concept of home, Donoghue also critiques the representation of homosexuality in society and works to ‘trouble’--to borrow Judith Butler’s expression - the dominant normativity of heterosexuality that renders it invisible. In *Stir-Fry* this occurs via the shifting perception of lesbianism as Maria ‘get[s] on with prising open her mind to fit this knowledge’ that a lesbian couple live within her home and to dispel her initial, socially conditioned and naturalised, homophobia (77). As Maria’s ‘straight mind’ is transformed the heteronormativity of society is rendered visible. Comparatively in *Hood*, Donoghue portrays how homosexuality is often invisible in a heteronormative society, a belief epitomised when Pen, following her long-term partner Cara’s death, questions ‘what would a non-religious lesbian sympathy card be like’ (171)? The culturally assumed normativity of heterosexuality results in Pen being known as Cara’s housemate, and, even if she were to break her own silence on the subject she realises society would not be able to offer her words of condolence; there is no sympathy card that articulates their lesbian relationship. Thus, in re-writing home to accommodate lesbianism Donoghue likewise reveals social heteronormativity, and challenges it as she does the traditional notion of ‘home’.

Going In and Coming Out/Coming Out and Going In: Closets, Doors and Kitchens

The space of the wardrobe, or closet, resonates in both academic and non-academic discourses as a culturally perceived marker of homosexuality. Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1979) acknowledges that:

Wardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers, and chests with their false bottoms are veritable organs of the secret psychological life. Indeed, without these ‘objects’ and a few others in equally high favour, our intimate life would lack a model of intimacy. They are hybrid objects, subject objects. Like us, through us and for us, they have a quality of intimacy. (78)

These objects’ spaces reflect individuals’ feelings through their spatial landscape yet serve as a referent for self-representation. The inner space of the wardrobe is intimate, private, and a location secure from the gaze of the world outside. As such, it functions on a microcosmic scale in a similar manner to the home. Characteristically, then, it is an apt space to be heralded as ‘the defining structure for gay oppression in this century,’ as Sedgwick contends (*Epistemology* 71). A synonym for wardrobe when employed as a noun, as a verb ‘closet’ also expresses the

repressive characteristic of the space as it means 'to hide.' The closet is a literal space within a home but it is also a metaphorical space that reflects the invisibility and marginalisation of homosexuals within society. This usage of the term is something Donoghue is aware of, as she regards in interview with Stacia Bensyl:

One particular aspect of the Irish lesbian and gay world rather than that world in any other country is that vast numbers are still in the closet. It's not as bad as it used to be, but still most people live with the closet in some form or another (76).

The closet motif then, holds particular resonance for Donoghue when writing novels that depict life as a lesbian in contemporary Ireland. Gill Valentine asserts that 'the use of this metaphor to describe lesbian and gay invisibility appears to have come into common parlance in the mid to late 1960s at the time when its material signifier became popular within the home' (153). In her theorization of the metaphor and object, Valentine intertwines the cultural sexual referent and object explicitly, in much the same manner as Donoghue's novels. Furthermore, Valentine warns that the irony of the closet is that to 'come out' of the closet is simultaneously to call the closet into being, highlighting the problematic tension residing in the motif (157). Coming out of the closet does not demolish it but paradoxically threatens to reinforce the closets prevalence, thus, reinforcing the marginalisation and invisibility of homosexuality in society. However, Donoghue's self-conscious, ironic employment of the closet in the novels avoids this entrapping paradox that sees homosexuality once again associated with, and restricted to, a 'closeted' space. Far from re-associating the closet, and thus homosexuality, with a socially marginalised and concealed space—as in popular usage—it becomes a site of transformation for individuals. Moreover, its historically 'closeting' characteristics are embraced in order to challenge heteronormativity.

This interrelation of closet as object and metaphor resonates in *Stir-Fry*: here it becomes a safe space forming a crucial point in Maria's self-discovery of her homosexuality. As Bachelard argues, 'a wardrobe's inner space is also *intimate space*, space that is not open to just anybody' (78). This inner space reverberates with connotations of an inner bodily space as, alone in the flat, it is Jael and Ruth's wardrobe that captivates Maria's attention. Upon opening the wardrobe and:

[s]hutting her eyes, Maria let her fingertips follow the clothes, hanger by hanger, trying to identify them by texture and the shape of a collar or elbow. After a run of heavy cottons and denims, her thumb fell on velvet, and sank into it. (183).

Maria caresses the clothes of her housemates, identifying them by their feel. Sequentially, she metaphorically touches Jael and Ruth. It is at the feel of the sensual velvet – a material that was a vernacular term for vagina, as Sarah Waters reminds us with her novel *Tipping the Velvet* (1998)—that Maria is pulled inside the wardrobe and shuts the doors until she 'was cloaked in darkness' (184). Maria's exploration of the inner wardrobe is explicitly connected to her own sexuality. Furthermore, it is an image that echoes her first visit to the flat where '[b]etween two steps Maria found herself in darkness,' as darkness and light come to symbolise Maria's sexual transformation (9). Enshrouded in the intimate space of the wardrobe, 'Maria reached under her nightshirt and touched herself for the first time since she could remember' (184). In this closeted inner space Marie discovers her own sexuality and going into the closet paradoxically allows for

her sexual ‘coming out.’ Her masturbation within the closet space acknowledges how – far from being a site of oppression—the wardrobe facilitates lesbian discovery via her touching of velvet, in both senses of the term. Maria’s attraction to the closet is that it provides a secure, intimate space that is explicitly associated with Jael and, more importantly, Ruth. Whilst a necessary part of her journey to realising her feelings and desire for Ruth, invoking the closet as part of ‘coming-out’ highlights how Donoghue engages with socially recognised metaphors that surround homosexuality and plays on them to raise awareness of homosexual invisibility and silence in the heteronormative sphere. Via the closet, an object universally visible in the home, lesbian sexuality is discovered and resides within a conventional understanding of ‘home’ space.

In *Hood*, the self-conscious employment of the wardrobe as a simultaneous metaphorical space and an object that also furnishes the home is equally significant. Pen’s badge, a present from Cara, reads ‘Technically a Virgin,’ and she explains that ‘I had never worn it but every time I glimpsed it on the inside of my wardrobe I grinned’ (114). Emphasising Pen’s use of the physical wardrobe to conceal certain objects, the practical and metaphoric functions of the space collide. The badge symbolises Pen’s homosexuality and by closeting it, Pen is metaphorically closeting her own sexuality. On her journey to the school in which she works Pen feels the need to hide her identity further:

[a]t the red light I braked and removed the tiny black triangle from my lobe with shaky fingers. Not that the nuns would be contemporary enough to interpret it, even if I forgot, but if you were going to live in a closet you might as well make it draught-proof (36).

Pen’s existence within a closeted space and the invisibility of her sexuality in the heteronormative space of society is recognised, but despite this invisibility the symbols still need to be removed from Pen’s body. In integrating the closet motif *Hood* questions how a homosexual can begin to ‘feel at home’ in both the physical space of the home and their individual bodies, as the lesbian home, closet and body all need ‘draught-proofing’ from the heteronormative social winds. In this quote, the humour invoked by positioning the nuns as not being ‘contemporary’ enough to understand the symbol mocks religious discourse prevalent in an Irish Catholic society and reveals the absurd and comical need for the closet. With the continual repetition of the closet motif Donoghue challenges the need for its existence in the ‘coming-out’ process and demonstrates how it is a central object in the re-writing of ‘home.’

Similarly to the closet, the liminal space of the door—a threshold—symbolises Maria’s sexual transformation and her position on the cusp of acknowledging her own homosexual desire. Richard Lang posits a phenomenological approach to dwelling and the home, arguing that ‘[t]he door is the incarnation of [the] experience of transition, animating in a visible manner the dialectic of inside and outside’ (203). The door symbolises an individual’s acceptance inside a home or their status as an outsider external to that space. As such, the crossing of the threshold is crucial to an individual’s experience of space and their own relationship with others in it. Whilst agreeing with Lang’s remarks regarding the inside/outside dichotomy as symbolised by the door, I suggest that any reading of the door requires further nuance. After all, the transitional quality of the threshold space not only distinguishes inside and outside, but also demonstrates that it is transitional, in turn challenging notions of inclusion and exclusion. In *Stir-Fry*, the door demarcates an individual’s belonging within the home and Maria’s transition across the threshold

mimics her sexual transformation: going *into* the flat results in her own *coming out*. Mid-way through the novel, upon arriving at the flat, Maria discovers that:

[t]he door at the top of the stairs was swaying open, so she strolled in and glanced through the bead curtain. It wasn't her fault; she was in no sense spying. She couldn't help but see the shape they made. Her eyes tried to untangle its elements. Ruth, cross-legged on the table, her back curved like a comma, and Jael, leaning into it, kissing her (68).

Positioned on the threshold, and straddling the border of inside and outside of the home, Maria witnesses Jael and Ruth in a sexual embrace. Here, the narrative metaphorically suggests that Maria is on the threshold of discovering her own sexual identity: she stands on the border of heterosexual and homosexual. But these binaries, like the scene Maria witnesses through the beaded curtain, become blurred and consequently are shown as crossable, as is demonstrated through Maria's own 'crossing over' by the novel's ending. Furthermore, Maria's blurred vision holds further significance as it highlights to the reader that she herself is yet to comprehend homosexuality in relation to herself. In discussing this scene, Antoinette Quinn argues that '[w]hat disturbs [Maria] most is the ordinariness and everyday domesticity of the scene in which this strange passion is enacted: women stretched out kissing on the kitchen table where the daily meals are prepared and consumed' (151). The sexual act occurring in the communal space of the kitchen makes this scene particularly troubling for Maria as homosexuality is not relegated to the space of the bedroom or hidden in the closet. Instead, Jael and Ruth express their desire within the everyday space of the kitchen, and, more specifically, on the kitchen table. The household object that symbolises family togetherness at mealtime is reclaimed in this scene to accommodate lesbian passion and desire. As acknowledged by Betty in *The Feminist Mystique* (1963) the kitchen is often referred to as the 'woman's place'; something that on this occasion fulfils the meaning of this colloquial expression but for a very different reason and suggests Donoghue's re-writing of the home to accommodate lesbians is also a specifically feminist agenda. As Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling assert in their study of the home, '[w]omen are far more likely to cook, clean and care for children, as well as manage the everyday running of the household. Men, on the other hand, are responsible for outside, and typically take charge of do-it-yourself projects' (110). However, in this passage Donoghue takes this traditional notion of gendered spaces and subverts it. No longer the place in which women cook and care for their husband and family, the kitchen becomes a space of lesbian desire and sexuality. That is, the heteropatriarchal connotations of the space within the home are reclaimed for women. In this moment, by standing on the threshold of inside/outside, private/public, home/society, Maria acknowledges homosexual existence within both spheres, as she stands outside the home and witnesses lesbianism inside the space, whilst simultaneously blurring the boundaries between the two.

Belongings and Belonging: Objects and a Lesbian Home Space

In *Stir-Fry*, objects within the attic flat are simultaneously inscribed by and in the process of inscribing lesbian identity; consequently, they contribute to a queering of space and re-writing of home. The appropriation of objects emphasizes how the home is a fluid and shifting construct that is influenced by multiple, smaller, substances than the overarching concept of 'home' may at

first suggest. Returning to Lawrence once again, he argues that '[m]any possessions do not serve only utilitarian purposes but are a means of communication with oneself, between members of the same household and with the public, including both friends and strangers' (*Housing* 116). Objects within a space serve a functional purpose and are decorative but also etch certain meanings upon the space, as an object reveals something about the individual who owns it. The figure most associated with heteronormative values within the novel is Yvonne, Maria's university friend, and thus synecdochical with contemporary society. When Yvonne visits Maria at the flat, objects become highly significant. Pointing to a picture in the living room, Yvonne comments, '[t]hat's a strange picture' to which Maria responds 'which, the one over the fireplace? It's just two women' (51). Maria's naivety here, about the significance of the picture, reflects that she is yet to discover her own homosexuality so the picture resonates no sexual or emotional meaning beyond its surface appearance for her. Related to this is Maria's use of the word 'just' which serves a normalising function - an image of two women together is 'just the norm' - thus the narrative challenges heteronormative dominance. Finally, Yvonne's reaction to the picture highlights her own heteronormative perspective as she is automatically disturbed by the visual presence of two women together and labels it 'strange,' a term which as a synonym for queer denotes her heteronormative queering of homosexuality as non-normative. Her inability to comprehend objects that reflect a lesbian identity symbolises Yvonne's failure to understand Jael and Ruth's relationship. When Maria and Yvonne discuss Jael and Ruth's relationship Yvonne questions, '[y]ou mean it's more emotional than actually . . . sexual' (133). Yvonne's inability to understand and recognise homosexuality as a sexual and emotional relationship on the same terms as heterosexuality emphasizes how her mind is embedded in an overdetermined heterosexual straightjacket. Monique Wittig's assertions in 'The Straight Mind' (1980) are apt here: her contention that the 'discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms' epitomises Yvonne's position (25). A product of straight society, she cannot think, and therefore speak, outside of heteronormative discourses. The pause preceding the word 'sexual' denotes the difficulty Yvonne has in discussing a lesbian relationship and sexuality; these words have to remain distant as sexuality is, in her mind, always heterosexual and thus she cannot come into verbal contact with the idea of 'lesbian' or 'homo' when discussing it.

Objects take on further significance as they threaten to reveal the lesbian identity of individuals in the flat. When Maria's aunt visits the flat Ruth carries out a full 'de-dyking' of the space. Ruth reassures Maria:

'The Women's Folk Festival poster is gone from the toilet, and as soon as she arrived I took the Dykes on Bikes badge off the kitchen noticeboard.'
 'Bless you. What about the labrys painted on the window?'
 'She's unlikely to know what it means, unless she's one herself. You didn't, when you moved in.' (180)

A seemingly private space, the home is still influenced by society's rules and although the objects within the home reaffirm to Jael and Ruth their own identity and create a space in which they feel comfortable, they also pose a threat when viewed by those from outside. In order to hide their lesbian relationship, Ruth has to remove objects from the private home space that may reveal their sexual orientation, consequently *closeting* the home and concealing symbols of homosexuality from view. Furthermore, the tone of this interaction provokes gentle humour at

Maria's naivety that seeks to challenge the dominance of the heterosexual perspective. Maria is concerned that her aunt will be able to understand the meaning behind the objects within the flat. Yet as Ruth mockingly reminds Maria, until she discovered the truth about Jael and Ruth's relationship she too did not comprehend the meaning behind objects of lesbian symbolism. This suggests that homosexual identity is often invisible in the heteronormative sphere of the home, but also that it only becomes an issue by its being rendered visible. By explicitly decorating the flat with objects of lesbian symbolism the novels reclaims the space from the heteronormative sphere and re-writes lesbianism within the home's walls.

Considering the importance of architecture on human experience, Juhani Pallasmaa argues that home 'is a staging of personal memory. It functions as a two-way mediator – personal space expresses the personality to the outside world, but equally importantly, it strengthens the dweller's self-image and concretizes his [*sic*] world order' (135). Filling a home space with objects that symbolise lesbianism displays that identity to the outside world, whilst reaffirming it to the individual involved. Furthermore, Pallasmaa here recognises the importance of objects in the home becoming a site of memory, an imagined ideal. In *Hood*, Pallasmaa's point illuminates our understanding of Pen's problem that, 'with living so long in one house [...] every corner of it was silted up with memories' (159). Following Cara's death, Pen is constantly reminded of Cara in the home they shared. Pen states that as 'Mr Wall was double-locking the front door [...] [t]he honey-suckle dangled near my face, but I breathed through my mouth,' to avoid the smell (18). Over time, everyday smells and objects become connected with individuals. When Cara is no longer around such objects trigger memories that recreate the feelings and associations of her in Pen's mind. Objects remind Pen of Cara, of their relationship and, as such, of the existence of lesbianism within the family home. Here, home becomes associated with the past, a place where Cara existed, even though Pen still physically inhabits the same house. In turn, the home Pen once knew is transformed as the other woman who formed it has vacated.

Home is where the Heart Is: Lesbian Relationships and Home

The attic space in *Stir-Fry* brings into question the safety and security of the home for homosexuals whilst providing an avenue for Donoghue to self-consciously critique the position of lesbian relationships in contemporary Irish society. Jael and Ruth hold reservations about explicitly revealing their sexuality to Maria after the response of their previous flatmate who 'when she found out by accident she made a ridiculous scene, threatened to tell the landlord and stomped off bag and baggage without paying that month's rent' (107). The threat to 'tell the landlord,' suggests that he would disapprove of their sexuality and that in turn the couple could be thrown out – exiled from – their flat and be made *home-less*. Valentine recognises that the home:

is often valorised by lesbians and gay men as a "private" place, a place of refuge, affirmation and belonging where they are free to express their sexuality [...] However, it can also be a place of fear, those renting may feel they need to hide their identity for fear of eviction and it can be an oppressive and confining space (153).

According to Valentine's argument, there is an intrinsic conflict in the home space between invisibility/visibility, public/private and danger/safety for homosexual couples. A home

is a private and safe space for those who conform to the heterosexual matrix and maintain it as a heterosexual sphere. Jael and Ruth's relationship needs to remain invisible to those outside of their home, especially their landlord, as the threat of visibility holds consequences of expulsion from that home space.

The attic space also foregrounds recognition of a distinct literary motif that has commonly been associated with transgressive women and feminist studies but here becomes relevant to homosexuality and gender debates. In her analysis of *Stir-Fry*, Antoinette Quinn states:

Since *Jane Eyre* and the sexual repressions of Victorian Britain, the attic has been a site of secret sexuality in women's literature. What is closeted and monstrous in 1990s Irish society, however, is homosexual rather than heterosexual desire (150-1).

Donoghue draws on a motif that, since the Victorian period, has resonated in feminist literature and literary studies. By employing a motif distinctly associated with women Donoghue implicitly acknowledges the historical representation and marginalisation of women and connects this comparatively to the position of homosexuals in contemporary Irish society. Crucially, homosexuality was only legalised a year prior to the publication of *Stir-Fry* as, despite the repeal of the British acts that criminalised homosexuality in 1885, this did not occur in the Republic of Ireland until 1993 (Peach 47). Just as the sexuality of women had to be restricted to the attic space in Victorian Britain, homosexuality was still a taboo in 1990s Ireland. Beginning to gain a voice in the metropolis of Dublin around this time, homosexuality is still largely considered to be an unspeakable sin in rural Ireland. The supposed sinfulness of homosexuality is brought to the fore in *Hood* through Pen's work in a Catholic school. In this case, just like in the home in *Stir-Fry*, lesbians exist in a space previously deemed heteropatriarchal: the institution of religion and the church. Returning to *Stir-Fry*, the location of Jael and Ruth's home in the attic symbolises their existence as a lesbian couple on the margins of Irish society. The location of the flat is important to Maria's 'coming-out' and suggests that her lesbianism is more readily visibly in the peripheral space of the attic as a more socially central position would be unwilling to recognise it. Upon moving in, when Maria asks after the people who use the downstairs of the house, she learns that '[y]ou're unlikely to meet them; they use the front staircase' (16). Entrance to their flat is only gained through the back door, reiterating concerns around invisibility and marginality surrounding lesbian identity. Moreover, this reinforces the home's existence as a construct at once ambiguous and relative to the individual, but that is also shaped and informed by society's expectations.

When thinking of the flat, the memories that strike Maria are that of 'hot buttered toast by the fire with Ruth, gossip and snatches of poems out of broken-backed anthologies, wasn't that something to look forward to?' (154). In comparison, when she returns to her family home midway through the novel, she realizes that 'she had lost that sense of being at home' (130). Liz Kenyon's research into students' experience of home during the transitional period of university demonstrates how 'students felt that their parental homes did not provide the autonomy and independence that they now needed within a home' (88). Maria is on a journey between childhood and adulthood, reflected by the physical journeys she undertakes between Dublin and rural Ireland. However, her discomfort within her family home is not just due to her development as a university student but it is specifically associated with the heterosexual familial model that

cannot accommodate her lesbianism. Johnston and Valentine argue that ‘a lack of privacy from the parental gaze constrains [individuals’] freedom to perform a “lesbian” identity “at home”’ (101). The family home, the epitome of heterosexual values, is unable to provide the space required for the individual to establish his or her sexual identity and to perform it freely. Whilst *Hood* re-writes this locale, in *Stir-Fry* it epitomizes spatial heteronormativity. Maria flees to her family home after Jael’s unexpected sexual advances and thus the initial return to the heteronormative sphere of her family symbolises her retreat to safety and security from Jael and on a symbolic level from her own lesbian desire which she is still unable to accept.

However, Maria discovers ‘what a boring little house’ her family home now is to her (194). Stifled by the outdated qualities of her family home, which ‘little’ suggests, the novel depicts Maria to have emotionally and developmentally outgrown it; resulting in her retreat to the bathroom to be by herself, where she reflects that ‘she had behaved like a normal healthy young woman for four days now, and the strain was beginning to tell’ (197). Maria becomes aware that she is performing an identity with which she is uncomfortable – that of a straight woman – and ‘normal healthy young women’ harkens back to the contrast between this identity and the non-normative lesbian in the attic flat. Whilst at this moment Maria still has not acknowledged her love for Ruth she becomes increasingly aware of her own discomfort in the heteronormative family home. Despite its suggested marginal position as an attic space, the narrative’s depiction of Maria slowly recognising the flat as her home challenges Sinfield’s proposition that homosexuality can only come into fruition in a ‘minority community’. Instead, I suggest, this movement towards the attic and away from the family home supports Anne Marie Fortier’s belief that queer migration narratives can subvert the heterosexual home as being the norm by revealing how another home offers the ‘emblematic model of comfort, care and belonging’ (‘Making Home’ 2). After all, it is not the attic space *per se* that defines home for Maria but the individuals within this space and the relationships she forms that facilitate her sense of belonging.²

Hood also emphasizes the importance of relationships in defining the home. In his exploration of what constitute the landscape of home, David E. Sopher writes:

[t]he primary content of home, from what people say, is not material landscape but people. When one is absent, recollection of home is primarily of the human beings there. Without the continuing presence of the sustaining group, the place would no longer be home (136).

Following Sopher’s argument, Donoghue portrays how when the home space is present but the individual has departed, a similar absence and lack is felt. Pen resides in the same space; she does not leave, but Cara no longer inhabiting the space causes a shift in how Pen views the house. It begins to feel empty to her, no longer a home. As Pen describes, ‘I was often haunted by Cara when she was away on trips. The radio tended to play the songs she hummed in the bath’ (100). The home for Pen is defined by her relationship with Cara and without her there it

² This notion of belonging reappears throughout Donoghue’s fiction as in her novel *Landing* (2007) where the idea of landing into a relationship for Síle creates a sense of home. Despite being geographically disparate, falling in love with Jude - whom she meets on a flight from Toronto to London – provides a sense of belonging and home for Síle in another country to her homeland. Likewise, in *Room* (2010) belonging is created by Jack’s closeness and bond to his mother not the space they inhabit. Even though it is a prison – to the child protagonist Jack – the soundproofed garden shed is home because it is where he lives with his mother. In all of these novels it is individuals and relationships that forge a sense of belonging and create a home.

becomes an unfamiliar and disconcerting place for Pen. The radio plays their songs, the honeysuckle smells of Cara, and when vacuuming Pen often finds ‘scrunched up tissues under the bed on her side’ (100). Such objects serve to connect the past and the present for Pen as they prompt memories that Cara lived in the space. Donoghue demonstrates how relationships encode a space with meanings and memories for individuals. The fact that it is a lesbian relationship that gives meaning to this space allows the heteronormative sphere to be challenged and rewritten. Unlike in *Stir-Fry*, Donoghue does not place specifically lesbian markers of identity within the house. Instead, she allows Pen and Cara’s relationship to naturally rewrite, as homosexual, the everyday objects that would usually be perceived heterosexual.

Lesbian integration in the family home is central to *Hood*’s depiction of homosexuality and Pen’s inhabitation of Cara’s childhood home reclaims the space from being synonymous with the heterosexual family. Instead, the discursive construct of the heteronormative home becomes a fluid site with the ability to accommodate plural identities. Following her death, Cara’s childhood home becomes a location of security and belonging for Pen. When she doubts her importance in Cara’s life Jo, a friend of Cara’s from the Attic – a home space shared by a group of lesbian friends – reassures Pen that her insecurities are unfounded. She states, ‘but the girl invited you into her family home, for god’s sake’ (69). Pen’s existence in the Wall’s family home is an acknowledgement and a visible marker of the significance of their relationship. Crucially, however, this marker is only visible to certain members of society: the Attic. To the outside world, including Cara’s father and Pen’s work friends, their living arrangement is based on friendship and separate bedrooms. The family surname ‘Wall’ suggests that the family home is a solid, confining and rigid structure and that it is an impermeable space. Cara and Pen’s relationship in the home subverts this and Pen’s acceptance, as part of the family, undermines the foundations the home is constructed upon.

Secrecy is a vital element of Cara and Pen’s relationship and of the narrative, as the unspoken suggestion is that a revelation of their relationship would result in expulsion from the family home. Here, safety and security once again come into play with the concept of the lesbian home. Throughout the majority of Pen’s narrative her relationship with Cara is kept a secret from Mr Wall and her friends, who refer to Cara only as her ‘housemate.’ However, the end of the novel brings about a recognition and voicing of their true relationship. Mr Wall asks Pen to stay in the house with him, acknowledging that she has ‘been more than... Like a daughter’ to him than she imagines (278). Suggestively, this gesture implies that a home does not have to be synonymous with the heterosexual family and that the definition of family itself is fluid. After all, Kate Wall, Cara’s older sister, tells Pen on arrival, ‘it’s not my home’ despite it being the house she grew up in as a child (51). The reclamation of the home space from the heteronormative sphere to integrate a homosexual identity is even more poignant when Pen reflects on Mr Wall’s speech:

Mr Wall’s words pranced across it [Pen’s mind], sparkling, *My daughter’s friend*. He had practically capitalized it. He didn’t mean palsy-walsy friend, schoolfriend, housemate. He meant friend – in the way his generation used it, as a polite euphemism for all the subtle non-marital relationships they didn’t want to pry into. He knew. (282)

The realisation that Mr Wall was aware of Cara and Pen’s relationship questions the notion that the heterosexual family home cannot accommodate a homosexual relationship.

Whilst Mr Wall's use of the euphemistic term 'friend' suggests that homosexuality is still invisible in heterosexual society, his acceptance of Pen suggests that an integration of homosexuality is possible. Donoghue's method of suggesting this reappraisal is crucial. Quinn argues that '[a]s the owner of a large house in an affluent suburb, Mr Wall could have been cast in the role of bourgeois homophobic patriarch' (161). The fact that Donoghue does not portray Mr Wall in such a light emphasizes her desire to realign the definitions of home with a more pluralistic and accommodating understanding of space and identity, rather than remaining entrapped in a critique of a 'bourgeois homophobic patriarch.' Instead she writes a character who, like the home space, is more open and accommodating to homosexuality than an initial look suggests.

Conclusion

Donoghue challenges the idea that the home is the domain of the heterosexual family and, in turn, subverts it as a heteronormative sphere as it becomes a reclaimed space that accommodates lesbians. By embracing the idea that home is an ambiguous, fluid and shifting space in line with theorists such as Lawrence and Werner *et al.*, Donoghue recodes the space with alternative meanings to the dominant heteronormative ones. By acknowledging the home, gender, and sexuality as discursive constructs, Donoghue deconstructs the binary of heterosexual/homosexual to encourage a more pluralistic understanding of both space and identity. Whilst the home has been viewed as an oppressive site for individuals whose identity does not conform to – and reaffirm – the heterosexual matrix, both *Stir-Fry* and *Hood* rewrite home to accommodate such an identity. By revealing the constructed nature of the concept of home and reworking it, these novels challenge Sinfield's preposition that this can only happen in a 'minority community.' In turn, these novels depict home as a queer locale. Donoghue reinforces the importance of home to the individual; after all, as Fortier explains, 'the movement towards home also serves to reinstate the boundaries of 'home' as an incontestably desirable site, reinforcing the idea of home as familiarity, comfort and seamless belonging' (420). Thus, in re-writing home Donoghue locates a space for lesbians in which they feel 'at home,' where they belong and are secure, but one which is not defined by traditional heteronormative assumptions.

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