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Landscape and Identity: Utopian/Dystopian Cumbria in Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army*

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ABSTRACT

In 2007, Sarah Hall published *The Carhullan Army*, a speculative narrative of environmental collapse and state repression. This article examines how the author's native region of Cumbria is used as the matrix of both utopian and dystopian speculations to consider the author's persistent exploration of landscape and identity. Sarah Hall uses the Cumbrian "feuding territories" to debate current human struggles with climate, gender equality, and fundamentalism. The article engages with the novel's retrospective and prospective deliberations through a survey of its post-pastoral poetics and retro-feminist politics to highlight Hall's simultaneous re-inscriptions of the cultural constructs of landscape and gender.

KEYWORDS

Critical dystopia; post-pastoralism; retro-feminism; spatialization; Cumbria

Sarah Hall is the award-winning author of five novels and three collections of short stories. Her third novel, *The Carhullan Army*, renamed *Daughters of the North* for the American edition, published in 2007, won the 2007 John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and the James Tiptree Jr. Award and was shortlisted for the 2008 Arthur C. Clarke Award. It is thus a work of speculative fiction that explores gendered identity in the post-apocalyptic context of environmental disaster, global warfare, and financial scandals, national economic crisis, and state repression. As Daniel Lea remarks, the novel "has clear generic links to the dystopian tradition, and particularly those novels such as Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and P. D. James' *The Children of Men* (1992), which explore contemporary feminist politics through the dystopian form" (Lea 170). *The Carhullan Army* shares a similar basis as Lessing's novel by depicting the collapse of British society in the near future due to a series of catastrophic events that the text only alludes to and from which the reader is able to draw an approximate picture of what happened: massive floods have drowned the country, including the houses of parliament, which has led to civil disorganization with waves of epidemics, a housing crisis, shortages, insurance scandals, financial collapse, and terrorist attacks, which have escalated to a global conflict. The world depicted in the book has followed an authoritarian process of Civil Reorganization (5) led by the Authority and its military police force, which has confined British citizens to designated sectors after carrying out a census, banned travel, implemented power restrictions, and now controls population through the mandatory fitting of a contraceptive coil, an inverse process to the ones depicted by Atwood and James. The narrator, called Sister, seeks to escape the Authority's control and join an unofficial agrarian commune of women hiding away in the Northern uplands, which recalls Piercy's utopian Mattapoisett community. Anticipating the 2008 global financial crisis, the novel originated in the shock Hall experienced in 2005 with the unprecedented floods that impacted her native region of Cumbria:

I was brought up in a remote, rural place, among formidably pragmatic and enduring women and I began writing my novel *The Carhullan Army*—the tale of one woman's escape from a repressive English police state to join a group of upland rebels—after the Cumbrian floods in January 2005. This was one of the worst episodes in

my county's history, a history that includes many violent sackings, and the implications of an altered climate became no longer merely imaginable, but visible. (Hall's "Survivor's Tale")

Although unique in her work for its speculative dystopian dimension, *The Carhullan Army* shares a common concern with the Cumbrian landscape that serves as a backdrop to all of Hall's novels. Hall can be best described as a landscape artist who consistently deliberates Cumbria as a cultural landscape with novels bringing into play the great variety of its geological, historical, geographical, and political features. This article aims to demonstrate how in *The Carhullan Army* Cumbria is used as the matrix of both utopian and dystopian speculations and to thus outline the author's persistent exploration of landscape and identity, using the "feuding territories" to debate current human struggles with climate, gender equality, and fundamentalism. Hall has elected her native homeland characterized as a border region to investigate the borderlands between past, present and future, utopia and dystopia, in a post-9/11 world impacted by climate change where macro scales and micro scales intersect, clash, or chime.

Narrating the Future, Remembering the Past

The catastrophic events alluded to in the novel that led to a global collapse closely resemble current climactic, financial, and political events. Thus the inference is that the book offers a vision of a near future to question the reader's present as recent past. It is Astrid Bracke's contention that the novel is set roughly in the 2040s (Bracke 30). The narrator, Sister, whose statement to the Authority as an insurgent prisoner the reader is given partial access to, resorts to her childhood memories of the region to emphasize the gap between her present and the past, or the reader's present. It is a narrative of environmental collapse that revolves around familiar geographical, geological, and atmospheric features. The cities of Warrington and Lancaster, to the south in Lancashire, which now accommodate the Authority's detention centers and where Sister's testimony was recorded, are mentioned. Sister herself lives in Rith, the alteration of the name Penrith functioning as a clue to the administrative changes that have occurred. Indeed, the original Cumbric meaning of "pen" as "head" or "chief" may read as an ironic reference to the country's dissolution into chaos and the authoritarian self-appointment of the Authority. The toponymic alteration mirrors the political upheaval. In addition, the graphic cancellation of the start of the place name, Pen, echoes the expunction of the citizens from the census "written off" (23) as missing persons who become Unofficials, as well as the dissolution of the nation state with Britain "now little more than a dependent colony" (36) because "They've signed us off for dependency and bankruptcy" (23). Local geography resonates with the larger scales of the nation and the world to depict the governmental aftershock of climactic disaster. Familiar landmarks such as Ullswater lake, High Street summit, and the Lake District are depicted as places reclaimed by the wilderness whose names and function are evocative of a former era: "the green abandoned wilds of what used to be national parkland—the place my father's generation had called the Lake District" (10). In contrast to the travel ban enforced by the Authority, the repeated mentions of leisure and touristic activities formerly typifying the region's cultural identity allow the readers to measure the gap between their present and the novel's future. Time and again on her journey to reach the women's commune in the uplands, Sister remembers hiking trips with her father in the national park. Her memories are complemented by such mentions as "the Wainwrights" (11), referring to the celebrated *Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells* by fellwalker Alfred Wainwright. Finally, the atmospheric conditions in Rith that Sister tries to escape by climbing up the fells evoke the impact of radical climate change on a stereotypical marker of British national identity, the weather:

The cool reminded of my childhood. Back then the weather had been more distinct, separated. Some older people in the factory where I worked said of all the English traditions to have been compromised, the weather was the saddest. [...]

Even the rain is different now; erratic, violent, not the constant grey drizzle of old postcards, jokes, and television reports. It's rain that feels wounded. There is seldom any snow on the fells, though people in the town look for it out of habit. (6)

Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini have demonstrated how “the [dystopian] text is built around the construction of a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance” (5). In *The Carhullan Army*, Cumbria articulates the divide between the two with its atmospheric and topological wounds signifying the destruction of a familiar national identity from the near past, while Sister’s efforts at reclaiming her memories testify to an attempt at reconstructing a regional identity to resist dissolution in the Authority. By opting for the cancellation of her identity under the Authority, becoming Unofficial Sister, a process that culminates in the final insurgent act of destroying the census, the narrator writes off the hegemonic present while endeavoring to pen an alternative future based on the re-inscription of the past. As the book progresses from Sister’s escape from Rith, her inclusion in the community after a brutal test of torture, toward the final insurgency of the women, it illustrates how “the process of taking control over the means of language, representation, memory, and interpellation is a crucial weapon and strategy in moving the dystopian resistance from an initial consciousness to an action that leads to a climactic event that attempts to change the society” (Baccolini and Moylan 6). It accounts for the great emphasis laid on the Cumbrian military past.

Carhullan is depicted as a strategic geopolitical location whose history Sister traces back to the Britons through to the Romans who elected the place as a defensive outpost as “it was the best outlook point for miles” (54). The remaining standing stones, called the Five Pins (54), testify to the Celtic presence, and even though “nobody knows why they’re there,” Sarah Hall said in an interview, “I get a sense they were mapping the region for people” (Fox et al.). The presence of a Roman fort heralds proleptically the final siege of the Authority headquarters in Rith when the women fighters occupy the medieval defensive castle of Rith that Hall relocates on top of Beacon Hill. Hall mixes fictive and real places and place names to rewrite a futuristic version of the Cumbrian feuding past. Thus the final battle scene eerily combines modern technology from the reader’s present like the Lynx helicopter—whose purpose is to yet again point to the collapse of the world as the reader knows it, as, due to the shortages, Sister says, “I had not seen anything put into the sky for almost ten years”—with medieval fortification vocabulary such as “ramparts, portcullis, crenellations” (206). The region’s past thus offers the means of resistance, and the geographic features of the landscape dictate its historical martial use. In addition, the recurrent allusions to the border nature of the region with its long feuding history with Scotland and the border reivers recontextualize the women’s bid for independence. They also provide a historical perspective on current separatist issues: even though the novel predates the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the 2016 Brexit, or the 2017 Catalan crisis, Sarah Hall is attuned to ongoing political struggles and declared: “For its speculations to be taken seriously, dystopian fiction must be part of a discussion of contemporary society, a projection of ongoing political failures perhaps, or the wringing of present jeopardy for future disaster” (Hall’s “Survivor’s Tale”). Her latest novel from 2015, *The Wolf Border*, is based on the premise of an alternative present-day England with the successful secession of Scotland from the UK.

The portrait of Carhullan’s founder, Jackie Nixon, depicted as “the clan’s principal mother” (159), makes clear the spatialization of power struggles with its reminiscences of feudal tenures, localized warfare, communal identity, and even mythological lineage. Jackie’s very name bears the inscription of armed resistance: “She’s one of the border Nixons. They were the ones who went out with bulldogs to meet the reivers” (49). She has been imprinted both by the history and spirit of the place imbuing her brutal personality, and by its geography as her physical traits are repeatedly compared to characteristic landscape features such as her eyes, which are “the blue of the region’s quarried stone” (50). Not only has “the territory [...] somehow gone into the making of her” (78), but Jackie also used to be in an elite military unit (165). In the process of unmaking her present identity to create an alternative future version of herself, Sister looks to the landscape itself to remodel herself. She joins Jackie’s soldier unit, whose training makes use of the harsh topographic and climactic conditions to forge an elite commando: “They would choose the worst days to decamp, always in gales, mist, ice, or in pouring rain” (133). Jackie has engineered a new breed of soldiers “made in the crucible of this wild place” (159) just as the commune women have bred a new generation of free

children, in defiance of the Authority's contraceptive coil. Jackie's soldiers are similar to the endemic species of the Cumbrian fell ponies successively trained by the Romans and the border counter raiders: "The Romans broke them first, up at the Wall. They crossbred them. They were used as pack animals back then. But we [Jackie's ancient family of breeders] made them fast. It was us who raced them" (181). Sister's progress, which culminates in her recruitment, sheds light on the novel's title both in its British version laying the emphasis on the unit itself, and in its American version referring to the significance of the territory in the breeding of those women soldiers.

Finally, the counter-resistance narrative articulates a linguistic lineage to the region's past, which becomes the means of interpellation of the civilians in Rith prior to the insurgency. Sister's narrative, which she delivers on Jackie's order, who, upon dying, charges her with the task of testifying to the Carhullan project, makes extensive use of Scottish and Northern dialects with words describing the landscape features and animals such as fells, becks, tarn, or corbies. Before they start the siege of Rith, the women devise a way of warning the townspeople by tying up sprays of whin and leaving them at the people's doorstep. The Northern term for gorse used by Sister echoes the symbolism of the plant meant as a signal to the enslaved civilians as "it was a plant that flourished only in the uplands now, that had been brought in from the old Lakeland district. It was a message from without" (194). The "strange rustic token" (193) may also be reminiscent of Celtic pagan rituals, recalling effigies such as the wicker man. Thus the regional past serves the double purpose of introducing the reader to a dystopic future and helping Sister to narrate an alternative path for her own present. *The Carhullan Army* can best be described as a critical dystopia, as Iain Robinson has demonstrated. The same tension between utopia and dystopia characterizes the Carhullan commune.

Post-Pastoralism and Retro-Feminism

In accordance with the region's cultural identity as popularized by William Wordsworth in his *Guide to the Lakes*, which famously depicted the local population as a "perfect republic of Shepherds and Agriculturalists" (Wordsworth 57), Sarah Hall has imagined a utopian agrarian community surviving in "one of the last working fell farms" (47). Like Wordsworth, she combines the local pastoral identity with an alternative radical political space. Hall's work is quite literally pastoral in the way it depicts farming in a detailed realistic manner. Jackie herself is a shepherd carrying on the ancient tradition of "training the sheep to be faithful to a portion of the uplands. It was an extreme and difficult thing to do, almost a lost craft, and one of the oldest ways of farming in the region" (125). The Northern and Scottish dialects used by Sister often relates to agriculture with such terms as the cattle bothies, the bields, or the expression "speaning the lambs." The seeds grown on the farm also relate to ancient Northern traditions such as the carlin peas Sister "had not eaten [...] since I was a child" (100), and which used to be eaten on Passion Sunday, also called Carlin Sunday. It is also pastoral in the second sense outlined by Terry Gifford of an opposition between the country and the urban with Sister insisting for instance on "a ripe smell of silage" or "the pungent tang of husbandry" (65), which are meant to contrast with the "bacterial smell of the refinery and fuel plant" (5) just as the home-grown food is set off against the "imported or reconstituted" (32) cans with which the townspeople have to make do, or just as the outdoor life at the farm stands in opposition to the stifling barracks-style city life with "all of us packed tightly together like fish in a smoking shed." (5). However, the post-apocalyptic context of the novel means that the pastoral trope of retreat to a self-sufficient agricultural lifestyle is far from being idealized and contrasts with Sister's earlier mentions of the former national park and summer residences. As in Rith, the community faces shortages, so that the soap and shampoo Sister has brought with her quickly disappear. Sister also depicts how the community deals with malnutrition and dietary deficiencies. There are also sanitary issues, with Sister herself affected with giardiasis due to the contamination of water. Even though one of the sisters is a doctor, the absence of medical supplies and facilities is dramatized through the late disclosure of the cause of death of Veronique, Carhullan's co-founder and partner of Jackie.

Veronique died of cancer after struggling with Jackie and categorically refusing to seek help from Rith.

Thus Sarah Hall could be said to develop an “alternative ‘post-pastoral’ vision” (Gifford 5) related to feminist ecocriticism, which aims to parallel the exploitation of the environment and the subjugation of women. The post-pastoral narrative of counter-resistance draws a parallel between an alternative agricultural space and a lesbian feminist separatist commune, a movement that, in the futuristic context of the novel, is called “retro-feminist” (50). The sisters look to the past to construct an alternative future. “Whilst the novel’s gender politics may seem a little dated” (Lea 171), Hall’s depiction of a retro-feminist commune reminiscent of the 1970s is perfectly coherent with her choice of the feminist utopian genre that emerged at the same period in response to the political struggles for equality. Sam McBean, who parallels Hall’s novel with Marge Piercy’s, quotes Carol Pearson and Joanna Russ to illustrate how “the genre is frequently narrated as emerging out of the necessity of women to imagine alternative social arrangements from the perspective of their experiences” (McBean 52). There is a decidedly retro flavor to Hall’s novel. Sister’s struggle with the mandatory coil is reminiscent of the 1970s fight for reproductive rights. The striking scene of her marital rape when Andrew pretends to confuse the wetness of the lubricant, which the doctor has just used to fit Sister with the coil, with Sister’s own sexual arousal recalls the fight against domestic abuse. Jackie and Veronique’s separatist commune is an essentialist retreat that excludes men who live in a nearby village along with boys who, upon reaching a certain age, are banished from the community. The differences between the two villages enhance the women’s professional competency as evidenced in their successful management of the household and food stores thanks to a reconfigured division of labor, recalling the founding principles of the 1970s communal experiences. Jackie’s original idea for the creation of Carhullan aligns with the lesbian separatist idea of escaping male supremacy and patriarchal oppression: “‘It’s still all about body and sexuality for us,’ she was once quoted as saying. ‘We are controlled through those things; psychologically, financially, eternally’” (51). The gradual change from an agrarian community to an armed force stems from Jackie’s fight against cultural stereotypes: “Do women have it in them to fight if they need to? Or is that the province of men? Are we innately pacifist? A softer sex? Do we have to submit to survive?” (116).

However, the post-pastoral rewriting of regional cultural tropes singles out the distinctiveness of Hall’s text and inscribes its retro-feminism in a contemporary dialogue with current issues of separatism and fundamentalism. Interestingly enough, it is the dystopian aspect of her text that allows Hall to escape the nostalgic allure of retro aesthetics while recontextualizing the legacy of the women’s movement in a spatialized regional milieu. Her writing strategy is based on a clash of perceptions between male and female, romantic and realistic, collective and personal, as filtered through and emblematic of a spatial struggle located in Cumbria. Thus the perception of Sister’s body by the Authority and Andrew as a site that can be annexed echoes the military history of the region as a contested border. Hall transcribes Andrew’s perspective to underline his connivance with the Authority when enjoying his wife’s body: “Sex was one of the few remaining pleasures, he said; it was nice to feel me without any barriers” (31). The absence of barriers is subtly mirrored in the absence of quotation marks in the replication of Andrew’s speech. The traumatic scenes of the fitting of the coil when the doctor “insert[ed] the speculum and attach[ed] the device as efficiently as a farmer clipping the ear of one of its herd” (28) and the marital rape are repeated several times in the text. Sister describes, for instance, the humiliating and abusive public inspection of the coil at her work station with the monitor “joking about dog leashes” (17). The dog reference carries multiple echoes. It parallels the presence of feral dogs in the city, an invasive species that emerged from the drastic changes to the urban environment. They call for a parallel with Sister’s own escape from the attempt at domestication represented by the coil, her desertion culminating with her arrival at Carhullan when she is placed into the dog box as a means of ensuring her deprogramming. Finally, the feral animals evoke the return of vanished species such as the Scottish corncrakes (184), the land’s return to the wild breeding new possibilities just as Sister’s return to the fells of her childhood enables to sketch an alternative future.

Sister turns to the landscape to empower herself through physical exertions. Before escaping Rith, she practices walking, which gives her a sense of anchorage in her own body: “I felt properly dressed in my own muscles, and ballasted by my sense of physicality, as if I belonged outside” (42). Similarly, the women at the farm refashion their identity through physical activity: working the land means they are “comfortable to be who they were” (131). Their bodies remodeled by agriculture allow them to escape gendered identity: “They did not look like girls, middle aged and older women. They seemed to be sexless, whittled back to muscle by toil and base nourishment, creatures who bore no sense of category, no dress code other than the one they chose. [...] strong, resilient” (118–19). Fashion at Carhullan is being reinvented by altering farming outfits and reappropriating Celtic traditions, the painted faces recalling the Picts and the figure of resistance to the Roman occupation of Boudicca:

They were [...] dressed [...] practically, with thrift and a certain bespoke artistry. Some had overalls that seemed extreme and invented, tribal almost. Other had panels and shapes shaved into their heads. They wore straps of leather around their wrists and upper arms, and stone pendants: their smocks and shirts were cut down, resewn, and there was a small girl among them with her face painted blue. (93)

Some of them sport blue tattoos that form an “ornamental border” (69). Hall skirts the borders of clichés and stereotypes as evidenced by the inclusion in her text of the local people’s preconceptions about the community: “They were nuns, religious freaks, communists, convicts. They were child-deserters, men-haters, cunt-lickers, or celibates [...] witches” (47). She rewrites the sexist commonplaces into an alternative utopian space of post-pastoral identity just as she rewrites the Cumbrian landscape. The Romantic writing of the Lake District as a place for meditative contemplation become hackneyed touristic platitudes is replaced by a realistic reading of the pastoral hardships fashioning strong temperaments. Hall takes this reading to the extreme once Sister joins Jackie’s unit. The military training in the fells leads to the modeling of a soldier’s body and the founding of a body politic: “It was the anatomy of a fanatic. It was the same body the rest of the unit had fashioned for themselves” (204). The collective utopia of “a bunch of women from the hills” (161) as mockingly perceived by mainstream society becomes a fundamentalist dystopia of guerrilla women, “a gang of bloody terrorists” (18). In her novel, Sarah Hall provides a fictional actualization of the discriminatory appraisal of separatist communal endeavors by imagining the shift from utopia to dystopia.

Place-Myths

The clash of perspectives engineered by Hall contrasting female rebellion and male connivance, past Romantic idealism, the reader’s present leisure society, and future alternatives, mainstream discrimination and dissident militancy, contribute to situate Cumbria as a “place-myth” according to Rob Shields’s definition, that is “a topology [...] over-written with often-contradictory ‘place-images’ to create a general ‘place-myth’” (31). Furthermore, the many parallels drawn between the landscape and the female body as a site of struggle also characterize the latter as a place-myth. Thus Hall’s critical dystopia combines a post-pastoral reading of her native region with a feminist approach to spatialization to further an interrogation on the altering borders and boundaries of situational identity. Her novel demonstrates how Cumbria is as much a cultural construct as female identity, which metamorphoses under the right circumstances. In the large body of her work, Hall systematically opts for extreme circumstances to precisely delineate the borders alongside which cultural constructs operate: “I create survivalist strategies where people are tested” (Garvey). Jackie’s own claim to a deviant form of tourism as an exploration of the psyche as a place reads as a metafictional comment on Hall’s own purpose: “I’m a dark fucking tourist, Sister, I like going to these places. It’s interesting to me. I’m interested in what holds people back. And what doesn’t” (117–18). The layered transfigurations of her native region form the matrix of Hall’s re-inscription of local, national, and gender identity. Like Sister, she bases her reconstruction of the terrain and its inhabitants on her

childhood memories. Thus her futuristic rendition of a retro-feminist commune originated in her reminiscences of local agricultural women:

“I was brought up in Cumbria where I saw all these fierce agricultural women,” Hall says. “They terrified me when I was young. But they’re also quite comforting to be around. I’ve always admired that strength in women. And I was thinking about self-sufficiency—those women had always managed farms. I’ve always been interested in the history of radical feminism—what happened to those women of the 1960s and ’70s.” (Brown)

Hall re-inscribes agro-pastoralism—which was the major feature recognized by Unesco for the inscription of the Lake District on the world heritage list in 2017—in a retrospective discussion of radical feminism and a prospective deliberation of feminist ecocriticism, enhanced by the distinct localism of her novel’s background:

Hall’s work is thus infused and enthused by a localism which is at the same time expansive and metaphorical; the Cumbrian landscape in her writing becomes the female body political—desecrated but defiant. By bringing together the themes of environmental degradation and gender politics into this dystopian speculation, Hall manages to achieve something which is both prospective and retrospective. (Lea 171)

The shift from neo-domestic agro-pastoral utopia to fundamentalist dystopia is brought about by the gradual development of Sister’s fanatic attachment to the leader figure of Jackie, whose transformation from feminist separatist founder to military chief affects the place itself: “She and Veronique had wanted it to serve as an example of environmental possibility, of true domestic renewal, but the world had changed too much, and the role of Carhullan had changed with it” (166). The religious undertones pervading Sister’s narrative clearly invite speculation on the contemporary issue of fundamentalist terrorism. When Jackie finally makes known her intention of going to war with the Authority, Sister says, “It was the morning of her annunciation” (164), thus emphasizing the messianic dimension of Jackie. Carhullan then transforms from Shangri-La (78), the lost horizon of the feminist movement, to Abaddon (65). The corrupted data in Files Five and Seven of Sister’s narrative serve as a *mise en abyme* of the corruption of the original utopian impulse of the place. The missing data in File Five anticipates the tipping point when the community will turn to armed terrorism as it concerns an unelucidated fight involving one the women, Chloe, who later opposes Jackie and, upon trying to flee from Carhullan, ends up being executed by the charismatic leader. The numerous parallels drawn between the Authority’s regime and Jackie’s rule already forebode ill for Carhullan, especially the animal comparisons used to symbolize dehumanization. The dog box used to deprogram Sister recalls the feral dogs of Rith. When Sister is first captured on the moor by the other sisters, they treat her like a stray sheep, “as if I were an animal they were stewarding, as if I belonged to a different species” (64), just like the doctor in Rith when he fitted her with the coil. While the Authority controls reproduction, the Carhullan community breeds a new generation from which the boys are excluded. The separatist founding principle of the community is expressed through an animal simile when the men turn up at the farm to get some peat for fuel: “I felt as if I were watching two species of animals drinking shoulder-to-shoulder from the same stream” (136). Jackie the shepherd—an image that already carried messianic connotations—turns into a wolf: she says to Sister she would like to see wolves reappear in the region, “We’re still missing a big predator in the chain” (184). Predation and transmogrification are favorite themes of Hall’s—particularly evident in *The Wolf Border* or “Mrs Fox”—which serve to problematize “the stripping away of the ground cover of socialized identity” (Lea 176) or, in her own words, “the civil veneer stripped off” (Crown).

The clash between Sister’s utopian expectations and the commune’s reality is the equivalent of the landscape’s divide between the green peaceful rolling lowlands and the harsh rocky fells. Sister is struck by the women’s raw personalities. Contrary to what she had imagined, the women’s original background is a criminal one: “There were fewer victims at Carhullan than I had imagined. Often it was the women themselves who had committed a crime or were misfits: they had been violent, outspoken, socially inept, promiscuous, drug-addicted” (130). Accordingly, they sing “an old prison ballad” whose “tune was similar to the Border songs” (132). The “camaraderie” at the farm (131) means that communal life is marked by troop-like behavior where “little was taboo, too impolitic or too rude” (129), the women enjoying crude banter and barrack-room humor as on the evenings they

call “smoor night” (96) when eating rabbit leads to feats of farting at dinner. Thus Hall’s imagined agro-pastoral commune also reads like a social rehabilitation center. Her unusual take on the trope of the criminal woman serves the same purpose as her reinterpretation of her native region of challenging conventionalities to draw new borders to social and cultural inscriptions.

Hall’s writing strategy is to strip off the cultural identifications of the place through the juxtaposition of its many contradictory place-images—the tourist destination, the military border region, the North of England, the agro-pastoral area, the Romantic place—so that Cumbria opens itself to renewed readings and rewritings. Similarly, Hall challenges the female identifications by layering seemingly conflicting characters—the charismatic leader, the criminal woman, the nun-like Sister, the nurturing figure, the agricultural woman, the woman fighter, the lesbian—to open up female identity to the reconfiguration of displaced types. Her spatialized feminist fiction exemplifies how

Spatialisation, the “production of space” concerns social and cultural reproduction and interaction. People learn the comportment associated with a place as well as with their social status and gender. Spatialisation is not only a matter of sites and networks of space but exists at all levels to tie the micro scale of the body to the macro scale of the region. (Shields 33)

The distinctive regional flavor of her novels does not aim at the nostalgic idealization of fixed identity markers; rather, the localism of her writing allows her to problematize contemporary spatial issues relating to the imaginary borders between countries, genders, classes, and cultures and to illustrate the very real ensuing struggles with discrimination, separatism, and fundamentalism.

Notes on Contributor

Emilie Walezak is a senior lecturer at Université Lumière Lyon 2. A specialist of contemporary British literature, she is the author of *Rose Tremain: A Critical Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

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