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Narrating Differences through Space :
John Lanchester's *The Wall*

Résumé | Abstract

FR L'article se propose d'étudier la représentation de la différence dans l'espace traditionnellement utopique de l'île à travers l'analyse de *The Wall* (2019) de John Lanchester, un roman dystopique de science-fiction climatique (cli-fi) situé dans un futur proche, où la catastrophe du changement climatique a produit des millions de réfugiés. Après avoir situé le roman dans le contexte de la BrexLit, des fictions sur le changement climatique et des débats contemporains sur les épistémologies de la frontière et les migrations induites par le climat, l'analyse envisage la comparaison de *The Wall* et de l'*Utopia* de Thomas More, puis s'attache à l'organisation géographique de l'île de Lanchester comme un espace de division sociologique profonde qui maintient néanmoins l'espoir et un horizon utopique dans les pages d'une dystopie critique.

Mots-clés : hiérarchies spatiales, récits de différence, espace utopique, dystopie critique, BrexLit, cli-fi, migration induite par le climat.

EN The article intends to investigate narratives of difference in the traditionally utopian space of the island through a close reading of John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), a dystopian climate fiction (cli-fi) novel set in a near future, in which catastrophic climate change has left millions displaced. After situating the novel in the context of BrexLit, climate change fiction, and global contemporary debates about border epistemologies and climate-induced migration, the analysis opens with a comparison between *The Wall* and Thomas More's *Utopia*, and then moves to analyze the geographical organization of Lanchester's island as a space of deep sociological division that nevertheless maintains hope and a utopian horizon within the pages of critical dystopia.

Keywords : Spatial Hierarchies, Narratives of Difference, Utopian Space, Critical Dystopia, BrexLit, Cli-Fi, Climate-Induced Migration.

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S pace is an important element in determining the social, political, and economic structure of a society and a central feature of any utopian or dystopian novel. The well-planned layout of the island of Utopia, for example, illustrates Thomas More's belief that appropriate spatial measures are crucial to building a society that is both just and peaceful. The island's topography is meticulously explained, highlighting its isolation and self-sufficiency as defenses against outside influences and conflicts. The layout and architecture of the cities are all the same, encouraging equality and homogeneity among the citizens. The social order, eliminating poverty and reducing social conflicts through shared resources and communal life, is symmetrical and ordered like the physical world. The way that space is used in More's *Utopia* shows how space and place may be combined to create a society that upholds and promotes utopian ideals[1]. Although space and place are often used interchangeably, distinguishing between them can be useful. Space typically refers to broad and abstract notions of spatiality, while place pertains to the local and bounded, it is space that has been given meaning through human experience and interaction. The transformation from space to place occurs when a specific area becomes important and meaningful to people, shaped by cultural, historical, and personal contexts.

This article intends to investigate narratives of difference in the traditionally utopian space of the island through a close reading of John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), a dystopian climate fiction (cli-fi) novel set in a near future in which catastrophic climate change has left millions displaced[2]. The global environmental transformation of the world is

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[1] Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Clarence H. Miller, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2014.

[2] John Lanchester, *The Wall*, London, Faber & Faber, 2019.

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known as « the Change », a time when « the shelter blew away, the waters rose to the higher ground, the ground baked, the crops died, the ledge crumbled, the well dried up »[3]. The novel leaves the reasons behind this transformation obscure, and all readers know is that environmental change has caused sea levels to rise and beaches to disappear, making parts of the world inhabitable and forcing entire populations to move from their countries. Although Britain is never named and *The Wall* is set on an unnamed island nation, a series of toponyms emerging gradually in the text – such as the Midlands, London, the Lake District, and Scotland – suggest that Lanchester's fictionalized space is in fact a Great Britain deprived of Northern Ireland and all other small islands. In order to protect itself from the rising sea levels and especially from the arrival of people referred to only as Others, this post-contemporary Britain has built a Wall around its ten-thousand-kilometer coastline – a « long low concrete monster » that looks « very tall and very straight and very dark »[4] – and forces all young citizens to serve on the wall for two years as Defenders, border guards on the Wall protecting the country from the threat of an armed invasion. A simple mathematical rule determines life at the Wall and the consequences of inadvertent watch : for each Other that enters the Wall, one Defender is put to sea. Additionally, Others who successfully enter the Wall « have to choose between being euthanised, becoming Help or being put back to sea »[5]. Most Others choose to be Help, legalized slaves who serve national residents : the attraction is that « if they have children, the children are raised as citizens »[6]. Readers are introduced to life at the wall through the viewpoint of its narrator Joseph Kavanagh, a young English man who has just been sent to the wall for the obligatory two-year term of service. One major split in the narrative occurs when Kavanagh and other members of his company are put to sea after a large group of Others succeeds in crossing the border with the help of a network of rebel nationals while Kavanagh and his crew are on duty.

In its reconfiguration of the dichotomy between the British self vs. the unspecified Others, Lanchester's novel seems to be partly inspired by Britain's withdrawal from the European Union on 23 June 2016 ; in other words, the Wall can be read as a literal Brexit. Following Kristen Sandrock's analysis of *The Wall* through what she refers to as « British border epistemologies »[7], María Alonso Alonso (2024) suggests that

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[3] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 4, 5.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 47.
[7] Kirsten Sandrock, « Border Temporalities, Climate Mobility, and Shakespeare in John Lanchester's *The Wall* », *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 43, n° 3, 2020, p. 164.

Lanchester's text seems to join a number of literary works known as « BrexLit »[8], a literary corpus inspired by this watershed event, whether directly or not – as Kristian Shaw suggests, indeed, British literature had already begun to imagine rebordering processes and to turn immigrant and refugees into subaltern subjects long before Brexit was even a possibility. Novels published in the years after the Brexit referendum, like Lanchester's *The Wall*, reimagine the aftermath of this poll while at the same time questioning its exclusionary rhetoric and outlining a counter-discourse.

Whilst Lanchester imagines an isolated and insular Britain after Brexit, however, his novel goes beyond recent UK politics as it enters « global debates about rebordering processes, mass migration, environmental change, biometric surveillance, and the role of the nation-state vis-à-vis contemporary global crises »[9]. As a matter of fact, the story is indeed influenced by the 2015 humanitarian crisis, by Donald Trump's plan to build a wall between the USA and Mexico, by Matteo Salvini's refusal to allow ships carrying migrants into Italian ports when he was interior minister in 2018 – but also by the inner-Irish border, Fortress Europe, and many other examples of politicians inciting fear of others as well as cruel anti-immigration policies. Interviewed by Lisa Allardice, Lanchester states that the novel's wall is not a metaphor for anything else, adding that « we had this period when walls were coming down around the world and now, just as an empirical fact, they are springing up all over the place »[10]. In the same interview, he describes himself as a « well-disguised semi-immigrant » : son of an African-born father and an Irish mother, he was born in Hamburg and spent much of his childhood in Hong Kong[11]. In this regard, he insists that for him the image of the wall was a comforting rather than a disturbing one : « Hong Kong was safe and that just over the border there was a place where

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[8] María Alonso Alonso, « A Posthuman Approach to BrexLit and Bordering Practices through an Analysis of John Lanchester's *The Wall* », *Humanities*, vol. 13, n° 34, 2024, p. 1-13. On BrexLit see John Day, « BrexLit : The New Landscape of British Fiction », *Financial Times*, 28 July 2017, http://www.ft.com/content/30ec47b4-7204-11e7-93ff-99f383b09ff9. [last accessed : 21/07/2024] ; Robert Eaglestone, *Brexit and Literature : Critical and Cultural Responses*, London, Routledge, 2018 ; Barbara Korte, Laura Lojo (eds.), *Borders and Border Crossings in the Contemporary British Short Story*, Cambridge, Palgrave, 2019 ; Kristian Shaw, *Brexlit : British Literature and the European Project*, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, and Christine Berberich, « Europe in Britain : The Marginalized Voices of EU Migrants in Contemporary British Brexit », in *Id.* (ed.), *Brexit and the Migrant Voice : EU Citizens in post-Brexit Literature and Culture*, London, Routledge, 2023, p. 31-45.

[9] Kirsten Sandrock, *op. cit*, p. 164.

[10] Lisa Allardice, « Interview with John Lanchester », *The Guardian*, 11 January 2019, www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/11/john-lanchester-interview-the-wall. [last accessed : 21/07/2024]

[11] *Ibid.*

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people were desperate to escape from, and that people died trying to get over the border, people drowned swimming […]. If people want to get to the place where you are, that means you are in a safe place »[12]. *The Wall* gives in fact center stage to the concept of a « safe space » – that will be analyzed in this article – and to the continuous shifting of borders : if, for most part of the novel, British citizens occupy the privileged position of those who happened to have been born in a safe place, halfway through the text « the territorial border of the Wall turns out to be an illusionary site for safety »[13]. At the same time, while those who arrive on Britain's shores are defined through the dehumanizing and Orientalizing term « Others »[14] – with a handful of references to some being of African origin, i.e., « they were from sub-Saharan Africa »[15] – it is eventually Kavanagh and his British companions who turn into Others after being put to sea.

In the end, no one is safe, and the novel's emphasis on borders as illusionary markers of safety helps to convey one of its main messages : that « climate change does not stop at the borders »[16]. *The Wall* enters current debates about environmental change positing that the climate crisis will affect all parts of the earth, whether directly or indirectly – increasing, for instance, climate-induced migration. According to Tom Holland, *The Wall* « is ultimately no more focused on immigration than it is on Brexit. Both are cast as symptoms of its ultimate theme : climate change »[17] ; in other words, Brexit, migration, and climate change are the three entwined forces of the novel. Being migration one of the main motivators for Brexit[18], these two major themes are often entangled in the novel, stressing that the need to fortify national borders is often triggered by global anxieties towards mobility. At the same time, it is well-known that climate change has led and will continue to lead to an increasing presence of climate refugees in contemporary migrant flows[19], including those across the British border. Besides being an example of BrexLit, *The Wall* can be therefore interpreted as a work of climate

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[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Kirsten Sandrock, *op. cit*, p. 170.

[14] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage, 1978.

[15] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 129-130.

[16] Kirsten Sandrock, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

[17] Tom Holland, « *The Wall* by John Lanchester. Review : "The Others are Coming" », *The Guardian*, 19 January 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/19/the-wall-john-lanchester-review. [last accessed : 25/07/2024]

[18] See Federico Fabbrini, *The Law & Politics of Brexit*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, and Richard Bellamy, Dario Castiglione, *From Maastricht to Brexit : Democracy, Constitutionalism and Citizenship in the EU*, London, Rowman & Littlefiel, 2019.

[19] See Gregory White, *Climate Change and Migration. Security and Borders in a Warming World*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.

change fiction, « cli-fi », – a genre that takes anthropogenic climate change as a point of departure[20]. In the novel, the global environmental transformation that drowned large parts of the world is known as the « Change », a single and extreme solitary event that destabilized people's conceptions of time and space. In his interview with Allardice, Lanchester quotes the German economist Rudi Dornbusch to explain the novel's temporality : « "In economics, things take longer to happen than you think they will, and then they happen faster than you thought they could". Substitute the environment for economics and the consequences are catastrophic »[21]. This is the way lots of things happen, he adds, « two ways. Gradually then suddenly »[22]. As one character puts it : « The Change – before and after »[23]. Such a static conception of climate change[24] is destabilized when Kavanagh asks a former Other now working as Help about the name for the Change in his language : the Swahili word for the Change happens to be *Kuishia*, « the end », suggesting that displaced Others have already endured one or many more apocalypses and that climate change outside Britain is not a matter of mere and minimal adaptation while life still functions as it used before for most people[25]. Surprisingly, it is a member of the elite – one of those people whose life and modes of consumption have changed the least – to explain the « uneven universality »[26] of climate change :

> As you all know, the Change was not a single solitary event. We speak of
> it in that manner because here we experienced one particular shift, of sea

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[20] See Axel Goodbody, Adeline Johns-Putra (eds.), *Cli-fi. A Companion*, Oxford-New York, Peter Lang, 2018, and Gregers Andersen, *Climate Fiction and Cultural Analysis. A New Perspective on Life in the Anthropocene*, Abingdon-New York, Routledge, 2020.

[21] Lisa Allardice, *op. cit.*

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

[24] This fast and extreme temporality of climate change can be found in many other works of climate fiction. One of the major problems with the climate change and the Anthropocene discourses, suggests Marco Malvestio in his book on Anthropocene fiction, is their tendency to represent the environmental crisis as a much more catastrophic phenomenon than it really is, or as denoted by an exceedingly visible form of catastrophism. Marco Malvestio, *Raccontare la fine del mondo. Fantascienza e Antropocene*, Milano, Nottetempo, 2021. In a 2022 article on the limits of catastrophic imagery, he further suggests that the intrinsic mode of contemporary eco-dystopias presents a series of ambiguities, that he summarizes in six theses : eco-dystopias are spectacular and sensationalistic, they focus on one single feature of the Anthropocene (climate change), they tend to portray a single catastrophic event, they might end up inhibiting actions to counter the current crisis even when their aim is to raise awareness of environmental problems, they are consolatory, and they are ecophobic. Marco Malvestio, « Theorizing Eco-Dystopia : Science Fiction, the Anthropocene, and the Limits of Catastrophic Imagery », *CPCL. European Journal of Creative Practices in Cities and Landscapes*, vol. 5, n° 1, 2022, p. 24-38.

[25] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

[26] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Boston, Harvard University Press, 2011.

level and weather, over a period of years it is true, but it felt then and when we look back on it today still feels like an incident that happened, a defined moment in time with a before and an after. There was our parents' world, and now there is our world […]. The Change – before and after. Elsewhere, though, it was not like that. The Change was not an event but a process, a process that in some places, some unlucky places, has not stopped. In many of the hotter places of the world, in particular, the Change is still continuing, still reshaping landscapes, still impacting people's lives[27].

As suggested by Lanchester (who in turn is quoting William Gibson) in his interview with Allardice, « the future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed »[28]. As *The Wall* consciously works within the tradition of utopian literature, reworking some of its tropes, such as the island/fortress (More), our analysis opens with a comparison between *The Wall* and Thomas More's *Utopia*, and then moves to analyze the geographical organization of Lanchester's island as a space of deep sociological division that nevertheless maintains hope and a utopian horizon within the pages of dystopia[29].

1. A Formal Inversion of More's Utopia

Lanchester's novel is built around juxtapositions and comparisons that, on the one hand, situate it in the tradition of utopian literature and, on the other, highlight the different meanings that spaces have been given through human experience and interaction. The first of these comparisons is with the genre's eponymous text, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). The state's response to the climate crisis and the threat of immigration is the erection of a wall surrounding its coasts. Officially called the « National Coastal Defense Structure », the Wall is guarded 24/7 by « two hundred thousand active Defenders at any given moment »[30].

The construction of the Wall around the island evokes King Utopus's creation of the island of Utopia : he « had a channel cut fifteen miles wide at the point where the land adjoined the continent, and thus caused the sea to flow all around the land »[31]. For Louis Marin, in *Utopics* (1984), this passage describing violence upon nature and humanity represents the creation of a myth about the founding of the social order, indicating that

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[27] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 110-111.

[28] Lisa Allardice, *op. cit.*

[29] On utopian hope maintained in dystopia, see Raffaella Baccolini, Tom Moylan (eds.), *Dark Horizons : Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York, Routledge, 2003.

[30] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 21, 34.

[31] Thomas More, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

the passage from nature to culture is a violent one[32]. In *Imaginary Communities*, on the other hand, Phil Wegner remarks how this gesture of territorial inclusion and exclusion « marks a *border* where there had previously existed only an indistinct *frontier* between "neighboring peoples" »[33]. Such act, that Anthony Giddens considers a « crucial dimension of the subsequent spatial practices of the modern nation-state », makes More's Utopia the prototype of the modern nation-state[34]. Regardless of its interpretation, the configuration of space through its appropriation suggests how, following Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), spaces have been shaped by human experiences and interactions[35]. Lanchester's debt to More signals then at least two things : first, as Wegner has also stated, that the post-contemporary British nation-state imagined in the novel is a formal inversion of the utopia encountered in More's text, namely a critical dystopia[36]; but also, that in a similar fashion to More's Utopia, Lanchester's island follows an isolationist and protectionist principle.

Both the island of Utopia and Lanchester's island have been fortified by walls. The city in Utopia « is surrounded by a high, thick wall with many towers and bastions. On three sides the wall is surrounded by a moat that is dry but wide and deep and blocked by thorn hedges; on the fourth side the river itself serves as a moat »[37]. The island of Utopia is therefore depicted as a separate, self-sufficient place whose detachment and separation are protected at all costs. Its isolation preserves it from external corruption, but the insularity of Utopia also brings with it an autarchic system and the principle of a closed economy.

The island in Lanchester's novel is also protected by a « ten thousand kilometres long » wall, « three metres wide at the top […]. On the sea side it is usually about five metres high; on the land side the height varies according to the terrain », a location that « looks like a cold, hard, unforgiving, desperate place »[38]. Human action has also transformed, using « millions of tons » of concrete, a future Britain into a separatist and isolationist state[39]. But while More's society is founded on an

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[32] Louis Marin, *Utopics : The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, trans. Robert A. Vollrath, Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press International, 1984.

[33] Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities : Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, p. 50.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place : The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1977.

[36] Phillip E. Wegner, « A Story Where Something Turns Out All Right, Part 1 : The Defense of the Critical Dystopia in John Lanchester's *The Wall* », in Patricia McManus (ed.), *The Dystopia Reader*, Oxford, Peter Lang, forthcoming.

[37] Thomas More, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

[38] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 14, 5.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

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agricultural system where production and consumption can be easily planned and work is equal for everyone, Lanchester's society is fraught with lies and inequality.

An exchange between characters during a camping trip makes clear that the post-contemporary British state's economic order is based on self-sufficiency. While memories of the variety of food available at all times are tinted with nostalgia, a certain pride accompanies the reduced crops of the closed economy :

> The produce you could get before the Change […]. Everything, all the time […]. I think, it must have been too easy, you know ? […] how did people know what to want? […] Now, there's less, but maybe, I don't know, I wouldn't say it's better, that would be mad, obviously it's not better, but you have to work with what you've got, […] and even if it is, you know, turnips, turnips, fucking turnips yet again, at least you know you're working with turnips because that's what came out of the ground and that's what you've got to cook and that's what you've got to make interesting, because there's no choice, you know ? […] that's what's amazing and beautiful about it, you know, that's what's interesting, not just going to the shops and being able to buy, you know, stuff that just got off a plane from who knows where[40].

These words waver between nostalgia for a lost time and pride for the new condition. The abundance of produce before the Change is associated with a certain weakness and a way of life considered to be « too easy », while the poor variety of available food is regarded « interesting », « amazing », and « beautiful » as people must get the best out of a difficult situation and « work with what [they]'ve got ».

However, the pride inherent in what seems to be the post-contemporary state's isolationist rhetoric turns out to be a lie. The characters, in fact, abundantly drink coffee and tea throughout the novel, a fact that reveals how the discourse of England as being self-sufficient is indeed a fantasy, one that also undermines the history of England's colonialism and its exploitation of resources and people[41]. But if self-sufficiency is a lie – one that seems to respond to Brexit's isolationist pride – it is not the only problem of this post-contemporary version of Britain, a society characterized by inequality once again perceived through the different groups' relation to geographical space.

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40 *Ibid.*, p. 75-76.
41 We are indebted to Antonis Balasopoulos for this observation.

2. Spatial Hierarchies of Difference

The spatial organization of Lanchester's island is one of deep sociological divisions, endowed with narratives of difference[42] that are responsible for an exclusionary version of citizenship[43]. As a critical dystopia, *The Wall* challenges and deconstructs the alleged ideal space of the island pursuing a politics of isolationism, border surveillance, and societal hierarchy. The physical border of the wall built around the coastline marks out hierarchies of difference, classifying groups of people according to the place they inhabit (islanders vs. the Others; Defenders forced to serve on the wall vs. older generations and members of the elite who are exempt from spending time on the wall) but also to their societal function (Defenders, Breeders, Help). As in many other dystopias, the identity of *The Wall*'s citizens is therefore dependent on the place in which they live as well as on their function in society.

Starting from the most visible rift (the island vs. the sea) of this « spatial distribution of hierarchical power relations »[44], citizens living within the wall occupy the privileged position of those being born in a safe place who can continue to live their existence with relative normality, while the Others are perceived as a threat to national security and therefore excluded from British society, besides being the ones most affected by the impacts of climate change. The Others are displaced from their countries, homes, and families, forced to live a disposable and inhuman condition worsened by border control of immigration and the smuggling of people. When Kavanagh first meets a former migrant who decided to turn into Help, he provides a handful of references to the lives of Others : « I could just about imagine burning sand, a huge yellow sun close overhead, salt water stinging in cuts, the weak being left behind, the bitter tastes of exile and loss, the longing for safety, the incandescent desperation and grief driving you onwards … no, I couldn't really imagine. And yet here they were »[45]. Citizens living within the wall, on the contrary, have still access to public transportation, pubs, and camping vacations, suggesting that the effects of climate change are not distributed evenly across the world. In this regard, the island might represent a utopian horizon for the displaced Others fleeing homelands : the ones who successfully enter the wall can indeed choose to become

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[42] Kirsten Sandrock, *op. cit.*

[43] James Holston, Arjun Appadurai, « Cities and Citizenship », *Public Culture*, vol. 8, n° 2, 1996, p. 187-204.

[44] Akhil Gupta, James Ferguson, « Beyond "Culture" : Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference », *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 7, n° 1, 1992, p. 8.

[45] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

Help – and most of them actually do, since, as Kavanagh explains, « if they have children, the children are raised as citizens. That's after being taken away from their parents, of course »[46]. The island, however, refuses to serve as a lifeboat for migrants, and the only utopian stance within the wall is that of a network of Britons who « don't agree with the Wall. They think you need the Wall to keep out the water but not to keep out human beings. Some of them don't agree with turning people into Help. They think it's slavery »[47]. Becoming Help means indeed going through processes of dehumanization that generate legalized slaves because of one's societal function; as one secondary character realizes, Help is more a « falling away, a lessening of one's own humanity » than « a form of providing shelter and refuge to the wretched of the world »[48].

Migrants are not the only displaced subjects in the novel, as hierarchies of difference are outlined within the island itself. If the lives of most British citizens continue with relative normality, the new generation born post-Change must spend two years of service as Defenders on the wall. The British society in the novel is one of deep intergenerational conflict and division, as it is the old generation that has allowed the Change to happen – the world « broke on their watch »[49] – and, to make things worse, does not need to spend time on the wall :

> None of us can talk to our parents. By « us » I mean my generation, people born after the Change. You know that thing where you break up with someone and say, It's not you, it's me? This is the opposite. It's not us, it's them. Everyone knows what the problem is. The diagnosis isn't hard – the diagnosis isn't even controversial. It's guilt: mass guilt, generational guilt. The olds feel they irretrievably fucked up the world, then allowed us to be born into it[50].

As suggested by Sandrock, this passage abounds with personal pronouns that mark the temporal and spatial split between these two generations, adding the intergenerational border to the many other borders discussed in the novel. Lanchester's society is unable to deal with generational guilt, and the older generation is still able to watch nostalgically a program about surfing while their children must risk their lives guarding a country where « there isn't a single beach left, anywhere in the world »[51]. Such intergenerational border is given a spatial connotation in the novel, as the two generations live far apart from each

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[46] *Ibid.*, p. 47.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 191.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 148-149.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 151.
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 55.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

other (the older in the safe inland space and the younger on the « dangerously cold, frighteningly cold » wall), and Kavanagh has to take « lorry, train, second train, bus »[52] to get back to his parent's house for his two weeks off. Time on the wall, moreover, affects and defamiliarizes his feelings of a comfortable and safe home :

> Home : it didn't just seem as if home was a long way away, or a long time ago, it actually felt as if the whole concept of home was strange, a thing you used to believe in, an ideology you'd once been passionate about but had now abandoned. Home: the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. Somebody had said that. But once you had spent time on the Wall, you stop believing in the idea that anybody, ever, has no choice but to take you in. Nobody has to take you in. They can choose to, or not[53].

Later on in the novel, after having spent some time on the wall, he realizes that safety is always an illusion : to think of being safe means to have hope, and he had already learnt « how dangerous hope is »[54]. Being raised after the Change, Kavanagh's generation has to deal with feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and fear affecting several areas of their lives, including the ethics of having children in the age of climate change[55]. Kavanagh and his generation are well aware that they should not want to bring children into the world – « we broke the world and have no right to keep populating it » – as most of the humans that are already living in this world are « starving and drowning, dying and desperate [,] so how dare we make more of them? »[56]. Nevertheless, the nation needs more babies as the slogan says « Breed to Leave »[57] : as the wall needs so many Defenders, people need to reproduce even though the world is such a horrible place, and those who decide to become Breeders can leave the wall. The intergenerational border separates Kavanagh's generation not only from their parents but also from future generations, as « some people say that this isn't fair to the children, who are born into a world where

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[52] *Ibid.*, p. 44, 49.

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 193.

[55] This resonates with real concerns about the environment that are currently preventing many young people around the world from having children. See Travis N. Rieder, *Toward a Small Family Ethic : How Overpopulation and Climate Change Are Affecting the Morality of Procreation*, Basel, Springer, 2016 ; Roy Scranton, « Raising My Child in a Doomed World », *New York Times*, 16 July 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/16/opinion/climate-change-parenting.html. [last accessed : 21/07/2024] ; Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Kit Ling Leong, « Eco-reproductive Concerns in the Age of Climate Change », *Climatic Change*, vol. 163, n° 2, 2020, p. 1007-1023 ; and Fiona Harvey, « Four in 10 Young People Fear Having Children Due to Climate Crisis ». *The Guardian*, 14 September 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/14/four-in-10-young-people-fear-having-children-due-to-climate-crisis. [last accessed : 21/07/2024]

[56] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

[57] *Ibid.*

they have to do time on the Wall in their turn »[58]. Halfway through the novel, Kavanagh decides to save himself from the wall by becoming a Breeder and bringing somebody new into the broken world. This decision opens up the possibility of imagining for the first time a hopeful future off the wall – « we'd find work, take turns looking after the baby, maybe take turns going to college, and it would be onwards and upwards. There would be a new life, and we would be living a new life »[59]. Most importantly, as a Breeder contributing to national – and nationalistic – fertility levels, he might have the possibility of becoming a member of the elite, those people « flying off to talk to other members of the elite about the Change and the Others and what to do about them »[60]. Besides the old generation whose careless watch caused the Change, members of the elite are the only privileged citizens living in the island, so rich and powerful that they are able to send Help to the wall in their place and, thus, refuse to serve as Defenders. Kavanagh is blinded by the possibility of a life as a member of the elite, and he is not able to question a hierarchical system that remains a utopia for few and a disaster for many. His viewpoint begins to change when he and other members of his company are put to sea after a large group of Others crosses the border, suggesting that the maps of power represented in the novel are neither static nor absolute. The rest of the novel continues to represent narratives of difference, exploring what happens after a reversal of the spatial setting engenders a radical shift of one's own position of privilege or discrimination and dispossession. As Sandrock states, Lanchester's novel « plays out against the unstable borders of environmental change and global mobility »[61], suggesting that alternative organizations of space might be necessary to cope with the current time of crisis.

3. Other Spaces : The Island vs. Utopian Enclaves

Besides being associated with utopia, spaces and places are also used to further the protagonist's utopian education. Whether utopian or dystopian, the imagined elsewhere also shares a pedagogical function which critics such as Tom Moylan and Phil Wegner have underlined. The presentation of another world or space allows readers « to perceive the world they occupy in a new way, providing them with some of the skills and dispositions necessary to inhabit an emerging social, political, and

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[58] *Ibid.*
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 152.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[61] Kirsten Sandrock, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

RILUNE — Revue des littératures européennes | n° 18, *Eu-topies. Géocritique du mode utopique dans les littératures européennes contemporaines*, (Michele Morselli, Gaetano Lacalandra et Camilla Marchisotti, dir.), 2024 (version en ligne).

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cultural environment »[62]. Thus, through a « process of pleasure and pedagogy »[63], the function of utopia reverts from merely that of « goal and catalyst of change to one of criticism, and the education of desire »[64]. One of the key functions of utopia, then, is the educative aspect stressed by Ernst Bloch in his *Principle of Hope*, explained by Ruth Levitas as follows[65] :

> The education of desire is part of the process of allowing the abstract elements of utopia to be gradually replaced by the concrete, allowing anticipation to dominate compensation. Utopia does not express desire but enables people to work towards an understanding of what is necessary for human fulfilment, a broadening, deepening and raising of aspirations in terms quite different from those of their everyday life[66].

These aspects of utopian and dystopian writing, articulating a geographical and temporal elsewhere (together with the necessary journeys involved) can usefully be applied to Lanchester's novel and its protagonist.

Dislocation from what is familiar and desirable is the event that allows Kavanagh to become the critically aware citizen of dystopia. In fact, following a successful attack on the wall, Kavanagh and a few other characters are expelled from the island. Their dis-placement from a meaningful and desirable place becomes that which turns Kavanagh into the « misfit » character that is a feature of every dystopia. Before the loss of place, Kavanagh proves to be unable to question the system he inhabits. If the generational conflict makes Kavanagh not thoroughly at home in the post-contemporary version of Britain, his unease is only the result of resentment toward the older generation. He never shows doubts about the hierarchical system, only the disappointment of being among the lower ranks and a desire to improve his individual condition and « become a member of the elite »[67].

It is once again a comparison between places that reveals Kavanagh's dream, one that begins to wear off, but that never really abandons him :

> At first I looked at those planes flying overhead and I longed, physically ached, to be up there looking down rather than down here looking up […]. To go up above people, to be away from ordinariness, to live in the pure inhuman element of height and air. I still felt the appeal of that, the thrill of

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[62] Phillip E. Wegner, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

[63] Tom Moylan, « Making the Present Impossible : On the Vocation of Utopian Science Fiction », *Arena*, vol. 31, 2008, p. 79-109, p. 80.

[64] Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2010, p. 226.

[65] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1986.

[66] Ruth Levitas, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

[67] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

it. To be up there rather than down here . . . but the problem was, that was the same as wishing to be above normal people, not one of them[68].

The space of the sky metaphorically represents the superiority that Kavanagh aspires to. But Kavanagh's doubts only seem to concern his discomfort about feeling better than his friends. He shows no compassion for the Help, and even less so for the Others. Far from being an occasion to reflect on the inequality of the system, the choice to borrow Help for the camping trip is savored as « a taste of what it's like to be rich. I had thought it might be awkward for us, from the human point of view, getting used to Help when we weren't the kind of people who had it in our private lives. But it was interesting how little adjustment it took »[69]. The camping trip, then, becomes an occasion to reflect at best on the ease of privilege, not its fairness.

The location of the camping trip in the Lake District and the atmosphere are evocative of utopia by being repeatedly described as « ideal », « beautiful », « blessed », and « perfect », a condition that can only be achieved by being « on the inside » : « this must be what it's like to be in the elite. To have things done for you »[70]. Associated with this place is « feeling safe and warm »[71]. What at first sight appears as a utopian experience is undermined by Kavanagh's not-yet-utopian stance. His acceptance of the hierarchical system as well as his exploitation of the Help show the limits of a utopian project that is not self-sufficient but rather is at someone else's expense. The presence of the Help, in fact, ensures the comfort of the experience while revealing the fragility of a false utopia. In a similar way, the pride in the rhetoric of self-sufficiency serves to hide that an autonomous Britain is only a fantasy.

The feelings associated with different locations are reminiscent of Homi Bhabha's reflections on discourses of the nation, belonging, and power. In *Nation and Narration*, Bhabha distinguishes between the « *heimlich* pleasure of the hearth » and the « *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other »[72]. Despite Kavanagh's position among the less fortunate compared to the elite and the older generation, he is still located in a comfortable, familiar place compared to the hostile space inhabited by the Others.

Because he enjoys privilege and inhabits the familiar, just as for the Help, he never quite expresses compassion for the Others until he becomes

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[68] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[69] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 68, 70, 71.

[71] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

[72] Homi K. Bhabha, « Introduction : Narrating the Nation », in *Id.* (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 2.

one. While, at an earlier stage, reflecting on the number of people needed to man the Wall he thinks that in the future perhaps « all the Others will have died off » and that consequently there will be no need for defenders, he begins to attempt to imagine the « longing for safety, the incandescent desperation and grief » of being an Other, although he still admits that he cannot « really imagine » it[73].

It takes Kavanagh the loss of place, and hence of comfort and privilege, to embrace the « terror of the space or race of the Other »[74]. The loss of place signals also a move away from a false utopia associated to a concrete, geographical space toward utopia as a process, a way of life, and a sense of community. Utopia does not offer a blueprint, a model or a goal to be reached; rather it disrupts the present and our common notions about how time is experienced. Space, then, becomes less relevant or significant for what it actually represents : if it is not the actual, bounded place which one must reach, then the emphasis moves to the process of attaining an unreachable place, the state of utopia. Utopia does not designate the space to be ultimately reached but, rather, the journey through space that we need to undergo.

But before Kavanagh can adapt to the new condition and turn the loss of the familiar into something utopian, he must first experience a variety of feelings associated with the terror of the space of the Other, the space of the sea : he faces « despair », « grief », « numbness », « fear », and « terror » after having also encountered « betrayal »[75]. Such a turmoil of emotions is what forces Kavanagh to reconsider his position and his attitude toward the Others : « I'd been brought up not to think about the Others in terms of where they came from or who they were, to ignore all that – they were just Others. But maybe, now that I was one of them, they weren't Others anymore? If I was an Other and they were Others perhaps none of us were Others but instead we were a new Us. It was confusing »[76].

Such an opening is what allows him to move from a simple sense of loss and an attitude to think primarily about himself to an acceptance of precarity and a sense of community. Being sent out to sea serves as the « gestalt shift » that Moylan, in *Becoming Utopian*, has identified as the « break » that moves the dystopian citizen from apparent contentment

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[73] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 35, 80.

[74] Homi K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

[75] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 183, 170.

[76] *Ibid.*, p. 203.

into « an experience of alienation and resistance » that leads to utopian agency[77].

The North Atlantic and other bodies of water are dangerous spaces because of the harsh weather, the presence of pirates, and the scarcity of food and fresh water. Once cast adrift, there is little chance of reaching another destination, as rising sea levels have destroyed all coastlines, leaving only steep cliffs in their place. As they are set adrift on a boat with enough food and water to last a few weeks, they eventually come across a « flotilla of boats », a floating community of ten members, sheltered in the bay of an unreachable island[78]. Although the group cannot be said to be an intentional community, as it « had not been a plan, more a series of accidents and coincidences », Kavanagh begins to entertain the idea that this life is acceptable : « it was a life that could be lived »[79]. Although he continues to waver between nostalgia for a past life and the realization of the misery of the present, he also begins to accept such hardship : « At sea, thinking about food had become a form of nostalgia, of time travel back to a safer place […]. Out here, it made you feel worse »[80].

But the acceptance of the present hardship is also evocative of the recognition of the precarity of life :

> The truth was, it was hard to imagine ever getting away from here. But it might be that we would never need to. Perhaps we weren't waiting for anything, but this was just life, life in its new form. There had been floating communities before, in the world before the Change. So maybe that is what we now were and would always be. It was better not to brood on it, so I tried not to. I tried to stick to the daily necessities[81].

Although the floating community is « nobody's fantasy of an ideal life », it is one that Kavanagh and the readers recognize as fair and equal, unlike that of the British island[82]. His education and resistance are marked by him distancing from the post-contemporary British exploitative system, choosing instead uncertainty and embracing solidarity for the « others » : « The storm was passing. We had survived. The rafts would not be torn apart. The community would keep going.

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[77] Tom Moylan, *Becoming Utopian : The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation*, London, Bloomsbury, 2020, p. 7 ; Raffaella Baccolini, Tom Moylan (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 5.
[78] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 201.
[79] *Ibid.*, p. 203, 204.
[80] *Ibid.*, p. 205.
[81] *Ibid.*, p. 210.
[82] *Ibid.*, p. 204.

I could have cried with relief »[83]. Kavanagh's new stance includes caring for the others, not just his friends or his own survival.

Putting their emphasis on « what is doable and viable given the conditions of the present »[84], Kavanagh and the rest of the floating community seek to build alternatives to mainstream and dominant practices. In this way, *The Wall* clears the space for the production of new critical utopian visions that resonate with Davina Cooper's « everyday utopias » capturing a sense of hope and potential, in that « they anticipate something more, something beyond and other to what they can currently realize »[85]. As such, everyday utopias are not the realization of a blueprint, a static notion of the ideal society that can be planned, imagined, and implemented, but they see the utopian as a complex process with failures, struggles, constant adaptation, and change[86] — a pirate ship launches in fact an attack on the floating community, tearing their rafts apart. In the utopian enclave of the floating community, failure and constant adaptation are as important as success, but the utopian impulse is always maintained within the pages : « nobody was idle. There were always things to do concerning traps and nets and food preparation, […] work of survival », ideas worth trying — even terrible ideas such as diving in the freezing waters of the North Atlantic — because they gave them « a sense of purpose and structure and something to do other than just exist and wait for… for… it wasn't clear what »[87]. This complex process that starts from what is doable given the conditions of the present echoes recent invitations to embrace the unknowability and unpredictability of the world, as theorized by environmental scholars such as Donna Haraway, Kate Rigby, Anna Tsing, and many more[88]. Within the Anthropocene, embracing uncertainty means « staying with the trouble »[89] of ecological devastation, learning to live and die well with one another on a damaged Earth, and to be « truly present, not as a

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[83] *Ibid.*, p. 224.

[84] Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias. The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2013, p. 4.

[85] *Ibid.*

[86] Ruth Levitas, « Looking for the Blue : The Necessity of Utopia », *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 12, n° 3, 2007, p. 289-306 ; Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible : Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, New York, Methuen, 1986 ; Lucy Sargisson, « The Curious Relationship between Politics and Utopia », in Tom Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini (eds.), *Utopia Method Vision : The Use Value of Social Dreaming*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2007, p. 25-46.

[87] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

[88] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble : Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016 ; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World : On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015 ; Kate Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster : Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2015.

[89] Donna Haraway, *op. cit.*

vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings »[90]. On a similar note, Tsing suggests that we should learn to coexist with the very conditions of our time, namely indeterminacy and vulnerability. In *The Wall*, moreover, pursuing an open, partial, and contingent building of another world means embracing solidarity and collective action with the Others, dehumanized by Fortress Britain for most part of the novel. This resonates with the narrative of « the collective » proposed by Janet Fiskio[91] : inspired by Rebecca Solnit's account of the spontaneous collectives that can arise out of disasters[92], Fiskio claims that one particular narrative thread that emerges in climate discourse and speculative film and literature is that of « the collective », suggesting that people need community and meaningful ways to engage in social change in order to face catastrophe. The opposed narrative explored by Fiskio is that of « the lifeboat », with individuals competing for survival in a world where resources are scarce and diminishing. When the floating community is attacked by a pirate ship, Kavanagh and his partner find a safe shelter in the lifeboat – packed with hidden boxes of supplies – aboard of which they were put to sea. Kavanagh says it all :

> I did not think it would sink us, sink the *lifeboat*, but I did think it would mean we couldn't stay together as a *collective*; the rafts and boats would be scattered over the seas and we would have to look for each other or for a different place of temporary safety. The sensation of despair, which I had been holding at bay ever since we had been put to sea – I suppose because we had been so busy with the work of survival – came back in full force[93].

The lifeboat can save him and his partner at the expense of the collective, and he faces despair over this selfish life choice. The rest of the floating community will be eventually killed in the pirates' attack, but Kavanagh is finally able to reject the British spatial distribution of hierarchical power relations and to embrace solidarity and a sense of community, anticipating something beyond and other to what post-contemporary Britain allows them to realize.

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[90] *Ibid.*, p. 1.

[91] Janet Fiskio, *Climate Change, Literature, and Environmental Justice. Poetics of Dissent and Repair*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

[92] Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell : The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*, New York, Viking, 2009.

[93] John Lanchester, *op. cit.*, p. 223-224, emphasis added.