

In Search of Liberation: Transcendentalist Literature and the Future of  
American Work

An Honors Thesis for the Department of English  
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## *Preface*

*“When I cannot see words curling like rings of smoke round me I am in darkness—I am nothing.”*

Virginia Woolf

Throughout my time as an English major, I have been continually moved by the way that written language connects people across time and place. I am a strong believer in the power of history as a dynamic resource for understanding and challenging the ways that we rearrange ourselves in relation to the world around us. When I read books from different time periods, I often feel that my personal observations are reflected in characters who lived in different historical circumstances than I do. I continue to recognize myself in the female characters of the nineteenth-century novel: Cathy’s incessant lust for being loved in *Wuthering Heights*, Jane Eyre’s impulsive streak and drive for validation, Emma’s confused and impulsive angst in *Madame Bovary*. Strong female leads from Victorian-era texts have been a source of companionship when I feel too much in a world that doesn’t stop overflowing around me. I am intrigued by the way that words contain this unceasing extractive quality that enables them to drift throughout time and circumstance in this way.

This quality of movement inherent to written language felt especially evident during the initial lockdown in spring 2020. It was at this time that I felt most reliant on words to escape what was happening around me, whether it was by reading Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* or painstakingly leaning into writing my final essays. The inspiration that eventually culminated in this thesis originated during this pandemic spring for two reasons. Firstly, in John Lurz’s British Literature survey course, I was learning that I felt such a deep connection to my beloved

Victorian-era characters because, like me, they were living through a moment characterized by an incredible amount of activity. Charged with revolutions, the expansion of empires, and massive industrialization, the world was moving too fast to keep up with, and the movement of words written into the minds of my adored characters is reflective of this extraordinary tumult. I found this incredibly relatable: the immense movement inherent to these texts reflected the intensity of American politics, always-newer technology, and rapidly depleting natural environment that punctuated my teenage years. It was at this time that I was thus compelled to further examine and lean into the way people used words as a reflection of movement and change. That spring I was also taking Professor Jay Cantor's "The Modern Mind" course, reading a variety of nineteenth-century political theory and philosophy.

The second reason this spring was influential for this project was because I became aware of my attachment to work itself as a kind of anchor and life force. During this time, I dove into the semesters' term papers and focused on them obsessively. These papers were the only remaining aspect of my life that structured my days and provided me with a sense of control and normality. As I watched labor strikes at factory farms and the materialization of the term "essential worker," I diligently settled into the window by my sister's room every day to work. I had to work to feel a sense of stability at this time, but I simultaneously hated it and longed for freedom. On one hand, I felt anxious: I could feel the schoolwork I "had" to do for this seemingly never-ending Zoom semester in my body, lodged between my rib cage like a hard rock. On the other hand, I didn't know what to do without this work, since I didn't have anything else to do. In a time when there was nothing stable to cling to, my schoolwork seemed like one of the only aspects of my former life that I could recognize, and I became hyper-focused on my academic performance. After I eventually turned in all my assignments, I found myself unable to

stop thinking about this odd personal experience, and what had begun as a dull ache grew into a new fixation. How was it that people seemed to be working more than ever during the most disruptive experience we had ever lived through? Why was there no ability for people to take a break without having to seriously suffer financially? How had we come to decide what kind of work was “essential” and what was not? And perhaps most centrally, what was it about work that tinged it with this urgency, its unwavering ability to persist, even grow in importance, in the most precarious of times?

As we settled into life in a pandemic, the original fervor I had felt towards my schoolwork in the spring began to falter. As I watched myself and those around me begin to flail throughout the fall 2020 semester, these same questions became more pressing. Everyone seemed to be burnt-out, anxious, and uncertain. Our backs hurt, our eyes hurt, we weren't sleeping, and yet we were still somehow working harder than ever, consumed by our coursework, or patient's needs, or the company's next new project. I felt like all we did was work, and my attachment to it felt utterly demoralizing. I was continuously able to find relief, in words as a form of escape. As I continued to read different texts assigned for my classes, I began to wonder if I could look to history to find people writing through different manifestations of these struggles. It was during this time that I stumbled across the Transcendentalists. Upon reading some of the movement's core essays, I was struck by the distinct, persistent energy that reverberated in these texts. With the guidance of my advisor, I did more research and learned that the Transcendentalists were a progressive social movement thinking and writing during a time when work was being completely restructured and reordered. The Transcendentalists combined the alluring movement of nineteenth-century American texts with questions around the politics of work. I was struck by this distinct combination and was thus inspired to look closer at the way

the Transcendentalists were thinking about work to draw inspiration for contemporary work politics.

## *Introduction*

*“The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.”*

David Graeber

Originating as an offshoot of the European Romantic period, Transcendentalism was a philosophical and social movement that began in New England in the 1830s and lasted through the antebellum period until the 1860s. As the first intellectual movement in the United States that has had a profound impact on contemporary social theory, this group of collective agitators is known for their non-conforming, progressively oriented beliefs. The Transcendentalists rejected traditional nineteenth-century thought, calling for abolition and reform in a variety of social institutions. I situate the progressive nature of the Transcendentalists as a reaction to the steadily rising power of industrialization in the United States in the early nineteenth century, examining how this historical context influenced the movement. During these years, the East Coast was undergoing the rise of industrialization, which was quickly changing how people were organizing their time and their conceptions of work and place. Looking more closely at these decades reveals a rapidly changing America, as provincial, rural farmland became densely populated and larger trade hubs transformed into thriving city centers. People living during this time were struck by how the places around them and their experiences of navigating the world were shifting faster than they could process.

The rise of industrialization in antebellum America significantly affected the different rhythms and tasks that constituted daily life. One of the most significant societal and cultural reorderings wrought by the rise of industrial society was a changing understanding of not only



physical places of work but also people's conceptions of work and labor. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the American north had developed a large economy and a resolute commitment to the dream of capitalist success, with the industrial transformation of work pressing inescapably on virtually everyone's conscience.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this social context, one of the central social issues that the Transcendentalists critiqued was the conditions of work. This thesis combines American history, primary source texts by Transcendentalists, and contemporary theory on work to provide a robust discussion of work politics within the Transcendentalist movement. The goal of my thesis is to show different ways that the political and philosophical movement known as Transcendentalism can be a resource for contemporary progressive work politics, as these thinkers interestingly anticipate many of the struggles of American society's relationship to work and labor today. The Transcendentalists' reactions pave the way for a new way to understand our relationship to work, offering surprisingly relevant suggestions for both personal relationships to work, and, more generally, to an American workforce that is continuing to experience the shocks of a global pandemic.

I will articulate my argument in three phases. The first chapter historically situates the Transcendental movement alongside the rise of industrialization in America and outlines the major characteristics to provide a more generalized understanding of the philosophy. The Transcendentalists called for progressive societal reform through several different mediums: fiction, essays, lectures, and firsthand accounts of their experiments. I will look most directly at Ralph Waldo Emerson's writing to discuss his perspective on work, providing a new reading that situates his response to work as an empowering site of individual and social transformation. In

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 234.

the second chapter, I explore how changing understandings of time and physical space can act as a stimulus for social change. I look at the origins of industrial capitalism occurring on the East Coast in the middle of the nineteenth century to make a new claim for the ways that these new conditions were intensely altering relationships to place, work, and self. This chapter articulates most directly how the Transcendentalists are an applicable resource for our current moment, as like today, they were living in a moment of extreme change and movement which altered the conditions of people's labor. Finally, the third chapter looks more closely at how Transcendentalists' undertakings were fundamentally utopian in spirit. I look at utopian experiments to draw out the ways that this kind of energy can be harnessed in our fights for labor justice today. Through these three distinct angles, I look more directly at this specific literary movement to build a sustained critique of the modern role of work in our lives today.

## *Chapter 1: The Power of Expansive Frameworks*

*“Indeed, human labor throughout all its forms, from the sharpening of a stake to the construction of an epic or a city, is one immense illustration of the perfect compensation of the Universe.”*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Trades and Professions.”

### ***I. Orientations***

Life in New England in the 1830s was a quickly shifting physical and cultural terrain. Since the turn of the century, the region had been in a continuous process of shedding its former self: no longer a haphazard scattering of villages and wide-eyed immigrants, it had comfortably leaned into its role as a central organ of the American nation. The home of the original colonies was now swollen with major cities and quickly expanding networks of commerce and trade, made possible by the presence of a diligent, unquestioning workforce. Familial and community-oriented concerns were increasing farmers' participation in the market economy, and “outwork”, or subcontracted work from merchants, was seeping into rural farming areas, tying an increasing amount of the New England population to urban industry.<sup>1</sup>

Fresh terrains of work were emerging to meet the needs of expanding industrialization and population growth, and New England residents responded to the new industries with a confident fervor. While Ralph Waldo Emerson embraced this attitude, this valorization of work is harshly contrasted in *Walden*, a book pervaded with Thoreau's blunt disavowal of work's significance in

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Dublin, “Rural Putting-Out Work in Early Nineteenth-Century New England: Women and the Transition to Capitalism in the Countryside,” *The New England Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (1991): 531–73.

mainstream society. This chapter thus asks what historic and cultural influences fueled these two distinct reactions to draw out the full potential of the Transcendentalist's philosophies on work.

The following section provides a brief outline of the origins of the Transcendentalist movement and the social conditions the Transcendentalists were responding to in nineteenth-century New England. While my later chapters dive into one or two Transcendentalists' specific politics regarding work, this chapter takes a broader view to situate the history of the movement alongside the arrival of capitalism. I display similarities between Marxism and Transcendentalism to make clear how the Transcendentalists were progressively oriented in their mindsets for social change. My historical summary provides a frame of reference for understanding how these thinkers developed a distinct conceptualization of work and makes clear that literature from this movement is an apt resource when thinking about work in our lives today.

After establishing this background, I look at Ralph Waldo Emerson's perspective on labor to examine a distinctly Transcendentalist reaction to work. I reference Henry David Thoreau alongside Emerson to highlight the different angles these thinkers held towards work. The goal of this chapter is to provide a broader historical account of the way work was changing in America and situate the Transcendentalists' different approaches towards work as two distinct ways of elevating the self to its fullest potential. I show that even the Transcendentalist thought that appears broadly "conservative"—especially Emerson's provocations that seem to bolster the power of the "Protestant Work Ethic"—still provides unexpected inspiration for rethinking the value of labor today. My readings unsettle traditional interpretations of Transcendentalist texts to generate a more expansive analysis, inspiring new ways to organize around work and setting the stage for my discussion of more imaginative efforts in the ensuing chapters.

## ***II. Conceptual grounding: The Protestant Work Ethic, Transcendentalism, and Marxism***

Like all other movements for change, Transcendentalism was at its core a protest against the general state of culture and society. Echoing the religious discontent occurring in the rest of the country and abroad, members of Harvard Divinity School in the 1830s began to critique the curriculum they were being taught on the doctrine of the Unitarian church. The Unitarianism they were learning reflected John Locke's claim that human knowledge is empirical and comes from the senses, and younger Unitarian radicals who were to soon become the pioneers of the Transcendental movement found this philosophy limiting. Their dissatisfaction was largely inspired by Romantic philosophers, most centrally Immanuel Kant, whose writing called for intuition as a better way to interpret the world.<sup>1</sup> In his lecture on what a "Transcendentalist" was, Ralph Waldo Emerson highlights the crucial distinction that came to define this intellectual group: "The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture."<sup>2</sup> Transcendentalists were idealists who believed in a spiritual and intellectual state that could "transcend" simply material views of the world, and advocated for processing what was occurring around them through leaning into individual feelings and opinions rather than objective conditions.

By 1836, a discussion group for these radical young Unitarian clergymen had begun in Boston. This group eventually came to be known as the "The Transcendental Club", with original members including Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Ripley, and Bronson Alcott.

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<sup>1</sup> "Immanuel Kant," Michael Rolph, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified July 28 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/>

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist" in *Nature and Selected Essays*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1982), 193.

Although these Bostonians originally came together on the premise of religious discontent, their gatherings quickly expanded and soon took the form of more of a general meeting place for progressive intellectuals in the Boston area. There was no specific protocol to be able to participate in this group. Rather, it attracted a haphazardly expanding crowd of like-minded city dwellers who believed that people were being corrupted by the whims of society, and their discussions revolved around the pursuit of independence and free thought as an antidote to the contaminating nature of mainstream culture.

Over the next four years, The Transcendental Club had around thirty meetings attended by a growing number of upper-middle-class Boston intellectuals, all of whom were disillusioned by conventional American thought of the time and driven by ideas of personal freedom and societal reform.<sup>3</sup> The Transcendentalists are widely known today for their progressive beliefs; they rejected traditional nineteenth-century lines of thinking, calling for abolition and radical changes in government, education, and the workplace. These thinkers made their dissatisfaction with society clear, boldly critiquing its injustices and embracing alternative ways of life.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, there was interest in making these ideas a reality through communal living experiments, and two were ultimately spearheaded by original members George Ripley and Bronson Alcott on Brook and Fruitland farms, respectively, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3.

The Transcendentalists quickly rose to represent the pinnacle of what has been coined the “American Renaissance”, in which literature was embraced as a medium for expressing one’s

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<sup>3</sup> In *Literary Transcendentalism*, Lawrence Buell discusses the origins of the Transcendental movement in more depth. See: Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 7.

<sup>4</sup> “Transcendentalism,” Russell Goodman, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified summer 2019, [plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentalism/](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentalism/).

values.<sup>5</sup> This is because most of the members of the club were highly educated, making the movement more literary than other groups in American history that were oriented around social change. The Transcendentalists' adept literary capabilities were a result of their largely upper-middle class identities that allowed them educational opportunities. Describing the Transcendentalists, Lawrence Buell notes,

The majority were born and reared in the vicinity of Boston. Almost all reached Transcendentalism by way of Unitarianism before they were thirty years old; more than half were at least trained for the Unitarian ministry; almost all the men attended Harvard. Many were from backgrounds of wealth and gentility, though their immediate families were of widely varying economic status; and virtually all were of old New England stock....<sup>6</sup>

One of the most compelling aspects of the Transcendentalist's body of work is the ironic way that their writing criticizes the very systems that allowed them their own educational and intellectual privileges. The Transcendentalist minister Theodore Parker was closely associated with the radical abolitionist John Brown, for example, and popular Transcendentalist literature disdains the social conditions of the time: Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the 19th Century*, Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience", and Orestes Brownson's "The Laboring Classes", to name a few, all argue for increased rights for all people.

The concept of the Protestant Work Ethic is central to understanding the emergence of the Transcendentalists' opinions of work. In the 1830s, the typical New Englander's contribution to an increasingly industrial capitalist economy was seen in meeting their needs through the guiding principles of what Max Weber distinguishes as the Protestant Work Ethic. The notion of "a calling" towards a higher purpose was central to the early New England Puritans' Protestant

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<sup>5</sup> Jeanetta Boswell, *The American Renaissance and the Critics: The Best of a Century in Criticism*, (Wakefield: Longwood Academic, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, 7.

religion and helps to explain why this region was infused with calculated, profit-seeking energy as early as 1632.<sup>7</sup> This connection is supported by Weber's thesis that Protestantism directly stimulated and encouraged capitalism.<sup>8</sup> Weber contends that the ever-present Protestant Work Ethic in America is a product of a long and intentional educational process that took aspects of Puritanical Protestantism and reoriented them towards work, which resulted in the young American nation approaching work "as *if* it were an absolute end in itself, a calling."<sup>9</sup> Weber's argument is central to discussions around work in America, and scholars believe that the Protestant Work Ethic thesis has set a conceptual frame for the majority of theoretical discussions around work since its publication.<sup>10</sup>

The Protestant religion is compatible with the paradigm of capitalism, as activity directed toward profit was embraced with a kind of calling that the individual felt an ethical obligation towards to eventually achieve salvation.<sup>11</sup> One of Marx's main claims in *Capital* is that wealth is ultimately measured by the possession of other people's lives and time, he argues, "But in the capitalist world the appetite for surplus labour appears in the drive for an unlimited extension of the working day."<sup>12</sup> Weber and scholars inspired by his thesis have argued that this particular drive is directly supported by the Protestant Work Ethic since it prescribes constant hard work as

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<sup>7</sup> A capitalist spirit can be identified in the characteristics of early New England colonists. From the beginning, these settlers were hungry to acquire and steal indigenous land so they could turn parcels of land into profitable enterprises. The first settlers were also literally brought to the states under corporate overseers, with the profit-seeking Massachusetts Bay Company and the Virginia Company of London having a deep effect on the mental framework of these early colonists. See:

Thomas Mcraw, *Creating Modern Capitalism: How Entrepreneurs, Companies, and Countries Triumphed in Three Industrial Revolutions*. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Bouma, "Beyond Lenski: A Critical Review of Recent "Protestant Ethic" Research," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 12, no. 2: 141-55.

<sup>9</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (New York: Scribner), 25.

<sup>10</sup> Liana Gorgi and Catherine Marsh, "The Protestant Work Ethic as a Cultural Phenomenon," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 20, no. 7 (1990): 499-51

<sup>11</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, (London: Penguin Classics Edition, 1976), 346.



a commendable act. Thus, this ethic has helped to solidify capitalism as the blueprint of the American nation.

This inherent spirit of capitalism, or “a kind of ethos for the conduct of one's life”, has been rooted in the American psyche since the birth of the nation through the tenets of the Protestant Work Ethic.<sup>13</sup> For example, the aphorisms of Benjamin Franklin that proliferated through the early colonies fervently advise people to be “diligent” and to “not be idle, for time is money”, an attitude towards work and profit that directly reflects Weber’s thesis.<sup>14</sup> New England was flooded with maxims like these in the eighteenth-century by popular figures of the time and were taken quite seriously by the general population, laying the foundation for labor becoming the essence of one’s moral conduct and overall success in life. This mental framework pervaded through the ensuing decades, and by the nineteenth century, the New England workforce had internalized that their occupations were akin to a kind of calling from God. The Protestant Work Ethic thus provides more context for the characteristics from which the Transcendental movement emerged. The centrality of the Protestant Work Ethic to the Transcendentalists’ relationship to work has been noted by scholars. Perry Miller explains how, “Protestant to the core, [the Transcendentalists] turn their protest against what is customarily called the “Protestant ethic”: they refuse to labor in a proper calling, conscientiously cultivate the arts of leisure, and strive to avoid making money”.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, he notes that the Transcendentalists’ writing was “the first outcry of the heart against the materialistic pressures of a business civilization.”

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<sup>13</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Quotations of Benjamin Franklin*, (Bedford, Massachusetts: Applewood Books, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), 11.

Miller's claims reflect how Transcendentalism materialized in a Boston that was changing pace to align with intensifying capitalist pressures.

The Transcendentalists' response to the rise of industrial capitalism in Boston tackled a similar set of questions to Marxists. Although structured quite differently, both groups undertook the task of challenging the current organization of society and offered idealized ways to rearrange and rethink the role of workers. There are further intriguing connections to be found between Transcendentalism and Marxism. Marxism originated in Europe at around the same time the Transcendentalist Club was taking off, with the Communist Manifesto being published in 1848 in Germany. William Prest's comparison of these philosophies notes how, "Both responded, albeit differently, to a common cause, the corruption within religion and the oppression of the state."<sup>16</sup> The literature from these two movements both derives conceptual support from the German philosopher Georg Hegel, who argued that one's necessities must be fulfilled to achieve true freedom. The Transcendentalists fought for a more just, equitable world where everyone's necessities were met through intuition and creativity, while Marxist theory pursues class struggle, materialism, and empiricism.<sup>17</sup> The similar impulses that inspired both Marxism and Transcendentalism are important lines to follow when analyzing the Transcendentalists' progressive opinions about work and labor. While the materialism inherent to Marxism is necessary for contesting the structural conditions workers endure under capitalism, the individualist perspective championed by the Transcendentalists is important for critiquing and transforming the personal experience of the American worker. Implementing different

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<sup>16</sup> Prest's comparisons between these two historical movements provide a concise summary of the ways that these moral philosophies in many ways work in tandem. See:

William Prest, "Transcendentalism and Marxism," last modified March 24 2020, <https://owlcation.com/social-sciences/Transcendentalism-and-Marxism>.

<sup>17</sup> Additional definitions for both Marxism and Transcendentalism can be found in Marx and Engels' "The Communist Manifesto" and Emerson's "The Transcendentalist."

aspects of Transcendentalism's individual and Marxism's collective approaches expands work as a site of imagination and transformation. The rest of this chapter highlights Ralph Waldo Emerson's individualistic approach toward labor, revealing how Transcendentalist perspectives offer a productive accompaniment to Marxist labor theory.

### ***III. Labor and the individual***

Ralph Waldo Emerson is perhaps the most widely known pioneer of the Transcendental movement. Emerson was raised and educated in Boston in the first decades of the nineteenth century, a time of major change in the area. Between 1800 and 1820, Boston's population grew by the tens of thousands and experienced a postwar depression that was soon followed by an economic boom that assisted the rise of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>18</sup> All of these major changes were compressed into the first half of Emerson's life and career and shaped the subjects of his writing and lectures, which focus on a variety of social issues and themes of individual development. Emerson's essays are filled with comments that largely support the role of work in one's life: he believes that labor is the way that a person develops their sense of purpose and finds their place in society and that it enhances one's intuition. He also promotes the innate value in all different kinds of professions, whether it is working with one's hands or mind. While Emerson's opinion on work's relationship to the individual may appear as nothing more than an enthusiastic reflection of the Protestant Work Ethic, my reading of Emerson attempts to unsettle this static line of thinking. Although Emerson was a pro-work moralist, his valorization of all professions and his view of the kind of "calling" that work provides also suggests a form of radical individualism that

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<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed history of Boston between 1800 and 1820, see "An Overview of Massachusetts History to 1820" in *The Colonial Society of Massachusetts Volume 57*.

broadens the possibilities for revolutionizing one's own lived experience. In conversation with Carolyn Maibor's scholarship, my analysis brings forth a new reading of Emerson that highlights the limitations but also the expansive possibilities that can be derived from his thoughts on work.

As discussed in the previous section, the pervasive positive moralization of work is generally associated with the pro-capitalist Protestant Work Ethic. As Kathi Week notes, "The ethic's consistent prescriptions for our identification with and constant devotion to work, its elevation of work as the rightful center of life, and its affirmation of work as an end in itself all help to produce the kinds of workers and the laboring capacities adequate to the contemporary regime of accumulation..."<sup>19</sup> This attitude towards work was inextricably tied to Boston's evolution into a major city during Emerson's lifetime. Writing within this moment, Emerson was thus an ardent believer in the importance of labor. He contends that the experience of working is a part of the process of harnessing value and potential within oneself, which he believes to be a crucial endeavor. His enthusiasm for the self-improving potential of work is seen in statements like, "I hear therefore with joy whatever is beginning to be said of the dignity and necessity of labor to every citizen. There is virtue yet in the hoe and the spade, for learned as well as unlearned hands".<sup>20</sup> In this comment, Emerson embraces the merits of labor while simultaneously articulating the inherent worth that can be found in all of the different kinds of work that are necessary for a society. This includes jobs that are often classified as degrading and denoted to the "unlearned", or the lower classes.

Here, advocacy of labor is also tinged with questions of how we assign social value to different kinds of people, a frequent move in Emerson's well-known essays. In *Labor Pains*, a

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<sup>19</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Trades and Professions" in *Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume II: 1836–1838*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 95.

study on Emerson, Hawthorne, and Alcott's relationship to work, Carolyn Maibor articulates how Emerson's moralization of not just work, but also work done by the working class, was a kind of radical prioritization of the individual: "In "The American Scholar" (1837), for example, [Emerson] says that all men need to have a "primary" relationship "with the work of the world", and he chastises those of the "learned professions" for their lack of appreciation for the "laboring men and women," which causes a breakdown in society."<sup>21</sup> In this essay, Emerson makes clear that there is not a hierarchy of worth in regards to the jobs one holds in society, but that all occupations have an inherent value and can help one best find their self and purpose

Emerson advocates for people trying all of the different kinds of work available to them within society, since he finds use in the benefit of one's profession radiating outward into the community. In his acclaimed "Self Reliance" he contends, "a sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who teams it, farms it, peddles, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always like a cat falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls".<sup>22</sup> Listing farming and working in Congress as options of work in the same sentence is another move that validates a wide variety of occupations, regardless of their place in social or economic hierarchies. It also suggests, even if falsely, that all people can try any occupation. In this way, Emerson's most widely read essays employ individualism as a way to help expand and envision new worlds and possibilities for both one's individual experience and the organization of society.

Henry David Thoreau offers a similar kind of imaginative framework, but outside of the constraints of the market. While Chapter 2 will discuss Thoreau's approach towards work in more

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<sup>21</sup> Carolyn Maibor, *Labor Pains: Emerson, Hawthorne and Alcott on Work and the Woman Question*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), xvii.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance" in *Nature and Selected Essays*, 161.

detail, referencing him in conversation with Emerson shows how both were emphasizing the potential of the individual to be amplified through work, just in different ways. Both Thoreau and Emerson advocate for the specialization of labor that aligns with one's purpose and calling; however, Thoreau believes that this is not possible within the constraints of mainstream society. For Thoreau, one can only find their full potential through labor when they are participating in work that is removed from the market economy. This is partly because of the aspect of leisure that becomes available once removed from the bustle of society, as approaching work in a less demanding way provides more opportunities for understanding the self. In his journals, he notes, "The truly efficient laborer will not crowd his day with work, but will saunter to his task, surrounded by a wide halo of ease and leisure, and then do what he loves best."<sup>23</sup> Although Thoreau approves of doing work to sustain oneself and acknowledges that this kind of work has innate value, he ultimately believes that work done within the capitalist system is corrupted and not worthwhile to engage in. After all, this was his own experience at Walden Pond: "Winter has come unnoticed by me, I have been so busy writing! This is the life most lead in respect to Nature. How different from my habitual one!"<sup>24</sup> For Thoreau, living outside of the whims of the marketplace removed him from the corruptive energy of society and allowed him to truly find himself through his labor, allowing him to both survive in the woods and write enough content for what was to become *Walden*. The imaginative energy that is ingrained within Emerson and Thoreau's approaches to working is an inspiration for how we should orient our mindsets today, as it can help to break down barriers of socially accepted ways of understanding our labor.

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<sup>23</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers: With Introduction*, (New York: Scribner, 1921), 107-108.

<sup>24</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal, Volume 7: 1853-1854*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 80.

The radical and creative calling toward the individual was also attractive to the Transcendentalists' successors. Friedrich Nietzsche frequently cited Emerson as one of the main inspirations for his philosophy, and both thinkers employ the concept of radical individualism as a way to expand one's capacities.<sup>25</sup> In his seminal work *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche emphasizes the importance of reclaiming ourselves through making our conditions of existence. Emerson makes a similar kind of move in much of his writing; Thomas Allen contends that one of Emerson's central goals was to "foster a more authentic condition of being among the American people".<sup>26</sup> In "Self Reliance" he fervently claims, "I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions."<sup>27</sup> This kind of impulse is explicitly reflected in Nietzsche, as his philosophy is concerned with how we assign value and calls for a new system of value-making. Allen notes, "Comparing Nietzsche's philosophy with Emerson's has a heuristic value, helping to reveal the kinds of imaginative vehicles for working through these problems that Emerson's philosophy had made possible."<sup>28</sup> Looking at Emerson's influence on Nietzsche emphasizes the sweeping possibilities that can be realized through his writing.

Emerson's pro-work approach also positions labor as a specific pursuit that can bridge class divides and bring more people together under a common goal. In his essay "Trades and Professions", Emerson contends that the rise of industrialism has the potential to heighten the connections between different kinds of people: "The constant progress of civilization...serves among other good purposes mainly these; to make men acquainted with each other by commerce, and to make labor attractive, by allowing each to do what he can, and therefore what he likes

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<sup>25</sup> For more on connections between Emerson and Nietzsche, see Chapter 5, "Emerson's Deep Democracy", in Thomas Allen, *A Republic in Time: Temporality and Social Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Allen, *A Republic in Time*, 209.

<sup>27</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance" in *Nature and Selected Essays*, 150.

<sup>28</sup> Allen, *A Republic in Time*, 200.

best.”<sup>29</sup> Although this certainly reads as capitalist in spirit, for Emerson, industrialization provided new opportunities for people to come together and generate better conditions for themselves and their communities:

Writing contemporaneously with Karl Marx, Emerson too is dismayed by the degradation and commodification of the worker he sees. Emerson’s remedy for the alienation of the worker, however, is not to get rid of the division of labor, but to encourage it to occur naturally, by insisting that each individual follow his or her innate calling, and by increasing the interconnections of the workers.”<sup>30</sup>

Here, Maibor draws out the radicalism inherent within Emerson’s pro-work leanings, demonstrating how work is a site for all people to cultivate their abilities and engage with the world and their communities in new ways. This kind of spirit can be seen as participating in the logic of the Protestant Work Ethic through the way that it romanticizes the power of work as an agent for people to realize their futures. However, there is a central caveat: Emerson’s valorization of work is also an effort to connect people and bridge differences across identities, which was a necessary antidote to the rise of capitalism.

While Emerson’s romanticization of all professions regardless of their culturally mediated “worth” provides an expansive lens through which to reimagine work, it also has clear limitations. Statements such as, “So that the entire working population of the earth, the weavers, fishermen, tanners, farmers, tinmen, smiths, stone cutters, joiners, grocers, are students all of nature and learning in her temple the Sanskrit or sacred cipher whose use is now merely commodious but whose higher sense they will by and by learn and find it a progressive key” are another example of Emerson advocating for the worth of all kinds of occupations.<sup>31</sup> However, these kinds of assertions

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<sup>29</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Trades and Professions” in *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Volume II, 1836-1838*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 128.

<sup>30</sup> Maibor, *Labor Pains*, 110.

<sup>31</sup> Emerson, “Trades and Professions,” 191.



also expose a key problem: Emerson's ardent belief in manual labor's potential when he has never participated in it as a career and only for leisure. A similar problem is seen when Thoreau advocates for a more "uncomplicated" kind of labor in comments like, "Farming and shopkeeping and working at a trade or profession are all odious to me. I should relish getting my living in a simple, primitive fashion..."<sup>32</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter 3, Nathaniel Hawthorne nods to this in his satirical novel *The Blithedale Romance*. Maibor notes, "For Hawthorne and the other Brook Farmers, the pressure of depending upon the success of their manual labor for financial survival ultimately saps rather than inspires their creative and intellectual energies."<sup>33</sup> Identifying this shortcoming is necessary for a contemporary analysis of Emerson and Thoreau.

This romanticization of certain kinds of labor traditionally demarcated to the lower classes also does not acknowledge how for many, engaging in these occupations is their only option. As Maibor indicates, "If our vocations provide us with the basis for our knowledge of the world, our ethical education and our self-development, as well as the means through which we engage in and contribute to society, where does this leave the women of Emerson's day, given that they were barred from most of the vocations?"<sup>34</sup> Following this logic in 2022, what can Emerson's philosophy realistically provide for marginalized groups who do not have the same access to all kinds of work? Immigrant laborers, the incarcerated, and countless other Americans do not have options for work in the way a person with Emerson's identity does, and because of their personal lived experiences, it is often impossible for an individual's work to be inflicted with the kind of potential that Emerson describes.

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<sup>32</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau Vol. VIII, 184*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2002), 7-8.

<sup>33</sup> Maibor, *Labor Pains*, 58.

<sup>34</sup> Maibor, *Labor Pains*, 32.

#### *IV. New Possibilities*

While in some ways unrealistic and limited, my reading displays how Emerson's attitude towards work is also expansive with potential: Emerson asks his readers what possibilities become available when we imagine a world in which all people have the unbounded opportunity to follow their interests, or "callings" for their occupations. Thoreau also leans into this imaginative framework, advocating for how labor can become desirable when one has more control over the conditions of their work. New conceptions of work can be drawn from the way that Emerson and Thoreau provide a refreshing reframing of personal values, as they provide the groundwork for beginning to imagine the possibilities of new realities.

Emerson contends that the realities we imagine for ourselves must always be that which lies beyond our constructions, and suggests that work can harness joy, purpose, and a more robust understanding of the society that one operates within, ultimately contributing to the formation of oneself. Meanwhile, Thoreau thinks about how to value the inherent worth of labor when it is outside of the constructions of the capitalist market. These strains of thought complicate and ask new questions about how to evaluate work in the present moment, which I will continue to deconstruct in the following chapters. These two different approaches of work are both rooted in individual intuition, positioning Transcendentalist approaches the individual's role in value formations as productive additions to Marxist conceptions of labor. As David Graber makes clear, "Marx's theory of value was above all a way of asking the following question: assuming that we do collectively make our world, that we collectively remake it daily, then why is it that we

somehow end up creating a world that few of us particularly like, most find unjust, and over which no one feels they have any ultimate control?”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> David Graeber, “It Is Value That Brings Universes into Being,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 2 (2013): 222.

## Chapter 2

### *Necessary Conditions for Change: Thoreau and the Politics of Work*

*“There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living. All great enterprises are self-supporting. The poet, for instance, must sustain his body by his poetry, as a steam planing-mill feeds its boilers with the shavings it makes. You must get your living by loving.”*

Henry David Thoreau, “Life Without Principle.”

#### ***I. Boston and the influx of industry***

The Boston area in the 1830s was largely defined by the rise of industrial capitalism. This new economic system disrupted existing ways of life, sweeping aside the present societal formations to bolster the power of the market. The Transcendentalist movement arose in tandem with the emergence of this new economic paradigm. At the same moment that industrial capitalism was reorganizing the way people lived, the Transcendentalists were writing and enacting their living experiments. Thus, much of the Transcendentalists' writing is punctuated with reflections on how industrialization was reshaping the way that people navigated the world, with many of these reflections a direct reaction to the way that this shift affected individual and collective ways of being.

This chapter explores how the rise of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century created new conditions that inspired social change, situating Transcendental theory as a reaction to this new economic paradigm. I begin by grounding my argument in theory, employing the concept “time-space compression” to discuss how new technologies such as the railroad altered

understandings of work and life during this period. This term helps to provide historical context for changes in work that occur both in the nineteenth century and today, and I draw parallels between these two time periods to display how Transcendental philosophy can inspire inclusive and equitable work politics in the contemporary moment. In the second part of the chapter, I analyze primary source texts as a reaction to newly emerging temporalities and technologies. Henry David Thoreau is one of the Transcendentalists whose writing directly addresses the rapidly changing conditions of time and space that were occurring around him. I show how resonant Thoreau's thinking remains today by looking at parts of his radical essay "Life Without Principle" and introduce three major ways that he writes back against the rise of industrial capitalism in his major publication, *Walden*, to position Thoreau's writing as a source of inspiration for our relations with work under capitalism today.

## ***II. The Rising Power of the Clock in the Nineteenth Century***

### ***i. Time-space compression***

The annihilation of time and space, or "time-space compression", is a concept that is central to understanding the conditions that create new reckonings with work. These new conditions were apparent both while the Transcendentalists were writing and at present as we continue to grapple with a global pandemic. The origin of "the annihilation of time and space" is found in an Alexander Pope poem:

Ye Gods! annihilate but space and time

And make two lovers happy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Pope, et.al, *The Art of Sinking in Poetry; Martinus Scriblerus' Peri Bathous*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968).

However, it was not until 1858 that time-space compression was used as a term in itself. First used by Karl Marx in 1858 in his book *Grundrisse*, to take scholar Rebecca Solnit's definition it "most directly means accelerating communication and transportation".<sup>2</sup> David Harvey expands on this, describing time-space compression as "processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves."<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth century, these processes were a result of the new technologies that coupled the rise of industrialization. Technology allowed the scale of commodity production to quickly expand and directly facilitated the growth of industrial society. The process of time-space compression that resulted from these technologies was important for Marx's examinations of the capitalist mode of production, as he was interested in the way that spatial and temporal changes served to boost the power of capital.<sup>4</sup>

Time-space compression arose in tandem with the arrival of clock time as a major organizing force in society, as the growing scale of industrial processes created new conditions where clocks became necessary for the first time. Michael O'Malley's study on the history of American time looks in-depth at how this process unfolded:

Industrialization and immigration shifted accustomed class relations; new technologies of communication and transportation disrupted market patterns and local economies. The same social and economic pressures that led to religious revivals, to utopian communities, to temperance movements, to reformations in the system of prison,

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Solnit, "The Annihilation of Time and Space," *New England Review* 24, no.1 (2003): 11.

<sup>3</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 240.

<sup>4</sup> Marxist scholar David Harvey defines capital as the process of reproducing social life through commodity production that restlessly and ceaselessly transforms the society within which it is embedded. See: Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 343

asylums, and schools, brought with them reorganizations in the systems of time governing labor and public life.<sup>5</sup>

O'Malley's description helps explain how many of the social changes occurring at this moment were a result of the rising power of industrial capitalism and the new technologies and understandings of time that came with it. Thomas Allen's *A Republic in Time* also explores how people's relationship to time was changing in the nineteenth century. Allen's research considers how increasing attention to clock time was a central way that people came to navigate the materializing industrial world, suggesting that clock time rose in significance alongside the new cultural, economic, and social arrangements that were emerging during this period.

## ***ii. The Railroad***

Allen explains that throughout history "advances in technology have made it possible to measure time more accurately, and this greater accuracy has in turn facilitated greater productivity, more efficient transportation networks, and the punctuality so important to modern business."<sup>6</sup> The railroad, which emerged in New England at the time that the Transcendentalists were writing, is perhaps the most explicit example of a technological advancement that facilitated time-space compression. The arrival of the steam engine on the East Coast was key to expanding and increasing the project of industry. Solnit describes how, "The Industrial Revolution preceded railroads, but railroads magnified its effects and possibilities unfathomably, and these roaring, puffing machines came to see that revolution incarnate."<sup>7</sup> Railroads were

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<sup>5</sup> Michael O'Malley, *Keeping Watch: A History of American Time*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, *A Republic in Time*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Solnit argues that the railroad expanded the power of industrial capitalism through the way that it standardized and commodified human experience. As goods began to travel farther than ever before, people's values and consumption habits became more homogenized.

Solnit, "The Annihilation of Time and Space," 10.

being built and chartered at an unprecedented scale in the 1830s: in this decade multiple rail lines were either chartered, constructed, or opened in Boston and its surrounding areas.

Opening in 1836, the Boston & Maine Railroad Corporation (B&M) was a large company that eventually maintained over two thousand miles of track throughout New England. B&M directly aided the growth of New England's manufacturing cities and eliminated isolated country life for many communities.<sup>8</sup> The echoes of the railroad's rising power reverberate deeply through Transcendental thought, as it was one of the effects of industrialization that was physically apparent every day across New England. Thoreau began living at Walden Pond in 1845, just a year after the Fitchburg Railroad opened for service directly behind the pond in Concord, and by the time Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, the railroad had been cemented as a central figure in of modern society:

“Through gale or calm, now swift, now slack, yet steadily careering;  
Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent”<sup>9</sup>

The railroad primed people to become adherent to a more time-sensitive way of life, as a train's arrival and departure from the station were regimented by specific schedules. These schedules were one way that people grew to be more reliant on clock time to structure their daily lives, as they learned to correlate the passage of time with the presence of the trains. Solnit describes how “It was these [industrial] factories and railroads that made knowing the exact time important, that launched the modern world of schedules and bustle.”<sup>10</sup> Thoreau also directly

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<sup>8</sup> The resources at the Boston & Maine Railroad Historical Society provide an excellent overview of a railroad corporation that created New England's connectivity and discusses in more detail how the B&M railroad connected communities of people and expanded commerce. See:

“Archives,” *Boston & Maine Railroad Historical Society*, last modified 2021, [www.bmrrhs.org/history-of-the-b-and-m-railroad](http://www.bmrrhs.org/history-of-the-b-and-m-railroad).

<sup>9</sup> Walt Whitman, “To a Locomotive in Winter” in *Leaves of Grass*, (New York: Norton and Company, 1973), 472.

<sup>10</sup>Solnit, “The Annihilation of Time and Space,” 16.



comments on this in *Walden*: “[Trains] go and come with such regularity and precision, and their whistle can be heard so far, that the farmers set their clocks by them, and thus one well-conducted institution regulates a whole country. Have not men improved somewhat in punctuality since the railroad was invented?”<sup>11</sup> Railroads were a crucial asset to the power of industrial capitalism, as they quickly created markets for different industries and allowed the flow of capital to proliferate. They are thus an example of a technology that creates time-space compression: in narrowing distances and drastically converting natural spaces, they ushered in a new way of life to New England in which “time and space both get defined through the organization of social practices fundamental to commodity production.”<sup>12</sup>

In his influential essay “Time, Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” E.P. Thompson offers one of the most precise commentaries on how new understandings of temporality precipitated concrete changes within the human mind. Thompson argues that the reorganization of time was the primary stimulus that modified people to be fit to work in a capitalist system. As a powerful technological force, the railroad disrupted senses of time that were previously attuned to natural rhythms and increased people’s reliance on regimented clock time. Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* discusses the public’s immediate infatuation with the new concept of “the machine” during this periods, and how the railroad was one of these machines, or technologies, that had the most direct impact on people: “If the landscape happens to be wild or uncultivated, and if the observer is a man who knows what it means to live by physical labor, the [railroad’s] effect will be even more dramatic and the meaning more obvious.” The railroad also taught people to internalize clock time relatively seamlessly, because “Anyone can understand

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<sup>11</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 96.

<sup>12</sup> Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 239.

[the railroad], and of course, that is just the point: it is the obviousness and simplicity of the machine as a symbol of progress that accounts for its astonishing power.”<sup>13</sup>

The railroad explicitly assisted people’s reliance on time measured through the clock. Since all of the trains followed specific schedules, the particular presence or absence of a train became a reliable way to measure the passage of time throughout the day. This reliance was a large contributor to the creation of the industrial laborer, as these workers were required to complete specific orders that followed a timed schedule. Before the rise of industrialism, labor was task-oriented, with each day lengthening or contracting according to the specific task.<sup>14</sup> Thompson argues that this kind of work was potentially the most humanly comprehensible way of understanding time: “Before the new technologies and ideas, time was a river in which human beings were immersed, moving steadily on the current, never faster than the speeds of nature - of currents, of wind, of muscles.”<sup>15</sup> However, new industrial technologies produced new ways of working, jolting time away from its intrinsic connection to natural cycles.

If the railroad helped introduce people to a new way of internalizing time, the industrial factory cemented it. What Thompson calls “time-discipline”<sup>16</sup> was apparent in nineteenth-century factories, as these were workplaces that directly created the experience of “time-

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<sup>13</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 192.

<sup>14</sup> Task-oriented labor is best seen in farm-work: depending on the season, specific work tasks vary immensely. In the spring, planting is long, and in the fall and summer the harvest requires different hours depending on the crop and month. In the winter, workdays are shorter and consist of entirely different tasks.

<sup>15</sup> E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present* 38 no. 1, (1967): 80.

<sup>16</sup> E.P. Thompson’s “Time, Work- Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” published in 1967 pioneered “time discipline” as a field of study in sociology and anthropology. Grounded in Marxist theory, Thompson contends in this essay that abiding by clock-time was produced by the European industrial revolution and claims that industrial capitalism would not have been possible without the simultaneous force of time and work discipline in the workplace.

measurement as a means of labour exploitation.”<sup>17</sup> Factory work disposed of the irregularity that was previously characteristic of task-oriented labor, as work hours were instead strictly regulated by a higher authority’s timekeeping. Thompson highlights how this new kind of work created the phenomenon of time becoming a means of ownership and exploitation; the ability to possess time in a factory setting quickly began to be equated with control. He explains, “It was exactly in those industries- the textile mills and the engineering workshops- where the new time-discipline was most rigorously imposed, that the contest over time became most intense.”<sup>18</sup> This reflects Marx’s claim that technology facilitates exploitation for the means of capital, he contends, “With capital something in technology changes, then... [technologies are] no longer tools, but entities that use us for labor.”<sup>19</sup> Clock-time quickly became a way to exploit laborers, as it created the ability to regiment people and adhere them to specific schedules and ways of life that revolved around the workday. Both the railroad and machines in industrial factories were technologies that enforced clock time in a way that allowed for increased labor exploitation.

Thompson's articulation of time-space compression shows how the new strictures of clock time entailed a profound, almost total restructuring of human life to serve a capitalist paradigm. The rapid adoption of clock-time into life made people have less power over the conditions of their labor and made it far easier for their work to be exploited. While this may seem pessimistic, scholars like David Harvey emphasize how the surfacing of these conditions can serve to spark resistance and change. He argues that “The history of social change is in part captured by the history of the conceptions of space and time...Furthermore, any project to

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<sup>17</sup> Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” 80.

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” 86.

<sup>19</sup> Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 347.

transform society must grasp the complex nettle of the transformation of spatial and temporal conceptions and practices.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, shifting understandings of time and space in a given moment are often a stimulus for social change, as they produce new tensions and resistances. Harvey argues that although they cannot fully change the reality of living under capitalism, individual resistance to intense time-space compression can produce images and experiments of new worlds, which can be useful on a smaller scale.

This assertion provides an interesting angle through which to analyze the boldness of the Transcendentalists’ social theory. Harvey claims: “And from time to time these individual resistances can coalesce into social movements with the aim of liberating space and time from their current materializations and constructing an alternative kind of society in which value, time and money are understood in new and quite different ways.”<sup>21</sup> Harvey’s assertion applies to much of the thought that set the Transcendentalists apart as progressive thinkers of their time. This was a movement that arose from people coming together to discuss their frustrations and imaginations of different social arrangements that would allow people to live better, fuller lives that were not regulated by the demands of Boston’s economic goals. The Transcendentalists’ social critiques and experiments can thus be situated as a direct response to living in a rapidly industrializing America.

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<sup>20</sup> Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 218.

<sup>21</sup> Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 238.

### *III. Thoreau's Response to Time-Space Compression*

#### *i. Intoxicated by the machine*

A clear example of this kind of response can be seen in Henry David Thoreau, whose experiment at Walden Pond as well as the radical views he expresses in his essays were a form of individual resistance to the changing conditions of time and space occurring around him.

Thoreau's writing is pervaded with comments on the acceleration of the general pace of life in the nineteenth century and is an example of an explicit reaction to societal change that remains applicable in the present moment. The essay "Life Without Principle" can be read as a culmination of Thoreau's radical philosophy. Written at the end of his life and originally delivered as a lecture in Providence, it was published in essay form posthumously.<sup>22</sup> Thoreau's principal aim in this piece is to reorient his reader's conceptions of value, as his essay emphasizes how the rise of industrial capitalism was negatively influencing nineteenth-century Americans. Thoreau maintains that the changing landscape he was experiencing in and around him was a destructive symptom of the industrial era and condemns how people seemed to be embracing these changes. The main new technological force that Thoreau critiques in "Life Without Principle" is the railroad, as he was suspicious of the way that the time-space compression it produced affected people's orientation of time and in turn the way that they structured their lives.

While Leo Marx's scholarship explores the public's fascination with the railroad and other machines, Michael O'Malley notes that people living during this time were also aware of

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<sup>22</sup> A list and outline of Thoreau's famous lectures is found in: David Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

the more sinister side of these technologies. He discusses how the railroad was also known for producing cynical reactions: "Railroad time reorganized public time to suit the needs of commerce. In the process it exposed both a deep seated ambivalence about this new public time and a wide range of objections to its implications."<sup>23</sup> "Life Without Principle " is an example of a negative reaction to the way that the railroad was influencing how much time and energy people devoted to working. Thoreau claims, "This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work."<sup>24</sup> Here, Thoreau paints the railroad as a constant disruptive entity, a machine that carries enough force to unsettle the natural rhythms of life. He comments on the disorienting effect that was a symptom of the constant flow of trains in and around him, and argues that the rail network's ability to continually run with a kind of severe, incessant vigor has troubling implications.

In addition to adjusting how much energy was put into working, Thoreau also comments on how the railroad changed the amount of energy people invested in their local landscapes and communities. In his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau was struck by how his neighbor's mindsets were expanding outwards. They were less invested in cultivating the places in and around them, instead prioritizing what he felt were more artificial values rooted in urban innovation: "We are provincial, because we do not find at home our standards; because we do not worship truth, but the reflection of truth; because we are warped and narrowed by an

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<sup>23</sup> O'Malley, *Keeping Watch: A History of American Time*, 98.

<sup>24</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Life without Principle," *The Atlantic*, October 1863.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1863/10/life-without-principle/542217/>

exclusive devotion to trade and commerce and manufactures and agriculture and the like, which are but means, and not the end.”<sup>25</sup> These sentiments display Thoreau’s overt concern that the time-space compression produced by industrialization was contaminating people’s moral principles.

Thomas Allen’s research reflects this, as he explains how the newfound adherence to the clock in rural areas was pushing people outside of their local community networks for the first time: “By consuming time, regulating their domestic lives according to reified standards of temporal economy, middle-class Americans brought the market into their bodies while simultaneously abstracting themselves outward into the market and the modern nation.”<sup>26</sup> The new presence of clock time powerfully realigned social imaginaries as the concept of “progress” rooted in the market began to take hold of the cultural psyche. I argue that Thoreau’s living experiment at Walden Pond can be read as an explicit protest against the new growth-oriented mindsets people around him were developing in response to changing understandings of temporality.

## *ii. A new style of living*

The following discussion analyzes how Thoreau intentionally rejects mainstream Boston’s industrial capitalist mindset by refusing certain lifestyle choices and opting instead for different modes of being. *Walden*, an account of a living experiment unconfined by societal expectations, is infamous for its meditations on solitude, presence, and freedom. Read through a Marxist lens alongside David Harvey, Thoreau’s sentiments in *Walden* are a form of concrete

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<sup>25</sup> Thoreau, “Life without Principle,” 8.

<sup>26</sup> Allen, *A Republic in Time*, 116.

resistance: they exemplify a personal relationship to work and place unconfined by the constraints of the time-space compression. My reading of *Walden* argues that Thoreau's undertakings at Walden Pond acted as a form of protest against the advent of time-space compression in antebellum America.

In *Walden*, Thoreau reflects on the state of society through a lens that directly opposes industrial capitalism. This attitude is a result of the physical reality that he was experiencing on the banks of Walden Pond, as he was surprised by how little he was able to escape the sway of industrialization even when he had intentionally removed himself from its grip. Studying *Walden* as a commentary on shifting temporalities and the transition to modernity in the nineteenth century, Benjamin Reiss notes, "The factory bells wake workers and those in surrounding areas in the world he has left behind, but at Walden, where trains come whipping through the woods, Thoreau still cannot escape the encroachment of industrial time."<sup>27</sup> Similar to "Life Without Principle", warnings about the force of the railroad and other new technologies are sprinkled throughout *Walden*. Thoreau notes, "To do things "railroad fashion" is now the byword; and it is worth the while to be warned so often and so sincerely by any power to get off its track."<sup>28</sup> Many of the comments throughout the book also criticize the way that society has heedlessly embraced a faster pace of life: "As with our colleges, so with a hundred "modern improvements;" there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance."<sup>29</sup> In these moments, Thoreau rejects the popular moral framework of his era, instead positing that the innovations creating this new moment of time-space compression are more sinister than they appear.

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<sup>27</sup> Benjamin Reiss. "Sleeping at Walden Pond: Thoreau, Abnormal Temporality, and the Modern Body," *American Literature* 85, no. 1 (2013): 11.

<sup>28</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, (New York: Signet Classics, 1999), 97.

<sup>29</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 43.



Using this reality as a call to action, Thoreau advocates for a new kind of politics that refuses the prioritization of economic growth and commodity production:

The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are, all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land' and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast.<sup>30</sup>

Through engaging in self-directed work and making detailed observations of the natural world, Thoreau shows that there is a way of living that does not align with the “superficial” and “unwieldy” characteristics of his rapidly modernizing country, rejecting the newfound values of the American nation through the way that he intentionally conducts his life at *Walden*. Thoreau’s actions thus serve as a clear example of individual resistance, and his intentional lifestyle choices directly juxtapose the chaos of industrial society.

One central way that Thoreau participated in resistance was by establishing a robust landscape literacy of the natural spaces in and around him. Landscape literacy is the ability to read landscapes and the stories they tell; similarly to verbal literacy, it is “a cultural practice that entails both understanding the world and transforming it.”<sup>31</sup> Acquiring a deep landscape literacy of Walden Woods by learning about the history and natural cycles of the land is one way that

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<sup>30</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 175.

<sup>31</sup> Anne Spirn developed the concept of landscape literacy through an environmental justice project in West Philadelphia’s Mill Creek watershed and neighborhood. This neighborhood is one of the poorest in the city, and Spirn taught students in the neighborhood to read the landscape through thinking about the creek in the past and envisioning what the space would look like in the future. This was a way they traced its past, deciphered its stories, and told their stories about its future. See:

Anne Spirn, *The West Philadelphia Landscape Plan: A Framework for Action*, (Philadelphia: Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Pennsylvania, 1991), and West Philadelphia Landscape Project, “Landscape Literacy,” WPLP, last modified 2021, <https://wplp.net/library/2012/projects/landscapeliteracy.html#>

Thoreau reclaimed the concepts of time and space for himself, as these practices required a specific form of attention that directly subverted the mental capacities required of industrial workers. Thoreau spent his time experiencing the world differently by creating an intimate relationship with the physical location that he was in through several different mediums, which allowed him to reject society's conceptions of productivity and standardized clock time.

The first deliberate way that Thoreau acquired landscape literacy was through learning in-depth about the people who had inhabited Walden woods before he began his living experiment there. A specific population that he writes about in *Walden* are Black former slaves, many of whom still lived as squatters in the woods surrounding his small cabin by the time he arrived in 1845. In her research on the Black population in Concord, Elise Lemire comments on the impact that these people had on Thoreau:

But for Thoreau, it was the marks left on the landscape by the former slaves and other outcasts as much as the plants and animals that made these areas so interesting and he thus devotes a section of Walden to their memory. That chapter, "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors," makes the case that the green spaces in Concord today are not solely products of nature.<sup>32</sup>

Readers are often surprised to learn that Thoreau devotes almost an entire chapter of *Walden* to these former inhabitants. However, the meticulous process of learning these people's histories not only allowed him to form a closer relationship with his surroundings but also was a concrete political act. Engaging with the history of a specific location in this way was rare at this time, as a consequence of industrial capitalism was that workers were no longer supposed to think about the calculated, often violent history that had created their current conditions. This phenomenon is

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<sup>32</sup> Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 11.

called “false consciousness”, a concept derived from Marxist theories of social class. False consciousness occurs when the working classes’ mental representations of the social relations around them conceal or obscure the realities of subordination, exploitation, and domination those relations embody.<sup>33</sup> As an outspoken abolitionist, Thoreau’s commentary about how the former Black inhabitants shaped these woods was a distinctly progressive undertaking.

In learning more about the people that came before him, Thoreau could also more clearly understand why the woods had evolved to their current state. He was aware of how this specific historical knowledge adjusted how he understood Walden woods. One of the slaves that Thoreau discusses is Cato Ingraham, whose owner had built him a separate house in the woods to dwell in outside of his larger residence in Concord Village. He remarks that the dilapidated cellar Cato once lived in had turned into a hole that was filled with two plant species: “smooth sumac” or “*Rhus glabra*” and “goldenrod” or “*Solidago stricta*.”<sup>34</sup> Thoreau suggests that these plants were able to thrive in this particular space in the woods because of the physical environment that was created by the remnants of Cato’s former home. Through openly discussing the history of the woods, these musings again push against the false consciousness that owners of production ingrained within the industrial working class.

Thoreau discusses how the traces left by the inhabitants of the woods enhanced the process of ecological succession, which is the way that the structure of a natural community changes over time.<sup>35</sup> He observes: “Now only a dent in the earth marks the site of these

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<sup>33</sup> A more thorough outline of Marx’s “false consciousness” is found here: “False Consciousness.” Understanding Society, University of Michigan, Daniel Little, last modified in 2021, [www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~delittle/iess%20false%20consciousness%20V2.htm](http://www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~delittle/iess%20false%20consciousness%20V2.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 210.

<sup>35</sup> See Kurt Kehr’s essay on “Ecological Changes in the Landscape of Henry David Thoreau” for more specific details on how ecological succession has changed Walden woods over time:

dwellings, with buried cellar stones, and strawberries, raspberries, thimble-berries, hazel-bushes, and sumachs growing in the sunny sward there; some pitch-pine or gnarled oak occupies what was the chimney nook, and a sweet-scented black-birch, perhaps, waves where the door-stone was...”<sup>36</sup> Intimately knowing about these peoples’ lives was one way for Thoreau to understand how manmade remnants affected the natural processes of the woods. This intentional devotion to discerning how the environment around him evolved over the years engages a specific mode of experiencing the world that engages with the history of a place and the passage of time. This form of attention is important in the way that it directly and purposefully rejects the rising pressures of industrial capitalism.

A second way that Thoreau participates in landscape literacy as an act of resistance in *Walden* is through the acute attention he gives to the changing of the seasons. In doing so, he once again observes time in a way that is different from what was being demanded by industrial life, dismissing the compliance to clock-time required by the advent of the railroad and the factory system. Instead, Thoreau thinks about the way that the world progressed and changed through an ecologically attuned lens. He notes that this was a part of his decision to undergo this kind of living experiment: “One attraction in coming to the woods to live was that I should have leisure and opportunity to see the spring come in.”<sup>37</sup> In cultivating this kind of observational practice, Thoreau created another concrete way to live a life outside of the values of industrial society.

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Kurt Kehr, “Walden Three: Ecological Changes in the Landscape of Henry David Thoreau,” *Journal of Forest History* 27, no. 1 (1983): 28–33.

<sup>36</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 214.

<sup>37</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 245.

Thoreau fully directs his attention to the changing of the seasons through the way that he writes about Walden Pond itself. He claims that “The phenomena of the world take place every day in a pond on a small scale,” discussing a kind of observation that is highly attuned to the detailed processes of nature.<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Reiss suggests that this kind of natural monitoring exemplifies how Thoreau was intentionally thinking about time, contending that “*Walden* is an artifact of heightened temporal consciousness in an age of capitalist conquest of time and space.”<sup>39</sup> This specific application of attention is continued in the meticulous way that Thoreau tracks and records the pond’s natural cycles. In doing so, he creates a form of work that engages and prioritizes the natural passage of time over any other form of measurement. Astute notes about when the ice in Walden Pond melted were one of the ways that Thoreau engages in a kind of work that directly challenges the disciplined clock-time enforced by capitalism. He records this data in *Walden*: “In 1845 Walden was first completely open on the 1st of April; in ’46, the 25th of March; in ’47, the 8th of April; in ’51, the 28th of March; in ’52, the 18th of April; in ’53, the 23d of March; in ’54, about the 7th of April.”<sup>40</sup> These detailed nature logs are artifacts that simultaneously provide an ecological service to the community and occupy new ways of thinking about work and time.

In addition to these two examples of landscape literacy, another explicit form of resistance is seen in the deliberate moments that Thoreau spends doing nothing during his stay. Interspersed throughout *Walden*, these performances of genuine leisure again model a way of living that withstands the nonstop motion of industrial life:

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<sup>38</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 244.

<sup>39</sup> Reiss, “Sleeping at Walden Pond: Thoreau, Abnormal Temporality, and the Modern Body,” 11.

<sup>40</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 246.

Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sing around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time (91).

Thoreau was able to participate in these extended acts of leisure because he was intentionally not working: “[Thoreau’s] liberation from work means he has more time—more “of what I will call life”—at his disposal.”<sup>41</sup> The benefits that can be found through the act of genuinely doing nothing have been reconstructed as a political act by Jenny Odell, who argues that “But beyond self-care and the ability to (really) listen, the practice of doing nothing has something broader to offer us: an antidote to the rhetoric of growth.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, Thoreau’s moments of leisure are inherently anti-capitalist due to the way that they reject efficiency. He candidly addresses the fact that his days of leisure did not contain any productive output: “The day advanced as if to light some work of mine; it was morning, and lo, now it is evening, and nothing memorable is accomplished... I silently smiled at my incessant good fortune.”<sup>43</sup> He continues to argue for the necessity of these moments by repeatedly detailing the inherent worth they provide.

Thoreau’s literary forms of resistance provide a tangible example of a rejection of time-space compression and industrial capitalism. These examples of landscape literacy and deliberate leisure are powerful in the way that they employ specific kinds of relationships to attention and remain important tools to look towards today as three ways to refuse modern expectations of work. However, there are also limitations to Thoreau’s philosophy. A progressive analysis of the

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<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Malesic, “Henry David Thoreau's Anti-Work Spirituality and a New Theological Ethic of Work,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 45, no. 2 (2017): 318.

<sup>42</sup> Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2019), 25.

<sup>43</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 92.

Transcendentalists would not be sufficient without acknowledging positionality. Thoreau's identity as a white, Harvard-educated man who grew up with economic security is what allowed him to engage with the world in the way that he did during this time. This economic privilege is especially seen through the way that Thoreau was able to incorporate leisure as an act of resistance into his life: the ability to leisure necessitates having one's economic and other needs met, a freedom that is not available for most of America. *Walden* can help us realize that the moments of leisure Thoreau experiences should not only be a possibility for a certain population but that a world where everyone has intentional time for rest should be a reality. The importance of engaging in free time or leisure is thus yet another concrete lesson Thoreau puts forth in his writing that remains relevant today.

#### ***IV. Contemporary connections***

I opened this chapter by bringing forth a connection between the nineteenth century and the present day, suggesting that time-space compression occurring in both moments makes Transcendentalist texts such as *Walden* a particularly notable resource for our lives today. At present, there is a dire need for this kind of resource, as the pandemic has continued to increase expectations of productivity and created new sites of exploitation through work. For those whose work was moved to a remote setting, a lack of distinction between the workplace and the home drastically erodes boundaries between work and leisure. In many cases, this has made it far more difficult to be truly "off the clock", which collapses the separation between work and the rest of one's life. Similar to what people were experiencing during the time of the Transcendentalists, this contemporary form of time-space compression creates new internalizations of time that tether us dangerously closer to work as an all-consuming life force.

Disintegrating the boundary between one's home and workplace has been made possible by recent technological innovations such as Zoom and Slack that exploded in usage over the country when the pandemic hit. A study on working from home by Stanford University that looked at 16,000 workers over nine months found that working from home increased people's "productivity" by 13%, which was in part attributed to fewer breaks and sick days.<sup>44</sup> Prodoscore, a software intelligence company that is contracted by businesses to produce "productivity scores" of worker's activity through machine learning and AI technology, is another interesting source for looking at the way the pandemic has changed people's relationship to work. Using 100 million data points from 30,000 United States Prodoscore users during March and April of 2020, the company compared that data to the same period in 2019. This year-long period showed a general increase in what they define as "productivity": work-related email activity and telephone calls were up fifty-seven and two hundred thirty percent, respectively.<sup>45</sup> This data shows how technology's ability to change time and space has once again increased the exploitation of people's labor. The influx of technology necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic is thus a present-day example of time-space compression, as working from home further collapses the already thin barriers between "work" and "leisure" in our late-capitalist society.

Meanwhile, "essential workers" who have worked in-person jobs throughout the pandemic have had their health, safety, and personal lives continuously undermined to regain the economic losses the global supply chain has suffered. People have been required to work more

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<sup>44</sup> This data is derived from a study that explored trends at a 16,000-employee Chinese travel agency company. See: Bloom, Nicholas, et. al, "Does Working from Home Work? Evidence from a Chinese Experiment," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 130, no, 1 (February 2015): 165–218.

<sup>45</sup> "Prodoscore Research from March/April 2020: Productivity Has Increased, Led By Remote Workers," Business Wire, last modified May 19 2020, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20200519005295/en/>



intense hours with fewer breaks than ever to compensate for the suffering economy: a report by the Polaris institute concluded that the prevalence of labor trafficking and exploitation situations in the agricultural sector alone doubled for the first six months of the pandemic.<sup>46</sup> While these are two drastically different examples of how the pandemic has changed work due in part to intense alterations of space and time, they both display a trend of increasing exploitation to prioritize the continuous circulation of capital. The way that time-space compression has changed work both during the rise of industrialization in American cities and throughout the pandemic reflects how at its core, capitalism is a period of domination over people's time and energy. Finding ways to refuse this domination through the way we orient our relationship to work is a central and necessary way to resist this powerful force.

David Harvey contends that the force of time-space compression has the power to radicalize individuals to change the conditions of their society and culture. He lists different sites of opposition that can be found in place and regional resistances, asserting that "At its best [these reorientations] produce trenchant images of possible other worlds, and even begin to shape the actual world."<sup>47</sup> Harvey's hopeful framework read alongside Thoreau exhibits how literature has real power to change our lived experiences. Thoreau's assertion nods to the power that words have to create concrete change in the world, as these texts can entrust in us a desire to navigate the world differently. Since work has been altered both today and in nineteenth-century America due to changing conditions of space and time, Transcendental philosophy remains quite applicable to work politics today. Lessons from these texts can be manifested into concrete forms

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<sup>46</sup> HERProject, "I Can Hardly Sustain my Family," *BSR*, December 2020, <https://www.bsr.org/reports/BSR-HERproject-Human-Cost-Pandemic-Report.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 351.

of resistance that can hold real leverage when applied to our individual and collective relationships with work.

### *Chapter 3*

#### *Embracing Open Futures: The Transcendentalists and Utopian Praxis*

*"To live for one's principles, at all costs, is a dangerous speculation; and the failure of an ideal, no matter how humane and noble, is harder for the world to forgive and forget than bank robbery or the grand swindles of corrupt politicians."*

Louisa May Alcott, *Transcendental Wild Oats*

#### ***I. Grounding in the utopia***

The history of our world is in many ways a history of dreaming. While the concept of “utopianism”, or social dreaming, was not solidified as an official term until 1516 by Thomas More, imaginative abstractions of different kinds of worlds are found in human’s earliest recorded literature. Plato's “Republic” from 380 CE is the most cited Western example of early utopian political thought, and Christianity’s image of Eden offered later utopian imaginaries a crucial reference point for figuring new visions of paradise on earth. Thomas More devised the word ‘utopia’ from the combination of Greek words ‘ou-topos’ and ‘eutopos’, which mean ‘no place’ and ‘a good place’, respectively.<sup>1</sup> As the etymology of the word suggests, a “utopia” is most generally the imaginative projection of a more perfect society that is different from the one in which the writer lives, though the negative connotation of “eutopus” may cast doubt on the potential for its realization. Across human history, the utopian impulse appears to remain

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas More’s fictional novel imagines a complex, self-contained community set on an island in which people share a common culture and way of life. For a history of the concept of utopia, see: Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, *The Utopia Reader* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2017).

constant, yet it is inflected by an ever-changing world, with religious radicalism, scientific discovery, and technological innovation just a few of the most wide-reaching changes since the sixteenth century that have prompted utopian reactions.<sup>2</sup>

Living and writing through industrialization, a pinnacle of technological innovation that was completely altering labor, the Transcendentalists leaned into the spirit of the utopia to inform their visions for alternative futures. If my first chapter served as an introduction to the inventive ways that specific Transcendentalists thought about work, and my second chapter looked more specifically at how the rise of industrialization helped produce these reactions, this final chapter integrates both of these angles through the concept of the utopia. I draw connections between the innovative nature of the Transcendentalist movement, which was largely a result of particular historical circumstances, to look more closely at the utopian essence that is lodged within the heart of the Transcendentalists' approach to work. This chapter is in direct conversation with Marxist feminist Kathi Weeks, whose writing challenges the way that American society values labor. Weeks contends that most of the existing scholarship on work is concerned with either improving the conditions of work or adhering to a modern reconfiguration of the Protestant Work Ethic, but rarely, if ever, contests work's actual place and value in our society. In her theoretical text *The Problem With Work*, she presents a new kind of scholarship that approaches work as a site for envisioning new ways of being.<sup>3</sup> One of the central ways that Weeks reimagines the role and function of work is through discussing the politics of utopia. She argues that utopianism is a crucial imaginative framework to invoke within progressive spaces:

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<sup>2</sup> Claeys and Sargent, *The Utopia Reader*, 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> Weeks' project is aptly summarized in this quote: "Work is not only a site of exploitation, domination, and antagonism, but also where we might find the power to create alternatives on the basis of subordinated knowledges, resistant subjectivities, and emergent models of organization" (2011, 29).

“By providing a vision or glimmer of a better world, particularly one grounded in the real-possible, the utopia can serve to animate political desire, to engage our aspirations to new and more gratifying forms of collectivity.”<sup>4</sup> Different movements throughout history have appealed to the utopia as a way to create a kind of open-mindedness that is necessary to mobilize around different social causes.

Weeks claims that utopian forms operate in two ways: by either negating or affirming. Engaging with these two central functions of the utopia is an effective way to organize Transcendentalist reactions to work. I argue that the spirit prevailing in Transcendentalist experiments and commentary is reflected in Weeks’ two primary functions of the utopia, which situates them as continuously generative sites of inspiration for any progressive social project. Categorizing the Transcendentalists’ reactions in conversation with Weeks reveals how two distinct forms of utopian political force were explicitly present within the movement. To articulate my argument, I look specifically at the Transcendentalists’ communal living experiments on Brook and Fruitland Farms as an example of an affirmative utopian form, as they “function as a provocation towards alternatives” and Orestes Brownson’s 1840 essay “The Laboring Classes” as an example of a kind of negating utopian form that “promote[s] disinvestment in the status quo.”<sup>5</sup> I also look to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, a novel that satirizes the Transcendentalists’ living experiments, to demonstrate how critical reactions to utopias themselves offer surprisingly ripe sites for radically contesting work.

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<sup>4</sup> Kathi Weeks, *The Problem With Work*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 206.

<sup>5</sup> Weeks, *The Problem With Work*, 204.

## II. *Utopian negation in “The Laboring Classes”*

According to Weeks’ classifications, the primary function of the negating power inherent to utopian frameworks is to alter our relationship to the present moment. In distancing us from the current arrangement of our lives, utopian negation serves to disrupt the idea that our realities are normal and static. As Weeks notes, “this first broadly deconstructive function of the utopia also serves to incite and enhance our more specifically critical capacities.”<sup>6</sup> A pertinent example of the utopian function of negation can be seen in Orestes Brownson’s 1840 essay “The Laboring Classes.” While Brownson is often not included as a core member of the Transcendentalist movement, this essay was foundational to the future of the movement’s goals, as it articulates the way that Transcendentalism and social radicalism were compatible in mid-nineteenth-century New England.<sup>7</sup>

“The Laboring Classes” is concerned with industrial capitalism’s treatment of wage workers in America, and Brownson provides a rare perspective that gives voice to a population that was virtually ignored in the literature of the time. Rising out of the turmoil of the financial panic and depression of the late 1830s, he ponders what the actual working conditions are for the laboring class, the people who do not own businesses and fall below middle-class status. In his scathing essay, Brownson criticizes how the exploitation of wage laborers is justified by the Northeast’s embrace of “free labor” which was widely viewed as the morally righteous alternative to the slave system in the south. Fueled by the ideals of the Protestant Work Ethic, the

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<sup>6</sup> Weeks, *The Problem With Work*, 205.

<sup>7</sup> In “Transcendentalist Class Struggle: Orestes Brownson’s Early Writings” Clemens Spahr argues that Brownson’s philosophical and social views are more aligned with the “central” Transcendentalists than he is often given credit for. See:

Clemens Spahr, “Transcendentalist Class Struggle: Orestes Brownson’s Early Writings,” *Nineteenth Century Prose* 36, no. 2 (2009).

concept of free labor offers a specific vision of individual human potential by maintaining the capitalist fantasy that the lower classes can always climb the ladder of success with hard work and dedication.<sup>8</sup>

One of Brownson's central aims in "The Laboring Classes" is to critique free labor. In this essay, Brownson positions free labor as an ideology that perpetuates oppression through acting as a mental framework that disguises the social contradictions of capitalism. He goes so far as to position the free labor wage system as worse than the slave system because it promises but cannot provide freedom, whereas at least slaves know that they are imprisoned.<sup>9</sup> While we might balk at the comparison, it's clear that Brownson, an ardent abolitionist, is not aiming to dismiss the lived experiences of Black slaves. Rather, he employs the slave system to reframe conceptions of the wage system, claiming just how dire the working conditions were for many Americans. Brownson asserts that the situation of the laboring classes can be compared to slavery because the exploitation of workers is continuously justified by a system that deprives them of basic human rights; wage laborers experience "all the disadvantages of freedom and none of its blessings."<sup>10</sup>

Weeks discusses how the negating utopian form holds power because of its capacity for estrangement, or the "ability to render unfamiliar the all-too-recognizable contours to the present configurations of social relations and the experiences and meanings to which we have become

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<sup>8</sup> Leah Glaser, "Free Labor Ideology in the North," Virginia Center for Digital History, last modified in 2005 <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/solguide/VUS06/essay06c.html>

<sup>9</sup> Brownson further articulates this claim in another piece for the Boston Quarterly Review:

"Where go the proceeds of their labors? The man who employs them, and for whom [the workers] are toiling as so many slaves, is one of our city nabobs, reveling in luxury; or he is a member of our legislature, enacting laws to put money in his own pocket; or he is a member of Congress, contending for a high tariff to tax the poor for the benefit of the rich; or in these times he is shedding crocodile tears over the deplorable condition of the poor laborer, while he docks his wages 25 percent. . . . And this man too would fain pass for a Christian and a republican. He shouts for liberty, stickles for equality, and is horrified at a Southern planter who keeps slaves."

See: Boston Quarterly Review 3 (1840): 368-370.

<sup>10</sup> Orestes Brownson, "The Laboring Classes," in *The Boston Quarterly Review*, (Boston, B.H. Greene, 1840), 10.

habituated.”<sup>11</sup> Brownson effectively uses estrangement in his argument through the way that he unsettles wage labor under capitalism as a positive structural force. He makes the word “free” signify differently; no longer a reassuring marker of the freedom and choice of the Northern laborer, it becomes a deceptive sign of their continued subordination. This reflects how estrangement can be used to “undercut the present social order’s ascribed status as a natural artifact, necessary development, and inevitable future”.<sup>12</sup> Through jarringly reframing the paradigmatic free labor ideology in the North, Brownson works within the mode of utopian negation to radicalize his readers.

Another central claim in “The Laboring Classes” is that wage laborers are exploited as a result of unequal power dynamics inherent in the blueprint of the American workplace, as Brownson asserts: “The only enemy of the laborer is your employer, whether appearing in the shape of the master mechanic, or in the order of a factory.”<sup>13</sup> Published eight years before the Communist Manifesto, Brownson anticipates Karl Marx’s framing of corrupt ownership in control of the means of production. Marxist theory discusses how under capitalism, the labor that workers participate in under their employers is not a part of their actual nature, which creates an exhausted, unfulfilled workforce and produces the structural condition of alienation. Alienation results when people do not own or have input in the products they make in their labor, which over time results in a loss of power and separates them from their fundamental creative capacities.<sup>14</sup> Since wage laborers sell their labor power to earn a living, and their employer owns

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<sup>11</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 205.

Weeks' definition of estrangement here is directly derived from Darko Suvin's discussion of science fiction as a genre of cognitive estrangement. See:

Darko Suvin, “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,” *College English* 34 no. 3 (1972 ): 372-82.

<sup>12</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 205.

<sup>13</sup> Brownson, “The Laboring Classes,” 8.

<sup>14</sup> In *Capital*, Volume I, Marx defines alienation more directly:



this labor process, the product of a worker's labor is not their product but instead the product of the capitalist employer.

Brownson can be read in conversation with Marx's criticism of the working classes' role in a capitalist system, as he makes stringent arguments for a future in which the owners of the means of production are not corrupt and the process of production is equally shared. He exposes the current crisis amongst the laboring classes as a deeply ingrained, systemic problem, proclaiming, "But the evil we speak of is inherent in all social relations, and cannot be cured without a radical change of those arrangements."<sup>15</sup> Here, Brownson again utilizes the faculties of estrangement to provide his readers with a lens for critically assessing the present order. The extractive quality of Brownson's demands is compelling, as they directly predict many of Marx's arguments around power structures and the erosion of class boundaries.<sup>16</sup> Extreme, far-reaching assertions are clearly in the foreground of "The Laboring Classes." Brownson concludes by declaring that the elevation of the working class will only be realized through the destruction of the priestly order, the banks, and ultimately, the entire capitalist system: "Following the destruction of the bank, must come that of monopoly, of all privilege... The system must be destroyed. On this point there must be no misgiving, no subterfuge, no paliation. The system is at war with the rights and interests of labor, and it must go..."<sup>17</sup> Brownson's unforgiving rhetoric in this moment produces what Weeks terms a utopian demand, which she defines as "a political

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"... he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker, therefore, feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labour. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs" (536).

<sup>15</sup> Brownson, "The Laboring Classes," 14.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, "Orestes Brownson: An American Marxist before Marx." *The Sewanee Review*. 47, no. 3 (1939): Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939, pp. 317–23, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27535562>.

<sup>17</sup> Brownson, "The Laboring Classes," 24.

demand that takes the form not of a narrowly pragmatic reform but of a more substantial transformation of the present configuration of social relations.”<sup>18</sup> The utopian demand functions effectively both within the negating and affirming forms of the utopia. In “The Laboring Classes” presentation of utopian negation, the utopian demand works to position readers away from the current system and acts as a motivating force for rejecting the material circumstances.

Although many of Brownson’s demands in “The Laboring Classes” seem over-ambitious and unrealistic, they remain productive because they are characterized by a fervent utopian spirit that negates the current material circumstances. This energy was likely part of what made this essay so well-known, as the passion contained within its argument was a catalyst for new discussions. In this way, Brownson’s essay extracts the social radicalism inherent in the Transcendentalists’ aesthetic vision, which gives readers an articulation of the progressive nature that is intrinsic to the movement.<sup>19</sup> This endeavor is a crucial addition to the literature of the movement, as it draws out the radical undertones of Transcendentalist thought and makes them available to the public. Ultimately, this is an essay that creates critical distance from present arrangements and destabilizes the idea that the position of America’s wage laborers is natural or justifiable. Brownson thus provides a successful example of the negating utopian form, marking “The Laboring Classes” as an effective site for stimulating imaginaries of a more collective future.

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<sup>18</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 176.

<sup>19</sup> Clemens Spahr, “Transcendentalist Class Struggle: Orestes Brownson’s Early Writings,” 32.

### *III. Utopian Affirmation on Brook and Fruitlands*

George Ripley, a member of the Transcendentalist Club and a minister at a church in Boston, was inspired by his friend Orestes Brownson's anti-capitalist arguments. Ripley's exposure to progressive, experimental attitudes by friends like Brownson and his former colleagues at the Harvard Divinity school made him continuously disillusioned by the constraints of the church as an institution. He was disgusted by his congregants weaving through the poor and homeless of the Boston streets to attend his sermons, as to him, this represented the inability of his work to make a difference in the real problems outside of his doorstep. By 1841, a year after the publication of "The Laboring Classes" Ripley impulsively quit his job; he had decided that he needed to expand away from the church to truly help society and did not want to be confined by an institution. As Holly Jackson notes in her book *American Radicals*, "Ripley's embrace of the most radical theoretical implications of Christianity had made him hate its pantomimed practice, along with capitalism and the society it structured."<sup>20</sup> Shortly afterward, on a summer holiday with his wife Sophia, the pair stumbled upon an area called Brook Farm. This two-hundred-acre former dairy farm was rich with hills and meadows and close to Theodore Parker and Margaret Fuller, other members of the Transcendentalist Club.<sup>21</sup> Within months, Ripley had impulsively established Brook Farm as a community living experiment, a mecca of sorts for those hoping to escape industrial society and create a more fulfilling relationship to work and community. Ripley describes his visions for Brook Farm in a letter to Emerson, trying to convince him to come and join the enterprise:

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<sup>20</sup> Holly Jackson, *American Radicals: How Nineteenth Century Protest Shaped the Nation* (New York: Crown, 2019), 108.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Fuller was an early editor of *The Dial*, the Transcendentalists' independent journal. She was an ardent feminist and is well known for her provocative and widely influential book "Women in the Nineteenth Century." Theodore Parker was a Unitarian minister who was close friends with Emerson and one of the earliest members of the Transcendentalist club.

Our objects, as you know, are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry; to do away the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all; and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions.<sup>22</sup>

Ripley's description of the Brook Farm enterprise in this letter is a direct example of the utopian mode of affirmation, the second function of the utopia. As Weeks notes, "Whereas the first function of the utopian form is to look backward from a virtual social situation to reorient our perceptions of the actual present, the second is to redirect our attention and energies toward an open future."<sup>23</sup> The function of utopian affirmation is depicted in Ripley's letter through the way that it posits the farm's approach towards labor and the cultivation of a specific kind of person as a way to create a better future. One of the central ways that an open future is prioritized through utopian affirmation is through provocation. Weeks contends, "As part of this provocation function, utopias can serve as inspirational models; they can help to activate political will."<sup>24</sup> Provocation was central to the venture at Brook Farms, which ended up lasting for six years, due to the way Ripley and his cohort questioned and challenged mainstream social organization.

During the first three years, there were a variety of "non-Utopian" visitors who frequented Brook Farm. Before long, the farm had come to be known as a popular "idealistic tourism" destination for Boston's political and cultural elite, especially because of its location

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<sup>22</sup> "Studies in Transcendentalism: Letters from George Ripley," Virginia Commonwealth University, last modified in 1999. <https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/ideas/letter.html>

<sup>23</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 206.

<sup>24</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 206.

located right off the central horse-carriage route to New York and its semi-well-known participants. Many of these visitors eventually enrolled their children at the Brook Farm school, which was the most successful aspect of Ripley's enterprise.<sup>25</sup> The permanent residents at the farm quickly leaned on this educational institution as the primary means for economic income, as they learned before long that the soil was rocky and largely ill-suited for long-term crop production. This structure is utopian, as the labor done at the farm was never much of a factor towards making a profit, but rather served to provide an experience and food for the farm members. However, as time went on reality hit, and the continued economic problems at Brook necessitated a shift in its philosophical approach.

Albert Brisbane was a rich New Yorker who had traveled to France and been inspired by the philosophy of Charles Fourier, known today as one of the central founders of utopian socialism. Upon returning to the United States, Brisbane published the book *Social Destiny of Man*, in which he translated Fourier's ideas about industry and communal lifestyles. Fourier developed the concept of the "phalanx", a kind of cooperative agricultural community bearing responsibility for the social welfare of the individual, characterized by the continual shifting of work roles among its members.<sup>26</sup> Brisbane's popularization of Fourier's philosophy in the United States led to the creation of the Associationists, who were American supporters of Fourier's ideas. Brisbane and other New York based Associationists were eager to fuel their growing movement and continue to spread Fourierism by supporting examples of "phalanxes" on the East Coast.

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<sup>25</sup> Jackson, *American Radicals*, 121.

<sup>26</sup> The irony of Fourier was his insistence on never carrying out these experiments in his lifetime, however, this reflects how "... the value of a utopian form lies less in its prescription for what to want, imagine, or will than in its insistence that we want, imagine, and will" (Weeks 2011, 208).

In late 1843, Brisbane began to visit what was a now widely known experiment, Brook Farm, with the hopes of convincing George Ripley that the Association's philosophy could save his flailing project. Ripley was enraptured by the new utopian possibilities Fourierism suggested, and before long made plans to convert Brook Farm into a Fourierist phalanx. This required changes to the structure of labor at the farm, with the Brook farmers reorganizing their work into series and groups that Fourier describes in his concept of the phalanx. Organizing work to align with the structure of the phalanx is an example of a provocation that is central to the affirming aspect of utopian forms; through literally embodying a new arrangement of work on Brook Farm, Ripley and the rest of the farm members again provoked the standard way that labor was seen in relation to one's self and community. The ultimate goal at Brook Farm was not just for its participants to experience this kind of lifestyle, rather, its founders truly believed that rearranging themselves and their labor would serve as an inspiration that could radiate outwards to change the rest of the world. This again reflects the conditions of the utopian mode of affirming, because "as inspirational models; they can help to activate political will, to mobilize and organize movements for social change."<sup>27</sup> This is directly reflected in another of Ripley's letters to Emerson, he predicts "If wisely executed, [the farm] will be a light over this country and this age. If not the sunrise, it will be the morning star."<sup>28</sup>

The conversion to Fourierism on Brook Farm exemplifies how Ripley embraced utopian visions of the way that people should work. Furthermore, his willingness to enact these ideas reflects a mode of hope that upholds the utopia: "Affirming the present as the site from which political agents-focused not only on their injuries and armed not only with a critique of the

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<sup>27</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 206.

<sup>28</sup> Sterling Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 8.

present but fortified as well by the affirmation of their collective power to resist and create—could act collectively to change the world.”<sup>29</sup> However, in March 1846 a fire tore through Brook Farm and burned down the nearly finished Phalanstery, the central community building in a Fourierist community that had been in construction for months. Shortly after, a smallpox outbreak hit. By the middle of the year, the Brook Farm endeavor was effectively over, ending almost as quickly as it had begun. Ripley returned to the city and became an editor, and the rest of the community trickled back into society. Nonetheless, the Transcendentalists and other members of Brook Farm had made an impactful example of what different imaginations of living and working conditions could look like. As Richard Francis notes, “Their excitement about crossing social boundaries was driven not by mere escapism or experimentation but by a desire to prefigure a classless society, an attempt to blaze a path out of industrial capitalism that others might follow.”<sup>30</sup> The headstrong nature of Brook Farm was rooted in fantasies of utopia that were centrally grounded in an insistent, desperate hope for the future.

Fruitlands Farm is another example of a Transcendentalist community living experiment rooted in a form of utopian affirmation. However, this endeavor was much less wide-reaching and lasted for no more than six months. Amos Alcott, an early Transcendentalist, was neighbors with Emerson and formed a very close friendship with him. Emerson’s philosophy was a large inspiration for his Transcendental experiment; in an Emersonian fashion, Alcott believed that “all effective and enduring changes in society must originate within the individual and work outwards.”<sup>31</sup> Again, the driving goal of this endeavor was to establish a way of living that would ripple outwards and ultimately benefit others. Alcott founded Fruitlands farm alongside Charles

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<sup>29</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 203.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Francis, *Transcendental Utopias*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 110.

<sup>31</sup> Francis, *Transcendental Utopias*, 135.

Lane, whom he met when he ventured to England in search of a partner for his imagined community. Similar to Brook Farm, Fruitlands established itself as a place that was staunchly separate from the outside world and aimed to act as a kind of bulwark against capitalistic society and the pressures of industry. At both farms, people did not subscribe to ideas of private property or paid labor, but Alcott and Lane took a different trajectory than Ripley, as Fruitlands was an experiment focused in some ways on romanticizing asceticism.<sup>32</sup>

The folks at Fruitlands were stringent vegetarians, and “without sugar, molasses, milk, butter, cheese, and meat, they wore unadorned, primitive clothing, and aimed to operate without the use of money.”<sup>33</sup> Louisa May Alcott’s *Transcendental Wild Oats* provides a fictional yet insightful account of the Fruitlands experience from when she lived on the farm as a ten-year-old. The book alludes to the fact that many of the members of the communal living experiment were much more interested in the theoretical idea of the experiment rather than doing the necessary labor to carry it out. The character representing Charles Lane is described as “being, not doing”, which was a frustration to other people at Fruitlands.<sup>34</sup> This experiment is thus an example where the approach toward work was not viable for more than a very short period because people were not willing to adopt the intense frugality that Alcott demanded.

An important aspect of the endeavors at Brook Farm and Fruitlands is the way that both communities thought about value. The inhabitants of these places were people who were eager to embody a particular way of living, most directly in regard to work. Their lifestyles were inherently based on assessing certain ways of being over others; in addition to a very specific

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<sup>32</sup> “Charles Lane,” The Walden Woods Project, last modified 2022, <https://www.walden.org/what-we-do/library/the-transcendentalists-their-lives-writings/charles-lane-1800-1870/>

<sup>33</sup> Francis, *Transcendental Utopias*, 143.

<sup>34</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Transcendental Wild Oats*, (Carlisle, Massachusetts: Applewood Books, 1873), 35.



way of laboring, they weighed the value of education, and at Fruitlands, what they consumed and wore, as necessary to produce change. All of these value judgments were entwined with a fierce sense of hope. People strongly believed that adopting and living these new values held endless possibilities to adjust the composition of their community, and eventually, society writ large. The particular continued insistence grounded in hope for a different future that is prioritized above all else, even potential failure, is the inherent characteristic that distinguishes these communal experimentations as specifically utopian. As Abba Alcott, Bronson's wife, noted in her journal on their first day at Fruitlands, "Though we may fail it will be some consolation that we have ventured what none others have dared."<sup>35</sup> Although none of these inventive living experiments panned out to change society on a large scale, they remain particularly useful in thinking about what ideas can be made real when infused with persistent hope.

#### ***IV. Critique as thickening resistance***

Brownson, Ripley, and Alcott's utopian agitations were coupled with a relentless stream of backlash. Reactions to utopian provocations are almost inherent to their existence, as there is a sustained impulse to attack the pull towards radical change and it remains difficult to imagine efforts for reform that have not been coupled with criticism and rejection. This compulsion is blatantly seen in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Blithedale Romance*, a satirical account of the communal living experiment at Brook Farm. This text brings forth an interesting paradox within the Transcendentalists: in the same archive that the utopia is embraced, there is an effort to draw attention to how these utopian experiments fail. I argue that the critical narration by the novel's central character Miles Coverdale functions as a different rendering of the utopian form of

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<sup>35</sup> Holly Jackson, *American Radicals*, 328.

negation, ironically cementing *The Blithedale Romance* as another resource for utopian projects. Through the same process of critique that Brownson participates in “The Laboring Classes”, Miles' descriptions in *Blithedale* provoke the status quo even as they simultaneously make a parody of the utopia. Miles Coverdale's narrative voice reflects a central function of the utopian form that Weeks describes: “the utopian form's power lies in its capacity to provoke more than prescribe, to animate more than prefigure.”<sup>36</sup> My reading of *Blithedale* shows how even critical accounts of radical imaginative efforts remain a resource when thinking about the indispensable power of the utopian form.

*The Blithedale Romance* follows protagonist Miles Coverdale throughout his time living on Blithedale Farm, a utopian community created to reject standardized labor and realize the true potential of work and life. Miles encounters many peculiar characters along his journey, and *Blithedale* is in many ways a reflection of Brook Farm, as it references a transition to Fourierism and the creation of a phalanstery. Hawthorne lived at Brook Farm for a few months in its early days and arrived during an April snowstorm. Like Hawthorne, in the novel, Miles arrives at Blithedale during a spring storm and most of the characters in the novel, including Miles himself, end up branching away from the farm before a full summer has passed.<sup>37</sup>

Miles explains the project at Brook Farm in the opening pages of the book: “It was our purpose—a generous one, certainly, and absurd, no doubt, in full proportion with its generosity—to give up whatever we had heretofore attained, for the sake of showing mankind the example of a life governed by other than the false and cruel principles on which human

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<sup>36</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 207.

<sup>37</sup> Terri Whitney, “Hawthorne at Brook Farm: Introduction,” Hawthorne in Salem, last modified 2004. <http://www.hawthorneinsalem.org/Life&Times/BiographicalInfo/BrookFarm/Introduction.html>

society has all along been based.”<sup>38</sup> Already within his initial description of the goal of Blithedale’s members, Miles embodies a kind of critique that distances us away from the experiment itself. Descriptors such as “generous” and “absurd” make the reader move away from the true circumstances and into the subjectivity of the narrator’s opinion of the enterprise. This creates more space for assessing what is being described than it would if it was described objectively. As readers, we are made to question whether or not we agree with Miles’ critical language, and Miles’ judgment creates a void through which we can respond with our own opinion on utopian experimentation.

Part of the critical urge within Miles that is apparent from the onset of *Blithedale* reflects personal questions that Hawthorne developed after his stint at Brook Farm: “Hawthorne was an acute observer of human nature: the sojourn at Brook Farm deepened his awareness of the limitations of human beings in their search for a less imperfect way of life.”<sup>39</sup> Hawthorne’s curiosity about human nature is reflected directly in Miles’ descriptions of the people living at Blithedale at the beginning of the book. He observes, “We were of all creeds and opinions, and generally tolerant of all, on every imaginary subject. Our bond, it seems to me, was not affirmative, but negative. We had all found one thing or another to quarrel with in our past life, and were pretty well agreed to the inexpediency of lumbering along with the old system any further. As to what should be substituted, there was much less unanimity.”<sup>40</sup> Here, Miles aptly comments on people’s urge to separate themselves from society but reframes it negatively by suggesting that not much happens after this removal.

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<sup>38</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (Ticknor and Fields: Boston, 1852), 10.

<sup>39</sup> J.C. Garret, *Hope or Disillusion. Three Versions of Utopia: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Samuel Butler, George Orwell*, (Christchurch, New Zealand: University of Canterbury Publications, 1984), 19.

<sup>40</sup> Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, 10.

This kind of commentary is reflective of Hawthorne's keen awareness of how part of the problem with humanity has always been the inability to collectively push forward the actual implementation of new worlds. This comes through in Miles' description of the characters at Blithedale who have sought distance from their lives in attempts to create something new. As Lauren Berlant suggests, "[Miles'] narrative poses the double articulation of individual and collective as a problem in history and for the narratives and persons that operate within its sphere".<sup>41</sup> Critical reactions to utopia, such as those seen through Miles as narrator and within *The Blithedale Romance* as a whole, highlight the fragmentation between individual and collective aspirations that is, as Hawthorne believes, inherent to human nature. This is another example of how critiques of utopias themselves function as another form of utopian negation. Contemplating the way that people's conflicting visions often fail in experimental spaces moves us away from Blithedale farm and compels us as readers to continue to search for alternatives that can withstand this problem. Miles' skeptical description of human nature's relationship to experimental projects instills us with more of a stake to prove his stubborn pessimism wrong. Ironically, it is the very essence of the weary, doubtful tone of Coverdale's narration that provokes a longing for a successful utopia in the reader.

There are also moments in the novel when Miles' narration is blatantly satirical. This is expressed most directly in his discussion of what he and fellow members do in their work on the farm:

While our enterprise lay all in theory, we had pleased ourselves with delectable visions of the spiritualization of labor. It was to be our form of prayer and ceremonial worship. Each stroke of the hoe was to uncover some aromatic root and wisdom, heretofore hidden

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<sup>41</sup> Lauren Berlant, "Fantasies of Utopia in *The Blithedale Romance*," *American Literary History* 1, no. 1 (Spring, 1989): 30.

in the sun. Pausing in the field, to let the wind exhale the moisture from our forehead, we were to look upwards, and catch glimpses into the far-off soul of truth.<sup>42</sup>

This is a direct performance of satire, as farm work cannot realistically produce this kind of transformative reaction consistently. Miles' satirical descriptions show that Blithedale's inhabitants are expected to view the act of laboring on the farm as powerful enough to affect the literal composition of who they are. This attitude reflects the idea of socialist humanism, which surfaced in the sixties from the ideas of philosopher Erich Fromm. Fromm argues that one's labor should be seen as the "primary means of self-realization and self-fulfillment."<sup>43</sup> Socialist humanists like Fromm view labor as "an individual creative capacity, a human essence, from which we are now estranged and to which we should be restored."<sup>44</sup> Creating a socialist humanist environment has been reoriented into a capitalist logic that is found in many contemporary workplaces; by forming the narrative that your work and the physical space at your office can be where you feel most creative, passionate, and inspired, people are "naturally" driven to work more than ever.<sup>45</sup>

Coverdale's romanticization of farm labor reflects the socialist humanist tendency to frame work as a constant site for personal transformation. However, the clear satirical nature of this commentary unearths the somewhat ridiculous aspects of viewing work in this way. Weeks is wary of socialist humanism as a way to think about work, as it diverts from a truly anti-work agenda, where "The goal is to restore work's dignity and worth, not to contest its status as the

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<sup>42</sup> Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, 40.

<sup>43</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 86.

<sup>44</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 86.

<sup>45</sup> Google is just one of many major companies that promotes this kind of thinking in its facilities. At Google's headquarters in California, employees are provided three gourmet meals a day, differently themed office spaces, access to fitness centers and workout classes, and spaces curated for relaxing. This kind of organization encourages employees to stay at work all day, as it is a place where they feel at home. See: Tanveer Mann, "We Took a Tour of Google's HQ...", *Metro*, March 16 2018, <https://metro.co.uk/2018/03/16/took-tour-googles-magic-happens-dreamy-imagine-7337482/>

pillar of social value.”<sup>46</sup> Miles’ commentary on the exaggerated thought process that is expected at Blithedale makes us think more directly about the consequences of a socialist humanist approach to work. In doing so, this description again performs the act of utopian negation, as “The object of critique retains a kind of power and presence, holding the critic in its spell”, providing an expansive lens towards what the actual possibilities of work, or non-work, can be. The cynical and dismissive tone that characterizes Miles Coverdale’s narration in *The Blithedale Romance* paradoxically creates a form of negation that is inherent to utopian imaginaries. Miles’ varying descriptions are essential for thinking about how critical reactions to utopia can effectively function as different manifestations of utopian negation. The performative nature of his attitude contains the ability to provoke readers toward new ways of thinking. His descriptions and commentary of life on the farm ultimately make us approach utopian experiments in a new way.

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<sup>46</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 87.

## *V. Continuing reverberations*

As America continued to march along through the second half of the century, the utopian spirit harnessed within the Transcendentalist movement began to fizzle into background noise. Northern intellectuals began to focus their intense energy on social science rather than social justice. Philosophy traveled away from the idealist nonconformism inherent to Transcendentalism to embrace American pragmatism, a mindset that is antithetical to utopian frameworks through the way that it encourages a practical approach to life.<sup>47</sup> Orestes Brownson adopted a fiercely conservative politics that shockingly juxtaposes his anticipation of Marxism in “The Laboring Classes”, and the general public’s mocking and ridiculing of the Brook and Fruitland experiments overwhelmed the dispersed positive reactions. As the country sped towards the Civil War, the radical progressives of the early part of the century were largely left in the dust as the nation leaned into what felt to be more pressing concerns. Walt Whitman, generally regarded as one of the last Transcendentalists, speaks to the overwhelming, unceasing movement within a nation that was fully spreading its wings:

The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new,  
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,  
The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,  
The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of money, or  
depressions or exaltations,  
Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events;  
These come to me days and nights and go from me again...<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> “Pragmatism,” Catherine Legg, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified April 6th 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pragmatism/>

<sup>48</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself” in *Leaves of Grass*, 32.

Whitman's attitude in *The Leaves of Grass* reflects a country that was exploding at the seams, arguably moving too fast for its own good. However, the utopian visions from the earlier part of the century continued to tremble under the surface. Although Brook Farm was ultimately buried in ash, the legacy of its project is cemented in American culture and helped define major literary figures that are widely read today. As Holly Jackson aptly mentions, "The Brook Farmers went on to astonishing prominence in American culture and letters in the postbellum period. The names of those shaped by the Fourierist zeitgeist, as well as their children who never forgot the intoxicating intensity and promise of that period, form the core of our literary canon: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Henry James, and Louisa May Alcott, to name a few."<sup>49</sup> And while Orestes Brownson's disillusionment ultimately resulted in him converting to the conservative Catholic church shortly after writing "The Laboring Classes", this very shift exposes a dilemma inherent to democratic theory that has inspired a more critical examination of our social structures in the ensuing generations.<sup>50</sup>

Although the twentieth century saw a collapse in wider-scale utopian experiments, small efforts sprinkled throughout the country persevered with a zealous insistence. The Celo community in North Carolina is just one example of a communally owned and run cooperative space that has been in operation and served hundreds of families since the 1930s.<sup>51</sup> The mass movements of the 1960s also highlight a resurgence in the utopian spirit. The Black Power movement, the rise of the New Left, and hippie communes premised on free love re-energized a

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<sup>49</sup> Holly Jackson, *American Radicals*, 326.

<sup>50</sup> Helen Mims, "Early American Democratic Theory and Orestes Brownson," *Science & Society* 3, no. 2 (1939): 177.

<sup>51</sup> Brian Berry, "Experimental Americans: Celo and Utopian Community in the Twentieth Century by George L. Hicks," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 58, no. 3 (2002): 439–40.



disillusioned and conformist post-war nation. These daring efforts were foregrounded by Transcendentalist predecessors who created the American blueprint for challenging accepted social frameworks and intentionally thinking about how we connect and orient ourselves in response to our communities. While they are often left behind in our historical narratives, the Transcendentalists are central to the history of social change in our country. As we live through a moment of a perhaps more disillusioned population than ever, we can look to the Transcendentalists, who offer a template for pursuing more expansive futures. The Transcendentalists show us that harnessing utopian energy in our ventures for social change keeps them hopeful and energized and that the power inherent to our ideas for different futures holds the ability to persevere for generations to come.

## *Coda*

*This is the urgency: Live!*

*and have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind.*

Gwendolyn Brooks

When I began this project, I felt that I had to write a thesis that contained enough inherent movement to create a tangible change in the world. However, the further I got in my research and writing process, the more I had to laugh at my almost comical ambition. The Transcendentalists themselves didn't produce this kind of wide-scale change: Thoreau's time at Walden only changed his own physical lived experience, not other peoples, and the various utopian projects I outlined never panned out to change social structures on a large scale. If anything, industrial capitalism's strength was only solidified as the country moved along into the modernist period. However, through this project, I have learned that material structural change isn't necessary for an undertaking to be successful. The Transcendentalists made people think differently about the way that they approached the world around them, even if they didn't explicitly change the structural conditions of an entire system.

As Daniel Rodgers suggests, "...one of the consequences of immersion in a society conspicuously dedicated to the value of work was to heighten the force of the term "labor" and of work-tied ideas of justice...", and the Transcendentalists were major contributors to changing how the concept of labor was signified.<sup>1</sup> This impact proliferated through to ensuing generations, and we can see these contributions in the premises of Massachusetts' first labor unions and the creation of the Socialist Party of America at the beginning of the twentieth century. My ultimate

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<sup>1</sup> Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850- 1920*, 215

goal, then, for this project has changed. I now hope that through articulating the vitality that is at the essence of the Transcendentalists' ideas, I adopt the provocative spirit of this literary movement to encourage my readers to think a bit more critically about how we configure our worlds around work today.

The new reckoning with work wrought by the coronavirus pandemic has already shown that Americans are thinking more intentionally than ever about their relationships to work. Harvey's observation that "crises in the experience of space and time, in the financial system, or in the economy at large, may form a necessary condition for cultural or political changes..." is apparent in our current moment.<sup>2</sup> Progressive circles since the Transcendentalists have continued to critique the structures of capitalism and labor, but in the past two years, the conditions of our work have risen to enough prominence to become a central beat in mainstream journalism and politics. The New York Times recently dedicated an entire issue to work, discussing how the pandemic is changing people's outlooks on the subject and the viability of different careers in the future.<sup>3</sup> The Reddit page r/antiwork is described as "A subreddit for those who want to end work, are curious about ending work, want to get the most out of a work-free life, want more information on anti-work ideas and want personal help with their own jobs/work-related struggles" is now one of the most popular subpages on the site, with a following that has exploded since the onset of the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> The rise of union power in major corporations such as Amazon and Kellogg, along with a record number of strikes in recent months, has held a stubborn presence in the news cycle. All of these examples show that the trend of exploitation can't last

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<sup>2</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 345.

<sup>3</sup> See: "The Future of Work Issue," *The New York Times*, February 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/issue/magazine/2022/02/18/the-22022-issue>

<sup>4</sup> See: "Antiwork for All, not Just the Rich!" Reddit, <https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/>

forever. Our current pandemic-induced time-space compression reveals an intriguing paradox. While America's attachment to work is powerful enough to withstand the most drastic of rearrangements, it is simultaneously more fragile than ever. As the months pass, resistance and protest against unsustainable, exploitative labor structures are swelling and gathering enough strength to create lasting structural change. I hope that this thesis prompts more awareness of the history that has helped foreground this new reckoning and positions the Transcendentalists as a resource for these fights.

Many people have asked if my own relationship with work has changed after all of my research and writing. My advisor and I often joked about the irony of spending so much time working on a project that was advocating for a more progressive anti-work politics. But like the tensions within the Transcendentalists themselves, in this very irony is something deeper. While critiquing work is becoming more mainstream, I have yet to meet anyone who can seem to fully move away from work's place as a central organ of their life. And what does this show about the inherent beauty, too, that exists in human beings' capacity to connect and create through their labor? This brings forth the layered complexity of tackling a concept that has come to be inherent to the way we understand life. However, though my relationship with my own work has not yet dramatically changed, the steps I am taking are important to continue to generate movement. This project has committed me to engage with the detailed histories of people and places around me as a tool to think about the spaces I inhabit.

As a student living in Boston today, I have been thinking ever more about the ways that the people before me have shaped the cities' social and political landscape. Additionally, tapping into this energy to assist existing organizations working towards labor reform has real effects. The labor unions in Boston, such as Local 26 that supports Tufts University's dining and janitor

employees, are doing important work on the ground to challenge exploitative structures. Boston mayor Michelle Wu is prioritizing work as a central part of her platform: she is committed to fighting for livable wages, corporate accountability, and guaranteeing a fair workweek for the city's workforce, as well as rethinking work's impact on the planet through implementing a Green New Deal for Boston. These efforts would not be possible without the path created by Boston's early progressives, and the cities' labor movements will continue to be successful if they are tinged with the imaginative, dynamic spirit inherent to the Transcendentalists.

I end with a thought from E.P Thompson, a true pioneer in thinking critically about the historical circumstances that shaped people's relationship to their work. Thompson asks, "What will be the capacity of experience of the people who have this undirected time to live?"<sup>5</sup> To echo Thompson's question, this project asks what can be generated if more people think, write, and organize around work in the spirit of the Transcendentalists. This kind of inquiry can help inspire new conversations and collective visions for a more equitable society. If we organize on a large scale to reject the exploitation of workers in favor of a more imaginative and truly liberatory future, there are no limits to what we can collectively create.

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," 95.

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