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Attending to Silence

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### Abstract

COVID-19 has burdened many academics with the responsibility of leading children through remote schooling. That academic parents are expected to suddenly and with no specialized training become grade-school teachers exposes the open secret of sexism and racism in the U.S. educational system, which has long deprioritized early childhood educators and their work. At a moment that institutions ask us to "raise our voices," I illustrate structural barriers that keep caregivers quiet. The article raises the provocation that inequity in academia is produced by design, and responds to institutional demands to speak up by asking for better attention to silence.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, Carework, Complaint, Remote Schooling, Structural Silencing

## Attending to Silence

I dream of submitting a blank document, the most honest thing I could write. Anything polished, anything written at all, would be a lie.



This summer, a coronavirus outbreak happened at a Bible camp in the state where I am living. I scrolled through a hundred variations of the same comment on social media, “What kind of mother sends her kids to a camp during a pandemic?”

Many of the commenters were liberals, angry with religion. Their reaction belies the truth that regardless of religion or politics we are asking miracles of mothers right now. Care for your children through a pandemic, hold down your job.

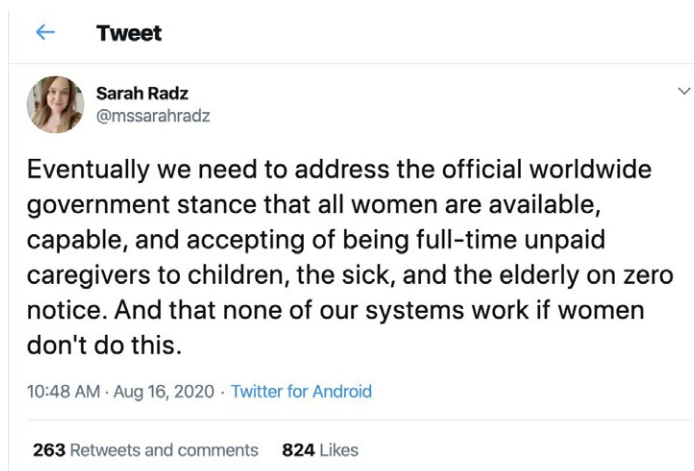
I fixate on a detail about the outbreak that has nothing to do with what mothers did or did not do: the state’s response was to request that campers self-isolate for 14 days. It didn’t test. It didn’t trace. Its excuse was that lab results could take up to two weeks to come back, and they might not be reliable anyway. Plus, a national shortage of tests meant there were not enough to go around.

The colossal refusal of government officials to prepare for a pandemic that experts everywhere foresaw suggests that maybe mothers are not expected to do it all, after all. Maybe

there is a different endgame. Maybe this is a reminder that we were never supposed to work outside the home and the patriarchal state perpetually punishes us for this transgression by withholding any resources for managing productive and reproductive labor.

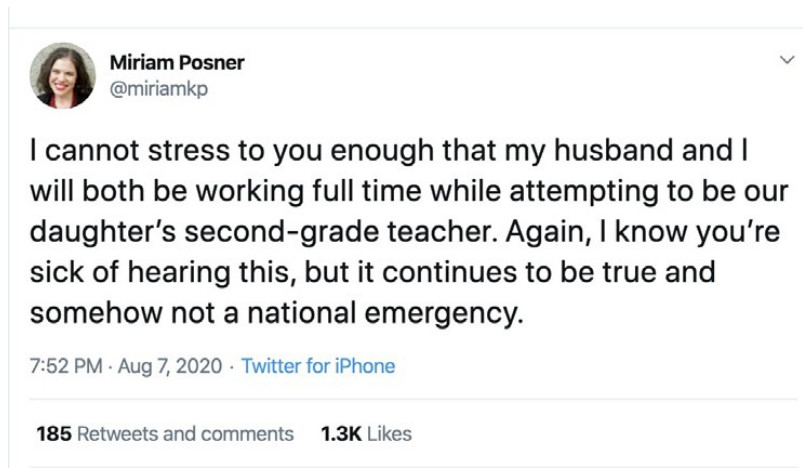
Teaching college classes. Advising graduate students. Writing research articles or books. Serving on committees. Conducting peer-review. Presenting at scientific conferences. Speaking to the media. Public outreach. Phone-banking for the faculty union. This list of obligations is multiplied many times over for Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color, for disabled women, for queer women, for non-cis parents – all of whom must navigate an academy that claims to want diversity without establishing adequate support. It was all only ever possible with childcare. Maybe someone somewhere took a look at faculty mothers and decided it was time we stayed home.

I am on the verge of collapse, but the uber-wealthy are thriving. Just now, as I write, I receive a push-notification alerting me to the fact that Apple has doubled its value to \$2 trillion since the pandemic-induced recession began. I wish that coronavirus was exposing the failures of our systems but, to paraphrase Ruha Benjamin (2019), it is instead exposing how robust they are, how well they have been designed.



It has been 23 weeks since my children were last at school— 161 days. Back in March, hamstrung schools gave parents (read: mothers) worksheets meant to replace their children's classes, as if this was doable, as if teaching small, stubborn children was not highly skilled labor. It has long been an open secret that the economic system we live within disregards the work of elementary school teachers, but now the contempt lies in plain sight (see Maes 2020).

My five-year-old and I came up with a game. I would ask him to do his work: "Please write the letter 't' three times in a row." He'd tell me to ask him louder. I'd comply, and he'd tell me to ask him louder still. Eventually I'd be screaming the request. "Scream mommy!" he'd yell back with delight. He would only do the work about a quarter of the time, but I am no good at being my kindergartener's teacher and accepted these odds.



In April, when I was locked into the screaming game for hours on end, I managed to submit a paper to the annual conference in my field. The panel's topic was social reproduction (see Bhattacharya 2017), and my presentation was about motherhood in Guatemala, a subject I've been researching and writing about for many years. The last time I was in Guatemala, a friend there told me she was thinking of picking up her children and leaving for the US. We had

just visited a graveyard that holds the bodies of many young women who have died attempting the dangerous passage north. My friend knew the risks were enormous but couldn't see a future in Guatemala. I planned to present about what happens when social reproduction is no longer possible, but COVID canceled the conference and all proposed panels were dissolved.

Soon afterward, the association announced it would hold a different kind of event—a virtual meeting titled RAISING OUR VOICES. This time around, I couldn't even find time to read the submission details. An email thread with a dozen or more academic mothers circulated asking: "Should we organize a session?" We had all seen headlines warning about the publishing penalties that academic mothers were facing, but we did not need to read them to know that our experiences were missing and our participation was crucial (500 Women Scientists 2020, Flaherty 2020a, Flaherty 2020b). The conversation stopped when someone on the thread drew attention to our reality: "How can we possibly take part?"

In the US, opening big box stores and preserving the false-liberty of white freedom-of-choice surrounding masks (see Valdez and Warin 2020) have been prioritized over safely reopening our schools. Come November, when the virtual conference was scheduled, we'd be stretched in a thousand directions. Or since this metaphor risks romanticizing the capitalist dream of infinitely multi-tasked labor, rather than describe how I am spread thin with words, let me instead show you a picture of my child's glasses, the result of a meltdown during zoom.



There are words on this page – it is not, after all, a blank document – because a few weeks ago I sent my kids to camp. I am *that mother* living through a pandemic in a country that refuses to prioritize people over corporations, who made a choice I had no choice but to make. There are no miracles when it comes to academic production. Without childcare, this document would not exist. Online elementary school starts back up in a week. Soon we’ll be back to the confined, angry space of our household where the frayed ends of work will unravel. But for now, I can write.

RAISING OUR VOICES™ furthers a vicious cycle by demanding that those who are not part of the conversation speak up. For the many barely holding on through the social collapse of covid this is an impossible ask. Besides, plenty of people are already yelling. That they are not heard speaks to the privileged place of the listeners. As Sara Ahmed teaches us (2020), silence is not a passive space, it is orchestrated – an effect of how institutions follow white patriarchal power.



Rather than compel those who cannot even be present to be louder, our organizations must attend to the silences they produce. The goal should not be the ableist, racist, sexist demand that the voiceless speak. Those occupying the white public spaces of US institutions need to listen more carefully, look around to see who is missing, and do the work of noticing how many stories are going untold.



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