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MUSING

Teachers as Housewives and the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract

The 1970s Wages Against Housework (WAH) movement has much to offer as we form a "new normal" for life and work within the Covid-19 pandemic. WAH feminist philosophers Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, and Silvia Federici, as well as WAH critic Angela Davis outline the ways in which the housewife functions as a laborer within capitalist accumulation, as her duties to care for the home and rear the children generate the possibility of the husband to labor outside the home. This role of the housewife in Dalla Costa and James' "social factory" parallels the work of teachers and the chorus of demands to "return to the classroom" that were placed on teachers in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Highlighting these parallels, the argument of this essay is simple: Covid-19 has visibilized the underpaid and unpaid labor of teachers. We ought to engage this moment of visibilization to demand transformative change to the teaching profession. Due to the parallels between WAH's "housewife" and teachers, we have much to learn from WAH theorizing as we demand those transformative changes, especially now as we solidify our "new normal" more than two years since the Covid-19 pandemic began.

The Wages Against Housework movement has much to offer us as we form a "new normal" for life and work during the Covid-19 pandemic. Growing out of feminist organizing in Italy and Great Britain in the 1970s, and eventually expanding in differentiated ways around the globe, the Wages Against Housework (WAH) movement[1] was united by a call to visibilize the unpaid labor of "the housewife." Some voices within this movement called for government subsidized salaries paid to housewives for cooking, cleaning, raising children, and managing the household. Other voices called for an end to housework as we know it as a moral beatitude designated for people socialized as girls and women to fulfill. A critique of WAH from philosopher Angela Davis called for an end to private housework writ large, demanding socialized and accessible domestic labor as a necessary tool for feminist liberation (Davis 1985, 199). Conversations on universal basic income, regardless of gender or household position, eventually began to open up new demands in WAH organizing. Despite differences in the branches of WAH thought, the core understanding of the role of "the housewife" can be summarized as: the housewife manages the household and raises

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the children so that "the husband" can go to work—so that he can do his part as wage laborer to accumulate more wealth for the 1 percent. The housewife then is also a laborer for the benefit of capitalist elites—simply an unpaid one. In this essay, I will connect the role of the teacher in the Covid-19 pandemic to the role of the housewife outlined in the WAH movement. I aim to put perspectives from Silvia Federici and Angela Davis in conversation to open up pragmatic solutions for the contemporary teaching profession. Though Davis critiques Federici, I do not place them in opposition to one another. Rather, I argue that, through understanding the proximity of the teacher's role to that of the WAH housewife, we can rely on *both* Federici and Davis' thinking as we ask teachers to return to the classroom during and after this pandemic.

The social factory

In 1972 Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James published a pamphlet for distribution that would later become their 1975 seminal text *The power of women and the subversion of the community*. In it, they outline a key analysis of the "social factory" that is a central tenet in the many manifestations of the WAH movement. Angela Davis later summarizes Dalla Costa and James' analysis:

> [The] private character of household services is actually an illusion. The housewife, [Dalla Costa] insists, only appears to be ministering to the private needs of her husband and children, for the real beneficiaries of her services are her husband's present employer and the future employers of her children. (Davis 1985, 200)

As a concept, the "social factory" helps us understand how production under capitalism is not relegated to a literal manufacturing facility, but expands to condition society, including the private home.[2] Dalla Costa and James articulate the role of the housewife within the "social factory," specifically how tasks such as occupying the children, as well as cooking and cleaning, allow the husband time to go to work; this work ultimately accumulates wealth for the husband's boss, not the family. Furthermore, the housewife's task of rearing children also benefits the boss of the factory, as the housewife conditions the new supply of workers (the children). Using Dalla Costa and James' original argumentation, we can understand "the housewife" as a role defined within capitalist accumulation—a role fulfilled by managing the household duties so that "the husband" can go to work.[3]

Much has changed since the 1970s regarding capital, gender, and the household. Speaking personally, as a non-binary head of household in a queer single-parent family, my own experience as both the wage laborer and homemaker does not quite resonate with the illustration of the WAH movement. Notably, the original proponents of WAH organizing were concerned with the stay-at-home proletarian woman in particular. Yet the American wealth gap has grown in such a dramatic fashion over the past few decades that it is quite rare to find working-class households with only one wage laboring parent and one stay-at-home parent—the American working-class family can no longer survive off of one job. Anecdotally, as a high school English teacher for the past ten years, scheduling conferences with working-class families has become noticeably more difficult, as the majority of my students live in households where two or more adults each work two or more jobs. These experienced changes in American working-class families show that the emphasis of original WAH organizers on the stay-at-home housewife within a heteronormative family is narrow and outdated.

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However, we can still employ WAH's theorizing of the position of the housewife within a structure of capitalist accumulation for our discussion on teachers' today because of teachers' duties to rear children and manage the household. I aim to make this connection between the WAH housewife and teachers explicit in the following section.

The role of the teacher in the social factory

The world has continued to change, and quickly, with the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020. When school buildings were shuttered and many parents newly took on double roles as both worker and educator for their children, there was an outpouring of appreciation for the work of teachers. I had never felt so appreciated for the 50–70 hours a week of work I had been practicing as a school teacher for the past decade. Yet, almost as quickly as the wave of appreciation came, so did the demand for teachers to get back inside the classroom—to take children off the plates and out of the homes of quarantined parents who *just needed to get back to work*. In this way, the housewife-like role of the teacher—to free up workers for productive labor—was revealed.

Teachers have been teaching for the duration of the pandemic. Yet we demand teachers return to the inside of the classroom. Now, we demand teachers "get back to normal," removing protective measures such as mask mandates and social distancing while Covid-19 is yet unconcluded. What are we asking for here? Or rather, what does this demand point to about the work of teachers? Teaching—which is what we have been doing all along—is what teachers are compensated for under contract. However, this was shown to be insufficient. When we demand or bribe teachers to return to teaching inside of the classroom without protective health measures, when administrators call teachers personally at home on the weekends and wax eloquently to them about how the students are falling behind without them there in front of a white board, we very clearly outline the additional labor required from the teacher as caregiver, homemaker, cleaner, and child rearer within the social factory. When we tell the teacher to get back inside the classroom no matter the health risks, we underscore the unpaid labor required of teachers to occupy the children so that guardians can work, and illuminate the housewife-like role of the teacher in WAH's social factory. We tell the housewife to get back inside the kitchen where she belongs; we tell the teacher to return the classroom without protective measures … in both cases, the housewife and the teacher are no longer a person separate from the tasks they take up to contribute to society.

Silvia Federici expands on Dalla Costa and James' economic analysis of the social factory to clarify demands in the WAH movement. In her 1975 treatise, Federici outlines early connections of housewives and the feminized professions, including teaching:

> Wherever we turn we can see that the jobs women perform are mere extensions of the housewife condition in all its implications. That is, not only do we become nurses, maids, teachers, secretaries—all functions for which we are well trained in the home—but we are in the same bind that hinders our struggles in the home: isolation, the fact that other peoples' lives depend on us, or the impossibility to see where our work begins and ends, where our work and our desires begin. (Federici 1975, 6)

As a teacher, it is indeed impossible to see where our work begins and ends. Teaching "in-front" of 27–40 students each hour, with three minutes passing time in between to

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check in with individual students about missing assignments, in one sense begins and ends with first and last bell, perhaps 8:30–3:30, with a lunch duty in between standing in the cafeteria with four other teachers in case multiple adults are needed to break up a fight. Then there is bus duty after last bell, as well as committee work or extracurricular activities. So, when do teachers answer emails? When do they stay updated on school policies or collaborate with other teachers to support a student in need? When do they read, grade, and respond to the 150 five-paragraph essays that are due every other week? When do they read the books they teach? What about the time needed to find new material to challenge the relevance, rigor, and inclusion of our curriculums? When do teachers reflect on their craft to become their best professional self possible for the sake of the students they teach? The answer to these questions is—constantly. The work does not end. We schedule phone calls with the academic counselor for 6 pm while we cook dinner for our families. We grade on Saturday mornings. We read the weekly memo that comes in Sunday evening from the administration to adjust our pedagogical schedules for the week. And the first thing to be cut when we consistently find ourselves out of time is collaboration. Federici's statement therefore outlines the isolation and the unending nature of the work of the teacher articulately.[4]

Oftentimes friends outside the teaching profession are surprised to hear that teachers must source their own substitutes. No substitute teacher requests are allowed before or after holidays, and only so many days a year, but even on authorized days when there is no substitute available through a sanctioned substitute teacher corporation (because we have a substitute teacher shortage) you are required to come in and teach whether you are sick or grieving. The housewife must prepare the food, for otherwise the children will not eat. The teacher must prepare and deliver the lessons, for otherwise the children will not learn—they will be left alone in a small windowless room all day instead and then the teacher will be fired. This is how Federici's statement outlines how other people's lives depend on teachers' work.

There are, of course, important differences between unpaid labor and underpaid labor. Teachers are paid laborers. Yet they are not paid for all of their labor. They are certainly not paid for their role managing the household, so that the adults in a student's life can labor for an hourly wage that ultimately grows wealth for the 1 percent. The starting salary for teachers in Minneapolis, MN, for example is $43,000 before taxes, which falls under the low-income threshold in Hennepin County. Yet, because teachers are contract workers, we can walk away from the job—not without egregious personal consequences in most cases—but there will be another teacher to underpay in our wake. This cleanly contractual right to walk away from the job is a distinct privilege of teachers over the kinds of domestic obligation in the role of "the housewife." We must understand this difference as we advocate for the housewife and teacher and the service worker and the domestic laborer all in solidarity. What would the public call to return to the classroom in this pandemic look like if we all took on the needs, ethos, and identity of teachers, domestic laborers, service workers, and housewives as whole persons outside of their vocation?

Considerations that Federici and Davis provide to transform the teaching profession

Federici calls for a unification of feminized professions, maintaining that, whether teacher, nurse, secretary, or housewife, a struggle for living wages within the social factory is a differentially manifested struggle rooted in a shared experience of sexist oppression. For "[as] is often said," reminds Federici, "when the needs of the wage labor

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market require her presence there—'a woman can do any job without losing her femininity,' which simply put means that no matter what you do you are still a cunt" (7). Federici ultimately demands government subsidized wages for housewives, without whom we cannot labor. Throughout her work, she makes both explicit and implicit connections to the work of teachers, which I have highlighted here. She calls on the power of unification of all feminized labor roles in the WAH movement, a unification I demonstrate extends to include teachers today with relative ease.

In her 1985 response to the WAH demand for government subsidized wages for housewives, philosopher Angela Davis illustrates two challenges to WAH organizing. First, Davis contends that the image of the WAH housewife only reflects "a partial reality" of white middle-class experience, for the housewife "was really a symbol of the economic prosperity enjoyed by the emerging middle class" (Davis 1985, 197). Today, 81 percent of America's teachers are white and 75 percent are women (NCES 2020). Keeping in mind the dwindling working-class family who can afford one parent to stay at home, we can then make sense of the teaching profession as an extension of the white middle-class housewife position. Davis explains how, for women factory workers, the immigrant migrant workers, and Black women in domestic labor, we have been required to manage both a wage labor shift, as well as fulfill the unpaid duties of the housewife in a "second shift." Davis' analysis urges WAH to include the experiences and needs of those taking on both unpaid and underpaid domestic labor, to center the folks who are experiencing multiple forms of oppression at once in the domain of care labor exploitation. As we demand transformative change from the teaching profession, we must heed Davis' advice to include the experiences of and center the needs of Black teachers and teachers of color, queer teachers, poor teachers, and teachers with disabilities, as well as to fundamentally interrupt the barriers to teaching training and retention that work to exclude teachers of color from the profession.[5]

Second, Davis cautions that instituting a wage for housewives may reify the housewife role of indentured servant when "in the final analysis, neither women nor men should waste precious hours of their lives on work that is neither stimulating, creative, nor productive" (194). Instead, she demands that "Child Care should be socialized, meal preparation should be socialized, housework should be industrialized —and all these services should be readily accessible to working class peoples" because "for Black women today and for all their working-class sisters, the notion that the burden of housework and childcare can be shifted from their shoulders to the society contains one of the radical secrets of women's liberation" (199). One application of Davis' ideas to the teaching profession could look like the demand for a care laborer/classroom manager, counselor/social worker, and homework management associate/tutor per classroom, all as team members that work alongside a curriculum-teacher in a successful classroom. It seems obvious to suggest that students' learning outcomes would benefit from a higher teacher to student ratio. Davis' demand for highly professionalized and competitively compensated household management careers extends easily to care professionals in a classroom setting. Ultimately, Davis argues that, rather than pay housewives for unending care or paying teachers for their 24-hour, seven day a week life of self-sacrifice, the state ought to industrialize and socialize tasks of household management.

Another important tenet from Davis' response and historical analysis of housework shows us that what counts as housework has changed over time and will continue to change. Davis' historical tracing demonstrates how the housewife is a product of industrialization to buttress capital accumulation, and how that role can continue to change

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and with those changes become obsolete. Quoting Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Davis highlights that

> "By the end of the [nineteenth] century, hardly anyone made their own starch or boiled their laundry in a kettle. In the cities, women bought their bread and at least their underwear ready-made, sent their children to school and probably some clothes out to be laundered, and were debating the merits of canned foods … the flow of industry had passed on and had left idle the loom in the attic and the soup kettle in the shed. (Davis 1985, 197)

Davis shows how housework has continued to shift over time. This reminder demonstrates how we have the power to shape those changes in anti-oppressive ways through the industrialization and socialization of care labor. Covid-19 has visibilized the under- and unpaid labor of teachers. We ought to engage this moment of visibilization to demand transformative change for care labor and the teaching profession. Due to the parallels between WAH's "housewife" and the teacher, we have much to learn from WAH organizing as we demand those transformative changes.

Davis challenges us to demand more than mere compensation for our labor. Her account alters our orientations to care labor as feminized labor through her critique of the WAH movement. Yes—this is in addition to ending wage theft and we must begin the work of respecting teachers by paying them for all of their labor. This is plain and simple. But it is only a plain and simple start; the work is not done there. We must work to dismantle our understanding of teachers and housewives as naturalized caring subjects. Davis contends:

> Already, more men have begun to assist their partners around the house, some of them even devoting equal time to household chores. But how many of these men have liberated themselves from the assumption that housework is "women's work?" How many of them would not characterize their house-cleaning activities as "helping" their women partners? (193)

In parallel to teaching, Davis' demand to disassociate care labor as naturalized and feminine work means letting go of the need to monetarily contribute to *Donor's Choose* to fund a classroom project or give teachers free burritos once a year. We don't need the posturing gestures of help. We need solidarity and change. This looks like doing the real work of compensating teachers for their labor, clearly delineating work and non-work hours, and specifically *not* asking teachers to return to inside the classroom without protective health measures while we are in the middle of a pandemic as the ultimate declaration of love and self-sacrifice. This looks like paying teachers, paying the parents of children, adequate relief money and respecting the life and livelihood of teachers as trained professionals who joyfully contribute to education, not as naturalized caring subjects available to live and die for the forward motion of capitalist gain.

In short, Federici's argument is employed here to demand we pay teachers fairly for their unpaid labors of care. Davis' argument is employed here to challenge us to transform the conditions of the teaching practice in anti-oppressive ways. The demands of both Federici and Davis ought to inform the way we choose to form a "new normal" for life and work within the Covid-19 pandemic. The conversation found between Federici and Davis ought to influence the attitudes we have about getting back to both work and the classroom.

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Conclusion

I argue here that understanding the teacher's role as housewife-like is key to transforming the teaching profession as we shape a new classroom practice more than two years into the Covid-19 pandemic. The demands on teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the ways that teachers function like WAH's housewife, used to occupy children and turn them into future workers, so that the childrens' guardians can get back to work and accumulate wealth for their bosses. Now that the conditions of teaching have been visibilized in this pandemic, we ought to act to change those conditions.

Federici and Davis' arguments present demands to struggle against the exploitation of the housewife within capitalist society, to fairly value and compensate the labor of the housewife (Federici) as well as to transform the conditions of domestic and care labor (Davis). These arguments, in tandem with the inseparability of the teacher to these struggles, offer us salient implications for how to transform the teaching profession: we must compensate teachers for their unending care labor, and we must transform the conditions of teaching beyond an emblem of self-sacrifice. The central imperative is that we must affirm the humanity of teachers as whole persons outside of their chosen vocation as we shape what a "new normal" may look like.

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Notes

1 Sometimes referred to as the "Wages for Housework" movement, this paper uses the name Wages Against Housework for two reasons: first, Wages Against Housework is the title of Federici's treatise on which this analysis relies heavily, and, second, the term "Against" highlights the generative criticism that Angela Davis offers in her critique of the Wages for Housework movement, that in summary, we need not merely compensate private domestic labor, but fundamentally transform the conditions which create an obligation for women to labor privately and domestically.

2 Dalla Costa and James' account of the "social factory" in the WAH movement further develops the term as originated by philosopher Mario Tronti (1962) during the 1960s.

3 The 2017 edited volume on social reproduction theory (SRT) by Tithi Bhattacharya dilates the work of WAH, including specifically addressing the role of teachers as both socially reproduced workers and social reproducing agents via the classroom. In addition, contemporary theorizing around WAH and SRT critique the heteronormative reproductive imaginary in which the housewife functions (see Capper and Austin 2018). In conversation with these pieces, this essay seeks to highlight the ways that teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic urgently visibilizes a demand to both value and transform unpaid domestic labor.

4 See Meiners (2002) for a comprehensive conversation on how this unending nature of the teacher is perpetuated via the myth of the (white) Lady Bountiful archetype, and furthermore, how that archetype is reified in North American teacher prep education.

5 Furthermore, we can employ Davis' critique to question the in-home training and pressure to become a housewife when challenging the central motivation for young white middle-class women to attend teacher

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training programs, the majority of whom last less than five years in the profession after graduation (Department of Education IES 2020).

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