"Lots of Troubling Ideologies": A Conversation with Writer Jennifer Haigh about Region, Extractivism, and Nostalgia

Heike Paul and Jennifer Haigh

Jennifer Haigh is a prominent and highly esteemed voice in contemporary U.S. American literature and the author of six novels and numerous short stories to date. She received an MFA from the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop in 2002. Among her many literary awards and prizes are a PEN/Hemingway Award (2004) and a Guggenheim Fellowship (2018).

The interview with the author took place on March 9, 2022. It has subsequently been edited for clarity and concision.

Heike Paul (HP hereafter): When I first read your amazing novel *Heat & Light* (2016), I did not know whether Bakerton, the town that is the setting of the novel, actually existed, so I went to look it up. Sometimes you find that writers make up their own geography entirely and yet, such fictional geographies can be very similar to real places. To me, it was intriguing that both seems to be true in the case of the town of Bakerton. It is a place that you seem to be intimately familiar with and very much connected to. Still, it is not a place we can find on a map. In what ways do you consider Bakerton, Pennsylvania, your invention? In what way do you consider yourself producing a chronicle of a certain kind of region or place in the United States?

Jennifer Haigh (JH hereafter): The short answer is that indeed both things are true. Bakerton has its roots in a place that actually exists. It is the town where I grew up, a coal-mining town, in Western Pennsylvania. In many ways, my hometown resembles Bakerton but in other ways, it does not. I invented the name Bakerton. Like the town where I grew up, which was called Barnesboro, Bakerton is named after a coalmine. The mine was there first. Later, there was a critical mass of miners and so it became a town. My town Barnesboro

came about in exactly the same way, and I find it significant that the mine was there first. They were towns founded for a particular reason, and that reason no longer exists, they have outlived their reason for existing, and that, to me, is very interesting. A lot of my writing about Bakerton deals with that idea. My short stories in the collection *News from Heaven* focus on how people find a way to continue in this town when its purpose is gone. That clearly reflects my experience growing up where I did. When I was a child, the coalmines were still functioning, and these towns were bustling. They were vibrant little towns. I was probably 11 or 12, when the mine started to fail and by the time I finished high school, it was all over, completely finished. These towns, as they exist now, are kind of ghost towns. My mother still lives there—she is 91 years old and not going anywhere, and I go back there to visit her—but everyone my age and younger has mostly left. It is a hard place to make a living now, as the mines were the only industry. Now that they are gone, there isn't very much to do. Cousins of mine who have stayed in this region are either working as prison guards, like Rich Devlin (a character in *Heat & Light*), or they are working in nursing homes with the elderly. Because the population there is aging, many old people need care. It is very much a transformed place from the town where I grew up, and that transformation has been a subject of my work. My first book is set in Bakerton at a time when the mines were booming. I have no memory of that time as the novel opens in 1944, when I had not been born yet. I grew up hearing these stories about what this place was like when things were good, and I have always had the urge to travel back in time and see what that was like. That was the impulse that led to my writing *Baker Towers*: wanting to time-travel and experience the town when it was supposedly a good place to live. When I was growing up, it was already a very hard place to live, and it has only gotten harder. But when my parents were growing up, it was very much the Bakerton you see in *Baker Towers*: That was their experience, coming of age in this region in northern Appalachia. Many Americans do not even realize that Western Pennsylvania is part of Appalachia. When I travel to Kentucky, or West Virginia, I feel much more at home than I do in Philadelphia. While Philadelphia is the other end of Pennsylvania, it is culturally entirely different. It is much wealthier; it was never predicated on extraction the way Western Pennsylvania is. That has been completely formative, the culture of this place is absolutely influenced by being founded on an extractive economy.

HP: It must have been a traumatic moment, when everything stopped, when you were around 11 years old. While it was an individual experience, it was, as you describe it, a kind of collective experience as well, of things

shutting down, this being the end of something, without there being a real plan of what is going to happen next.

JH: Yes, and I was aware of this as a child. My father was a schoolteacher, so he was not in danger of losing his job. But all my friends' fathers were coal miners, and their families were really struggling. Lots of families moved away, because there was no more work. I lost friends at that age, which was my experience of this as a child. This is a true story: When I was 11 or 12, I went back to school in September with a new pair of sneakers. I got them every year and so did everyone else. That year, I was the only kid in my class who had new sneakers. I was so ashamed of having new sneakers, I wouldn't wear them. It was very clear to me that nobody else could have them, but I could because my father wasn't a miner. That was my understanding of what was happening. Nobody understood that this was a permanent change. It turned out to be permanent, but at the time, this wasn't clear. The economy of coal mining or oil drilling or gas drilling had always been cyclical. There were ups and downs, there were slowdowns. Even when the town was booming, the mines would sometimes experience a slowdown and the men would maybe only work three days a week. That would last for a period, and then business would improve, and they would be back to working five days a week. The slowdown was a familiar phenomenon and, I think, that's how people understood it at first. It wasn't clear for some time that they were not coming back.

HP: In your Bakerton-novels and short stories, you describe an interesting mix of emotions amidst changing times. In *Heat & Light*, specifically, you seem to indicate that you see some sort of historical continuum for which extractivism is foundational and that you do extend backwards to settler colonialism and forward to fracking. It seems to be a very ambivalent issue to build a community around logics of extraction, and I was struck by this sentence in the novel: "More than most places, Pennsylvania is what lies beneath." It seems both so powerful, and at the same time mystical. In the way that you critique extractivism, you also seem to talk about some sort of mystery of what is hidden, what we cannot get at. That even if we think we can understand a place, we do not seem to grasp all there is to it.

JH: Yes, and in this way, Western Pennsylvania is similar to Kentucky or Tennessee or all these Appalachian states who have all been determined by extractive economies. This is not universally true in the U.S., but it certainly is a regional truth. In many ways, these places are blessed and cursed by the same thing: It comes down to geology. And the same geology that produced coal, also produced oil and gas. They're all there for the same reasons, it's just that the

technology has changed. We've known for a long time that there is an ocean of natural gas in this region. But for a long time, we didn't have the technology to extract it. Geologists had known it was down there, there was simply no way to get at it. That changed in the 1990s and that is why gas exploration has begun there. In a certain way, it appears to be the destiny of that region to be extracted.

HP: In an essay included in this volume I compare your novel and put it in contrast to one of the speeches the former president Trump gave in front of oil lobbyists, because he was always so fond of talking about what I like to call the "treasure hunt narrative" with phrases such as "all that wealth underneath," "why don't you dig it up," "we just have to take it outside, and then we are rich," and "why don't you want to do that." This kind of performance reminds me of a character in your book who is contoured along the same lines. I contrast this speech with the novelistic discourse that you unfold in your book, because I think it provides an interesting antidote to this discourse of finding a treasure, just having to dig, and then everyone being rich.

JH: It's true! Of course, it makes sense to me that the people in that region have been huge supporters of Donald Trump, because it is a narrative that appeals to them, to their sense of nostalgia. I think it is very pertinent to talk about the culture of extraction in the context of sentimentality. There is a kind of mythology that people in this region cling to, this idea that things were much better in the past when you could mine and drill without regulation, without restriction. If you look at the campaigns of Donald Trump: He ran on nostalgia. Think about his campaign promise "Make America Great Again." The implication is that it used to be great, and now it no longer is. That he is going to turn back the clock to the times when things were great. The people in that region who have suffered terribly, economically, have responded very enthusiastically to that appeal. There is a real sentimental attachment to the idea of mining and miners. The miners are almost heroic figures in these communities, because everybody's father or grandfather was a coal miner, and it is inextricably tied to this kind of reverence for family and ancestry. My grandfathers were both coal miners. Six of my uncles were coal miners. Every person there has a connection to this history of mining and people see very keenly the contrast between how things used to be and how desperately hard things are now and have been for a long time now. It has now been 30 years of hard times and more. This nostalgic appeal was very effective there. Even though, of course, Donald Trump knows nothing about coal mining or working class people or people who work with their hands, obviously. Yes, it could not be more obvious. It is enraging

to me that people who have this history of hard work, don't see that; that it is not a factor in their thinking. So, this idea of sentimentality that you've put your finger on, I think it's very significant. The difference between sentiment and sentimentality, I think is worth discussing. Sentimentality is not simply feeling. It's an attachment to a romantic idea. There's an element of fantasy to sentimentality that distinguishes it from simple sentiment. In *Heat & Light*, there is a passage, where Darren Devlin, who has come back to Bakerton, is at a barbecue at his brother Rich's house and Rich has leased his mineral rights. There's going to be gas drilling on his property and he's very happy about it, and they're having a conversation about this, and Rich says to Darren, "Look, nothing's perfect. The point is, it's an opportunity. I'm not sitting around waiting for the mines to come back. Unlike some people." And Darren says: "Seriously? […] That's the dream?" "They were good jobs," says Rich. Darren says, "Define *good*." (200). This gets us to something really important: that the people in this part of the country who yearn for the days of coal mining to come back have a very romantic understanding of what those jobs were really like. My maternal grandfather was a coal miner. He was what was called a pinner. His job was to hammer in these posts that would hold up the ceiling in the mineshaft that they were excavating. It's an incredibly dangerous job, and he spent most of his day on his hands and knees. Now it's unimaginable that workers could labor in these conditions for years on end. Of course, he died of black lung, as a lot of men there did. But that is not part of the narrative now. When people in that part of the country—and I'm generalizing, of course, not everyone thinks this way—, but the Trump supporters in these communities, when they think about coal mining, they're not picturing a grown man on his hands and knees for eight hours. They're thinking of prosperity and stability and this idea that you could have a high school education and raise your family and educate your children and have job security and belong to a union and rely on that way of life. That is what people are nostalgic for—yet it is a very romanticized picture.

HP: Let me take up this ambiguity, because one of the concepts that came to my mind, when I thought about this sort of cognitive or affective dissonance was what Lauren Berlant call "cruel optimism" in their work as a cultural theorist. They say that there are certain American myths—or not only American, obviously global notions—that promise you something, and then you become attached to these myths of this better past etc. However, sometimes you don't realize how harmful this attachment can actually be for your life. I thought that this might also be a way to describe what you unravel in *Heat & Light*. Specifically Rich is a very interesting figure here. He is a very complex character, and,

of course, you can dislike him for this or that. Yet on the other hand, he is very vulnerable and helpless in trying to rehearse a certain kind of masculinity that is not really working out so well. Does this idea of a cruel optimism resonate with you?

JH: Yes, it does. Well, I think optimism is one of those American ideals and generally, I think it is considered a positive trait. Part of what I find likeable about the character of Rich Devlin is that he is a doer. That he has a plan. He is trying to make something happen, and he is in these bad circumstances, but he has not resigned. He has a plan. He has an idea. He is going to start dairy farming; he's going to buy these milking machines. And he's going to finance this by selling his mineral rights.

HP: He works two jobs. He is also a man, who is very concentrated on his goal and very engaged in everything he does.

JH: Completely. You know, he is attached to this idea of self-sufficiency. He is not waiting for someone to rescue him. He really believes that he can turn his circumstances around, that it is a question of hard work and having a plan and being smart. In Rich's case, it is not enough. It's a very hard lesson. And it's reflected in people's actual lives: It's in fiction because it's in life. I want to go back to your first question, namely to what degree Bakerton is an invented place and to what degree it actually exists. There is, of course, a lot of invention involved with it, too. It is not an exact replica of my hometown. If it were, I would have kept the same name. The reason I renamed it was to give myself the freedom to modify it as needed, to make my work possible. After having written three books—actually four books now with *Mercy Street*—that connect to Bakerton—, it is a place that really exists to me now. It has a life separate from the real town it was inspired by, and that's because of the people I have invented. At this point, I now have a very long, detailed list of all the characters I have invented, who have a connection to Bakerton. It's an alphabetical list and it gets longer and longer. It's an elaborate form of insanity at this point, like imaginary friends listed alphabetically. When I start to write something new that is set in Bakerton or has a connection to Bakerton, I think immediately, "Well, this character graduated high school in 1990. Who was in his class? Would he know Darren, would he know Gia? He's the same high school class as Darren and Gia. So certainly he would know them." It has made my life more complicated because now I'm writing several generations of the same families. For instance, Rich Devlin's father Dick, who owns the bar, appears very briefly in *Baker Towers*. He was a classmate of Sandy Novak. When they graduated high school, they went to Cleveland together and got jobs in this factory at Fisher

Body, making auto bodies. Dick Devlin is a person who exists in my mind, and I can't, for instance, change his age. I know what year he was born and if I ever want to reference Dick Devlin, he was born in that year; I can't change it now, because I've made it a fact by writing about him. Of course, all these characters are creations, but I feel compelled to be faithful to what I've written before. If I were to write something else about Dick Devlin, I couldn't make him a different kind of person. I couldn't make him younger. I couldn't make him older. I couldn't modify these facts that I've already written. This created Bakerton is a world that exists unto itself now, and it has a population, its citizens have children and grandchildren, and I feel bound by what I have already written. I feel some allegiance to those characters I've already written.

HP: So Bakerton is your own fictional universe, and it has a name that is much easier to pronounce than the town William Faulkner invented in his work.

JH: That's right! Faulkner's invented place Yoknapatawpha was a county in Mississippi and although it is hard to pronounce, it's no more difficult than many of the names in Mississippi. It is in that way quite realistic. But Bakerton as a name is a lot easier.

HP: When you talked about nostalgia earlier, I was also reminded of this book by Zygmunt Bauman, who also uses Trump's campaign slogan as an example to talk about what he conceptualizes as "retrotopia," and he says we're now at this place in time that we think the better things are in the past and we just have to redeem them. So, I thought that retrotopia was a very fitting label for "Make America Great Again," Trump's campaign slogan you mentioned earlier.

JH: It is very fitting, and it is also, as we know, very dangerous, because part of this idea that life in the past was better, is that it was a kind of utopia. When you look at the particulars of that life, well, it's before feminism, before any sort of racial equality in this country, and it has set up people to embrace ideas that they would not otherwise have embraced. Here's another example from my hometown: When I was growing up there, the town was entirely white, and it still mostly is. There were no people of other races at all and that was true of all the small towns in that region. I was not aware of racism growing up and in part, this was because there was nothing to stimulate it, there was never any interaction with people of different races. So, there was nothing to make this an issue. But now, when I go back there, I have seen Confederate flags flying. That never, never happened in all the years of my growing up. Of course, Pennsylvania was not part of the Confederacy, it was part of the Union, so it's

historically inaccurate. It is shocking to me now, to see these flags—people will have them on flagpoles outside in their yards, I've seen them on people's trucks. People have really embraced this symbol of racism. There is no pretext that this is our history. It is not. They are embracing this symbol precisely because it is a symbol of racism, and they can do this, and no one can stop them. That is something new. It is historically inaccurate, but it says, if this appeals to you, the past has opened the door to lots of troubling ideologies. I'm not going to say, this place was always racist, and Trump simply enabled people to express that. I'm not convinced that this is entirely true. I think there probably was some racism there, as there is everywhere. But I think a lot of it has been cultivated. And it's partly Trump, it's partly the internet, where people find these online communities where they are introduced to these ideas, where they are validated for expressing these ideas. Those two things operate hand in hand. But I do not accept the argument that "Oh, these people have always been terrible racists and Trump simply enabled them." No, it is more complex than that. There's a grain of truth in that, but it's more complex.

HP: I remember that I met a former student of mine when I was on the campus of the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, which is a place in the Midwest. This was in 2018 and she said that her family was now divided because of the President and that they could not have any family reunions, because some people voted for Trump and the others didn't, and there was just no way that the family could get together.

JH: Oh yeah, certainly true. It is a very common American story, that a family's divided about Trump. It was true in my own family and my extended family, not my mother or my brother, but say cousins, more distant relatives. Many of them were Trump supporters and it did become very difficult. I think most American families experienced some version of that.

I'll come back to this question of race, which I think is significant. In my recent book, *Mercy Street*, the character who comes from Bakerton is a white supremacist. He is opposed to abortion precisely because he doesn't want white women to have abortions. He has no problem with women of color having abortions, but he's concerned about the demographic balance in the U.S., this feeling of suddenly facing no longer being in the majority, this kind of white panic that I think is at the root of some of the revival of racism in this country. It is painful to me in a way because this is a place that is dear to me and I've written about it a lot, that I have a long artistic engagement with. It is painful to me that the racist character in *Mercy Street* had to come from Bakerton. I didn't know that when I started writing the book. I live in Boston, I've written two

other novels set in Boston, and when I started to write *Mercy Street*, it was going to be a Boston story. And it is. But when I started to think about an antagonist for my main character Claudia, in the figure of an anti-abortion activist, and I thought about where would such a person come from? It was very natural to me to make him come from Bakerton. Part of the reason is this: When I was growing up in that town, it was very common to see these signs along the roadway. They were handmade signs; they were not mass-produced. Signs that people actually made with anti-abortion slogans like "It's a Child, not a Choice" or "Abortion Stops the Beating Heart." What I found interesting about them is that somebody spent the time and money to buy the lumber, cut the lumber, paint the signs, and then drive around and plant the signs on people's land. When I was thinking about what sort of person would be an antagonist to Claudia, I thought about the kind of person who would make those signs. They are still there. When I go back to visit my mother in Pennsylvania, if you drive 10 miles in any direction, you will see them, the signs are still up there. So, in a way, to my surprise, even *Mercy Street* became something of a Bakerton story. Not entirely, of course, but it was a surprise to me that those two worlds connected.

HP: It is a surprise to your readers as well, I think. I didn't expect Bakerton to play a role in the novel and then, all of a sudden: "Oh, okay, here it is, again," which was nice. I saw that you had this conversation with Stewart O'Nan about your new book. I once did an interview with him about similar topics, the family, rural America, but also about the meaning and the role of affective economies. He told me: "You know, you may think that I'm not sentimental in my books, but I'm actually a very sentimental person, but in my books I try to avoid that a bit. You know, *I don't stop at the sentimental*." I actually took this line as the title for the interview. You already said, you want to differentiate sentimentality from sentiment. There is a certain kind of toxic nostalgia, which obviously can be very sentimental. Apart from that, do you have any other investment in the term or in the way that you use or avoid sentimentality in your writing? Because the topics that you deal with, of course, are in specific ways emotionally over-determined.

JH: Well, certainly I have written characters who are sentimental, but that is a different matter from the writer being sentimental, and it is an important distinction. Let us come back to the character of Claudia in *Mercy Street*: All this sentimentality around the fetus, around motherhood, around traditional marriage, and family—Claudia seems to be immune to this. Her immunity to this comes from her own life experience, having been raised the way she was,

growing up with a single mother, living in a trailer in poverty, and, in particular, in a family where foster children would come to stay for a period of time. She is immune to any sentimentality, about motherhood, or family, or childbearing. Because every example in her own life contradicts that. She just does not have any appetite for those mythologies, because she has seen the truth of it.

HP: I thought that she was a very interesting protagonist. Until the very end of the novel, we anticipate some kind of confrontation to come, because you pull up all these different plots, and then we wonder, is there going to be a fatal shooting in front of the abortion clinic?

JH: Right, because it is the U.S.A., after all. These are thoroughly American problems—first, the ongoing controversy over abortion that will simply never go away, and second, the easy access to—and great enthusiasm for—guns of all kinds. The novel could not be set in any other country. Really. It is a thoroughly American novel. It is a thoroughly American problem, this ongoing controversy over abortion that will just never go away here. Certainly, in other countries, there are people who oppose abortion, but there is nothing like this protracted battle we've been having in this country for 50 years now.*

HP: Thank you for the conversation.

* Note: Shortly after this conversation took place, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, the 1973 landmark decision granting women the right to abortion.