# Fables of Empowerment: Myrtle Mae Borsodi and Back-to-the-Land Housewifery in the Early Twentieth Century

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Since at least the early twentieth century, various US popular press books and magazine articles have promoted the back-to-the-land movement as a self-sufficiency project bound to American myths of individualist autonomy and independence. The back-to-the-land philosophy has had various iterations across the century but generally is defined as social movements and political projects that call for a retreat to an agrarian life, usually in the countryside where the self-sufficient "everyman" can find meaningful and autonomous work growing food, raising animals, and building shelter. According to historian Dona Brown in her comprehensive book, *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America*, early in the twentieth century this movement had mostly been written as an utterly masculine endeavor leaving women out of the self-sufficient agrarian promise. To write women into the back-to-the-land story, many paths were available especially in the wake of the suffrage victories of the early twentieth century. What emerged, however, was a narrative that defined females as the valued and vital housewife of the male smallholder—a woman who would "share his vision" of the self-sufficient life (Brown 95).

This particular and enduring feminine model of self-sufficiency can be traced to the writings of an early foremother: Myrtle Mae Borsodi.[1] Often overshadowed by her more famous husband, the decentralist Ralph Borsodi,[2] Myrtle Borsodi attempted to write women into the back-to-the-land political project by merging patriarchal gender expectations with feminist empowerment rhetoric in over thirty articles in magazines, newspapers, and trade publications during the 1920s and 1930s. Using herself as an exemplar, Borsodi wove a fable of empowerment where housewifery, organized by scientific management and the mechanization of the home, was the only truly fulfilling career for women. Borsodi told a simple but powerful story: women and women's labor are valuable and vital to back-to-the-land (and the world in general). This is a fable of a career housewife whose labor is necessary for self-sufficiency. But as an ideological narrative it also recreates a familiar problem where freedom for some comes at the expense of others. Indeed, this fable of the empowered back-to-the-land housewife rests on racialized, and relatedly, class disempowerment where white middle-class privilege is unnamed under the guise of domesticity reclamation.

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## Back-to-the-Land, Women, and Domesticity

In the United States, the back-to-the-land ideal originated in the nineteenth century, but did not fully emerge as a popular movement and genre until in the early twentieth century. This literature advocated a retreat to a romanticized agrarian life in the countryside as a solution for the discontent felt by many in the urban, industrial cities. Here, the individual, or individual family, could find meaningful and autonomous work growing food, raising animals, and building shelter. According to historian Dale E. Potts, at the beginning of the twentieth century, back-to-the-land narratives were an "over-arching antimodernist appeal to middle-class urbanites concerned with unchecked industrial growth, urban sprawl, and the fast pace of modern living" (820). Such narratives offered a potent fantasy for many and were sold to the public as such. From the beginnings of the movement, in books like progressive activist Bolton Hall's *A Little Land and Living* (1908), specialty magazines like *Country Life in America* (1901–17), and popular press magazines like *The Atlantic Monthly* (1857–present), back-to-the-land stories were written as idyllic narratives wrapped in a "how-to" of self-sufficient agrarian living (Brown 21). Such writings could be used as a blueprint for setting up one's own smallholding or, as was often the case, were used as a detailed fantasy for the primary audience for the stories: the predominately white urban white-collar male worker (84).

While the actual people who chose to adopt agrarianism included individuals from different races, ethnicities, nationalities, classes, and genders, the popularized narratives assumed a universal white masculinity. That is, the story told in self-sufficiency literature promised the back-to-the-land lifestyle as available to all who sought simplicity, yet at its core the narrative focused on the roles, expectations, and access afforded white males at this historical moment. As a genre, these texts assume, first and foremost, that land is available and accessible to the aspiring smallholder. Yet, African Americans, for example, had limited access to land ownership because of both Jim Crow and *de facto* segregation. Indeed, the Great Migration of black people emigrating from rural lands of South to the urban North clashed with the narrative call to retreat to a rural life. Further, the movement's expectations of return ignored populations already on the land like Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American agricultural workers in the Southwest who, like African Americans, were often legally or through custom barred from land ownership. Ironically, the literature of the time urged an urban-to-rural movement of people, yet overlooked the existent farmers. These struggling and impoverished, usually white farmers across the nation, were presented as lacking the business skills that the white-collar worker, the prime target audience, had. Finally, the very idea of going back-to-the-land ignores the history of Native people of the Americas whose land was stolen via colonization and genocide.[3]

For women as a social category, the back-to-the-land genre was more complicated. The movement was promoted in the literature of the time as a masculine endeavor that sought to reaffirm and rebuild manhood and the traditional heteropatriarchal family that was perceived as threatened by modern, urban industrial life. Consequently, most early writers rarely included women. Yet US women were, themselves, also interested in going back to the land, seeking the "very independence and self-sufficiency—the 'manhood'—[that] reformers thought they were safeguarding for men" (Brown 10). Like the other excluded voices in the self-sufficiency narrative, within the popular writings in the early twentieth century, females were generally absent as active, autonomous participants, and women's work was ignored or taken for granted. Some women were excluded because of race and class, and single women were often omitted from the heteronormative back-to-the-land promise. In contrast, white and most often heterocoupled women were not excluded so much as discounted. If acknowledged at all, the focus was as the wife or

companion of the male smallholder. Indeed, according to Brown, some of the male back-to-the-land authors of the early twentieth century were concerned with women *derailing* self-sufficiency by refusing the drudgery and isolation of farm life. These authors warned that "without a wife who shared his vision, a man simply would not make it" (95). Such an acknowledgment of the importance of a domestic partner, even when present, focused on convincing the wife to endure hardships presented by the farming experience. In fact, some women did question the desirability of being such a helpmate. For example, female fans wrote to author David Grayson about his sister/female character, Harriet in *Adventure in Contentment* (1907), complaining Harriet could not find contentment in the countryside because of the vast amount of drudging labor. According to one such letter writer, Harriet "would have all the extra tasks that rural women performed—the butter to make, the chickens to feed, the hired man to care for—but she would miss out on "the companionship of congenial friends" (97).

This lack of women's voices either as authors or participants in the literature of the movement is problematic since the back-to-the-land lifestyle is absolutely dependent on the domestic and affective labor performed predominantly by females. Food production, household cleaning, and childrearing, for example, are key to successful self-sufficient smallholding. Thus, even as the back-to-the-land project could not exist without this female labor, the focus on manhood and masculinity rendered both the women and their work nearly invisible. However, unlike the male writers of the genre, Myrtle Mae Borsodi developed a model for back-to-the-land womanhood that centered women and valorized their work crafting a distinct story where housewifery was an empowered and even feminist career.

## Myrtle Mae Borsodi

Born in 1884 in Iowa, Borsodi worked in advertising in Kansas City and then in New York City before marrying Ralph Borsodi, the son of her employer, in 1911. Her husband, an author and intentional community organizer, wrote several books including his most influential, *This Ugly Civilization* (1929), which condemns industrialism and promoted the back-to-the-land movement as a solution. As a decentralist who advocated dispersing economic production to small self-sufficient farms and workshops, he offered a critique of industrialism that had a profound impact for back-to-the-land imagination, especially in the wake of the Great Depression.

Ralph, unlike many of the other early self-sufficiency authors, did write of the necessity of domestic labor. In his 1933 book, *Flight from the City: An Experiment in Creative Living on the Land*, he discussed the economic value of domestic labor (Chapter II: Domestic Production) and included the importance of growing and preserving food (Chapter III: Food, Pure Food, Fresh Food), sewing and weaving (Chapter IV: The Loom and the Sewing Machine), and the housewife as homeschooling teacher (VII: Education—The School of Living) (10–60, 83–95). Indeed, he even claimed his wife's domestic work helped him develop his "entirely new theory of living" (10). It began, as he wrote,

> In the summer of 1920—the first summer after our flight from the city—Mrs. Borsodi began to can and preserve a supply of fruits and vegetables for winter use. I remember distinctly the pride with which she showed me, on my return from the city one evening, the first jars of tomatoes which she had canned. But with my incurable bent for economics, the question "Does it really pay," instantly popped into my head." . . ." It's great," I said, "but does it really pay?" "Of course it does," was her reply. (10–11)

What followed this domestic scene was an analysis of home canning including costs of gardening, spices, electricity, kitchen overhead, appliance depreciation, as well as the cost of Mrs. Borsodi's labor. Ralph found that the cost of home canned tomatoes "was between 20% and 30% lower that the price of the factory-made merchandise" (12). This foray into the importance of domestic labor led Ralph to his condemnation of the factory and factory production and call for more efficient home production.

While Ralph may have been inspired by the domestic, his respect for women and women's work was conditional. He tied the value of females directly to their roles as wife, homemaker, and mother and voiced disapproval of other women and women's roles. For example, he was rather condescending toward women he called "job holders" whose work outside the home made them minimize domestic labor, "so they become what may be called without exaggeration, tin-can cooks" (119). However, his most noteworthy contempt centered on the "careerist" feminists, whom he claimed "formed the habit of looking upon homemaking and motherhood as a sort of treason to the cause to which they were devoted" (113). He continued,

> Most of them [the careerist feminists] live intensively in their work, associate only with their own kind, know nothing of the possibilities of life in partnership with the complementary sex. Most of them live an abnormal sex-life—one ranging from complete sex-starvation to the partial sex- life of unions without home or children. For few of them marry, and fewer still have children. Thus, they invite the life-long frustration which nature inflicts upon all those who flout her mandate of fecundity. (113–14)

This focus on the perceived natural roles of women as wives, mothers, and homemakers permeated Ralph's work, occasionally explicitly as above but more often as his understood hierarchical natural order. Indeed, as agricultural historian David. B. Danbom explains, such contempt along with the promotion of home as the sole sphere for women in *This Ugly Civilization* shows "an insensitivity to women that was remarkable even by the standards of 1929" (4). Contemporarily, the sexism in much of his work was condemned in popular press magazines including in a *New Republic* series where female critics "accused him of promoting a return to "patriarchal ways" (qtd. in Danbom 4).

Much like her husband, Myrtle Borsodi valued women most in the roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, vocally rejecting the feminist criticisms lobbed at her husband. For Borsodi, back-to-the-land housewifery put into practice Ralph's decentralist notion of dispersing industrial production to smallholdings. Because such productivity centered on the home, traditionally the private sphere and realm of women, the homemaker became a key to the success of the rural smallholding. For Borsodi then, the home as the central locus of production with the housewife at the helm was not a return to patriarchal ways but instead offered a powerful and empowering opportunity for women.

## Constructing the Fable of Back-to-the-Land Womanhood

While little has been written about Myrtle Borsodi, religion and environmental studies scholar Rebecca Gould's astute discussion in *At Home in Nature* shows how Borsodi negotiated her domestic role within the patriarchal American environment of her lifetime, sometimes even crossing masculine/feminine stereotyped boundaries particularly when she drew upon her earlier career in advertising and publishing to promote the family's back-to-the-land homestead (Gould 213). Vivian Dreves' excellent article, "The New Woman Goes Home: Myrtle Mae Borsodi Pits Home Production against Industrialization, 1929–1940," further details how Borsodi attempted "to reshape the culture and economy, with women at the center" (285). Both scholarly works highlight Borsodi's role as an advocate for both decentralist philosophy and the importance of the home and homemaker in back-to-the-land. Yet a deeper analysis of the enjoined narratives of self-sufficiency and womanhood shows both a powerful and problematic construction of "woman." This specific construction, in which Borsodi offered herself as exemplar, was a fable of empowerment that, like other fables, tells a simple but powerful story: women and women's labor are valuable and vital to both the back-to-the-land movement and the world.

Like the more masculinist back-to-the-land arguments, Borsodi's writings sought to convince women to "share his vision" as the housewife of

the self-sufficient man. However, the self-sufficient women she envisioned was not a mere helpmate but, she insisted, an essential partner in their agrarian smallholding. Indeed, women's domestic labor is crucial for decentralized production to replace what she and Ralph saw as the failure of large-scale industrial production. In her effort to make homesteading appeal to women, Borsodi "advocated a conventional model of womanhood while subtly subverting some aspects of the conventional work-family structure" (Gould 213). Such use of convention and subversion infused her over thirty articles in popular press newspapers and magazines, trade, craft, and academic publications, and in at least two major talks between 1929 and 1938. Borsodi remained consistent in her message: back-to-the-land housewifery is an empowered, profitable, even feminist career that earns income and offers security for the family.

What made Borsodi's fable of empowerment so persuasive was that she took women and women's work seriously, employing feminist rhetoric and ideals to promote the value and necessity of back-to-the-land housewifery. For example, in her article, "The New Woman Goes Home" she employed a feminist trope of empowerment, the "new woman." Emerging in the late nineteenth century and lasting well into the 1930s when Borsodi was publishing her work, the figure of the new, often single woman reflected changing attitudes and increased opportunities for women in education and employment. This image of female empowerment changed over time, embodied in a variety of characters including the suffragist, career woman, mannish lesbian, bachelor girl, and flapper (Ware 3). However, by the time Borsodi was publishing in the 1930s, the new woman often focused on the idea that women can have it all—family, marriage, and career (Dreves 284; Patterson 1).[4]

As an urban career woman who combined marriage, family, and work, Borsodi herself was in many ways a new woman. Once she left the city to go back to the land, she set out to create "a new mix of career and traditional roles" that combined the traditional homemaker with the career woman, creating what at the time could be seen as "a very viable option to many "new women" (Dreves 284, 285). For Borsodi, she was not only promoting the new woman as homemaker, she was calling for something far grander: back-to-the-land housewifery was a "new woman's movement—toward the home" (Borsodi, "New Woman Goes Home" 77).

Borsodi not only used feminist rhetoric, she embraced feminist values that respected women and women's labor. While few other back-to-the-land writers like her husband discussed housework, Borsodi centered domesticity, specifically detailing and enumerating its value. For example, Borsodi aligned with mainstream home economists of the time, like Florence Ward of the USDA, seeking to answer the problem of farmwomen's long workday and heavy manual labor.[5] In "Discovering Self-Sufficient Farming" (1937), Borsodi stated this outright: "I cannot blind myself to the fact that country life has been hard for women—that for some reason the farm woman has not secured her share of the creature comforts, and the high standard of living which scientific progress seems to have made possible for city women (1). The reason that farmwomen endured drudgery, she claimed, was that farmwomen had, "in some way made a mistake about the way in which they were running their farms" (1). Borsodi offered farmwomen and any other woman seeking the back-to-the-land experience strategies to make such work easier and more enjoyable. She took the same problem seen by the male back-to-the-lander authors and, instead of trying to convince women to simply endure their fate as beasts of burden, offered a better, more enticing model of female farm life.

This new, more attractive model depicted the successful, self-sufficient woman as a keen business manager who used scientific rationalism and modern machinery to make the home and homemaking a profitable endeavor (Dreves 294). She described this approach simply:

> By scientific management I mean that each unit of work, whether day or week, should be carefully planned and scheduled, and that the homemaker

> should be responsible for instructing the help as to how the task should be performed with the least waste of time, materials and equipment. ("Full Time Job at Home" 22)

Here, she used the language and rhetoric of business to separate and categorize labor and equipment by return on time investment. In other words, to ensure efficient home management, the rationalized household was a business, where machinery is in an investment in efficiency. In another example in "Cheaper and Cleaner" (1931), electrification, the installation of running water, and the use of electrical hot water heaters are offered as labor and cost-efficient investment in the home. With the electrical and running water foundations in place, a housewife could further control and contain the rigors of housework with major appliances. In articles like "Dough in the Range" (1936) and "The Kitchen that Pays for Itself" (1937) Borsodi claimed that appliances such as electric ranges for cooking decrease the time spent on meal preparation and food preservation. Sewing machines and electric looms were promoted in "Women and Machines" (1930) and "Weaving One's Own Clothes" (1932). These were classified as necessities, rather than luxuries, that enabled the self-sufficient woman to meet the family's clothing, linen, and decorative needs. Small domestic machinery such as vacuum cleaners and floor polishers also would make more efficient use of the homemaker's time ("Cleaning the Unavoidable Task" 36–38).

Yet mechanization was not simply about efficiency. It would also release the home manager from the agony of cleaning. Such relief was key to convincing women to share their husband's vision of agrarian life. In particular, many of Borsodi's articles focused on a specific bugaboo for farmwomen: laundry. Laundry was an endless and painful chore since at least the mid-nineteenth century when cotton cloth became widely available, greatly increasing the articles of clothing owned and thereby the amount laundry for families (Shehan and Moras 40). Borsodi wrote six articles that solely focused on laundry: "The Home Laundry Earns Money: A New Approach to Selling" (1931), "The Argument Laundries Cannot Meet" (1935), "Cutting Laundry Costs" (1936), "Home Laundry Earns Money" (1937), "The Facts On Home Laundry Saving" (1938), and "Home Laundry Costs vs. Commercial Laundry" (1938). In these articles, she exhorted readers to recognize that old-fashioned laundry was a pure slog for women and then offers instead the delights and cost savings of appliance washing. Or as she explained in "The Home Laundry Earn Money," "the development of the electrical washer and the electric ironer has made it possible to bring all the advantages of power into the home and to do all this work not only with infinitely less of the labor and drudgery with which it was associated at one time" (133). By recognizing the pain associated with hard labor in the home, Borsodi's back-to-the-land housewife narrative took women and women's work seriously.

Indeed, while earlier authors of back-to-the-land books and articles sought to convince women to deal with the never-ending toil of farm life, Borsodi offered back-to-the-land housewifery as a distinctly nondrudging and stimulating adventure for women. She claimed instead that women should think of homemaking as

> A great adventure and approach it in the spirit of the explorer with a definite objective or as the artist with a vision of hidden beauty or as the man of science on the track of a new truth, for you the domestic routine suddenly loses its drabness, distractions no longer entice and within your own four walls you find a career as engrossing and fascinating as any that may be found in a studio or workshop, office or laboratory. ("Full Time Job at Home" 22)

For Borsodi, then, organizing and performing housework in the manner of a factory or business would offer a woman an engrossing career.

Homemaking was for Borsodi at its heart a profitable endeavor. Her articles and speeches emphasized that the labor of the new self-sufficient home manager actually created wealth for the family. For example, in a 1931 address before the *Women's Committee Session of the National Electric Light Association*, she explicitly argued that home-based productivity is lucrative:

> I am advising women to "earn" money in the home, by producing in the home all that they possibly can with modern scientific methods and modern domestic machinery. The difference between the value of the

> foods women can produce in the home, and the factory price for them is so great that it is possible to create more wealth, or to earn more in the home than to go into business. ("Our Electrical Household Equipment Paid for Itself" 2)

In other writings she quantified such income. For example, in the article "For Budgeteers" (1936), Borsodi compared the value of home-cooked rather than store bought meals:

> During the month of March, the actual time spent in the kitchen . . . including the time spent using the can-opener and the bottle-opener . . . was 2 hours and 7 minutes per day. This increase of 33 minutes—just about half an hour—represents what the average woman would have to contribute in order not only to earn $26.00 per month by cutting the family budget for food 43% but in order to furnish her family with fresher, purer, and I believe tastier meals. (8–9)

Such specific cost-benefit calculations appeared throughout her writing. Borsodi offered the idea that women could earn "50 cents an hour baking bread to $6.00 an hour baking beans" for their family ("Kitchen that Pays" 35). In "Home Canning Made Easy" (1937) she claimed that by canning food, "the housewife earns the equivalent of $1.55 per hour for the time she devoted to this work after deducting every possible money cost" (25). For Borsodi, the mechanized and rationalized housework of the back-to-the-land female would allow "a woman to earn more working at home for her own family than it is possible for the average women to earn in the various 'gainful occupations' to which so many millions of women are now devoting themselves" ("Home Laundry Costs vs. Commercial Laundry" 41).

While later scholars have called Borsodi's math into question, at the heart of this argument is the idea that money is earned by the family unit in multiple ways (Dreves ft. 3, 285).[6] Here, the man works to bring home direct financial remuneration while the woman does the homemaking work to retain and thereby expand their jointly held capitol. Borsodi saw the home as a collaborative endeavor with the housewife having rights to the husband's earnings. For example, in "The New Woman Goes Home" (1937), Borsodi explained, "The revolution will not be complete until men, even more than women, can be made to see that the family production of income is a joint enterprise and that the home-maker's equal right in what the man earns in cash is like his equal right to what she produces at home" (77). This insistence on the value brought by unpaid and unrecognized domestic labor of the home is nearly unheard of in the back-to-the-land narratives from this period.

Part of the power of her story is that she took domesticity seriously even defending housewifery and housewives to feminists of the time. While Borsodi admired feminists like Ellen Keys, a Swedish difference feminist, and adopted Keys' feminist arguments about career and empowerment, she was quite critical of most feminists of her time, and many were likewise quite critical of her and housewifery in general ("Creative Freedom" 116). Borsodi's argument with feminists bookended her decade-long publishing career. Her first article, "A Full Time Job at Home (1929)," was an answer to the concerns of "independent, modern, and progressive women" as to whether women can find fulfillment as homemakers (22). Her last engagement with contemporary feminist criticism in print culminated in a 1938 magazine debate in *Forum and Century* with feminist Sara Moser. In the article, "Creative Freedom," Borsodi responded to Moser and other feminists by shattering the argument that women's work outside the home is inherently creative and fulfilling:

> For every woman who has left the home for a job in which she can do creative or non-instinctive work, a thousand devote themselves to mechanical jobs [like] working in steam laundries, clerking behind counters of stores, and pounding typewriters. . . in comparison. . . homemaking is complete self expression. (118)

Here, Borsodi deflated the careerist argument that claimed the sole place for female self-fulfillment was professional careers because this assumed a type of work not available to most women. Indeed, for those who worked in repetitive and demeaning labor, a home could be seen as a workplace where one controlled one's own schedule, creatively developing food and clothing, and producing products like well brought-up children. The home became a place where women

were appreciated and valued and where their work was done in service of the family rather than for the profits of businesses. Moreover, according to Dreves, Borsodi "blasted educated women who took advantage of childcare facilities and paid good money for things they might produce at home in order to work for wages" (301). Indeed, Borsodi was contemptuous of "non-feminine" career women's rejection of the home, when, "for the majority of women the noblest career remains the making of a home and the creating of a family" ("Creative Freedom" 117).

Borsodi's contempt for the career woman leached into her discussion of motherhood as well. In the article, "Home and Children" (1930), Borsodi detailed the important role a mother played in her children's education. Here, she was concerned that like housewifery, motherhood was being lost in the home to the childcare business and public education. Drawing from the work of Maria Montessori, Borsodi called for homeschooling to produce resilient children who learned from the labor on the farm. Key to this argument was the idea that mothers should be interested and willing to make the time to educate their children in the home. Those who chose other activities like socializing should be condemned. She explained,

> Do mothers enjoy social contacts which whet their wits more than they do the effort to figure out how best to get a message to that little brain? Since so much thought has been given by educators and so many splendid books written on the subject, it would not seem difficult for mothers to exert more intelligent home influence in child education. Furthermore, there is one great difference between what the mother applies to the task and that of a teacher—the mother CARES more, and intelligent solitude on her part has that intangible asset one cannot purchase with money. (24)

Here, she broached no excuses for women not taking part in their children's education. The affective labor of motherhood meant that the caring for children would make mothers better educators than professional teachers. Furthermore, the very nature of the back-to-the-land homelife would create a better education for children through labor on the farm and the solitude and separation from urban distractions.

Overall, Borsodi's prescription for the back-to-the-land woman rested on both a condemnation of industrialism's outsourcing from the home and a disdain for women who worked outside the home. Yet, her prescription also promoted the idea that women, specifically housewives, and women's work, specifically domestic labor, was valuable and key to the success of the self-sufficiency endeavor. She best summed up her philosophy in her last published article, "Creative Freedom":

> If the women of America would take back into their homes the creative and productive crafts which they should have never abandoned and if they would use modern appliances and efficient methods in working these crafts, not only would they add enormously to the comfort, happiness, and prosperity of their families, not only would they find new arts and crafts in which to express themselves, but their addition to the productive forces of the nation would help more to ensure prosperity and to stabilize industry than anything else to which they might devote themselves. (119)

Once again, she called for women to return to the home where they could, through the use of modern machinery, find an empowered and creative career. Indeed, by returning to the home, Borsodi argued, women could not just save themselves and provide for their families but "ensure prosperity" for the nation as a whole.

Throughout her writing career then, Borsodi promoted a powerful and simple story where the back-to-the-land career housewife, employing scientific management and utilizing domestic machinery, could feel valued, needed, and important. By detailing and enumerating women's work she centered women's experiences and labor in back-to-the-land texts. Yet this empowered career Borsodi sold in her writings is a fable for many reasons not the least of which is because, like the feminists who left out the women working in "noncreative" business and industries, Borsodi also left out many who made her idealized housewife possible.

## Empowerment for Whom?

Borsodi's narrative can be read as an empowering model. Yet her fable of domestic liberation,

which sought to include women and acknowledge the value of their labor, relied on a model of racial, and relatedly, class exclusion. This self-sufficient woman, then, was coded—written for particular types of women who, like Borsodi herself, were educated, white, and middle- to upper-middle class. Indeed, Borsodi's story of self-sufficiency, like that of other back-to-the-land writers, rendered invisible the labor of people of color and lower/working class white women who served as domestic servants and factory workers. Such narrative erasures emerge from unquestioned race and class disempowerment, which serves to naturalize whiteness and white claims to land.

First, Borsodi's focus on "women," while presented as universal, was actually rooted in gender and heteronormative essentialisms. Peppered throughout her writing are claims about the so-called inherent nature of women. In "New Woman Goes Home," she commented, "Men and women are biologically so different that there must be a difference in the economic activities in which they engage, if their contribution is to prove of equal value financially" (53). In "Creative Freedom," she argued for monogamous heterocouplehood and heteronormativity, pushing against feminist's critiques of homemaking:

> The woman who does not mate, who does not establish a home, or who does not have children is the one who cuts herself off from life. She is the one who refuses to take those risks which are natural to women because she prefers to take those risks which are natural to a business executive, a professional singer, or one of the many other kind of people which men or women may become. (118)

While such essentialist constructions of woman defined as the universal may not be unusual for a writer from the early twentieth century, as a construction the biological prescription of wife, mother, and homemaker narrows who is being offered the empowering career.[7]

More troubling is who her definition of "woman" leaves out. Ironically, much like the earlier male writers of the genre, Borsodi relied on exclusion. While she claimed to write to and about "woman," "women," or "housewife," she actually wrote about and to a specific subset of women who could choose to work exclusively in their home. Indeed, Borsodi's unquestioned heterocoupled perspective basically omitted single women outright. That is, for her version of empowered back-to-the-land housewifery to succeed, one spouse had to earn money to buy the appliances at the very least. Beyond the heteronormative assumptions, her writing was class and race coded. She wrote to and for certain women who, like Borsodi herself, were race and class privileged. In doing so, her empowered women model enabled the self-fulfillment of the white middle-class homemaker at the expense of laborers in factories and the predominantly non-white domestic servants.

One of the primary ways that Borsodi's housewife was coded white and middle-class can be seen in how she separates "drudgery" and "productive" housework. As Borsodi wrote in "My Home is my Career" (1932):

> My time, I realized was valuable. For me to spend too much of it at what I called "drudgery" and my husband called "non-productive work"—such as dish-washing, cleaning and laundering—was as foolish as if a business woman spent her valuable time searching haphazardly for papers because she lacked an adequate filing system. On the other hand, the less of my time and energy that went into the "non-productive" housework, the more there was for cooking, sewing, gardening, etc.—the "productive" work. And finally, I realized for myself, if I could so organize my work that every possible process was carried on inside my home instead of outside of it—I could actually be earning money as much as if I held a business job. (11)

Here, using the language of business, she separated and categorized labor by the return on time investment. She also judged that labor. That is, "productive" work, the "cooking, sewing, gardening," produces tangibles like a meal, a shirt, or garden vegetables and is creative. Nonproductive work, "dish-washing, cleaning, and laundering," is maintenance work. Borsodi's woman would be "foolish" to waste time on such maintenance labor. Yet this labor, according to sociologist Mignon Duffy is the "dirty work of reproductive labor" or the task that are the everyday labor necessary for a healthy and safe home. Because of cultural race and class inequalities, such dirty work is historically associated with "racial-ethnic women" as domestics and service workers (Duffy 317). Thus, Borsodi's definition, while not overtly

about race, relied on racialized cultural understanding of "appropriate labor."

According to "Defining Appropriate Labor: Race, Gender, and Idealization of Black Women in Domestic Service," appropriate labor is "a negotiated ideal" indicating "who has been socially defined as suited for a particular type of work" (Wooten and Branch 295). In the United States, while domestic servants originally included large numbers of white poor and later white immigrant ethnics, by the early twentieth century most domestic servants were women of color (Nakano Glenn 93). According to the US Bureau of the Census, in 1930, 27.7% of black women over the age of ten were gainfully employed in the category of "servants/laundresses." For white women, only 2.5% were employed as servants or laundresses (93). Here, along with the increase in percentages of women of color, particularly black women as domestics, beliefs about black women's so-called natural proclivity to serve, and the *de jure* limits on employment for African Americans in other fields merged as a discourse which defined black women as, "the appropriate laborer for the domestic service" (Wooten and Branch 300, 303). For white housewives, hiring black women as servants not only affirmed racial and class social identities but also rid the white housewives of the hardest dirty work of reproductive labor routines, "enabling them to concentrate on the aspects of domesticity that they found more appealing" (296–97).

It is important to point out that Borsodi never overtly stated that dirty work or any household work for that matter should be pushed onto other women. In fact, in "Creative Freedom" she condemned the shifting of the housewife's work onto the back of others, particularly those in steam laundries. She named those housewives "parasites" (118). Yet the underlying discourse coupled with the racialized construction of appropriate labor at this historical moment helps one to understand Borsodi's judgment between productive and nonproductive. Here, the housewife was coded white (a person not "foolish" enough to waste time on the dirty work) and middle-class (the one with means to employ others). Clearly, the woman in Borsodi's narrative was associated with the productive and management. Simultaneously, the nonproductive was culturally coded to women of color working as servants.

And Borsodi did endorse the use of servants. While she rejected outsourcing housework to laundries for example, she did discuss maids and laundresses in the home as a natural part of the household experience. Again, she used the language of business and the factory to support her argument, but in doing so she allied with management rather than the workers. Such focus assumed the audience—the ones she is writing to—inhabited the role of the household manager and not the labor.

Scattered throughout Borsodi's writings were hints and asides that mention the use of domestic servants. In some cases, it is supervising the "charwoman" to efficiently use domestic machinery or the "handyman" who helped build the tennis court at their home ("Cleaning the Unavoidable Task" 44; "Home and Children" 24). Her main discussion of servants, however, was centered on the washerwoman—the one who enacts the most drudging "nonproductive" of household labor. For example, in "Our Electrical Household Equipment Paid for Itself" (1931), Borsodi offered the washing machine and ironer as time saving appliances but only if homemaker takes the time to instruct and convince her washerwoman to use them properly. "The efficiency of a laundress, for instance, can be greatly increased if the homemaker can show her how to use the machinery, how to soften the water, how to gage the temperature and the amount of soap to use in each suds (1–2). In another article, "The Ironer is Hot" (1931), she spoke of her own "exceptionally steady and hard-working laundress" (43). This article promoted the "ironer" or a cylindrical tube where clothing is rolled rather than pressed. Borsodi taught her servant to use the ironer—a teaching task that took persuasion and time because, she explained, her laundress was so efficient at using the regular electric iron. However, once the washerwoman was taught to use the ironer properly, the labor was cut in half from six hours to three hours a week. Borsodi did her math:

> I pay my laundress 50 cents per hour which makes the cost of labor approximately $1.50 each per week. It consumes about 3.7 kilowatts of current each week at a cost of about 14.8 cents per week. This may be a little below average because my kw.hr. rate is only a little more than 4 cents. (43)

Here, the cost of the electricity and the washerwoman were made rhetorically equivalent. The cost savings were the main focus and it is implied that the laundress wins in this situation by having her labor cut in half. Yet as someone paid by the hour this is hardly an advantage. This is efficiency is for the employer rather than the employee. Borsodi was presenting a universal argument for "women" but the women here are defined as necessarily not the washerwoman. Again because of the racial politics of the time, washerwomen were predominantly women of color. While there is no record of the race of Borsodi's "hardworking laundress," it is a fair estimation that she was a woman of color. Even if she were not, the unquestioned use of a servant in a narrative that calls for self-sufficiency reveals the ways that "women" referred to only some women.

While Borsodi employed domestics, appliances were her servants of choice. Indeed, her argument for homemaking as an empowered career was predicated on machinery.[8] Yet as industrial products, factory laborers must build the machinery she used. Yet there is little to no evidence that she considered benefiting from workers' toil in the factories as problematic. She did mention the plight of the factory-working woman when railing against sending out one's laundry because it means, "250,000 women spend every day a week, 8 hours each day, at grueling work in steam laundries" ("Creative Freedom" 118). She also wrote about factories when she argued that women would earn more in the home than in business or the factory ("Kitchen that Pays" 35). Yet, she never specifically referenced the factory workers who make the machinery that allowed her homemaker to have an empowered career.

Borsodi may in fact have had a vested interest in ignoring the factory worker. The majority of her writings were published in sales trade journals like *Advertising & Selling* where she published two articles, and *Electrical Merchandising* where she published seventeen of her thirty-three articles. She also wrote for industry promotional magazines like *The Silent Hostess* published by the General Electric Company's Electric Refrigeration Department. All in all, she published the clear majority of her articles in venues focused on the promotion and sales of domestic machinery. In these articles, she often offered ways to increase sales to women. For example, in "Dough in the Range" published in *Electrical Merchandising* she wrote, "If American women were taught that doing a complete cooking job in their homes actually would pay them in health, in leisure and in money, it would be comparatively easy to open an enormous market for modern kitchen equipment" (4). Indeed, "not only would manufacturers sell hundreds of ranges and appliances where they now sell a dozen, and domestic consumers quadruple their use of current, but the American family would be better fed at a lower cost in money" (4). While her argument returned to the home and "American family," at its core she was promoting the increase manufacture of appliances in the name of decentralist production. Factory work and factory workers were necessary for her empowered housewife career and decentralist back-to-the-land smallholding. The factory laborers were simply ignored in her narrative.

Borsodi's main problem with factories, however, was how domestic production had been outsourced from the home; factories effectively robbed the homemaker and family of their rightful and healthful labor ("Full Time Job at Home" 22). The women to whom Borsodi offered the empowered career were not factory workers on the assembly lines building the machinery. Even if it were men that worked the factory lines, this still shows how Borsodi's empowered housewife relied on the labor of others to buy the self-sufficient life. This contradiction of rejecting and needing factories also points to a major issue with decentralist philosophy, which calls for disbursed production as key to a utopian society. A contemporary critic questioned this very need for factories to build machinery necessary for the small farms and workshops in a 1929 *New York Times* review of Ralph Borsodi's book *This Ugly*

*Civilization*. Here, book critic William MacDonald writes:

> He [Ralph Borsodi] begins by denouncing the factory system as such, goes on to discriminate between factories that are necessary or, as he perhaps would prefer to say, useful, and those that are unnecessary or undesirable, and ends by condemning a part of the humanity whose salivation he seeks to work in factories of the essential kind if they are fit for nothing better. (65)

The people whom Ralph "condemns" to the factories are those he called "herd-minded men." In *This Ugly Civilization* Ralph categorizes people into three groups: "herd-minded men who have the characteristics common to average men; a small minority of quantity-minded men who have the characteristics which predatory, acquisitive, power-seeking, ruthless men have in common, and a still smaller minority of quality-minded men (142). The decentralist back-to-the-land promoted in *This Ugly Civilization* was to be led by the smaller minority quality-minded men (as Ralph saw himself) with the herd-minded men left to work in the remaining factories needed to produce the machinery necessary for decentralized farmsteads and workshops (Dreves 293).

Myrtle Borsodi may not have used the same terms as her husband but underlying her work are the same essentialist and exclusionary discourse as Ralph's. Her assumed audience was tagged by coded whiteness and middle-class expectations and needs. The factory workers whose labor is necessary for such empowerment are absented from the narrative—their labor is made invisible in the construction of the machinery necessary for her empowerment of women and a decentralist society.

## Borsodi's Legacy

What can be made of Myrtle Mae Borsodi's housewife fable? It does write women into back-to-the-land and center the importance of domestic labor in a movement that generally ignored women and women's contributions. Using feminist rhetoric and ideals, Borsodi constructed her housewifery model as the next step in women's equality and as a "new woman's movement—toward the home" that would allow women to have it all—marriage, family, and career. More so, Borsodi's prescription claimed that women returning home would save themselves, their family, and even the nation itself.

Of course, like all idealistic prescriptions, Borsodi's back-to-the-land housewifery was, indeed, a fable. Ultimately, she ignored reality in favor of promoting ideologies, in this case decentralism to disperse economic production and difference feminism that relied on essentialist gender roles. More problematic were the ways this fable rested the empowerment of the housewife on the backs of those less powerful in society like the predominantly women of color servants as well as the laborers in factories making the appliances. As can be expected in early twentieth century US culture, at the foundation of Borsodi's prescription was dominant whiteness and privilege naturalized under the guise of domesticity reclamation.

For US women today, the roles for women are more widespread. While gender inequalities remain, many of the earlier feminist demands for women's freedom have been fulfilled. Today there is a wide range of roles and careers for women, particularly for the privileged middle- to upper-middle class. Still, domestic and affective labor of the home remains a necessity. And like in Borsodi's time, capitalist production and consumerism has stepped in to fill the need. We have multitudes of labor-saving devices and consumer products to help women balance family and career, to "have it all." Yet, like in Borsodi's time, the freedom of some is bought on the backs of others with much domestic labor farmed out to Global South women as maids, nannies, sweatshop labor to provide cheap clothing, and low-wage workers to provide cheap, precooked food (Hu-Duhart 250).

For contemporary women in today's back-to-the-land movement and in a variety of connected political projects like frugality, simple living, minimalism, and urban homesteading, valuing domesticity remains a complicated endeavor. Like Borsodi, many current back-to-the-land practitioners like Amy Dacyczyn, author *of The*

*Tightwad Gazette,* a "bible" of frugality popular among homesteaders, use cost calculations as proof of the value of domestic labor. Dacyczyn, for example, uses the outsourced childcare expenses to show the cost savings of one stay-at-home parent (24–26). However, while this is often framed as gender neutral, it is almost always the woman who is expected and does stay home. Again, like Borsodi, domesticity advocates like Dacyczyn value women and women's work, but rarely question the capitalist logics requiring a wage earner in the home.

Others offer a stronger rejection of capitalism. Here, self-sufficiency proponents draw from Borsodi's work maintaining the value of women and women's labor while rejecting capitalism. For example, Sharon Astyk's *Depletion and Abundance: Life on the New Home Front* (2008) calls for cultural and economic adaptation outside of capitalist hegemony through the recentralization of family and home. Like Borsodi, Astyk is concerned with the takeover of the private home economy by business. But unlike Borsodi, she promotes a home economy for women and men and indeed, the entire family focused on home production without an outside wage earner. In another example, simple living proponent Shannon Hayes' *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture* (2010) offers a collection of interviews with women who reject capitalism and find alternatives to consumer culture through valuing domestic labor. Many works like these recognize both the value of women and women's' work but also the need to combat the privilege and power of the exploitative. Such focus on the value of housewifery and the rejection of exploitation recognizes the real promise in Myrtle Mae Borsodi's reclamation of domesticity.

## Notes

1. The Myrtle Mae Borsodi writings used in this article come from the Ralph Borsodi Collection at the University of New Hampshire Library's Milne Special Collections & Archives. I would like to thank the staff for all their help in my research and for access to these hard to find copies of Myrtle Borsodi's magazine articles and published speeches.

2. Throughout this article, I refer to Myrtle Borsodi as "Borsodi" while referring to Ralph Borsodi as "Ralph" for clarity.

3. The ways that race, class, and nationality intersect in back-to-the-land literature are beyond the scope of this article. Dona Brown in "Chapter 2: Back-to-the-land" (pp. 21–51) of *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America* provides a detailed examination of the ways that actual back-to-the-land colonies and promotions would often offer "not one but at least two distinct back-to-the-land efforts—one for "us" and one for "them" separating by race, class, and native/immigrant status (47). For a comprehensive discussion on the Great Migration of African Americans including the economic and cultural factors driving the migration see Stewart E. Tolnay's "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond" in the *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 29, 2003, pp. 209–32. There is much written about the genocide and theft of land from Native Americans but for a history of theft directly related to agriculture and back-to-the-land see Angela Firkus' "The Agricultural Extension Service and Non-Whites in California, 1910–1932" in *Agricultural History*, which explores not only the ways that Native lands were stolen to aid agribusiness but also to maintain a laboring class population including immigrant Mexicans and Mexican Americans (vol. 84, no. 4, Fall 2010, pp. 506–30).

4. Dreves offers a discussion of the new woman referring to Nancy Cott's treatment in *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* that explores the new woman by interpreting the actions and quotes of many new women at the turn of the century. These include Lillian Smyes who said of her generation that they refused to choose between marriage and career, "we were determined to have both, to try for everything life would offer of love, happiness, and freedom—just like men" (284, Cott, 152). Martha H. Patterson in her first chapter of *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894–1930* provides a detailed and nuanced exploration of the changing meaning of new woman from the late nineteenth century to the Great Depression that explores not only the mainstream trope of the new woman but how race and class intersect in the construction and use of the trope.

5. See Ronald R. Kline's "Ideology and Social Surveys: Reinterpreting the Effects of "Laborsaving" Technology on American Farm Women" where he discusses how Ward's survey of farmwomen in the Northern and Western United States "found "five outstanding problems" of the farm woman: a long workday (over eleven hours), regular performance of heavy manual labor, low standards of beauty and comfort in the house, perilous health of the mother and child, and few income-producing home industries. To overcome these problems, Ward recommended that farmwomen adopt measures that had long been advocated by home economists: "improved home equipment," "more efficient methods of household management," and education in nutrition and childcare (361).

6. In *More Work for Mother*, historian Ruth Cowen claims that commercial laundries are more cost effective than home laundry performed by the housewife once labor is accounted for (110). Cowan's claim rests on the work of Heidi Hartmann's dissertation, "Capitalism and Women's Work" (1974). Hartmann recalculates Borsodi's math on home laundry using costs offered in a Washington State Agricultural Bulletin from 1931 which shows that at $.35 per hour for housewife's labor, home laundry is only slightly less expensive than commercial laundry. Hartmann concludes that using Borsodi's hourly wage of $.50, home laundry becomes more expensive. Furthermore, Hartmann explains that Borsodi's math was also problematic because she relied on commercial laundry prices for individual rather than family rate. With the cheaper bulk rate, commercial laundries which would even less (319–21).

7. An essentialist construction of the self-sufficient woman or even the homemaker was not the only choice. Contemporaries of Borsodi, while not as well published as her, offered different possibilities. For example, novelist Ruth Cross' memoir, *Eden on a Country Hill* (1938) documents her back-to-the-land experience on a Connecticut smallholding that explored gender roles in tension with an affective connection to the land. Author Lucile Grebenc, wrote of the single woman's back-to-the-land experience in *Under Green Apple Boughs* (1936). This book offered the voice of a single female whose flight from the city allowed for a solo self-sufficiency. In terms of housewifery itself, there were radical housewives fighting against price fixing and union busting during the Great Depression (See Annelise Orleck's "We are That Mythical Thing Called the Public': Militant Housewives during the Great Depression" in *Feminist* Studies, Vol. 19, No. 1, 147–72).

8. That Borsodi focused so heavily on household appliances is not surprising because it reflects a common focus of many home economics college departments and professionals from the early twentieth century to at least the 1970s. For a detailed history of the importance of household machinery to home economics at universities see Amy Sue Bix's "Equipped for Life: Gendered Technical Training and Consumerism in Home Economics, 1920–80." Bix explores the importance of household technology at universities focusing on Iowa State College's Home Economics curriculum which offered "an undergraduate major in the study of household equipment" (729).

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