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PLAYING HOUSE: SPATIALITY, HOME, AND PRIVACY IN THE THEATER OF JENNIFER HALEY

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ABSTRACT: The most celebrated plays of the American dramatist Jennifer Haley are normally appraised in terms of the ethical questions they pose: collectively, how our digital selves appear to offer a complicating impunity. This essay argues that considerations of space, and, more particularly, the compulsive search for privacy, are central to how we define ourselves in virtual realms and in our envisaged transition to a disembodied existence. Both *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom* (2008) and *The Nether* (2013) illustrate how Una Chaudhuri's theory of geopathology, the problem of place, continues to characterize modern drama, establishing patterns of victimage and exile, and how the promise of a more social and egalitarian future may dissolve in the face of ever greater fragmentation and isolation as the game of nationhood runs its course.

RESUMEN: Las obras más célebres de la dramaturga estadounidense Jennifer Haley suelen valorarse en función de las cuestiones éticas que plantean: colectivamente, cómo nuestras identidades digitales parecen ofrecer una complicada impunidad. Este ensayo argumenta que las consideraciones sobre el espacio y, más concretamente, la búsqueda compulsiva de privacidad, son fundamentales para definirnos en los espacios virtuales y en nuestra transición prevista hacia una existencia incorpórea. Tanto *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom* (2008) como *The Nether* (2013) ilustran cómo la teoría de la geopatología de Una Chaudhuri, el problema del lugar, sigue caracterizando el drama moderno, estableciendo pautas de victimismo y exilio, y cómo la promesa de un futuro más social e igualitario puede disolverse ante una fragmentación y un aislamiento

> cada vez mayores a medida que el juego de la nacionalidad sigue su curso.[1]

A simple internet search will unearth countless real-estate websites offering prospective property owners the opportunity to explore and furnish homes of interest via a virtual-reality headset or an augmented-reality program that can be downloaded to a smartphone. Without the inconvenience of traveling to a property, they can reconfigure it or, in the case of a new build, form a greater appreciation of its floor plan. The ability realtors have to stage a home, to show it off to a perceived best advantage, either by redecoration or the strategic placement of furniture, has been a routine part of property selling for some time; the virtual-reality option turns the performance of home over to the buyer who, armed with an array of digitalized tools, effectively becomes a set designer.

Inevitably, the purchaser is still not navigating a dream home so much as a convincing approximation, an ultra-faithful imitation. As with the most elaborate stage sets in naturalistic drama, the viewer is seduced into thinking she/he is actually in a space that corresponds to both a personal and culturally determined notion of home, one which affords a degree of privacy and which is seen more discreetly than is customarily the case with an arranged viewing. And so virtual reality, a highly sophisticated form of technology in ever-widening use, shares its fundamental mimeticism with the ancient art of theater.

Of course, however the property is presented and personalized, in reality it corresponds to only a fairly limited definition within the wide spectrum of home theories. While realtors may favor the word's more sellable connotations of coziness and family togetherness over the often more functional connotations of "house" or "apartment," this small and straightforward-sounding word is polyvalent, a "multidimensional concept" (Mallett 62). Home could extend to something much larger—a community, town, or nation—and equally it could correspond to less tangible ideas and feelings related to shelter, security, identity, and rootedness. Additionally, home may acquire meaning from both the journeys taken to and away from it, and from its social context. Concrete and abstract, then, home is a slippery term: one which we think we know but one which is elusive and permeable.

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[1] Translation provided by the editors.

In a theatrical context, it takes its life from the naturalistic drama already mentioned: the dominant European plays of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whose faithfully recreated living rooms suggest the entrapment and myopia of bourgeois life and record the emergence of privacy, the separation of personal and professional lives. This dramatic mode inevitably changed, became stale, but, as Nicholas Grene has shown, the centrality of a domestic space in drama has persisted: “A surprising number of adventurously experimental modern playwrights have returned more or less reluctantly to the family home on the stage” (10). We still see home on stage, in whatever form, as an important construct.

One of the ways in which home and our understanding of it can evolve theatrically is through the application of virtual reality. To create virtual worlds on stage is to simulate a simulation but, through that simulacrum, to explore alternative spaces that existing in (rather than merely entering into) online domains can create. As ever more sophisticated graphic interfaces highlight the possible form and geography of virtual worlds to users of programs like *Second Life*, so the theater can make a similar experience accessible to non-users and generate a raft of questions: about the viability and co-dependence of these alternative domiciles; and about the ethical issues they inevitably provoke.

American dramatist Jennifer Haley is very much at the forefront of such questions. Though not all of her work asks how theater can make sense of embedded and imagined technology, her best-known plays, *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom* (2008) and *The Nether* (2013), do just this, boldly recreating virtual space and through other genres—crime and Gothic horror—pinpointing the moral dilemmas they raise. Yet, for all her interest in computer technology and how it can best be represented on stage, Haley is, at heart, concerned with more universal questions about intimacy, how we achieve it, and the nature of family life; the video game or virtual environment is just a “wrapper” (“Jennifer Haley Talks About Technology and Theatre”), the means by which a story is told. Hers is a drama insisting on the likely inescapability of a virtual future within the context of emotional needs, generational difference, and privacy. Fundamentally, *Neighborhood 3* and *The Nether* address problems of place: how the online space of social virtual worlds and computer games can be colonized and how the resulting homes permit new patterns of independence and security.

My project in this essay will, then, be to extend Nicholas Grene's thesis about the survival of domestic life to a digital environment, asking whether it is possible and desirable to recreate something approximating to the coordinates of home (contested though these may be) and whether this version of home will be subject to greater public and political scrutiny. Following the idea that dwellings can acquire meaning through the journeys to and from them, I will also probe the faultline between real and virtual worlds, the liminal spaces they create, and the possibilities they both raise and deny about total submersion in cyberspace.

Though much has been written about the extension and occupation of virtual space— anything from the identity issues created by avatars to the possibility of realizing a more egalitarian environment—Haley's work in relation to home will largely be viewed through the critical lens of Una Chaudhuri's *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. This influential 1995 survey of modern and postmodern drama establishes the idea of geopathology: the theatrical representation of place as a problem. Chaudhuri argues that the entrapment we witness in late nineteenth-century naturalism becomes, in the twentieth century, a fully-fledged "poetics of exile" (7) determined by "*a victimage of location* and a *heroism of departure*" (original emphasis), the former being the protagonist's "fundamental problem, leading her or him to a recognition of the need for (if not an actual enactment of) the latter" (Preface xii). The transition to more experimental forms of drama means that place (and, by extension, home) become both more indeterminate, lacking the "*total visibility*" (Preface xii, original emphasis) of naturalism, and reduced to a discourse that often lingers on failed homecomings. Though Chaudhuri's thesis predates some of the technology that Jennifer Haley writes about, it is, I would argue, adaptable to any dramatized place, our affiliation to which is both inevitable and problematic. As Chaudhuri states,

> The idea of natural affiliation to a particular place (be it the place of individual birth, the place of collective origin, or the place of historical habitation) has given the twentieth century its politics; it should not surprise us that it pervades our drama, making depth and rootedness one of its most habitual tropes. (98)

As we will see, a crucial difference in Haley's work is that the "natural affiliation" of which Chaudhuri speaks is reconstructed, lent an ersatz nostalgia that satisfies personal and professional needs, or is challenged by those who can only escape virtually, shunning and destroying family and home as a logical outcome. This is loosely what Chaudhuri would refer to as "the reinscription of place in the late twentieth century" (3), and, though she cannot include cutting-edge virtual reality, the critic, drawing on the work of Mark Poster, stresses that, like postmodernism, forms of electronic communication have dissolved our certainties about place, making us nomadic in our almost constant negotiation of different digital channels. Our "spatial particularity" (4), the "fixed point in space and time" (3) from which we experience life, has been lost.

Haley's two plays suggest that cyberspace will, almost by default, imitate actual space—something already lived or a desired location that can compensate for real-world deficiency. As such, then, they suggest not just exile but the splitting or reproduction of home, and the necessity of traversing boundaries. Her characters live in a state of liminality, unable to commit to one world, unwilling to distinguish between real and digital realms, and, paradoxically seeking the moorings of home within a sought for and liberating placelessness. Almost by definition, her plays ask whether virtuality can be convincingly dramatized, whether the audience can be made to believe twice—in the character and the character's avatar—and whether this double distancing compromises our ability to empathize and judge.

REJECTING SUBURBIA AND ITS MYTHS

Jennifer Haley's background working in web design and her leisure time spent playing virtual games like *World of Warcraft* largely explain her fascination with bringing digital technology to the stage. Yet, for her, technology is not an end in itself, a gimmicky demonstration that our online experience is unignorable and deserving of theatrical treatment. Haley's interview comments ("Jennifer Haley Talks About Technology and the Theatre," for example) suggest that she views herself as a traditional dramatist preoccupied with family life, intimacy, and the ways in which forms of human behavior constantly challenge both moral and legal codes. If we block out Haley's wrapper of technology, then, we naturally find ourselves in the familiar territory of so much canonical American drama—that of the plays of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Sam Shepard, for instance—where the home confronting us, or reimagined in memory and its many subtle distortions, is a locus for debate, accusation, confession, and the subversion of myth. The real-life fixtures of Haley's dramaturgy—the monitored and monotone suburbia and the colorless interrogation room—approximate those restrictive, even entombing structures that dominate mid to late twentieth-century American drama and which adumbrate, or partly stand in for, familial dysfunctionality: the Tyrones' cheerless living room in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956); the Kellers' suffocating house in *All My Sons* (1947); the apartment buildings "*burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation*" (Williams 143) in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944); and that central space in *Buried Child* (1978) where Dodge, a failing patriarch, appears to decompose before us.

The initial inspiration for *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom*, fundamentally just such a drama of family life, was apparently Haley's younger brother's ability to manipulate their mother, to get what he wanted while contributing little to family life. A ten-minute scene in which a mother resorts to "cajoling and badgering" ("Interview with *Neighborhood 3* Playwright Jennifer Haley") was, over time and with the addition of game infrastructure, developed into the play that premiered at the Humana Festival in Louisville in 2008. Though the computer world is immediately evident in the full, overblown title (the name of a fictional game) and use of walkthroughs (instructions to players to enable them to move to the next level of the game), it becomes clear that this is essentially a satire of middle-class West Coast life in a suburb of identical properties where adults parent ineffectively and where children increasingly have hidden, online lives. It is a highly recognizable setting, one which has become a staple of American literature, especially the novel, but its familiarity can be explained by the "decidedly narrow and static set of tropes" (Dines 3) that define the suburban imaginary: homogeneity, stultification, and entrapment. As Catherine Jurca argues, American novels about suburbia have tended to promote "a fantasy of victimization" (8-9), especially among their male characters, and so while the physical appearance of suburbs has altered significantly, the mindsets of suburban dwellers and those looking on have shifted little since the 1950s. There is still an expectation that, despite its spread, suburbia is synonymous with domestic breakdown and a host of neuroses.

Excepting the widespread use of computers, Haley's "modern day suburbia" (Production Notes for *Neighborhood 3* 7) offers little concession to twenty-first-century versions of suburbia, to the plurality of developments that now includes gated communities and technoburbs. Though the nature of the dramatic action means that geographical layout is central, there is also no sense of what lies beyond the neighborhood, or indeed of its ethnic composition.

The play is loosely structured in a series of short scenes written in a chatbox style devoid of punctuation and upper-case letters. The aforementioned walkthroughs offer connecting tasks for the characters/computer-game players and remind the audience that, for all the discussions about the neighborhood and the waywardness of its teenagers, a significant part of the action is ludic: a quest to reach the Final House, both a last exit point from this level of the game and a means of quitting the neighborhood, if not, symbolically, American suburbia generally. Thus, the play blends reality and a game that uses the latest global-positioning technology to the point where the two become almost indistinguishable, especially for those teenagers who, seeking to deny their actual environment, have shut themselves away in their rooms with computers. Though all of the characters are named, they are, more significantly, types (father, mother, son, daughter), less recognizable as individuals than they are as opponents in a pitched battle. And when we reach the denouement of the play in scenes nine and ten, Joy and her son Blake, who have not featured before this point, embody the complete breakdown of relations between parents and children. Joy, troubled by noises outside the house and then by the prostrate body of another parent and neighbor, Barbara, voices her concerns to an increasingly disorientated Blake who, convinced she is a zombie that he has to kill as part of the game, beats her to death with a claw hammer. The final scene consists of Blake's single-word question, "Mum?" (102), reflecting an uncertainty that, in performance, could be panic or mild concern, though the accompanying stage direction, "*Shivering, he looks around the empty room*" (102) suggests that the killing of Joy or even just a zombie has had some impact.

The equation of parents with zombies, mindless creatures that constitute an obstacle rather than a significant threat, is, of course, telling in this community. Exhibiting little apparent differentiation, the mothers and fathers of the play have both surrendered to uniformity and have conceded authority, accepting their powerlessness in a time when teenagers mature more quickly, are reluctant to display emotional engagement, and erect boundaries that define their own space. But the zombification ironically refers to the teenagers themselves who live for a game that has become their life, a game that has replaced their other addictions, and which heightens and justifies their anti-socialness, although "they conspire for hours" (25) with other players.

Though the blending of game and reality means that there is no obligation on the part of the set designer to create a series of realistic interiors, home space is vitally important as a personally and politically contested site. Highly territorialized and characterized by narrowing and withdrawal, home registers both the younger generation's disenchantment with a patched-up social respectability and its determined pursuit of almost complete autonomy. The likely outcome of such an objective is not simply an awkward estrangement, but also a dangerous empowerment fueled by resentment, what Emily Klein calls "new bravado, ubiquitous militarism" (270). Haley's production notes make plain the conjunction of game and reality in the context of home: "Most of the play," she advises, "should be staged abstractly in the netherworld of a video game or modern day suburbia" (7). The fact that the two—suburbia and the game—are interchangeable implies the syntheticism and combative nature of everyday life as well as the beguiling authenticity of virtual landscapes and the "skins" adopted by players. The reassurance of the actual has been reduced to the vagueness of the abstract, partly to create confusion about where we are and partly to remind us that suburbia, long an easy target for criticism, has become an abstraction: a netherworld that is hellish but increasingly ill-defined beyond its surface symmetry and policed conformity. This is manifested in the bewildered reactions of the parents who can no longer pin their anxieties on more traditional forms of threat and rebellion—pedophilia (though this is mentioned as an online concern), teenage drug taking, and verbal stand-offs—but who must, instead, face an impenetrable secrecy: "we don't know what they're really up to" (29), confesses Steve, a parent who, unlike some others, has discovered the game, just not its concept, and whose language configures teenagers as aliens or foreign nationals plotting an attack. The markers of generational difference are not merely a source of wry bewilderment; they provoke political alarmism, a belief that an abnormally introverted youth might be the enemy within.

Shackled by their own liberalism and political correctness, the parents of the play create and perpetuate this harmful privacy, a physical and emotional divide which means that they rarely see, let alone communicate with, their sons and daughters. Their permissiveness is an acknowledgement of timidity: their reluctance to cause upset or infringe independence, and a genuine fear of what they might discover if they probe too closely. Vicki Prichard, the mother of Tyler, a wayward teenager whose bad behavior has been rewarded with two Hummers (the second bought because he "totaled" the first), embodies this leniency. By her own admission, she has not entered Tyler's room for months and has no idea what she might find. Even when an ex-girlfriend, Kaitlyn, asks if she can go and retrieve something, Vicki is mindful of boundaries: "he sealed off the room/and like i said/i want to give him/a place of his own/to be himself/isn't that good" (37). The lack of punctuation here means that the last line hangs uncertainly between a statement—a self-vindication—and a question, both being ludicrous in the context of Tyler's clinical sealing of his war-bunker room.

The bedroom, a last refuge, is a place of exile, as is the Neighborhood 3 game itself, but, in Chaudhuri's terms, this new home space is no solution per se to the victimage engendered by the suburbs. However, the game *is*, providing a liberating, energizing, and consequently addictive, hyperrealism. A simulation rooted in the familiar—the landscape of identical cul-de-sacs, manicured lawns, swimming pools, and the recognizable objects culled as part of the quest—*Neighborhood 3* yokes privacy and verisimilitude in a fantasy of art being consumed as life and of parricide being a consequenceless game. Though the bored teenagers of the play are increasingly unable to distinguish between real life and the fiction of game play—a worrying trait caused by both their online omnipresence and the uncertainty induced by parental separation ("taking a break/from the family," 24)—the simultaneity of zombie and parent deaths is finally undercut by Haley's instruction in "Some Scene Notes" that the violence at the end of the play "should be very dramatic, unbelievable, and loud. Perhaps stupidly spurting blood, like a video game" (7). On the brink of the unthinkable, and still maintaining the tension of uncertainty in the dialogue itself, Haley exposes the audience to cartoonish video and horror-film imagery, partially retracting moral doubt and reinstating violence as merely a definitive stage in a game, as playful and artistic rather than naturalistic.

While Michelle Salerno is right to draw our attention to Haley's altered style in the final two scenes of the play (punctuated dialogue with a more conventional layout) and the way it helps to intensify the play's ambiguity, "its uneasy marriage between the real and the digital," this ploy to give the impression that we are leaving the game momentarily is not simply a reflection of "the increasing political anxiety" created by an invasive digital culture. It is also part of the play's consistent, ironic referencing of clichéd or familiar violent episodes and storylines. Joy is watching an episode of *CSI* (Haley even reminds us that "The Final House" is an actual *CSI* episode), and she recalls a horror film about a house built on an American Indian burial site. Earlier, in scene six, we learn of Tobias's three girls dying in their mother's womb and being buried in the backyard—perhaps a nod to Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*. Earlier still, Doug quotes Charles Manson to his son, Ryan, who also refers to Warren Leblanc, a notorious teenage killer who may have been influenced by a video game, *Manhunt*. And Makaela even blurts out the play's entire plot as if its very title is as predictable as "something out of a horror movie" (15).[2] All of these allusions, including the play's self-referentiality, suggest a somewhat tired recycling of real and fictitious horror narratives, an acknowledgement that the representation of domestic violence—and, by extension, home— has become stale because it is so often the subject of popular entertainment and is allocated disproportionate space in news stories.

Hence, just as the play warns of divided families, inept parenting, and alienated teenagers, blind to their considerable privileges and consumed with either hate or indifference, so it mocks its own preoccupation with violence and its use of the suburban landscape that has increasingly become the epicenter of national unrest. It is a satire of the suburbs, their perceived ideology, and the socio-economic inequalities on which they are premised; equally, it self-consciously lampoons the over insistence on suburban living being the chief source of horror. As Bernice M. Murphy has remarked, "the Suburban Gothic has always had much more to do with how people chose to perceive suburbia than the reality of such neighbourhoods" (5).

Because the stage is essentially an approximation of the computer screen for much of *Neighborhood 3*'s duration, the audience forced into the position of player–spectator, the true sensation of being in a home, and of seeking release from it, may not be something that is properly realized beyond the characters' interactions. And what they—the teenagers and at least some of the parents—say creates little sense of community, only the feeling of being in exile within the family home or the suburban subdivision, of notionally belonging at best. In *The Nether* (2013), Haley pushes this experience of exile further within the context of a virtual environment, replacing the immersiveness of game play with that of alternative living and morally questionable role play. In doing so, she imagines a more nomadic future in which our embodied lives may be supplemented by, or even replaced with, our virtual selves. As in *Neighborhood 3*, the focus is on the way that identity is shaped and defined by a paradoxically familiar yet alien place, and on the digital reshaping of human relationships within the quest for privacy.

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[2] Emily Klein sees "a kind of gallows humor" (272) in this moment and also traces irony and "an air of eerie suburban predictability" (273) in the play. However, her emphasis is more on the script's harmful "culture of militarism" (272) than its ridiculing of Gothic tropes.

THE ART OF PRIVACY

> **Sims** *People should be free in their own imagination!*
> *That is one place, at least, where they should have total privacy!* (32)

The five years between *Neighborhood 3* and *The Nether* are obviously significant in terms of the rate of technological development, especially the sophistication of social virtual worlds and their accessibility. For example, the introduction of Palmer Lucky's Orcus Drift headset in 2012 arguably democratized virtual reality and encouraged many competitors to enter, and so expand, the market. Despite this, Haley still sets her play in an imagined future where a "bloated, grotesque descendant of the internet" (Barnett), the Nether, has expanded into a metaverse, offering the possibility of prolonged occupation and, though it may be dangerous enough to warrant life support, even a permanent crossover—the chance to become a "shade" in the language of the play. She does, though, draw on extant or past nomenclature: at the front of the play, where Haley has lifted definitions from urbandictionary.com, the Nether is variously defined as "Another world for mythical creatures," a "Demon world," and "A dimension of Evil or Imagination," but computer gamers will recognize it more specifically as the second dimension of *Minecraft*, an inhospitable underground realm that nevertheless harbors useful resources. Additionally, Sims or Papa, the play's purveyor of adult pleasure, clearly recalls the massively multiplayer game, *The Sims Online*, in which participants lovingly construct their own houses and, tellingly, create "a symbolic context that encourages players to treat the virtual home like a real one" (Martey and Stromer-Galley 14).

So, Haley sets up the expectation that the Nether will be both vice-ridden and a sanctuary and does so in the context of pedophilia. Whether what takes place there can be properly labeled deviant or, conversely, a safe filtration of pedophilic urges, it is clear that the Nether offers an alternative space that is hard to police, where identities and relationships may be refashioned away from public scrutiny. These ethical issues are framed by an investigation—a crime procedural in the style of *CSI* that lends grittiness at the same time as it unfolds with a degree of predictability. Morris, a real-world detective, interrogates Sims/Papa after going undercover in the avatar guise of Mr. Woodnut, a supposed pedophile who seeks virtual encounters with young girls in the Hideaway, Papa's neo-Victorian house of pleasure. Papa's girls are avatars too, so technically there is no case of child abuse to answer for, a point confirmed by the ritual Papa insists on: decapitating the girl with an axe in order that she can re-form herself and prove her insubstantiality. Papa has created a series of girl avatars, also taken up by male clients, but the latest, Iris, has proved enduringly popular; she has been adopted by another subject under investigation, Doyle, previously a family man and award-winning high school science teacher. Doyle's suicide seems to confirm the inescapable guilt felt by the pedophile who is forced to turn informer, but, though Sims is ultimately made to surrender his Nether login permanently, Haley's play is remarkably open ended in its morality. Morris herself seems to have enjoyed her undercover experience rather more than her duty should have allowed, and an epilogue reunites Sims and Doyle (now viewed separately from Iris) in a touching statement of mutual love.

Unsurprisingly, critical reviews of *The Nether* have tended to focus on the question of pedophilia at the heart of the play and, as a corollary to this, the use of a young actress to play the avatar Iris.[3] Though Haley, in her notes accompanying the published version, insists that a prepubescent actress is necessary to take "the audience *out* [Haley's emphasis] of the play" (66) and add a warmth critical to its chemistry, the *Guardian* reviewer, Michael Billington, has objected to how the dramatist unnecessarily "plays on our fears of molestation." Given the sensitive nature of the subject, it is understandable that there should be misgivings, but, as already suggested, Haley is not making a closed "central argument" in the way that Billington's review suggests. Moreover, though the play is fundamentally concerned with what happens to self-confessed pedophiles, it is also about precisely the spatiality that Una Chaudhuri sees so widely in modern drama—both the sense of place that soaks into and informs individual identity and, paradoxically, the placelessness that is a by-product of our digital age. And closely linked to this are questions of authenticity and privacy. Are the locations created in the Nether just skillful simulations, or can they come to be accepted as real, as legitimate homes rather than temporary sanctuaries? Is the privacy they afford justified (as Sims insists in the comment quoted at the start of this section), or does it merit surveillance?

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[3] Though *The Nether* has been produced around the world, I will focus on its London premiere, directed by Jeremy Herrin, at the Royal Court Theatre in order to consider some of the challenges presented by the staging of virtual worlds and by the realization of some form of digital home.

Morris's questioning forces this issue at the very beginning of the play. When Sims states matter-of-factly that he wants to go home, he refers to his actual home, a brownstone that he supposedly shares with his wife and which has been improved with the profits accrued from his business: it has a vegetable garden and real grass—both at a premium in this future world of environmental decline. Yet, Morris's follow-up, "Which home?" (11), implies elusiveness and flight. Sims has split his own identity (into Sims and Papa) and has created separate homes, although, as Morris points out, he spends a disproportionate amount of time in the Nether. The virtual Hideaway, an 1880s Gothic Revival surrounded by trees, is a dreamy and seductive fiction, a place that both conceals itself and draws attention to its old-world charm, and a version of Victorian innocence that hides symbolic modern and historical child abuse.

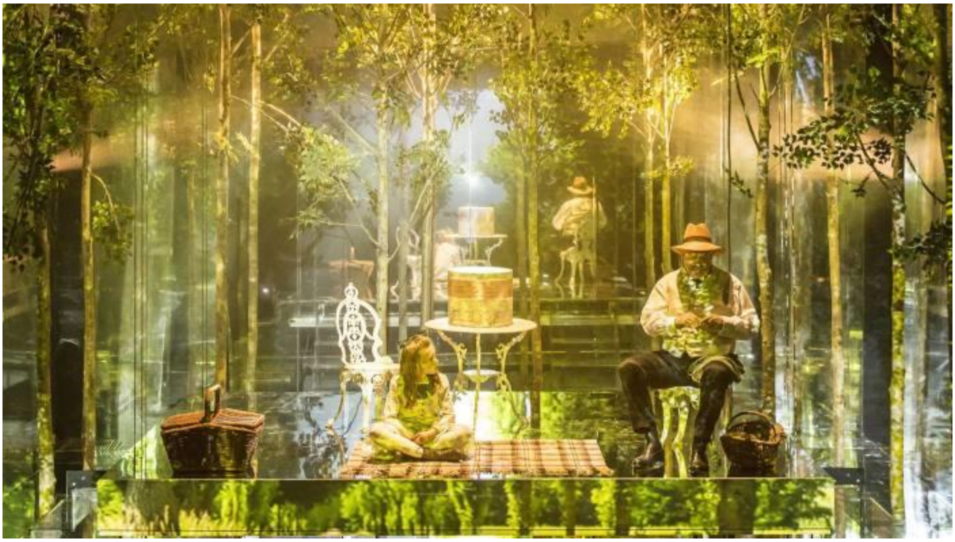
Morris's description of entering the Hideaway for the first time, presented as a separate agent's (Woodnut's) report but ultimately her own, emphasizes a complete sensory experience: there is the "squeak in the top porch step" (13) and "the smell of mulch rising from a garden beneath her [Iris's] window" (23)—fussy, realistic details that insist on Sims's supreme skill as artist–programmer, as an orchestrating Prospero. Morris, who, away from the Hideaway, views such simulation as an act of dissimulation, a money-making venture that both protects and exploits like-minded transgressors, cannot help but be impressed. She concedes that "your code is the closest anyone has come to perfecting the art of sensation" (31), and Woodnut is almost overwhelmed by the combination of light and sound.

Thus, Sims creates a set and cast of characters that underlines the fundamental connection between theater and virtual reality: mimeticism. As Sarah Bay-Cheng notes, *The Nether*'s increasing metatheatricality whisks us away from the limiting notion of "a digital construct" to a theatrical space "in which the props and costumes of a past era are lushly realized and vicariously, pleasurably experienced" (692). It is, in theory, a public space, one given over to performance and reinvention, but Sims's art is not one of public spectacle; it is one of privacy and survival and not intended for general consumption. Central to the play and to discussions about the governance of virtual worlds, privacy is at the heart of everything Sims does and a key concept for Haley. At its simplest level, it takes the form of concealment: Sims's expert encryption of the code necessary to access the Hideaway and his careful separation of the server ("in an anchored sub off the coast of Malaysia," 63) and the realm itself. He has learned how to cover his tracks and to vet thoroughly those who would seek out the Hideaway, especially out of ill-judged curiosity. Yet, he takes this subterfuge and control further, imposing a degree of order that opens him up to charges of egotistical control. Woodnut draws attention to his arbitrary rules about what can be said and levels of intimacy. He attempts to strip away Papa's image of the benevolent father figure recreating a simpler world without technology by imputing that it merely masks the behavior of a self-serving creator, a metaverse god: "He doesn't trust you," he tells Iris, "he controls you. He controls everything! He sits at his terminal and makes you dance at the end of his strings" (51).

While we never quite lose the sense that Papa's world is morally abhorrent and deserving of societal censure, we increasingly come to see the puppet master's true vice (or virtue) as artistic perfectionism, the ability to create a flawless beauty that can be held in stasis. Precariously paused in time, Sims's creation is so finely tuned that any increase in Iris's age—acknowledged by a birthday celebration, for example—would signal her replacement, the rescinding of the avatar and its availability to the client. The most conspicuous conjunction of this aesthetic with privacy is symbolized by the trees that screen the Hideaway. A notable casualty of an unspecified environmental disaster, trees are ordinarily a rarity outside of the Nether. Papa's virtual trees are the first thing that Woodnut notices and form an obvious contrast to the real world: the sparse and ugly interrogation room where the play commences—"a place to twist people" (62). They improve upon reality, reminding us what has been sacrificed in the course of progress, though there is no direct correlation between the expansion of the Nether and the deterioration of natural space.

Serving as objects of almost forgotten beauty and as a protective digital barrier, the trees are more widely part of Sims's re-ordering: his insistence that creation and destruction are no longer mutually exclusive and his conviction that both the Hideaway and the Nether are not a pale imitation, an essence, but just as much a reality as the lived world. "Just because it's virtual doesn't mean it isn't real" (17), he states, turning logic on its head and exalting the imagination, while paradoxically asserting that "real" images, especially those of children, incur no consequences—either moral or legal. Thus, Sims has turned privacy into a self-serving artistic credo, one which satisfies his apparent need to police his own operations and self-medicate at the same time. This final point perhaps constitutes his greatest defense of evasion and secrecy since Sims comprehends both the uncontrollable predilections that make him a risk and the ineffectiveness of conventional treatment programs for child abusers. "I have been cursed with both compulsion and insight" (19), he confides to Morris as he explains why the Hideaway offers the best way of dealing with his addiction.

The set design for the UK premiere of *The Nether* at the Royal Court Theatre in London on July 17, 2014, illustrates just how enticing and magical the Hideaway can be made, and how, following Sims's comments, virtuality can assume reality. For both *Neighborhood 3* and *The Nether*, Haley has repeatedly stated her premise that the realization of real and virtual worlds be left to the interpretation of the director. Accordingly, the plays contain few stage directions and are consistent with an admission that the playwright conceives "tonally, not visually" ("*The Nether*—Jennifer Haley and Jeremy Herrin in Conversation"). Jeremy Herrin, the director of both this production and of that which subsequently transferred to the West End, wanted to emphasize the disparity between a realm that was visibly damaged and one which was aesthetically and nostalgically appealing. "Bouncing the audience from one world to another" ("*The Nether*—Jennifer Haley and Jeremy Herrin in Conversation")—in essence the structural and thematic framework of *The Nether*—not only complicated the central ethical issue but also validated Sims's technical creativity and his claim that the virtual is, or is as good as, the actual. However, this did not warrant a highly naturalistic Hideaway. Instead, the celebrated set designer, Es Devlin, working in conjunction with a video designer, Luke Halls, played with surfaces and perspectives in both realms, "projecting the image of an object on to its actual surface, giving the sense of glitching and fragmentation" (Trueman). Another reviewer found in the production's default design "strips of what look like animated contact sheets" (Taylor); and still another suggested that the overarching scheme "captures the Instagrammy slickness of a society hooked on voyeurism" (Hitchings). Combined, these comments stress the importance of image and texture, even in the gray world of actuality; the way the audience is being lured into something arty and tricksy consistent with Haley's futurism and Sims's project. More revealing of the interaction between privacy and art is Es Devlin's own comment: "[…] it was instinctive that the design should be those lost trees. I was referencing a hotel in Lapland, which is formed of reflective cubes suspended in the forest" (Jays). A cross between an art installation and a temporary home, the Mirrorcube hotel is marketed as "an exciting hide-out among the trees" ("The Mirrorcube"), has an exterior of mirror panels, and even a hidden balcony. Like Haley's creation and the set it inspired, the hotel enshrines privacy with artifice, offering a reflection (the mirrors) of a desired, and attainable, world.



The Nether, The Royal Court Theatre, 2014. Photo: Johan Persson

Apparently absent from Devlin's lush design was the more disturbing interior of Haley's play: "a darkened hallway […] the walls covered with weapons" (22). For all its artifice, quaint Victoriana, and guilt-free violence, the Hideaway also resembles a torture chamber and is a business rather than a home, a commodified space. There are references to: Sims's entrepreneurialism; to other, more legitimate operations within the Nether; to the possibility that Papa is attending to affairs elsewhere in cyberspace (excusing his absence from the house); and to a program that the guests (rather than residents) must follow. In short, Sims's illusionary politics misrepresents home and settlement. Both Sims and the world that encompasses the non-virtual and the Nether are in transition, liminally caught between diversion/business/retreat, and the tangibility of domestic existence. They are refugees, part of an e-diaspora—"We are at the edge of what could become a mass migration into the Nether" (31), Morris warns—that offers no clear rhythms or locations of home and work.

CONCLUSION

Though Haley's *The Nether* is more hypothetical than narrowly predictive, it does tend to point to the probability of a virtualized future in another dimension, one in which it may be possible (if not desirable) to assume a disembodied existence. Indeed, as we have just seen, the play marks a pivotal historical moment when many realms of daily life—business, education, and leisure—have already been moved across to the Nether in anticipation of an exodus that will fully transpire when digital technology reaches the advanced state in which medical support is obsolescent. Haley is interested in the ethical conundrums this could provoke—specifically, the enhanced freedom afforded pedophiles in a boundaryless digital space where detection is more difficult and where the adoption of skins to enjoy virtual behavior uncouples provable action from transgressive intention and desire.

Does such a disembodiment represent progression? Ultimately unclear on the answer to this question, Haley's play shows how departing our bodily lives within an unfathomable space could lead to greater isolation for the individual and increasing fragmentation for a society where nationhood, a wider sense of home, could cease to have relevance. In this imagined scenario, there is also the possibility that fewer restraints and enhanced movement will both obviate binding moral judgements pertaining to corporeality and encourage a sense of community among those previously branded dangerously deviant.

Although the Hideaway in *The Nether* may eclipse anything that the actual world can offer, Haley's theater, in the two plays discussed here at least, holds different realms in balance, creating a spatial uncertainty, an equivocation about the morally freighted judgements that our present and future lives necessitate. Open-ended, her drama proposes no solutions to the problems of differentiating between real and digital landscapes and the limits of permissible behavior, whether conducted by an individual, a community, or an extension/distortion of the self: an avatar proxy. The fundamental right of privacy, enshrined in American law and cultural attitudes since Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis's *Harvard Law Review* article in 1890, is something that the characters of both plays claim and cling to as a source of security, as a disavowal of their "scripted and dominated lives";[4] however, it also becomes a mode of artistic expression that enables metaxis and even the assimilation of the actual into the virtual, no matter how fleetingly. In *Neighborhood 3*, the doubling of home is also a shrinkage and layering, the wormhole of one house providing instant access to another, simultaneously suggesting the conflation of our sterile lives and the abbreviated escape route to internecine struggle and a mock apocalypse: middle-class America's most predictable game. In *The Nether*, Sims's virtual theater, so meticulously conceived, promises telepresence, friendship, and love within a deterritorialized space, an exclusive but fragmented existence away from the scrutiny of an over-policed, ecologically damaged America. Yet, even in the unspecified future the play envisages, there is the lingering expectation that "the world is still the place we have to learn to be" (64), that Sims's exoneration from charges of organized pedophilia is really a term of imprisonment.

By way of a postscript, we might note that at the margins of both plays lies a third space, beyond but also encompassing the actual and the digital. Haley's character-driven drama paradoxically permits little opportunity for personal reflection given its relentless structure of duologues, but the epigraph used for *Neighborhood 3*, the first stanza of Emily Dickinson's 1862 poem "One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted," insinuates that we are tormented by our own demons, not, as Haley confirms throughout the play, by manifestations of the supernatural, by the ghouls of suburbia that have become a cliché. Dickinson's architectural imagery takes us on a journey through the dark recesses of the mind, and it follows from Haley's reference to this poem that technology and our enslavement to it are a symptom of, and an excuse for, the deeper psychological problems they mask, for the disturbing mental spaces that we must occupy alone. Similarly, in *The Nether* Morris's memory of her father, a variation on the theme of relationships between parents and children and physical demonstrations of love, becomes concentrated on the "single realm" (49) that was the parent's own hideaway in the Nether. Visiting this space after her father's death, Morris discovers the highlighted final stanza of Theodore Roethke's "In a Dark Time," lines that offer a clue to the zealousness of the detective's pursuit of pedophiles: "a fallen man" (49) contending with his dark desire, the father, like Sims, sought the anonymity afforded by the Nether, its pockets of seclusion, where he could keep himself away from temptation. Roethke's poetic voice, while still held by the "tearing wind" (49), manages to find consolation in the mind of God. For Sims, Doyle, and the teenagers of the neighborhood, however, the promise of digital salvation, of a Lefebvran counterspace defined by withdrawal and privacy, is a compromised one at best.

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[4] The phrase is used by Rob Shields in a slightly different context: reading Jean Baudrillard, he sees the documenting and over exposure of teenage lives via webcams in bedrooms as the real attempt at rebellion. See *The Virtual*, p. 102.

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