

**The Biopolitical Unconscious:
Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory**

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In keeping with Fredric Jameson's founding claim in *The Political Unconscious* that Marxism provides not just one more hermeneutics of literature and culture, but a project that integrates all other hermeneutics to their historical determination, this essay will argue that ecocriticism, perhaps the youngest of contemporary literary hermeneutics, likewise can and should be dialectically assimilated to the project of a Marxist literary and cultural criticism. In redescribing ecocriticism as the analysis of modern literature's determination by the category of the "environment" within the successive iterations of the capitalist mode of production, however, I will also argue that Marxist literary criticism must be inflected in a new way. Insofar as politics, understood in their broadest sense, designate social struggles over how life (human and nonhuman alike) will be used as a means to a collective end that is *also* life, I will propose that the "absent cause" of history, which in the proverbial last instance determines the form of modern literature and culture, must be understood as a *biopolitical* unconscious.

In recoinning this classic Jamesonian term, I am joining it to Michel Foucault's well-known analysis of the rise of "biopolitics" during the early nineteenth century, the historical moment at which, Foucault argues, life itself for the first time became the object of politics. If, in fact, it was *both* human and nonhuman life that became explicit objects of regulatory or governmental power at around this time, as part of the political reckoning with the demographic and industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century, then for quite some time now we have been facing a political modernity in which life, or "bios," is at the core of capitalism's mode of regulation. What the media typically call the "environmental crisis" is better understood as the

current face of politics itself, namely the many different kinds of geopolitical struggle to reshape the circuits of power that flow between planetary life and accumulation on a global scale. Just as the early industrial phase in the capitalist mode of production established the preconditions for Marx's ability to critique and historicize the key categories of classical political economy, so now the contemporary movement toward a "green" regime of capital accumulation — one that seeks a "sustainable" relation to planetary life — permits us to historicize what Jameson called the "path of the subject," the key concepts, categories, or reading habits upon which ecocriticism depends: the "environment" or "ecology," indispensable abstractions that (like labor or exchange value) have only become generalized concepts through the work of an ensemble of concrete historical processes in need of investigation.¹ A rigorous eco-Marxist literary criticism today will first need to grasp the historicity of these terms, and then retroactively develop a symptomatic reading of literary and cultural texts that attends to their complex determinations by the same biopolitical history of capitalism that (by way of a different circuit) gives rise to the critical apparatus.

The Limits of Ecocriticism

In her introduction to the landmark 1996 collection *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty proposes that ecocriticism might be defined most simply as:

the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its readings of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies.²

Glotfelty's goal in offering this comparative definition would appear to have been twofold: first, she proposes a commensurability between ecocriticism and feminist and Marxist criticism as parallel and analogous hermeneutical enterprises. But what exactly is the nature of the analogy? To paraphrase Tony Bennett's formulation, we might say that Glotfelty poses each of the three hermeneutics in question (feminism, Marxism, ecocriticism) as organizing itself in relationship to a constitutive "outside" of literature.³ Feminist criticism is "conscious" of gender as it reads literature, while Marxism brings an "awareness" of class and modes of production. The relation is modeled quite explicitly on the phenomenological conceit of

human perception. Each mode of criticism appears to occupy literature as if it were a subject looking outward, seeking to become conscious, or aware of how it registers that which lies *outside* of itself. No doubt it is precisely because what they register issues from an exteriority, that Glotfelty considers them to be no mere formalisms, but political or (better yet) *worldly* criticisms (to invoke Said) that show their concern for something that encompasses the merely literary.

Glotfelty's formulation of ecocriticism faces an immediate problem, however, since the "outside" that it advances to literature — the "physical environment" — appears strikingly vacuous. After all, feminism's "outside" possesses the specificity and substance of a critical political analysis of gender and sexuality, while that of Marxism brings to bear the social relations of alienation and exploitation that accompany the division of labor in the production process. Both feminism and Marxism rigorously theorize the political "outside" of literature before they activate their hermeneutics. But for ecocriticism, what encompasses literature is, well, simply the "environment" per se, which would appear to include anything and everything that encompasses it. This set of all sets of physical externalities to literature threatens to universalize its worldliness to the point where it becomes untheorizable, and hence, unpoliticizable as well.

In practice, however, ecocriticism operates through a kind of contradiction between the relentless universalism of its alleged frame (the limitless domains of environment or nature) and the specificity of the "externality" that actually animates it, and which makes it discernible as a matter of politics: the framing discourse of an *anthropogenically produced crisis of earthly life*. To borrow Glotfelty's own metaphor, ecocriticism has one foot planted in literature, and the other in

the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits ... when ... human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support system. We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse.⁴

If actually existing ecocriticism has a theoretical framework for its externality, it most typically lies in the natural sciences, which establish the axiomatic truth of contemporary ecological crisis that grounds its hermeneutical project. To interpret texts ecocritically is to read them in relation to the run-up to a human-generated eco-catastrophe that threatens, not exactly the planet itself, but the "biosphere," planetary life in all its

human and nonhuman forms. For this reason, ecocriticism often takes itself to be both fully historical in its perspective and planetary in the scope of its concern. Its readings of literature in this sense work backward from the crisis-ridden present (either openly or tacitly) to the origins and development of either the human attitudes and practices that have led to the brink of such disaster, or else to alternative human attitudes or practices that might help us to avert it.

Paradoxically, however, as literary scholars immersed in the uses of narrative, genre, and metaphor, ecocritics are often well aware that such proleptic appeals to the catastrophic must themselves be understood narratologically. Both Lawrence Buell and Greg Garrard freely admit (and reflect upon the fact) that ecocriticism's reliance upon the ubiquitous trope of environmental crisis — central to and derived from such canonical movement manifestos as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Paul Erlich's *The Population Bomb*, and Al Gore's *Earth in the Balance* (and, for that matter, ecosocialist tracts such as Joel Kovel's *The Enemy of Nature*) — descends directly from apocalyptic religious rhetorics of the catastrophic end times.⁵ The real question becomes, to what end has this avowedly Christian religious narrative been secularized and imported into the context of environmental criticism? To what histories does this peculiar path of the ecocritical subject allude?

Biopolitical Regulation: Toward a Historicized Externality of Ecocriticism

In his comments on the apocalyptic trope, Greg Garrard briefly observes that the ur-text for this environmental crisis tradition is none other than Thomas Malthus's 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which famously argued that the outstripping of arithmetic increases in food production by the geometric increases in human population threatened a return to demographic equilibrium only by way of misery and disaster. I would like to press on the deeper significance of this origin. Marx famously attacked the intellectual substance of "Parson" Malthus's account of "population" as a specious abstraction that collapses together (and de-differentiates) the social classes out of which it was composed, while expelling from view the relations of production through which those classes are themselves constituted.⁶ In criticizing Malthus for his *political uses* of the concept of population — preaching it to the workers as a means of discouraging their reproduction — Marx also demonstrated his full awareness that the elaboration of this new category of population had real social effects. A midwife to the birth of what Michel Foucault would call "biopolitics," Malthus's trope of demographic apocalypse stimulated new mechanisms for the governing of human beings

specifically conceived as a species with regulatable rates of birth, health, education, and morbidity. Nor, contra Malthus himself, did it take long for the study and management of "population" to begin differentiating the Malthusian mass into subgroups whose analytic segmentation only aided the regulatory aim.

It was at this precise historical moment — Marx's time — when the study of populations from the viewpoints of class, race, sexuality, gender, and education, became the very stuff of demographic management, insurance systems, public hygiene, education, labor management, and even the modern prison system. Borrowing the analytical terms of the French Regulation School, the birth of biopolitics appears to have announced the advent of a self-reflecting or governmental "mode of regulation" for capitalism, understood here as the deployment of mechanisms and processes that establish the social preconditions for the more strictly economic "regimes of (capital) accumulation."⁷ The problem that biopolitics sought to solve from its inception was how best to manage politically human life in the context of the demographic and urban explosions associated with the industrial era of capitalism.

I recognize that I am reading Foucault against the grain in aligning him so closely here with Marx. Certainly this is not a connection that Foucault himself openly encouraged in his lifetime. But consider for a moment the argument in *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* that power is productive and not simply repressive. If this move is typically read in its antipsychoanalytic sense, as counter to the so-called "repressive hypothesis," it also makes Foucault's histories highly compatible with the Marxist tradition because his genealogies of productive power may be usefully integrated into both our analyses and histories of the *mode of production*. Antonio Negri, for one, reads biopolitics along exactly these lines, as

a non-static, non-hypostatized process, a function of a moving history connected to a long process that brings the requirement of productivity to the center of the dispositifs of power, it is precisely that history that must be understood.⁸

Following Foucault's general notion of productive power, biopolitics marks the growing *political reflexivity* associated with the active development of capitalism's productive forces, so long as we approach these forces in a rigorously noneconomic sense, i.e., as inclusive of forces (or powers) that produce the preconditions of accumulation and not only those that become elements in the accumulation process itself.

How and why is this conjunction of Foucault and Marx relevant to the

task of ecocriticism? It is my intention to show that *biopolitics represents the political externality with which this literary hermeneutic, knowingly or unknowingly, concerns itself*. This is so, above all, because biopolitics were not limited solely to the management of human populations. When life itself became a political problem in that historical moment, its target already extended to the *nonhuman* domains of life. This is not a central theme of Foucault's writings, but it haunts them around the edges. In a brief but revealing passage in the *Society Must Be Defended* lectures, for example, Foucault notes that:

Biopolitics' last domain is, finally — I am enumerating the main ones, or at least those that appeared in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; many others would appear later — control over relations between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are a species, insofar as they are living beings, and their environment, the milieu in which they live. This includes the direct effects of the geographical, climatic, or hydrographic environment: the problem, for instance, of swamps, and of epidemics linked to the existence of swamps throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. And also the problem of the environment to the extent that it is not a natural environment, that it has been created by the population and therefore has effects on that population. This is, essentially, the urban problem.⁹

This passage, then, marks the discovery of two other major concepts accompanying that of “population,” which, over time, would work together as a unified theoretical field guiding the development of biopolitics. The first of these concepts is the “environment” itself, understood as the milieu within which a population seeks to flourish. As Foucault notes above, the “environment” may be thought of as “natural” (the swamp) or it may be artificially, humanly produced (the city). What is important here is that the environment becomes something that may be studied and manipulated for its regularizing effects in exactly the same way as the population itself. To study the health of the population, one must study as well the “environmental factors” with an eye to governing and adjusting them so as to optimize the population itself as a productive force.

Although this is not Foucault's own claim, I would argue that the population/environment pair effectively worked to translate and displace their proximate political analogs from within the logic of sovereignty. For Foucault to suggest (as he would in his next set of “Collège de France” lectures) that governmentality concerns itself with “security, territory,

population” strikes me as both an error and a failure to press his own insights to a fuller conclusion. Juridical power, after all, rests upon the articulation of peoplehood and territory: those who form the *collective subject* of the sovereign on one hand, and their associated object world, the geographic realm or domain that delimits the sovereign's jurisdiction. Explaining the impetus for the birth of biopolitics, Foucault writes at one point that,

It is as though power, which used to have sovereignty as its modality or organizing schema, found itself unable to govern the economic and political body of a society that was undergoing both a demographic explosion and industrialization. So much so that far too many things were escaping the old mechanism of the power of sovereignty, both at the top and at the bottom, both at the level of detail and at the mass level.”¹⁰

Industrial capitalism could not have secured its rate of expansion, without the regulatory interventions of new mechanisms of power. In this context, disciplinary power began to operate at the “bottom” or at the “level of detail” that concerned individual bodies. But it was biopolitics that intervened at the top, on the mass level. In place of the “people,” a juridical category that conceives the citizenry as a political body, biopolitics introduced the “population,” constituted not by their political belonging but by their biological status as species. The proper triad of governmentality or biopolitics is therefore security, *environment*, population. It is in lieu of the territory, again a juridical space concerned with applications of law and the extension of jurisdiction, that biopolitics introduced the “environment,” a space organized not by the law but by the regularities of life and its biological requirements. The *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms that the word “environment” bursts into usage during the 1820s and 1830s as a term for the “conditions under which any person or thing lives or is developed; the sum-total of influences which modify and determine the development of life or character.”¹¹

The second crucial concept, alluded to by Foucault's musing but never explicitly named, is the advent of “ecology,” which slowly emerges as a kind of systematization of the population/environment coupling. To the extent that, as population, human beings become regulated for the first time as one species alongside others, interspecies relations *within the space of the environment* now emerges as a central problem for biopolitics. How, within their milieus, are living human populations affected by their relationships to nonhuman life in its many guises, as food, contagion, competition, or resource? Of course, it is not that these things were never thought of before

or never treated as a problem. But now they became at once a scientific and a political problem, a matter of *rational governance*. Like disciplinary power, which targeted and pacified the individual body or organism in order to maximize its productive force, so, too, biopolitics names the strategies deployed for maximizing the productive forces unleashed by demographic or aggregate relations, both between human beings, according to class, race, gender, sexuality, and between human beings and other species. The O.E.D. informs us that “ecology” first appears as a scientific term in the 1870s, and that its definitional meaning is in fact predicated upon the invention of our prior two terms, for ecology is quite literally the branch of biology that “deals with the relationships of living organisms and their environment.”¹² By the first decade of the 1900s, it would also become a sociological concept that dealt analogously with “the study of the relationships between people, social groups, and their environment; (also) the system of such relationships in an area of human settlement.”¹³

Consequences for Ecocriticism

This may appear to have been a long detour from the subject of ecocriticism, but it is in fact an absolutely necessary one if we are to be able to historicize the “environment,” which functions as the field’s reigning abstraction. Like “population,” the “environment” is a category that cannot be taken for granted as something to be universally generalized throughout human history. It is true that human beings have always made their lives under the conditions established by their necessary relationship to the land, waters, climate, and other species with which they cohabit. But the discovery of the environment as a statistical set of factors amenable to political intervention quickly placed it at the center of the first genuinely reflexive mode of regulation in the history of capitalism, one that at its core sought to govern the effects of both natural and social surroundings on the productivity of the population that drew life from them.

This point is crucial because it upends completely the founding (and deadlocked) idealistic binary of all hitherto existing ecocriticism, namely that between “man” and “nature,” “humanity” and the “environment,” or the “anthropocentric” and the “ecocentric” perspective. To the extent that ecocriticism’s animating assumption grew out of the political tradition known as deep ecology, it explains the escalation of environmental damage as a direct effect of human beings’ failure to appreciate the “intrinsic value” of a nonhuman world (the environment, ecology, nature). In this view, if ecocriticism can inculcate an appreciation for the intrinsic value of the environment, its transformation of people’s “hearts and minds” promises to

liberate nature from our degradation of it. The canonization of nature writing by ecocriticism directly reflects this search for intellectual and artistic traditions within which this intrinsic value of nature is recognized and honored. As Lance Newman points out, this philosophically idealist conception of historical change stands in utter contradiction to ecocriticism’s allegedly materialist concern with the environment.¹⁴ Ecocritics who attribute environmental degradation to our wrongheaded ideas about dominating nature in fact resemble nobody so much as the young Hegelians of the early nineteenth century, whom Marx and Engels roundly attacked for expecting that the world could be changed simply through a change in our “consciousness [which] amounts to a demand to interpret reality in another way.”¹⁵

So far, my point has been to argue that a historical materialist ecocriticism must study literature’s relationship, not to our ideas about the environment, but rather to the *material relations* that have historically produced the “environment” as an operative biopolitical category. Both the “population” and the “environment” are not merely ideas, doctrines, or ideologies, although they certainly do approach human beings and their milieus through an act of abstraction (their statistical or demographic character). Rather, they are concrete mechanisms through which those bodies and places are governed. To use Althusser’s term, they are *apparatuses* that serve to reproduce the capitalist mode of production. Above all, the history of biopolitics teaches us that ecocriticism’s binary opposition of man and environment (aligned with bad anthropocentric and good biocentric thinking, respectively) is utterly ahistorical. The historicizing alternative to such metaphysics would be an ecocritical inquiry into the materially specific (and recent) invention of the “population/environment/capital” triad, a systemic exercise of political power that only some two hundred years ago began to develop strategies for pacifying, harnessing, and reorganizing the mutual relationships of human and nonhuman life toward the end of optimal capital accumulation.

This system of biopolitics remains a human creation, as does capitalism itself. But to borrow Marx’s words, these are powers that, though “born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and governed men as powers completely alien to them.”¹⁶ In making such a point, Marx and Engels themselves draw upon a Darwinian understanding of the “natural history” of humankind as a species that, though possessing consciousness, has had many modes of producing its needs out of its physical environments, yet often (like other species) without grasping their operations nor the possibilities of alternatives to them. Yet even if grasping these operations remains an urgent task, it would certainly not be enough to understand them.

Any meaningful struggle over environmental politics must ultimately intervene at the level of the mode of production itself, engaging in the many different kinds of struggles to deinstrumentalize life as a strategy of capital accumulation. When the biopolitics of population and environment are considered together, it becomes much clearer why the various histories of environmental degradation — the impoverishment of the land, the extinction of “surplus” animal or plant life, the squalor of the city, the pollution of water and air — are deeply coarticulated with class struggles, racialization processes, sexual and gender normalization, and, in general, with the conversion of humanity into a biological population whose life processes are managed as one more natural input of production to be maximized.

Marxist Ecocriticism: The Biopolitical Unconscious

A fully historicized criticism dealing with the relationships of literature to the environment will need to reckon with the fact that, at bottom, it studies the relationship between literature and *the mode of production at the level of its biopolitical self-regulation*. But while this means that ecocriticism must come to terms with Marxism, it must be stressed that ideology critique is not the sort of Marxism here being called to task. Neither are we speaking here of a criticism narrowly concerned with representations or expressions of class conflict (though class surely enters into the textualization of what we might call social conflict over “environmentality”). Rather, it is the analytic of the “political unconscious” that offers ecocriticism hermeneutical purchase, since only this approach is adequate to the most challenging of questions: how does the ultimate horizon of human history — the mode of production — pass into textuality?¹⁷

It would seem, on the face of it, that environmental biopolitics could manifest themselves at any of the three successively deeper semantic horizons that Jameson proposes: that of 1.) political history (text as narrative or symbolic solution to an openly articulated political problem of its time), 2.) sociality (text as an ideological speech act within the larger social codes of a language striated by class antagonisms), or 3.) the mode of production itself (text as the ideology of literary form itself in its unconscious relationship to transitions between modes of production).

This last and deepest level raises particularly interesting questions for the study of literature and the environment for at least two reasons. First, it would seem evident that, as capitalism mutates from one regime of accumulation to another (monopoly/imperialism capitalism, Fordism, post-Fordism), so, too, the mode of biopolitical regulation undergoes transformations, and, with it, the way in which it targets, normalizes, and regulates the “environ-

ment.” But the second reason is more explicitly literary, for it concerns Jameson’s interest in the “ideology of form,” which he further explains as the “determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation.”¹⁸ Without a doubt, the great weakness of ecocriticism as a hermeneutic enterprise has rested in its utter incapacity to theorize itself as anything other than a *thematic* criticism that passes ethical judgment on the depictions of either nature or built environments. In this respect, ecocriticism has barely moved beyond a kind of Marxist criticism that looked only at the portrayal of classes, or a feminist criticism that studied images of women. In insisting that “environment” must be understood historically as a constitutive biopolitical element in the mode of production, I view ecocriticism as needing to imagine “environment” as a problem of *form* that must be diagnosed in terms of the biopolitical unconscious of literature.

I wish to end with the suggestion that a Marxist literary criticism attentive to ecocritical questions (or an ecocriticism that becomes Marxist by rigorously historicizing both itself and its literary object) would analyze the political unconscious of *setting* in its dialectical relationships with other structural literary elements such as character, plot, and genre. Ultimately, such an ecocritical analysis would share the broad questions of a Jamesonian Marxist criticism that analyzes the codes offered to us by the historical “Real” through which we, in turn, come to structure our imaginary relations to that “Real.” However, the key contribution of a Marxist ecocriticism, or an ecocritical Marxism, would be to focus attention on the recodings of setting as a mechanism through which the biopolitical environmentalization of actual spaces (as governable milieus for life) might pass into the literary.

This question would seem to be analogous to that of how the category of population reconstituted the formal logic of literary character. In both cases, the problem may be posed in the following way: the objects of biopolitics (whether environment or population) manipulate statistical norms that can be asserted only on an aggregated level, but that dissolve at the local or individual level (the place, the organism) into the aleatory. At the level of the individual person or place, therefore, what does it mean to become subject to a macro-procedure of knowledge/power whose operation comes to undergird some accumulation regime? How is genre itself reconstituted by the contradictions that this introduces in the textualization of place and its relationship to personhood?

These questions suggest a certain critical project that would explore how genres are refunctioned through the reconstitution of settings in response to the history of biopolitical environmentality. For example, we might begin with romantic poetry, at the very dawn of biopolitics. To what extent can

romantic poetry be read symptomatically as the refunctioning of the pastoral genre in relationship to an incipient “environmentalization” of the countryside? The Inclosure Acts converted land into a new kind of private property, but simultaneously into “environments” whose productivity would be calculated as surely as the productivity of workers (as laboring populations) would come to be measured. One could ask how pastoral nostalgia (for land) and the grandiosity of the romantic self (as the subject) operate as a kind of symptomatic reaction to the emergence of the (rural) capital/environment/population triad? It might also be the case that what romantic poetry reveals symptomatically is a psychic clinging to the land at the very moment that “environment” (which first emerges as an issue for agrarian capitalism) is separated from population, the disposed masses who are (invisibly from the viewpoint of romantic poetry) forcibly relocated to the cities.¹⁹ If Romanticism follows the path of environment, then realism (either Balzacian or Dickensian) can be said to follow the population, playing out the aleatory effects of the arrival of the countryman to the city.

Some one hundred years after the Romantics, now well into the biopolitical age, the generic mutation of “naturalism” evinces on its discursive surface an urban setting explicitly modeled upon the biopolitical concept of the “environment” as a calculable milieu. Naturalism, we might say, is a breakthrough genre that introduces both population and environment simultaneously into its literature, taking for the first time the “built environment” of urban life as a kind of ecological system that has quantifiable consequences for the populations that live within it. Ethnicity and race now begin to constitute formal elements in the sizing up of characters as quanta in a statistically analyzable population. Narrative paths of self-destruction (think Maggie in Stephen Crane’s novella or Hurstwood in Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*), though conveying individual fates, carry something of the “statistical” about them as well, so that either’s suicide might, for example, be read as an implicit micro-narrative counterpart to Émile Durkheim’s study of the statistically amenable macro-question of *Suicide*. How different in kinds are the “quantitative” logics of these literary suicides from (for example) that of Goethe’s *Young Werther* (for example) in the late eighteenth century.

From an ecocritical viewpoint, however, it is vital to remember that narratives responding to such calculations of life and death in the population are, in fact, also referencing the meaning of an urban environment that often also serves as their setting: the city as a completely monetized space of economic survival, the “eco-logics” of adjoining immigrant districts, class antagonisms, and, finally, the most straightforward of environmental issues such as sanitation, public health, education, quality of food, and the calculations of

injury in the workplace. In keeping with Jameson’s notion of “cultural revolution,” we might say that naturalism thus appears at a moment of transition between the urban environment, born of an industrial accumulation regime, and the ongoing development of a statist and welfare-driven approach to that environment’s biopolitical regulation, which will itself ultimately lead to a transformation in the mode of production itself. The era of the naturalist city is also the reform era for public health, public schools, and public safety. It also bears witness to new environmental interventions into the management of class conflict, including (in the narrower sense of natural environment) both the development of urban public parks and the wilderness preservation movement that will lead to the national park system, with its implicit notion of environmentally produced patriotism. By the mid-twentieth century, these various developments will coalesce into the biopolitical framework for a new Fordist regime of accumulation, organized around the construction of a *suburban* environment whose synthesis of urban space and wilderness as a “garden city” seeks to pacify and enlist the ethnic, working-class population in a system of mass consumption that articulates tightly with a Taylorized mass production system. The various mid-twentieth-century literatures of discontented suburbia, conformity, and mass consumption — from the Beat writers onward — all bear the symptoms of this transition.²⁰

I end my short cycle of illustrations with a brief mention of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, situated in the transition between a still-dominant Fordist regime and emergent gestures in the direction of a globalized post-Fordism. From the perspective of setting, DeLillo’s novel locates itself firmly in a Fordist suburban space, surrounded both in a mass consumerist and a racial sense by the “white noise” that explicitly names its seemingly “reformed” environmentality, a consumer universe that safely regulates and protects life. But this setting is satirically treated in every possible way: work, family, product, setting, and, finally, biosecurity in its pure form. Protagonist Jack Gladney’s labor is absurdly unproductive, as a phony scholar in the unimaginable field of “Hitler Studies.” His apparently Fordist nuclear family camouflages actual divorces, stepchildren, mysterious former wives, and distant, foreign-raised children who visit only occasionally. Meanwhile, the pastoral, suburban “College-on-the-Hill” is just a short hop from Iron City, an environment of savage deindustrialization that represents a “return of the repressed” vis-à-vis naturalist urban violence. But from an ecocritical perspective, the striking narrative device is the so-called “airborne toxic event,” a pollution spill to which Gladney is inadvertently exposed, thereby placing him under a medical death sentence. Like a naturalist character, DeLillo’s protagonist appears as the chance victim of a calculable

environmental risk. But *White Noise* generically encodes this biopolitically quite different moment — the breakdown of Fordist regulation — in the form of satire, offering a comically masochistic narrative pleasure in shattering the illusory security of the suburban milieu as an environment designed to eliminate risk from the life of the social body. Engaging what to this day remains a still-unresolved biopolitical trajectory, the novel's ironic stance anticipates the last few decades of environmental instability, amidst inconclusive struggles over the regulatory framework for a new "green" regime of accumulation that would seek to stabilize what is still an elusive post-Fordist alternative to a now rapidly receding Fordist golden age.

The ecocritical project that I have mapped out in this essay is a far cry from the celebration of nature writing that launched this hermeneutic. It has more in common, to be sure, with what Lawrence Buell calls "second-wave ecocriticism," which takes an open interest in urban environments, third world literatures, and a much wider range of genres.²¹ But what I hope here to have provided is a rigorous externality that justifies this opening up of the ecocritical archive, and that puts to new work the same imperative guiding Marxist criticism at large: always historicize. But if that is the goal, then we must return at last to the apocalyptic language of eco-catastrophe with which I began this paper, and which I termed the putative "externality" of ecocriticism. If a certain disavowal has animated ecocriticism's ahistorical relation to its own categories, it has to do with an inability to relinquish its apocalyptic claims. One might note that, at every single step in the history of biopolitics, the trope of eco-catastrophe serves as a mechanism for insisting upon biopolitical reform, calculated change to the environment (and/or to the population) before it is too late. This was true for Malthus, for the late-nineteenth-century reformers, for the environmentalists of the 1970s, and is also the case today. In each case, the motif of eco-catastrophe facilitates some kind of regulatory transition between accumulation regimes. We must therefore think of eco-catastrophe as itself a standing trope of the biopolitics of environmentality, as its discursive norm, much as the discourse of reform has always accompanied the modern institution of the prison.

Many ecocritics will surely be appalled by this argument, and insist that turning to the question of the mode of production in this way simply distracts us from the all-too-real endangerment of the planet, of human and nonhuman life as it is threatened by anthropogenic climate change. The point, however, is not to deny that massive climate change is highly likely, any more than Marxism has required us to deny the very real risk of nuclear war. What we must recognize, rather, is that climate change is not going to happen because capitalism has *ignored* the environment or because nobody *cares* about nature. On the contrary, the point is to stress just *how much* the environment

has mattered to capitalism throughout its history, how central a role it has played, precisely because "environmentality" is the mechanism through which the milieus of life are assessed and transformed, and rendered more productive. Much of the rhetoric of ecopolitics today in fact works precisely in this historical tradition, arguing that we will have to "green" our relationship to the environment in order to make capitalism more sustainable. The political goal of a properly Marxist ecocriticism will not be to save the environment. It will be to abolish it.

Notes

¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 9.

² Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996) xix.

³ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 2-10.

⁴ Glotfelty, *Ecocriticism* xx.

⁵ See Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 285, and Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 85-93.

⁶ For Marx's critique of Malthus's concept of "population," see selections from *The Grundrisse* in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978) 276-77. For his ferocious critique of Malthus's class hypocrisy in preaching his dogma, see *Capital, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977) 766-77.

⁷ For a clear exposition of the critical analytics of the "regime of accumulation" and the "mode of regulation," see Robert Boyer, *The Regulation School: A Critical Introduction*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1990) 15-47.

⁸ Antonio Negri, "The Labor of the Multitude and the Fabric of Biopolitics," *Mediations* 23:2 (2008).

⁹ Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003) 245.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Society* 249.

¹¹ "Environment." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 16 July 2009.

<http://dictionary.oed.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/cgi/entry/50076498?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=environment&first=1&max_to_show=10>.

¹² "Ecology." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 17 November 2009.

<http://dictionary.oed.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/cgi/entry/50071982?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=ecology&first=1&max_to_show=10>.

¹³ "Ecology," OED.

¹⁴ Lance Newman, "Marxism and Ecocriticism." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 9:2 (2002): 2-3.

¹⁵ Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology." *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978) 149.

¹⁶ Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology" 164.

¹⁷ Lawrence Buell has proposed as an ecocritical rubric a concept of the "environmental unconscious," but his reference is so loosely analogical and uninterested in Jameson's actual theoretical argument as to lose its entire force. For Buell, the "environmental unconscious" has nothing whatsoever to do with the mode of production. It is not even clear that it serves as a hermeneutical strategy for the historicization of texts. Rather, it is just a way to talk about any kind of "distortion, repression, forgetting, inattention" of a physical environment as it manifests in a literary text. See Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and the Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Boston: Belknap, 2003) 18. Even as an attempt to provide ecocriticism with Freudian insights into the hermeneutics of absence, this is fairly weak stuff. I propose instead the term "biopolitical unconscious," as a way of keeping ecocriticism focused on the *historical specificity* of literature's relationship to the environment, and to indicate its inseparability from literature's relationships (in growing concentric circles) to population, processes of political regulation and antagonism, and, finally, the mode of production itself.

¹⁸ Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 99.

¹⁹ The exceptional text in this regard might be Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village," which visibly marks the absent population as a frame for its pastoral nostalgia, and in doing so brings its biopolitics close to the textual surface.

²⁰ My book, *Rebels*, develops the literary and cultural terrain of this historical juncture in great detail, and in ways compatible with the project I am here delineating. See Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005).

²¹ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (New York: Blackwell, 2005) 19-24.