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# My Adopted State: Teaching, Movement, and Precarious Labour in Contemporary American Women's Writing

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## Abstract

In 2014, the publication of Marilynne Robinson's fourth novel, *Lila*, completed a trilogy of novels set in the small, fictional town of Gilead, Iowa. Following the success of her debut novel *Housekeeping* (1980), which was set in the Pacific Northwest of Robinson's childhood, the author had relocated several times, serving as writer-in-residence at Washington University in Missouri and holding visiting professorships at the University of Kent in England, Amherst College in Massachusetts, and the University of Alabama. When Robinson finally took up a permanent position at the University of Iowa in 1991, she quickly developed an interest in her 'adopted state' (Robinson 2012: 35) and what she called the 'Middle West' of America, whose rich past Robinson claimed had been forgotten because of national 'prejudices' against rural and agricultural communities (Fay). This paper will account for the Gilead trilogy's impact on and place in contemporary American fiction by reconsidering two of Robinson's central topics: border crossings and environment. Robinson claims that living in Iowa reconfigured her 'mental landscape' to such an extent that she felt compelled to locate her fiction there. As such, I will argue that Robinson's environmental concerns arise from dual interests in the symbiotic relationship between self and landscape and the forgotten traumatic histories of rural locations. Drawing on her twenty-first century novels and the understudied work of nonfiction, *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* (1999), this paper situates Robinson within a body of contemporary eco-critical American women writers who attempt to uncover the forgotten histories of rural landscapes in order to save them from environmental destruction.

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