

Shuffelton's Prolegomenon on Educating Mothers

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With unsentimental, embodied-critical savvy and honesty, "How Mothers Divide the Apple Pie" re-opens a too-long-neglected line of revolutionary inquiry initiated in early modernity, now vital once again. Amy Shuffelton's study of "Maternal and Civic Thinking in the Age of Neoliberalism" is a much-needed prolegomenon to broader philosophical conversation, increasingly urgent across myriad cultural contexts beyond any one *Philosophy of Education* yearbook essay's possible scope: A conversation on *educating mothers* amid public education's current corporatist reconfiguration.¹ I mean that phrase "educating mothers" ambiguously, to signify culturally, economically, and politically diverse "mothers" as both subjects and objects of "educating." Shuffelton's inquiry could draw new theoretical attention to the parent-teacher organization as a critical public-school site for educating mothers in both those senses. Albeit perhaps unintentionally, she has also mapped out a possible undergraduate or graduate philosophy curriculum for and about educating mothers for parental citizenship.

Not premised on "mother" as an identity necessarily linked to sex or heteronormative gender, Shuffelton's account of "thinking like a mother" focuses on *mothering* as a practice while cautioning that the term "parent" conceals the practice's still-common default assignment to women.² She further complicates maternal identity by acknowledging its applicability to childrearing practitioners who are not "bloodmothers," individuals whom Hrdy calls "allmothers," whom readers of Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* might call "othermothers."³ How might Shuffelton want educators to regard thinking of othermothers "for whom raising a child is *not* a primary commitment," just a mighty important one? How might she want mothers to regard thinking of school-teachers for whom raising school-children can indeed be a primary civic and professional commitment even if they are raising none at home? How can educating mothers devalue categorically such individuals' "thinking like a mother" without impoverishing that practice? A courageous act of intellectual leadership that I hope others will take up from vastly different locations, Shuffelton's essay can elicit educationally consequential conversation over such complex ontological questions.

Historically astute and critically contextualized, Shuffelton's essay begins theorizing generally, albeit implicitly, what educating for parental citizenship might require — especially for a particular, privileged caste of mothers in a postfeminist, neoliberal market society that is now radically reconfiguring childrearing within families, schools, and states. The anomalous question of educating mothers is not Shuffelton's own explicit question, however. It is mine — prompted by her cogent argument that "thinking like a mother" whenever negotiating for children's flourishing requires parental attention to their socio-political context — at odds both with neoliberal autonomous impartiality and with selfish partiality toward only one's

own children. Her argument implies, even if it does not claim outright, the necessity of educating mothers in my ambiguous sense of that phrase.

Shuffelton acknowledges her present inquiry's historical roots in classic thought of both Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft, who narrate their own divergent normative conceptions of educating mothers for parental citizenship, which others, in later thought, have amended variously.⁴ In *Three Guineas*, for example, Virginia Woolf regarded educating mothers as members of an "unpaid-for profession" who got their learning for it by "unpaid-for education," which she regarded as an indispensable ethical resource for civilizing a pugnacious, property-obsessed, patriarchal, and imperial society on the brink of a second world war.⁵ Indebted to pacifist philosopher Sara Ruddick's Woolf-inspired *Maternal Thinking*, Shuffelton has joined thinkers in this same tradition by confronting education's current political-economic conditions with her own claim for "maternal politics" as a possibly promising approach toward building "a better world for all children." For her that means an educative, democratic "socio-political regime in which citizens collaborate for mutual advantage."

Unwilling to advocate reliance entirely upon mothers to accomplish that utopian end, however, Shuffelton outlines practical problems that unqualified acceptance of her own claim may pose — which could constitute a strong rationale for educating mothers, in both senses of that phrase. First, she acknowledges mothers apparently unconcerned with childrearing, whom she regards as fairly "subject to criticism." Why should we not also regard disengaged parents (however gendered) as needing education? Turning next to "those privileged mothers who want to do what is best for their own children," Shuffelton observes that they need to attend to their children's social world if they are to succeed in that effort. She lists several of its negative impacts that should concern mothers, but many privileged mothers who want what is best for their children will scorn Shuffelton's list.

My own mother, for one example, was "civic-minded" enough to serve her community generously in various ways responsive to needs of the sick, poor, and elderly; as an ecologically engaged Girl Scout leader, she collaborated with others to mother and educate both my friends and me creatively. But she endorsed wholeheartedly the educative power of children's competitive striving; she garnered stratified resources for her own children's education by collaborating with friends much more prosperous than herself to found an academically rigorous church-sponsored school in the decade following *Brown v. Board of Education*; and she understood family and community bonds in much more proudly exclusive terms than probably Shuffelton or you (or certainly I) would. She was indeed ideological kin to those mothers whom Shuffelton posed as *the* problem focusing her essay, whose choices "minus the motherhood justification" appear "inequitable, unfair, unkind, selfish ... not self-evidently right at all." But, to be fair, although my mother was liberally educated in modern languages and literatures and botanical sciences, she was never educated to understand the full civic implications of commitment to her own children as entailing a democratic commitment to a better world for all children.

Contemplating such miseducated “privileged mothers,” Shuffelton argues that school systems should “encourage mothers” in the latter direction. This plea implies the necessity of educating mothers in both senses, mothers who educate not only their own children, but also one another, and other citizens as well, including present and future mothers who are open to learning parental citizenship. Shuffelton does not presume to speak for or about mothers of color now raising children under the yoke of “the New Jim Crow” or leading the reproductive justice movement in southern red states.⁶ Nor does she mention mothers voicing concerns on what the environmental crisis poses for children,⁷ nor about gay parents working with their children’s “straight schools.”⁸ Yet contextual limits that Shuffelton draws conscientiously around her critical analysis of parental citizenship do beg for such diverse mothers, supporting, challenging, and educating one another in and around their children’s public schools.

I think we should take Shuffelton’s claim for maternal politics’ transformative possibilities seriously. Yet her insightful critical readings of Gutmann, Ramaeker and Suissa, and Warner (not to mention our own corroborating experiences and observations as educators) pose serious caveats about educating mothers within this market society that is claiming colorblindness, denying climate change, and resisting sexual justice while privatizing public education and reducing public support for parental efforts even while professionalizing, intensifying, and exploiting them. How can educating mothers in schools and family services avoid exacerbating those political-economic developments’ “cultural miseducation”?⁹ Perhaps such reasonable concerns prevented Shuffelton from proposing the necessity of educating mothers? Her critique of education’s parental-civic landscape demonstrates nonetheless our need to rethink taken-for-granted conceptual meanings of both “educating” and “mothers” in light of those doubts — obviously questions for future studies that I hope her own will inspire.

1. On that reconfiguration, see James M. Giarelli, “Reflections on Educational Theory and Practice: From Pre-School to After-School,” *George F. Kneller Lecture* (paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Studies Association, Seattle, Wash., November 2012); Jane Roland Martin, *Education Reconfigured: Culture, Encounter and Change* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

2. See also Amy Mullin, *Reconceiving Pregnancy and Childcare: Ethics, Experience, and Reproductive Labor* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

3. Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Women and Motherhood,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1999), chap. 8.

4. See Lyndsay Spear, “Citizenship and Domination: The Relationship Between Sophie and Emile,” *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald Glass (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 358–364, which argues that Sophie’s education comes closer to preparation for citizenship than Emile’s even though Rousseau denies her public voice and power to realize her full participation as a citizen. Also Susan Laird, *Mary Wollstonecraft: Philosophical Mother of Coeducation* (London: Continuum, 2008); Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), chaps. 2 and 3.

5. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (San Francisco: Harcourt, 1938), which influenced Sara Ruddick’s thought, cited by Shuffelton.

6. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012); and Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena

Gutierrez, *Undivided Rights: Women Organizing for Reproductive Justice* (Boston: South End Press, 2004).

7. See Sandra Steingraber, *Raising Elijah: Protecting Our Children in an Age of Environmental Crisis* (Philadelphia: DaCapo, 2011).

8. See, for example, Virginia Casper and Steven B. Schultz, *Gay Parents/Straight Schools: Building Communication and Trust* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).

9. Jane Roland Martin, *Cultural Miseducation: Towards a Democratic Solution* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).