

Barefoot in the Kitchen: New Materialism, Education, and Reproductive Labor

Claudia W. Ruitenberg
University of British Columbia

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, Canada, and Europe, one of the characteristic developments of the 1950s was the introduction of new technologies into the home. As Ronald Tobey summarizes the process of domestic “electrical modernization”:

In 1940, the electric iron was the only electrical appliance owned by more than half of all American households; by 1950, half of all homes possessed the refrigerator, vacuum cleaner, and clothes washer; by 1960, most homes had the full range of electrical devices, now including, of course, the television.¹

These technologies drastically changed the requirements of physical labor required for cooking and cleaning, and enabled the introduction of pre-made products such as the TV dinner. The reproductive activities of the private sphere—cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, etc.—became less time-consuming, allowing for a greater focus on productive activities in the public sphere.

In recent years, the same societies that celebrated the possibilities of “outsourcing” reproductive household tasks are seeing a return to making, preserving, and growing one’s own food and other products. Titles such as *Urban Homesteading: Heirloom Skills for Sustainable Living*² and *The Hands-On Home: A Seasonal Guide to Cooking, Preserving & Natural Homekeeping*³ are targeted not at older, conservative readers seeking to maintain traditional housekeeping practices, but rather at younger, often urban, environmentally conscious readers seeking to rediscover small farming, food storage, and other housekeeping practices that had all but been abandoned with the introduction of pre-made, dispos-

able, and other convenience products. In 2009 *The New York Times* observed about home canning that “the recent revival of attention to it fits neatly into the modern renaissance of handcrafted food, heirloom agriculture, and using food in its season.”⁴

This “renaissance” may stem, in part, from a nostalgic desire for hands-on engagement with food production and housekeeping tasks among those who had been able to distance themselves from such hands-on tasks in the first place. There is certainly a risk of privileged romanticism; urban homesteader and microfarming scholar Michael Mikulak acknowledges: “Especially in the wealthy West, gourmet food, farmers markets, home cuisine and gardening are typically bourgeois pursuits and cannot (and should not) be offered up as a kind of pan-political movement capable of uniting the world at a mythic shared table.”⁵ Nonetheless, there is a desire to become more educated about, and gain more control over, the origins of the food and other materials we rely on and the effects their production, use, and disposal have on the ecosystems of which we are a part. This desire is political in the sense that it seeks to intervene in social and economic systems that structure societies. *Urban Homesteading*, for example, is motivated by a concern that “all the systems that sustain us—food, water, shelter, medicine, family, and community—are at risk from the ongoing disintegration of life brought about by global capitalism’s profound disrespect for natural limits.”⁶ The *New York Times* article mentioned earlier acknowledges that “in today’s swirl of food issues (local, seasonal, organic, industrial), home preserving can also be viewed as a quasi-political act.”⁷

These developments raise questions about our conceptions of education and how they continue to favor the knowledge, skills, and activities of the public sphere over those of the private sphere. These conceptions of education get at the heart of our ideas of what it means to be fully human. In this article I return to one work on what it means to be fully human that has been influential in educational scholarship, Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*,⁸ and juxtapose it with Jane Roland Martin’s essay “The Ideal of the Educated Person.”⁹ I take as my point of departure Martin’s distinction between reproductive and productive activities:

I use [“reproduction”] here to include not simply biological reproduction of the species, but the whole process of reproduction from conception until the individual reaches more or less independence from the family. This process I take to include not simply childcare and rearing, but the related activities of keeping house, running the household and serving the needs and purposes of all the family members. Similarly, I interpret the term “production” broadly to include political, social and cultural activities and processes as well as economic ones.¹⁰

Martin’s central claim, and her critique of dominant conceptions of the educated person (better known at the time as the “educated man”) was that “an adequate ideal of the educated person must give the reproductive processes of society their due.” The main argument supporting this claim was that “an ideal which is tied solely to the productive processes of society cannot readily accommodate the important virtues of caring and compassion, sympathy and nurturance, generosity and cooperation which are genderized in favor of females.”¹¹

Today, 35 years after Martin’s important intervention in the discourse of the educated person, I want to support her claim that an adequate ideal of the educated person must include education in reproductive processes, but I want to do so for reasons that have to do less with gender roles and an education of moral virtues and more with the ecological-political role of reproductive labor. This is not to say that reproductive labor is no longer gendered; it is, and it is not coincidental that the authors of the *Urban Homesteading* and *Hands-On Home* books that I mentioned earlier are women. However, my interest is in the unavoidability for people of any gender of participation in reproductive processes and the ecological-political importance of such reproductive processes. Put most plainly: we all require food, clothing, and shelter, and growing and preparing food, and producing, cleaning, and maintaining clothing and shelter are reproductive processes that position us in ecological systems that involve the use, disposal, and recycling of *matter*. An understanding of such material and reproductive processes must be part of an education that aims to foster an

understanding of the human condition especially at a time when we have grown more aware of the ecological precariousness of that condition.

I deliberately refer to reproductive activities as reproductive *labor* to connect Martin's claim to Arendt's conception of labor as comprising the repetitive tasks that are required for physical survival but that do not involve the creation of enduring objects: "unlike *working*, whose end has come when the object is finished, ready to be added to the common world of things, *laboring* always moves in the same circle, which is prescribed by the biological process of the living organism and the end of its 'toil and trouble' comes only with the death of this organism."¹²

THE MATERIAL (RE)TURN

Arendt's *The Human Condition* is a critique of Marxism's emphasis on labor and materiality. As Margaret Canovan summarizes, Arendt concluded "that Marx had fatally misconceived political action in terms of a mixture of the other human activities she calls work and labor."¹³ Marx focused on the relations of production, but in Arendt's schema, it would be more accurate to say he focused on the relations of reproduction: "For although Marx spoke of *making*, using the terminology of craftsmanship, Arendt claims that he actually understood history in terms of processes of production and consumption much closer to animal life—labor, in fact."¹⁴ And indeed, it is the chapter "Labor," not the chapter "Work," that Arendt opens with the words, "In the following chapter, Karl Marx will be criticized."¹⁵ For Arendt it is neither the world of work nor the world of labor but the discursive world of speech and other human action in which human beings can properly be called political, because through action human beings are exposed to and encounter the plurality of other human beings. The world of labor is the furthest removed from this political life as it is closest to mere animal life; in the world of labor we encounter others not in their plurality but in the shared human condition of material subsistence: procuring and preparing food, and the "constant unending fight against the processes of growth and decay through which nature forever invades the human artifice,

threatening the durability of the world and its fitness for human use.”¹⁶

When I claim, then, as I did earlier, that an education in material-reproductive processes has “eco-political” significance, I am using “political” not as Arendt does. For Arendt, the political arises from human beings speaking and revealing their distinctness to one another. She sees labor as not just “un-political” but in fact “antipolitical,” as it is “an activity in which man is neither together with the world nor with other people, but alone with his body, facing the naked necessity to keep himself alive.”¹⁷ My conception of the political, by contrast, hinges on the contingency—and thus contestability—of any set of power relations ordering a society at a given time,¹⁸ not on human plurality and distinctness. Making available for questioning how societies have organized material-reproductive processes, and the effects of these processes on human and non-human participants, is political in the sense that it can spur contestations of and interventions in the organization of these material-reproductive processes.

In recent years a number of scholars have once again been paying attention to materiality. This “material turn,” however, is not a return to Marxism or to a conception of the human condition as first and foremost related to our roles in systems of production. Instead, it is a turn to posthumanism and a conception of the human condition as first and foremost related to our bodily, material dependence on ecological and other material processes. As Serenella Iovino explains, “the material constitution of nature, and the nature of matter, are at the center of the so-called ‘material turn,’ an interdisciplinary debate involving environmental philosophy, ecological humanities, and ecocriticism.”¹⁹ Reproductive labor, considered through the lens of ecocritical materialist theory, gains a new political import. The personal is political because the public and private spheres remain gendered, but also because reproductive labor today confronts us with the far-ranging ecological-political consequences of our participation in cycles and systems of matter. This is a clear departure from Arendt’s limitation of the political to the world of human plurality. The political significance of reproductive labor today is related to ecological crises that have put our shared physical vulnerability and ecological dependence and interdependence into sharp relief. What Arendt did not call attention to in her description of the

world of labor was that how we go about procuring and preparing food and how we keep our environments clean and protect them from growth and decay have significant effects on our and others' subsequent ability to engage in those same activities. For example, a reliance on agricultural monoculture and crops requiring intensive irrigation affects the subsequent availability of fertile soil, water, and thus food for people in other times and places. Arendt was disdainful of labor, noting that "the daily fight in which the human body is engaged to keep the world clean and prevent its decay bears little resemblance to heroic deeds; the endurance it needs to repair each day anew the waste of yesterday is not courage, and what makes the effort painful is not danger but its relentless repetition."²⁰ Today, people are making efforts to "keep the world clean and prevent its decay" that can be considered heroic and exceptional, not because the very need to keep the world clean and prevent its decay is exceptional, but because the threats against which they fight are severe and acute. Reducing our reliance on electricity produced through the use of fossil fuels; reducing our reliance on food transported over great distances; reducing the amount of waste we send out into the world; these and other interventions are political when they stem from a changed understanding of the human reliance on and responsibility for larger ecosystems and a desire to change the social and economic order based on that understanding. Arendt was wrong to suggest that "it is ... the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent."²¹ For we now know that what is left behind, the material effects of our material engagements in the world of labor, matter a great deal. The world of labor, which is, as Arendt points out, relentlessly repetitive, is also enormously influential in creating the conditions for the other worlds in which we participate. The current lens of materiality, writes political theorist Jane Bennett, "tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota. It draws human attention sideways, away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans."²² It thus differs from its Marxist predecessor in both its ontological assumptions and its political consequences, suggesting that if we more fully understood the human condition as both thoroughly dependent on and consequential for the

non-human condition, we would not “continue to produce and consume in the same violently reckless ways.”²³

THE KITCHEN AND THE BATTLEFIELD

Martin observed that reproductive processes are associated with the private, domestic sphere. Schooling, by contrast, has been predominantly concerned with preparing children for the transition from the home into the public sphere. This observation aligns with that of Nel Noddings, who writes: “Historically, schooling—except for certain forms of all-female education that had both salutary and pernicious effects and salutary and pernicious purposes—has concentrated on public life, not on home life.”²⁴ I concur with Noddings that “the best education recognizes that children should be educated *for* the centrality of home life, not merely *from* it,”²⁵ but, different from Noddings, my interest in home life is the centrality of reproductive labor and an understanding of its material processes rather than the centrality of home life for learning to care. Noddings’ account of engagements with matter in the home focuses on learning to care for objects and gardens and taking pleasure in their beauty.²⁶ My interest in the reproductive labor of the home is inspired by a more pedestrian concern with our inevitable imbrication in material processes.

In the current literature with a posthumanist and materialist bent, many examples are from well outside the domestic sphere. Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, present an extended consideration of the reliance of war on assemblages. It was not the invention of any new tool or technique by itself, they argue, but rather the deployment of such tools and techniques in assemblages comprising humans, objects, discourses, and environments that changed how wars were waged:

It is always the assemblage that constitutes the weapons system. The lance and the sword came into being in the Bronze Age only by virtue of the man-horse assemblage, which caused a lengthening of the dagger and pike, and made the first infantry weapons, the morning star and the battle-ax,

obsolete. The stirrup, in turn, occasioned a new figure of the man-horse assemblage, entailing a new type of lance and new weapons; and this man-horse-stirrup constellation is itself variable, and has different effects depending on whether it is bound up with the general conditions of nomadism, or later readapted to the sedentary conditions of feudalism.²⁷

I want to shift the attention from the man-horse-stirrup constellation to the woman-tub-washboard constellation or the man-dryer-dryersheets constellation. These assemblages, similarly, rely on the availability of new tools and techniques; just as a “rider” refers not to a human being by himself but a human being as part of a man-horse-stirrup constellation, “laundress” refers not to a human being by herself but to a human being as part of a woman-tub-washboard constellation. As new tools became available, the labor of hanging laundry on a line or a rack, securing it with clothespins, and remembering to bring it in before the rain starts gave way to the labor of stuffing wet laundry in a dryer and adding dryer sheets; now that awareness is growing of the energy consumption of dryers, some who can afford dryers use them less or get rid of them altogether, returning to the more time-consuming and labor-intensive process of hanging laundry and ironing clothes.

I deliberately give the example of laundry as it is possibly the most unglamorous reproductive task, the furthest removed from R. S. Peters’ lofty conception of the educated person that Martin critiqued: “someone who is capable of delighting in a variety of pursuits and projects for their own sake and whose pursuit of them and general conduct of his life is transformed by some degree of all round understanding and sensitivity.”²⁸ However, since all of us rely on clothing in one way or another, we all rely on laundry in one way or another. An understanding of what is involved in cleaning and maintaining the clothes on our backs, then, is part of an understanding of the human condition. This brings it within the purview of educationally relevant material, even from Peters’ perspective. For in later work Peters clarified that “education surely develops a person’s awareness by enlarging, deepening and extending it,”²⁹ and that the object of this awareness ought to be “the human condition,”

in which he included “those features of the natural world that impinge on man and those that he shares with the natural world as part of the kingdom of nature,” “the interpersonal world of human affection and hate, of dominance and dependence, of friendship and loneliness,” and “the economic, social and political world of poverty and affluence, authority and violence, crime and punishment, consensus and dissent.”³⁰ In all their mundaneness, laundry and other forms of reproductive labor depend on “features of the natural world that impinge on man” and, expanding Peters’ description, reproductive labor in turn impinges on that natural world. Laundry detergents that send chemicals into our water systems; washers and dryers that use more or less water and energy; ways in which we repair or discard clothes requiring us to make or buy new ones more or less quickly: these aspects of the “laundry assemblage” position us in material processes that affect larger ecosystems and about which we have a responsibility to educate ourselves.

TOWARD A POSTHUMANIST HOME ECONOMICS EDUCATION?

I have argued that the materialist turn, particularly combined with ecocritical perspectives, gives a new impetus to Martin’s claim that an adequate ideal of the educated person must include education in reproductive processes, and Noddings’ claim that children should be educated for the centrality of home life. Different from other educational scholarship that has taken up new materialism, I want to remain focused on the importance of reproductive labor in an understanding of the materiality of the human condition and the profound interdependence of human and non-human conditions. Influential materialist and posthumanist scholar Karen Barad might argue that interdependence is better conceived as *intra*-dependence, since “inter-” suggests the existence of *relata* before the relationship, whereas in her relational ontology “phenomena are ontologically primitive relations—relations without preexisting *relata*.”³¹ While I acknowledge the ontological implications of ecocritical and other new materialism, I am concerned here primarily with how reproductive labor has come to matter in an ecological-political sense, and how education can take up this important understanding. Where Barad uses her background in quantum

physics to understand “the entanglement of matter and meaning” in general,³² I propose examining such entanglements in everyday processes such as cooking, discarding waste, and home maintenance. I have argued for education in the reproductive processes of the home because educating for an understanding of the human condition is incomplete without an understanding of the reproductive and material aspects of the human condition. Our collective understanding has grown of the ecological effects of the material processes we are part of, and how those processes are contingent on larger social forces. New materialist perspectives have contributed an understanding of how human beings are not separate entities affected by and in turn affecting their material environments, but are co-constituted by the matter with which they interact (or intra-act).

An education in and about the reproductive and material aspects of the human condition and their ecological-political consequences can, of course, take place anywhere, not least at home. An educational program designed from an understanding of “the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans,”³³ as Bennett puts it, would likely have to be organized quite differently from the customary disciplinary breakdown and human-centered perspective. I will not attempt a proposal for such a program here, but make two suggestions from within existing schooling structures that might offer points of departure for this larger conversation.

The first and perhaps most obvious possibility is the subject of home economics. The *oikos* or home is at the heart not just of eco-nomics, but also of eco-logy. In many US states what was once called “Home Economics” is now called “Family and Consumer Sciences,” typically as part of “Career and Technical Education.” As the name indicates, the emphasis is on preparing students for careers in home care, food service and culinary arts, clothing and textiles, and so forth. While the programs do typically still include courses that focus on house-keeping, these are cast as “life skills” and include goal setting, financial planning, and healthy relationships. In the Canadian province of British Columbia home economics education has been absorbed into a subject called “Applied Design, Skills, and Technologies,” in which the idea of the home and of “housekeeping” in both the economic and ecological sense has been rendered quite invisible.

None of these courses includes a discernible focus on the ecological aspects of the use and disposal of matter that is part of all reproductive labor. Some home economics scholars have called for recognition of the ideological nature of home economics education, contesting the dominant capitalist career focus and positioning home economics education as part of an education about the human condition, with a greater focus on human wellbeing and sustainability.³⁴ Perhaps these are hopeful signs that home economics education might still be rethought to include the critical examination of the reproductive and material aspects of the human condition.

A second possibility comes from the current popularity of “maker spaces” in schools, encouraged by the US Government’s celebration of the “Maker Movement” through the National Week of Making and the National Maker Faire. The focus of the maker movement, which has been defined as “the growing number of people who are engaged in the creative production of artifacts in their daily lives and who find physical and digital forums to share their processes and products with others,”³⁵ has been on technology and entrepreneurship, often involving DIY software, 3D printers, and robotics. The emphasis of maker spaces is on what Arendt would call the world of work, not the world of labor. Using the criteria for vendors used by my local farmers market—“you make, it, you bake it or you grow it”—an education of the reproductive and material aspects of the human condition would require an expansion of “maker spaces” with at least “baker spaces” and “grower spaces.” Some schools already have school gardens or work with urban farming initiatives, and some have kitchens. All of these offer possibilities for ecocritical education about the materiality of reproductive labor, but none of them inherently provides such education. “Culinary programs” are often part of the Career and Technical Education discussed earlier and school gardens can also be touted for fostering students’ self-esteem or supporting literacy and numeracy skills.³⁶ In other words: education about our participation in food and other material cycles and systems, even in kitchens and gardens, requires explicit ecocritical pedagogy.

Regardless of the approach taken to include a critical examination of the reproductive and material aspects of the human condition, Martin warns

against a segregation of such curriculum: “If possible, a replication within the curriculum of the split between the productive and reproductive processes of society is to be avoided,” especially if the liberal education of rational and autonomous individuals continues to be most valued and to be associated with the productive world of work, rather than the reproductive world of labor.³⁷ Considering reproductive labor after the materialist turn means contesting autonomous individual agency, and coming to understand instead how the material entanglements of the everyday reproductive processes we all rely on bring with them responsibility for the effects of our participation in cycles of matter.

1 Ronald C. Tobey, *Technology as Freedom: The New Deal and the Electrical Modernization of the American Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 208-209.

2 Rachel Kaplan with K. Ruby Blume, *Urban Homesteading: Heirloom Skills for Sustainable Living* (New York: Skyhorse, 2011).

3 Erica Strauss, *The Hands-On Home: A Seasonal Guide to Cooking, Preserving & Natural Homekeeping* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2015).

4 Julia Moskin, “Preserving Time in a Bottle (or a Jar),” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2009, accessed from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/27/dining/27cann.html>

5 Michael Mikulak, *The Politics of the Pantry: Stories, Food, and Social Change* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013), 83.

6 Kaplan and Blume, *Urban Homesteading*, 7.

7 Moskin, “Preserving Time in a Bottle (or a Jar).”

8 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

9 Jane Roland Martin, “The Ideal of the Educated Person,” *Educational Theory* 3, no. 2 (1981): 97-109.

10 Ibid., 105.

11 Ibid., 106.

12 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 98.

13 Margaret Canovan, "Introduction," in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958 [1998]), xi.

14 *Ibid.*, xii.

15 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 79.

16 *Ibid.*, 100.

17 *Ibid.*, 212.

18 See Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

19 Serenella Iovino, "Material Ecocriticism: Matter, Text, and Posthuman Ethics," in *Literature, Ecology, Ethics: Recent Trends in Ecocriticism*, eds. Timo Müller and Michael Sauter (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publisher, 2012), 51.

20 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 101.

21 *Ibid.*, 87.

22 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Materiality: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 112.

23 *Ibid.*, 113.

24 Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 174.

25 *Ibid.*; Noddings distances herself from Dewey, who advocated hands-on education in the kitchen and garden as a way of starting experiential learning in familiar environments. From there children would move on to learning in more public environments.

26 *Ibid.*, 165.

27 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 [1980]), 399.

28 R. S. Peters, "Education and the Educated Man: Some Further Reflections," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 4, no. 1 (1970): 5-20, 14.

29 R. S. Peters, *Essays on Educators* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 33.

30 *Ibid.*, 34.

31 Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*

28, no. 3 (2003): 801-831, 815.

32 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007).

33 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Materiality: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 112.

34 Sue L. T. McGregor, Donna Pendergast, Elaine Seniuk, Felicia Eghan, and Lila Engberg, "Choosing our Future: Ideologies Matter in the Home Economics Profession," *International Journal of Home Economics* 1, no. 1 (2008): 43-62. See also International Federation for Home Economics, "Home Economics in the 21st Century," *International Journal of Home Economics* 1, no. 1 (2008): 6-7.

35 Erica Rosenfeld-Halverson and Kimberly M. Sheridan, "The Maker Movement in Education," *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 4 (2014): 495-504, 496.

36 Rob Bowker and Penni Tearle, "Gardening as a Learning Environment: A Study of

Children's Perceptions and Understanding of School Gardens as Part of an International Project," *Learning Environments Research* 10, no. 2 (2007): 83-100.

37 Jane Roland Martin, "Becoming Educated: A Journey of Alienation or Integration?," *The Journal of Education* 167, no. 3 (1985): 71-84, 81.