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Recalling Sandburg's "Prairie": Labor, "The Windy City," and Ecological Consciousness

More so than other areas of literary study, ecocriticism aims to change the world. Its early and continuing aim is to develop new conceptions of the human relationship to our environment that can serve as a cultural rationale for, and spur to, broad economic changes that reduce pollution and ecological exploitation, increase conservation, and remediate the effects of climate change. Ecocriticism has made progress in that reconceptualization by adding and/or developing key concepts like "biocentrism," "posthumanism," and "speciesism" to the academic lexicon, inspiring their application in fields across and beyond the humanities, and filtering such theorizations throughout society through the usual channels of teaching and writing. Yet though these concepts have successfully penetrated, influenced and helped expand the broader environmentalist movement, we have not witnessed much progress within our global economic systems. Environmentally destructive production and consumption habits are more widespread and necessary for human survival than ever before, paradigms of "growth" still dominate economic discussion among academics, policy makers, and laymen, and political resistance to environmentalism has reinforced and entrenched its position. Technological progress has enabled the development of cleaner energy sources, yet we appear to lack the cultural will to use them. As a movement that seeks to shape our cultural attitudes and actions toward our habitat, ecocriticism—and environmentalism more broadly—must ask itself where we are going wrong and what more we can do. Why, despite the enthusiasm and interest they generate, are our theorizations unable to penetrate the economy in which we need them to take root? One reason we do not have much of an answer is that we have not yet bothered much with the question. Despite the fact that economic changes are ultimately what we most desire to effect, ecocriticism tends to elide discussion of what those changes might look like and how we might get there, in effect separating the realm of (human) economy, or the ways we daily subsist on the earth through labor, from our visions of (natural) ecology.

The immensely popular yet critically neglected poetry of Carl Sandburg illustrates the dynamics of this condition and suggests ways in which it might be transcended. Written within the spectacularly fast and

total industrial transformation of the upper Midwest, Sandburg's poetry embodies the way economic experience inculcates ecological consciousness, suggesting that the ecology/economy facet of the nature/culture divide is so difficult to disrupt because ecocriticism and environmentalism are products of the same urban-industrial mindset that impels industrial progress by precluding intersection of the two spheres. Sandburg's 1922 "The Windy City" demonstrates that the capitalist metropolis entails and requires a collective human forgetfulness of the ecological basis of the human economy, allowing industry (and some humans) to thrive by forcing other beings to languish. Within the urban-industrial mindset, the cosmic ecological context of human activity can only be superficially and imaginatively recalled, since the daily labor of city-building precludes direct economic interaction with the nonhuman actants that sustain human life. Yet to the rural-agrarian mindset depicted in Sandburg's 1918 "Prairie"—which must daily witness and manage the immediate and physical connection of "me" to soil, water, and sky—ecology and economy are always already not merely entwined, but one in the same.

My readings suggest that an ecological vision capable of effecting economic change must reunite economy and ecology in our urban imaginations, yet too that the only method of meaningfully recalling this union is through personal and regular economic interaction with our ecological context. This interaction must not be recreative, but creative: it must be performed to sustain our bodies and beings. And, since Sandburg shows that urban-industrial labor requires the discursive separation of economy and ecology, our work must be non-industrial. Performing such labor is direct economic activism, disrupting the environmental and human injustice inherent to industrial economies by reclaiming the production and distribution of the necessities of life—food, shelter, clothing, and warmth—for non-industrial community networks. My conclusion will explicate what such an agrarian program might look like in both urban and rural landscapes.

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Lawrence Buell's 2011 article reviewing the disciplinary history and identifying "Some Emerging Trends" of ecocriticism does not contain the words "labor," "economy," or "agriculture." But these terms represent the processes by which human culture is most directly connected to its nonhuman environment,

and must be as thoroughly interrogated as the more frequent ecocritical targets of “nature” (found on 19 pages of Buell’s essay), “animal” (4 pages), and “wilderness” (3 pages). Part of the problem is that the Enlightenment slowly dislodged the very term “economy” from its roots in the Greek “oikonomia,” or “management of a household or a family,” so that today “economy” calls to most American minds fuzzy and confusing networks of global financial shenanigans, measured by points on the Dow, GNP and unemployment rates (“economy, n.”). Those trained in the environmental humanities may thus feel unqualified or insufficiently informed to discuss such matters, much less to offer economic prescriptions. Yet we must remember that our current conception of “economy” is subject to the same methods of critique we in the humanities level at ideas of “race,” “gender,” and “nature.” And it is indeed in dire need of such problematizing, since common measures of economic health such as GNP possess weak, if any, positive correlation to actual human welfare (Daly 15). As Jennifer Hamilton argues in the brief entry for “Labour” in the *Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities*, the field “needs a ... kind of manual gearing, because for any kind of ethical, and, indeed, livable future on the planet, we not only need new ways of thinking about the world, but new ways of being in and of the world” (183). Until we heed Hamilton’s call to “begin rethinking labor,” we will continue to surrender the concepts of “economy,” “labor,” and “agriculture” to “economists,” and will thus continue to see individual well-being suffer at the hands of soaring stock markets, inadequate and drudging labor opportunities, and an agricultural system which wastes most of the poisonous food it produces in the global North while permitting famine to grip the global South (183). For the important emerging ecocritical concern with “environmental justice” (referenced on 8 pages of Buell’s article) to bear fruit, theorization of economy must take center stage.

The ecocritical directions which have demonstrated most concern with economy are bioregionalism and the new agrarianism. Indeed, Buell may be able to identify bioregionalism as one of the most enduring research areas of first-wave ecocriticism because it is so unique in its staunch practicality; as the introduction to the 2011 edited collection *The Bioregional Imagination* explains, “in addition to establishing a particular way of delineating place, bioregional thinking also implies a political and cultural practice that manifests as an environmental ethic in the day-to-day activities of ordinary residents” (3).

Literary-critical bioregionalism in particular aims to enact this manifestation by “encourag[ing] readers to connect the texts they read with their own lives, places, and practices, [and] helping them imagine how to move, both physically and imaginatively, from the word to the world” (11). Though this is precisely the target for which ecocritical practice should be aiming, bioregional literary criticism ultimately suffers from the same stymying economic avoidance as does ecocriticism, able and eager to imagine potential modes of bioregional epistemology and politics, yet hard pressed to prescribe exactly which labors today might move us “from the [imaginative] word to the [economic] world” we actually and currently inhabit.¹ The new agrarianism, by contrast, is perhaps the area of environmentalism which is both quickest to utilize economic arguments and to advocate specific economic changes.² Yet its suggestions, borne from idealization of certain rural landscapes, often appear hollow and inapplicable to 21st-century readers in an increasingly urban and “globalized” world.

Ultimately, failure to adequately address urbanization is the key roadblock for both approaches. A successful economic application of ecocriticism must be appropriate not only to rural watersheds, but to the cities of Chicago, Tokyo, Manchester and Accra, to those places in which humans already live and work. And unfortunately, broader ecocritical plumbing of urban networks remains, in Buell’s terms, “more earnest than resoundingly successful,” despite the fact that urbanization has always been, and continues to be, the human process at fault for the environmental disruption now endangering the future of the human species on our planet (93). A large part of the difficulty in developing a specifically “urban ecocriticism” is that, as William Cronon’s seminal *Nature’s Metropolis* demonstrates, urbanization is not a phenomenon that belongs purely or even mostly to city spaces; cities are merely the administrative core of a cooperative peripheral capitalist network that, at this point in history, extends its ecological influence to every corner of the planet.³ This renders the very term “urban ecocriticism” somewhat redundant, since all of today’s targets of ecocritical analysis are, economically at least, “urbanized.”⁴ More useful than the critical category of “urban” may be that of “industrialism,” which signifies a condition of enmeshed economic and cultural practices that guide the political and material labor of urbanization across city and rural landscapes.

The underlying reason ecocriticism and environmentalism stumble when confronted with issues of economy, labor, and urbanization is that the movements are themselves phenomena borne of and belonging to urban-industrial life processes, and are thus subject to the entwined material and cultural conditions that enable its existence by preventing recognition of its peripheral ecological context. In her 2008 “Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling,” Val Plumwood describes the Western process of “dematerialization,” or “becoming more and more out of touch with the material conditions (including ecological conditions) that support or enable our lives” (141). This process is, of course, intrinsic to urban-industrial life, from the Greeks and Romans to the neoliberal megalopolis, which alike require the import of resources from outside city limits. Yet dematerialization accelerates as economies become more complex and globally interconnected. The supply chain through which a Chicago environmentalist may obtain, say, a belt—with leather sourced from multiple international locations, processed in a sprawling complex located in a southern Asian country yet owned by a European company, with chemical ingredients similarly internationally sourced, which is then distributed, marketed, and sold by other variously located and interconnected corporate entities around the world—is so multifaceted, complex, and unreported as to effectively preclude its apprehension by a typical consumer. Though this Chicagoan may participate in local elections and activism to increase the health of her immediate ecology, the global economy actively prevents her knowledge of, and thus capacity of regard for, the much larger and more environmentally and socially meaningful “economic places . . . on earth that support [her] life” and are in turn shaped by her lifestyle (145). Thus, globalization entrenches and accelerates the Western “split between singular, elevated, conscious ‘dwelling’ places, and the multiple disregarded places of economic and ecological support” that “is one of the most important manifestations of the mind/body split,” and I would add, that of culture/nature (146).

Sandburg’s poetry demonstrates that this divide is so difficult to transcend because it is inculcated by the subjective human experience of dematerialization intrinsic to urban-industrial lifestyles. The rapid 19th-century rise of Chicago was unprecedented in human history, and Sandburg’s *Chicago Poems*, his first and most enduring volume of poetry, takes this new urban-industrial cultural ecology as its focus. As John

Marsh illustrates, Sandburg viewed urban landscapes through the lens of his early fascination with the Arts and Crafts Movement, using the writings of Ruskin and Morris “to understand and describe contemporary scenes of production ... and distribution” (534). The Arts and Crafts Movement added to Marxist concern for adequate compensation for proletarian work under industrial capitalism an interest in the bodily and mental effects of that labor, which the Movement perceived to be more drudging and alienating than non-industrial modes of production. Preoccupation with such thinking leads Sandburg’s poetry to focus squarely on the lived experience of the labor he describes, from the factory floors of Chicago to the wheat and cornfields of its agricultural hinterlands. Sandburg explores what Thomas Andrews terms “worksapes,” or

place[s] shaped by the interplay of human labor and natural processes, ... constellations of unruly and ever-unfolding relationships—not simply land, but also air and water, bodies and organisms, as well as the language people use to understand the world, and the lens of culture through which they make sense of and act on their surroundings.” (125)

Sharing such an expansive conception of work, Sandburg recognizes that the daily maintenance of urban spaces requires human acquiescence to immense ecological violence against human and nonhuman populations alike: “Every day the people sleep and the city dies; / every day the people shake loose, awake and / build the city again” (“Windy City” 123). To maintain the logical “sanity” that builds the metropolis, the urban-industrial mind must psychologically separate its own existence from the ecological crimes which sustain it, purging questions of economy from the home and public sphere by relegating such discussion to the realm of far-off “experts” beyond the layman’s control. An urban-industrial mind may obtain glimpses of the city’s—and itself’s—larger ecological context, yet this awareness must remain superficial and fleeting, since the urban human must return to direct participation in normalized economic practices of violent ecological exploitation to remain alive.

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Sandburg’s poem “The Windy City” clearly demonstrates this dynamic. Though its title implies a reprise of his earlier and more famous “Chicago,” “Windy City” is longer and broader in scope, presenting

an epic depiction of the rise of the city out of its prairie ecology. The poem's opening description of Chicago's inception emphasizes the work of men, beginning with "The lean hands of wagon men" selecting the location of the city through the "hitching place[s]" for the "pony express" and "the iron horse" of its hinterlands (1-6). All of the action of the first stanza derives from the "hands" of the initial line, and the second stanza repeats the image, stating that:

the hands of men took hold and tugged,
 And the breaths of men went into the junk
 And the junk stood up into skyscrapers and asked:
 Who am I? Am I a city? And if I am what is my name? (10-14)

The work required by the city's founders does not require them to think, speak, observe, or describe; they merely "point," "pick," "find," "make," and "set up," as directed by distant capital. Their labor requires no direct or personal engagement with raw nonhuman actants as fellow beings, merely externally managed manipulation of commodified animals ("the pony express") and metal ("the iron horse"). The first entity of the poem to express any thought whatsoever is the city itself, which upon its inception immediately questions its existence, though this is only interpretable by the poem's speaker. Whereas the "Early ... red men gave a name to a river, / the place of the skunk, the river of the wild onion smell, / See-caw-go," respecting the autonomy of the confluence's prior ecology and naming it as such, the modern city-builders "laugh" at the "junk" they have thoughtlessly imported, responding condescendingly and inaccurately to the city's question, "You? ... *we* gave you a name, / ... Your name is Chicago" (15-16 emphasis added). The awesome industrial work of "standing" "junk" "up into skyscrapers" the city builders perform allows them to claim an hubristically outsized role in the creation of the space. They thus incorrectly assume it is they that have the power and right to name their creation, rather than permitting objects to name themselves (as do the Indians).

As the poem moves from Chicago's beginnings to its present, readers receive images of the city notable for their lack of typical Sandburgian attention to nonhumans. This reflects that urban landscapes, especially those of the industrial age of concrete and supermarkets, are defined by an absence of living

nonhumans; insects and small mammals become pests, and flora is relegated to carefully contained parks which mimic wilderness. This landscape inculcates an anthropocentric humanist ontology necessary for industrial growth that simplifies ecology into two broad categories of moving humans and their inert creations. This simplification enables the “ease” with which human conversation in the city takes place, in a set of stanzas anaphorically privileging the phrase “It is easy” to talk of this or to listen to that (30-40).

And, as with the city’s founders, discussion avoids inhabitants’ present economic engagements: schoolchildren learn and “babble” of the city’s previous human populations, and though “respectable taxpayers” read of the city’s violence and poverty in the newspapers, they do so “easily,” such events apparently not affecting their daily activities. The final stanza of the section reads:

It is easy to listen to the haberdasher customers hand each other their
 easy chatter—it is easy to die
 alive—to register a living thumbprint and be dead
 from the neck up. (33)

This seems to be the speaker’s ultimate assessment of the people of Chicago: “dead from the neck up,” performing automatic work with hands and lungs yet unable to critically place that labor in any sort of broader context. Stanzas consisting entirely of snippets of overheard conversations reinforce this, as contextual objections to the city’s lifestyle are met with both stern rejoinders (“What we want is results, results / And damn the consequences”) and urging to ignore such thoughts, to “Hush baby” and to “sh... sh...” (37). Our narrator tells us ““Coo coo, coo coo””; this command to forget the consequences “is one song of Chicago” (37). In one of its two middle stanzas, the poem’s narrator asks readers to themselves “remember” that Chicago is “Independent as a hog on ice,” a phrase typically bringing to mind the impotent freedom of such a living creature, yet also ironically referencing the violent industrial innovations upon which Chicago’s rise is built, namely the ability to transport vast quantities of dead animals by rail to growing consumer markets in eastern and European metropolises (41). The ethical ramifications of this industry must remain forgotten, repressed, for its activity to continue.

Readers begin to see the economic conditions that inspire this lullaby in the next stanza of the poem, which presents a typical catalog of urban ills, including “cripples sit[ting] on their stumps” and a mother carrying home the “limp bundle” of her dead son (78). The speaker repeatedly asks the reader to “forgive us” these events: “forgive us if it happens—and happens again— / And happens again” (95). We reach the nadir of the poem and perhaps of Chicago itself with this central stanza:

Forgive us if we work so hard
 And the muscles bunch clumsy on us
 And we never know why we work so hard—
 If the big houses with little families
 And the little houses with big families
 Sneer at each other’s bars of misunderstanding;
 Pity us when we shackle and kill each other
 And believe at first we understand
 And later say we wonder why. (97-105)

The workers may “believe at first” in the humanist-capitalist logic of industrialism, driven to the city by promises of “better” living through higher wages, yet “later” realize the logic to be insufficient in the simplicity of its humanism, leaving workers beholden to wage slavery and the unfulfilled “wonder[ing]” it inspires. Tragically, these urbanites create their own lack of fulfillment daily through labor that perpetuates a metropolis that excludes nonhuman beings, yet are prevented from realizing it by the urban mindset that that very work inculcates.

Yet after this lament, the poem immediately shifts to a cosmic conception of the metropolis in which human concerns fall away. Instead of more human discourse, we abruptly hear “the bevels and the blueprints whisper / ... / Two cool new rivets say, ‘Maybe it is morning’ / ‘God knows’” (114-6). As the speaker transcends the humanist mindset of the urbanites he has described, the nonhuman skyscrapers and other components of the city animistically come alive. We are reminded of what the urbanites “easy chatter” elides, that “The city” is daily labor,

a tool chest opened every day,
 a time clock punched every morning
 ...

I am the woman, the home, the family,
 I get breakfast and pay the rent;
 I telephone the doctor, the milkman, the undertaker;
 I fix the streets
 For your first and your last ride—
 Come clean with me, come clean or dirty,
 I am stone and steel of your sleeping numbers;
 I remember all you forget.
 I will die as many times
 As you make me over again. (100-128)

Though the urban human labor that builds the city, that *is* the city, forces a forgetting of its ecological context, the city's matter itself stands as a testament to it, "remember[ing] all you [human readers] forget." The speaker provides catalogs of things moving in, around, and beyond the metropolis: "overland trains," "wheat barges," "carload[s] of shorthorns taken off the valleys of Wyoming" (142-5). This wider perspective recalls the metropolis for what it more truly is: not just an blank urban stage for human drama, but a vast new economic system guiding object interactions throughout the West. Though the speaker attributes these great movements of matter and transformations of economy to human actors and human choices (which are by poem's end recognized as occurring constantly, daily, with even the most benign human movements) the poem no longer lingers in the realm of human misery—human morality drops away as descriptions of the wider system emerge. The poem's sense of time also widens, until finally we are treated to a conversation between "the Great Lakes" and "the Grand Prairie":

... they had little to say to each other,
 A whisper or so in a thousand years.

‘Some of the cities are big,’ said one.

‘And some not so big,’ said another.

‘And sometimes the cities are all gone,’

Said a black knob bluff to a light green sea. (170-5)

But the narrowly concerned human inhabitants of Chicago are unable to recall these cosmic voices, surrounded as they are by human constructions that obscure most of nonhuman nature, and commodify those few nonhuman beings humanity allows itself to witness.

A typical ecocritical interpretation of the poem’s final cosmic turn might suggest that more widespread human adoption of the biocentric perspective it demonstrates presents hope for a less troubled metropolitan existence. The cosmic ecological context of human activity that the poem recalls may thus provide the “wonder” lacking in urban lives, and awareness of how individual urban actions connect (via “wheat barges,” etc.) to the broader environment may spur environmentalist political or lifestyle changes. Yet this reading is frustrated by the extent to which the poem’s humans do not achieve this biocentric awareness; it is precluded by the urban mindset city life necessitates. Only the speaker can access awareness, and only by himself temporarily “forgetting” the human suffering that dominates the poem’s first half. Within the urban mindset, the cosmic context of human activity can only be superficially, imaginatively, and temporarily recalled, since the daily labor of city-building entails massive ecological violence that must be psychologically repressed for that labor to be performed. One can imagine Sandburg setting down his pen after finishing the poem, rubbing his eyes, and wandering over to the icebox to fix himself a pork sandwich, wondering if the traffic will be light enough that he can make it to the newspaper office by a deadline. Though Sandburg as narrator (and his readers) can imagine a more biocentric conception of the metropolis, they cannot conceive (much less enact) an alternate set of economic relations within it that might alleviate the human misery the poem documents precisely because they must exit the poem and return to “normal” city life. This is a problem that ecocriticism (as an urban phenomenon) shares, since the university system is a key actant in the continuing and constant construction of the now-neoliberal global metropolitan complex. Though we in literary studies are permitted to reveal and critique the moral

crimes embedded within that economic system, our complicity necessitates a continual repression of the destruction it wreaks that, in ecocriticism, takes the form of an elision of economic discussion.

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In search of a path out of this stymying settlement, I turn to Sandburg's second volume of poetry, *Cornhuskers*, which widens his attention from Chicago's center to the rural landscapes from which the city economically and culturally originates. *Cornhuskers* begins with a lengthy poem called "Prairie" which reverses the chronology of "The Windy City," beginning with the geological formation of the prairies themselves, and then moving toward intimate descriptions of contemporary human lives within that scope. This reflects the experience of georgic life as Sandburg documents it throughout *Cornhuskers*, as human subjects are constantly impressed with direct observation of and interaction with nonhuman ecologies that obviously exist outside the control of mere human hands. The poem's narrator introduces himself thus:

I was born on the prairie and the milk of its wheat, the red of its clover,
the eyes of its women, gave me a song and slogan.

Here the water went down, the icebergs slid with gravel, the gaps and
the valleys hissed, and the black loam came, and the yellow sandy
loam.

Here between the sheds of the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians,
here now a morning star fixes a fire sign over the timber claims and
cow pastures, the corn belt, the cotton belt, the cattle ranches. (1-3)

There are no pastoral illusions here: no sooner is the garden introduced than does the machine incur, as we hear immediately of the "claims," "belts," and "ranches" that power the metropolis. But this activity is presented from the very beginning as occurring under the cosmic "fire sign" of "a morning star," within the context of a total, cosmic ecology in which all interactions are enmeshed. Early in the poem we receive a pair of descriptions of two trains, one "in the city," "choked and / the pistons hiss and the wheels curse," and one "On the prairie" which "flits on phantom wheels and the sky and / the soil beneath them muffle the

pistons and cheer the wheels” (14-5). The industrial metropolis is decidedly present in both urban and rural spaces, though its identical economic activities possess different inflections: the rural landscape mutes its negative consequences, twisting the capitalist mode of production into a less morally ignorant incarnation through its constant reminders of the “soil beneath” metropolitan economic activity.

This reminder takes the form of agricultural labor that reveals to the human subjects of “Prairie” the ecological enmeshment of their economic practices. Whereas industrial urban worksapes rely on the establishment of work-places, which create the appearance of separation between the economic and social spheres of one’s life, the agrarian operations of a farm workscape reveal the extent to which all of one’s activities, whether consumptive or productive, are at once economic *and* ecological, natural and cultural. The title of Sandburg’s collection—*Cornhuskers*—identifies the residents of the prairie entirely with their work, and suggests that it is that labor that engenders their perception of the total cosmic economy. In one of “Prairie”’s central stanzas, we see that “The frost loosens cornhusks. / The sun, the rain, the wind / loosen cornhusks. / The men and women are helpers. / They are all cornhuskers together” (105-9). Unlike “Windy City,” in which human labor with the nonhuman world is limited to manipulating dead, commodified objects into products for superfluous human consumption and profit, on Sandburg’s “Prairie” all beings move, act, and labor “together,” aware of and communicating with each other to get the job done. The work of a farm requires constant and careful attention to and communication with every object within the farm’s ecological system. Such labor thus impresses the fact that objects are forged of the same material stuff, bound in the same ecological-economic mesh, and act on us humans as much as we act on them. As Charles Mayer points out, Sandburg “believes that the instincts of the people are at one with the world of natural phenomena”—there is no “other,” only the total massed whole of natural movement that is the universe (91).⁵ Accordingly, the poem’s narrator alternates seamlessly and constantly between the omniscient poet himself, dust, the weather or seasons, various human subjects, and often, if not always, the prairie itself. It is at times impossible to discern exactly which of these entities is speaking, suggesting that all of the prairie’s beings possess a lively rhetoric that is in the city thought to belong to humanity alone.

And it is importantly the agrarian economic work of the prairie that reveals this cosmic biocentric ontology: “handling a pitchfork at hayrack” is “cool prayers to the harvest hands” (8-13).⁶

In contrast to the people of the “Windy City” who look forward to fulfilling their desires, the gaze of Sandburg’s agrarian population lingers in a simultaneous past and present, both of which constantly surround their places and guide their actions. “The land and the people hold memories, even among the anthills and / the angleworms, among the toads and woodroaches—among grave- / stone writings rubbed out by the rain—they keep old things that / never grow old” (105-9). Unlike the mindless inhabitants of the city, surrounded exclusively by human beings and the objects they’ve created, cornhuskers must constantly confront the ghosts of their present situations, the ecology surrounding their economic activity: “‘The shapes that are gone are here,’ said an old man with a cob pipe” (114). Past “shapes” are not only present, but actively recognized and minded by the poem’s people, who must consider them constantly while moving through their daily actions. The working rural landscape reveals the constructedness of the human experience of time itself, and inspires the cosmic awareness of “The Windy City”’s end at every turn, allowing all inhabitants the vision which in the city belongs to the poet alone. The necessary remembering of ecological context agricultural labor inculcates within Sandburg’s rural residents entails too a valuing of one’s ecology, impelling an agrarian ethics of careful consumption inspired by and correlated to their economic-ecological situation. This suggests that to maintain a robust and honest conception of one’s human existence that unites the realms of self and natural context, human identity and economic-ecology, requires a working lifestyle which is to some extent non-industrial.

Many recent ecocritics have presented conceptions of the interrelatedness of human and nonhuman ecology similar to Sandburg’s, yet are unable to envision ways of transferring that biocentric awareness into economic practice. While we have been epistemologically limited by the ecology/economy facet of the nature/culture divide Sandburg’s poetry illustrates, we’ve been politically distracted by our inheritance of the postmodern tendency to reduce issues of economy to questions of culture, and to thus assume that a change in awareness will effect a change in economics. In ecocriticism specifically, we suppose that if we

can discursively engender a political ontology aware of nonhuman activity, it will be able to mobilize democratically to enact top-down change to respect and protect that activity through existing institutions. As such, first-wave ecocritics sought to reveal and promote to middle-class urban audiences a wilderness or land ethic, and second wave ecocriticism too seeks to elevate narratives of overlooked matter (in the case of speculative realism) or neocolonial spaces in the global south (in the case of environmental justice writing) with the hope that raising awareness of these extra-urban stories will prime positive environmental action in the lives and voting habits of Western citizens.

But Sandburg's poetry reveals the limitations of this strategy: the economic activities required of urban residents preclude both the sustained imaginative adoption and active implementation of a biocentric ethic by requiring an entwined mental and material acquiescence to anthropocentric industrial logic. This is why, as Anne-Marie Brumm notes, Sandburg "had no intention or hope of bringing the lessons he learned in nature back into the city for application" (251). Sandburg realizes that an industrial lifestyle can only permit the kind of superficial and fleeting recognition of the "lesson" of the city's ecological context that concludes "The Windy City". As agrarian Wendell Berry recognizes, "it is ultimately futile to plead and protest and lobby in favor of public ecological responsibility while, in virtually every act of our private lives, we endorse and support an economic system that is by intention, and perhaps by necessity, ecologically irresponsible" (65).

To meaningfully recall and retain a biocentric conception of our daily ecological context, it must be enmeshed with non-industrial, non-anthropocentric economic practice. Plumwood's essay concludes that adding a "principle of environmental justice" to environmentalism, which Buell rightly applauds as the most important goal of future ecocriticism, "is a project whose realization ... is basically incompatible with market regimes based on the production of anonymous commodities from remote and unaccountable places" (147). Ecocriticism and environmentalism need to admit that the "principle" undergirding its most important goal is "basically incompatible" with the way nearly all Americans live their daily lives. We must either linger in hypocrisy, revise those principles, or reach toward integrity by participating in economic arrangements not reliant on the industrial process Plumwood describes. An economic unit

striving for separation from industrialism possesses three main characteristics: a reduction in consumption of industrially produced commodities, undertaking home or local production of as many of the necessities of life as is possible, and locally purchasing what one cannot make to the extent possible. In Ruskin's words, we need "a determined sacrifice of such convenience, or beauty, or cheapness as is to be got only by the degradation of the workman; and by equally determined demand for the products and results of healthy and ennobling labor" (1285). Since food is the basic necessity of human life, such an economic theory and practice is well described as "agrarian," or "a temperament and a moral orientation as well as a suite of economic practices, all arising out of the insistent truth that people everywhere are part of the land community, just as dependent as other life on the land's fertility and just as shaped by its mysteries and possibilities" (Freyfogle xiii).

Richard White, in a 1995 essay that is one of ecocriticism's most direct and enduring treatments of labor, provides a succinct example of the typical environmentalist response to the few voices of agrarian reform within its ranks: agrarianism is "a dead end. For such work is always either vanishing or unable to yield a living ... it is not really our work in the world" (180, 179). This response uses the guise of an economic argument to avoid the economic interrogation agrarianism demands by positing industrial economics as a static natural "real[ity]" to which we must conform, rather than as an emergent network enmeshed with a cultural understanding of nature that ecocriticism has potential to shape. A meaningful ecocritical attempt to theorize labor must think beyond current economic realities that enable administrative, informational, and service labor through displaced environmental damage; it must seek with Ruskin "a right understanding, on the part of all classes, of what kind of labor are good for men," and with Hamilton "imagine and then enact the type of labors required to build [the] future" it wants to bring into being (1285, 186). Indeed, that agrarian labors bear little profit indicates their inherent resistance to the industrial-capitalist logic of modern urbanization, and is thus precisely the reason they are worth enacting. The idea of profit as economic necessity is an industrial idea we must discard, for small-scale agricultural and other production activities are, of course, economically realistic; they have for millennia, and continue to be, performed every day across the world. White is correct that agrarian labor of Sandburg's "Prairie"

may not “yield” the sort of hyper-consumptive, industrial “living” to which we have become accustomed. But this is its key virtue, because the current growth-oriented conception of economy White uses to measure which labors are worth performing is delusional, and is quickly running up against the constraints of our global ecology. The minority economic voices which admit this, such as Herman Daly, advocate an “ecological economics” entailing policy recommendations for the most part accordant with agrarian principles. The remainder of the 21st-century will bear out whether it will be industrial or agrarian labor that will “vanish” as temperatures rise.

The fact is that despite vast market pressures, non-industrial agrarian labor has not vanished, nor will it ever. As Raymond Williams concludes his seminal *The Country and the City*, “the common idea of a lost rural economy is false”; it is one of the key myths upon which the industrial paradigm relies (300). Examples abound of individuals, families and communities doing economically successful agrarian work around the U.S. and the world. The most prevalent and perhaps overlooked agrarians belong to non-Western indigenous cultures.⁷ Though all to varying degrees under threat from Western forces of capitalist “development,” the economic agrarianism of such communities often inculcates in Plumwood’s terms “a more unified place relationship” than in the dematerialized West (143). Plumwood argues, and I agree, that ecocriticism and agrarians should use indigenous experiences as a model to “develop forms of life and production where the land of the economy (production consumption, and service provision) and the land of attachment, including care and responsibility, are one in the same” (148). Luckily, many essential and popular labors of the global North perform such union of economy and attachment. Hobbyist and professional artisans such as wood-workers and knitters, beekeepers and cooks all carry an intuitive bodily recollection of the ecological genesis of their craft. And technologies such as Etsy, social media, and advanced transportation logistics both facilitate the exchange of raw materials and finished products, and provide record of their ecological origins. While it is impossible as a 21st-century world citizen to fully escape the ideological and economic clutches of industrial capitalism (nor is that what I am recommending—I do deeply relish my gas-fired furnace), one can certainly achieve varying degrees of escape by practicing agrarian economics.

And of course, the core recommendation of any agrarian program is expanding opportunities to practice agriculture. There are a variety of creative and realistic ways to do this. And luckily, nearly all of them can be practiced in existing urban and suburban landscapes. Methods of so doing include community and home gardens and orchards, institutional farms and gardens, CSA, and market farms that integrate into their local community through sales and employment, beginning-farmer training programs and networks, trade and artisan schools, and, importantly, shifting subsidies from supporting large farms to small ones. Ecocriticism in particular possesses the unique opportunity to develop, manage, and expand farms attached to schools. Many colleges currently possess such programs, though few attract the community buy-in to reach their full potential. Building that support is the most important and revolutionary outcome ecocriticism has the power to affect. A school farm can be constructed right now, and from within our current institutional contexts. Beyond unleashing potential for myriad interdisciplinary educational programs and providing valuable instruction in the agrarian arts tragically absent from most curricula, a school farm establishes a real and consequential economic structure that inculcates ecological consciousness and materially and immediately prevents socio-environmental destruction and injustice. This effect is the strength and beauty of agrarian economics. They work slowly and peacefully by rewiring our ecological consciousness through labors that are meaningful not only to practitioners, but also to the global ecological community, by performing the necessary work of life with deliberation, care, and justice.

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Notes

¹ Some contributors to *The Bioregional Imagination*, such as David Landis Barnhill, recognize that “the bioregional habitat we identify with ... involves not merely physical space but also social structures, economic systems, and political power,” and that “somehow these elements need to be part of bioregional literary criticism,” yet they struggle to articulate an effective method of incorporation (213). One exception is Daniel Gustav Anderson’s contribution, which recognizes that “practical engagement with this regime of unequal, undemocratic extraction and distribution of resources must come before questions of personal aesthetics, values, and their expression” (228).

² See Freyfogle.

³ I use the terms “core” and “periphery” in the sense of Wallerstein’s method of World Systems Analysis.

⁴ This problem is illustrated in Michael Bennett and David Teague’s 1999 collection *The Nature of Cities* and Schliephake’s 2015 *Urban Ecologies*, which both assert themselves as correctives to a supposed dearth of ecocritical interest in the city, despite the fact that so much environmental criticism is written in explicit negative response to urbanization. Bennett, for example, names Wendell Berry and Leslie Marmon Silko in a catalogue of early ecocritics who do not “have much to say about urban culture,” despite the fact that cities are for Berry precisely what is “unsettling America,” while Silko states that the capitalist drive that creates them “is absolutely irredeemable [and] flat out evil” (“From” 41, Arnold 183-4). Attempts at “urban ecocriticism” at times seem not so much concerned that urban environments have been insufficiently theorized, but that such theories have been insufficiently friendly toward cities. They also often perform insufficient engagement with economics. Tellingly, discussion of the physical agricultural and extraction industries that literally build urban environments is largely absent from Bennett’s collection, and Colin Fisher’s *Urban Green* focuses its attention away from processes of production and consumption and toward opportunities for escapist recreation.

⁵ Other Sandburg critics have reached similar conclusions. Oscar Cargill writes that “Sandburg’s love of the land has a mystical quality—a belief that the land will shape people to good ends” (369).

⁶ Agricultural and other rural labors can, of course, be industrialized, reduced to a godless and genocidal calculation of inputs and outputs managed by the rich and performed by petroleum, machines, and/or exploited human workers. The antebellum plantation model of the American South is one such example, as are the megafarms dominating the agricultural industry today. See Conlogue for an overview of the literary response to the 19th-century mechanization of agriculture. Though the human labor of industrial agriculture can inculcate some of the same effects as the agrarian labor Sandburg describes, those effects are considerably dulled by the mechanical reduction of work processes that industrial economic logic requires. Thus, in the terms of this essay, today’s army of agricultural workers of California are today more truly urban than rural or agrarian laborers; their work is drudging and poorly compensated purely by money, which must be exchanged for the necessities of life off-farm.

⁷ James C. Scott is the agrarian theorist who explores non-Western agrarianism with most breadth and depth. See *Weapons of the Weak*.