

## Toxic Discourse *Waste Heritage as Ghetto Pastoral*

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# Toxic Discourse: *Waste Heritage* as Ghetto Pastoral

ALANA FLETCHER

RECENT EXAMINATIONS of Irene Baird's once-forgotten novel *Waste Heritage* (1939) and the publication of a new edition of the work by the University of Ottawa Press in 2007 evince a renewed interest in this fictionalized account of one of the major protest events of the 1930s in Canada. In fact, sustained critical responses to the UOP edition from scholars such as Colin Hill, Jody Mason, and Candida Rifkind suggest that Herb Wyle's optimistic reflection in 2007 that Baird's novel should perhaps "no longer be considered neglected" (64) has, to a great extent, been realized. The novel takes place in the immediate aftermath of the three-week sit-down protest participated in by twelve hundred men in Vancouver during May and June 1938. The narrative begins in an atmosphere of stasis, immediately after the eviction of the "sit-downers" from the public buildings they occupied. The story of the sit-downers, filtered through the novel's protagonist Matt Striker, is then followed as they move from Aschelon (representing Vancouver) to Gath (representing Victoria) in continued protest of cuts to unemployment relief.<sup>1</sup>

As this short summary suggests, stasis and movement are central themes of the novel. Recent work by Hill, Mason, and Rifkind has turned discussion of the novel toward its urban industrial themes and its images of mobility and immobility, significantly extending the limited nods to space and movement apparent in earlier criticism (e.g., in Anthony Hopkins's discussion of the novel's crowd formations and militarized marches). This paper adds an ecocritical dimension to these readings of the built and natural environments of the text. *Waste Heritage*, I argue, employs what Lawrence Buell has called "toxic discourse": a mode of writing that inculcates environmental awareness through images of toxified spaces, places, and bodies. At the risk of putting forth yet another label for a novel whose far-ranging generic possibilities have figured repeatedly in critical debate,<sup>2</sup> I suggest that the toxic discourse of *Waste Heritage* allows us to read the novel as a "ghetto

pastoral,” a genre most commonly identified among early-twentieth-century American working-class novels. There are a number of ways in which *Waste Heritage* does not fit the accepted definition of ghetto pastoral; certainly, it is not the classic tale of growing up in an urban ethnic enclave that we might think of, following Michael Denning, as ghetto pastoral. The label is more of an affordance: reading *Waste Heritage* as ghetto pastoral reveals an otherwise unapparent affinity between the novel’s environmentally framed class critique and that of acknowledged Depression-era ghetto pastorals. The most marked aspect of this affinity is the use of what Leo Marx calls “complex pastoral,” a mode in which pastoral imagery self-reflexively indicates its own untenability. In *Waste Heritage*, as in the great majority of Depression-era ghetto pastorals, complex pastoral sharply critiques what Baird called, in a sales catalogue description of the novel, the “stupidity, irony and menace” (qtd. in Mason, *Writing Unemployment* 115) of a system in which working-class efforts toward the independent life of leisure promised by traditional pastoral are futile and self-defeating. The intervention this paper makes, then, is twofold: first, it provides a much-needed analysis of how complex pastoral relies on toxic discourse, and of how ghetto pastorals are characterized primarily by this toxified pastoralism; second, it models this relationship through the first sustained ecocritical reading of *Waste Heritage*.

Traditional pastoral is a narrative mode dating back to the poetry of Hesiod and Theocritus. Pastoral originally focused on the work and lives of shepherds, and in general the mode refers to an idealistic representation of rustic life and labour in contrast to, and often in satire of, urban living. In early modern natural history and travel literature, pastoral was often in this Georgic vein of an idealized “poetics of work” (Buell, *Future* 145); in more high-culture anglophone painting and poetry of this period, however, pastoral was typically a representation of landscapes as “spaces of aesthetic pleasure contemplated at leisure . . . landscapes indeed that tend[ed] to delete workers in order to enhance the idyll” (145). This deletion of the labourer became prevalent by the seventeenth century, and pastorals of this period are decried in Raymond Williams’s seminal work *The Country and the City* (1975) for propagating a “mythical or utopian image” of the “unworked-for providence of nature” that elided the “economic reality” of rural life; this transformation of pastoral tradition, in Williams’s view, served the

interests of “a developing agrarian capitalism” (25, 32, 22). Marx’s influential reading of pastoral in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) similarly emphasizes the symbolic power of pastoral to elide material realities. Popular literature in the United States, Marx argues, has traded on a “sentimental” pastoralism that idealizes rural life in oblivious disregard of advancing industrialization. In contrast to this naive pastoralism, Marx sees more serious literature — including writings by Mark Twain, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne — as practising a “complex pastoral” that exposed the contradiction of American culture’s simultaneous rural idealization and commitment to technological production. These works revealed that “the aspirations once represented by the symbol of an ideal landscape have not, and probably cannot, be embodied” and that “our inherited symbols of order and beauty have been divested of meaning” (365). Marx’s complex pastoral, at its most basic, is a self-critical version of the mode that points up the classist unrealities of simple pastoral.

Although Buell refrains from making this connection explicit, I see the toxic discourse he describes as naming the primary stylistic and structural methods by which complex pastoral is conveyed. Buell’s four major aspects of toxic discourse are: a contaminated or disrupted pastoral vision; images of total pollution; gothic elements, including Virgilian descents to polluted underworlds; and “David-versus-Goliath” representations of the weak oppressed against the strong oppressors. Each aspect is a means by which the destabilization of simple pastoral ideals is effected; we could call them the stylistic building blocks of complex pastoral. All four of the aspects of toxic discourse enumerated by Buell are present in *Waste Heritage*, though my reading of the novel concentrates on the first three, with images of pollution considered part and parcel of the disruption and contamination of pastoral vision.<sup>3</sup> Toxic discourse’s insistent disruption of pastoral ideals contributes to the general sense of awakening or realization of betrayal<sup>4</sup> that characterizes complex pastoral. This awakening to the reality that, as Marx says, the aspirations represented by pastoral vision “have not, and probably cannot, be embodied” is behind the sense of betrayal conveyed in *Waste Heritage*, as in other Depression-era ghetto pastorals, by the foreclosure of working-class aspirations for living wages, suburban life, and leisure space.

Buell's explication of toxic discourse focuses primarily on contemporary literature, but he also suggests that a precursor of contemporary toxic discourse was the "congeries of initiatives on behalf of urban and workplace reform" that began to gather momentum at the turn of the twentieth century, and he mentions Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), "a landmark muckraking novel that exposed the victimization of workers in the meat-packing industry," as part of this congeries ("Toxic Discourse" 631). In his 2002 essay "In Search of Left Ecology's Usable Past: *The Jungle*, Social Change, and the Class Character of Environmental Impairment," Steven Rosendale reads *The Jungle* as a significant early attempt to yoke leftist human concerns including social life, class politics, and ward corruption with ecoconscious anxieties about the environmental consequences of production. This reading of *The Jungle* as an example of early leftist ecocriticism provides a useful template for a similar reading of *Waste Heritage*. *The Jungle* straddles the same generic boundaries as Baird's novel: it arose from a six-month investigative stint similar to Baird's participant observation in the aftermath of the Vancouver sit-down strikes, and, like *Waste Heritage*, it couches social protest within a fictionalized journalistic mode (a mode Baird would later call "make-believe journalism" ["Sidown" 84]). With its emphases on animal-human relations, urban crowding, and exploitative working conditions in one Chicago meat-packing neighbourhood, *The Jungle* certainly exemplifies the kind of leftist-ecological (or Red-Green<sup>5</sup>) thinking that would dominate the Depression-era American novels most readily recognized as ghetto pastorals, including Mike Gold's *Jews without Money* (1930), James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* (1932), and Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934). Following Denning's definition of ghetto pastoral in "'The Tenement Thinking': Ghetto Pastoral," *The Jungle* would probably be denied the label due to its "cover story" character; ghetto pastorals, according to Denning, are semi-autobiographical stories of "growing up" in particular urban ghettos, written by the "plebeian men and women" who lived there (230). *Waste Heritage* might similarly be discounted as ghetto pastoral for this reason. From an ecocritical perspective, however, the preoccupation of Sinclair's and Baird's novels with the disproportionate subjection of the working class and the unemployed to exploitative work conditions, pollution, and urban decay — an interconnected inequality we would now call environmental injustice — places them in the same

Red-Green tradition as Denning's autobiographical stories. It is this shared preoccupation with environmental injustice that I mean to draw out by calling *Waste Heritage* a ghetto pastoral.<sup>6</sup>

Both Rosendale's "recovery and revision" (64) of *The Jungle* as an environmentally aware leftist text and Denning's discussion of the pastoral nature of American ghetto novels pick up on a critically neglected assertion made by William Empson in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), a work that not only defines proletarian literature as pastoral but also delineates one of the two major ways in which leftist novels employ complex pastoral. The proletarian novels produced in the first decades of the twentieth century, Empson declares, were at bottom pastoral; as "good proletarian art," they shared the "trick of the old pastoral": to "make simple people express strong feelings in learned and fashionable language" (11). Touching more closely on how pastoral supports leftist aims, Empson also notes that the depiction of the worker as martyr-hero — which he likens to the Christian storytelling trope of Jesus as shepherd — "gives a natural expression for a sense of social injustice" (17). His observation about the pastoral elevation of the worker that colours proletarian writing describes one of the two major approaches of ghetto pastoral writing: to pastoralize the ghetto. In this vein of ghetto pastoral, overcrowded, polluted, and toxified ghettoscapes and exploited urban workers are described in a pastoral mode that elevates them, as in the Georgic poetics of farming or shepherding. Examples of this type of ghetto-pastoralization abound in Roth's *Call It Sleep*, the "great virtue" of which Kenneth Burke, in a letter to the *New Masses*, described as "the fluent and civilized way in which [Roth] found, on our city streets, the new equivalents of the ancient jungle" (21). *The Jungle* operates predominantly in this vein as well, describing the built environment of Packingtown in strikingly natural terms: the narrow roads between the houses, with their "mountains and valleys and rivers, gullies and ditches," "resembl[e] . . . a miniature topographical map of a continent"; the sound of the factories humming is "like the murmuring of bees in the spring, the whisperings of the forest"; and the factory chimneys belch "river[s] of smoke" (Sinclair 21, 24). The neighbourhood is described throughout the novel as "wild," "wilderness," or "unsettled country"; as Rosendale notes, in this novel "industry has remade the entire environment in its own image" (60). The opening sequence of *The Jungle*, though, in which the Rudkuses watch out the window of

their train car as the natural colours fade, the grass grows less green, and the landscape becomes more bare as they enter Chicago, partakes of the other major approach to ghetto pastoral: to present characters who valorize the non-urban, pristine, natural spaces they are denied in an escapist or nostalgic manner. This aspect of ghetto pastoral is derided by Alfred Kazin in “The Revival of Naturalism” (1942) as producing overly deterministic (and pessimistic) narratives, positioning ghetto dwellers as non-agential prisoners of industrialization. Mikey and his gang’s protection of the fragile grass growing through cracks in the sidewalk and the family’s mushroom-picking trip to the park in *Jews without Money* (Gold 40-41, 148-55) operate in this idiom, and the “Nature Study” classes that Mikey is forced to take comment explicitly on the insult of offering the “withered corpses” of leaves and cornstalks to boys who “ached for the outdoors” (40, 41). Parks are signifiers of this more escapist pastoral mode, and they function in *Jews without Money* and in Farrell’s *Young Lonigan* — as in *Waste Heritage* — as leisure spaces that prompt belief in a better life. This type of pastoral desire plays on the escapist leisure-pastoral that Williams derided, and its inevitable foreclosure indicates the naïveté of such escapism.

Denning gestures toward these two sides of ghetto pastoral when he clarifies that ghetto pastorals were neither the “abject surrender to naturalism” deplored by Kazin nor the “covert pastoral” identified by Empson but “a curious synthesis of the two . . . always caught in this dialectic of [naturalist] degradation and [pastoral] elevation, the grotesque and the simple” (251). Both pastoral approaches are vehicles for Marx’s complex pastoral, for both draw attention to “the reality of history”: that is, to the reality of “the forces which have stripped the old [pastoral] ideal of most, if not all[,] of its meaning” (Marx 363). Pastoralizing the toxic subtly ironizes the aspirations of the urban working class as misguided and futile, while disrupting the escapist pastoral visions of naïve characters with toxic imagery is more explicitly critical — primarily of the system that promotes such impossible visions, but also of characters who believe them possible. The occurrence throughout *Waste Heritage* of both of these modes, often in tandem, signals the heretofore unremarked position of Baird’s novel on the literary side of Buell’s early twentieth-century congeries on behalf of urban workplace reform. The novel seems to be a rare Canadian representative in a group of Depression-era texts that, as Tristan Siple puts it, “strategically and

self-consciously utilized and transformed the pastoral tradition in order to explore issues of pollution, housing, health, and spatial stratification” (3).

As Hill notes, the Depression marked a turn away from the optimistic literary portrayals of urbanization apparent in early 1920s Canadian literature and toward “noticeably darker” urban portraits (*Modern Realism* 147; see also “Critical Introduction” xxxii). Hill’s assertion that Baird’s depiction of modern industrialism in *Waste Heritage* in terms of “reeking streetcars, screeching fire trucks, towering skyscrapers, menacing crowds, and murderous trains” is “an unmistakable indictment of urban life in the 1930s” (“Critical Introduction” xxxiii) provides a rich point of departure for a reading of the toxic discourse and complex pastoral of *Waste Heritage*. In support of his thesis that Baird was one of a number of writers behind the modern realism movement in Canada (*Modern Realism* 6, 18, 19), Hill cites the novel’s “uncompromising” portrayals of everyday urban life; these portrayals, he claims, “contrast markedly with the descriptions of rural life and landscape that are almost ubiquitous in Canadian fiction before 1950” (“Critical Introduction” xxxiii). I want to nuance Hill’s idea of marked rural/urban contrast, and extend his assertion about Baird’s indictment of urban life, by demonstrating the ways in which Marx’s industrial machine insistently invades and intertwines with pastoral imagery in *Waste Heritage*.

First, the streetcar-ride passage that Hill pinpoints as a prime example of Baird’s urban realism (“Critical Introduction” xxxiii) should also be read in light of its complex pastoralism. This passage describes the streetcar ride Matt and his girlfriend Hazel take to the beach in Aschelon, and Matt’s first view of the water. I will quote from it at some length to provide a sense of the diction and imagery through which toxic discourse conveys both of the modes of complex pastoral outlined above:

The street car had its windows shoved right up to the top and the people next the windows sat with their bodies pressed up close to the bars as though that way they could get a little extra air. . . . Air charged with hamburgers, hot dogs, peanuts and gasoline. A long white beach swarming and shrieking and the dragging steps of the first families turning for home.



The sea was flat-still and the colour of pewter where the sun was beginning to leave it. Where the sun still struck it was orange and purple and green and shot with silver lights. The bay was flecked with yachts and a freighter was going by far down in the water heavy with lumber. As it passed through the area of sun the lumber turned bright orange. The mountains behind broad and snow-bearded were blue in the evening light. (Baird, *Waste Heritage* 72)

In this relatively brief passage, the natural environment is repeatedly disrupted by the built environment. The urban dwellers in the crowded streetcar can barely find air to breathe, and the air that does circulate is tainted with the mass-produced fuels on which modern society runs — hamburgers, peanuts, gasoline. The anthropomorphization of the beach itself into a “swarming and shrieking” mass conveys a sense that the natural space of the beach is occluded by the people’s very valorization of it; this in turn underlines the fact that the beach is not natural, but humanly constructed in an image of the natural. From these images of foreclosed escape into nature, the second paragraph turns to a pastoralization of the very productive and consumptive chains that invade the natural in the preceding paragraph. Elevated descriptions of the beauty of the water coloured by the setting sun carry over to literally colour the lumber freighter, framed against the sublime image of the “snow-bearded” mountains.

This turn from an urban invasion of the natural to a naturalized interpretation of the urban is echoed in a later instance of Matt gazing at water, this time in Gath. After Matt and Eddy drop off a letter for Hep, they wait to watch a boat pull out of the harbour: “They leant on the rail and looked out over the harbour, watching the lights winking on the water and the swirling shadows of the piles. The lights made small shimmering pools of colour and the water looked like oil, a full, smooth sheen with scraps of driftwood floating in it” (Baird, *Waste Heritage* 190). The description of the “piles” — the posts that support the dock — as “swirling shadows” in the water collapses the distinction between human-made dock and natural water: the posts appear not as themselves but as part of the ocean.<sup>7</sup> The oil pollution in the harbour is then elevated through the alliteration and assonance of “winking on the water” and “swirling shadows of the piles,” devices that increase the strange aesthetic appeal of the verbs “winking,” “swirling,” “shimmering,” and “floating.” That all of these verbs appear in the present

progressive has the added effect of ahistoricizing, if not naturalizing, the appearance of oil and gas products on the water.

The only critically remarked-upon example of complex pastoral in *Waste Heritage* similarly couples a foreclosed pastoral escapism with a translation of the urban into pastoral terms. Matt's idealized view of the Aschelon cityscape as "something out of Arabian Nights only more modern, taller and with a lot more class" (Baird, *Waste Heritage* 44) has been read by Rifkind as evidence of the double illusion offered by the city, the illusion of "physical structures of abundance . . . [that] obscure the social structures of scarcity" and that of "freedom generated in spaces of control" (185-86). This reading, based largely on Georg Simmel's theory that the freedom-seeking individual finds himself or herself swallowed up by the city, can be expanded to address the importance of this scene to the novel's toxified pastoralism.

The terms in which Matt perceives the skyline — as something mythological, touched with "unreality," possessing "perfection and beauty," "smoothness and greater power" (Baird, *Waste Heritage* 44) — translate the urban into a sublime idiom usually reserved for natural phenomena. Indeed, Matt's sense of connectedness, or his desire for connectedness, to a vista that awes and baffles him mirrors what Susan Glickman (drawing on Samuel Monk) describes as the "imaginative sequence" in which the natural sublime most often appears in contemporary Canadian poetry: a sense of "connectedness" arises "not in spite of but *because of* the ungraspability of the natural world" (153). Matt's sublime view is underscored by the picturesque image of the gulls sweeping, wheeling, and swooping over the surf, "kinda like those travelogues they show you at the movies," as Harry says (Baird, *Waste Heritage* 45). This too mirrors a convention Glickman outlines as "*still* inform[ing] English Canadian poetry," that of picturesque description supporting a sublime view of the natural world (ix). What is most notable about Matt's sublime view for my toxic reading, of course, is that it is a view not of the natural but of the built environment. Naturalization of the industrial is coupled more closely here than perhaps anywhere else in the novel with the escapism of sentimental pastoral, as represented by the open water, the wheeling gulls, and Matt's desire to hope.

Rifkind's note that Harry's offer to drive Matt around Stanley Park "parodies the leisure activities of urban tourists" (185) indicates the irony of this sublime perception of the urban skyline as seen from the

leisure space of the park. Just as Sidney's famous pastoral *Arcadia*, as Williams notes, "was written in a park which had been made by enclosing a whole village and evicting the tenants," so too is Matt's sublime view of the urban landscape imaginable "only at arm's length" (22) from the reality of urban life and labour, in an urban version of the aesthetic elision of materiality Williams vilifies so profoundly in English neopastoral. As with so many of the other 1930s ghetto-pastoral idealizations that take place in urban parks,<sup>8</sup> the reader is made aware of the futility of such naive hopes by the constant presence of the urban. In Matt's vision of the skyline, this irony is compounded by his inability to recognize the obvious presence of the "machine" of technological advancement, industrialization, and manufactured scarcity in the "garden" of his aspirations of getting a job and settling down (Baird, *Waste Heritage* 44, 45). Harry's interpretation of the urban skyline as a "dangerous poisonous beauty," and his attempt to "clean the poison" out of Matt's system by driving him back through Chinatown, away from the park and its vista (45), emphasize for the reader the fact that Matt's vision is not only invaded by the toxic but also founded on a misinterpretation of the toxic as sustaining. This misinterpretation, which Rifkind underscores when she describes Matt as "infected" by an urban vision "toxic in its false promises" (186), is the same error more subtly indicated by other instances of urban-pastoralization in the novel — the shimmering pollution on the water, the hamburger-charged air, the sun-kissed lumber freighter.

Harry's chauffeuring of Matt back through the "maze of run-down shacks and swarming streets" of Chinatown directly after this episode in Stanley Park (Baird, *Waste Heritage* 45) participates in another major aspect of the toxic discourse outlined by Buell: Virgilian descent to the underworld. This element of toxic discourse arose in descriptions of slums in American literature even before major industrialization, and was a mode of allegorizing urban, often ethnic slums in "classico-biblical terms" (modelled on Aeneas's journey to the underworld in Book VI of the *Aeneid*) in order to "instill shock and compassion in insouciant middle-class readers" (Buell, "Toxic Discourse" 654). Underworld descent in *Waste Heritage* achieves an effect Buell originally defined as undesirable: to depict slum dwellers as dangerous aliens. Reading this aspect of *Waste Heritage* as part of its toxic discourse adds ecocritical dimensions to the

link between racialized others and urban decay observed by Hill and to the foreign/native binary identified by Mason and Rifkind.

The intent of the trope of underworld descent in early American literature, as Buell, drawing on Eric Homburger, points out, was to politicize the middle class. The trouble with this kind of allegorizing, however, is that it reinscribes a “polarization of saved versus damned, the guide being so much wiser, so much more like us, than the hapless, hardly human victims” (Buell, “Toxic Discourse” 655). As Buell observes, the fact that the pity this trope evokes can “lapse abruptly into contempt” undermined the urban reformist projects that nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century reformers sought to further (655). In *Waste Heritage*, however, a feeling of contempt for the “hapless, hardly human” inhabitants of “underworld” spaces like Chinatown seems to be the aim. That racialization in the novel serves a political purpose has been discussed at some length by both Mason and Rifkind. As Mason points out, in order to combat the prevailing 1930s dichotomy of deserving citizen versus undeserving transient, “the novel’s advocacy of the transient’s right to settlement and citizenship is articulated through the creation of another binary — the transients become the deserving if neglected native sons of Canada and are opposed to those who are labelled as foreign” (*Writing* 118). Rifkind similarly observes that, to highlight the way in which capitalism and federalism have intersected to “unfairly mar[k]” the white male sit-downers as “different,” they are set apart throughout the novel “from those who seem to be truly different because of their race” (191). The lens of toxic discourse, and specifically its element of Virgilian descent to the underworld, allows us to link Mason’s and Rifkind’s identifications of the novel’s native/foreign binary to Hill’s observation that Chinatown appears to be “inimical to the aims of the sit-downers” (“Critical Introduction” xl). Scenes of urban decay and danger among racialized others, like Matt and Eddy’s altercation with a diseased prostitute in Chinatown (Baird, *Waste Heritage* 115), suggest both the separation of the sit-downers from these morally and physically polluted others and the threat of pollution they pose. The sit-downers’ uncomfortable stay at the Angel Arms in Gath, a former brothel surrounded by “the windowless shell of an empty bottling works,” an auto-wrecking yard, and a “kike” junk dealer (161), similarly evokes a sense of descent to the underworld. In both cases, the insinuation is that the men should not be there; the deadened, decayed areas

into which they have descended are the habitats of toxified and toxic racialized others.<sup>9</sup>

As Hopkins has noted, an “atmosphere of futility” pervades the sit-downers’ collective efforts. Like Hill, Mason, and Rifkind, Hopkins points out that this sense of futility undermines any argument about the effectiveness of strikes, demonstrations, and socialist solidarity that one might expect from a strike novel like *Waste Heritage* (120-21; see also Hill, “Critical Introduction” xxv; Mason, “Sidown” 144, *Writing Unemployment* 113; and Rifkind 163). While the futility of the strikers’ efforts seems to support claims that the novel is not fundamentally radical or revolutionary — claims supported by Baird’s own denials of communist or radical sympathies (see Baird, “Sidown” 82) — the novel’s irony and futility are also significant vehicles of protest. Unlike the central child characters of the best-known ghetto pastorals, the young men in *Waste Heritage* are generally aware that their aspirations toward living wages and family homes are unrealizable. This jadedness is revealed in direct references to the rural in the novel, which most often concern farms. No longer the sites of idyllic, non-alienated labour celebrated in traditional pastoral, farms in *Waste Heritage* primarily connote exploitation — seasonal, underpaid work intended to temporarily lessen the influx of unemployed men into cities rather than substantially relieve unemployment (see Baird, *Waste* 24, 185-86).<sup>10</sup> These gestures toward the reality of life in the country highlight the irony of nostalgic references in the novel to the country as “pretty” and “different” from the “dog eat dog” city (199). When Matt’s desire to believe the promise of Hazel’s pastoral vision of “a home of my own . . . [and] a slew of kids” (77) leads him to resume the job hunt, his re-realization of the futility of doing so is all the more painful. Belief in the dream of work and wages is deflated most dramatically through the naive Eddy, whose simple desire for a pair of new shoes eventually leads to his death and Matt’s arrest. The novel’s ending, in which Eddy is mowed down by an oncoming train (that well-worn symbol of runaway industrialism) in a last desperate attempt to “get away from here” (275), hammers home what the complex pastoral of the novel indicates throughout: pastoral aspirations are no longer tenable in the modern technological-capitalist world.

Drawing on Hopkins’s note about the irony attending the novel’s biblically named fictional cities Aschelon and Gath, Philistine cities

conquered by the Israelites when they occupied the promised land,<sup>11</sup> Hill explains: “The irony is that Aschelon and Gath, in *Waste Heritage*, are never conquered; the men leave Aschelon after their sit-down achieves little, and Gath proves to be no ‘promised land’ when, at the end of their journey, the men are forced to accept a flawed and meagre settlement.” He adds that “Baird may also be suggesting more cynically that expectations of a job, home, family, and dignity have become unrealistic in 1930s Canada. . . . [A] mythological ‘promised land’ cannot exist in the modern world” (“Critical Introduction” xxxv). A reading of the toxic discourse by which the industrial insistently invades the natural in the novel, as conveyed by both ironic urban-pastoral imagery and harsh deflations of escapist pastoral ideals, supports this conclusion that *Waste Heritage* depicts such expectations as unrealistic. The cynicism the novel reveals, however, is not Baird’s own but that of the system, in which — to recall Marx — the aspirations represented by images of an ideal landscape can no longer be realized, and attempts to do so are foredoomed to failure. The novel’s foreclosure of pastoral images and the aspirations they represent contributes to what Hill identifies as the novel’s sense of determinism as well as to what Glenn Willmott describes as its “tendentially tragic” plot (Hill, “Critical Introduction” xxix; Willmott 33). By consistently pointing to the contradictions of a social order in which valorization of the rural coincides with the effects of unabated techno-capitalism, the novel’s toxic discourse harshly criticizes, and protests, this system.

There is much about the label of ghetto pastoral that does not apply to *Waste Heritage*. As noted above, the novel is more a faux-journalistic “cover story” about a newsworthy event than a tale of growing up written by a ghetto dweller. Further, while ghetto pastorals were usually written against popular stereotypes of ethnic minorities in novels and periodicals (Denning 232), *Waste Heritage* uses stereotypical racialized others to reinforce a sense of the wrongness of the current situation. I put forward the label not as a watertight definition but rather as a useful approach to the novel that illuminates its otherwise unapparent ecological aspects. Reading *Waste Heritage* for its ghetto-pastoralist elements alerts us to the more minute instances of urban/rural contradiction that underscore the structural ironies the novel protests. Such a reading also expands the definition of ghetto pastoral, foregrounding the complex pastoral mode in which the genre so often operates and

highlighting the critically overlooked relationship of toxic discourse to this mode. Perhaps most importantly, examining the ways in which *Waste Heritage* employs complex pastoral reveals the novel's affinity with other Depression-era texts that strategically employ, and modify, the pastoral tradition to highlight class issues and protest against capitalist contradictions. While it is outside the scope of this brief paper, similar affinities could be drawn out by affixing the label of ghetto pastoral to other leftist-ecological Canadian works, which in turn would more firmly shift the definition of ghetto pastoral toward its characteristic toxic discourse.

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am grateful to Matt Lambert at Carnegie-Mellon for our March 2014 conversation about the various elements of ghetto pastoral and the lack of Canadian examples of the genre, which greatly influenced my thinking in this paper.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Some of the criticism on *Waste Heritage* disagrees over the details of the events on which the novel is based. Michiel Horn follows historians Pierre Berton and James Struthers in placing the strike in May and June 1938, after the closing of relief camps in April (Horn 36-37; see also Berton 446-59; and Struthers 192-93). Though his ordering of events is the same as Horn's, Wylie places the strike and the subsequent action of the novel in 1937 (65-66). Confusingly, Baird herself describes the novel as depicting "the summer of 1939" ("Sidown" 83). Caren Irr mistakenly describes the novel as "set in Vancouver and various prairie towns during the sit-down strikes that led to the 1935 On-to-Ottawa trek" (*Suburb* 166).

<sup>2</sup> As Hill notes in his critical introduction to the UOP edition, "It is difficult to situate Baird's *Waste Heritage* in a single literary tradition because it resists many labels, draws upon many influences, and breaks much new ground" (xxv). Generic definitions applied to the novel include: proletarian novel (McDougall 16), novel of engagement (Hyman 77), sentimental novel (Irr, "Queer Borders" 522), bildungsroman (Willmott 33), and documentary fiction (Rifkind 163). Its representational mode has been characterized as "journalistic" (Hyman 81), as approaching socialist realism (Doyle 118), as social realist (Hill, "Critical Introduction" ix; Irr, "Queer Borders" 512; Mason, "Sidown" 144), and as reportage or mediated reportage (Hill, "Critical Introduction" xxxv; Mason, *Writing Unemployment* 121).

<sup>3</sup> The element of David-versus-Goliath conflicts of weak oppressed and strong oppres-

sors is obvious throughout the novel, and it is implicitly addressed by my reading of toxic discourse as revealing the structural oppression of the strikers.

<sup>4</sup> Buell argues that “contemporary toxic discourse effectively starts with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), whose opening chapter, ‘A Fable for Tomorrow,’ introduces one of the key discursive motifs [of toxic discourse]: a ‘town in the heart of America’ that awakes to a birdless, budless spring” (“Toxic Discourse” 645).

<sup>5</sup> This coupling generally refers to leftist or class-conscious ecocriticism in the tradition of William Morris, Raymond Williams, John Berger, and Kate Soper (among others).

<sup>6</sup> Reading Baird’s novel alongside Sinclair’s in the vein of ghetto pastoral helps us resolve the critical question of whether Baird intended to shape a particular argument or simply document contemporary events: ghetto pastoral combines a documentary recording of working and living conditions with a proletarian ethic of anti-capitalism and just treatment of the labouring class.

<sup>7</sup> It might be worth noting that “piles” also commonly refers to petcoke piles, open-air mounds of gas-derived petroleum coke often stored at shipping transfer points. Petcoke is easily picked up by the wind so that it swirls around like dust or flour; though the phrase “swirling shadows of the piles” seems to refer to reflections in the water, it could potentially refer to shadows created by swirling petcoke polluting the harbour. At the time of the novel’s writing, petcoke piles would have been signs of modern industrialization, as petcoke refineries came into use only in the 1930s (Webber).

<sup>8</sup> One of the most extreme of these is young Studs Lonigan’s vision in Chicago’s Washington Park of growing wings and flying with Lucy “right through clouds . . . until they came to some kind of a place with a palace, and servants, and everything they wanted to make them happy” (Farrell 85). As elsewhere in the Studs trilogy, this environmentally induced happiness quickly fades when Studs leaves the park. In this case, the naturalness of his love for Lucy is also revoked, his feelings recast as a shameful secret by the Lucy-Studs graffiti scrawled on ghetto sidewalks and fences (90-91).

<sup>9</sup> Adding to the threats of moral and physical pollution posed in these instances is the threat that the success of these racialized others is due to the implosion of the productive system the sit-downers want to access. The juxtaposition of the Jewish junk dealer and the auto-wrecker with the abandoned bottling plant across from the Angel Arms carries especially clear implications that a racialized new industry is capitalizing on the wastes of the white sit-downers’ productive heritage.

<sup>10</sup> As Wylie points out, the immediate impetus for the sit-down strike whose aftermath *Waste Heritage* depicts was the 1937 closure of British Columbia’s joint federal-provincial forestry relief camps, an action that removed last-resort opportunities for the unemployed (65-66). Farming and forestry camps (as well as some more radical homesteading initiatives; see McGoey) were one of the main avenues by which governments and private organizations attempted to alleviate Depression-era mass unemployment. As Struthers has illuminated, back-to-the-land policy approaches in the early years of the Depression maintained the interests of industrial farmers and other resource industry employers while doing nothing to alleviate unemployment; in fact, back-to-the-land attitudes largely excused government and industry from any responsibility to assist the unemployed (8-9). It therefore seems ironic that back-to-the-land initiatives such as farm and forestry camps were developed to combat the unemployment that back-to-the-land attitudes had exacerbated. See Bowen for a comprehensive look at the general failure of back-to-the-land movements in Depression-era Saskatchewan.

<sup>11</sup> Ashkelon is usually spelled Ashkelon in biblical usage. See 1 Samuel 6 and 2 Samuel 1 for the Israelites’ occupation of Philistine cities. See also Amos 1:8 and Zephania 2:4 for prophecies regarding this occupation.



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