

Starving to Death: Reproductive Labor as Ecological-Political Learning

Susan Laird

University of Oklahoma

Reading and thinking about Claudia Ruitenberg’s “Barefoot in the Kitchen: New Materialism, Education, and Reproductive Labor” has given me pleasure in a most painful season for thoughtful U.S. citizens. But my pain does cast a shadow over this response. The severely limited length of a PES Yearbook article can scarcely do justice to any topic as large, complex, and dynamic as this one. To this demanding rhetorical situation, Ruitenberg has brought uncommon discursive artistry, signifying for the possible purpose of bringing diversely located voices into lively face-to-face philosophical discussion with all of us today. Thus, finding ourselves occasionally at philosophical odds with one another, allowing ourselves to be disrupted by unpredictable otherness that we encounter here and learn from, we might accept our mutual vulnerability and study together the complex interdependence of our own many disparate, complicated concerns and conflicts, spoken and unspoken, relating to her argument. Oops! That formulation sounds a bit (even if not entirely) like the Arendtian politics of human plurality, doesn’t it? Should we just forget that, or claim its value in a cultural context like this one? I will leave that question for her and you or others to discuss and decide.

But to the main point of her article: Ruitenberg has made a careful argument for thinking about reproductive labor as ecological-political learning—which, with artful irony, her article’s playful gender-troubling title avoids signifying.¹ Why is that? There’s another question for you or others to discuss or decide, or perhaps set aside. Reflecting my own ethical preference for “the loving eye” rather than “the arrogant eye” in “encounters” with others,² the genre of my reading response to Ruitenberg’s thought-provoking article is primarily another invitation to you, a plea to engage this overdue discussion in future work, and to keep the conversation on this urgent topic going.

Ruitenbergh has framed a “new materialist” conception of reproductive labor intent upon learning to understand “the human condition,” as R.S. Peters advocated in his later work, albeit with her own posthumanist purpose of theorizing ecological-political education in and beyond home. She takes her argument’s premises from Nel Noddings’s claim for the educational centrality of home life, minus Noddings’s ethical emphasis on learning to care; from Jane Roland Martin’s 1981 critique of early Peters, pleading for education’s conceptual reconfiguration to include “reproductive processes of society”; and from Hannah Arendt’s 1958 critique of Marx in *The Human Condition*, remapping the conceptual distinction between labor and work in a way that seems somewhat to parallel Martin’s distinction between reproductive and productive processes of society. Without acknowledging Martin’s frequent claims concerning the ecological consequences of neglecting or providing education for all (not just women) in reproductive processes, but neither discrediting nor commending Martin’s critical analysis of gender’s distortion of education’s conceptual meaning, nor here refusing Martin’s early race-blindness, Ruitenbergh has nonetheless grounded her own original formulation of reproductive labor in Martin’s concept of reproductive processes.³ Thus, critically following both Martin and Arendt, she has made a strong distinction between *reproductive labor* and *reproductive work*. Whereas the repetitive actions of cleaning the house and laundering clothes would fall into the former category, the achievement of designing or building a house could fall into the latter category. Both reproductive labor and reproductive work may have profound ecological-political consequence, but Ruitenbergh focuses on reproductive labor because, she claims, it is “closer to animal life,” so that through it “we encounter others not in their plurality but in the shared human condition of material subsistence.”⁴ Meanwhile, therefore, she has proposed a concept of ecological politics different from Arendt’s humanist concept of politics, replacing its emphasis on human plurality with Jane Bennett’s and Karen Barad’s posthumanist insights into vulnerable, mutual interdependence, and entanglements among diverse human and non-human living organisms. Ruitenbergh enjoins educators to recognize reproductive labor as having ecological-political consequences insofar as its inescapable participation in the interdependent cycling and recycling of

matter exerts material power in relation to land, air, water, and diverse non-human and human creatures' lives. She envisions home economics as one possible curricular means for reframing reproductive labor as ecological-political learning in schools, citing two promising, imaginative new approaches to that subject.

Never having wanted or experienced a life “barefoot in the kitchen,” I must confess I enter this discussion personally afflicted with profound *domephobia*—Martin’s critical name for cultural “devaluation and morbid anxiety about things domestic.”⁵ As a White-privileged professor-and-digital-device “assemblage” outside the home, trying to navigate the brave new world depicted by Steve Mims’s documentary film *Starving the Beast* - about U.S. public higher education that is literally starving many of its students and adjunct faculty, a system whose many compulsory complicated “new tools and techniques” are now tyrannizing campus labor and works - I have impossible material conditions; no time whatsoever for urban homesteading or a hands-on home. Nor do any of my students or colleagues, nor any school-teacher I know. I have hired no woman-with-washtub assemblage nor man-with-mop assemblage nor starving-student-with-crushing-debt assemblage to help me with my inescapably material domestic duties, which I do much less well than I should, though at least I do hang my laundry to dry on a clothesline. Believe it or not, I was well educated, not at school, but by grandmothers, mother, 4-H,⁶ and Ithaca’s hippies, for the reproductive labor that my current material conditions prevent me from doing well. As a student at Cornell, I supported my learning with paid work as a house cleaner. This fraught testimony is not merely personal self-indulgence, however; it is one narrative of material interdependence and organizational power relations in a domephobic cultural context that I know many others share in different ways, to different degrees, and from different locations. The extent of its resonance here today might suggest some difficult philosophical questions for us to consider about Ruitenberg’s proposed New Materialism, while also suggesting some strong philosophical support for it. To spark such discussion, I want to close by taking up Ruitenberg’s proposal of posthumanist home economics education with a troubled and troubling

thought experiment that takes seriously her theorizing both today and in previous work:

A hospitable curriculum ... pays explicit attention to the voices that have been excluded from its development, and the effects of their absence. Furthermore, it asks how it can give place to, or would be undone by, the arrival of new ideas—for new ideas do not necessarily sit comfortably in the existing home of the curriculum.⁷

Some likely new settings for education in reproductive labor of the sort that home economists conceived a century ago might include the currently necessary development of campus food banks for students impoverished by high tuition and fees now demanded by privatized institutions of public higher learning. Might posthumanist home economics include students' service-learning employments in school lunchrooms, public kitchens, laundries, day-care centers, and animal shelters, and as campus custodians and gardeners? High schools and colleges might include for all students such educational programs in service learning for survival akin to that which Booker T. Washington conceived at Tuskegee Institute, which included young women's laundry labor as well as students' other reproductive labors in its curriculum concerning clothing, food, and shelter. Thus, freedmen and freedwomen learned to build and maintain their own communities and homes within a White-supremacist postwar economy that had hitherto depended upon slave labor.⁸ Indeed, the biological inquiry that George Washington Carver integrated so brilliantly into the Tuskegee home economics curriculum might provide a suggestive model for how educators might attempt today to infuse ecological inquiry and learning concerning interdependence among human and non-human lives into such an educational project of cultural formation centered on reproductive labor and work, so that students' survival labors of this sort might become explicitly and rigorously ecological and political to suit the demands of this epoch.⁹ They might become heroic, too, if their reproductive labors begin to require their repeated assertive actions together to insist upon water safe to drink without risk of cancer or brain damage, for air clean enough to breathe without expect-

tation of asthma or cancer or brain damage, for land clean enough to till with the expectation of harvests from which healthy food might be produced and served. Wherever such repeated reproductive labors become politically futile in the face of powerful opposition or ecological damage beyond repair, some such heroic students will upon graduation confront their need to learn more peripatetic reproductive labors as they migrate to other locations that remain more habitable, as many wild species are now doing.

1 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-893.

2 Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1983), 66ff and 72ff; Jane Roland Martin, *Education Reconfigured* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

3 Martin borrowed this conceptual language from political theorist Lorenne Clark, and in later works abandoned that language because of confusion arising from the different meaning that Marx had given it.

4 Ruitenberg, this volume.

5 Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1992), esp. chapter 4.

6 <https://4-h.org/#>

7 Claudia Ruitenberg, “The Empty Chair: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality,” in *Philosophy of Education 2011*, ed. Robert Kunzmann (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011), 34.

8 Booker T. Washington, *The Booker T. Washington Collection: 8 Classic Works* (Waxkeep Publishing); Mark D. Hersey, *My Work Is That of Conservation: An Environmental Biography of George Washington Carver* (University of Georgia Press, 2011); Dianne D. Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (Chicago Review Press, 2010); Marilyn Nelson, *Carver: A Life in Poems* (Honesdale, PA: Wordsong, 2001, 2016).

9 Robert K. Musil, *Rachel Carson and Her Sisters: Extraordinary Women Who Have Shaped America's Environment* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014).