Gilman’s Garden: *Herland*, Literary Naturalism, and the Good Anthropocene

There is no “nature” apart from the human in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herland (1915), a utopian novel in which three male explorers discover a land of parthenogenetically reproducing women. They find a land “in a state of perfect cultivation, where even the forests looked as if they were cared for; a land that looked like an enormous park, only that it was even more evidently an enormous garden”; a land more “petted” than any before seen (“even in Germany,” the birthplace of modern forestry), as a result of which nearly all of the trees are “[f]ood-bearing.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This is not to say that the land is all cleared and tilled, plastered over with monocultural production in the manner so familiar to the twenty-first century. Rather, the humans of Herland guide these systems as part of them, increasing through the same subtle methods their environment’s vitality and its capacity to sustain human life. They are ubiquitous but decentered, ghosts in the machine of a mechanistic nature. And yet, despite this mechanism, which in the Baconian legacy makes nature something to be dominated, Herland’s culture is marked by a profound respect for and cooperation with the natural world, a recognition of the consequences of action without attention to the material entanglements on which civilization relies. The result of this respect is that, while there is no “nature” without the human, there is also, conversely, no economics that is not also ecology. The product of labor in Herland is not saleable produce but life-sustaining environments, self-improving systems that include the human. As such, the products, if they can be called that, are held in common, not only among humans but across all life in the Herland ecosystem. In the absence of a money economy, such guiding intervention constitutes the *raison d’être* of human activity. Extending this activity to the scale of the society as a whole, we might call it *ambient labor*: a conception of environments as objects of economic production, produced by methods that are themselves understood as part of the environment they produce. In such a system, economic activity at once fades into the background and creates it.

This is the utopian wing of Anthropocene literature, born at least a century ago, when the Anthropocene was not so much an object of thought as an uneasy premonition, the conditions that would create it immature but nascent and ominously powerful.[[2]](#footnote-2) *Herland*, traditionally read for its proto-feminist insights, is due not just the ecocritical rereading it has recently begun to receive, but recognition as part of the intellectual prehistory of one of our most important contemporary concepts.[[3]](#footnote-3) Herland has an Anthropocene of its own, one that begins (ironically) with a geological event beyond the reach of human activity, namely, a volcanic eruption that seals the only passage out of their “high spur of rock” set above the surrounding forest; the resulting isolation forces them to come to terms with their own destructive and, eventually, productive potential as agents of environmental change and ecological guidance. Yet Gilman’s response to these evolving conditions confounds the way we talk about the Anthropocene in the humanities now, because although she presents an ecological imaginary in which there is no nature free from human influence, she also depicts the natural world as more robust because of this fact. Along with their recognition of the destructive capacity latent in unmanaged human activity, Gilman and some of her contemporaries in the sciences also saw the possibility for optimism in an environmental future defined by human activity.

The twenty-first-century instantiation of this optimism is often referred to as the “good Anthropocene,” a diverse collection of perspectives that imagine an Anthropocene without catastrophe and suggest that embracing human influence over the planetary ecology could ultimately benefit all involved. One of the the most extreme versions of the good Anthropocene, “An Ecomodernist Manifesto,” celebrates the apparently boundless expanses of human ingenuity, viewing limits to growth as temporary obstacles—a view that many, especially in the environmental humanities, understandably see as an uncomplicated justification of our domination over nature or as yet another vehicle for capital investment.[[4]](#footnote-4) Another version of the good Anthropocene more reasonably emphasizes the necessity to adapt and mitigate, acknowledging the scale of human influence on the planet without giving in to a dystopian vision of the future.[[5]](#footnote-5) Whatever the version, though, the good Anthropocene is hardly new except in name—though perhaps not in the sense its critics might assume, as an uncomplicated return to the bad old days of exploitation. In fact, the twenty-first century conception of a good Anthropocene reflects an earlier moment in the history of ecological and evolutionary history, one that has faded behind more hegemonic intellectual lineages, in which humanity was seen as neither fully subject to Darwinian determinism nor an omnipotent force of waste and destruction, but nature’s own consciousness.

Reading it in the context of Lester F. Ward’s *Dynamic Sociology*, a work by which Gilman was influenced both sociologically and for its environmental thinking, it becomes clear that *Herland* is a literary representation of an environmental stewardship seen as a process of reforming humanity’s interactions with the natural world rather than lessening them. This article will examine *Herland*’s ecological vision as a theory of the good Anthropocene *avant la lettre*, showing that Gilman saw reform of humanity’s economic systems (into ambient labor) as a way to reconcile humanity’s omnipresent and determinative influence on nature with the desire for a more verdant world. Such a reading is an opportunity to extract an ecological-economic conception of labor that is tailored to conditions that anticipate those of the twenty-first century; it also can, and must, be taken as a test-case for the Promethean optimism of the good Anthropocene, grounds to explore the less salutary outcomes that are elided when the impact of humanity on the natural world is embraced rather than lessened.

If such a reading complicates the way the Anthropocene is commonly mobilized in the humanities, it will also call for a reconsideration of Gilman’s literary moment. Formally and narratively, *Herland* strains the ideological and aesthetic purviews of its genre, American literary naturalism, forcing us to reconsider some of the genre’s defining characteristics as they have traditionally been constituted by its critics. Jennifer Fleissner’s influential rereading of naturalism in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* (2004) lays the groundwork for rethinking these definitions. She argues that where earlier readings of the genre presume a “known-in-advance ‘nature’ lost or refound,” there is actually “a far more nuanced and serious confrontation with the meanings of ‘nature’’s changing status in the modern world.”[[6]](#footnote-6) With Fleissner, I suggest that the logic of “determinism” in naturalism, be it biological, environmental, economic, or historical determinism, is more complicated than it seems. Until the turn of the twenty-first century, determinism dominated the naturalist critical conversation through the “plot of decline” or the “plot of triumph” over always-pernicious external “forces.” While “determinism” refers to a simplistic premise that individual will is at the mercy of dominating “forces,” more generous and nuanced discussions of determinism in naturalism see it as complicating conceptions of individual agency and the coherent self rather than reducing that self to the point of irrelevance.[[7]](#footnote-7) Fleissner has moved the conversation beyond even the more nuanced accounts of determinism, her focus on the genre’s women leading her to replace the concept with a theory of “compulsion,” or entrapment in a pattern of “ongoing, nonlinear, repetitive motion.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Sharing Fleissner’s complicating impulse without wanting to do away with determinism entirely, I see in Gilman and other naturalist writers a system of *mutual determinism*, a coevolutionary counterpoint to Darwinian environmental determinism. Under conditions of mutual determinism, the human remains “determined” by environmental forces but is also able to transform those determining forces through collective action. In Gilman’s resultant utopian form of naturalism,[[9]](#footnote-9) collectivist environmental praxis becomes humanity’s means of transforming itself by transforming its environment.

The context of the Anthropocene, then, makes this mutual determinism more visible in works of literary naturalism, but the context of literary naturalism also reveals the ways in which the Anthropocene as a heuristic challenges the deterministic logic of many of our stories about nature. On one hand, reading *Herland* as part of the intellectual pre-history of the Anthropocene, and more particularly of the good Anthropocene, brings into focus the ways in which the human has long been conceived as a simultaneously determining and determined force. On the other hand, it also reveals the capacity of the Anthropocene to challenge a pervasive myth of the human as an innocent non-agent on which natural forces act—an inverse of the familiar Baconian story of nature as inert, but perhaps no less pernicious. The Anthropocene, in other words, challenges the unidirectionality of deterministic ontologies, replacing the post-Darwinian conception of “organism plus environment” with a more ecological understanding of complex networks of influence and interaction.[[10]](#footnote-10) Reading the Anthropocene and literary naturalism together is less a matter of updating literary naturalism than it is of realizing that the “nature” of naturalism is a highly contested ground in the body of literature itself, that the version of “nature” on which theories of naturalism have commonly been premised represents but one entry in a wider set, and that these conflicting perspectives, taken as a whole, prefigure many of the debates we are having today about how to understand the place of the human in nature. As Donna Haraway puts it, riffing on British social anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, “it matters what stories we tell other stories with,…what thoughts think thoughts.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The premise of my approach here is that, through *Herland*’s mutual determinism and ambient labor, literary naturalism and the Anthropocene can think each other.

What follows will be divided into three sections. The first will show how Gilman backgrounds the human in her narrative, a process that challenges the traditional role of naturalist description established by Lukács at the same time that it reforms inhabitation into a coevolutionary act. The next section will extend the concept of backgrounding to Herland’s economy, exploring the system of ambient labor that results from folding economic activity into ecological processes. The conclusion will argue that what is true of *Herland* is not an exception in the wider purview of its genre, but indicates a broader correspondence between literary naturalism and the Anthropocene.

### Backgrounding the Human: The Garden, the Full World, and Coevolutionary Inhabitation

For much of her life, Gilman kept a garden—a “vegetable garden mind you!, not merely flowers”—at one point as a partial means of subsistence, at another as what she referred to as a “sanitarium.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Herland is insistently presented as a garden in itself, but a peculiar one, in which the gardener is both the manager of the garden and, as it were, one of the plants. Yet this “garden” is also the world entire as it is known to Herland, subject to conditions (of population and resource availability) that would amount to extreme scarcity were it not for the Herlanders’ careful attention to their place in the overlapping systems of their environment. To understand Herland ecologically thus requires a mediation between two opposed paradigms for conceiving of natural environments: the garden and the full world. The garden paradigm is a fundamentally utopian and Edenic environmental imaginary in which the human is master and beneficiary but does not lessen the vitality of the natural system as a whole.[[13]](#footnote-13) The full world paradigm is a dystopian and Malthusian one in which ultimate limits are finally encountered and survival requires transformative systemic change through collective human action. They are opposed reactions to a common set of conditions: the world’s containment, its apprehension as a holistic system due to its containment, and the supposition that the human has a defining role in this system’s character. The dialectical tension between these two paradigms is the same that is encountered by contemporary theories of the good Anthropocene, which paradoxically acknowledge the dystopian potential of unmanaged human activity while responding with a utopian vision of collective environmental management.

To depict this intersection, Gilman backgrounds human activity both in the setting and the country’s history. By *backgrounding* I refer to a double operation of deemphasizing human activity, making the people and their products appear as part of the natural environment, and using the descriptive rendering of the environment as a vehicle for the novel’s arguments. Through this process, Gilman’s novel formally reflects the new form of human inhabitation it theorizes, and in so doing complicates the traditional reading of description in the naturalist genre. But the term “backgrounding” is also chosen to reflect the status of women’s labor. Where contemporary ecofeminists name and resist instances where the contributions of environments and women are placed in the background,[[14]](#footnote-14) especially the acts of motherhood and reproduction that unite historical conceptions of both, Gilman backgrounds everything, placing all work on the level of domestic, reproductive, and ecological processes. Finally, backgrounding as a term reflects the potential for concealment, for the utopia of Herland’s gardenic present is built on the dystopia of its full-world past. Like the modernity celebrated in the Ecomodernist manifesto, Gilman’s utopianism has strategic elision of historical traumas and inequalities as a precondition.

Gilman’s narrative backgrounding begins with her environmental descriptions, in which she establishes the omnipresence of human activity while also figuring her own social and economic arguments in the landforms themselves. She provides a conspicuously cartographical overview, delivered as the three male protagonists view Herland from a biplane, hoping to get “the lay of the land” before they descend.[[15]](#footnote-15) This vantage point allows them to see in one glance the argument in the terrain, though they do not recognize it as such. Gilman’s own world construction—primarily through description—is carefully controlled to create the kind of “nature” she is most interested in discussing, anticipating the way Herlanders themselves will manipulate their physical environment to achieve an ecological ideal.

Distinct types of natural space occur where they will be most useful to the human inhabitants of Herland, a schema whose organization betrays intentional influence and while its agentless narrative framing suggests natural development. Describing Herland from the boundaries in, Vandyck says, “It appeared to be well forested about the edges, but in the interior there were wide plains, and everywhere parklike meadows and open places”; while forest is clustered on the edges of Herland, only “closely cultivated gardens” mark the interior plains.[[16]](#footnote-16) The organization of natural spaces reflects Herland’s distribution of urban spaces, as it clears the way for transportation between an interior network of small cities throughout the interior.[[17]](#footnote-17) They are connected by “clean, well-built roads” that permit the speed with which three Herlanders on foot are able to distance themselves from the male intruders and the speed of their electric ground vehicles—“an easy rate of some thirty miles an hour.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The relegation of the forest to the edges of Herland, then, and the creation of various types of landscape that exist throughout, creates a setting that appears natural but is catered to human use.

Be that as it may, these are not dead spaces, nor purely functional ones. Though they are crossed by sterile “perfect roads, as dustless as a swept floor,” the plains are also idealized as natural spaces. Alongside these roads are “the shade of endless lines of trees” and “the ribbon of flowers that unrolled beneath them, and the rich comfortable country that stretched off and away, full of varied charm.”[[19]](#footnote-19) “Varied” works as both an aesthetic category here (with “charm”) and an incidental marker of biodiversity, its double semantic function mirroring what a permaculturalist might refer to as the “stacking functions” of these trees and gardens, serving both human purposes and the broader ecology.[[20]](#footnote-20) Here as throughout the novel, Gilman presents a land that is constructed for a purpose; but more accurately, it is constructed for multiple purposes cutting across the human and extra-human communities, its human uses coextensive with natural fecundity rather than in tension with it.

The human is reflected in natural landscapes through the ideologies that have been used to shape them; human Herlanders are also integrated into the landscape more directly, becoming backgrounded through Gilman’s insistent representation of them as flora and fauna. Animal and insect metaphors abound as they run and leap “like deer…not as if it was a performance, but as if it was their natural gait”; though not “as alike as so many ants or aphids,” they are repeatedly compared to the hymenoptera order that includes bees and ants, as when their commonplaces are compared to “the way the ants and bees would talk—do talk, maybe” and their nurseries to an “ant-hill.”[[21]](#footnote-21) The metaphors range freely into the plant kingdom, as well, particularly in the case of child rearing. The children grow up “as naturally as young trees” because they are given an environment that promotes this growth, using methods “they had found in their work with plants”; the result is a community that is compared to “the most perfectly cultivated richly developed roses” despite the fact that they do not “seem ‘cultivated’ at all—it had all become a natural condition.”[[22]](#footnote-22) This backgrounding ultimately leads to invisibility (or concealment) for the humans of Herland. After a fruitless escape attempt early in the novel, the men are returned to their comfortable captivity and realize they had been surrounded the entire time, “had been seen, by careful ladies sitting snugly in big trees by the riverbed, or up among the rocks.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Human individuals become part of the environment just as easily as their ideologies do. Indeed, becoming part of the environment in the background *is* the ideology.

Backgrounding constitutes a unique form of description, or at least a unique literary use to which description can be put. Georg Lukács’s foundational essay “Narrate or Describe,” for example, singularly fails to capture the integration of event and background as it appears in *Herland*. Lukács privileges works in which events are “*narrated* from the standpoint of the participant” over those in which they are “*described* from the standpoint of the observer” because the former integrates description into the “total action of the novel” while the latter constitutes “mere filler.” Human “action” is forgrounded against a background of inert natural and built environments. Of course, for Lukács, the point of this distinction is the relative ability to capture the contradictions of capitalism. Description fails because it presents “social facts…as *caput mortuum* of a social process” where narration captures the process itself.[[24]](#footnote-24) By this logic, the majority of Gilman’s intensely descriptive novel would surely be considered a crypt of *capita mortua*.

Yet it is telling that there is no place for nature in Lukác’s binary, a hierarchy in which valuable action is always human and worthless description is always of the products of human activity (dead labor) or of non-human environments as *mise-en-scene* (in the case of the agricultural fair, dead animals). If description fails to capture the processes by which capitalist contradictions come to be, an anthropocentric narration can never capture the processes by which *environments* come to be.[[25]](#footnote-25) It is not that Gilman privileges description over narration, but that in putting people in the background as one part (albeit a decisive one) of the processes by which environments come to be, narration and description lose the absolute distinction that Lukács assigns them.

Indeed, the plot of *Herland*, its chain of events, is inseparable from the management of natural systems that defines the content of its descriptions. But these events are subordinated to the needs of the setting rather than the other way around. Any human-centric chain of events essentially concludes when the men’s attempted escape from Herland is thwarted, giving way instead to a system-focused narrative in which three new elements, the three men, are considered for introduction into the overlapping human and non-human processes. Only when they are “tamed and trained to a degree [the Herlanders] considered safe” are the men “at last brought out to see the country, to know the people.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The three men represent three different outcomes: Jeff is fully integrated, marrying into the Herland society and accepting their values wholesale; Terry is fully rejected, having resisted integration entirely from start to finish; and Vandyck is essentially accepted but decides to leave and take with him, or even replicate, the system of values into which he has been accepted. If the women of Herland are already backgrounded in the descriptions that define the novel’s setting, the human plot is one of the process of backgrounding.

Backgrounding thus results in the dissolution of an anthropocentric, event-driven narrative in favor of one in which the human “protagonists” become the dual subjects and objects of a human-ecological system. And to the extent that they become part of this system, the background itself becomes the true protagonist.

Putting humans in the background, combining event and description, and decentering the human from the protagonist role are narrative reflections of what we might call coevolutionary inhabitation, in which changes in the human realm are mutually determinative with changes to the environment, creating a human-nonhuman feedback loop. The resulting relationship between human Herlanders and their environment is defined not by the Hobbesian war of all against all, so essential to Darwinian evolution and its misapplications to social life, but by guided transformation in which competition is deemphasized in favor of mutual sustenance. Linking the fates of the human and the environment in this way leads to an ecological reformism similar to that of the domestic reform movements championed in Gilman’s early writings.

Coevolutionary inhabitation does not begin with *Herland*. In earlier essays, Gilman espoused a vision of the human-nature relationship in which environmental transformation is seen as part of a larger process of human evolution. In such a vision, the natural world is arrogated to the human by default, but so is responsibility for its stewardship. She saw the human species and its environment both as mutable and, indeed, in need of mutation to avoid waste and suffering. In a 1908 article “Modern Beatitudes—The Newness of the Earth,” for example, she suggests that Earth and humanity are both mere children, as yet relatively undeveloped but always growing into greater harmony. The evolution of the human race is framed as an ever-increasing understanding of the planetary effects of our activity coupled with adaptation based on that understanding. After describing the exhaustion of Earth’s resources by “our present methods,” Gilman reassures us that the process will not continue to its catastrophic conclusion, for we

are waking up in good earnest these days; ceasing to be a baby race, a set of ignorant, selfish, short-sighted infants, madly quarreling with one another over the fruits most easily gathered. We are young yet, but no longer mere children; young with the splendid hope and courage of youth, but not with the weakness and irresponsibility of infancy.… All we have to do is to apply ourselves to study the conditions of life on earth, and learn to meet them.[[27]](#footnote-27)

As Gilman tells it, humanity will be saved by its inevitable development into a wiser, gentler race. Progress is not the social Darwinist Herbert Spencer’s steady march from simplicity to complexity or continued expansion to the edges of the Earth, ignoring all limits.[^33] It is instead a renunciation of wastefulness and destructive behavior, which is to be replaced by the more careful management of the natural environment. With anticipatory echoes of both *Herland* and the Ecomodernists’ belief in the transformative capacity of human society, she suggests that there “is absolutely nothing prevent us from reforesting our hills, checking our floods, preserving our soils, maintaining the balance of nature plus the art and skill and learning of mankind.” By framing this development in terms of the growth of the human species—and indeed, of the planetary system as a whole—she builds her vision of coevolution on a simultaneous development of human and environment rather than opposition and conflict. Joining with the environment replaces dominating it as the means by which humanity will thrive in “Modern Beatitudes,” just as entering the background becomes the key to survival in *Herland*.

This account of teleological coevolution was influenced by the theories of Lester F. Ward. Ward was a friend and inspiration to Gilman who would go on to become an important founding figure in sociology, but only after serving as the chief paleobotanist for the U.S. Geological Survey in an environment rife with conservationist ideas and ideals—ideals that led him to differ from Herbert Spencer, the figure more commonly seen as the naturalists’ gateway to evolutionary theory.[[28]](#footnote-28) Ward understood humanity’s potential for destructive transformation of the planet, pointing out the rapidity with which resources from forests to soil to animals are exhausted to satisfy “temporary wants” of the “first occupants, who know only the immediate present.”[[29]](#footnote-29) He did not see this as grounds for lessening humanity’s impact on the environment, however—precisely the opposite. From Ward’s perspective, this wastefulness and “wanton disregard of the future” are the traits that make the human most *natural*. What he sees in humanity, he sees to an even greater degree in nature. The “wasteful methods [that] prevail in society” derive from those “in the animal and vegetable kingdoms,” and nature itself “acts on the assumption that her resources are inexhaustible.”[[30]](#footnote-30) The only possible alternative is for the human species to fulfil its rightful role as the source of teleology in the natural world, replacing the randomness and suffering of Darwinian natural selection. And yet, for all this talk of the human responsibility to take over where nature has fallen short, the human remains *part* of “this great unconscious creative whole called nature” nature: the solution is not to get out of nature but to fix it.[[31]](#footnote-31) It is as though nature developed humanity as its brain, and humanity has since, rightly, taken command of what Marx would call “man’s inorganic body,” the rest of the natural world.[[32]](#footnote-32)

In a Wardian sense, then, guided coevolution means on one hand accepting the teleological transformations that humanity effects on its environments as a matter of course, and on the other hand accepting the shortcomings of these transformations when they are performed by what Gilman calls a “baby race” that too closely mirrors the wastefulness of nature. The first step in a truly salutary guidance of coevolution must be the social transformation of humanity into a collective that is able to responsibly transform the natural world, a transformation that will in turn continually transform them (being part of nature themselves).

And yet, as will not be surprising to contemporary critics of Ward’s social theories,[[33]](#footnote-33) even what is a seemingly more relational social application of evolutionary theory presents major challenges to both human and environmental ethics, challenges that any form of teleological progress towards a good Anthropocene must address. Guiding a natural system that includes humanity as a biological body is, of course, part of a broader sympathy for eugenics for which Gilman and Ward have often and rightly been criticized. Kristen R. Egan argues that Gilman “associates a clean environment with a clean race,” and that the need to “sanitize” the natural environment through management is closely tied to a contemporaneous desire to preserve the nation for, and through the creation of, a racially homogenous body of future Americans.[[34]](#footnote-34) The guided evolution of Gilman’s Herlanders is pursued in part through collective control over who reproduces and to what extent. Here is one place where “backgrounding” takes on a sinister cast, for the decision-making process determining reproductive rights receives much less attention than the perceived benefits. Nor does couching this process in the management of other species, ethically dubious in its own right, redeem it. One need only remember that Francis Galton’s original case for eugenics is built on a comparison of different sects of humanity (racial or otherwise) to different species in a zoo to see how easily the management of non-human species can bleed dangerously into the management of human Others. It is perhaps no coincidence that the men discover that women, the rational managers of this ecological and social system, were only able to come to power—only able to experience the birth of their all-female race—after quelling a slave uprising. Backgrounding human actions in submerged historical narratives and the seemingly agentless transformation of physical space let Herlanders off the hook for, as Benjamin might have it, the barbarism that undergirds their civilization.

And yet, though Gilman’s support of eugenics is irredeemable, it is also not the whole or even the primary story. The process by which Herland’s social ecology is transformed has much more to do with the alteration of physical and social structures to repair what Marx called the “metabolic rift” in the energetic and material circulation between town and country.[[35]](#footnote-35) Reform of the physical environment (albeit mostly the built environment) preoccupied Gilman’s work well before *Herland*, cutting through her domestic reform activism as well as her theoretical writing. Throughout her career, she sharply criticized the relegation of women to the domestic sphere and the exploitation inherent in domestic labor;[[36]](#footnote-36) among the most programmatic of the results was her campaigning for the kitchenless household, a change in physical structures that she hoped would change something historically central to human society.[[37]](#footnote-37) In *Herland*, a coevolutionary system, the change cuts both ways. Taking pains to point out, via Jeff, that the entire world is a home, she scatters eating-houses throughout the landscape that replace kitchens.[[38]](#footnote-38) But now, this centralization of food production has a positive ecological effect coextensive with its economic significance: it contributes to the “perfect scheme of refeeding the soil with all that came out of it” in which “the scraps and leavings of their food, plant waste from lumber work or textile industry, all the solid matter from the sewage, properly treated and combined—everything which came from the earth went back to it.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Herland’s communal kitchens fertilize the soil while eliminating the need for private domestic labor, as such labor is incorporated into the ecology and the economy at once.

It is a shift that has defining ecological benefits, as the industrial economy of twentieth-century America is replaced by an encompassing domestic one in Herland, focused on sustenance of human and environment alike as well as their increasing codependence. It is difficult to separate taking care of oneself from taking care of one’s environment when the natural environment is less a reservoir of exploitable resources than an environment for living, something that reflects and even defines the self while at the same time demanding management. Considering world-as-home in the context of Gilman’s broader environmental insights, it becomes clear that this reevaluation of the home and inhabitation is also part of achieving a greater ecological maturity, aligning human activity with the health of an ecosystem. The backgrounding that so defines *Herland*’s narrative form is merely a device for embedding this alignment within the substance of the novel itself.

Coevolutionary inhabitation represents a social ecology of the type demanded by any version of the good Anthropocene. The mutually sustaining social-ecological feedback loop that defines her system proposes to resolve in miniature the problems of the too-human natural environment by putting a “better” human in the background, as a determinative element of the larger system.

### Ambient Labor as an Early Ecological Economics

Nowhere are the effects of backgrounding more transformative than the Herland economy, which becomes singularly difficult to describe in the usual terms of standard economics. Not only, as Alex Shishin points out, are we “left to deduce what Herland’s industry and political economy are like by piecing together clues scattered throughout the novel” due to Gilman’s unusual economic reticence, but the resulting economy is marked by “contradictions and ambiguities”—due in no small part to the peculiarity of what is depicted.[[40]](#footnote-40) A different set of economic categories is needed to represent an economy that exists within the constraints of the ecology and conceives of nature as more than a bank of raw materials.

More pointedly, the terms of ecological economics are needed here, even though introducing them is anachronistic, and even though they will also, ultimately, fall slightly short. Ecological economics radically recenters the materiality of economic value, conceiving of the economy as a system constrained by the energetic and material flows that make up ecosystems. In other words, it insistently focuses on what standard economics conveniently forgets, that the environment is both the source of all value and the ultimate limit to growth. Representing the departure of ecological economics from standard economics, Joan Martinez-Alier says that ecological economics “sees the economy not as a circuit or spiral of exchange value, a merry-go-round of producers and consumers, but instead as an entropic flow of energy and materials that runs through the economy.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Further, where standard economics discusses production, ecological economics focuses on *re*production, seeking to limit resource depletion and pollution within the constraints that will allow the ecosystem to continually reproduce itself and develop. Herman Daly, in one of the founding texts of the field, describes the resulting system as a “steady-state economy.”[[42]](#footnote-42) These descriptions of ecological economics might just as well describe *Herland* from an ecological perspective. There is no evidence that Gilman was familiar with this work, but *Herland* should nevertheless be considered as an early literary precursor of ecological economics.

Gilman’s depiction of labor is the most interesting aspect of *Herland* from this perspective, for the system of backgrounded, environment-forming activity introduces a unique form of labor, what I am calling “ambient labor.” Herland’s system of ambient labor is distinct from labor under extractive capitalism primarily in that it conceives of its product as the *environment itself* and the systems that make it up, not commodities. At the same time, this ambient labor is also understood as a *part* of the environment it helps produce, fading into the background of both life and narration just as the Herlanders themselves do. It differs from other forms of labor in that it is a total system, voluntary, and divorced from the production of commodities and exchange. But, crucially, it anticipates some aspects of ecological economics by including “ecosystem services” in the economic balance sheet, such as absorbing carbon and producing oxygen in the case of plants or cycling nutrients and transporting seeds in the case of animals; but it is peculiar even among ecological economic theories in that it includes the biological functions of humans as ecological services on par with those provided by plants and animals.[[43]](#footnote-43) Human *actions* contribute to ambient labor in the extent to which they form and are part of the environment, but the human’s *being* is also a crucial part of the system. Indeed, labor and being become almost inseparable.

Ambient labor is not theorized directly, but can be inferred from what is shown of the economy and the roles within it. In the example of Ellador, a Herland forester, we see a characteristic mode of Herland labor as well as a sense of how human welfare and ecosystem welfare coexist—but this coexistence does not necessarily take the expected form:

“It was a butterfly that made me a forester,” said Ellador. “I was about eleven years old, and I found a big purple and green butterfly on a low flower. I caught it, very carefully, by the closed wings, as I had been told to do, and carried it to the nearest insect teacher…to ask her its name. She took it from me with a little cry of delight. ‘Oh, you blessed child…. This is a female of the obernut moth,’ she told me, ‘they are almost gone. We have been trying to exterminate them for centuries. If you had not caught this one, it might have laid eggs enough to raise worms enough to destroy thousands of our nut trees—thousands of bushels of nuts,—and make years and years of trouble for us.’…I grew a foot, it seemed to me, and determined then and there to be a forester.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

On the narrative level, this passage sets up, and then reverses, an expectation of conservation, disclosing instead an ideology of environmental management. The tender, careful handling of the fragile creature will ultimately culminate, we realize, in the its death, as well as the last stage in a deliberate extinction of the entire species. Though not all of the methods of influencing the system are premised on extermination, this episode typifies the influence Herlanders seek to exert on their environment in its focus on minimal interventions that will have outsized effects on the system over time. The more characteristic method is one of gentle guidance: the word “cultivated” is repeated many times with reference to every aspect of the landscape, flora and fauna alike, as well as the tiny gardens that dot the open plains—at one point the forests are simply referred to as “the cultivated area.”[[45]](#footnote-45) The forests are not planted or culled but “petted,” or indulged in their natural growth and proliferation; similarly, the vines are “trained,” a term of domestication but not inherently of exploitation. The forced extinction of the obernut moth is treated with the same way, an air of tenderness coloring what is ultimately a quietly horrific act. This recasting effectively invokes an uncomplicated reverence for the “natural world” only to replace it with a commitment to finding the “natural” system that most benefits humans (and also the fictional obernut tree, if only incidentally). Understanding that the obernut moth limits the propagation of the obernut, and realizing that the obernut is Herland’s “best food-nut,” they create a situation in which nurturing the environment they have crafted will mean nurturing themselves (123).[[46]](#footnote-46)

Even the social norms and structures in Herland result from the ecological roles played by the Herlanders, individually and collectively. Ellador is narrating her formation of a professional identity—the moment when she conceives of herself in terms of her role in the economy and is celebrated for it. But the nature of the “work” in Herland is such that this moment is inseparable from the realization of her place in the *ecology*, as a conscious limiting factor of the obernut moth in this case, and probably of other species in the future. Ellador becomes more of a directed ecological force than a laborer. She is not quite an agricultural producer, and yet her actions contribute to the sufficient supply of food. She is not exactly employed by the state, as a forester in our world might be, and yet her function to the community is clear. Her duties are framed in terms of maintaining the environment, and yet in doing so she is also maintaining herself—both materially, by providing food for herself and others, and psychologically, by embracing a coherent identity. In this ambiguous form of labor, the social, economic, and ecological place of the individual come together in ways that make them difficult to distinguish.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Though its methods are ethically suspect and it is described in part by its effects on the individual human, ambient labor’s transformative capabilities are ultimately put in service of a stable and thriving, but emphatically not “wild,” natural environment. The end goal of their labor is always a more secure and comfortable means of survival that can arise without coercion from their immediate ecosystem, as opposed to profit-motivated industrial agriculture, which takes commodified produce as its only object. Instead of understanding production on the level of the product, they produce process; where the rapidly industrializing society of 1915 America was defined by systems of production, Gilman’s alternative opts for the production of systems.[[48]](#footnote-48)

In addition to being produced by backgrounded processes, the environmental systems of Herland support ambient labor in that, by their very nature, they constantly lessen the need for human intervention. Horticulturally, this means that the Herland system resembles what we would now call permaculture, an autonomous and self-maintaining ecosystem that is nevertheless designed. For example, the extent of forested land and the fact that all the trees are food-bearing suggest that Herlanders cultivate food-bearing plants in quantities that go well beyond what will be harvested, which would leave plenty of material for the support of the non-human members of the ecosystem and the natural propagation of the plants in question. In a permacultural system, the soil is not improved by external inputs, but by the system’s own ability to absorb its waste products; permacultural environments become self-replicating and self-improving in the same way that a forest is.[[49]](#footnote-49) Gilman specifies that “[I]nstead of the progressive impoverishment so often seen in the rest of the world,” an impoverishment that results in more and more maintenance and inputs as the environment becomes less able to support itself, in Herland “an increasingly valuable soil [is] built,” supporting autonomously increasing vitality.[[50]](#footnote-50) The development of the Herland environment is allowed to proceed without direct human maintenance, but the conditions are set such that this autonomous development adheres to a desirable course. Human Herlanders are not absent, of course, but only construct the system at the beginning—as in “the deliberate replanting of an entire forest area with different kinds of trees”—and then participate in it as members, contributing to its self-improving nature.[[51]](#footnote-51) Physical human labor in the active sense of standard economics would thus constantly become more and more ambient, taken over by the working of the system itself. Where human intervention does continue, it is almost incidental—as is the case for Ellador, the forester discussed in the introduction. And in the case of the production of soil, the main place of intervention would be in byproducts of consumption—compostable scraps and human excrement. As we have seen in the case of kitchenless houses, composting and waste management are defined by systemic interventions that either make use of or strategically prevent the natural activity of the ecosystem’s organisms.

The economic value of these environmental systems, then, must be measured by the degree to which human intervention is diminished by the system itself. In the first place, in standard economics, anything outside of a trade-based equation of raw materials and saleable commodities is disregarded.[[52]](#footnote-52) For example, worker health, ecological impacts, or downstream effects of the thing produced (such as its disposal or impact on its consumers) only come under economic consideration when they can be expressed as a change in the cost of labor or fines levied for pollution. In Herland’s ambient labor, the “equation” is composed entirely of the environmental health factors and downstream effects that are forcibly excluded from the consideration of standard economics. Betterment of the Herland environment cannot be measured as “improvement” in terms of economic output, but must be quantified in the scale of its ecological effects.

The difference can be understood, in the terms of ecological economics, as a shift in focus from production to reproduction. This reproductive focus is unusually literalized in *Herland* with its insistent focus on child-rearing and education, not to mention the cult of motherhood that is its religion. Specialization, for example, is framed as part of creating an environment conducive to literal human reproduction: “They developed all this close inter-service in the interests of their children. To do the best work they had to specialize of course; the children needed spinners and weavers, farmers and gardeners, carpenters and masons, as well as mothers.”[[53]](#footnote-53) While some of these roles appear to be devoted to the creation of products, they are prevented from acting as commodities because there is no market in which to exchange them, because they are held in common, and because they are conceived of as part of a socialized reproduction. In other words, the products are understood environmentally, just as the food of the communal eating-houses is an extension of the freely accessed edibles of the fields and gardens. Understanding the environment in this way extends the regard Herlanders hold for their own children to the future generations of the ecosystem’s other organisms by conceiving of a system supports the environment’s replication of itself and the replication of humans that comes with it, as opposed to the endless expansion of humanity at the expense of everything else.

Finally, the Herlanders’ bodies themselves become one more ambient system of reproduction. Including bodies in the economic system is a natural effect of rendering the human as part of an ecology, but it also means that human reproductive labor must be considered as an ecological service. As she does more directly elsewhere in nonfiction writings like *Women and Economics* (1898), in *Herland* Gilman defines motherhood as an economically valuable contribution to the collective, which would be either impossible or ethically complicated in a commodity-based economy (for offspring would necessarily be commodified).[[54]](#footnote-54) When a division of economic labor is expanded to include ecology, taking into account the ecological services of human and nonhuman alike, incorporating human reproduction into the economic division of labor simply subsumes it into the managed regional ecology. In this context, their parthenogenetic reproductive capacity is explicable less as a product of miraculous genetic mutation than as a bodily extension of ambient labor, a speculative conceit to put human biological processes on the same level as those of domesticated plants and animals. Reproduction in the desired proportions takes on the same inevitability and automatism of production, becoming a feature of carefully (and communally) controlled conditions rather than a sum of uncoordinated individual choice—with the same worrying ethical implications of any attempt to control human reproduction.

Ambient labor, then, is a cornerstone of Herland’s economic system and an attempt to conceive of a reproductive economy that could replace a productive one. In the terms of ecological economics, ambient labor is a way to pursue a steady-state system in which progress is decoupled from growth. As an anachronistic *contribution* to ecological economics, the Herland economy is significant in that it identifies the intervention in or reconstruction of environmental systems as a way to think about economic activity that embraces a certain degree of determinative human influence on our environments without giving in to the historically prevalent destructiveness this influence. Crucially, the basis of this embrace is understanding and acceding to a degree of mutual determination, a process in which changing the environment means changing the human and vice versa. It is far from clear whether it would be possible, in the twenty-first century or beyond, to take the environment as an object of labor and biological processes as the teleological endpoint of constantly shifting means of production, but from Gilman’s perspective in 1915 it seemed both possible and necessary to imagine. In a moment when theorizing a good Anthropocene is one of the only extant ways to imagine a salutary environmental future, such theories are again—or are still—needed.

### Naturalism in the Anthropocene

This reading of *Herland*—as backgrounding human activity to cope with humanity’s pervasive influence, a process that in turn leads to revolutionary forms of inhabitation, ecological-economic exchange, and labor—makes the novel in many ways a peculiar specimen of American literary naturalism. In any case, it makes it peculiar in the context of most naturalist criticism up to the previous fifteen years. Here, there is no social Darwinism, nor a deterministic “plot of decline” in which a heroic male character degrades under the influence of alcohol or gambling. Nor do we find the paradigmatic capitalist struggles with the markets, neither through domineering arch-speculators (as in *The Financier*, *The Pit*, or *Burning Daylight*) nor through consumers caught in the currents of window displays (*Sister Carrie*, *The House of Mirth*). These paradigms are such poor fits for *Herland* that we would be closer to the mark understanding it as a deliberate subversion of these generic streams.[[55]](#footnote-55) In fact, it is in precisely this sense that Gilman’s novel remains naturalist: it adopts naturalist logics to subvert or reform them. *Herland* is determinist, but of a different kind; it is invested in the role of human evolutionary history in understanding the individual, but its investment is not strictly Darwinian; it narrates complex economic structures, but does not contain itself to the capitalist system.

This subversion is most obvious and significant in the unusual visage of its determinism. A strong conception of naturalist determinism would follow Émile Zola’s vision of characters who are “completely dominated by their nerves and blood, without free will” and events that “are the proper products of the characters living under given conditions and cannot at will be changed in their order or kind.”[[56]](#footnote-56) More recent and nuanced views of determinism maintain some of these terms without giving in to them. Lee Clark Mitchell in Determined Fictions, for example, reframes determinism as a conflict between the naturalist character’s own self-conception as an “autonomous, integrated, freely willing agent” and the countervailing narrative strategies that prove such conceptions to be false; agency becomes largely psychological, while determinism becomes a narrative, rather than an ontological, premise.[[57]](#footnote-57) Donald Pizer is one of the more optimistic voices on the topic of determinism, seeing in the resistance to “amoral” deterministic forces a revitalization of “man’s sense of his own dignity and importance.”[[58]](#footnote-58) All these treatments share an understanding of determinism as unidirectional, with some external “force” always conceived as an agent of change, and the nature of the human, individually and collectively, as the thing changed.

Gilman rejects the unidirectionality of this influence. As we have seen, her coevolutionary system instead presents a form of mutual determinism, in which human agent and environmental “conditions” influence each other. The human remains subject to a certain degree of determinism, but the avowed task of Herlanders individually and collectively is to transform the forces that determine. In Gilman’s insistent return to the task of creating an environment that will produce the best children, we can see a direct intervention into a process of determination that much naturalist criticism would claim removes free will entirely. Backgrounding on one hand concedes that humans are as “determined” as other organisms, placing human and non-human on the same level, but on the other hand, it puts human actors in the middle of the web of mutual influence that defines ecology, crossing the boundary of determined human and determining environment. Humans are *in* the environment and *of* the environment without being ruled by it. The Darwinian—or, perhaps more accurately, Spencerian—logics of naturalism are reformed in ways that trouble the usual constitution of the genre.

It is in the way it reforms this deterministic logic that Gilman’s naturalism resembles an early vision of the good Anthropocene. The Anthropocene in any form makes it impossible to maintain the notion of a unidirectional determination of the human by a dominating environment. Where the strong determinist reading of naturalist nature is as a current buffeting a human non-agent that may nevertheless understand the situation, the Anthropocene proposes a vision of the human altering natural systems on a vastly outsized scale: human agency outstrips human understanding. Considered in the terms of naturalism, the Anthropocene itself can be seen to have, at least in some forms, a deterministic logic. All of nature is as an apple of Sodom, turning to ash when plucked. While some triumphalist versions of the good Anthropocene can be similarly deterministic, in that everything technology touches seems to turn to gold, more nuanced versions reveal another possibility that resists the dystopian determinism of pessimistic Anthropocenes and the triumphal determinism of naïve good Anthropocenes. In these good Anthropocenes, the human is one actant among many, and the outsized power of the human can reverse its trend by taking positive actions that will improve the planetary environment. The key is to destabilize the human/environment split entirely. To put in Haraway’s terms, though she refuses the Anthropocene and especially the good Anthropocene as descriptive concepts: we have reached a moment when “bounded individuals plus contexts, when organisms plus environments, or genes plus whatever they need” no longer suffice.[[59]](#footnote-59) The good Anthropocene, at least in visions like Gilman’s, is premised on not just reversing the vector and charge of determinism but revising the structure of that thought entirely. Even if the human is conceived as the primary beneficiary of environmental praxis, neither the human nor a monolithic “environment” is the sole actant, and the benefit must be mutual to be real.

Though *Herland*’s utopianism and optimistic bent are unique among naturalist novels, its exploration of an Anthropocenic “nature” may not be. Even though the traditional understanding of naturalism’s determinism is its precise inverse, the Anthropocene has given us an attentiveness to humanity’s pervasive effect on the planet that makes visible a similar set of concerns in naturalist novels beyond Gilman’s. *Herland* may just be one example of a genre that was engaged in a debate that closely mirrors our contemporary one in the extent to which it took the place of the human in nature as an urgent site of philosophical contest. Early-twentieth-century evolutionary theory as it appears in naturalism has to be understood in its historical context as coeval with the birth of ecology and the conservation movement, rather than as a purely social-Darwinist conception. If we understand naturalism less as a coherent movement than as a phenomenon, a literary response to this moment marked by competing visions of human-and-nature in science and economics, we can see that the genre is defined by a diversity of perspectives on the same topic and in the same time. We might therefore define naturalism less by a univocal response to this moment than by a peculiar responsive*ness* to it. Of course, in taking *Herland* as representative of naturalism, we ignore at our peril the genre’s reputation for “pessimism,” but in this sense naturalism and the Anthropocene are even more comfortable bedfellows: Gilman is not unique among naturalists in her relevance to theory in the Anthropocene, merely in her particular orientation towards what we would now call the *good* Anthropocene.

Taking this conception of naturalism beyond the context of Gilman’s work, a few areas of study immediately present themselves. To take one example, we might note the undercurrent of intensive agriculture in the works of Jack London, Frank Norris, and Ellen Glasgow as a counterpoint to the capitalist agricultural methods that have been the mechanism of Anthropocenic destruction. These authors all depict the destructive transformations to the American landscape that comes from exploitative cash-crop agriculture while to varying degrees presenting the judicious improvement of soil health as a more rational environmental future. Clover and alfalfa, which improve soil and prevent erosion, line these texts in ways that only make sense as a resistance to widespread anthropogenic destruction of the environment. Furthermore, London’s simultaneous interest in environmental reform and narrating species as such in his “dog books” and elsewhere is fertile ground for an investigation into the place of the *anthropos* in this moment of American environmental thinking. The example of *Herland* might be one among many suggesting that American literary naturalism can be usefully understood as part of the long intellectual pre-history of the Anthropocene—and that in order to be understood as an engagement with the natural world, it might have to be.

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1. Gilman, *Herland*, 42–44. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The beginning of our new geological epoch, defined by humanity’s ascent to the status of a geological force, will likely be officially marked by some combination of industrial agriculture, nuclear proliferation, and carbon emissions, dated sometime in the middle of the twentieth century. Other proposals in the sciences and humanities consider major agricultural and industrial revolutions as possible points from which to begin. See Zalasiewicz, Waters, and Head, “Anthropocene. and Waters et al., “The Anthropocene Is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene.. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One critic refers to this as an “ecocritical and place-based turn” in Gilman scholarship over the past decade and a half. Formisano, “’It Had All Become a Natural Condition’., 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also the roundtable in *Environmental Humanities* 7.1 responding to the Ecomoderns, especially: Crist, “The Reaches of Freedom., Latour, “Fifty Shades of Green., Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene., Szerszynski, “Getting Hitched and Unhitched with the Ecomodernists.. The anti-capitalist critique of geoengineering, though not specifically a response to the Ecomodernists, is outlined well in Klein, *This Changes Everything*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bennett et al., “Bright Spots.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See especially Mitchell, *Determined Fictions*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Other scholars have seen this as evidence of Gilman’s “reform naturalism.” See Formisano, “’It Had All Become a Natural Condition’. and Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gilman, *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 180, 281, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, of course, Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, as well as Chang, “Economics, Evolution, and Feminism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Utopian Fiction. 342-3. For a more extended treatment of the garden as a realist and naturalist motif in *Herland*, see Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground* 76, 93. For an extended discussion of Gilman and ecofeminism, see Graham, *Herland*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Gilman, *Herland*, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 42, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. There are no indications of the exact distribution of these cities, but the presence of such a network is indicated during the men’s escape attempt and their eventual lecture circuit. ibid., 70-1, 109-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 42, 47, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Hemenway, *Gaia’s Garden*, 33–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Gilman, *Herland*, 61, 93, 97, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 98, 102, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Lukacs, “‘Narrate or Describe?’” 111–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This understanding of the place of nature in historical materialism is based on the foundational work of John Bellamy Foster in *Marx’s Ecology* and Paul Burkett in *Marx and Nature*. See also Jason W. Moore’s understanding of capitalism-in-nature and nature-in-capitalism in his more recent *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*; Burkett, *Marx and Nature*; Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Gilman, *Herland*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Gilman, “Modern.” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. In Ward’s years at the USGS, he worked under the guidance of Major John Wesley Powell, the second director of the U.S. Geological Survey and an early voice urging stewardship of the land in place of the purely extractive relationship that had until then prevailed. Powell’s work was in turn built on the foundation of George Perkins Marsh’s revolutionary work from 1864, often taken as an originary text for consciousness of the Anthropocene: *Man and Nature: Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*. On Ward in the context of Powell and Marsh, see Ross, “Man over Nature.. On Ward’s relationship with Powell and Powell’s place in the history of American conservation, see Worster, *A River Running West* 442. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ward, *Dynamic Sociology*, 2:2:88–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 2:2:87–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 2:2:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Marx, *Early*, 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. On Ward and race in a literary context, see Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations* 410; on Ward and social engineering, see McNamara, “The Ames of The Good Society. 217–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Egan, “Conservation and Cleanliness. 77. On Gilman’s relationship to eugenics more broadly, see Davis, “His and Herland.. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. This Marxian concept is authoritatively examined in Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See especially Gilman, *Women*, Gilman, *The Home*, and Gilman, “The Waste of Private Housekeeping.. For the wider context of domestic reform in Gilman’s work and in the context of the early twentieth century, see Gaudelius, “Kitchenless Houses and Homes., Allen, *Building Domestic Liberty*, and Hayden, “Two Utopian Feminists and Their Campaigns for Kitchenless Houses.. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Gilman, *Women* 242-3. See also Allen, *Building Domestic Liberty*: “By the middle of the nineteenth century, roughly one-third of American women entered the paid labor force on a temporary basis, usually until they married. Only the poorest women—immigrants, widows, and free blacks—engaged in a lifelong effort to make ends meet financially by working outside of their homes” (12). See also Chang, “Economics, Evolution, and Feminism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Utopian Fiction., especially 323-4; and Fusco, “Systems, Not Men. 420-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Gilman, *Herland*, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Shishin, “Gender and Industry in Herland,” 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Guha and Martínez-Alier, *Varieties*. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. The concept is outlined in a book of the same name: Daly, *Steady*. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ecosystem services can be defined simply as the benefits derived from an ecosystem, but can be subdivided into the types of specific services described here (and others). See Leemans and Groot, *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* 53-8. Including humans as providers of ecosystem services might seem peculiarly tautological, since humans are the ones who are *deriving* the benefits, but that is precisely what is unique about Gilman’s system, even today. She includes humans on both sides of the equation, as those who derive benefits but also as one of those in the ecosystem. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Gilman, *Herland*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. This concept will be elaborated further in the “Ambient Labor” section below. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. For more on systems as a paradigm of production, personhood, and society in *Herland*, and more specifically the relevance of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s *The Principles of Scientific Management*: Fusco, “Systems, Not Men.. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. The description of this system as permacultural is less anachronistic than it might seem, given that F. H. King’s *Farmers of Forty Centuries*, a study of “Permanent Agriculture” in China, Japan, and Korea, was published in 1900., King, *Farmers of Forty Centuries or Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea, and Japan*. There is no evidence to suggest that Gilman read King’s work, but the concepts were in circulation in America at the time. For evidence of another naturalist author interested in King’s work and proto-permacultural farming methods, see Tichi, *Jack London*. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Gilman, *Herland*, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Cf. Daly, *Steady*. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Gilman, *Herland*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. This aspect of the novel has been widely discussed in Gilman scholarship, as has the understanding of motherhood as an ecological and systemic process. Shishin, “Gender and Industry in Herland.; Fusco, “Systems, Not Men.; and Hall, “Mothers and Children.. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. I allude here to the title of Charles Walcutt’s influential mid-century study of naturalism: Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism*. His contention that naturalism is defined by a series of contradictions between, among other things, perspectives of hope and despair partially informs my view that naturalism ought to be understood as a competing set of responses to a scientific-historical moment. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Mitchell, *Determined Fictions* vii, ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid. xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Pizer, *Realism*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)