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Planting-out after Blithedale: transcendental agrarianism and ecocritical economy

Toward the end of the first chapter of Emerson's Nature, while "crossing a bare common," his "head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."[1] These lines, along with Thoreau's Walden, suggest Transcendentalism as a tributary of ecocriticism, an early incubator of biocentric attitudes. For when the "mean egotism" of humanism "vanishes," Emerson receives "the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable," effacing the conceptual divide between nature and culture, body and mind.[2] Yet the lines directly following this famous image illustrate one of the central problems of both ecocriticism and Transcendentalism. For as that "transparent eye-ball," Emerson relates that "the name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance."[3] This unsettling severance encapsulates a key Transcendentalist tension between individual ecological vision and responsible social ethic that ecocriticism has inherited as we struggle to transfer the updated ecological ontology for which we advocate to viable socio-economic recommendations.

This paper will explore one Transcendentalist solution to this quandary that has yet received little ecocritical attention: socialist agrarian utopianism. The socio-economic experiments of Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden Pond were all direct attempts to bridge the troublesome gap between theory and

practice by applying a Transcendentalist philosophical vision to the actual socio-historical context of 19th-century New England. This essay will thus turn to Hawthorne's Blithedale Romance—a fictionalized account of Brook Farm, where Hawthorne resided, like his poet-narrator Coverdale, for a single summer season—in an attempt to glean positive directions for ecocriticism from Blithedale's shortcomings. For, in the novel's final pages, Coverdale declares that "more and more, I feel that we had struck upon what ought to be a truth. Posterity may dig it up, and profit by it."[4] This truth, I argue, is one commonly approached: that agrarian engagement is the mental and physical act in which nature and culture meet. The failure of Blithedale is due not to its georgic preoccupation but due to its pervasive social strategy of detachment, a tactic that begins within individual human souls and extends in concentric rings to the settlement's relationship with its wider economic community and ultimately to the vast order of space, time, and nature itself. My reading suggests that ecocritics looking for social applications should train their gaze toward a new sort of agrarianism, one unmoored from utopian prospects of a society of small farms, and that instead places emphasis on evaluating and performing more meaningful and responsible labor within existing ecosocial networks.

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As yet neither Blithedale, nor the general topic of Transcendental utopianism, has received extended ecocritical attention. This may appear surprising, given the importance of Romanticism and bioregionalism to the development of ecocriticism, but the neglect of Transcendental utopias corresponds with ecocriticism's wariness of wading into the sticky realms of application. Though ecocriticism was animated early by the promise, indeed the necessity, of a literary-

theoretical "return to activism" and a "re-engagement with realism" that would extend its ontological revisions outside of the academy to assist the aversion of environmental catastrophe,[5] it has largely elided discussion of the economic changes needed to do so. Accordingly, the one extended ecocritical reading of Transcendentalist social projects, Lance Newman's Our Common Dwelling, is inspired by the same desire for biting ecocritical application that drives this essay. Writing in 2005, Newman recognizes ecocritical practice to "suffer from the weaknesses of the postmodernist tradition it extends," namely that "it is so willing to see performing radicalism, thinking difference, or renarrating history, not just as necessary but also as sufficient forms of political action."[6] This is especially troubling since the political strategy of consciousness-raising Newman identifies can actually collaborate in the perpetuation of oppressive institutional systems by eliding the economic action required to combat them. Indeed, consciousness-raising depends on many such systems (such as the media or representative democratic structures) for enactment of its own supposedly counter-cultural programme. The strength of this postmodern-neoliberal settlement has rendered Newman's call for an ecocritical embrace of the economically-oriented Marxist tradition largely unheeded, and study of Transcendentalist approaches to ecosocial problems have not been further critically plumbed.

Instead, ecocritical reliance on the assumption that discursive changes will necessarily lead to material ones has only increased as economically-oriented critiques languish in favor of either post-colonial calls for an eco-cosmopolitanism reliant on the continuance of neoliberal power structures, or the questionably applicable approach of speculative ontologies that retreat ever further from economic discussion. The former

direction is illustrated perhaps most prominently within Ursula Heise's 2008 Sense of Place and Sense of Planet, which, positing excessive commitment to fostering political change through a local sense of place "a visionary dead end," advances instead an ideal of "eco-cosmopolitanism" fostering a global "field of reflection" that can allow humanity to address, as a whole, the pressing ecological threats facing our entire species.[7] Eco-cosmopolitanism has become the dominant thrust of applied ecocriticism—Graham Huggan, for instance, names it a "politically oriented ecocriticism" and Greg Garrard asserts "its most remarkable aspect" to reside not in its contribution to literary studies but in its "constructive engagement of ecocritical analysis with environmental policy making"[8]—yet it remains plagued by an over-reliance on the same strategy of consciousness-raising dominant in earlier ecocritical trends. In many ways, eco-cosmopolitanism exacerbates these problems in its reliance on "policy making" and enforcement by the global political power structures that perpetuate norms of environmental destruction and injustice. As Hu Zhihong recognizes,

> The so-called planetary sense . . . often conceals ulterior motives, even pretexts for ecological exploitation, environmental racism, and colonialism in the eyes of the disempowered peoples or countries. From a rhetorical standpoint, the planetary vision is often used as a strategy to win the moral high ground, thereby defeating weaker countries. The planetary vision represents more the voice of the first world.[9]

Meanwhile, other popular ecocritical developments in the vein of speculative realism, while offering promising ontological plumbing of nonhuman cultures and rhetorics, simultaneously entail a retreat from questions of economic applicability.

Timothy Morton, for instance, has correlated widespread adoption of his object-oriented paradigm to the coming of a vaguely postcapitalist system of "conscious cooperation,"[10] though he gives little indication of what such an economics might look like, and ultimately leans more heavily than ever on the largely unquestioned assumption that discursive changes must lead to material ones. But, to borrow the language of Jameson, that assumption simultaneously provides the rationale behind poststructuralist critique and the logic of late capitalism in that it moves spheres of political action away from the world of action and to that of rhetorical construction, to a leisure-based discursive practice that requires material ecological acquiescence to dominant economic modes and ideologies. As Tim Sweet, one of the few ecocritics to theorize economic activity, warns in the conclusion of American Georgics, "so long as our focus remains perceptual, what we actually do in the world and how we do it may remain secondary issues."[11]

Current ecocritical trends thus appear to be enacting Michael Branch's 1995 fear that the institutionalization of ecocriticism may "simply reproduce the habits of mind that precipitated the environmental crisis."[12] To resist this powerful force, we must recognize that our ecological consciousness is inextricably entwined with the neoliberal economic system in which we daily participate (especially from within the academy). As Sweet recognizes, "labor is life": to "save the environment for future generations, we must begin . . . with that part in which we are already necessarily engaged . . . as members of the human community."[13] To plant our new theoretical "habits of mind" outside of humanities departments in ways that will yield materially meaningful results, we must keep our gaze trained directly on the economic landscape in which they must germinate.

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Fortunately, we can learn from Transcendentalism's battle with a similar predicament. Brook Farm founder George Ripley writes that the Transcendentalists' "leading idea is the supremacy of mind over matter. Hence they maintain that the truth of religion does not depend on tradition, nor historical facts, but as an unerring witness in the soul."[14] But once truth becomes unmoored from history, even from the "facts" of "matter," what can serve as the ethical basis for inevitable social action? Or, to put the question in ecocritical terms, to what ethics can ecological critique of the hierarchical, binary intellectual tradition of modernity lead when actors remain enmeshed in a staunchly capitalist social economy? Transcendentalists were as susceptible as ecocritics to answering this question by ignoring its relevance. Their standard-bearer Emerson, though perturbed by social injustice, remained more concerned with his "central project" of "unchain[ing] individual minds," and was reluctant to permit this philosophical interests to become bogged down in the difficulties of social implementation.[15] Yet other Transcendentalists maintained that their "metaphysics led inescapably to a social philosophy and to a critique of existing institutions."[16] From this belief stem the economic projects here considered. Richard Francis, in his authoritative treatment of <u>Transcendental Utopias</u>, argues that such plans attempted to

> connect the eternal world of nature and natural law … with the dynamic world of history and contingency. They connect subjective and objective, inward and outward, contemplation and action. Utopias provide the bridge the Transcendentalists were seeking, for they are situated exactly halfway between the ideal and the real.[17]

Though the utopians, like their broader Transcendentalist brethren, disagreed about many particulars, Francis argues that

they shared a belief in a doctrine of serial order: the idea that the total natural-social world operates according to a set of nested, serial forms, of which a Transcendentalist mindset grants some perception. From this belief flows the utopians' shared conviction that, in the words of Francis, "we have to address ourselves to and perfect the microcosm, though they disagreed about what that might be; and that when we have done so, a new social order will crystallize around it."[18]

Though the forms of these "perfect microcosms" varied, all shared a basic belief in the centrality of agrarian practice. Newman notes that "efforts to engage in handiwork preoccupied most of the members of the broader Transcendentalist movement,"[19] and farm labor served as the economic base for all of their utopian experiments. Georgic engagement was for the Transcendentalists the primary means of recognizing the single system of order they found to be inherent within a total Nature including both human mind and historical society. Emerson writes in "Musketaquid," for example, that "the order in the field disclose / the order regnant in the yeoman's brain,"[20] and Stephanie Sarver's analysis of his late essay "Farming" extrapolates that "the farmer always exists at the nexus of nature and culture."[21] This is because the georgic act entails, indeed requires, the physical, mental, and spiritual connection of the spheres of mind and matter, nature and history, that the Transcendentalists sought to bring together. In the words of Bronson Alcott, gardening is "the intermingling of mind with matter, a conversion of the earth into man through the mind, the hands assisting."[22] And though Hawthorne and Emerson viewed utopian reforms pessimistically, they still praised agrarian life. Even <u>Blithedale</u>'s pastorally-minded, labor-hating Coverdale finds in georgic activity "an unwonted aspect on the face of Nature, as if she had been taken by surprise and seen at

unawares, with no opportunity to put off her real look, and assume the mask with which she mysteriously hides herself from mortals."[23] And though Emerson refuses Ripley's request to join Brook Farm, he states in his reply that he will nonetheless seek to "acquir[e] habits of regular manual labor" in his own home and garden.[24] These enthusiastic passages (and the persistent legacy of the agrarian tradition in the modern West) suggest that georgic engagement is a realistic and meaningful socio-economic application of Transcendentalism's biocentric ontology: by working the land, Blithedalers occupy the space at which nature and culture meet, their working lives becoming an integrative dance with the cosmos.

Transcendentalist enactments of agrarianism failed in practice not due to an improper emphasis on georgic labor—indeed, the experiments were surrounded by economically sustainable, even successful agrarian communities, and agriculture remains necessarily practiced productively today both in industrial and subsistence modes—but instead rests ultimately within their theoretical method. Aside from its tendency to render adherents egotistic and hypocritical, the utopians' theory ultimately collapses in its pervasive insistence on detachment from the crystalline Natural order it simultaneously asserts to be total. In "Farming" Emerson states that agrarian activity inspires a recognition that "the great circles in which Nature works" operate

> on a method of <u>all for each and each for all</u>. The strain that is made on one point bears on every arch and foundation of the structure. There is a perfect solidarity. You cannot detach an atom from its holdings, or strip off from it the electricity, gravitation, chemic affinity or the relation to light and heat and leave the atom bare. No, it brings with it its universal ties.[25]

This is both an expression of the utopians' insistence on a serial, crystalline order in Nature, and also suggests their central trouble: "you cannot detach" from this complex. If our socio-ecology is crystalline, it must bind with its "universal ties" the entire cosmos, all objects and ideas, in which the practitioners of Brook Farm and Blithedale are unbreakably entwined. Any social theory predicated on "estrang[ement] from the world," as Coverdale puts it, is thus bound to fail in economic practice, creating detachment where it seeks connection.

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Hawthorne offers critique of Blithedale (and by extension Brook Farm) most obviously through the character of Hollingsworth, whose dedication to his "philanthropic theory" engenders an ironic egotism and hypocrisy due to inevitable detachment of his actual and proposed actions. Coverdale offers a sustained critique of Hollingsworth throughout the novel, and considers devotion to specific ideas of social reform an essentially selfish enterprise in which otherwise benevolent and kind souls become narcissistically wedded to the execution of their own achievements, distorted from social good to personal goal and eventually leading to an "all-devouring egotism."[26] But underlying this moral sits an even more troubling relationship between theory and practice. For, as Coverdale explains,

> while our enterprise lay all in theory, we had pleased ourselves with delectable visions of the spiritualization of labor, . . . each stroke of the hoe [promising] to uncover some aromatic root of wisdom . . . [I]n this point of view, matters did not turn out quite so well as we anticipated. . . . Our thoughts . . . were fast becoming cloddish. Our labor symbolized nothing, and left us mentally sluggish in the evening.[27]

Coverdale here draws a sharp dichotomy between labors of the body and mind; agricultural work is supposed to bridge these two areas, yet in practice does not. And indeed, the extent to which shared labors interfered with Hawthorne's individual intellectual pleasures was the primary reason he left Brook Farm, leading him to state famously that "labor is the curse of this world, and nobody can meddle with it, without becoming proportionally brutified."[28] The problem with this view is, of course, that shared labor is the essence of the socialist relationship the community seeks to foster. Without participating in that labor, an individual hypocritically separates his ideals from his daily economic practices, which continue unabated regardless of the rigor of one's internal intellectual activity. More troubling, excusing an individual from labor, especially for the mere purpose of personal pleasure, re-creates the very inequities the scheme seeks to ameliorate; it is by ceasing labor that Hawthorne "brutifies" those who must perform it for him. Coverdale's critique of Hollingsworth's philanthropy is thus aptly directed at Blithedale itself, as its practitioners' commitments to socialist ideals become "false deities" that reflect merely their desire for social change, and not their willingness to make personal economic sacrifices for it.[29] Without materially performing the socio-economic changes this sacrifice entails, Blithedalers detach within themselves the elements of ideals and work, mind and matter, which their community seeks to bridge.

Fractured foundations surely lead to crooked houses, and this individual detachment between ideals and practice further weakens the social ties holding the community together. Coverdale tells us that Blithedale is "a society such as seldom met together; nor, perhaps, could it reasonably be expected to hold together long. Our bond, it seems to me, was not

affirmative, but negative."[30] Mutual dissatisfaction with the social status quo is not a strong binding force, and the Blithedalers' differing opinions regarding the appropriate "substitution" ultimately leads to the main characters' exits from the community.[31] This is largely why successful intentional communities in American history are often religiously based, since their participants possess a shared vision of both wider society's ills and its prescription, and find the primary gain of their projects to be the spiritual benefits arising from close economic association. At Blithedale, however, Hollingsworth rejects Coverdale's pleas to incorporate his philanthropic ideas within Blithedale's larger mission, his theory instead requiring the hijacking of the entire community to ensure ideological purity. Blithedalers thus extend their detachment from their own actions to disconnection from each other, as they remain more loyal to their own theoretical commitments than to economic relationships with their associates.

Yet Blithedale's most obvious flaw, and the critique most often leveled at similar communities since, is its economically impractical and philosophically unsound detachment from existing social reality. The most obvious way in which this occurs is that, since the Blithedalers sell their agricultural products in the local markets, the very labor upon which their connection between mind and matter is predicated is itself a direct interaction with the traditional economic systems they sought to escape. But beyond that irony, as Coverdale notes early in his stay, "as regarded society at large, we stood in a position of new hostility; rather than new brotherhood."[32] This problem also plagues many revolutionary socialist movements: the initially universal values of liberté, égalité, et fraternité grow more and more limited in scope as they are forced to exclude those

who inevitably disagree. And though Blithedale was no violent revolution, its lofty Transcendentalist rhetoric of reform necessitated the Othering of outsiders, who take the ironic form not of wealthy Boston merchants or politicians but neighboring farmers, those who have been practicing for their entire lives the georgic connections between nature and culture the Blithedealers wish to foster anew. Blithedalers imagine a "millennium of love," yet are unable to realize it due to the deeply rooted ideologies of class upon which their own philosophical projects "unhesitatingly" depend.[33] Coverdale conjectures that Hollingsworth, for instance, views "all Mankind" as "but another yoke of oxen, as stubborn, stupid, and sluggish as our old Brown and Bright," revealing Blithedale to deepen the very economic distinctions it seeks to efface.[34]

But the widest level of Blithedale's nested detachment is from time itself, as the community denies history in its refusal to connect to any outside context, rendering it impotent to effect change beyond its boundaries. After his initial exit from the community, Coverdale reflects that at Blithedale he

> was beginning to lose the sense of what kind of world it was, among innumerable schemes of what it might or ought to be. It was impossible, situated as we were, not to imbibe the idea that everything in nature and human existence was fluid, or fast becoming so; . . . that it was a day of crisis, and that we ourselves were in the critical vortex.[35]

The problem with this idea is that it is discordant from the ordered view of the universe Transcendentalist philosophy promotes. For the utopians did not operate in a void: there already existed an ecological structure of which nature, culture, and the utopians themselves were a part. A locally perfected microcosm cannot, as the utopians believed, inspire a new social order to crystalize around it when that microcosm is

already inevitably bound in an existing material plane. The only way this theory could be enacted were if its proponents created a totally new plane, a new environment upon which a new order could form. This may have seemed plausible to early Americans, who lived on the edge of a vast, supposedly empty "wilderness," but recent ecological theory demonstrates its impossibility in its recognition of the totally networked interactions of all object relations: there is only one plane, one cosmic network, upon which we are permitted to act. Hawthorne expresses this sentiment throughout his oeuvre by consistently stressing the irrepressibility of the past. Read in this context, it is ultimately the historical tradition from which Blithedale cannot break; in fact, the tradition breaks Blithedale. Coverdale considers the community "part of another age, a different state of society, a segment of an existence peculiar in its aims and methods, a leaf of some mysterious volume, interpolated into the current history which Time was writing off."[36] But of course, this is not materially true, since Blithedale is inevitably bound, influenced, and guided by its location in space and time. As Coverdale finally realizes, "the soil, beneath our feet, [is] fathom-deep with the dust of deluded generations, on every one of which, as on ourselves, the world had imposed itself as a hitherto unwedded bride."[37]

The absurd hypocrisy of the Blithedale project is captured well in the climactic scene of revelry Coverdale finds upon his return to the farm. Rather than working the fields, where Coverdale expects them, his former companions are masquerading as a motley assortment of Indians, shepherds, and mismatched gods and goddesses, attempting the creation of new traditions which, while enjoyable, are mere childish play, in which one pretends to live a life one does not. Silas Foster, the working-class farmer who manages the actual operations of Blithedale,

simply looks on, doing “more to disenchant the scene” in his reminder of economic reality “than twenty witches and necromancers could have done, in the way of rendering it weird and fantastic.”[38] As Coverdale attempts escape of these “chimaeras,” he finds himself stumbling

> over a heap of logs and sticks that had been cut for firewood, a great while ago, by some former possessor of the soil. … But, being forgotten, they had lain there, perhaps fifty years, and possibly much longer; until, by the accumulation of moss, and the leaves falling over them and decaying there, from autumn to autumn, a green mound was formed, in which the softened outline of the wood-pile was still perceptible.[39]

Yet this reminder of the cyclical context of natural economic reality, of relation between trees, humanity, climate and death, can last only momentarily for Coverdale, who is quickly drawn back into the romantic windings of the novel’s plot. The only thing that can truly shake the Blithedalers out of their agrarian masquerade is the death of one of their own, Zenobia, whose suicide represents the ultimate, tragic break with reality, the inevitable end of an unmoored life. Coverdale early states that he “shall never feel as if [Blithedale] were a real, practical, as well as poetical system of human life, until somebody has sanctified it by death.”[40] Zenobia’s demise, however, ironically wrenches the community back into the old system, as the Blithedalers’ plans for elaborate new burial traditions are eschewed in the moment, Zenobia ultimately “buried very much as other people have been, for hundreds of years gone by.”[41] The Blithedalers are in the end themselves broken by their own Transcendentalist conceptions of natural order, forced to adhere again to existing crystalline socio-ecology.

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Blithedale seeks to efface the distinction between history and nature, mind and matter, philosophy and economy, yet its insistence on detachment from existing social order denies the extent to which these elements are already firmly intertwined in the cosmic economy of which we are all a part, their cooperative play rendering the distinctions between them already meaningless. Transcendentalist and ecocritical philosophy grasp this in their denial of these binaries, yet both struggle for economic application because, as the Blithedalers discover, all actions are bounded by a greater historical ecological context that does not permit the crystallization of totally new structures; As Zenobia finally realizes, "there are no new truths."[42] This inspires her suicide as it does ecocriticism's applicatory impasse. In the words of Latour, we have "run out of steam" in the wake of socialist failures,[43] either denying any stable order to reality in a post-structuralist mood, lapsing into modern arguments for continuing humanist reforms in an (eco)cosmopolitan one, or, most recently, retreating into the asocial safety of ontological speculation.

A better route is to embrace the existing connections between nature and culture in our inexorable cosmic snowflake. Though the Blithedale experiment appears to Coverdale "nothing but dream-work and enchantment," he admits that there "in the sweat of my brow, I had there earned bread and eaten it, and so established my claim to be on earth, and my fellowship with all the sons of labor."[44] As even the urbane and mightily intellectual Hawthorne and Emerson admit, nature and culture meet in the activities of labor through which we all daily construct our existences, and georgic labor is the most direct and honest residence of that nexus. This suggests, then, a form of agrarianism as the apposite social manifestation of a

biocentric ontology. Agrarianism often appears an unrealistic economic recommendation in our rapidly urbanizing and technology-driven global society, but let us remember that the failure of Blithedale lies not in its agrarianism, but with its utopian impulse. Though an ideal manifestation of a philosophical commitment to agrarianism may well entail an abundance of small farms, an attempt to enact such an imaginative social scheme would inevitably fail since it would require an impossible detachment from our existing crystalline ecosocial order. An agrarianism for the 21st-century must appeal to and build from the living global tradition of georgic engagement that has been the locus of ecological resilience for the entirety of human history, the recent deviation from which drives our accelerating problems with our habitat. Enacting this agrarianism requires no utopian scheme, but merely for us in the West to labor, individually and as a society, a little less like we do now and a little more like human communities in the non-modern world. Many economists and social scholars have presented detailed recommendations for enacting such changes, often under the moniker of "de-growth."[45]

Ecocriticism can work for this goal within the academy by more often asking questions of economics, and especially of how, why, and how might, we labor. The Blithedale Romance represents Transcendentalism's "economic turn," and ecocriticism needs a better one. We cannot fall into the trap of separating our theoretical endeavors from the realities of the material ecological interactions that sustain our selves. The inclusive global breadth of eco-cosmopolitanism can help us do this—as Siobhan Senier notes, indigenous agrarian cultures are often already "acutely aware of larger political and economic forces that keep interrupting them"[46]—but such a theoretical commitment needs not be placed in opposition to an agrarian economics that

appears nostalgic only from an urban Western perspective. For agrarianism is a cultural economy practiced today, in various incarnations and to varying degrees, within every nation on earth, its resilience stemming from, and dependent upon, the extent to which it is able to exist independently of the policies of global economic powers upon which cosmopolitan perspectives, without an economy of their own, must rely.

Luckily, much work toward an ecocritical economics has been done. Among others, Tim Sweet has mapped the literary mode of "early American Georgic," William Major has theorized potential collaboration between cosmopolitanism and agrarianism, Kimberly Smith has explicated Wendell Berry's union of environmentalism and agrarianism, and Janet Fiskio imagines the applicability of the American agrarian tradition to new generations of unlanded migrant workers.[47] Yet key questions of agency, politics, technology, and urbanization remain. In extending these analyses, ecocriticism must focus not merely on creative theorization but also, as Newman quotes Raymond Williams, "creative practice; not casting off ideology or learning phrases about it, but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships."[48] Newman continues that to this end, the job of criticism "is to make available, as a living tradition from which we can learn in the present, the history of revolutionary consciousness in creative, cultural practice."[49] To effect broad and meaningful change, ecocriticism must examine stories and ideas that exist at the working nexus of nature and culture, plumbing them for insights into how we can create, in our own present existences, modes and systems of labor that will offer, instead of anxiety, alienation, and injustice, sustainable ecological attachment.

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