
Toward an Ecology of Life-making: The Re-membering of Meridel Le Sueur

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Volume 22 Issue 2 (June 2020) Article 6**Rosemary Hennessy,****"Toward an Ecology of Life-making: The Re-membering of Meridel Le Sueur"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss2/6>>

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Abstract: This essay advances Marxist feminism's attention to social reproduction in order to account more fully for the relations that support life-making. The ecology of life-making is, I argue, an under-developed facet of social reproduction theory and an extension of its reach. I begin by clarifying social reproduction theory's explanations of the value of reproductive labor time to life-making. I then turn to feminist political ecology's attention to capital's deregulation of life and to Native feminist onto-epistemologies as they expand the material history of capital's theft of time and imposition of embodied debt. In the essay's final section, I consider the writings of Meridel Le Sueur as theoretical contributions to a feminist ecology of life-making. I highlight literature's capacity to render a history of life-making under capitalism as a complex and contradictory felt experience. From the 1930s through the last decades of the twentieth century, Le Sueur attended to the embodied debts incurred by capitalism's theft of reproductive time and elaborated an ecology enriched by materialist and Indigenous thought. In countering capital's fragmented temporalities, knowledges, and dependencies, her work exemplifies a timely feminist representation of life-making as critical re-membering and contributes to an ecology of life-making that more effectively addresses capital's escalating squeeze on life.

Rosemary HENNESSY

Toward an Ecology of Life-making: The Re-membering of Meridel Le Sueur

Introduction

What would it mean to understand social reproduction as part of an ecology of life-making and to do so in keeping with the legacy of Marxist feminism? Disclosing the relationship of feminized reproductive labor to the accumulation of capital has been one of the principle contributions of Marxist feminism. By interrupting the imaginary division between home and market, Marxist feminism highlights capitalism's fragmentation of social life as it organizes human activity and concepts such as public versus private, marketplace versus domestic. This segregating logic has the effect of dis-integrating the dependent relations that sustain the reproduction of life and disappearing them from our cultural imagination even as capital penetrates into all life forms. In this essay, I argue for advancing Marxist feminism's attention to social reproduction in order to account more fully for these relations of interdependence that support life-making. What I am calling "an ecology of life-making" is both an underdeveloped facet of social reproduction theory and an extension of its critical reach. Articulated from the critical contributions of that theory and from the discourses of political ecology and Native feminist knowledge, an ecology of life-making offers a timely line of inquiry when capital accumulation is pushing to the limit the deregulation of life.

In what sense is an ecology of life-making an extension of social reproduction theory? The concept of social reproduction as developed by Marxist feminists is often taken to denote domestic labor, historically the unwaged labor of women. This labor reproduces the human capacity to work, or labor-power, which is exchanged for a wage. It converts the consumer goods purchased with wages into meals and clean clothes; it educates and cares for waged workers as well as the young, the sick, and the old; and it performs other social activities that sustain wellbeing. In calling for a Marxist feminist ecology of life-making, I emphatically am not proposing to ignore labor. On the contrary, I aim to clarify the structural relation of reproductive labor to capital accumulation as a regime that deregulates human and other-than-human life. In the spirit of standpoint feminism's aspiration toward a less partial perspective, I uncover somewhat shrouded lines of thought in social reproduction theory and elaborate their affiliation with knowledges that have been fragmented or disciplined as feminist political ecology, Native studies, and environmental literature. In this respect, as I explain in more detail below, this essay is a work of re-membering, by which I mean a critical assessment of remembering as representation of past time that also aims to reckon with the relations of life-making that have been dismembered under capitalism.

Each of the sections that follows considers a theoretical perspective with strong materialist and feminist roots; together they form the basis for an ecology of life-making that defies capital's fragmenting insistence. I begin with social reproduction theory, specifically its attention to capital's extraction of value from the time and activities of reproductive laborers. I then turn to feminist political ecology as it tracks a history of embodied debt that registers capital's calibration of time in the erosion of sustainable livelihood and in human and environmental catastrophe. Some Marxist feminists and feminist political ecologists develop this line of inquiry in alliance with indigenous struggles. I briefly consider indigenous knowledge in its own right in order to highlight its understanding of human dependency as deeply conditioned by relations to the land and to other-than-human life forms. Native feminists have attended to the long history of colonial expropriation as violating these life-supporting relations and as losses imposed most brutally on women.

In the final section, I address at some length the writings of Meridel Le Sueur (1900-1996). I read Le Sueur not to apply concepts from these theories but because her narratives offer theoretical insights inflected and re-membered through powerful affective accounts of lived experience. In this respect, they add a vital dimension to a feminist ecology of life-making as perhaps only literature can. Although Le Sueur's work generally has not been read as feminist theory, in fact it is a valuable contribution to feminist thought precisely because the ecology of life-making it traces occurs through the critical affordances of aesthetic form and storytelling. From the fractured temporalities and parallel lives she renders in her reportage, fiction, and memoirs, history's forgotten subjects come into focus, bearing evidence of the embodied debts that capital accumulation forced upon them as well as the persistent dependencies that nourish life-making. The ecologies these narratives represent enact a layered creative re-membering that illuminates capital's dismembering impact and lucidly exposes the life-sustaining value of forgotten communal relations. As a critical practice, re-membering enables a conception of life under capital as an organization of living in time that spans so-called social and natural life worlds. Indeed, re-membering discloses the distinction between social and natural life as itself one of capital's historical casualties. The re-membering of humans to the planetary biosphere of which we are a part

therefore informs my case for life-making, even as from time to time I use the terms "nature" and "social life" for analytical purposes.¹

Reproductive labor legacies

In making domestic work visible as labor, Marxist feminists draw attention to aspects of life-making that the legacies of Marxism and feminism marginalized or ignored. An early phase of such attention to domestic labor is evident in the writings of nineteenth and early twentieth-century women in Europe and the United States who called for the socialization of housework and childcare and claimed this labor is integral to the reproduction of life. They decried the isolated single home as oppressive to women, especially for those who tried to balance wage work and childcare. They formed homemakers' cooperatives, designed and implemented kitchenless houses, and led experiments in collective living. Their writings conceptualized new models for domestic economy and reached a wide audience, and yet they have been largely unacknowledged as contributors to social theory (Hayden).

Beginning in the late 1960s, a considerable body of academic feminist theory took up the question of domestic labor's relationship to capital, and histories of feminist social reproduction theory often locate its roots in these debates.² Although it is often unacknowledged, the ground for these academic debates was laid in the streets when New Deal programs inaugurated by the emerging US welfare state did not extend to domestic labor, and grassroots efforts to redress its invisibility and devaluation began stirring.³ After World War II that discontent coalesced, and poor women began organizing campaigns focused on welfare rights and waged domestic work. Both were led by African American women; indeed, it is fair to say that African American women were the first to bring visibility to the domestic workplace (Triece; Nadasen). African American poor women put domestic workers' rights on the national agenda and presented their demands in "overt, collective, and public forms of opposition" (Nadasen 5, 6).⁴ Both welfare rights and domestic labor campaigns offered valuable conceptions of the racial and gendered face of domestic labor (Glenn; Triece). Racist discourse regarding poor black mothers as undeserving, immoral, or hypersexual—the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow—shaped debates on welfare as a state funded provision for social reproduction. In the 1960s, poor black women began to organize around the inadequacy of welfare provisions. Unlike white women, they did not demand the right to paid work—black women had long been working for wages—rather they demanded the state support their mothering as socially valuable labor. As legislation to address their demands unfolded into the 1970s, the line between welfare and wage work remained a site of struggle. Under Work Incentive Programs (1967-84), women welfare recipients were made to serve as maids or to do day work in white homes to keep their welfare checks (Triece 126).⁵ Like welfare mothers, domestic-worker organizers aimed to re-value social reproductive labor, both paid and unpaid, and thus they expanded the definition of work that characterized much of the history of labor and labor organizing (Nadasen 4). These struggles remain important reminders that the arenas of life-making in which social reproduction takes place have embedded in them a history of capital and state investment in racial oppression that spans any reductive division between public and private social spaces.

The Wages for Housework campaign, initiated in 1972 by the Italian feminist Maria Rosa Dalla Costa and the US feminist Selma James then living in the UK, fueled international demonstrations and calls for general strikes.⁶ The Wages for Housework campaign was not organizationally tied to the welfare and domestic labor movements led by black women, although it shared some of their goals and should be seen in this context.⁷ As Kathi Weeks and Silvia Federici both point out, although this campaign called for wages, it was in actuality a demand for a different relation between life and work that rejected the family-centered organization of social reproduction and the gendered distribution of labor (Federici 15; Weeks 133, 24). In confounding the ideological division between the formal

¹ For more on this point see von Werlhof.

² The theoretical chemist Margaret Benston's 1969 essay was the first; for reprints of hers and others, see Hennessy and Ingraham.

³ One example is Mary Inman's 1941 case for the value of women's domestic labor which was initially rejected by the Communist Party press.

⁴ Household workers spotlighted the exclusion of domestic work from the minimum wage and workers compensation and fought for legal protections and collective bargaining rights (5-6).

⁵ One telling example is that "during the cotton picking season no one [was] accepted on welfare because plantations need[ed] cheap labor to do cotton picking behind the cotton-picking machines" (Quadrango 1994, 128 quoted in Triece 126.)

⁶ See their pamphlet "The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community," reprinted in James.

⁷ Angela Davis (1981) critiques the Wages for Housework campaign for neglecting to address the racialized division of housework labor, including its impact on black women domestics who were paid for their labor.

workplace and the private family, the campaign made visible that the family and its ties to a broader community of relations, what they called "the social factory," is essential to the reproduction of labor power and is a "hidden source" of surplus value (James 51). The term "social factory," associated with the autonomist Marxist tradition, makes explicit the broad scope of social reproduction occurring across communities that include more than individual households (Weeks 120). In an essay published almost a decade after the campaign, Selma James acknowledges that "the massive women's movement, led by black single mothers for wages for housework in the form of welfare" was "virtually ignored by the new Women's Liberation Movement" (James 145). James came to feminism by way of her involvement with autonomous Black struggles and acknowledges that the women's movement came into being on the tide of the working-class power and class consciousness expressed by the Black movement (*Sex, Race, and Class* 99). However, the analysis offered by the initial Wages for Housework campaign did not develop the racial stratification of women's housework.

The lessons from this history are important to consider as feminist insights on social reproduction are again circulating. Some of these approaches still emphatically center labor, and some of the current attention to social reproduction turns on how we understand that centering. In her 2017 edited collection, for example, Tithi Bhattacharya asserts that "the fundamental insight of SRT (social reproduction theory) is, simply put, that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole" (2). Susan Ferguson's analysis of children under capitalism, however, suggests that participants in social reproduction do more than reproduce labor-power; "they are reproducers of life" (130). In an earlier collection, the Canadian feminist Meg Luxton contends that feminist theorists of social reproduction show "how the production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated socio-economic process" (36-37). These gestures toward the reproduction of life signal that social reproduction entails a broader network of relations even as it raises questions about how we understand the structural relation of that labor to capital.

In calling for attention to life-making, I pursue a line of thinking in Marxist feminist thought that argues social reproduction is integral to capital as a social relation through which value is accumulated and to which the stratified relations within social reproduction indirectly contribute.⁸ In so doing, I attend to the distinction between 1) capital as a structural relation between those who own and control the resources for reproducing life and those who do not, and 2) the forms that this relation takes in specific times and places. The former is the property relation that conditions the accumulation of profit, a relation in which the reproduction of labor power is essential. The latter attends to historically specific social formations in which ideologies of race and gender organize the subjects of labor power and inflect or overdetermine their relation to capital's property or class structure.⁹ Here the work of Marxist feminist Martha Giménez is particularly instructive.¹⁰ The labor of social reproduction contributes to capital as a structural property relation by reproducing labor power—the capacity of wage earners to return to work—but also by reproducing non-wage earners who contribute to reproductive activities or minimally exist as disposable surplus populations. Here the historically specific reproduction of gendered and racialized bodies and subjects is crucial. As I argue elsewhere, because wages are set by how much labor power is valued (as skilled) or devalued (as unskilled and disposable), in so far as reproductive labor across family and other institutions in the social factory "predicates" differentiated embodied subjects, it contributes to capital's accumulation of surplus value (Hennessy 2017). Such an approach offers a historical and materialist analysis of the reproduction of gender and race as historically specific ideologies that the metaphor of intersectionality fails to offer (Giménez 82-93; Hennessy 125-150).

Dis-membered times and embodied debt

A life-making analytic broadens the reach of social reproduction theory to include not only the ideological reproduction of differentiated social subjects but also the reproductive relations that entangle human and other-than-human life.¹¹ In their recent manifesto, *Feminism for the 99%*, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi

⁸ There is considerable debate on how to understand social reproduction's relation to capital. For a useful overview, see Ferguson and Mc Nally's Introduction to Vogel. My own position differs from their conception here of race and gender.

⁹ For an example of such an analysis see Glenn on race and gender ideology as components of the division of productive and reproductive labor whose reproduction in particular social formations is ensured by institutional practices such as structural spatial and temporal segregation enacted in daily life and as discourses subject to contestation and struggle. See also Carby; Davis.

¹⁰ See especially Chapter 13 in *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Reproduction*.

¹¹ For overviews of Marxist debates on this topic, see Foster; Foster and Burkett; Burkett.

Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser applaud efforts that "refuse to separate ecological issues from those of social reproduction" (48). The work of Silvia Federici, a founding member of the Wages for Housework campaign, is one of the major voices promoting such an ample conception. Her work situates social reproduction within the ongoing processes of capitalist primitive accumulation from the early modern period to the present and marks its impact on women's bodies as they have been differentially situated across global and local divisions of labor. A recent collection of her essays reiterates that the violence of primitive accumulation is not "a one-time historical event confined to the origins of capitalism," but rather part of the continual process of capital expansion through the privatization of communal assets like land and water that converts life-making resources into market relations (*Re-Enchanting*, 15). Federici sees the global economy's late twentieth-century restructuring as a continuation of this "concerted attack on our most basic means of reproduction—the land, the house, and the wage—in each case leading to the destruction of our 'commonwealth'" (18). As the lands that support the maintenance of life are increasingly enclosed and people are displaced from their homes and jobs, capital is no longer able to provide even the minimal conditions of reproduction. These new enclosures, like the older ones, consolidate control over land as a means of subsistence into the hands of a small group. They shrink human living space and time and disrupt the reproductive rhythms of all life forms including the earth itself—making holes in the ozone, polluting the air, the seas, and beaches (29). Federici helps us recognize that the separation of social from natural worlds is an ideological effect of this continual process of primitive accumulation. Moreover, her attention to efforts to reclaim common resources acknowledges that "the first commoners in the Americas" were the Native American populations, the First Nations who "held the land in common for centuries, honoring, celebrating its bounty, taking from it just enough for their survival" (79). She recognizes that in their struggles to retake their lives indigenous peoples and practices have led many of the subsistence projects in the global south and north.

The "subsistence perspective" as documented by Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Claudia Von Werholdt and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen is coherent with this understanding of primitive accumulation as an ongoing structural incursion into life-making. It, too, promotes relationships that are respectful, reciprocal, and cooperative and that recognize the interdependence of all life. Collaborations with indigenous and peasant struggles for eco-sufficiency and global justice characterize a feminist political ecology like theirs and point to openings for social reproduction theory's further elaboration. As a basis for confronting the logic of capital development in the global South at the turn of the twenty-first century, indigenous encounters organized around the debt crisis and free trade's expansion (Federici, *Re-Enchanting*, 35; Hennessy and Ojeda). Led by environmentalists, peasants, women, and Indigenous peoples, these encounters put forward a strategy that upended the concept of economic debt. Calculating the human and environmental costs of centuries of colonial land appropriation, and connecting them to a diagnosis of the earth as a system in disequilibrium, they presented these losses as a debt that the North owes to the former colonies—a debt that far exceeds that of these colonized regions to the World Bank and IMF (Salleh 2).

As Kevin Floyd has argued, the history of debt accumulation is a fundamental material basis of capital, a structural social relation in which value is accumulated through increasing indebtedness across sectors. This debt registers not only in the appropriation of resources and labor but also in the growing number of surplus populations. Some of these surplus people enter the pool of social reproduction labor that crosses global households; others are disposable populations unable to labor (the disabled, the ill, the imprisoned). Still others are a "vital remainder" of "bio-available populations"; in the twenty first century, many of them risk their health and even their lives in clinical trials, organ harvesting, and blood donation schemes (81)

With debt as a structural mechanism of value accumulation as her entry point, Ariel Salleh calls for a "gender literate political ecology" that complements social reproduction theory and can amplify its reach. Given that gender ideology is structurally entangled with racial difference, we can revise her appeal to call for a gender and race literate political ecology. Such a political ecology articulates historical materialism's analysis of the theft of labor time from the bodies of workers with the ecological premise that "humans are themselves 'within' nature" (20). Her analysis enables us to understand that the property relation underlying capital accumulation is a regime of extraction in which all life forms are severed from the interdependence that nurtures life-making. Capital's subsumption of life forms incurs embodied and ecological debts when "physiological or endosomatic energy" is harvested from human and non-human life and the time of livelihood is eroded. In short, the concept of embodied and ecological debt enables us to comprehend debt's material and temporal dimensions. The debts sustained by this dis-integration are compounded over time, and they carry with them a temporal dimension that imbricates capitalist organizations of time in historically specific ecologies of reproduction.

As with every other mode of production, capitalism can be understood as an economy of time, and in that economy of time lie embodied debts, a material consequence of its deregulation of life-making. Cinzia Arruzza makes this point via an extended reading of Marx, and her thinking on temporality helps us understand more fully how embodied debt features in social reproduction as life-making. She begins with Marx's assertion in the *Grundrisse*, "Economy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself" (172-73) and then draws upon several theorists who elaborate Marx's understanding of time as both a social relation and the measure of social relations under capitalism. Stavros Tombazos, for example, calls the time of capital a living rationality that is shaped by the notion of socially necessary labor, itself a product of the entwined temporalities of production, circulation, and reproduction (5). He points out that for Marx socially necessary labor is a temporal abstraction. As such, it is embedded in the commodity as "a labor time that is different from time as human experience" (3). In his analysis of time in Marx, Daniel Bensaïd underscores that this splitting of abstract and experiential time is characteristic of capital's "contradictory, conceptual organization of social time" into fractured units, which configure the rhythms of daily life that subjugate and mortify bodies (74-75). As an example of this fractured time, Bensaïd reminds us of the temporal despotism of the factory. Here time is regulated by a public clock that marks the hours for the beginning and ending of work and the pauses allowed for meals. Under the surveillance of the clock, capital looks for scraps of time "to close up the pores of the working day" (Bensaïd 75). In locating them, it embraces the body as an accumulation strategy and wrenches it into living differently in time, in other words, into abstract labor time, the indifferent labor time measured by the clock and crystallized in constant capital, commodities, and money.

Building upon these insights, Arruzza draws out capital's constant metamorphosis as "the tension between conflicting temporalities" that explodes into a proliferation of multiple times at different scales in concrete social formations (39). She emphasizes that value accumulation is not just the outcome of these overlapping and conflicting times, but also takes place through the constantly repeated transformation of living labor into dead labor, in which process time is reified as a social relation (39). Arruzza points out that temporal abstraction meets up with corporeal erosion "in the oppositions between living labor and dead labor, concrete and abstract labor" (38). In fixed capital, "dead labor," or past labor, posits itself against living labor as an externality that subdues the rich temporality of the worker's life to the homogeneous mechanical temporality of abstract labor. In other words, concealed in the temporality of abstract labor is a history of primitive accumulation, of generations of value (or stolen time) extracted from the worn bodies of wageworkers, subalterns, slaves, and also from reproductive laborers in the form of lifetimes of work and unmet need for the time of rest and renewal.

We can understand the living history that haunts this so-called dead labor as embodied debt accrued through processes of bioderegulation. As many readers of Marx have recognized, throughout his writings he notes this deregulation of life as capitalist progress erodes the temporal requirements for human and non-human life forms to regenerate (Brennan; Burkett; Foster; Saito). Bioderegulation removes the constraints that the time of regenerative life-making imposes on life forms when self-regulating systems are overridden by the pace and demands of production (Brennan 22). As Teresa Brennan describes it, "bioderegulation dismantles the natural 'rules' which govern living things, rules which allow for replenishment both in humans and in nature. It is in effect the product of capital's fractured time. Like economic deregulation, it subordinates to abstract time the requirements of human, plant, and animal life in pursuit of immediate profits over long-term sustainability" (33). The concept of bioderegulation recognizes, as did Marx in the *1844 Manuscripts*, that humans survive through their reciprocal interaction with nature and with one another. It concedes that capital accumulation and technological progress incur embodied and ecological debts as they use up resources like land, air, water, and the laborer, dismantling the temporalities that govern their regeneration and moving on to others when these are depleted.

In response to crises of overproduction, new modes of value accumulation and capital circulation speed up clock time to the point that conditions of labor approach the 24 hour limit in the wage economy and in reproductive labor. As Rhacel Salazar Parreñas reminds us, even when reproductive labor is wage work, the domestic worker's reproductive labor time, like the time of assembly for export, is always on-call and on-demand (78). As humans are made to work faster in conformity with the times of capital, they must abandon traditions and customs such as no work after sundown. The constraints that human time and natural time impose as the body's self-regulating systems are overridden by the pace and demand of production (Brennan 19-22).

The land in me: theory from life

Indigenous knowledges, more than any Western epistemologies, are attuned to life-making as reciprocal and dependent reproductive relations. As Vine Deloria Jr. (Yankton Sioux) puts it, in Native forms of

knowledge "power and place are dominant concepts—power being the living energy that inhabits or conquers the universe, and place being the relationship of things to each other" (22). Native knowledges have a deep-time ecological knowledge and it informs their traditions and history of anti-colonial resistance. Central to Native knowledge, and to Native Studies, is a relational onto-epistemology in which "power is understood as the living energy that inhabits the universe, and place is comprehended as the relationship of things to each other" (Deloria 23). Native feminist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg) explains that in this form of comprehension, "intelligence flows through relationships between living entities," and meaning is derived "through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships" (155-56). Much of Indigenous feminism has taken shape around the disruptive effects of colonial practices on these relationships rather than focusing on women's devalued labor of social reproduction *per se*. In this respect, feminist Native Studies have had an uneven relation to social reproduction theory's roots in Marxism. As Audra Simpson (Kahnawake Mohawk) and Andrea Smith have put it, many Native scholars "have seen Marxism as presupposing Western development efforts that aim to liberate Native people from their land bases and move them into capitalist work." They concede, however, that "Marxist theory provides a helpful lens for addressing questions of how struggles over land appropriation can be tied to struggles over labor exploitation" (18). This is a significant concession because some Native theorists assert that colonialism should be the overarching framework for understanding the structural dispossession of Native peoples and their struggles around the question of land. Glen Coulter (Yellowknives Dené), for example, refers Native theory to Marx's concept of primitive accumulation as useful for thinking about colonialism as "structured dispossession" (58). He argues for more attention to *colonial dispossession*, however, as the "dominant background structure shaping the character of the relationship between indigenous peoples and the state" (62). It is important to remember, nonetheless, that colonial dispossession lies at the heart of capitalism's structural property relation in which a few seize and control the means for sustaining life (like access to land) and thus disrupt a complex system of reciprocal relations and obligations. As Robin Kimmerer (Potawatomi) affirms, in Native traditions, honoring these obligations is an ancient practice through which power and place are lived over time not as a property relation but as webs of connection integral to the reciprocal wellbeing of people, communities, and the land.

As a result of colonial settler incursions, a plurality of indigenous and Native temporalities has come to be (Rivkin). Even so, in most Native cultures tradition is understood as a distinctive way of being in time that emerges from a reciprocal relation to the land. The land question orients Native temporalities, relations, and struggles, especially as homelands have been stolen in treaties and allotments. As Coulter points out, these struggles have been not only for land in the material sense but also for land as "a complex system of reciprocal relations and obligations [that] can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms and less around our emergent status as 'rightless proletarians'" (62). Sustainable life-making in this context underwrites Native struggles and claims for "the reciprocal wellbeing of people, communities, and the land over time" (Coulter 86).

In Native traditions land loss is called back through story, which is itself a form of theorizing and of temporal relation. "Storytelling," the Native feminist scholar Dian Million (Tanana Athabascan) asserts, "tells us who we are in the discursive relations of our times" (33). Her essay, "There is River in Me: Theory from Life" enacts such a form of storytelling as "felt knowledge" (37). Precisely because they are insistently relational and non-linear, Indigenous onto-epistemologies can be difficult for non-Natives to grasp, but they offer a valuable critical re-orientation from which non-Native feminists drawing on social reproduction theory might more lucidly inhabit our historical positions and more effectively work in alliance.

Le Sueur's literary re-membering

In writing that spans the twentieth century, Meridel Le Sueur considers the capacious relations of social reproduction and the clashing settler and Native temporalities that traverse them, and in so doing elaborates a timely ecology of life-making. Across a lifetime of writing, she makes visible the temporalities of life-making and does so in narrative forms that conjure embodied debts and fractured time as well as felt knowledge as theorizing. Publishing prolifically in the 1930s, then blacklisted, silenced, and hounded by the FBI during the Cold War, Le Sueur nonetheless continued to write and publish into the last decade of the twentieth century. Her attention to women's bodies, labor, and desire caught the attention of feminist critics in the 1980s and 1990s, among them Constance Coiner, Elaine Hedges, Linda Ray Pratt, and Paula Rabinowitz. Most recently, Stacy Alaimo has reclaimed Le Sueur as an environmental feminist writer who renders the transcorporeal relations supporting life. I turn to Le

Sueur's work as an instance of a materialist feminist political ecology deeply indebted to socialist and indigenous thought.

In her early work of the 1930s, Le Sueur discloses the value of women's reproductive labor in a time of world economic crisis when the circuits of production and circulation failed and tensions intensified between the abstract time of wage labor and the times of living labor. In her later years she brings into focus the losses that Native people suffered from capital's advancing and violent accumulation and the property relations imposed by even the most radical settlers. Attuned to the cultural organization of time and memory, she re-members fissured temporalities and relations not as a gesture of healing or commemoration but rather as a refusal to embrace a dismembered past.

Le Sueur's family introduced her at an early age to a radical line of feminist and socialist dissent, a critical legacy that shaped her re-membering sensibility. Her mother, Marian Lucy Wharton, left her first husband in 1910 when Le Sueur was 10, propelled to flee with her children from their home in Texas because divorce there meant a woman's children were taken away. She earned a living lecturing on women's suffrage and reproductive rights. Along with other suffragettes, she chained herself to the White House fence, and she was tried in Kansas City for distributing birth control information. She went on to work in the People's College in Ft. Scott, Kansas, an experimental working-class correspondence school devoted to challenging the elite established educational institutions (Greer 256). As a member of the English department, she developed a popular education curriculum documented in the pamphlet, *Plain English for the Education of the Workers by the Workers*. There she met and married the socialist attorney Arthur Le Sueur. The son of immigrant farmers, Arthur Le Sueur graduated from the University of Minnesota law school and served as the mayor of Minot, North Dakota before becoming president of People's College, where Eugene Debs was chancellor. After anti-socialist vigilantes destroyed the college during World War I, the Le Sueurs moved to St. Paul, Minnesota. Here Meridel grew up in a home frequented by populists, Wobblies, and members of the Farm-Labor Party and Non-Partisan League (Hedges, "Introduction" 2-4). Departing from the progressive political views of her parents, in 1924 she joined the Communist party and began writing regularly for the party's *Daily Worker*. Later she joined the staff of *The New Masses* and was active in other leftist organizations. Communist party support probably aided her survival as a woman writer even though party doctrine was at times at odds with her politics and portrayals of women (Pratt, "Woman" 47). Critical of the party's male dominated leadership, she was committed to the representation of common women and the land – "their centuries of parallel suffering and exploitation" (Hedges, "Introduction" 19). By the early 1930s, she had gone to jail for protesting the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, decided to have a child, had given birth to a second daughter, gotten divorced, retaken her maiden name, and returned to Minneapolis to live with her family. During that decade, she published over two dozen pieces of reportage, almost thirty short stories, some poems and miscellaneous articles, and a writing manual for workers based on the classes she taught under the auspices of the Federal Writers' Project. She also drafted a novel entitled *The Girl* (48).

In her essays "Women on the Breadlines" (1932) and "Women are Hungry" (1934), Le Sueur describes the toll of the Great Depression on women's laboring bodies and does so in terms of several temporalities. One of them is the unnatural time of waiting. In the domestic employment bureau, women come every day to wait for a job—and there are no jobs. Girls who had been machine operators, pressers, trimmers, or button sewers are now out of work. Hour after hour they sit with "always before them the pit of the future" ("Breadlines" 143). There are only a few more days of summer and they are anxious to "lay up something for that long siege of bitter cold" (137). "Dreading that knowledge," she writes, "we look away from each other. We look at the floor. It's too terrible to see this animal terror in each other's eyes" (137). This time of waiting is the complement of capital's abstract time by which wages are calculated, a time that irrupts when the structures of production and circulation fall into crisis. It is not generative; rather it multiplies unmet need, breeding a "city hunger" as she calls it, "like the beak of a terrible bird at the vitals" (137).

From the stories she hears and sees written on the hungry faces of women and girls, Le Sueur makes visible the bodies of those for whom there are no statistics, and she draws a gendered history of the ravages of abstract labor time on bending backs and water-soaked hands. Migration to the cities leads to years of toil yielding only loss, propelling men to go away to hunt for work, not find it and drift on, leaving women to struggle alone, feeding many mouths, starving silently. Le Sueur confronts the startling facts that "there are not many women in the bread line and there are no flop houses for women as there are for men" (141). She catalogues where the women are—in attic rooms and condemned buildings, eating a cracker a day and quiet as a mouse (141). Many, like Mrs. Gray, wash and scrub their whole lives and never earn any security. Bernice, a "large Polish woman of 35...has been working in people's kitchens for 15 years or more. She is slightly deaf from hanging out clothes in winter," and

"suffers from loneliness and lack of talk" ("Hungry" 149). There is Ellen who shows her legs in the alley to men who give her food and small coins. But as Le Sueur points out, like every commodity, the body is difficult to sell in hard times ("Breadlines" 140). A few bold girls become hobos riding the rails, and Le Sueur interviews them, too. "They arm themselves alone," she writes. Some "keep away from men and marriage," swapping generation's slow and laborious time for a more immediately gratifying one. "I'll drink when I like it and have a time," they say, "but no guys for me." They are on strike, Le Sueur concludes; "they don't like the terms so they aren't having any of it, and it will make a difference to our living for a long time" ("Hungry" 151).

In her fiction, Le Sueur takes up this slow time of life-making gestation, which she sets against the abstract labor time of capital. In the short story "Annunciation" (1935), the narrator is a woman too pregnant to work for wages, home alone in a one-room flat all day while her husband looks for work. Ever since she knew she was having a child she has been writing on scraps of paper. Her writing is a form of re-membering that draws out, preserves, and values an embodied and fractured temporality. Trying to locate past events in clock time's duration, she gives up: "I don't know how long it was," she says, "for I hadn't any time except the nine months I was counting off" (127). She re-members the hard times of looking for work that were punctuated by this other time of the body in the early weeks of pregnancy when lying in bed she was "nauseated by the smell of the foul walls" or in an alleyway when she "must give it up with the people all looking" and Karl was angry, walking away so people wouldn't think he was with her (126). She savors the memory of one night when she and Karl rode on a riverboat to get out of the cold and she charted her child's future with wishes that might bind it to other life forms. She hears the scurrings of tiny animals on the shores, "and their little breathings seem to be all around... I think of them, wild, carrying their young now," she says, "crouched in the dark underbrush with the fruit-scented land wind in their delicate nostrils, and they are looking out at the moon and the fast clouds. Silent, alive, they sit in the dark shadow of the greedy world. There is something wild about us, too... We, too, are at the mercy of many hunters" (127). Perhaps because of this felt shared precarity with other creatures, she wishes the child to "come glistening with life power... a warrior and fierce for change, so all can live" (128). Her musing re-members time, integrating it with a "life power" that is shared with other creatures, a sharing that is a vulnerable and yet a generative component of the possibility for another way of living.

A pear tree beyond the porch is the central vehicle in the story. It propels her reflection upon the reification that distills from life rhythms "a world that remains a stone," a process she tries to forestall for herself even as she wonders if she may "have a hard time remembering this time at all" (129). And so she writes it down. Her meditation conjures a counter-chronology to clock time, a season of spring when "light is falling upon darkness, closed spaces are opening, still things are now moving" (92-93). The alternative she plots is no modernist aesthetic escape but rather envisions subjects who might sustain the dangerous desire to "remember what all must have" (93). "For us," she tells her child, "many kinds of hunger, for us a deep rebellion" (95).

The woman in this story sees through her window in the house next-door activities that contribute to reproducing life. Several involve the body's need for rest and renewal: a young man sleeping, a young girl making a bed from which she had just arisen, an old woman rocking who "scratches herself, cleans her nails, picks her teeth" (129, 131). Other actions highlight the embodied capacity building of learning, feeding, and care: a boy leans over a table reading a book; a woman who has been nursing a child "comes out and hangs clothes on the line, her dress in front wet with milk" (129). By throwing into relief these socially necessary activities, each embodied and contributing to the reproduction of corporeal life, the narrator de-reifies abstract time. "My child," she writes, "may be looked at in this way as if it suddenly existed... but I know the slow time of making. The pear tree knows" (131). And like trees "born from a far seed walking the wind," she imagines her child arriving "from a far seed blowing from last year's rich and revolutionary dead" (131). She is aware that the "wondrous opening out of everything" will fade and the moments of openness will be sealed up by hard times, in part because history does not authorize her story. "It is hard to write so it will mean anything," she says. "I've never heard anything about how a woman feels who is going to have a child" (130).

The closing pages of the novel *The Girl* pursue this insertion of women's reproductive labor into history in a scene reminiscent of the food demonstrations during the 1934 Minneapolis teamsters' strike. The word "remembering" marks time here like a drumbeat, as women's reproductive capacities and embodied temporalities punctuate political demands for fresh milk. "We got to remember," announces Amelia, the organizer from the Workers' Alliance, adding her injunction to "remember the breasts of your mothers" (175). Several of the women living in a warehouse squat abort pregnancies; others resist forced sterilization. The narrative interpolates all of them into its re-membering work, as the "strange timing" of birthing takes over, and Amelia, now become midwife, marks birthing's time with her

instruction to the Girl to "wait—push—stop—breathe" (181). Together the women generate collective agency sprung from their time-consuming maintenance of life. It becomes the basis for the public demonstration demanding milk, an action that thrusts into political discourse social reproduction as embodied, generative, necessary labor and a well of unmet need.

Later in her life in a memoir celebrating her parents, Le Sueur attributes this communal sensibility to the radical legacy of her extended family. The major figures that drive the stories in *Crusaders* (1955) are settlers who became regional leaders and democratic socialists who "in the slow, tortuous movement of the agrarian struggle... were moving toward Marxism, aware that sharper instruments must be had for the stronger struggles" (13-14). "My family came from all the great migrations," she asserts: "the Black Irish fleeing the famine of '48," others forcibly dislocated and traveling "the Trail of Tears from seized tribal and ancient and deeded lands" (6). Her great grandmother was an Iroquois who married an Irishman and her grandmother, Antoinette Lucy, a valiant independent woman who "sat in her buggy on the line of the Indian Territory of Oklahoma, when the stolen land was opened as a state. With her shotgun over her knees, she made the run and held the land until the claim was filed" (7). The tensions represented by these grandmothers straddle several disjointed times that are elemental to the work Le Sueur pursues through the dark time of the 1950s and beyond.

Throughout *Crusaders* and an autobiographical essay "The Ancient People and the Newly Come" (1976) Le Sueur chronicles an embodied temporality that feminists would later conceptualize as ecological debt accumulated from the "ancient people" whose land was claimed, homesteaded, and ploughed by the "newly come." In these and other narratives she represents the history of Native losses as counter to and at times entangled in the history of Midwest settlers, farmers, and workers, some of whom, like her parents, "stood against the kings of power in the vast new empire" (*Crusaders* 55). Evident in these representations is a dual consciousness of the claims and lives of Native people and those of settlers, even the radical ones. If Le Sueur surpasses the limits of Marxism in her attention to women's labor and to a deeply relational ecological sensibility, here she expands that critical scope to acknowledge settlement's debt to an Indian presence. "I had been conceived in the riotous summer," she writes,

and fattened on light and stars that fell on my underground roots, and every herb, corn plant, cricket, beaver, red fox leaped in me in the old Indian dark. Crouching together on Indian land in the long winters, we grew in sights and understanding. The severity of the seasons and the strangeness of the new land, with those whose land had been stolen looking in our windows, created a tension of guilt and a tightening of sin ("Ancient" 40).

Le Sueur recognizes the gaps punctuating settler time when she asserts that growth in "sights and understanding" becomes felt knowledge of the fractured relations of settler life. She concedes that at a time "in the beginning of the century [when] the Indian smoke still mingled with ours," her grandmother "probably did not consider that the house she built as a homesteader was squared off on an ancient land of mounds and pyramids and cones, land that had not been plowed in a million years. Neither did she think the land had been monstrosly taken from Native people." ("Ancient" 39, 50). Yet Le Sueur also admits that "the design and beauty" of her grandmother's house moved her, "and when I see its abandoned replica on the plains," she adds, "I weep," for it was "a haven against the wild menace of the time" ("Ancient" 50). Recurring acknowledgements like this one offer a complex historical memory that speaks from a settler heritage while also disclosing the relations it so violently severed. Le Sueur's lifelong political commitments take the form of such a political re-membering that refuses to betray elements of a settler heritage while also disclosing its brutal history and the voices of the forgotten ones it displaced.

Le Sueur's accountability to Native communities and knowledge takes varied forms throughout her life. Among the children's books she wrote, is a history of the Native American mound builders (1974). Another, *Sparrow Hawk* (1950), is a story of a Native boy and his settler friend that was reissued with an admiring "Forward" by Native scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. In her later years, Le Sueur spent months of each year among Native communities in New Mexico, and these alliances spilled into extended family ties. Her daughter Rachel's husband, Ken Tilsen, was lead defense attorney for the American Indian Movement participants in the Wounded Knee occupation and attorney for AIM leaders Dennis Banks and Russel Means.

Native people appear in her narratives not as icons or props but as actors and generators of knowledge. That she most often represents them through a strategy I am calling "parallel syntax" is a feature of Le Sueur's multifaceted handling of knowledge and time. Parallel syntax conveys the gaps, silences, and contradictions in the daily lives of Midwestern settlers who lived side by side with Native

people. It has the effect of capturing the silences that punctuated the ruptured times and conflicted relations that defined their lives. We see this parallel syntax in the marking of seasonal time in her historical narratives. In recounting the autumn years of her youth in Minnesota, for example, Le Sueur lyrically recalls annual activities that entwine farmers who show their crops and beasts in great fairs with Natives in their nearby camp. As the days grow shorter, "a dark wind flows down from Mandan as the Indians slowly move out of the summer campground to go back to the reservation. Aries, buck of the sky, leaps to the outer rim and mates with earth. Root and seed turn into flesh. We turn back to each other in the dark together, in the shortest days, in the dangerous cold, on the rim of a perpetual wilderness" ("Ancient" 42). As each group turns to its winter places, a summer mingling, or perhaps merely a parallel co-existence, leaves its trace in shared ancient maps of sky and harvest. Whether "we" represents members of each community singly or together is left unclear even as the season's fertilizing cycle is written in the heavens and saved in seeds that bind them "in the dark" to one another.

The unsaid embedded in this parallel form shelter both the clashing aspirations and firm allegiances of the women in this region. The year when Meridel was twelve was a significant time of budding awareness of these divergent and entangled histories. She situates the year in a timeline of international structural violence: "fourteen years from the Spanish American War, twenty-two years from the Ghost Dance and the Battle of Wounded Knee, and four years until World War I would change the agrarian world" ("Ancient" 42). In the wake of this martial imperial history, her relational sensibility was being nurtured in the "the maternal forest" of the "three fertile and giant prairie women" who reared her (42-43). They were her mixed-race grandmother and mother and the Mandan Native woman "we called Zona" (43). They "strode across my horizon," she announces, "in fierce attitudes of planting, reaping, childbearing and tender care of the seed," their influence organic and nurturing. "As a pear ripens in the chemical presence of other pears, I thrive on their just and benevolent love" (43), yet they lived, she tells us, "a subjected and parallel life" (43). These "puritan and Indian women" seemed to her "similar, unweighed, even unknown, the totemic power of birth and place, earth and flesh" palpable as they "listened to each other and the horror of their tales" (46). These stories traverse a fractured ruthless history: how the Iroquois fled the assassins of her grandmother's village; her mother escaped from Texas law; and Zona's mother fled to her death in the battle of Wounded Knee.

It was Zona, "tall and strong like many of the Plains Indians," who sealed for the young Meridel a relational sensibility (44). Zona lived in the grove with the Indians who came to work in the fields and she helped the settler women at canning time. Le Sueur remembers that she sneaked out with Zona frequently to "go through the pale spring night to the Indian fires, where the Indian workers drummed until the village seemed to sink away and something fierce was thrust up on the old land" (44). Zona would tell the girl stories of how the grass once moved in the wind "before the terrible steel plow put its ravenous teeth in her" (45), and she took Meridel to Mandan to show her "the great mounded grass-covered excavations with no windows except the top" (47). Zona told of the animals "who lived richly upon the plains and the warriors who hunted them, of the buffalo going south to the salt licks and the Mandans to their great mounded grass cathedrals where they spent the winter (44). She told of a relation to the land that was not for taking and not to be divided into squares, and she prophesized the earth's response to this violence.

She said the earth would give back a terrible holocaust to the white people for being assaulted, plowed up, and polluted. She swept her sacred feature around the horizon, to show the open fan of the wilderness and how it all returned: mortgaged land, broken treaties—all opened among the gleaming feathers like a warm breasted bird turning into the turning light of moon and sun, with the grandmother earth turning, turning. What turns, she said, returns. When she said this, I could believe it (45).

Zona's cyclical ecological time is both prefigurative and rooted in the metabolic time of growth and regeneration. In this respect, it differs from the Messianic version of the Ghost Dance she recounts. One summer day when the women all sat together on the porch, Zona spoke sadly of the Ghost Dance and of her inability to believe the dancing would bring the land and the buffalo back. Zona's husband had died of grief when the buffalo did not return and because, after the massacre at Wounded Knee, the government had suppressed their societies. Her story ends, however, with the affirmation that "we have to keep things alive for the children" (48). At this point the narrative stitches its parallel syntax. The young Meridel's "mother and grandmother nodded. They knew this. They had made long treks to farms they lost to the same enemies" (48). The grandmother sings "her own ceremonial and prophetic song, 'We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.'" But Le Sueur picks up Zona's visionary warning:

I look out now along the bluffs of the Mississippi where Zona's prophesies of pollution have been fulfilled in worse ways than she could dream. Be aware, she had cried once. Be afraid. Be careful. Be fierce. She had

seen the female power of the earth immense and angry, that could strike back at its polluters and conquerors (48).

Le Sueur weaves the stories that bind and distinguish these women into evidence not of settler triumph nor of a dying Native people but of embodied debts. If they record fragmented parallel temporalities, they also afford a critical perspective that is layered and ample, bringing to Le Sueur's representation of the labor and ecology of women's social reproduction a knowledge indebted both to the ancient people and the newly come who remained an active force in her life.

The re-membering of time in her rendering of Zona's prophetic vision offers yet another temporality that leaps out of the past to foretell a dire future and it, too, counters clock time: what turns, Zona says, returns. In Native culture, this cyclical time has a material existence and efficacy. It appears in her stories that render for the young Meridel both the earth's warning and "the benevolence of the entire cosmos" ("Ancient" 47). In her storytelling, the lessons of Native people remain a potent parallel heritage to the "prairie agrarian prophets," but it is these prairie voices that carry the narrative force of the concluding sections of "The Ancient People and Newly Come" (62). Here an opening for radical social transformation is marked by Le Sueur's memory of being present as a young girl at a speech given by Eugene Debs, founder of the IWW and the great champion of workers, a charismatic man who conveyed for her "a new kind of tenderness" (62). Although his voice gets the last word, in Le Sueur's re-telling this cry that "all we want is the earth for the people!" echoes a Native demand and vision as the narrator concludes, "These prairie agrarian prophets, these sages of the people still rise in the nitrogen of the roots, still live in the protein" (62). Here in an expansive rendering of ecological time, the dead return and usher in new ways of living. Indeed, they have never gone.

In writings that re-member sages of the people to the sages of the land, Meridel Le Sueur traces the entangled relations and temporalities of capital debt extraction and resistance to it in workers' struggles, women's collective care, and the endurance of Native knowledge. Inserting the female body as a laboring, living organism more fully into history, she discloses the value and substance of the labor of life-making as deeply ecological and explores its temporalities and relationalities as potential material for political demands. Her conceptual insights into the corporeal rhythms of this social and ecological reproduction as it is lived, felt, gendered, and embodied reincarnate history. In the voices of laboring women, most of them settlers who sustained the metabolic rhythms of life-making at times in parallel with their Native neighbors to whom they were indebted, she crafts a rich and instructive re-membering. Her narratives are far from reparative, however. At times pointedly caught in the contradictions of the US settler's historical perspective, they offer readers a lucid and unsettling perspective on their own fraught relation to life-making. Thus, in the best tradition of Marxist and Native theories of history and storytelling, Le Sueur reminds us that previous attempts at liberation await their completion. Indeed, this is the political riddle of remembrance. Far removed from commemoration, Le Sueur's re-memberings are both provocative and illuminating incitements to an ecology of life-making, an ambitious feminist project that aims to pry possibility from history's incompleteness. As Zona predicted, we are learning quite palpably that deregulated life pushes back in the form of floods and fires, drought and extinction. As the re-membered archives here attest, the energy of life-making rises in the nitrogen and lives in the protein, but life itself is not the agent of more sustainable life-making. The capacity to alter the relations of life-making lies in the hands and hearts of humans. As capital's demands upon the reproduction of life intensify, time is running out. A feminist ecology of life-making is a critical re-membering resource in our untimely historical condition, and in that effect lies its power to amplify our understanding of what is and our efforts to organize what can be.

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