

# Proletarian Pastoral Reconsidered: Reading Mike Gold in an Age of Ecological Crisis

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Pastoralism comports with a dialectical mode of perception.

– Leo Marx

In the well-known first chapter of William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* the literary genre of "proletarian fiction" is revealed to be nothing more than our old friend the pastoral in disguise. Beneath the literal content of working-class struggle, Empson finds the secret presence of "more subtle, more far-reaching, and . . . more permanent, ideas." This witty blast against the strictures of socialist realism is also a quintessential example of ahistorical and decontextual reading. For Empson, proletarian writing succeeds insofar as it fails to represent historically specific conflicts and instead morphs into a universal truth about the human condition. Thus, in addition to praising the pastoral, Empson's analysis actually performs a pastoralization, as it turns discontent with modernity into an eternal, unchangeable, and indeed, "natural," fact of life. It is this very move that has for so long made Marxist critics skeptical of pastoral. At least since Raymond Williams, we have been instructed to read the pastoral against itself – to see it as a nostalgic form that erases particularity, displaces conflict, and serves as "propaganda of the victors" (Sales 15-18).<sup>1</sup>

But is the pastoral a completely bankrupt concept? In recent decades, global environmental crisis itself has brought renewed attention to this literary mode. The emerging academic field of ecocriticism has highlighted pastoral literature's rhetorical power as a critique of industrialization, and its acute sensitivity toward the nonhuman world. Responding to the "relativism" of much cultural theory, ecocritics emphasize the referential accuracy of pastoral descriptions, and the material histories of ecological change that underlie these discourses. As prominent ecocritic Lawrence Buell says, "The

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary and explication of Williams' response to Empson, see Hubble. For Marxist/New Historicist analyses of romantic nature-writing see critics like Levinson, McGann, and Liu.

conception of represented nature as an ideological screen becomes unfruitful if it is used to portray the green world as nothing more than projective fantasy or social allegory” (36). Literary renderings of nature may always be symbolic and intertextual, but they are also statements about actual physical spaces. A truly materialist critique of pastoral would thus account for the shaping role of biological and ecological (as well as socio-economic and cultural) forces on these texts. This ecocritical perspective offers a corrective not only to ahistorical formalisms and poststructuralisms of every sort, but also to a type of Marxism that would view natural description only as a sinister form of distraction from politics, and, by extension, would view the land base itself simply as a passive stage for the unfolding human social drama, rather than as a space of contention and resistance.<sup>2</sup>

The problem is that ecocriticism often swings to the opposite extreme, uncritically celebrating the pastoral and jettisoning any awareness of ideology. The alternative would be to formulate a properly Marxist ecocriticism, or, ecocritical Marxism, which would integrate an understanding of ecology into the sociological critique of literature, holding the image of nature in tension as both an ideological screen and literal historical referent. Such an analysis would explore how ideas about the land, and the land itself, are shaped by the logic of capital, but also how concepts of nature, and the biosphere itself, play active roles in these processes. Descriptions of nature may be ideological in the old, “bad” sense (as a form of false consciousness), but they may also be ideological in a more neutral sense: as the expression of a particular class position which is often, but not necessarily, bourgeois. The very definition and use of “Nature” as a concept is thus a contentious issue that is inherently bound up with class conflict. This approach would build on what Buell calls the “double-edged character” of pastoral – its bivalence as both a reactionary form and a critical weapon (51).<sup>3</sup> To materialize our analysis of the pastoral would be to consider how the contradictory impulses embedded in nostalgic images of Nature are generated by the contradictory position of natural systems within the capitalist regime. We could further suggest that the conflicted state of pastoral points to the duality

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<sup>2</sup> For ecocritical discussions on the radical and politically subversive nature of pastoral see Garrard and, more recently, Newman and Walls.

<sup>3</sup> The dialectical nature of pastoral might be compared to Fredric Jameson’s more general point that cultural texts contain both ideological and utopian moments. For promising work on links between Jameson and ecocriticism see Medovoi and Ivakhiv.

of economic and ecological “crisis,” as both a moment of great destruction and a moment of political opportunity.

A perfect example of pastoral’s ecosocial dialectic can be found in the proletarian fiction of the 1930s. While there has unfortunately been little ecocritical attention paid to Depression-Era proletarian novelists, their work strategically and self-consciously utilized and transformed the pastoral tradition in order to explore issues of pollution, housing, health, and spatial stratification. In this essay I will argue that Mike Gold’s proletarian novel *Jews without Money* consistently registers the pastoral’s dual nature. After surveying the relationship between theories of economic and ecological crisis and their relationship to the historical context of the early-twentieth century U.S. city, I will then examine Gold’s literary response to these crises, exploring: 1) his use of nonhuman animals, 2) his representations of pollution and its health effects on the working class, and 3) his employment of utopian pastoral nature imagery. In each case we will see how Gold constructs nature as an issue of class, continually pointing to the structural conditions that degrade both humans and ecosystems. My aim is not to displace a Marxist critique of pastoral, but rather to hold it in tension with an example in which the pastoral is mobilized in the *service* of class-critique. I will show that Gold stands as a literary forebear to the theoretical development of an eco-Marxist synthesis, insofar as his ecological-consciousness is intensified by his class-consciousness, and his class-consciousness is intensified by his ecological-consciousness. This is not to fetishize proletarian fiction as the sole or primary site of such analysis. As Leerom Medovoi stresses, ecological Marxism mustn’t be “narrowly concerned with representations or expressions of class conflict” – it must go beyond a “thematic” criticism that merely praises writers for including images of trees alongside images of workers (132-33). However, I hold that an important first step in developing such a theory would be an exhaustive analysis of those texts that *do* directly represent class struggle in relation to nature: providing class-based readings of environmental texts and environmental readings of working-class texts. While a fine example of the former approach can be found in Lance Newman’s Marxist study of Thoreau’s proto-ecology in relation to the changing industrial economy of New England, I mean for this project to be a foray into the latter

approach. Furthermore, by taking Mike Gold's novel not primarily as an object for critique, but as a form of critique, I hope to remind us that literature, too, theorizes.

### **Ecological Crisis and the Capitalist Mode of Production**

We have to see that the economy is itself the crisis.

– *The Coming Insurrection*

What is the relationship between economic and ecological crisis? Within the Marxist tradition, economic crisis has a specific, technical meaning: a rupture in the accumulation of capital and a turning point between periods of boom and bust – moments of creative destruction through which capital reorganizes and rejuvenates itself, but also moments that make apparent the system's inherent instability and present opportunities for organized resistance. Ecological crisis is more difficult to define, but we could suggest that it involves a rupture in the healthy functioning of biophysical systems, manifested at the level of the Earth's "tap" (the input of raw materials) and "sink" (the output of waste). Problems of pollution and resource extraction involve a transition from quantity to quality: a certain amount of "waste" is the inevitable byproduct of organic life and is "natural" insofar as it can be reabsorbed into the ecosystem; however, at a certain point, a quantity of waste will exceed the carrying capacity of the land-base, and a qualitative shift will occur, as "waste" becomes "pollution," and we enter a crisis situation.

Does ecological crisis cause economic crisis? James O'Connor's *Natural Causes* argues that in some situations, "self-induced ecological problems" can hinder profits (183). This can occur, for example, when materials shortages cause prices to rise for individual corporations, or when ecological degradation inspires environmental movements to demand government regulation, thereby placing limits on growth (183). Overall though, environmental destruction doesn't seem to be much of a problem for capitalism. As John Bellamy Foster argues, contra O'Connor, "there is no natural feedback mechanism that automatically turns environmental destruction into increasing costs for capital itself" ("Capitalism and Ecology," Para. 18). In fact, destruction often

provides opportunities for new investment.<sup>4</sup> We might say that, at best, ecological crisis can impede the smooth functioning of business in local situations, and provide opportunities for anti-capitalist mobilization. But in the main, ecological crisis does not generate economic crisis.

But what happens when we look in the other direction? Does economic crisis cause ecological crisis? At first there may appear to be an inverse relationship here: environments seem to be threatened more during “boom” times of expanding accumulation and less during the “bust” times of compulsory efficiency. In fact, though, this efficiency is often achieved by externalizing costs onto the natural world. During lean times, O’Connor explains, “troubled industries or regions try to save money by neglecting environmental protection and cleanup,” and by being “more ecologically careless about exploration, extraction, and processing techniques” (185). Although overall levels of production may be down, individual capitalists, in a desperate attempt to stay afloat, may actually intensify exploitation. The fluctuations of the market simply mean that environmental destruction manifests itself in different ways and to varying degrees.

The central point is that the capitalist mode of production creates a state of crisis for social and ecological systems *whether or not* the economic system itself is in crisis. Therefore Paul Burkett urges us to think of ecological crisis not simply in relation to its effect on the economy, but in more general terms of the quality of human and nonhuman life. It is “essential,” he argues, “to distinguish environmental crises of capital accumulation from environmental crisis in the sense of a general deterioration of the conditions for the development of people as a natural and social species” (Para 16). Socio-ecological crisis is endemic to capitalism, a system that by definition is predicated not only on the ever-intensifying exploitation of workers, but also on an ever-increasing material throughput. Contrary to post-industrial fantasies of economic growth decoupled from production, profits cannot be increased without continually manufacturing more “stuff,” thereby extracting ever greater quantities of resources and expending ever

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<sup>4</sup> While we might philosophically posit the Earth as some sort of “limit” to capitalist development, insofar as natural resources are ultimately finite, if there is a built-in ecological “self-destruct button” (in which capitalism imperils itself), it lies only at the point of complete extinction; otherwise capital can, in essence, continue to accumulate, no matter how degraded the natural conditions (see Foster, “Capitalism,” Para. 14 and Burkett, Para. 16).

greater quantities of waste. Thus, as Foster and Burkett consistently show, we must be careful, in our eco-Marxist analysis, to avoid a reductive and anti-dialectical economism that fetishizes economic crisis tendency as either the main source of our ills, or of revolutionary transformation. Rather, we should see the economy itself as the crisis, or, see the totality of the capitalist mode of production as the generator of a state of permanent crisis for the biosphere and for humans as biological and social beings. As we will see, Mike Gold's *Jews without Money* offers one example of the way in which cultural texts can help us think about the relationship between capitalism and ecological crisis, as both tragedy and turning point.

### **Urban Environmental Crisis and “Ghetto Pastoral”**

The graphic illustrations of exploitation in *Jews without Money* found a receptive audience in the cultural and political climate of the 1930s, and indeed the novel came to be hailed as a preeminent example of Depression-Era proletarian fiction. It is interesting to note, then, that the text was published only a few months after the October 1929 stock market crash. The novel was actually written in the 1920s, and set during Gold's childhood at the turn of the century. These facts should reorient our understanding of the literary rendering of crisis: Gold's novel was not written during, and does not represent, a period of economic crisis *for* capitalism, but rather emerges from and deals with a time of economic growth and expansion in the United States. The squalid existence of immigrant laborers on the Lower East Side is an effect of the success of capitalist production. These are the system's “good” times. The crisis situation in the novel is not about a crisis for capital, but an illustration of the socio-ecological crises that underwrite a boom period.

In the late-nineteenth century, while westward expansion and the closing of the frontier led to the devastation of complex ecosystems – such as the deforestation and over-farming that culminated in the “Dust Bowl” – on the east coast a different type of ecological crisis was emerging. Polluting mill towns sprang up almost overnight and older metropolitan areas were increasingly industrialized. For example, Manhattan, often thought of as a commercial center, experienced an explosive growth in manufacturing at the turn of the century, and remained a center of commodity production for several decades (Lin 47, 54). The most significant of these industries was garment

manufacturing, centered in the infamous sweat shop system of the Lower East Side. Hidden away in tenement houses, sweat shops escaped regulation, allowing for factory-level exploitation without the solidarity of the factory floor, and creating an appalling, unhealthy built environment.

In order to provide the labor power necessary for these industries, the population was increasingly concentrated, creating what Marx called a “rift” in the “metabolism” between country and city, and thus, more fundamentally, between humans and natural systems. As Marx writes, “Capitalist production collects the population together in great centers,” a phenomenon which “disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth” (637).<sup>5</sup> The forced migration of laborers left rural areas destitute and urban areas overpopulated, creating problems not just of scale but of density. For example, population density on the Lower East Side of New York peaked in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Problems of crowding were exacerbated by an utter lack of infrastructure and municipal services. The negative health effects of unregulated growth were of course not distributed equally among the population; as conditions worsened, environmental historian Martin Melosi remarks, “none suffered the repercussions of the environmental crisis more than the working class,” who were forced to live and work in the most polluted areas (10). The uneven geographic development of capital created what we would today call an “environmental justice” crisis, as disadvantaged groups – immigrants, people of color, and the poor – were disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards. Such conditions often gave rise to organized opposition movements, not only in the form of unionization and radical political agitation, but also through a proto-environmental justice movement concerned with housing conditions, sanitation, park construction, and occupational health. Though often reformist in orientation, these Progressive Era activists – including settlement house workers like

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<sup>5</sup> The concept of “metabolic rift” is analyzed extensively by Foster.

<sup>6</sup> According to one estimate, in 1855 there were 200 persons per acre on the Lower East Side, and by 1910 this figure increased to 543, and then by 1930 it decreased to 250 (Lin 54). By the 1920s the population of the neighborhood was decreasing, as stricter immigration policies cut off the flow of immigrants into the city, and as mass transit allowed for the dispersal of residents into the outer boroughs.

Alice Hamilton and Florence Kelley – helped forge links between labor movements and urban ecology.<sup>7</sup>

These socio-environmental conflicts provide important context for the autobiographical tales of childhood coming-of-age amidst inner-city poverty known as “ghetto pastorals.” Arising from, but also significantly reformulating traditions of realism, naturalism and muckraking journalism, these novels arguably became the most significant form of the proletarian cultural movements of the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Though such works were often maligned in the Cold-War academy, the painstaking work of critics such as Barbara Foley, Alan Wald, and Michael Denning has shown that U.S. socialist and communist fiction was not simply a reductive form of literary propaganda that slavishly narrated Soviet ideology, but was rather an innovative, aesthetically complex, and conflicted body of work. A central feature of the ghetto pastoral is an attention to the shaping role of the biophysical environment. Denning calls them “regional novels,” and quotes Harold Strauss’s remark that the characters are “creatures of their environment” (247, 233, 250). They are typically made up of a series of descriptive sketches, and in the absence of an overarching linear plot, the unifying principle of the text becomes the physical neighborhood itself. As a result, the ghetto pastoral frequently emphasizes how exploitation is manifested geographically.

Ironically, from the 1930s to the present, many Leftists rejected ghetto pastorals as too personal and insufficiently “historical” (236). Mike Gold was chided for not including important events like the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in his depiction of the Lower East Side. One is reminded of Georg Lukács’s influential critique of naturalism. For Lukács, naturalism’s penchant for wallowing in immediate descriptions of suffering meant that it missed capturing the dynamism of the broad social totality. But what is lost in the absence of socio-historical referents is gained in the registering of environmental history. By focusing on the direct, embodied, empirical sensations of human characters and their interactions with the physical environment, these works map class conflict as a problem of spatial stratification and geographic underdevelopment. These descriptive, naturalistic works thus provide an ecosocial knowledge not readily available in other

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<sup>7</sup> For an extended argument that the history of American environmental politics must include reforms in sanitation, housing, and occupational health, see Gottlieb’s groundbreaking *Forcing the Spring*.

<sup>8</sup> Denning calls ghetto pastorals “the central literary form of the Popular Front” (230).

texts. While such works are filled with images of “nature” (descriptions of animals, plants, bodies, spaces, etc.), the impulse of the narrative is to denaturalize the natural – to continually interject into their descriptions an awareness of nature’s socio-economic constitution. In this sense they are a kind of anti-naturalist naturalism. Their environmental determinist impulses are counteracted by a utopian strain, informed by the naturalist’s awareness of the primacy of the biophysical environment as well as the socialist’s desire to remake the world through collective human agency. They constitute a dialectical literature that refuses to choose between the natural and the social, or between determinism and freedom, but instead holds these oppositions together in order to force us to a new level of thought. For an illustration of this operation one need look no further than the work of Mike Gold.

### **From Nature to Economy: Biopolitics on the Lower East Side**

It is no accident that the title of Denning’s chapter on ghetto pastoral, “The Tenement Thinking,” is taken from a statement by Mike Gold: “The tenement is in my blood. When I think it is the tenement thinking” (230).<sup>9</sup> Gold’s influential proletarian novel *Jews without Money* melds body and environment to the point that place itself seems to speak. Like other texts in Gold’s oeuvre, such as the wonderfully strange “Love on a Garbage Dump” (1929), *Jews without Money* is a striking example of urban nature writing. As with most “ghetto pastorals,” the novel is made up of a series of spatially oriented “sketches,” in which a semi-autobiographical narrator speaks through the voice of the child “Mikey.” The text opens with a striking place-based memory:

I can never forget the East Side street where I lived as a boy.

It was a block from the notorious Bowery, a tenement canyon hung with fire-escapes, bed-clothing, and faces.

Always these faces at the tenement windows. The street never failed them. It was an immense excitement. It never slept. It roared like the sea. (13)

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<sup>9</sup> See also Foley 284.

Immediately the words “canyon” and “sea” establish the naturalist trope of the urban jungle. Indeed, throughout the novel human struggle in the built environment seems to be naturalized, as for example when the people “chirp like a jungle of parrots” and “sniff like hibernating bears” (15-16). But if the novel’s animal metaphors risk naturalizing a historically contingent situation, Gold’s socialist impulse is to humanize these descriptions (“always these faces at the tenement windows”) in order to suggest that such struggles “with nature” are, more fundamentally, aspects of class struggle. As we will see, nature imagery in the novel continually points back to structural critique, as the text maps the effects of capitalist urbanization on the land, animals and people of a particular neighborhood. For example, in the opening pages Mikey tells us that “Earth’s trees, grass, flowers could not grow on my street; but the rose of syphilis bloomed by night and by day” (15). On one level this is simply a vivid metaphor, but it also implies a literal, material connection between the vegetation and the illness: both are biological agents that impact, and are impacted by, the systematic underdevelopment of the neighborhood. The same social arrangement that prevents trees, grass, and flowers from growing, simultaneously encourages the spread of viruses and bacteria – the same space that prohibits the flows of some forms of life promotes the spread of others. Thus the novel explores the relationship between space, biology, and power at the level of individual sentences and phrases.

Animal imagery is particularly important to Gold’s biopolitical project. When Mikey exclaims that “it’s impossible to live in a tenement without being mixed up with the tragedies and cockroaches of one’s neighbors,” this is most directly a comment on the lack of privacy that comes with urban overcrowding (30). But “tragedies” and “cockroaches” can also be read as twin figures for the social and the material: in this built environment characters struggle with both social conflict (tragedies) and with biological systems (cockroaches), and by mentioning them in tandem, Gold illustrates their parallel significance.

For Gold, moments of human-animal identification are always occasions to work outward toward a broader critique. This impulse is foregrounded most directly in a chapter entitled “Did God Make Bedbugs?” which moves through several human-animal

interactions. First, Mikey's gang abuses a stray cat, and while at first the description of the animal's suffering elicits pathos, the narrator then remarks dispassionately:

There was nothing in this incident that ought to be recorded. There were thousands of cats on the East Side . . . there were too many cats, there were too many children . . . the stink of cats filled the tenement halls. Cats fought around each garbage can in the East Side struggle for life. . . . We tortured them, they tortured us. It was poverty. (64)

Feelings of sorrow for the individual cat are rerouted toward a critique of a system that pits cats and children against each other. Instead of allowing the scene to become a moralistic value judgment on the behavior of the boys or the situation of the cats, Gold turns the vignette into a statement on capitalism: "It was poverty." The class inflection of this situation is amplified when we hear that "these cats were not the smug purring pets of the rich, but outcasts, criminals and fiends" (63). Although there is clearly an ethical concern for the cat, readers are cautioned against projecting onto the animal a bourgeois notion of the domestic "family pet." Thus the scene emphasizes that interactions with and perceptions of animals are conditioned by one's class position. Nature, we are reminded, is always a problem of class.

And yet, just as the narrative warns us against sentimentalization, Mikey's momentary, pathos-filled identification with the creature – "I pitied the poor mother-cat" – carries with it a radical utopian impulse (64). What we begin to see emerge here, and continue throughout the novel, is a tension within the narrator between his boyhood self (Mikey) and the older, reflective narrator who more closely resembles the author himself.<sup>10</sup> With these two personas, Gold creates a formal dialectic, which we might describe as "experiential" versus "theoretical." The dual-voiced narrator – a boy who experiences an immediate situation and an older man who remembers this situation – allows the text to blend an emotional appeal with a dispassionate critique. The

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<sup>10</sup> We must not forget, however, that the older narrator is himself a constructed character, and that *Jews without Money* is thoroughly a work of fiction. Gold often added, omitted, and/or embellished details from his life in order to advance his own mythic persona and create what he saw as an aesthetically moving and politically effective work. For an extended discussion see Alan Wald's chapter, "The Invention of Mike Gold," in *Exiles from a Future Time* (39-70).

immediate voice of Mikey describes sensory experiences and emotional responses, while the reflective adult voice provides objective analysis. As Barbara Foley explains, “the political commentary offered by the older and wiser narrator is crucial in demonstrating to the reader that the cruelties Mikey experiences are directly traceable not simply to the hard lot of the urban immigrant but to capital’s structural compulsion to exploit and oppress” (305). Considering that the novel ends with a socialist “conversion” narrative, what we have is a fully radicalized, class-conscious narrator remembering, and commenting on, his pre-socialist experiences.

From an ecocritical perspective we could say that young Mikey is “pastoral” and old Mike is “anti-pastoral” or “post-pastoral”: while Mikey pulls us toward an identification with the animal, Mike pushes us to see the relationship as socially mediated. In one voice the text celebrates nature, while in the other voice it denaturalizes. The reflective narrator’s social critique undercuts Mikey’s impulse to pastoralize his experience with animals and natural spaces. But if the older post-conversion narrator provides a necessary element of socio-economic awareness, the younger boy’s pastoralization adds what we could call a utopian impulse that is vitally necessary for radical politics. While Mike’s commentary keeps the pathos from lapsing into bourgeois ideology, the young boy’s passionate identification is itself an important element in the text’s eco-politics, retaining, as it does, a subversive, utopian image of the possible “green world.”

The double-edged nature of the human-animal identification is amplified in the next scene, a poignant story of Mikey’s relationship with an intelligent but neglected neighborhood work-horse, Ganuf. Though Ganuf is frequently beaten by his owner for stealing fruit, Mikey observes that “the horse was hungry . . . they should have fed him sooner after a hard days’ work” (68). Mikey’s growing awareness of labor exploitation is projected onto the horse, as the boy recognizes the injustice of punishing an animal whose biological needs are not met and whose work is not compensated. When Ganuf collapses and dies from exhaustion his body is left in the street for days, which Mikey takes as an insult to “my kind old friend” (70-71). The close relationship between the boy and the horse, rather than distracting us from class conflict, actually amplifies it, as we see the dual exploitation of worker and animal.

The continuity between human and animal suffering plays an important role in the novel. Humans and animals are both described as “prisoners” of the East Side, and descriptions of human misery are continually framed by the plight of animals (140). In a winter scene, Mikey relates how the boys discover “a litter of frozen kittens and their mother” while digging a “snow fort” (242). A few lines later we learn that “men and women, too, were found dead in hallways and on docks,” and then we immediately hear that “horses slipped on the icy pavement, and quivered there for hours with broken legs, until a policeman arrived to shoot them” (242). It could be objected that sandwiching a statement on human suffering between descriptions of animals de-humanizes the people and belittles their plight. However, it could be argued that this is not what the *novel* does, it is what *capital* does. The novel objectively renders the actually existing de-humanizing practices. On the Lower East Side, what happens to men and women also happens to kittens and horses. Exposure to the elements in this crowded built environment is a structural condition with which all warm-blooded mammals must struggle.

To be sure, the conflation of humans and animals is problematic. Like the earlier socialist and naturalist Upton Sinclair, Gold employs the familiar “worker-as-animal” trope, in which laborers are rendered bestial by their exploitation. However, if Sinclair uses the human-as-animal metaphor to denote a “lowering” of workers to the “level” of beasts (thereby erecting a species hierarchy that re-enforces the very environmental exploitation he rails against), Gold instead uses the metaphor to emphasize human dependency on organic processes. Take the following passage:

New York is . . . the most urbanized city in the world. It is all geometry angles and stone. No grass is found in this petrified city, no big living trees, no flowers . . . just stone. It is the ruins of Pompeii, except that seven million animals full of earth-love must dwell in the dead lava streets. (40)

By calling the inhabitants of New York “seven million animals full of earth-love,” the text calls attention to the animality of human subjects, not in pejorative way, but in order to stress the necessity of the land base to human survival. In Gold’s description, humans struggle to retain a connection to the biosphere even amidst an

ossified stone world that constricts and perverts this impulse. The built environment is cast as an inorganic prison that is devoid of flora, but nonetheless filled with the fleshly presence of human beings, who retain a utopian element of “earth-love.” New York is *not* Pompeii, Gold seems to say, precisely because the bodies of human and nonhuman animals continue to flourish amidst this city’s rubble. “Nature” exists in the city because people exist in the city. Thus the novel refuses to create a dichotomy between humans and nature, instead exploring the interaction between the social and the biophysical as part of an internal dynamic.

Animals and animality are sites of class conflict in *Jews without Money*, and their descriptions provide a texture that primes the reader for the novel’s further treatment of environmental justice issues and the politics of pastoral. When Mikey asks if God had made flies and bedbugs, his skeptical musings, with their implication of cosmic injustice, foreshadow his impending loss of faith and his embrace of socialism as the “true Messiah” at the end of the novel; but this rhetorical question is also a political statement on Lower East Side living conditions. “Bedbugs,” the older narrator interjects, “are what people mean when they say: Poverty . . . Nothing could help [the bedbugs]; it was Poverty; it was the Tenement” (71). Clearly “God” did not create these bedbugs, or at least “He” did not create the situation in which these creatures infest Mikey’s bed. This was an act performed by other humans, a social act. Like the situation in which the boys are pitted against stray cats, we are told that “it was poverty.” The suggestion that we read “bedbug” and “poverty” as synonyms (like the earlier slippage between the words “tragedy” and “cockroach”) points to a profound biopolitical critique. The novel offers a corrective to social constructivist readings which would overlook the importance of biological processes, as well as to ecocritical readings which would ignore the shaping influence of socio-economic processes. In the world of Mike Gold’s novel these categories are part of an internal dialectic – one that is inherently conflicted and contradictory.

### **Class Struggle as a Struggle over the Built Environment**

If depictions of human-animal interaction provide a way for Gold to link natural systems and socio-economic systems, the novel goes on to explore the effects of

environmental conditions on human workers more directly at the level of content, making this what we might call a class-based “environmental justice” text. *Jews without Money* has been criticized by mid-century theorists of proletarian realism for its lack of historical awareness. However, this is perhaps based on too narrow a view of what counts as “historical.” For example, the text does directly reference a historical event when it mentions that “Delancey Street” is being torn up and “converted into Schiff Parkway” (45). This real-life instance of modern urban planning turned a bustling Lower East Side street into a wide boulevard, in a process not unlike the reactionary *Hausmannisation* of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> For an explication of this process one need go no further than Frederick Engels’ essay on “The Housing Question”:

By “Hausmann” I mean the practice which has now become general of making breaches in the working-class quarters of our big towns, and particularly in those which are centrally situated . . . No matter how different the reasons may be, the result is everywhere the same: the scandalous alleys and lanes disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-praise from the bourgeoisie on account of this tremendous success, but they appear again immediately somewhere else and often in the immediate neighborhood. (Parson 202-03)

Considering that Delancy Street directly approaches the Williamsburg Bridge (completed in 1903, when Gold was a boy), it is likely that the street widening was meant to ease travel from the outer boroughs to the city center, and in the process cut a swath through the poor neighborhoods of the Lower East Side. In the novel the construction initially creates vacant spaces for Mikey and his gang to seize upon for their enjoyment, however their games ultimately lose out to the encroaching highway: “Schiff Parkway was an opponent we could not defeat. It robbed us of our playground at last . . . a long concrete patch was laid out, with anemic trees and lines of benches” (Gold 48). The street’s modernization has rendered it more productive for the circuits of capital, and (with green spaces down the center), more typically “pastoral.” In the process, however, life in the local community has been violently disrupted. This is illustrated textually in the fact that

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<sup>11</sup> For two contrasting views of Delancey Street/Schiff Parkway before and after “renovation” see Watson and Gillon, 138-39.

soon after the construction project is completed, Mikey's pal Joey Cohen is killed by a horse car on the parkway (49). Then, later in the novel, Mikey's younger sister, Esther, is run over by a delivery cart (281). The literal death of these characters in the roadway gestures toward the structural violence of capitalist urban planning.<sup>12</sup> Thus we see how struggles over control of the built environment constitute the primary locus of class struggle in Gold's writing.

The novel also explores how life in the built environment is modified by weather. The text is structured around the four seasons, and at first this appears to be simply a kind of allegorical pathetic fallacy: the movement from summer boyhood, through the struggles of autumn, to the despair of winter, and then the rebirth of spring, which provides an emotional and symbolic rising and falling action for the protagonist. However, as with the earlier reference to blighted plants and proliferating venereal diseases, we could hazard a *literal* reading of weather *as* weather. In this sense the seasonal descriptions are a comment on the way the tenements amplify the effects of weather: for the poor the heat of the summer is hotter and the cold of the winter is colder. For the impoverished, the change in seasons is not fuel for philosophical-aesthetic reflection; it is a drastic change in one's material engagement with the natural world, both in terms of the labor one performs and in the everyday logistics of survival. For example, Mikey describes tenement families spending summer nights on the rooftop in order to escape the stifling heat of the unventilated apartment: "mothers, greybeards, lively young girls, exhausted sweatshop fathers, young consumptive coughers and spitters, all of us snored and groaned there side by side" (126). Environmental conditions drive people with diseases into close proximity, further exacerbating health problems. When it begins to rain they must choose between sleeping in the elements and going back into the suffocating building.

Concerns over urban environmental conditions crystallize in the figure of Mikey's father, a housepainter who suffers from lead poisoning. The narrator tells us that the

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<sup>12</sup> Considering that the road's namesake, Jacob Schiff, was an investment banker and philanthropist involved with urban reform work at the turn of the century, this reference may also be a veiled critique of the limits of charity in dealing with Lower East Side poverty. The reference to Schiff Parkway also introduces a historical problem: while the novel is supposed to be set during Gold's own childhood at the turn of the century, the highway wasn't constructed until the 1920s, suggesting that Gold was unconcerned with precise dating.

affliction “eats up the painter’s stomach and nerves, and poisons his bones,” eventually causing severe lung and kidney problems (111, 244). Here we have a moment in which Mike Gold departs significantly from his own autobiography, transforming his own father – a struggling petty-bourgeois entrepreneur – into a working-class manual laborer (Wald 46; Folsom 11). Though Gold’s father did fall ill and die when Gold was young, this was not immediately a result of his occupation. However, these textual liberties help to create a more forcefully political narrative, and also, I would argue, a more “environmental” text, as the embellished father character creates a more explicit link between class exploitation and physical surroundings. For instance, it is vitally important that the narrator of *Jews without Money* refers to the ailment as “painters’ disease,” thus equating the sickness with the job. In the late nineteenth century, as medical science became increasingly specialized, the “causes” of illnesses were increasingly abstracted away from social conditions and identified with germs. While clearly a breakthrough in scientific knowledge, the narrowing of focus on disease itself had reactionary political consequences, as the focus was taken off of the human-influenced environmental conditions that allowed for the spread of pathogens. As Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin write in *The Dialectical Biologist*:

Which one of a chain of intersecting causes becomes *the* cause of a given effect is determined in part by social practice. For example, medical research and practice isolate particular causes of disease and treat them. The tubercle bacillus became *the* cause of tuberculosis, as opposed to, say, unregulated industrial capitalism, because the bacillus was made the point of medical attack on the disease. The alternative would be not a “medical” but a “political” approach to tuberculosis and so not the business of medicine in an alienated social structure. (270)

*Jews without Money* resolutely takes a “political” rather than a “medical” approach to sickness. Mikey’s father is aware that his illness is caused by his “accursed trade,” and by extension, the reader is made aware that the character’s wellbeing is directly tied to the general state of the environment in which he labors (112). The “treatment” for this problem is not a medication, but a social revolution. Gold’s

treatment of the father's disease, as with his treatment of animal life, carefully refuses to naturalize a biological conflict, instead exploring how biology is inextricably bound up with the social. This example also illustrates how environmental justice is a problem of access to and dissemination of knowledge – how material struggles over the control of urban space are also ideological battles over the discourses used to describe these spaces. The novel thus intervenes, as a form of discourse, in working-class struggles for healthy urban environments in the early twentieth century.

The discrepancy between working-class experiential knowledge of the lived environment and a detached academic study of “Nature” comes into sharp focus when Gold describes the “Nature Study” the boys are forced to undergo in school:

Each week at public school there was an hour called Nature Study. The old maid teacher fetched from a dark closet a collection of banal objects: birdnests, cornstalks, minerals, autumn leaves and other poor withered corpses. On these she lectured tediously, and bade us admire Nature.

What an insult. We twisted on our benches, and ached for the outdoors. It was as if a starving bum were offered snapshots of food, and expected to feel grateful. It was like lecturing a cage of monkeys on the jungle joys. (40-41)

The educational establishment has constructed “Nature” (with a capital N) as an abstract category, separate from the boys' lived experience. They are commanded to admire an idealized, transcendent Nature from a detached observational position. This interdiction ignores the boys' ongoing dwelling *in* the built environment of the Lower East Side. With living nature all around them in their daily material negotiations with the city, they are nonetheless presented with a “dead” Nature circumscribed by the disciplinary regime of the industrial classroom space. But the boys seem to know better, as the naturalistic metaphor of “monkeys” in the “jungle” implies; they have an innate awareness of the city environment that is not accessible from the “cage” of the schoolroom. The passage is essentially a critique of a bourgeois reflective consciousness which passively looks out on the world as a reified object – what Lukács calls a “second nature” – rather than as something actively produced through human labor. We might go so far as to suggest that the classroom scene makes a Lukácsian argument about the relationship between class

and epistemology: the teacher metaphorically represents the dominant ideology into which the students are inculcated, namely to accept a pastoral view of Nature, while the students themselves – children of the slum – stand in for the potentiality of proletarian subjectivity. These boys are able to “know” the environment in a way that the educational establishment is not because they are a part of the class that actively *produces* the environment through their labor. In Lukács’ terms, their status as producers means that they are able to unite subject and object through praxis. Their perceptual potential to understand the socio-ecological situation goes hand in hand with their political potential to remake the built environment. If this sublation of the nature/society binary entails a critique of the pastoral, however, it simultaneously relies on a radical re-appropriation of the mode.

### **Dialectical Pastoral and the “Scandalous” Ending**

Though *Jews without Money*, like many a naturalist novel, is filled with deterministic descriptions of pollution and degradation, there is also a consistently “utopian” pastoral thread that runs through the work. A series of brief utopian moments coalesce in the concluding pastoral image – an image that asks us to retroactively view the previous pastoral moments as a structuring principle of the novel as a whole. Reading the novel’s form in this way allows us not only to bring forth the work’s environmental concerns, but also to reassess what many critics have found to be an aesthetically and politically problematic conclusion.

As previously suggested, it is the dual-voiced narrator – Mikey’s innocent child’s voice filtered through the memory of an older and more critical narrator – who allows Gold to mobilize the pastoral impulse in the service of radical critique. The narrator may envision the tenement dwellers sleeping on the roof as a nightmare of “pale stricken flesh tossing against an unreal city”; however, he simultaneously recognizes this as a moment of class solidarity, a vision of a people enduring hardship together (126). Mikey may tell us bitterly that the “East River is a sun-spangled open sewer running with oily scum and garbage” that “stinks with the many deaths of New York” and is filled with “dead swollen dogs and vegetables,” and yet, he interposes this description with comments about the great fun he and his friends would have playing in the polluted water,

ultimately concluding that “the sun was shining, the tugboats passed, puffing like bulldogs . . . the river flowed and glittered, the sky was blue, it was all good” (39). The language moves back and forth between realistic descriptions of urban blight and a pastoralism that casts the landscape in the rosy glow of childhood.

One of the main “traits” Mikey and his gang show is a “hunger for country things” – a hunger which is not satisfied by the stone and steel of the city (40). “Once,” Mikey relates, “Jake Gottlieb and I discovered grass struggling between the sidewalk cracks near the livery stable. We were amazed by this miracle. We guarded this treasure, allowed no one to step on it. Every hour the gang studied ‘our’ grass, to try to catch it growing” (41). The image is reminiscent of “grass sprouting between the stones” of London in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (20). In both instances the grass reminds us that nature is “alive” beneath the concrete. But whereas in Conrad the sprouting grass is a fearful reminder of the encroaching wilderness, a reminder that this too “has been one of the dark places of the earth,” in Gold the grass positively connotes the persistence of organic nature amidst urban blight (18). The sprouting grass signifies the glimmering *potential* for a healthy and just urban environment.

The pastoralization of urban decay continues, as the vacant lots and piles of garbage become play spaces in the eyes of the children. We are told that the “acres of empty lots” near Delancy Street are a “fairy-tale gift to children,” as they re-appropriate these “waste” spaces for their imaginative games (45-46). At one point the narrator’s wistful feelings for the space break all bounds, as he directly addresses a garbage pile, in a romantic and rhapsodic apostrophe:

Shabby old ground, ripped like a battlefield by workers’ picks and shovels, little garbage dumps lying forgotten in the midst of tall tenements, O home of all the twisted junk, rusty baby carriages, lumber, bottles, boxes, moldy pants and dead cats of the neighborhood – everyone spat and held the nostrils when passing you. But in my mind you still blaze in a halo of childish romance. (46)

In this passage the narrator freely admits to childhood nostalgia, but in a self-conscious way that guards against full endorsement. If standard pastoral tends to freeze and

universalize a situation, the ironic pastoralization of this terrible situation points to the potential for change.

The pastoral heart of *Jews without Money* is located in a central chapter entitled “Mushrooms in Bronx Park,” in which Mikey’s family spends a Sunday picnicking in the park. Gold sets up a stark contrast between the pastoral park itself and the severely overcrowded conditions on the train that takes them north to the Bronx (149). This juxtaposition more forcefully sets up the entrance into the park as a release from the constriction of the overpopulated urban space. Though Mikey’s mother, Kate Gold, is at first reluctant to leave their neighborhood and travel to the park, the journey turns out to be an especially moving experience for her, reminding her of the childhood she spent in the fields and forests of a Hungarian village (148). When they step off of the train the mother remarks, “It’s a pleasure to see green things again . . . I am glad we came” (150).

As we might expect, this turns out not to be a simple and innocent “escape” into nature. For a class-conscious pastoralist like Gold, the movement into urban green space comes with an awareness of property and power. As the family enters the “big lonesome country” of Bronx Park, the narrator tells us, “We looked for signs: KEEP OFF THE GRASS. There were no signs. So we walked into the middle of the field, and found a wonderful tree. This tree we made our own” (151). By “making it their own” the narrator simply means that the family eats lunch under the tree, experiencing its presence. The family’s claiming of the space through use implicitly challenges the notion of privatization suggested by the “Keep off the Grass” signs. While the passage gestures towards a feeling of “freedom” in nature, it also exudes a sense of surveillance. It is only because “there were no signs” that the family is able to enjoy this space, and so their pleasure remains circumscribed by the capitalist state. Mikey’s father warns the mother that she could be arrested for taking off her shoes, and so she looks around “to see if no policeman was near” before removing her shoes and stockings to walk in the grass (150, 152). Lurking behind the pastoral enjoyment is a kind of paranoia – an awareness that this healthy, rejuvenating space is built upon accumulated capital and associated with class privilege. By simply taking a stroll in the country these slum dwellers are transgressing class boundaries.

When they do enter the forest, however, the space transforms the characters: Mikey observes that his mother's face suddenly "looked younger," as she is inspired to take the children on a mushroom-hunting expedition (153). With her "sharp nose," she leads the children through the forest, and warns her daughter, Esther, that some mushrooms will be poisonous and must not be picked without proper knowledge, a knowledge that these children lack because, as she remarks, they are "American" (153). When Mikey asks if the mushrooms will come "on strings" his mother exclaims, "Those are the grocery store mushrooms . . . Ach, America, the thief, where children only see dry, dead mushrooms in grocery stores!" (153). In contrast to the common "American mushrooms" that are grown "in cellars" and taste "like paper," a "real mushroom" she says, "should taste of its own earth or tree." The mother reminisces that as a child in Hungary she could identify birds, snakes, and edible berries, and could venture twenty miles into the forest without getting lost (155). She ends by exclaiming that she is "so happy in a forest" and adds "You American children don't know what it means!" (55).

The repeated contrast between Hungary and America reverses the standard polarity of American wilderness and developed Europe. Far from "Nature's Nation," the United States is here equated with capitalist urbanization, while the "Old Country" of Eastern Europe is pastoralized. Adam Meyer points out that this is a common motif in the immigrant novel, and with good reason, given that the turn-of-the-century immigrant experience often involved rural peasants traveling to an alienating city – a movement from agrarian to industrial way of life (162). In the mother's harsh words for the "American" children, we have essentially a nostalgic criticism of capital from the standpoint of a pre-capitalist peasant formation. But this does not detract from the force of the critique: the mother's statements reveal how the division of labor has alienated the children from their land base, rendering them unable to identify edible plants, and thus made them helpless. However, by locating this back-to-the-land Jeremiad in the midst of an urban park, on the edge of a highly industrialized city, Gold gestures toward the futility of the mother's critique. We know that knowledge of birdsong and a nose for mushrooms will not help Mikey survive on the East Side. Here the pastoral thus serves merely a negative function. Through contrast, it illustrates the depth of the socio-ecological problems. By conjuring a green memory, it reminds us of what has been lost

and what is at stake. But ultimately, Gold seems to intend the reader to see it as only a beginning. The Bronx Park scene, placed almost at the center of the novel, crystallizes a utopian impulse that emerges intermittently throughout the work, but that only fully emerges in what Michael Denning calls the novel's "scandalous final page" (248).

The conclusion of *Jews without Money* has been argued about from the moment of its publication to the present day. Barbara Foley calls it the "locus classicus of troublesome closure" (311). In the final chapter, Mikey, now a teenager, quits school to search for employment, eventually finding, and then losing, work in a factory. In desperation he becomes a gang member, contemplates suicide, and adopts various coping mechanisms, from alcohol to religion, which Gold sets up as false alternatives to Mikey's ultimate conversion to socialism as he watches a soap-box orator. The episode is incredibly abrupt, as Mikey's teenage years are condensed into one chapter, and the introduction of socialism makes up only the last dozen lines. The swiftness of the conclusion has often given the sense that it is artificially tacked-on, and that it idealistically closes off the narrative, containing its many contradictions. However, Foley, for one, sees a kind of formal and political consistency in the "conversion" ending, as the epiphany that ends the novel arises as an understandable response to the scenes of suffering earlier in the text (296). An ecological-Marxist interpretation extends this reading: the many images of animals, pollution, and green spaces that emerge throughout the novel culminate in the pastoral garden image that closes the work. As Mikey exclaims, "O workers' Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely, suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit" (309).

The apocalyptic/utopian prediction that ends the novel is cast in environmental terms. The Workers' Revolution will "destroy" the slum and build in its place a "garden." The concluding call to transform the neighborhood into a garden is an extension and amplification of many earlier pastoral moments in the text, such as the scene in which the boys find grass pushing through the sidewalk cracks and carefully tend it. For some critics, the overtly political ending is especially abrupt and out-of-place, considering that previously in the novel the characters had rarely if ever discussed organized struggle – there appears to be little narrative preparation for Mikey's

radicalization.<sup>13</sup> However, from an ecocritical perspective we could argue that the novel has in fact been “political” all along, in the sense that Mikey’s sensory impressions of the East Side living conditions have primed him to be receptive to the orator. Attenuation to the environment has aided in the process of revolutionizing the protagonist’s consciousness and politicizing him. In brief moments throughout the novel, as well as in these final lines, Gold imagines the communist alternative to the industrial-capitalist city in pastoral terms. He imagines the ideal future as a greenhouse rather than as a machine. This seems only natural for someone whose main contact with industrial civilization was being forced to grow up in a polluted slum, bathing in the East River.

What makes Gold’s rhetoric significantly different from the wealth of romantic anti-capitalist and anti-civilization sentiments in twentieth-century literature are two important revisions to the pastoral mode. First, it does not involve a retreat or escape from civilization into an external nature, but rather, a forceful importation of the green world into the Lower East Side. Mikey does not want to leave his neighborhood and go back to the land, he wants to remain there and reconstitute the space as pastoral, with the collective help of a revolutionary humanity.<sup>14</sup> Second, it is future-oriented rather than nostalgic. It is not a Golden Age to which we return, but a society that has not yet existed. In fact, one could argue that these final lines are not even the “conversion” itself, but simply the catalyst that will become the conversion. By ending with the word “Beginning,” the novel points beyond its own pages. Gold’s refusal to represent the culmination of his conversion, or even, arguably, the conversion itself, is a kind of fidelity to the Marxist idea that a future communist society would be unrepresentable until there existed the conditions of possibility for such a thought. Thus, “proletarian” isn’t exactly the right term for Gold’s novel, if by this word we mean a novel about proletarians. Rather than laborers working or engaged in political organizing, we mostly see lumpenproletarian suffering. The novel is more precisely about the conditions for the

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<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the only exception is Mikey’s Aunt Lena, who has become a labor organizer and gone out on strike by the end of the novel (Chapter Seventeen, Section Six). As Barbara Foley points out, this lack of political radicalization amongst the characters is especially odd, considering that Gold, like so many young people in the Jewish ghetto at the turn of the century, would have been directly exposed to organized socialism (306-07).

<sup>14</sup> As Adam Meyer states, Gold at first appears to “reintroduce the pastoral” but in actuality “point[s] to a new way of reaching such an idyllic world: the communist movement to which he wholeheartedly . . . dedicated the rest of his life” (169).

possibility of proletarianism, as the stagnation and oppression of ghetto life become grounds for political resistance and radicalization.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to classify *Jews without Money* as an early “environmental justice” text, insofar as it narrativizes the process by which the living and working environments of an impoverished community may become the primary site of that community’s political struggle. Gold’s novel thus deserves a central place in the emerging canon of environmental justice literature, as it shows how class, alongside race, gender, nationality, etc. determine one’s contact with environmental hazards. Further, the novel marks Mike Gold as an ecologically-sensitive critic of capitalist modernization in the “Green Left” tradition running from William Morris to Lewis Mumford to Mike Davis. Finally, the novel provides a literary starting point for an ecological-Marxist cultural theory capable of understanding the relationship of literary texts to the capitalist-generated ecological crisis – a crisis that in the coming years will be at the forefront of political struggle.

*Jews without Money* ends with a call for the oppressed to see their built environment not as “natural” – in the sense of fixed and inevitable – but rather to see it as a malleable space that is produced by human labor and thus can be remade in more healthful ways. Ironically, this utopian call is only achieved by recognizing how human well-being is conditioned by ecosystems. Here is the productive paradox in Gold’s formulation (and it is the reason Gold’s novel sublates the dichotomy between social constructivist and ecological determinist readings of the pastoral): only by accepting the primacy of biophysical nature, as well as the contingency of social formations, can people de-naturalize and progressively re-naturalize the built environment that surrounds them. The recognition of humanity’s dependence on the biosphere is a prerequisite to the freedom of imagining a truly sustainable society. This freedom-in-determinism is encapsulated in the natureocultural image of the East Side garden: a fully humanized nature and a fully naturalized humanity.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Thus, to the choice, frequently offered on conference panels and academic journals, between a “first wave” biological-determinist ecocriticism and a “second or third wave” post-structural (Deleuzian/Derridean) ecocriticism, we must answer that only the historical and dialectical materialist thought of the Marxist tradition is capable of fully understanding and engaging with the cultural politics of ecological crisis.

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