

**ACADEME MAID POSSIBLE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SIX WOMEN
EMPLOYED AS CUSTODIAL WORKERS AT A RESEARCH EXTENSIVE
UNIVERSITY LOCATED IN THE SOUTHWEST**

A Dissertation

by

BECKY PETITT

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2008

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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Approved by:

Co-Chairs of Committee, Yvonna S. Lincoln
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ABSTRACT

Academe Maid Possible: The Lived Experiences of Six Women Employed as Custodial Workers at a Research Extensive University Located in the Southwest. (December 2008)

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This qualitative study sought to understand the ways classism, as it intersects with racism and sexism, affects how low wage-earning women negotiate their work world in the academy and the way the academy functions to create, maintain, and reproduce the context within which oppression is able to emerge. Field research took place at State University, a pseudonym for a Land Grant, Research Extensive institution located in the Southwest. Through the lenses of critical theory and critical feminist theory the stories of six women employed as custodial workers, nine administrators employed at State University, and two State University employees involved in the community's Living Wage initiative, were analyzed.

The lives of women employed as custodial workers are largely unremarked and undocumented, and the ways in which their work serves to make the academy possible have been unacknowledged. This study found that the job of cleaning in the traditional higher education environment is laced with challenges. The nature of the academy, the ethos and operation of State University, and the interlocking systems of classism, racism and sexism fuse together arrangements of power that simultaneously obliterate and render

these women agonizingly visible through systems of oppression. In an environment where honor is conferred upon “the educated,” the custodial participants, whose opportunities were limited due to their social locations, exist on the border of the academy. Their marginality is reinforced daily, as they are in constant contact with higher-status individuals who perform raced, classed, and gendered behaviors that are woven into the fabric of our society. The study also found that the custodial participants and the university administrators are locked in a relationship of mutual distrust. State University administrators do not trust the custodians and the custodians do not trust State University administrators. Furthermore, existing at both the literal and metaphorical “bottom” of the organization, custodians are among the first to feel the impact of major institutional shifts, such as increases in student and faculty bodies, and large-scale economic recovery initiatives. Additionally, I reconceptualize the notion of “borrowed power” to name the impermanence of the authority which Black custodial supervisors, and people of color in general, hold in our racialized society. Finally, the data decidedly point to White male students as primary actors and architects of the overtly hostile work environment within which the women work. The custodial participants negotiate these challenges with facility. They find creative ways to resist and to negotiate the obstacles they face. Unfortunately, they also occasionally internalize negative messages and are complicit in their marginality. Administrators who participated in the study were aware of these conditions, but remained silent on the issue of resolution.

Through various intentional (if unconscious) State University policies, practices, rules, norms, behaviors, and structures that sometimes act in insidious, hidden ways, the dominant groups’ interests continue to be pursued while the interests, needs, and even the

very presence of marginal members is ignored. Thus, systems of domination and subordination are produced, reproduced, validated, and institutionalized in the academy. This process is presented in a *Conceptual Map of How Systems of Oppression Flourish and are Re/produced in the Academy*.

The findings of this study contribute to existing bodies of knowledge that discuss racial, gender, and economic inequality. Yet it opens new lines of inquiry into the overlapping conditions of gender, racial, and economic marginality as they impact the lives of women custodial workers in the academy. The findings issue a clarion call for institutions of higher education, one of our nation's longstanding and respected foci of social change, to tap into its available expertise to end oppression, beginning in its own "backyard."

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study in memoriam to my mother, Sylvia Anne Petitt, with immeasurable love and deep, enduring gratitude. Every good decision I make is guided by your wisdom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The debts I accumulated while working on this research project are many, since it unfolded over a three-year period. First, I must express heartfelt gratitude to the six women employed as custodial workers at State University, who entrusted me with their stories. The time spent with them was an extraordinary gift; they provided inestimable lessons I could never have learned in a classroom. I am thankful for the members of my dissertation committee, who supported me through this process. I am honored to have had Yvonna Lincoln as co-chair. Her contributions, as a key intellectual provocateur of qualitative research, were invaluable. I am deeply grateful to my co-chair, M. Carolyn Clark. Her research involving domestic and custodial workers drew me to this line of inquiry and her mentoring, teaching, and sincere partnership were precious to me. I value the support, mentoring, and encouragement of Christine Stanley, my committee member who provided the most consistent and persistent urgings toward completion. Christine's faith in me as a scholar enabled me to travel down this path more confidently. For her support and leadership, I thank Karan Watson, my committee member who constantly reminded me that "the best dissertation is one that is finished."

I acknowledge and honor my ancestors, upon whose shoulders I stand. Many of them were denied access to formal education and made incredible sacrifices, some with their very lives, to pave the way for me. Their risk is my reward and I hope I make them proud. I am especially grateful to my late father, Albert Petitt, Jr., for nurturing my pride in our heritage and for teaching me the uses of humor, keen observation, and resistance. I am appreciative of my siblings: Annabell Lopez-Curtis, Preston Petitt, Jimmy Petitt, and

Joyce Dunn for their love and support. I am honored to be your baby sister. I owe a world of thanks to my longtime friend, Shirley Ennis, for her life-supporting friendship and love. I extend a special note of gratitude to my cherished friend, Monique L. Snowden, whose infectious enthusiasm and unwavering belief in my abilities offered much needed encouragement. I wish to thank Angelia Raines, my Soror, for allowing me to “lean on her shield” during a particularly difficult time.

To my constellation of supportive colleagues: John Scroggs, Paul Robles, Julie Barker, Jan Winniford, and David McIntosh, I extend gratitude for the many ways they have enriched my life. And to my employers and other colleagues who have supported me in this pursuit, I am indebted to you for your selfless support. I am also grateful for the thoughtful feedback and important suggestions Ginger Thornton offered during drafts of this dissertation. I am blessed beyond measure to have had the love, laughter, patience, and song of Julián Tárula, the wonderful young man in my life, throughout this process. He reminds me how much fun life can be.

My final appreciation is reserved for my partner and best friend, Carolyn L. Sandoval. I am profoundly appreciative of your heroic patience, generosity, and wise counsel. I celebrate the warmth, love, joy, and light you bring to my life. Thank you for loving me through this journey.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Go to the principal’s office right now, young lady! I have had about all I can stand. And call your mother when you get there,” shouted Mrs. Harvey, the kindergarten teacher, as she pointed her plump, pale finger in the direction of the door. The “young lady,” a six year-old Black child with tight little pigtails and scared eyes, gathered her things and proceeded out the door down a very long hallway to the principal’s office. Once she arrived, she was ushered directly to Mr. Hall, the principal, who instructed her to tell him exactly what she had done wrong. “I asked why we couldn’t cut out silhouettes of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks,” she said. “Mrs. Harvey said we were cutting out silhouettes of famous people and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks are famous, too,” she continued. “She will only let us cut out silhouettes of old White men.”

After hearing her story--and without further conversation--Mr. Hall reached for his paddle, instructed the little girl to bend over, and swatted her three times—hard. “Now, call your mother,” he said. Crying, the little girl did as she was told and called her mother. She conveyed the entire story, including the part about having been paddled by Mr. Hall.

Her mother had only one question. “Where does he keep his paddle?”

“On a hook behind his desk,” said the little girl.

“I’m on my way,” her mother said, before slamming the phone down.

The girl trembled with fear while she sat, waiting for her mother to arrive. The fact that her mother had inquired about the exact location of the paddle led her to believe she had not seen the last of it. In what seemed like barely five minutes, the little girl's mother stormed through the door, dressed in her white work uniform. In a huff, she rushed past the secretary's desk and directly into the principal's office, where both the little girl and the principal waited. Without a word, the little girl's mother went behind the principal's desk to retrieve the paddle. Then, in one quick motion, she used his paddle to wipe his desk clean of the piles of paper that had been neatly stacked there. Papers flew everywhere. Not allowing time for a response to this sudden, fierce gesture, she raised the paddle in the air, pointing it in the principal's direction and said to him, "Bend over, motherfucker!"

The brave woman in this story is my mother, a woman whose life experiences educated her beyond the walls of a classroom. I am the little girl who, at six years old, dared to challenge an absence of representation in the curriculum. Reflecting back on that incident brings to mind the many powerful and transforming lessons I learned from my mother. This confrontation was about something much bigger than me and my silhouettes. It was about my mother's pain and anger, and her struggle to provide the best education for her children in a society that thinks we deserve less. She taught me—to borrow a phrase from Audre Lorde—that to "hide your pain is to hide your power" (1984, p. 36) and that being "silent would not protect" us (p. 41) from further injury. "Don't let nobody else define you, baby," she always said, knowing the power that lies in self definition: "Without knowing fancy political terms like 'decolonization,' our mother

intuitively understood that consciously working to instill positive self-esteem in black children was an utter necessity” (hooks, 2001, p. 76).

My father taught me important lessons as well. In fact, his guidance provided the impetus for my insistence on cutting out silhouettes of Black leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. He had purchased an African American Heritage series for me to read. Offering these books, he framed them as “resources” and “tools” (not “gifts”), declaring, “This is who we are, baby-girl. This is where we come from. Don’t listen to what the White people say.” My father openly expressed his contempt for White people. He taught me not to trust them and to always question their motives. He passed on the “armor and battle plans” (Scott, 1991, p. 144) that would enable me to “guard against the erasure of our experiences and our lives” (Rowell, 2000, p. 2) as people of color.

My parents did their best to equip me for the world as they knew it by “passing along their ‘stock of knowledge,’ which include[d] their understanding of their own and their children’s place in the larger scheme of things” (Johnson, 2002, p. 19). They helped me understand at an early age that I would have to fight for inclusion, appropriate representation, and respect.

My study grows out of these concerns and I direct my attention to the working poor, lending my ear to those who are often unheard and my voice to those whose experiences have been muted. My work here is to examine the broader goals of higher education and its responsibilities to its low wage-earning employees who are challenged by the intersectionality of multiple layers of oppression. Specifically, this inquiry focuses on the lived experience of women employed as full-time custodial workers at State University, a Land Grant institution located in the Southwest. This investigation builds

upon research I was privileged to perform in collaboration with Dr. M. Carolyn Clark and Carolyn L. Sandoval that focused on domestic and custodial workers' constructions of their identities (Clark, Petitt, & Sandoval, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

When articulating their mission, most colleges and universities use language such as “‘preparing students for responsible citizenship,’ ‘developing character,’ ‘developing future leaders,’ ‘preparing students to serve society,’ and so forth” (Astin, 1997, p. 12). Accordingly, individuals who work in the academy see themselves as serving society and believe they are strengthening and promoting “our particular form of democratic self-government” (p. 13). Universities are on record as committing themselves to modeling and promoting moral and civic responsibility. Higher education is also philosophically grounded in the notion of democracy and social responsibility (Levine, 1996).

“Institutions of higher education have their roots in society in ways others do not . . . they are brought into existence by means of governmental charters or legislation that grant them certain rights to pursue a set of goals, the achievement of which society deems desirable” (Weingartner, 2000, p. 3). These establishments exist to “serve society . . . by engaging in scholarship, research and critical reflection for society’s benefit” (p. 6).

Regrettably, many institutions fall short of their potential and espoused mission in this regard. They do not embody or employ these ideals on their college campuses where low-wage earning employees are concerned. Economic disparity, the accompanying oppression, and the invisibility of employees who perform work at the lower level of organizations are contemporary social problems that exist within the walls of the academy. Failure to address the problems facing their low-wage earning employees

renders higher education out of step with its stated mission and the integrity of its founding principles. Moreover, institutions of higher education reproduce social class stratification and inequality (Johnson, 2002) rather than educate the campus community about “larger conditions necessary for a just democracy, including respect for minority rights, [and] support of basic economic and personal freedoms” (Marcy, 2002, p. 8).

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the ways classism, as it intersects with racism and sexism, affects how low wage-earning women negotiate their work world in the academy and the way the academy functions to create, maintain, and reproduce the context within which oppression is able to emerge.

Many women employed as custodial workers are paid wages so minimal that they fall into the category of the “working-poor.” According to Newman (1999), the largest group of poor people in the United States is not those on welfare but instead the working poor, “whose earnings are so meager that despite their best efforts, they cannot afford decent housing, diets, health care, or child care. The debilitating conditions that impinge upon the working poor—substandard housing, crumbling schools, inaccessible health care—are hardly different from those that surround their nonworking counterparts” (p. 40). Instead of having paychecks keep low-wage workers out of poverty, they keep them in poverty.

According to Newman (1999), the poorly educated, racial and gender minorities, and single parents find themselves in this category. This study explores how these variables of difference and the accompanying persistent inequality shape the employment experience of women in low wage-earning positions in higher education. Further, this

work urges institutions of higher education, who claim to be deeply invested in the tradition of “serving society,” to direct its functions of teaching, research, and service toward the transformation of American society into one that is more equitable. It calls upon the academy to maintain the integrity of its mission by providing an effective model of developing responsible citizens among students, staff, faculty and administrators.

Research Questions

1. What is the lived experience of women custodial workers employed at State University?
2. What is the role of women custodial workers in furthering the mission of State University?
3. How do class, ethnicity, and gender affect the experiences of women who are employed as custodial workers at State University?
4. What economic and other stressors do women custodial workers at State University face?
5. What survival strategies do women custodial workers at State University employ?
6. How do Administrators at State University articulate the role and “place” of women custodial workers employed at the university?

Limitations and Location

My location and associated politics across ethnicity, gender, and class influenced every stage of this research process. I operate and write from a philosophical belief system based on my lived experience. I occupy a dual position of subjugation and power in society and in the academy. I am marginalized by the interlocking systems of racism and sexism, and I am privileged by my current economic status and position.

Not a day goes by in which I am not aware of my Blackness. I am constantly reminded through subtle and not so subtle gestures and comments. A recent incident, and perhaps the most egregious and offensive act I have experienced in quite some time, involved a White male colleague telling me to “hang myself” with a phone cord. In context, I was the only person of color among a group of university officials who were called to a meeting with the president to deliberate about unrest on our campus that was evoked by a publicly embarrassing, racially offensive incident. A colleague who was unable to physically attend the meeting joined us by phone; the phone and phone cord rested between me and the individual who delivered the racist insult. At the conclusion of the meeting, we released the individual who had joined us by phone and, as my colleague reached to relocate the phone to its original desk, he grasped the phone cord, held it up near my neck and said: “Here, Becky, why don’t you go hang yourself with this.” Staggered and stung by the statement, the only thing I could think to say, with unmasked indignation was: “That’s nice, [Jim]. That’s the thing to say to *me*, of all people, at a time like this!” Flushed with embarrassment, he explained, “We’re just in an awful situation, is all I mean,” and besides he was “only joking.” He probably was. But there was nothing humorous about the comment then or now.

Do I feel intimately connected and equally offended when one of the custodial participants shares a story of finding a Black doll hanging from a noose that was affixed to the door hinges of her supply closet? Indeed, I do.

At the same time, I experience gender discrimination in my male-normed environment. My ideas are often co-opted by male colleagues who will repeat my verbal contribution word-for-word and then receive and shamelessly accept credit for it. I am

occasionally propositioned with unwanted sexual advances; I have been in meetings in which men will seize any opportune moment to sexualize the conversation that has, on one occasion, spiraled downward (indeed) to the “joys of Viagra”; my name has been intentionally removed from educational material I generated, replaced, reproduced and presented as original work by a White male colleague; and from time to time I hear about the “meeting after the meeting (now comprised of men only)” that convenes once I have left the scene; and a recent salary analysis revealed that I was paid considerably less, as much as 50% less, than my White male (and female) counterparts who hold the same title and perform comparable work. It is noteworthy that I have more years of professional experience and more credentials than many of them.

I care deeply and bristle with anger and recognition when another custodial participant tells the story of how she approached her male supervisor with her application for promotion. She stood before him with the painstakingly prepared application in her outstretched hand only to be told outright, “I’m looking for a man for the job. You’re not it,” as he turned on his heels and walked away without accepting the application.

And though no amount of achievement protects me from sexism and racism, my current socio-economic status “mediates the other forms of oppression” (hooks, 2000b, p. 98). My class of origin is working-class, but I now occupy a position far above that of the underpaid women I write about and upon whose labor I depend.

Having access to financial means has allowed me to pursue advanced educational degrees, and my advanced education has opened many doors of opportunity. I have gained access to and learned the “rules of engagement” in my milieu, higher education administration. I have successfully moved up within the system in pay and in status. I

enjoy many privileges and am blind to many other benefits—earned and unearned—bestowed upon me.

This research journey was validating and familiar when the women talked about their struggles with racism and sexism. It became less so when we approached the subject of classism. I shifted in my seat as the women compared their salaries to faculty and administrators, and I felt intense shame when they talked about the grueling physical labor they expend to do their jobs—grueling physical labor which I hardly noticed before this research undertaking. My discomfort was so intense that I wrote the following piece, an adaptation of a song by the same name (Reagon, 1998), in my reflexive journal:

Are My Hands Clean?

I earn an income almost six times that of the lowest paid participant. Combined with my partner's salary, our household income is almost nine times that of the lowest paid participant. Our earnings allow us to own our home (with contents secured by an alarm system and insurance), employ help to maintain it, purchase healthy food, drive "nice" cars, eat at expensive restaurants, wear high-quality clothing, take advantage of leisure activities such as extended international vacations, massages, and fitness center memberships. We also have the luxury of saving and investing to ensure our financial future.

My work environment is designed to protect my class interests. There are occasions I can move through an entire day without expending one cent of my personal funds, except for the gasoline necessary to get from my home to the office. Such a day might look like this: I join a colleague at a local restaurant for a breakfast meeting and pay the check with my business credit card. I meet with a group of faculty and administrators during the lunch hour and the meeting coordinator caters the meal. Then, I may attend a fully catered work-related evening event. And if I am privileged to serve on a search committee, it is possible that I may progress through an entire week without paying for one lunch or dinner meal in the process of hosting and deliberating about candidate after candidate.

In addition, I have a work-issued cell phone which doubles as an electronic communication device, for which I receive a monthly stipend. The price of the furniture in my office exceeds the annual salary of a custodial supervisor. The entire design of my workstation has been ergonomically engineered to my precise specifications to provide optimal working conditions for my body.

And there I sit, in my windowed office, cleaned daily by a custodial worker who does not earn enough to support her family.

I reap the benefits of a system that oppresses the participants of my study.

My hands are incontestably s(p)oiled.

As painful as it is to do so, I commit myself to this truth: I “cannot maintain [my] class position and class power without betraying the interests” (hooks, 2000b, p. 77) of those on whose behalf I advocate through this study. From my privileged class position, I control outcomes of prospective and current employees within my purview; a single decision makes the difference between someone being employed or unemployed. Colleagues seek my participation, I offer unsolicited advice, and I expect to be taken seriously. I am in a position to influence decisions of the highest ranking university officials who in turn use this information in ways that impact the lives of every university community member. My position of authority marks the considerable distance between me and the women who participated in my study. Thus, this work is also about my attempt to take personal responsibility for my own contributions to classism. I am “working from within” (Pinar, 1972) to explore creative ways to “manufacture freedom” (Scott, 1991, p. 167) from all forms of oppression and to make room for the voices of many other “disremembered” (Rowell, 2000 p. 1), marginalized women.

Organization of the Dissertation

I have organized the dissertation into five chapters. In the first chapter, I offer a personal story that influenced my early understanding of the uses of anger and the importance of activism. I also provide a statement of the research problem, the purpose and significance of the study, relevant research questions that will guide the study, my

personal limitations and location, as well as the design of the dissertation and an explanation of transcription conventions I employ throughout the dissertation. In Chapter II I provide a comprehensive review of the literature which offers a context for the research, and in Chapter III, I discuss the methodology of my research, specifically, I explain the research design as well methods of collecting and analyzing the data. I introduce the readers to the participants by presenting excerpts of each of their interviews that help to illuminate phenomena under exploration to begin Chapter IV. Chapter IV also presents findings and interpretations for the study. In the final chapter, Chapter V, I include a conclusion that reviews and summarizes the previous sections, discussion of the study's implications, and recommendations for future practice, policy, and research efforts. I end with a postscript that picks up the thread of my opening story and weaves it into the overarching narrative of this dissertation.

Transcription Conventions

Personal narrative and reflections have been integrated throughout the dissertation. The use of intertexts, signified by the use of italics, highlights this narrative. This method is borrowed from authors Lather and Smithies, as demonstrated in their book *Troubling the Angels* (1997). This technique permits a “multivocal” (Pillow, 2003, p. 179) text that allows the data, the research participants and the author to speak for themselves. Additionally, the following symbols are used to explain the flow of the text: < > shows emotions, sounds, or inaudible gestures or behaviors; .. indicates suspension points, pauses in thought and speech or narrative turns; and italic is also used to display leading quotations that highlight key points in the section that follows, and where either participants or I have added emphasis.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Money pads the edges of things . . . God help those who have none.
- E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*, p. xviii

Overview

In reviewing the literature, I have looked at this problem through multidisciplinary lenses, drawing on literature from economics, education, sociology, law, cultural studies, labor theory, women's studies, policy research, and psychology. This approach, I believe, allows for a deeper, more critical, and more comprehensive understanding of this issue. Such work attempts to synthesize and evaluate what scholars have discussed about the lived experiences of low wage-earning individuals and how those individuals negotiate the interlocking systems of classism, racism, and sexism.

This review begins by discussing the meaning of work and the working poor, a discussion followed by separate analyses of the dynamics present in the interactions of work with class, ethnicity, and gender. I will then provide an overview of how the working poor are judged, and look at the systems of power and oppression they negotiate in their daily lives. The focus will then shift to an examination of the impact of interlocking systems of oppression, a review of survival strategies, as well as an exploration of the higher education context within which these conditions emerge. It will conclude with thoughts about the responsibilities and opportunities for intervention.

The Meaning of Work

The 'work ethic' holds that labor is good in itself; that a man or woman becomes a better person by virtue of the act of working . . . America's competitive spirit, the 'work ethic' of this people is alive and well . . .

- Richard M. Nixon's 1971 Labor Day Message, in Thorpe (1980)

Our culture confers honor and respect on those who are employed. Independence and self-sufficiency are virtues of extreme importance in this society; to be deemed a "hard worker" is a source of pride (hooks, 2000b; Johnson, 2002; Newman, 1999; Terkel, 1974). Americans have always been committed to the moral adage that work defines the person, and we are expected to orient our lives around the workplace and its demands. The work ethic is more than an attitude toward earning money—it is a disciplined existence, a life structured around the workplace (Johnson, 2002). "Our 'work-is-the-purpose-of-life' ideology is predicated on middle-class experience, ignoring the reality of most people's lives. If identity is to be defined by paid work, where does that leave the women and men whose work is scrubbing toilets, flipping burgers, or polishing floors?" (p. 90). According to Newman (1999):

We carry around in our heads a rough tally that tells us what kinds of jobs are worthy of respect and what kinds are to be disdained, a pyramid organized by the income a job carries, the sort of credentials it takes to secure a particular position, the qualities of an occupation's incumbents—and we use this system of stratification (ruthlessly at times) to boost the status of some and humiliate others. (p. 86)

Johnson (2002) articulates the complexity of this investigation when she states:

The conceptual waters of research into work are muddied by the often unacknowledged assumptions . . . all of which proclaim that paid work is the most worthy domain in which to invest one's best efforts, and one's essential self; the following assumptions are common: strong involvement in one's paid work is good, a pragmatic, instrumental orientation to it is bad; valuing intrinsic characteristics of the job is good, valuing extrinsic characteristics bad; commitment to paid work is good, commitment to leisure activities is bad; making work central to one's identity is good, not identifying with work is bad. But the ideology that everyone "should" not only work, but work hard, make work a central part of their lives, and look to the workplace as a major source of identity ignores unequal job opportunities and uneven job rewards. (p. 90)

In short, any study of low wage workers must undertake its investigation within this pre-existing context of prejudiced definition. Not all work in our society is equally valued, leaving those at the bottom of the income scale to suffer a corollary psychological disenfranchisement. Any study of their lives must thus ask: why is it that work doesn't work for some and how does this systematic devaluing of their work affect long-term low-wage workers?

The Working Poor

The working poor . . . are in fact the major philanthropists of our society . . . To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor to everyone else.

- Ehrenreich in *Nickel and Dimed: On (not) Getting by in America*

The official poverty threshold in 2006 was \$20,614 for a family of four, approximately \$16,000 for a family of three, roughly \$13,000 for a family of two and roughly \$10,000 for an individual. The poverty threshold, or poverty line, is the minimum level of income deemed necessary to achieve an adequate standard of living. Many experts believe these annually-generated thresholds—representing an oversimplified portrait of poverty—are too low. Individuals or families are considered “poor” if their annual pretax cash income falls below a federal measure.

By official estimates, 37 million people, or nearly 13 percent of the total United States population, lived in poverty in 2006 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Poverty rates in 2006 were statistically unchanged for Whites (8.2 percent), Asians (10.3 percent) and Blacks (24.3 percent) from 2005. The poverty rate decreased for Hispanics an approximate 1 percent from 2005, though Hispanics and African Americans are still about three times more likely than Whites to be poor (Rizvi, 2007).

The median household income in the United States was \$48,451 in 2006. The income of non-Hispanic White households was \$52,400, \$38,747 for Hispanic households, and Black households had the lowest median household income among the race groups at \$32,372. An analysis of the gender-specific data reveals that in each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, median earnings were less for women than they were for men in 2005. Women earned from 71 to 91 cents for every dollar that men earned, and women whose work experience was comparable to men saw their earnings decline by 1.3 percent. Additionally, families headed by single women who were the

sole wage-earners tended to have higher poverty rates than women who lived in homes with dual incomes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

Taken together, the gender and ethnic minority—women of color—figure among the nation’s poorest; they live without enough money to survive adequately or well, and little is being done to improve their fate. Leondar-Wright & Yeskel (2007) note:

The federal government now plays a smaller countervailing role in counteracting poverty than in the decades from the 1930’s through 1970’s. For example, President Ronald Reagan reduced spending on affordable housing and home ownership by 80%, saying he wanted to ‘get the government out of the housing business’; this spending has never been restored. (p. 309)

And beginning in 2001, President George W. Bush endorsed a series of large tax relief initiatives that disproportionately benefited wealthy taxpayers.

Federal assistance programs for survivors of disasters, such as the 2001 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina, gave more money to the well-off and corporations than to the poor and working class. Earnings fell during Bush’s first term, in particular for African Americans. Enforcement of labor rights slacked off so much that most union organizing efforts were stymied by illegal employer actions, which limited workers’ ability to counter declining wages.

(p. 408, Appendix 13J)

A reflection of current national priorities may be seen in the amount of money being spent on the present war in Iraq. The war is costing \$720 million a day or \$500,000 a minute (Lydersen, 2007; Rizvi, 2007). “The money spent on one day of the Iraq war could buy homes for almost 6,500 families or health care for 423,529 children, or could

outfit 1.27 million homes with renewable electricity” (Lydersen, 2007, ¶ 1). These facts and figures add new meaning to former Secretary of State Colin Powell’s declaration that “The war against terror is bound up in the war against poverty” (as cited in Sachs, 2005, p. xiv). It is mind-boggling that this war and its costly, daily carnage can be framed as a war about *freedom* “over there” when it leaves so many poor, disenfranchised, and dying in the homeland it purports to “secure.”

Many individuals living in poverty are considered “working poor,” a term used to describe individuals who work, but who, nevertheless, fall under the official definition of poverty due to insufficient wages. The term is used in reference to people among the lowest stratum of economic attainment, with all of its accompanying problems (Shipler, 2004). In President George W. Bush’s 2001 Inaugural Address, he said:

We know that deep, persistent poverty is unworthy of our nation’s promise . . . where there is suffering, there is a duty. Americans in need are not strangers, they are citizens; not problems, but priorities, and all of us are diminished when any are hopeless . . . Many in our country do not know the pain of poverty. But we can listen to those who do . . . (as cited in Sklar, Mykyta & Wefald, 2001, p. 4)

The excerpt from his speech sounds gracious and considerate. We will “listen” to people in poverty. But what can we “do” about people in poverty? How can we create a fairer society; one in which we as a nation “uphold the belief that everyone has the right to a life of well-being, which includes access to prosperity” (hooks, 2000b, p. 79)? If individuals work full time, they should not be poor. No one should be *working* poor: “Americans believe that work should be the major avenue out of poverty . . . for millions of Americans, however, the simple fact is that work does not provide sufficient income to

protect themselves and their children from the devastating effects of poverty” (Sklar et al. 2001, p.113).

Many labor long and hard but still cannot manage to make ends meet (Abramovitz, 2001; Chant, 2006; Edin & Lein, 1997; Ehrenreich, 2001; Glenn, 1991; Higginbotham & Romero, 1997; hooks, 2000b; Johnson, 2002; Lambert, 1999; McDonnell, 2003; Shipler, 2004; Shulman, 2003; Sklar, Mykyta, & Wefald, 2001; Weis, 2004).

These are not Americans who have been excluded from the world of work; in fact, they make up the core of much of the new economy. Indeed, our recent prosperity rests, in part, in their misery. Their poverty is not incidental to their role as workers, but derives directly from it. (Schulman, 2003, p. 4)

This is morally revolting especially when you consider that the gap between rich and poor in the United States is the greatest it has been since 1929 (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007) and that the United States has more billionaires than any other nation on earth (Davey & Davey, 2001). The fact that year-round, full-time employment cannot keep some members of our society out of poverty is a crime. “While one can argue that certain individuals should receive larger rewards than others for their contributions to society, it is quite another story to leave those who have worked hard without even the minimal necessities” (Shulman, 2003, p. 81). It sends a message that work doesn’t work. It damages our claims to democracy and our nation’s economy and “aggravates society’s social ills. Ultimately, allowing these conditions to persist undermines the country’s moral foundation and in the process diminishes us all” (p. 82).

Operationalized, this “institutional, cultural, and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socioeconomic class; and an economic system that creates excessive inequality and causes basic human needs to go unmet” is the system of “classism” (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007, p. 389, Appendix 13C). Thus, one’s “class” may be identified by relative social rank in terms of income, wealth, education, occupational status, and/or power, and “status” can be understood as the degree of honor or prestige attached to one’s position in society (p. 389). The working poor are targets of the system of classism; they are expected to live with less and are socialized to accept less (hooks, 2000b). The jobs they occupy offer scant possibilities for substantial improvements of their position (Chant, 2006), and the services they perform have come to be known as “class appropriate” to the individuals performing “lower-level” work.

Class is a dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon. Our gaze must go beyond the quantitative focus on income and consumption to a “more holistic approach [that includes] entitlements and capabilities and notions of vulnerability and poverty as a process . . .” (p. 93). We need to extend understandings “to include the practices of everyday living—practices that are both engaged in by, and simultaneously encircle, men, women, and children on a daily basis” (Weis, 2004, p. 4) to see class as a lived identity.

In every crevice of everyday life we find signs of class difference; we are acutely aware that class plays a decisive role in all social relations. There is little blending of people from sharply disparate economic backgrounds. Professionals and managers do not mingle much with service or industrial workers and if they

have conversations, they are short, and the subject matter is trivial because they simply do not inhabit the same worlds. (Aronowitz, 2003, pp. 31-32)

Class differences are also sharply defined by accent; people talk like the neighborhood they come from. Varying vocabulary levels, which can signal levels of academic preparation and sophistication (hooks, 2000b) are also class indicators. Researchers have long known that “income and occupational status are largely ‘inherited’ - in other words that the income and occupational status of children is disturbingly similar to that of their parents” (Johnson, 2002, p. 35). The system of classism is difficult to escape, and this challenge becomes more complex when one considers how it intersects with the system of racism.

Interlocking Systems of Oppression

Class is still often kept separate from race. And while race is often linked with gender, we still lack an ongoing collective public discourse that puts the three together in ways that illuminate for everyone how our nation is organized and what our class politics really are.

- hooks in *Class Matters*, p. 8

Classism and Racism

Racism is best understood when we have a clear picture of whiteness. I share this lengthy explanation from David Owen’s work titled *Towards a Critical Theory of Whiteness* because it provides one of the clearest accounts of the roots and mechanisms of racial oppression. He discusses the “functional properties” that characterize aspects of how whiteness operates or functions as a socio-historical phenomenon that reproduces white supremacy.

The *first* functional property is that whiteness defines a particular racialized perspective or standpoint that shapes the white subject’s understanding of both

self and the social world. As a structuring property, whiteness situates persons racialized as white in a social location that provides a particular and limited perspective on the world. *Second*, whiteness defines a specifically racialized social location of structural advantage. Being located in a social position by whiteness is not merely a location of difference, but it is also a location of economic, political, social and cultural advantage relative to those locations defined by non-whiteness. A *third* property is that whiteness is normalized. What is associated with whiteness becomes defined as natural, normal or mainstream. This contributes to its transparency in the dominant cultural consciousness of the post-civil rights era. The *fourth* functional property is implied by the third: it is that whiteness is largely invisible to whites and yet highly visible to non-whites. Many critical whiteness scholars have argued that whiteness is invisible or transparent, but such a claim presupposes the perspective of whiteness. Whiteness is (largely) invisible only to whites, yet it tends to be less transparent to non-whites, as is suggested by the long history of African-American analyses of whiteness that includes W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison. This differential visibility for different racialized groups is significant and reflects its social and cultural dominance and hegemony. *Fifth*, although whiteness must be distinguished from mere skin color, it nevertheless is embodied. As I will contend, whiteness is grounded in the interests, needs and values of those racialized as white, so it is founded on the ascribed racial identity of being white. But, as Marilyn Frye argues, whiteness - or as she calls it, whiteness - is not the same as having light-colored skin.

Rather, it is “a deeply engrained way of being in the world.” Whiteness shapes actions, social practices and dispositions, and thus constitutes a part of that “know how” or practical knowledge that competent social actors possess. By means of ongoing processes of socialization and acculturation, it becomes part of our bodily dispositions and comportment within the world. A *sixth* functional property of whiteness is that its borders are continuously being redefined, entailing that analyses of whiteness’s functioning must always be grounded in specific contexts of its manifestation. Whiteness is a socio-historical phenomenon, and theoretical analyses should not reify it as an essential form. Finally, a *seventh* functional property is that of violence; whiteness cannot be understood apart from the violence that it begets or apart from the violence that produced - and continues to produce - it. Not only does whiteness have its origins in the physical and psychic violence of the enslavement, genocide and exploitation of peoples of color around the world, but also it maintains the system of white supremacy in part by means of actual and potential violence. (Owen, 2007, p. 206)

The structuring property of whiteness produces and maintains white supremacy and disadvantages and subordinates non-whites. “If the social world is systematically shaped by the needs, interests and values of whites, then individuals are always already being socialized and acculturated into whiteness, with the consequence that they will internalize cognitive and evaluative schemas that reflect this whiteness” (p. 208).

“Whiteness has always required an Other, a ‘constitutive outside’—usually, but not always African American, Latino/a, or Asian” (Weis, 2004, xiii)—upon whom they depend to establish and maintain their privilege and identity. With superiority intact,

whites engage in “racial border work” (p. 157) to keep non-whites out of white space (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Weis, 2004). Condescending glares and disapproving attitudes and behaviors convey a message that has become socially unpopular to verbalize—“this space is *still* for whites only!” Thus, they assert their right to own space and patrol and control who is safely in or out of a given environment.

When we frame this conversation in the world of work and look at “working-class whites,” Weis (2004) tells us that this category “emerged discursively and materially in relation to black Americans, working off of deeply rooted constructions of ‘blackness’ in the white imagination . . .” (p. 6) and that “American white working class, and white America generally, quite simply *cannot be understood* without reference to blacks” (p. 7). Blacks are the bordering others who have been—and continue to be—“used as the repository for all that white society fears and hates, in relation to both the white self and the black ‘other’” (p. 68). Indeed, in this society “racism is at its most violent and dehumanizing when it comes to black folks” (hooks, 2000b, p. 117).

Yet border work is not reserved for people of color; poor whites are marginalized as well. “White trash,” is a term privileged whites invented to separate themselves from poor whites, and “white trash folks are the lowest of the low because socially and economically they have sunk so far that they might as well be black” (hooks, 2000b, p. 112). A racial epithet has been invented for the “might as well be black” group, too,—“wiggas,” short for “white niggas” (Beattie, 2000).

But wiggas still have and may invoke white privilege at any moment, even if they are poor or working-poor. A “sense of white superiority ‘softens the blow’ of their

obtaining only working-class jobs” (p. 4). Poor whites know the power race privilege gives them and they preserve it and use it. “Assailed and assaulted by privileged white folks, they transfer their rage and class hatred onto the bodies of black people” (hooks, 2000b, p. 111). White people are “deeply dependent on racism, dependent on its privilege, [and] dependent on the existence of the rejected racial other . . .” (Scheurich, 2002, p. 18) to safeguard existing cultural, structural, and institutional arrangements designed for their benefit.

Racial domination is also intricately linked to economic or class domination (Amott & Matthaei, 1996). In employment, racial preference for whites in hiring increases white people’s chances of economic and personal well-being and security. People of color, however, have no such assurance.

Blacks, Mexicans, Chinese, and Japanese share a common history of entry in the United States. Whites brought members of all these groups into this country as a cheap source of labor. Africans were forcibly transported and enslaved; Mexicans were incorporated through American territorial expansion and conquest; and many Chinese and Japanese were bound by labor contracts or were lured by the “siren’s song” of American labor recruiters. All these groups were brought into this country to help build the economic infrastructure . . . Once incorporated, each group was segregated . . . excluded . . . disenfranchised . . . subordinated . . . [and] exploited. Denied basic legal rights and protections, all of these groups had little ability to organize, resist unfair treatment, or enter more desirable occupations . . . [People of color] were paid less and relegated to jobs considered too dangerous, demeaning or unstable for European-American workers . . . Whites monopolized

“clean work,” and white men dominated in the most desirable and highest paid jobs. (Glenn, 1991, p. 1336)

Race still plays a role in determining job levels within occupational groups. “Minorities hold a disproportionate share of low-wage temporary-help industry jobs with black workers twice as likely to hold these jobs as whites” (Shulman, 2003, p. 76). Almost all jobs tend to be “typed in such a way that stereotypes make it difficult for persons of the “wrong” race and/or gender to train for or obtain the job” (Amott & Matthaei, 1996, p. 24).

Blacks and Latinos who seek loans, apartments, or jobs, are much more apt than similarly qualified whites to be rejected, often for vague spurious reasons. The prison population is largely black and brown; chief executive officers, surgeons, and university presidents are almost all white. Poverty, however, has a black or brown face: black families have, on average, about one-tenth of the assets of their white counterparts. They pay more for many products and services, including cars. People of color lead shorter lives, receive worse medical care, complete fewer years of school, and occupy more menial jobs than do whites. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, pp. 10-11)

Even employers can “turn racism into higher profits in two ways: directly, when they pay less-than-average wages to people of color; and indirectly, when they are able to keep a divided labor force in a weak bargaining position” (Albelda, McCrate, Meléndez, & Lapidus, 1988, p. 39).

Unregulated workplace guidelines and rules also function as a source of everyday racism such as regulations surrounding language discrimination. “English-only

legislation has resulted in bilingual employees being told that they cannot speak any language other than English anywhere on the work site” (Romero, 1997, p. 244). Any infraction is met with harsh punishment. And even when low wage workers do “stay in their place” by adhering to arbitrary rules and social regulations, they are still “subject to harassment in the form of racial slurs, stereotyping, and shunning by supervisors and fellow employees [and] they are frequently evaluated more harshly by superiors, given more assignments, and suffer patterns of intimidation” (p. 243). Systemic inequality and racism continue to shape both identities and institutions in significant ways (Apple, 1999).

That poverty is clearly tied to race was forcefully demonstrated recently in the aftermath of one of the deadliest hurricanes in U.S. history, Hurricane Katrina. The 2005 hurricane devastated much of the north-central Gulf Coast with New Orleans, Louisiana, experiencing the largest loss of life and property due to a catastrophic failure of its levee system. “In the weeks immediately following Hurricane Katrina, it was impossible to avoid images of the storm’s destruction or the plight of those who bore the brunt of the storm’s wrath: poor African Americans” (Bullock, 2006, p. 32), who could be seen live on television, stranded and begging for rescue from rising waters that washed dead black bodies of men and women, children and the elderly before their eyes. Though we may not know the full impact of this national tragedy for some time, public acknowledgement and outrage about the extreme inequality the hurricane laid bare has quickly faded from view. Yet it provides a powerful example of how race and class converge to become defining elements of life—and death.

Classism and Sexism

For the purpose of this study, it is also important to understand how gender and the feminization of poverty complicate this picture.

Gender, race, and class are not natural or biological categories which are unchanging over time and across cultures. Rather, these categories are socially constructed: they arise and are transformed in history, and themselves transform history . . . Gender is rooted in societies' beliefs that the sexes are naturally distinct and opposed social beings. These beliefs are turned into self-fulfilling prophecies through sex-role socialization: the biological sexes are assigned distinct and often unequal work and political positions, and turned into socially distinct genders. (Amott & Matthaei, 1996, pp. 12-13)

Amott and Matthaei stop short of naming this process. It is “sexism”: “a system of beliefs and practices that privileges men and subordinates women” (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007, p. 127, Appendix 9B).

Sexism in the world of work disenfranchises women. “Women hold a disproportionate share of jobs in low-wage industries and a disproportionate share of the low-wage jobs in higher paid industries” (Sklar et al. 2001, p. 14). Low wage-earning jobs have historically been, and continue to be, women’s jobs. Nationally, women are concentrated in the jobs that cluster at the bottom of the income distribution (Abramovitz, 2001; Figueira-McDonough & Sarri 2002; hooks, 2000b; Newman 1999; Shulman, 2003). And when workers are “not paid a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work, they are not just underpaid—they are subsidizing employers, stockholders and consumers” (Sklar et al. 2001, p. 9).

Not only are these women underpaid, but the wages they receive are not livable wages, which places them among the working poor.

[S]ome of the processes which place women at an above-average risk of poverty are fairly undisputed. These include women's disadvantage with respect to poverty-reducing entitlements and capabilities (education, skills, and so on), their heavier burdens of reproductive labor, and discrimination in the workplace.

(Chant, 2006, p. 99)

Their gender disadvantage also strips them of power to control significant decisions that affect their lives, including how to use their own income. Women's incomes are essential to low-income families. "Women in many married couples are the sole support of the family. In 1993, one out of every five married couples was supported solely by the wife's income" (Shulman, 2003, p. 75). "For example, where men become ill or are unable to work . . . the burden for upkeep falls on other household members [women], who may be called upon to provide health care in the home or to pay for pharmaceuticals or medical attention" (Chant, 2006, p. 97). And when women are partnered with a male wage-earner living in the same household, women's earnings may be "undercut by men withholding a larger share of their own earnings" (p. 99).

Female household heads often talk about how they find it easier to plan their budgets and expenditures when men are gone, even when their own earnings are low or prone to fluctuation. They also claim to experience less stress and to feel better able to cope with material hardship because their lives are freer of emotional vulnerability, dependence, subjection, to authority, and fear. (p. 94)

“There is often as much going on within the home as outside it which determines women’s poverty, well-being, and power” (p. 100).

Classism, Racism, and Sexism

“Recognizing that a woman cannot be a woman without race, ethnicity, and social class allows us to begin examining both the range of diversity and the kinds of commonalities that make up the gendered work experience” (Romero, 1997, 236).

Classism, racism and sexism are interlocking elements that work in concert to operationalize oppression. There are varying degrees of power, privilege, and life experience among women differently socially located by class and ethnicity (Amott & Matthaei, 1996; Chant, 2006; Collins, 2000; Dill, 1988; Dill, 1994; Higginbotham & Romero, 1997; hooks, 2000b; Hull, Scott & Smith, 1982; Jaquette & Summerfield, 2006; Johnson, 2002; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Romero, 1997; Weis, 2004). Thus, we must attend to multiple social identities and corresponding inequalities, since “these cannot be easily separated in their effects and lived experiences” (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003, p. 18).

The interconnected systems of classism, racism and sexism produce poor women of color who are relegated to the dirtiest and most arduous jobs, for which they are poorly remunerated (Hurtado, 1996; Figueira-McDonough & Sarri, 2002; Glenn, 1991).

Women of color are marginalized in U.S. society from the time they are born (Hurtado, 1996, p. 19). And “black women are clearly at the bottom of this society’s economic totem pole” (hooks, 2000b, p. 103). According to Newman (1999), “there is nothing more damning than being black in this country” (p. 223). African Americans are aware that they face higher hurdles and more scrutiny because of the color of their skin.

Potential employers immediately make assumptions about them as soon as they walk through the door. They scrutinize their dialect, speculate about the types of neighborhoods they may come from, and even judge the earrings they wear. “Seeking a good job is an object lesson in frustration . . . What employers see coming in the front door is a black face, and they fill in the negative assumptions accordingly” (p. 155).

Young Black women have the highest rate of poverty of any group in the labor force, but the racial disparity persists as they age: Black and Latina women workers who head families are about twice as likely as white women to be members of the working poor. This already dismal number jumps to three times the rate for white women among those minority women who have young children. (p. 43)

“In this country, if you are poor, black, fat, female, middle-aged, or on welfare, you count less as a human being. If you are all of those things, you don’t count at all—except as a statistic” (Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982, p. 204).

Poor White women are marginalized and othered as well, but they are also buffered and buoyed by race privilege (Glenn, 1991). “It is not the case that race and gender are mere ideologies that mask the reproduction of class inequality; they are organizing principles in their own right, processes that are co-created with class” (Beattie, 2000, p. 29). Race, class and gender are interconnected and interdependent processes.

Judging the Working Poor

Who these women are and how society views them contributes to the cycle of oppression. “Low-wage jobs and the workers in these jobs are intimately involved in every aspect of American life . . . yet in spite of their contributions, these jobs and the

workers in these jobs are dismissed and undervalued” (Shulman, 2003, p. 45). They are constructed as throwaways, undesirable elements, and are met with fear, condescension, and outright hatred. “Stereotypes about the poor and ethnic minorities mirror each other with intersecting characterizations including laziness, sexual promiscuity, irresponsible parenting, disinterest in education, and disregard for the law” (Bullock, 2006, p. 3), all qualities that violate mainstream American ideals. The poor are often described in behavioral terms as criminals, alcoholics, and drug addicts, and they are held out as examples when discussing pathological behaviors (Clawson & Trice, 2000). These stereotypes about the poor are weapons of race and class warfare (Bullock, 2006). The poor are perceived as “too rough, too loud, too dirty, too direct, too ‘uneducated.’ They are valued—if at all—as requisite labor and service, but not valued as intelligence and knowledge” (Zandy, 1995, p. 2). Working class people do not have the quiet hands or the neutral faces of the privileged classes – especially when they are within their own communities (p. 5) and their bodies bear the markings of class: missing, misaligned or decaying teeth (Oldfield, 2007, p. 5), poor health, and well-worn clothing (Adair & Dahlberg, 2003)—all signs read as “nobodiness” (King, 1963, p. 84).

Not surprisingly, “poor people are often judged to be blameworthy for their situation” (Apelbaum, 2001, p. 424), which affects willingness to provide support and aide. “When a flaw . . . is attributed to an internal cause, the result is anger rather than pity, leading to lack of desire to engage in helping behavior” (p. 423), and withholding assistance from people deemed responsible for their circumstances “appears to stem from a desire to punish people who violate norms” (p. 423).

This jaundiced view ignores the real sources of the conflict and concentrates instead on the symptomatology of growing up in concentrated-poverty communities where the social resources and assistance necessary to negotiate mainstream society successfully are either totally lacking or insufficient. (Oliver, Johnson, & Farrell, 1993, p. 137)

“The denial of race and class privilege further maximizes the tendency to see poverty as a personal failing and to judge those who don’t prosper as ‘undeserving’ of public support” (Bullock, 2006 p. 1).

The media, policy analysts and public officials contribute to the stigmatization of poor and working-poor individuals by using the terms “low-wage” and “low-skilled” as if the two terms were indivisible. This contributes to the assumption that if a job pays poorly, it must be because it does not require important skills (Shulman, 2003). Yet many low wage-earning jobs do require discernment, attention to detail, patience, and communication skills, to name a few.

However, the stigma associated with poverty and low wage-earning jobs inhibits identification with particular occupations and prohibits utilization of available assistance.

The stigma associated with welfare receipt may keep eligible poor and working class people from applying for benefits, particularly publicly visible forms of aid such as food stamps. It also makes low paying jobs appear more desirable than public assistance, a function that benefits businesses and corporations, not service and other low-wage workers. (Bullock, 2006, p. 7)

Cleaning

We're nothing to these people. We're just maids.

- Marge in Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed:
On (not) Getting by in America*

According to Amott & Matthaei (1996), employment in service occupations grew rapidly between 1900 and 1990, from about 2 to 15 million workers, nearly 9 million of them women.

Today, service occupations outside the private household include food preparation and service (waiters and waitresses, cooks, counter workers, and kitchen workers), health service (dental assistants, nurses aides, orderlies, and attendants), cleaning and building service (maids, janitors, and elevator operators), personal service (barbers, hairdressers, guides, and child-care workers), and protective service (police officers, firefighters, and guards). (p. 328)

This study focuses on custodial workers who, in the literature, are also referred to as janitors and maids. Shulman's (2003) research indicates that three hundred thousand janitorial jobs are expected to be added in the next ten years. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007) reports that individuals working full-time as janitors and building cleaners earn an average of \$11.67 per hour, \$462 per week, and \$23,826 per year, and the mean earnings for those employed as maids and housekeepers is \$8.92 per hour, \$345 per week, and \$17,801 per year. Many justify these wages because cleaning is considered unskilled work—unskilled because it has traditionally been a woman's "job" and any woman knows how to clean (Chant, 2006; Dill, 1994; Higginbotham & Romero, 1997; Rollins, 1985).

Literature on the lived experience of custodial workers in higher education is virtually non-existent. The most analogous occupation discussed in the literature, to which custodial work may be compared, is that of domestic work. Domestic service was one of the first major occupations in all racial-ethnic groups. Although initially unpaid, the job gradually came to be compensated in wages (Amott & Matthaei, 1996). Today, people who clean homes and buildings for a living are “disproportionately women of color: ‘lower’ kinds of people for a ‘lower’ kind of work” (Ehrenreich, 2002, p. 91). The “association between housecleaning and minority status is well established in the psyches of the white employing class” (p. 91), and “dirt . . . tends to attach to the people who remove it [obvious in reference to them as] ‘garbagemen’ and ‘cleaning ladies’ . . . The whole mentality out there is that if you clean, you’re a scumball” (p. 102).

Cleaning is a physically punishing occupation that drains and strains the body and discourages use of the mind. So-called low-skilled jobs allow little independent thinking—indeed, employers often expect that it will be suspended—which leaves its occupants little autonomy (Rubin, 1976; Shulman, 2003). “The skills they once had – skills of planning, of understanding and acting on an entire phase of production – are ultimately taken from them and housed elsewhere in a planning department controlled by management” (Apple, 1982, p. 71). Workers are expected to be obedient, unthinking, unquestioning, procedural, routinized, and unimaginative. Working under these conditions makes the work less fulfilling and tends to decrease one’s sense of feeling valued for any unique contributions one may be able to offer (Ross, 1993), which is a primary cause of high turnover in the cleaning industry (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002).

Women who clean for a living “measure their satisfactions and dissatisfactions both by their feelings about the kind of treatment they received from any given employer as well as the tasks they were asked to perform” (Dill 1994, p. 88). Dill also found that domestic workers, in particular, appraise their status and worth in direct relationship to the power, prestige, and wealth of their employers. In addition, the women’s personal recognition and interaction with people of wealth and power increases their feelings of self-worth and sense of the value of their own work.

There is also a unique aspect to domestic work in that it “brings together, in a closed and intimate sphere of human interaction, people whose paths would never cross, were they to conduct their lives within the socioeconomic boundaries to which they were ascribed” (p. 3). Often these environments, unfamiliar to their own culture and upbringing, gives workers a glimpse into what it takes to be “successful.” Dill further suggests that domestic workers tend to adopt and modify elements of their employers’ lifestyles. They incorporate ideologies, behaviors and cultural practices they believe will help their families get ahead.

Cleaning in Higher Education

The definition of clean is ultimately an executive-level call, notes Morrison (2003) in his article titled “How Clean is Clean?” Cleanliness is often in the eye and nose of the beholder and is generally recognized as the absence of soils. Though each industry establishes its own cleaning standards, there are professional associations dedicated to providing cleaning standards. Morrison, a cleaning specialist, writes specifically about the challenges of custodial work. He notes:

One of the greatest deficiencies in today's cleaning programs is a general lack of structured custodial training. For the most part, custodians today are self-taught; important procedures are often left to custodians to figure out on their own. This would explain why it's unusual for any two custodians to perform the same task in the same way and in the same time. Not only is this frustrating for the worker, but extremely unproductive, costly, and the final results are inconsistent. (p. 7)

He further notes that most custodians never benefit from new methodologies that have been developed that have the potential to make the work more effective, efficient and easier on their bodies. What's worse, he notes, is that most custodians are forced to use outdated tools. "Not only are these tools ineffective for cleaning, they are also painfully slow and often result in fatigue, injury and workers' compensation claims" (p. 8). "At the end of the day," Morrison says, "the greatest factor affecting a cleaning program is budget. And there is certainly a correlation between the amount of available resources and the appearance of the building . . . Over the years budgets for cleaning and maintenance have been slashed across the board" (p. 8), which has increased the custodian's workload to unimaginable proportions. When organizations experience financial strain, it is the cleaning areas that often suffer when equipment is not serviced or updated and supplies are compromised in quality and quantity.

Yet cleanliness and attractiveness of a campus is very important in recruitment and retention (Cain & Reynolds, 2006; June, 2006). Cain and Reynolds' 2005 study revealed that 16.6 percent of prospective students rejected an institution because an important facility was poorly maintained, and current student satisfaction wanes when

facilities are not well maintained. Facilities clearly play an important role in the overall functioning of the institution.

Power and Oppression

No discussion of low-wage work is complete without a discussion of employers and the raw power they have over their workers.

Employers determine whether a worker can pay the rent and put food on the table of their family. They control their daily lives. They can help workers, harm them, give them favors, discipline or suspend them. They can dismiss them at will for no reason whatsoever. This inherent power gives employers enormous influence over workers. (Shulman, 2003, p. 133)

This “high degree of subjectivity and discretion in management behavior creates a climate in which it is difficult or impossible to create anti-harassment policies and complaint procedures” (Romero, 1997, p. 244) through which one may address grievances. “As subordinates in relationships marked by asymmetries of race, nationality, citizenship, language, and class, many [low-wage] workers are not accustomed to expressing face-to-face criticism to their superiors. In fact, they fear retribution for doing so” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2002, p. 65).

I turn now to an exploration of the complex ways that power operates to dominate and shape our consciousness and our world. Low-wage workers who are also marginalized by race and gender contend with oppression that operates as an interlocking, multileveled system. Any situation in which someone exploits or hinders another’s pursuit of self-affirmation is one of oppression (Freire, 1970). This oppression is manifested through intentional and unintentional *individual* acts of prejudice,

ignorance and hatred; through *institutional* policies, practices, and norms; and through *cultural* assumptions, norms, and practices (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). These norms are established and maintained by the powerful to provide justification for their dominance (Chomsky, 2003), and oppressors may be conscious or unconscious of their behavior.

Once a situation of violence and oppression has been established, it engenders an entire way of life and behavior for those caught up in it—oppressors and oppressed alike . . . This violence, as a process, is perpetuated from generation to generation of oppressors, who become its heirs and are shaped in its climate . . . This climate creates in the oppressor a strongly possessive consciousness—possessive of the world and of men and women . . . The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination.

(Freire, 1970, p. 58)

“The powerful live within the confines of kingdoms, always trying to push out their borders, enlarging their space, always conscious of others trying to breach their defenses and steal their territory” (Kayden, 1990, p. 47). They exercise discursive power by regulating “what can and cannot be said, who can speak with the blessings of authority and who must listen, whose social constructions are valid and whose are erroneous and unimportant” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 310). They demand deference—a concomitant of power (Kayden, 1990) -- and they engage in psychological attempts to win people’s consent to domination. Aida Hurtado (1996) constructs an intriguing fable to explore the unspoken rules of power which she calls “The Trickster Treaty: A play of Power”:

Trick Number 1: The Center of the Universe

If I am not the center of the universe, you do not exist. If I am not the central actor in whatever drama, I will not listen to you, I will not acknowledge your presence, and I will remove myself from the situation. My absence will highlight my centrality to all actions. I will not acknowledge your presence; my ability not to *see* you is my power. If I do not see you, you do not exist. If you only exist at my will, you are nothing without my attention. I am, therefore, the one that controls who is *real* and who is not.

Trick Number 2: Special Needs Population

I will claim my right to be central to all action by claiming my special needs as a (white) child, a man with important work/ideas/artist/genius/, a (white) woman with special demands that supersede the needs of anybody else involved in the situation. If you claim your own needs, I will proceed as if I did not hear you and will reassert my initial claim. The more you push, the more I persist in my claims, with no reference to yours. Unless I want you to exist, you do not.

Trick Number 3: Special Games

All rituals/games that involve me are life affirming and enhancements for the soul, even if it is at the expense of your *essential* needs of food and clothing. I will build great stadiums and pay enormous amounts of money for players to enact the rituals/games that glorify me and my group . . . I will also use these games to train my people to love and exercise power. The lifetime socialization

through my games will provide the framework for teaching the dynamics of power and domination, all in the guise of “having fun” . . .

Trick Number 4: The Pleasing Game—Boosting, Stroking, and Silence

I will make it impossible to please me. I will make request upon request, one after another in rapid succession, making it impossible for you to fully comply and barring you from thinking of anything else but me. I will rob you of time and energy so you cannot develop your own subjectivity and identity independent of my needs . . . You are nothing when I am not around. I am the master and creator of the universe and you will have nowhere to exist if I am not present.

Trick Number 5: Power Solidarity

I will be a rabid individualist unless the power of my group (based on gender, superior social class, and white race) is threatened. If it is, I will use all of my capacities to think of alternative, benevolent explanations for ruthless and abusive behavior for members of my power group. If a member of my power group is attacked, we will close ranks without a single word being spoken . . .

Trick Number 6: The Pendejo (stupid) Game

When you, the outsider, come close to subverting my power through the sheer strength of your moral arguments or through organized mass protest, I will give you an audience. I will listen to you, sometimes for the first time, and will seem engaged . . . I will consistently subvert your efforts at dialogue by claiming we do

not speak the same language . . . I will ask you to educate me and spend your energies finding out ways of saying things so that I can understand. I will *not* do the same for you . . . The claim of ignorance is one of my most powerful weapons because, while you spend your time trying to enlighten me, everything remains the same. The “*Pendejo Game*” will also allow me to gain intimate knowledge of your psyche, which will perfect my understanding of how to dominate you.

(Hurtado, 1996, pp. 133-135)

Those who occupy low-wage jobs are controlled, disciplined, demeaned, and made to feel unworthy and untrustworthy. They are often “faced with nothing less than outright contempt from their employers” (Shulman, 2003, p. 41).

Everyday Challenges

Low wages pose a significant challenge to those who clean for a living. In 2003 Virginia McDonnell conducted a study of full-time custodial wages at “Big 12” universities in the State of Texas. The Big 12 refers to a league of 12 institutions that have shared rivalries throughout their histories. Member schools include: Baylor University, University of Colorado, Iowa State University, University of Kansas, Kansas State University, University of Missouri, University of Nebraska, University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University, University of Texas, Texas A&M University and Texas Tech University. Baylor University declined to participate in McDonnell’s study. She learned that full-time custodians employed at 11 of the Big 12 schools earn a wide range of wages for performing similar work: The University of Oklahoma was the lowest on the pay scale, with full-time custodial salaries starting as low as \$5.15 per hour, which translates to an annual wage of \$10,712.00 and Iowa Sate ranked highest on the pay

scale, with a starting salary for custodial workers at \$9.19 per hour, an annual wage of \$19,115.00. Not surprisingly, McDonnell learned that the majority of individuals employed in a custodial capacity were minorities and that the highest paying institution, Iowa State University, employed the fewest number of ethnic minorities (8%), whereas institutions among the lowest paying employed the highest number of ethnic minorities (up to 90%). These findings support long-standing knowledge that racism defines and confines the employment and earning opportunities of people of color. Universities in the southern region of the United States, she found, paid starting annual wages below federal poverty guidelines for a family of three.

Even the process of searching for a job is stressful. Barbara Ehrenreich (2001), a bestselling author who went undercover to explore the life-world of the working poor, encountered such an obstacle when she moved from city to city in search of employment: “I need a job and an apartment, but to get a job I need an address and a phone number and to get an apartment, it helps to have evidence of stable employment” (p. 54). This unfortunate cycle often renders many unemployed until they find an employer willing to look past these arbitrary requirements. Low-wage jobs historically have had few career ladders and little to no training. “Those who receive training earn up to 16 percent in higher wages than comparable workers who lack such training. Yet workers in low-wage jobs are half as likely to receive employer-sponsored education as workers in higher-wage jobs” (Shulman, 2003, p. 42).

Considerable challenges attend the lives, hearts, and minds of the working poor. These problems affect a number of core areas of life: safety, security, health, stability,

family, and respect (Edin & Lein, 1997; Ehrenreich, B, 2001; Higginbotham & Romero, 1997; hooks, 2000b; Johnson, 2002; Shulman, 2003).

“Poverty renders women vulnerable to abuse” (Brush, 2003); they are over three times likelier to suffer domestic violence than those living in wealthier households (Wilcox, 2006). Research shows that such acts are carried out by abusers to compensate for their perceived lack of or loss of power and that “raw physical power increasingly becomes the last defensive resort” (Weis, 2004, p. 138). “Violence is a powerful instrument of control” (Chomsky, 2003, p. 156). Female victims reported missing an average of 3 days of work per month due to domestic violence (Wilcox, 2006). However, “the links between poverty and the risk of interpersonal violence is unclear and they say it may be that poverty is associated with the onset of domestic violence, or it may be that in fleeing domestic violence women are reduced to poverty” (p. 116).

Earning too little also means being chronically ill and suffering unnecessarily with treatable illnesses due to lack of funds. It means living in crowded spaces and sharing housing with friends or relatives in noisy, polluted areas. It means being at a higher risk than the non-poor to be evicted or have utilities cut off. It means living in rat-infested, dilapidated, filthy, crime-ridden environments and struggling against “the street”; it often means walking to work or using public transportation—all ultimately a reminder of their devalued status in America (Dill, 1994; Watts, 1993).

Low wages also create food insecurity. In extreme cases, some resort to sifting through trash receptacles in search of food. What we as individuals, restaurants, and corporations have designated as unneeded or unfit for human consumption, they consume (Winne, 2005). And when the poor have limited funds, “food is one of the few flexible

parts of a tight budget . . . The amount a family spends on food is elastic; it can be expanded or squeezed to fit whatever cash is left after the unyielding bills are paid” (Shieler, 2004, p. 201). Nutrition is important, but to the poor it is a matter of economics (Adair, 2003). Fresh, wholesome, nutritious food is costly, so the poor eat cheaper, energy-dense foods rich in starch, sugar or fat (considered “Class B food”) because it is what they can afford (Le, 2007). Many suffer from malnutrition, which impairs very important parts of the immune system and the functioning of the body (Shieler, 2004).

We are either fat or skinny, and we seem always irreparably ill. Our emaciated or bloated bodies are then read as a sign of lack of discipline and as proof that we have failed to care as we should . . . Exhaustion also marks the bodies of poor women in indelible script. Rest becomes a privilege we simply cannot afford.

After working full shifts each day, poor mothers who are trying to support themselves at minimum-wage jobs continue to work to a point of exhaustion that is inscribed on their faces, their bodies, their posture, and their diminishing sense of self and value in the world. (Adair, 2003, p. 33)

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Smith, 2006, p. 203). Clearly, the lives of the working-poor are wrought with circumstances that lead to compromised well-being.

The working-poor expend a good deal of energy thinking about money. Though they are capable of stretching a dollar and “getting by on the minimum,” they constantly have to juggle, forecast, and plan, and every decision carries considerable weight. “Many of those for whom money is tragically important make their choices with enormous care, scouring the papers for sales, clipping coupons, [and] perusing secondhand stores with a

canny eye for bargains” (Shipler, 2004, p. 27). The shortage of options and scarce resources take an emotional toll. They live precariously perched on the edge of financial disaster; any lay-off, any cut-back in overtime, any unforeseen financial emergency threatens to plunge them into the abyss (Rubin, 1976).

Low-income consumers are also victimized by lenders. They are often in desperate need of cash and unaware of the unscrupulous behavior of the lenders.

Poverty is like a bleeding wound. It weakens the defenses. It lowers resistance. It attracts predators. The loan sharks operate not only from bars and street corners, but also legally from behind bulletproof glass. Their beckoning signs are posted . . . “Payday Loans,” “Quick Cash,” “Easy Money.” You see them everywhere in poor and working-class neighborhoods.” (Shipler, 2004, p. 18)

Other income-generating strategies to help bridge the gap between their income and expenses include working multiple jobs, engaging in unreported and underground work and gambling. Holding multiple jobs to earn enough to make ends meet is all too commonplace for the working-poor. They typically hold one full-time job and one part-time job, a combination that makes for endless days, restless nights and precious little time for family, let alone leisure activities. They also engage in the “third shift,” which refers to the direct exchange of community labor for goods and services (Romero, 1997). Such services include babysitting, sewing, cooking meals for others, housecleaning, and the like – services considered part of the “informal economy.”

The term “unreported work” is often used when work is performed for a formal establishment such as a department store or corporation. Many workers

collude with employers to receive their pay in cash, an arrangement some employers like because it saves them money too. Many employers requiring temporary, contract, or irregular labor prefer not to list these jobs on their official payrolls in order to avoid paying into unemployment and worker's compensation programs. (Edin & Lein, 1997, p. 173)

Edin and Lein further explain that, typically, employers who offered off-the-books work also took advantage of the workers' need to hide their employment by offering them wages below the legal minimum.

Yet another way of piecing together enough money to meet a low-wage worker's needs is "underground work," which includes selling sex, drugs, and stolen goods (Edin & Lein, 1997). Of the many avenues to obtaining funds to supplement their income, this is the least popular with working-poor women, especially those who are mothers, because it lowers self-respect and exposes them to considerable risks. When they feel forced to resort to less-than-noble means to make ends meet, they know they are judged for it, but moral fiber is something that comes more easily when people have jobs with livable wages (Davey & Davey, 2001).

The working-poor also participate in gambling in an effort to draw additional income. "The non-earned sources of income, more available now than before, become increasingly attractive as the payoff to work declines" (Welch, 1999, p. 15). Gambling participation has grown among lower socioeconomic groups. Welte, Barnes, Wiczorek, Tidwell, & Parker (2002) report that while the more affluent Americans were the most likely to have gambled in the past year, it was the least affluent gamblers that had greater involvement. They further note that "blacks were less likely to have gambled than

whites, but blacks who did gamble exceeded other racial groups in frequency, absolute value of win or loss, and extent of gambling involvement” (p. 324). “Blacks, Hispanics and Asians were more likely to be problem gamblers than whites and prevalence of problem gambling declined significantly as socioeconomic status increased” (p. 325); and “blacks showed a much higher than average rate of pathological or problem gambling” (p. 331).

“State lotteries do a booming business at the corner stores in poor parts of town as people pray for the right number to come up and deliver them from hardship” (Shipler, 2004, p. 21). From a financial perspective, gambling and playing the lottery is a bad investment, but it is fun and relatively cheap. Money spent on gambling could be used for important necessities, but a few dollars buys hope, albeit temporary. For the price of a ticket, poor people have an opportunity to dream about how they will spend their winnings and how money might change the meaning and quality of their lives. When asked, “What would be the first thing you would do if you suddenly had a windfall of a million dollars?” 95% of poor people said the first thing they would do if they won a million dollars is “pay off their bills” (Rubin, 1976, p. 165). They had a difficult time planning a future beyond that because they have not had much to say about it (Janeway, 1980). The absence of control of one’s own destiny can press down so heavily that it becomes internalized, causing “low expectations, discouragement, and self-doubt, in particular about one’s intelligence. Internalized classism can also be manifested through disrespect toward other working-class people, in the form of harsh judgments, betrayal, violence, and other crimes” (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007, p. 311).

The Work Environment

Many low-wage workers are employed in environments where value and belief systems differ from ones with which they are familiar. Where they come from, they grew the food they ate, canned their own vegetables, changed the oil and spark plugs in their cars, learned how to sew, put up drywall (Faulkner, 1995), and they were busy all the time. Idleness and self-sufficiency did not go together (hooks, 2000b). The early socialization of people in poverty typically does not include lessons on the “cultural capital” that would allow access into the dominant society; they live without the “tidy rules of middle-class mannerisms” (hooks, 2000b, p. 19). Johnson (2002) tells us that “[c]ultural capital is more than parents’ aspirations for their daughters; it is also knowing the ‘right’ thing to do, say, wear, and like, and the ‘right’ places to go—preferences, tastes, and values that include the ‘right’ people and exclude the wrong” (p. 208). Cultural capital involves tastes that result from “good breeding” and includes the art of conversation, musical culture, playing tennis, and pronunciation (p.17): “Our social class of origin shapes what we take for granted as normal and involves basic assumptions about what to expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, and act” (hooks, 2000b, p. 103).

These early influences are slowly transformed by the norms and values of the workplace. Newman (1999) notes:

As time spent in the workplace increases, and the mix of one’s social acquaintances shifts toward other employees, work culture comes to dominate the rest of life. The rhythm of the workday, the structure it imposes, the regularity of

obligations and expectations, becomes second nature. Other people depend on you; an organization requires you, and being on time matters. (p. 108)

Individuals are mentally and physically transformed by the world of work.

The workplace can be harsh and uncivil to the working poor. Many report daily assaults on the mind, body, and soul. “They suffer both the pain caused by material lack and all the problems it produces and the pain caused by ongoing assault on their self-esteem by privileged classes” (hooks, 2000b, p. 121). Low-wage workplaces are often emotionally humiliating. Constant surveillance, rigid time expectations, random drug testing, and inflexible rules reinforce the pervasive sense that employers view them as untrustworthy (Case, Case, & Catling, 2000; Foucault, 1995; Shulman, 2003). “Unlike higher paying jobs in which workers are assumed to be acting in the interests of the company, lower-wage workers are assumed otherwise. To keep them in line, they are monitored, drug-tested, timed, and threatened with discipline” (Shulman, 2003, p. 42). “Fear is the chief motivator in these workplaces. Their work is highly regulated. Being five minutes late can mean the difference between having a job and not. A few minutes too long in the bathroom could mean discipline or a dock in pay” (p. 8). Disrespect is a major source of distress for many working-poor women. They are ordered around, “told what to do, not asked, and their supervisors feel no need to couch their demands in pleasant, polite language. Because their jobs require little or no training and lack union protection, these women are expendable, and they know it” (Johnson, 2002, p. 52).

Mental stress is also caused from what Rowe (1990) calls “micro-inequities: apparently small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator” (p. 153). Micro-

inequities occur whenever people are perceived to be “different” and the acts are small in nature, but not trivial in effect. When one experiences repeated micro-inequities or “micro-aggressions,” the cumulative effect is powerful. “As one drop of water has little effect, though continuous drops may be destructive, one racist slight may be insignificant but many such slights cause serious damage” (p. 153). Subtle barriers such as these maintain their strength because they are “distinguished by the fact that for all practical purposes one cannot do anything about them; one cannot take them to court or file a grievance” (p. 154) because they are difficult to name. Rowe adds that micro-inequities cause damage in part because they are a kind of “punishment” which cannot be anticipated, and, as an intermittent, unpredictable, negative reinforcement, micro-inequities have peculiar power as a negative learning tool. “Moreover, because one cannot change the provocation for negative reinforcement, (for example, one’s race or gender), one inevitably feels some helplessness” (p. 157). The aggressor often “gets away with it” because she or he is unaware of aggressing, even though observers would agree that injury took place. “We are socialized to believe that intent to injure is an important part of injury, and it is certainly critical to our actually dealing with injuries at the hands of others” (p. 158). Whether micro-inequities are addressed or not, they cause serious harm and rob the targets of valuable time and energy. “Disrespect is harmful” (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007, p. 311).

Again and again, the working poor share stories of being stripped of their dignity, an aspect of their employment far worse than hard work, low pay, or lack of benefits (Adair & Dahlberg, 2003; Buss, 1985; Daniel, 1991; Ehrenreich, 2001; Figueira-McDonough & Sarri, 2002; Higginbotham & Romero, 1997; Johnson, 2002; Newman,

1999; Swartz & Weigert, 1995). The bodies of the poor are “read as unworthy, laughable and often dangerous” (Adair, 2003, p. 30). Their perceived value is reflected in the faces of those with whom they come in contact. Maggie Holms, a domestic worker interviewed by Studs Terkel (1972), said, “When people come in the room—that’s what bugs me—they give you that look: You just a maid. It do something to me. It really gets to me” (p. 117). The mere act of encountering others—no exchange of words—simply coming into contact with others can be a dehumanizing experience.

Low-wage workers are also often publicly chastised and punished. According to Foucault (1995), the visibility of punishment is essential.

The presence of people must bring down shame upon the heads of the guilty; and the presence of the guilty person in the pitiful state to which [their] crime has reduced [them] must bring useful instruction to the souls of the people . . . punishment must be a school rather than a festival; an ever-open book rather than a ceremony . . . A secret punishment is a punishment half wasted. (pp. 111-112)

The bodies of the poor and working-class “are useful only as lessons, warnings, and signs of degradation that everyone loves to hate” (Adair, 2003, p. 33).

Such injuries are also “*messages*—symbolic communications. They are ways a wrongdoer is saying to us ‘I count and you do not,’ ‘I can use you for my purposes,’ or ‘I am here up high and you are down there below’” (Murphy & Hampton, 1988, p. 25).

Some women have spoken of working in unpleasant and occasionally openly hostile work environments in which supervisors explode at workers and berate them on a frequent basis. And if workers want to keep their jobs, they remain silent and swallow the indignities. They temper their emotions because they do not have the luxury of rage

(Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Hayward, 2003), and they have little power to create better working conditions. Any attempt to pursue formal grievances may result in retaliation or termination (Falkenberg, 2007). Yet this hostile environment leaves its traces. A dictatorship takes a psychological toll on its subjects (Ehrenreich, 2001). According to Newman (1999), a demoralizing work environment where workers are berated and forced into silence is one of the reasons low-wage positions carry such a “powerful stigma in American popular culture: they fly in the face of a national attraction to autonomy, independence, and an individual’s ‘right’ to respond in kind when dignity is threatened” (Newman 1999, p. 93). Indeed, the organizational culture they join is instrumental in creating conditions that challenge a worker’s self-esteem.

Most of us tend to care about what others think about us – how much they think we matter: Our self-respect is social in at least this sense and it is simply part of the human condition that we are weak and vulnerable in these ways. And thus, when we are threatened with contempt by others, it attacks us in profound and deeply threatening ways. (Murphy & Hampton, 1988, p. 25)

Ehrenreich (2001) observes that “women seem inordinately sensitive about how [their employer] is feeling about them . . . getting reamed out [by their supervisor] can ruin their whole day; [and] a morsel of praise will be savored for weeks” (p. 116).

Employers also create social distance by the imposition of certain “linguistic practices” (Gill, 1990, p. 129) (like addressing their employees by their first names while insisting that they be addressed formally), through “speech patterns, voice tone, and the requirement that employees wear uniforms” (Rubio & Taussig, 1983, p. 15): “They want us to get in a uniform . . . they don’t want you walkin’ around dressed up like them”

(Maggie Holms as cited in Terkel, 1974, p. 116). They don't want to see you working in "civilian clothes" (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 117). The uniform symbolizes servitude and otherness--which makes it easier for the employers to differentiate themselves from their employees and reaffirm their own superiority (Gill, 1990).

Sometimes employers humiliate employees by instructing them to clean floors on their hands and knees (occasionally with knee pads) instead of using a mop. Maggie Holms (in Terkel, 1974) continues: "They give you knee pads--like you're workin' in the fields, like people pickin' cotton. No mop or nothin'" (p. 113). Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) also experienced this as an undercover maid, noting:

A mop and a bucket full of hot soapy water would not only get the floor cleaner but would be a lot more dignified for the person who does the cleaning. But it is this primal posture of submission—and of what is ultimately anal accessibility—that seems to gratify the customers of maid services. (p. 84)

Low wage-earning positions are deemed to be "deprofessionalized" and relegated to the "underskilled." People who occupy these positions are more closely supervised and their jobs are geared towards achieving results through control (Figueira-McDonough & Sarri, 2002; Foucault, 1995). They are also often divided into classifications. Such distribution according to ranks or grade has a double role: it "marks the gaps, hierarchizes qualities, skills, aptitudes; [and] it also punishes and rewards" (Foucault, 1995, p. 181).

An even greater offense workers experience is being rendered invisible. At times, their employers behave as if they don't exist: "This ability to deny the very existence of employees and treat them as nonentities reflects deeply entrenched prejudices" (Gill 1990 p. 129; Rollins, 1985). "To be made invisible is the first step toward being considered

nonhuman, which is why making another person invisible often precedes treating them inhumanely” (Rivas, 2002, p. 79). Some workers recognize the advantages of being unseen (Ellison, 1972) – it allows them to temporarily avoid mistreatment. Thus they consent to their own invisibility by intentionally withdrawing from public gaze. Does this disappearance bear out the axiom “better safe than sorry?” Not according to Janeway (1980): “When women are asked to choose between being safe and being sorry, they find it a less agonizing choice than men do because, in their experience, there isn’t a great deal of difference between the two. One is never wholly safe and one is never free from sorry” (p. 211).

Cleaning, however, is best done when the occupants are not around and situated in spaces that need to be cleaned. Maids remain invisible to the people they serve, working evening and weekend shifts when buildings are empty or when occupants have left for the day (Cohn, 2003; Ehrenreich, 2001). When they are seen, they are sorry for it because, if they are seen, they should be seen working and this insures subjection (Foucault, 1995).

Low-wage working women have always performed hard, unforgiving labor. They carry out the dirtiest, heaviest, and least desirable work (Higginbotham & Romero, 1997) that eases the lives of the more privileged. They disproportionately suffer occupational injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome, caused by repetitive motion, tendonitis, back sprains, muscle strains, overexertion due to lifting, pushing and pulling equipment, and swollen knees due to long hours standing, bending and stooping – all common physical ailments faced by service workers who use their bodies to perform their jobs. Yet their

long hours do not pay off in livable wages. In the book *Principles of Political Economy*, John Stuart Mill notes:

The really exhausting and the really repulsive labors instead of being better paid than others, are almost invariably paid the worst of all . . . The more revolting the occupation, the more certain it is to receive the minimum of remuneration . . . The hardships and the earnings, instead of being directly proportional, as in any just arrangements of society they would be, are generally in an inverse ratio to one another. (as cited in Johnson, 2002, p. 32)

Women in unskilled jobs bring home an aching fatigue that, combined with lack of flexibility in their working hours, makes it harder for them than for other women to juggle their work and family responsibilities (Rubbo & Taussig, 1983).

The fatigue of women in low-wage jobs means that families at the bottom are also more likely to experience chronic health problems. Jobs held by the working poor often subject them to physical danger, and they are more likely to sustain a serious injury than are employees with non-physically demanding jobs (Newman, 1999). The working poor also have poor dietary practices, often smoke, and are more likely to engage in behaviors that are linked to chronic disease. They also do not have regular visits with doctors, and medical insurance is difficult to obtain (Ehrenreich, 2001; hooks, 2000b; Lambert, 1999; Newman, 1999). This lack of health care has dire results: “The uninsured are at a much higher risk for disease, disability and death. Lack of health insurance typically means lack of health care or second-rate treatment. People can’t afford to see doctors for preventative screening or illness, fill their prescriptions or get proper care at hospitals” (Sklar et al., 2001, p. 5); more than four million Americans have no health insurance

(Schulman, 2003, p. 29). Ehrenreich (2001) notes that low-wage workers inhabit a world of “pain-managed by Excedrin and Advil, compensated for with cigarettes and, in one or two cases and then only on the weekends, booze” (p. 89). Living without health insurance is a “serious health risk that needs to be treated with the same sense of urgency as drunk driving” (Sklar et al., 2001, p. 128).

Low-wage workers are also bullied in the work environment. “Workplace bullying is, among other things, an attempt to regulate the body” (Lewis, 1998, p. 103). For example, victims may find their physical mobility constricted by having to work long hours or alternatively, they may be forced to move around frequently. Bullying is

... a kind of assault on the victim’s body. It can be a deeply unpleasant experience which has damaging physical and emotional consequences. Even in milder cases the victims tend to feel that their bodily space is somehow being “invaded,” their bodies are no longer quite their own. (p. 91)

According to Lewis, bullying affects its victims physically and mentally. Physical symptoms include: nausea, crying, disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, sweating, shaking, palpitations, loss of energy, headaches, stomach/bowel problems, increased dependency on alcohol, caffeine and nicotine, ulcers, skin rashes, irritable bowel syndrome, high blood pressure, and various illnesses of organs such as kidneys. Mental symptoms include: feeling belittled, worry, anxiety, fear, low self esteem, confusion, depression, mood swings, lack of motivation, anger, over-sensitivity, loss of libido, loss of confidence, bursting into tears, and contemplating suicide. Bullying is a special kind of terror – made more horrific when its victims are judged as incompetent and weak when they buckle under its pressure (Lewis, 1998).

Use of Space

“Space” is also used to convey messages of marginality. “Physical settings do not function as socializing agents *sua sponte*; they are things. The people who design, ornament, and maintain them are the true sources of socializing messages, and the settings are merely the means by which these messages are propagated” (Margolis, 2001, p. 45). Yet the structures endure and continue to impact individuals who inhabit them long after those who built them have left the environment. Margolis, speaking specifically about college campuses, continues:

Looking at the building you are to have a certain attitude towards education and towards that institution that’s embodied in that building. When you walk through the doors – through the arched door with the gothic work on the wood, and the stone work, and the windows and all of that – you are to feel a certain something. The way in which you structure an institution tells you about the desires and agendas of that institution. (p. 27)

And the strong “symbolism attached to spaces on college campuses becomes part of the personalities and identities of individuals associated with those spaces” (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996, p. 53). Specific messages of exclusion and inclusion are written on the walls – the buildings themselves tell you who belongs there and who does not. Some people are in and some people are out (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Margolis, 2001). This group visibility, or invisibility, is a critical aspect of Feagin, Vera, and Imani’s concept of “racialized space” which “encompasses the cultural biases that help define specific areas and territories as white or as black, with the consequent feelings of belonging and control” (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996, p. 50). White individuals come to

see space as their “‘home territory’ in which they have a broad freedom to act, which is coupled with a sense of control over their area” (p. 58). “Pain-creating racist epithets like ‘nigger’ . . . are used as a way of defining white spaces. The epithet is frequently meant as an insult and as a warning that you should not be in this place or ‘watch your step’” (p. 57). Negative or hateful glances and actions imply the unspoken question “Why are you here?” The unfriendly atmosphere is palpable even in the way one is looked at. This type of cold glance or “hate stare” is experienced in many institutional settings (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996). The marginalized know they are somehow violating others’ strongly felt sense of place. This “psychic sense of one’s place leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded, such that the expectations that people develop are grounded within notions of what is acceptable for ‘people like us’” (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003, p. 129).

Powers of the Weak

But while low-wage workers are policed and exploited, they are not powerless. Abramovitz (2001) suggests, for example, that “[c]ontrary to stereotypes of these women being passive and apolitical, poor and working-class women in service positions have a long history of activism” (p. 121). The people we traditionally perceive as powerless actually do have some level of control, if not over others then over themselves and how they choose to engage with and in society. Cope (as cited in Gilbert, 1998) notes:

No one is without power altogether, but each person’s power constellation consists of many different sets of relations that take shape in a variety of spaces (and times), and which can occur simultaneously and even contradictorily. Thus, power is not just a dominant/subordinate relationship between individuals,

groups, or institutions; it is also a set of mutually conditioning or contradicting relationships . . . (p. 598)

Constable (1997) puts it more succinctly when he notes that the relationship is reciprocal: “employers do not have a monopoly on power and workers a monopoly on resistance. Rather, power and resistance coexist and constantly reassert themselves against each other” (p. 11). “Power,” Foucault declared, is everywhere (1980) and “its relations are neither static nor unidirectional” (Butin, 2001, p. 168). And though “highly asymmetrical relations of power inhibit resistance” (p. 171), individuals continue to be understood as “acting agents” (p. 168).

“We know pretty well how the interests of the powerful affect the weak. How do the interests of the weak affect the powerful” (Janeway, 1980, p. 21)? Janeway suggests that women learn and employ “ordinary and ordered uses of power.” These are powers which must be taught and demonstrated to children as part of helping them grow to responsible maturity. This teaching is done within, and by means of, relationships – by using the self as giver of love or withholder of praise, approving and disapproving, turning emotions into instruments while they are still felt . . . (pp. 20-21)

She further explains that ordered uses of power depend on there being two members to the power-dependence relationship, each able to control the things the other values. And what is it that the powerful want from the weak? “Legitimacy, not power itself . . . but rather the right to power” (p. 162) is what they want. When women begin to question this legitimacy, it undermines the authority of those in power and destabilizes prevailing truths.

Coping Mechanisms

Low wage-earning women are “keenly aware of the low social status of their occupation, yet they rarely present themselves as defeated by it” (Thornton Dill, 1988, p. 36). They often manage the employer-employee relationship in ways that allow them to maintain their self-respect by insisting upon “some level of acknowledgement of their humanity from the employer” (p. 50). The stress they experience stimulates many adaptive responses and coping mechanisms that “may range from constructive adaptation to a breakdown of normal functioning . . . many victims of discrimination have marshaled resources that were not previously obvious or strengths of which they were not aware” (Feagin & Sikes, 1994, p. 273). “While ‘doing time’ in a depriving work situation, they developed strategies to neutralize demeaning aspects of the job. The neutralization process involved techniques of increasing self esteem and enhancing pride and dignity” (Cohen, 1991, pp. 209-210).

Research indicates that although fight-or-flight may characterize the primary physiological responses to stress for both males and females, some believe, behaviorally, females’ responses are more marked by a pattern of “tend-and-befriend” (Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung, & Updegraff, 2000). Tending “involves nurturant activities designed to protect the self and offspring that promote safety and reduce distress; befriending is the creation and maintenance of social networks that may aid in this process” (p. 411). Women know their survival depends on the ability to mount effective responses to threat.

Taylor et al (2000) elaborate on women’s strong tendency to affiliate under conditions of stress, noting that through the befriending process women cultivate more

eyes for the detection of predators that may be more reluctant to attack potential prey if they believe there are others who may come to that prey's rescue. Further, "females are more likely to mobilize social support, especially from other females, in times of stress. They seek it out more, they receive more support, and they are more satisfied with the support they receive" (p. 418).

I turn now to an explanation of stress regulatory systems women employ using "tending" and "befriending" as organizing rubrics. Tending behavior is separated into psychological and behavioral categories, and befriending behavior is detailed in discussions of establishing social networks, building alliances and organized resistance.

Tending

Psychological Responses

One coping strategy is denial of marginalization (Akbar, 2002; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Rubin, 1976). At times assaults can be so wrenching many will handle the pain by simply pretending oppression does not exist. Noticing and naming it is more than they can bear; ignoring it reduces the agony and allows one to survive. This self-protective strategy allows individuals to negotiate their environments and even find hope when confronting discrimination.

Another approach to negotiating oppressive conditions is to mistrust those who wield power, which, according to Janeway (1980) is a natural impulse of the governed. Such apprehension allows the less powerful to subject the powerful and their opinions to analysis. One very tangible way this mistrust manifests itself is through active skepticism. When considering trustworthy sources of information, individuals distinguish between "hot" knowledge (acquired through the grapevine) and "cold"

knowledge (official or formal knowledge). Middle-class individuals make use of grapevine knowledge then seek out “cold” knowledge with which to replace or supplement it. Working-class individuals, on the other hand, rely on grapevine (hot) knowledge unquestioningly, seeing it as a way of making choices grounded in the opinions of others like oneself. “Cold” knowledge is viewed with suspicion because the providers are perceived to be serving their own interests (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003).

Another strategy of responding to oppression Janeway (1980) notes is the refusal to accept the definition of oneself that is put forward by the powerful.

Disbelief signals something that the powerful fear, and slight as it may appear, we should not underestimate its force. It is, in fact, the first sign of the withdrawal of consent by the governed to the sanctioned authority of their governors, the first challenge to legitimacy. (p. 162)

Resentment is also an important coping mechanism. It is “directly linked to governmentality in the sense that resentment is deeply imbricated in the techniques and processes of self-management and the self-regulation” (McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2000, p. 172). Resentment is more than a protest; it is also an “emotion which attempts a certain kind of personal defense” (Murphy & Hampton, 1988, p. 55) and an assertion of self-respect (Thornton Dill, 1988), though occasionally, when one’s marginalized status is internalized, there is a “fear that the insulter has acted permissibly in according treatment that would be appropriate only for one who is low in rank and value . . . [and] there may be some degree of belief that the insulter is right” (Murphy & Hampton, 1988, p. 57) to display such disregard.

While hatred and anger could be qualified defenses (Dill, 1994; Murphy & Hampton, 1988), these strategies are accessed less often than forgiveness, which, according to Murphy and Hampton (1988), involves an attempt to overcome resentment. Though many women have been taught to forgive (Borysenko, 1999), “forgiveness is not always a virtue . . . Indeed, if resentment is appropriately linked to self-respect, “a too ready tendency to forgive may be regarded as a vice because it may be a sign that one lacks respect for oneself” (Murphy & Hampton, 1998, p. 17).

But Christianity has “encouraged the development of meek and forgiving dispositions that will tolerate oppression and that will call that toleration a virtue” (p. 9).

Even though we value and encourage love towards our fellow human beings, prompting us to forgive them when they wrong us, we also seem to respect the idea that the guilty deserve to pay in pain for the wrongs they cause others, a thought generally encased in an anger that drives out love. There does not seem to be any easy way to reconcile these two responses to wrongdoing, nor is it easy to give either response up. Yet they coexist uneasily within us. (p. 122)

Religion has been invoked in an attempt to govern those who live in low-income households. Policymakers have seen religiosity among parents as a way to help children avoid poverty in adulthood. They believe

the moral content of religion leads both children and parents to behave in ways that promote children’s future economic well-being. According to this view, religious belief provides a moral compass that leads children away from teenage childbearing, delinquency, drug and alcohol use, and other behaviors that can lead to a life of poverty. At the same time religion instills a work ethic, honesty, and

other characteristics valued by employers, making it more likely that when children grow up they will get and keep a job. (Ludwig & Mayer, 2006, p. 180)

Whether these forced ideologies have proven to be effective is debatable, but that “low-income Americans are more likely than high-income Americans to identify with a religious denomination, attend church, and pray often” (Ludwig & Mayer, 2006 p. 181) is well documented (Fredrick, 2003; hooks, 2000b; Jackson, 2005; Manuel, 2000; Villarosa, 1994). Additionally, “African Americans are more likely to identify with a religion and to have greater religious intensity than whites” (Ludwig & Mayer, 2006, p. 181), as “Christianity has served as a foundation among African Americans for centuries, dating back to the time of enslavement” (Villarosa, 1994). When slaves understood that God as a creator of all people was on the side of the oppressed, that Christ was a liberator, they embraced the Bible and held onto its promise of freedom (Manuel, 2000). Spirituality was used as a tool against oppression and a way to engage “oppositional consciousness to endure hardship and poverty without succumbing to dehumanization” (hooks, 2000b, p. 127). When their enslaved bodies were wracked with pain they sought consolation in the future, while finding tangible relief in prayer (Raboteau, 1978):

My knee bones am aching,
 My body’s rackin’ with pain,
 I ‘lieve I’m a chole of God,
 And this ain’t my home,
 Cause Heaven’s my aim. (p. 218)

This song excerpt acknowledges present pain while anticipating future relief. It also reflects suffering and hope. This drawing upon spiritual resources in the face of adversity

has been at the core of black survival since slavery and it remains very important, as it facilitates optimism, offers comfort, and serves as an important aid in resisting oppression (Feagin & Sikes, 1994).

Latta (2002) raises an important point about how black women distinguish between work on secular jobs and working in the service of their faith.

What is different is the way they describe work performed primarily as a source of income and the work performed as a spiritual assignment is the relationship between themselves as workers and the force that controls their actions. On one hand, they contest 'being used' and occasionally abused by the powers-that-be on their secular jobs, and, on the other hand, they allow themselves 'to be used' as instruments by an omnipresent power in the grand scheme of sacred work. (p. 269)

It is also interesting to note that no matter the ethnic or gender background, the majority of Americans have a traditional American image of God that derives from Western (Christian) art and literature. This god is singular, male, white, often elderly, and usually bearded, with other bodily features of human beings (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Akbar, 2002).

Behavioral Responses

I have reviewed several psychological responses to oppression. I turn now to an overview of behavioral responses employed by those who are targets of systems of subjugation. The acknowledgement and questioning of the constant and cumulative experiences of oppression and their negative effects may lead targets to resistance (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Apple, 1982; Dill, 1994; hooks 2000). As I have

previously noted this resistance begins with disbelief and questioning “truths.”

Gradually, target groups become “more skilled at identifying the oppressive premises woven into the fabric of all aspects of their social experience” (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007, p. 5, Appendix 2A). “Dissent can preserve the mind though not the body; but an alert mind, able to judge for itself by its own stubbornly maintained precepts, stands a better chance of saving the body it inhabits than does a subservient robot” (Janeway, 1980, p. 215).

This awareness is transformed into strategic acts of resistance that have the goal of minimizing domination through the redistribution of power (Apple, 1982; Butin, 2001; Foucault, 1980; hooks, 2000b; Thomas & Davies, 2005). “Resistance weakens processes of victimization, and generates personal and political empowerment through the act of naming violations and refusing to collaborate with oppressors” (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 728).

Low-wage workers have few means of resisting employers’ attempts to control the work and conditions of the job, yet within their capabilities they try to wrest control in their environments in ways that allow them to maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect. Their strategies combine a mixture of passive and occasionally overt resistance with accommodation to the power exercised by employers and the circumstances of the workplace (Gill, 1990). To reduce feelings of deprivation, low-wage workers may try to “correct or ‘level off’ the ‘unbalanced’ exchange situation” (Cohen, 1991, p. 205).

However, some targets may find that their resistance results in losing benefits acquired when they collude with the system of oppression which may lead to passive resistance.

Passively challenging subjugation allows them to stay in favor with those in power, while

rejecting oppression (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). These strategies include: 1) decreasing the employer's outcome by slowing down, reducing production, or decreasing work hours; 2) increasing the employer's input by making them pay more, pay for overtime or additional duties; 3) increasing one's outcome by accepting gifts; 4) withholding information; 5) using "back door" acts of resistance; 6) honing observational skills; 7) gossiping about employers; and 8) using laughter.

In Cohen's (1991) work on women of color in white households, she addresses the restoration attempts of domestic workers who, at the beginning of their employment went above-and-beyond to please their employers. But after realizing that "there are few rewards for heroic performance" (Ehrenreich, 2001p. 195), they scaled back by shifting the pace of their work – essentially extending the time it would take to perform a task or completing fewer chores during the workday. When asked to carry out tasks that exceeded regular duties, they would request additional compensation. Domestics also increased their outcomes by accepting gifts. While a number of scholars indicate that one-way gift-giving, from employer to employee, reinforces the inequality of the relationship (Anderson, 2001; Dill, 1994; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1999) because the low wage-earning employee is not in a position to reciprocate, Cohen's (1991) research suggests that such gifts operate as leveling mechanisms, whereby the employee's outcome is increased and thereby restores a more balanced exchange. Thus, many low wage-earning employees deliberately extract gifts and handouts: holiday bonuses, Christmas and birthday presents, and unused articles.

Petty theft may be another mechanism available to workers who feel under-rewarded (Cohen, 1991). Though raising employee wages may be one of the best

avenues for leveling the exchange, additional compensation threatens to “weaken the employer’s belief in the inferiority of the domestic; for does not the fact that she will work for low wages help prove her inferiority? To pay more in cash would be to admit the greater worth of the servant” (Rollins, 1985, p. 193).

Absent adequate recognition and pay, an additional strategy of resistance is the withholding of information. In some cases, bilingual employees would not inform employers when they were more conversant with English (Vasconcellos, 1994), and they withhold particular knowledge and skills that might encourage employers to add work to their daily chores. They have learned that it is “important not to ‘know too much’ or at least never to reveal one’s full abilities to management, because ‘the more they think you can do, the more they’ll use you and abuse you’” (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 195).

Low-wage workers also practice “strategic compliance: bending to institutional constraints, but choosing to retain oppositional beliefs and ideologies” (Margolis, 2001, p. 36). They are able to sustain their “front stage” performance while being engaged in “back stage” resistance (Cohen, 1991). This back stage opposition involved such things as: “little tricks,” on occasions where workers would hide equipment to avoid performing demeaning chores, or intentionally handling important items carelessly to discourage future related assignments, or the outright damaging of property to avoid undignified chores altogether (Cohen, 1991; Rollins, 1985). Work quality and commitment naturally languish when employees feel cheated and demeaned.

When Barbara Ehrenreich worked as an undercover maid, she was subject to the same disrespect as her counterparts--and the same resentment and thoughts of revenge. After a particularly unpleasant encounter, she contemplated using an E. coli-rich rag that

had been used on the toilets to wipe down someone's kitchen counters. And in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982), the character Celie spit in a glass of water her hateful father-in-law demanded of her and decides that on a subsequent visit she would "put a little pee in his glass [to] see how he like that" (p. 50). These deliberate acts of back stage resistance allow those who hold less power to get revenge while still retaining the employers' favor.

Observation is another skill low-wage workers utilize (Rollins, 1985). According to Janeway (1980):

All the governed have to find room to live in a world they don't control. They come to sense the presence, and the weight, of others who live there. Because these others make the decisions and exercise authority that affects the governed, they are judged also in terms of competence and realism. Do they know what they're doing, or are they rash and willful . . . ? (p. 21)

Domestic workers in particular are

able to describe precisely the moods, habits, expectations, characters, and lifestyles of their employers. They developed observational skills in studying the nuances of the women they worked for . . . Their relative powerlessness necessitates a state of awareness of the employer's weaknesses in order cognitively to refine the reward balance between the two. (Cohen, 1991, pp. 209-210)

Having observed their employers, low-wage workers gain valuable, personal information that may be used as social currency through gossip. "Gossip identifies, validates, and reaffirms group values and expectations. Through gossip, social

boundaries are formulated . . .” (p. 204) and important alliances are established. Stories they tell are typically about employers’ stupidity and the workers’ own boorishness toward their respective employers. Gossiping is a low-cost mechanism through which employees can express hostility toward their employers.

The final “tending” behavior addressed here involves the uses of laughter. Laughter helps to psychologically manage the effects of mistreatment. It is a temporary release and an opportunity for feelings of empowerment, though fleeting, to take root. When laughing at one’s tormentor, humor can be a means of covert retaliation that defangs the oppressor (Feagin & Sikes, 1994) and helps to relieve tension. Joking may also be a way for individuals to reinterpret experiences while seeking support and legitimacy in their resentments toward and ridicule of their employers (Cohen, 1991). Making fun of employers outside of their presence helps to compensate for “the loss of self-respect that might have occurred when performing an accommodative service in a face to face setting” (p. 210).

Adam Phillips (2002) considers the psychology of laughter. He writes that when we laugh at someone else we violate, or simply disregard, their preferred image of themselves. In the face of being laughed at, it “becomes extremely difficult to sustain, to hold in place, our preferred images of ourselves, of who we would rather be . . . It generously diminishes us [and] lowers us down gently from our own ideals” (pp. 36-37). He further notes that “ridicule is a fantasy of restoration of status; and mockery is always performed from a position of wished-for privilege. It is, whatever else it is, the revenge of the displaced” (p. 39). Phillips continues:

When we laugh at others – when the joke is on them – we have found a way of using them for our forbidden pleasure. Laughing at someone is – like all real pleasure – a stolen pleasure. But when we laugh at someone they feel stolen from. What has been stolen is your freedom to supervise, to control the representations of yourself. The other person or people no longer care to protect, or wholly disregard, the images of yourself that you believe you need to sustain you. Humiliation strips the self of its safeguards.

To laugh at someone one must enjoy their hatred of being laughed at . . . and for mockery to work, something about a person has to be exposed, usually something they would prefer to conceal from themselves and others because it is at odds with the person they would rather be. And what is exposed has to be described in such a way as to render it amusing.

It is like all cruelty, a calculated not-me experience. I have apparently created a boundary, a distance between myself and my victim. Indeed, it may be the separateness – the belief that I can instate such a distance – that is the important thing . . . the inner superiority of being in a position to ridicule someone is the grand illusion of disunity, of apparently having nothing in common with one's victim. (pp. 41-43)

In *Laughter as Liberating Memory* (1994), Joan Vasconcellos introduces laughter as a ritual of empowerment and resistance – a courageous unmasker among working-class women. They “used laughter to laugh at authority. The college educated. The

politicians. The church officials. The they-think-they're-better-than-us relatives" (p. 118). They laughed when her father, angry for having been mistreated by his employers, left the milk factory with the conveyor belt going. They laughed when her grandfather outsmarted his bosses who thought he could not speak English. While others thought him stupid, he outwitted his superiors. Laughter was a weapon and a tool: "We learned self-respect for who we were in the gasping for breath between fits of laughter. In the side pains that accompanied our laughing out loud so strongly and passionately, we learned to be proud of who we were" (p. 119). In the laughter they resisted you're-not-as-good-as-us messages. In the laughter they forgot humiliation. Through laughter they healed from the grief and misfortune of their lives. Laughter is empowering, restorative, and it helps the low wage-earners stay connected to their working-class roots.

Befriending

Social Networks and Building Alliances

Again, "befriending" addresses the creation and maintenance of social networks. While some who work hard do not earn livable wages, they do have the compensation of well-established social networks. Hardship often binds women together in recognition of their similar vulnerabilities (Taylor et al., 2000). Women's sense of self is organized around being able to make and then maintain affiliations and relationships (Figueira-McDonough & Sarri, 2002). Women are more likely to rely on family members for support in emergencies and for both financial and non-financial assistance. Low-wage workers who requested and received financial support generated \$291 more per month (Edin & Lein, 1997) to be able to meet basic family needs.

Newman (1999) found that the working poor deliberately stay close to one another not only because they need one another for practical support but because they value family above all else. This practice is looked upon unfavorably because “public perceptions of America center around middle-class nuclear families as the norm, the goal toward which others should be striving . . . Middle-class Americans value autonomy, including autonomous relations between generations and siblings once they reach adulthood” (p. 192). Gilbert (1998) also found that African American women participate heavily in church activities and rely on the church for different kinds of economic support as well as emotional and spiritual sustenance. Families who have access to more resources can buy the services they need to manage the demands of work and family. They can purchase child care, borrow from banks, or utilize health insurance: “Affluence loosens the ties that remain tight, even under oppressive times, in poor communities” (Newman, 1999, p. 194).

The second befriending strategy involves the cultivation of internal and external alliances.

Shared goals are worth more, may even be worth fighting for, especially now that allies in the fight have been found. A group that is knit together begins to believe that it’s looking at a realizable future, at changes that can actually come about in the world . . . When the ruled begin to join hands and to speak their minds to each other, mutuality puts an end to isolation and increases confidence. (Janeway, 1980, p. 183)

Apple (1982) notes that resisting and establishing an informal work culture creates some sense of worker control over the labor process and rejects a good deal of norms to which workers are supposedly socialized.

External support is also important: “Working-class women have always needed allies outside their class” (Cobble, 2004, p. 227). It has proven emotionally and practically beneficial that they “gain entrance into a circle of people who were deemed more likely to treat them with decency and dignity” (Dill 1994, p. 102). In addition, more powerful allies who are external to the low-wage worker’s environment may leverage their authority in support of improved conditions.

Organized Resistance

A final befriending strategy is that of organized resistance--activity working-class women have engaged in throughout history. For the purpose of this work, my survey of the literature will focus on campus-based strategies designed to improve the working conditions of low wage-earning employees. The majority of these initiatives have pursued a “living wage” for employees who work full-time, year-round jobs and yet do not earn enough to adequately care for themselves and their families. Though the minimum wage, as of July 24, 2007, rose from \$5.15 per hour to \$5.85 per hour beginning July 24, 2007, and will rise to \$6.55 per hour beginning July 24, 2008, and \$7.25 per hour beginning July 24, 2009, the minimum wage is not a family-supporting wage (Heins, 2007). A living wage, on the other hand, is a more fitting consideration. “Living Wage” is a term used by advocates to refer to the minimum income necessary for an individual to afford basic necessities in a given community (housing, food, utilities, transportation, health care and child care). Living wage advocates propose rates that

allow employees to earn an annual income that is above the federal poverty guidelines, taking into account the cost of living in a given community. “The modern living wage movement had its first victory in Baltimore where clergy running food pantries noticed that many regular visitors were working full time but still couldn’t feed their families” (Sklar, Mykyta & Wefald, 2001, p. 70). Baltimore’s living wage ordinance led the way for numerous living wage campaigns in communities and on campuses around the country.

Most campaigns on college campuses have not been initiated by the workers themselves. Instead, the vast majority have originated in the student body, who may speak more freely without fear of severe retaliation. In some cases faculty and staff (those not considered low-wage workers) offer support to the initiatives and in rarer cases, living wage movements are initiated by staff, faculty and community coalitions as one unified group. Workers are not absent, however. Low wage-earning employees strategically meet with coalition members to share needs and concerns outside of public forums in an effort to maintain the anonymity of the already vulnerable workers.

Living Wage campaigns have taken place on numerous college and university campuses such as: American University, Arizona State University, Brown University, Bucknell University, Cornell University, Fairfield University, Georgetown University, Harvard University, Miami University, Notre Dame University, Princeton University, Stanford University, Swarthmore College, Texas A&M University, The Johns Hopkins University, The University of Tennessee Knoxville, The University of Texas at Austin, University of Virginia, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, University of Vermont,

University of Connecticut, University of Vermont, Vanderbilt University, Washington University, Wesleyan University, Western Michigan University, and Yale University.

The names of coalitions include: Campus Labor Action Project, Council for a Living Wage, Labor Action Coalition, Living Income for Employers, Living Wage Coalition, Solidarity Committee, Students for Staff, Student Labor Action Committee, Student Labor Action Project, Student Labor Alliance, Student Worker Alliance, United Student Labor Action Coalition, and Workers' Rights Coalition.

Activists have deployed multiple strategies to raise awareness and to garner support. Tactics have ranged from moderate to dramatic and severe. Milder approaches include: sizeable banners; chalk on university sidewalks, timed to coincide with campus visits by prospective students or in advance of high-profile events; petitions; sleeping outside in the rain, as well as articles and comics in campus newspapers. Slightly more aggressive approaches have included: serenading administrators in their offices with the words of popular Christmas carols replaced with themes detailing circumstances of the working poor; substantial billboards strategically located throughout the city; on-line videos detailing worker conditions and university responses to wage increase demands; broader media attention extending to local and surrounding areas; rallies; disrupting meetings attended by high-ranking university officials; and seizing the agenda at well-attended, university-sponsored events. The most aggressive tactics have included: teach-ins, sit-ins, hunger strikes, daily pickets and rallies drawing thousands of participants, blocking traffic, building take-overs, popular celebrities enlisted to leverage their status, tent cities erected in the middle of campus, national and international media attention, chartering an airplane to fly over commencement trailing a banner that advocates for a

living wage, and assertive campaigns encouraging current and former students to rescind or withhold financial gifts to the college or university unless and until it pays a living wage to all employees.

These initiatives have been met with mixed reactions. Some gained support of local city councils, organizations, labor unions, and churches in their respective communities, and faculty and student senates have generated resolutions in support of living wage proposals. Naturally, many met resistance. In some cases proposals were completely ignored, not even dignified with a response. In others, administrators went weeks without responding and when they did, many reacted with a university-named task force to consider the issue. Names of these taskforces include: Advisory Committee on Business Practices, Basic Needs and Equitable Compensation Task Force, Compensation and Classification Working Committee, and Task Force on Wages and Benefits. Their deliberations were at times lengthy and rarely involved members of groups that raised the issue of a living wage.

Campus police disrupted rallies, prohibited free speech, and occasionally arrested students and faculty. Several mid-level managers also verbally threatened, harassed, and intimidated workers believed to be associated with such movements. And in cases where workers were courageous enough to be directly involved, newly-installed university video cameras proved menacing. In some cases, workers were transferred, suspended or fired for their participation or suspected involvement in living wage campaigns.

A majority of campus-based living wage campaigns have succeeded in raising employee compensation, though few receive the exact dollar figure they initially demand. The most successful campaigns were grounded in worker-based solutions and yielded

sustainable results such as centers, policies, standing committees, or formalized coalitions that will ensure that livable wages remain a priority over the long term. Above all, “these coalitions have been successful because they speak a powerful truth: working Americans are entitled to a living wage” (Shulman, 2003, p. 143).

Higher Education as Context

Economic trends have been kind to intellectuals, but cruel to service workers.

- Bernstein & Symonds (2003 p. 112)

This research considers the amalgamation of classism, racism, and sexism within the institutional framework of the academy with an eye toward constructively challenging “the system” and many of the underlying assumptions upon which the institution is based (Albro, Culligan, & King, 2005). The very system of education widely believed to “level the playing field” is rife with inequities as it “reflects the bias and the power agenda of the society within which it is embedded” (Hilliard, III, 2002, p. 54). The higher education context itself is not stable; it is constantly in flux, like the world in which it resides, and “it has embraced, maybe unconsciously, some of society’s least noble and perhaps even self-destructive values and beliefs” (Astin, 1997, ¶ 37).

It is important to situate the current struggles in and around the university in their historical context because only then can we fathom their meaning; only then can we comprehend fully the reason for and the nature of the challenges we continue to face in American universities (Levine, 1996).

The history of classism, racism, and sexism is well documented. As instruments of oppression, they are all interlocking systems that involve domination and control.

Oppression depends on socialization into systems of belief that mask injustice and promote dominant “commonsense” rationales for accepting social injustice as part

of the natural order, the result of meritocracy, hard work or individual talent.

Harro (2000) proposes a Cycle of Socialization (FIGURE 1), through which we learn to accept oppression as “the way things are” through our interactions with individuals, social institutions, and cultural practices and beliefs. We were each born without prejudice into a world that has systematically taught us to accept an oppressive system. We learned this from people who love and care for us: parents, teachers, or friends. What we learn is reinforced in schools and by the media as well as other institutions with which we interact. (Hardiman & Jackson, 2007, p. 60)

Higher education and society mutually inform each other in ways that help re/produce inequality. Many critical researchers have argued that schools have a significant role in sustaining and re/creating inequality through the formal curriculum as well as the “hidden curriculum,” which encompasses norms and values transmitted to community members through everyday operations and relations (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003; Astin, 1997; Giroux, 1997).

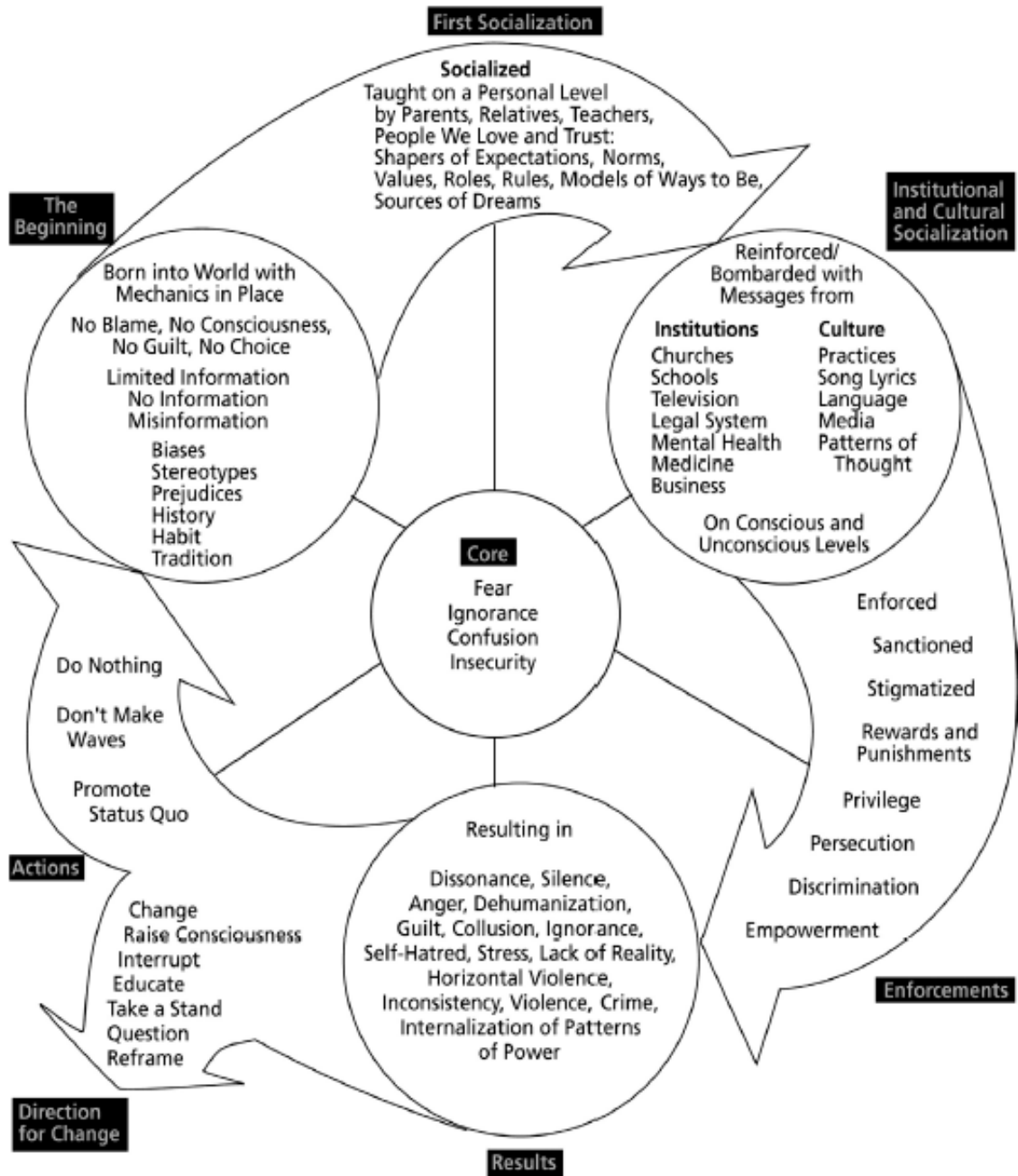


FIGURE 1. Cycle of Socialization (Harro, 2000, reprinted with permission from Taylor & Francis Group LLC).

Systems of privilege and disadvantage are engaged in every facet of the academy from the classroom (“men are better in science and math than women”), to the staff arena (“cleaning is a job for people of color”), to the board room (“we need to ensure we continue to admit high-quality students, let’s avoid the riffraff,” – a direct quote¹).

The hidden curriculum is quite effective in re/producing stratified outcomes because it remains an entrenched and largely ignored element of academic life.

Physical depictions of certain elements of hidden curricula, including classroom structures, architecture, fraternity and sorority gatherings, and representations of school pride, were somewhat obvious, but a large part of what constitutes the hidden curriculum – social relations like race and gender hierarchy, social class reproduction, the inculcation of ideological belief structures, and so on – is much less visible. (Margolis, 2001, p. 22)

Margolis further explains that hidden curriculum “consists of the tacit ways in which knowledge and behavior get constructed outside the usual course materials and scheduled lessons in a way to conduce us to comply with dominant ideologies and dominant social practices . . .” (p. 25). Much of this socialization is indeed covert and “will not work if made visible, and in fact will produce resistance if revealed” (p. 4). Here, the author refers to intentionally produced forms power that benefit some at the expense of others. This power emanates from an obscured place, often through “hidden persuaders that subliminally convey messages” (p. 3), further hidden by a “general social agreement not to see” (p. 2). Moreover, some knowledge, Margolis notes, is “guilty knowledge. One turns away from certain knowledge and hides his or her face in shame . . .” (p. 3). Thus,

whether hidden or overt, higher education legitimizes, helps sustain and informs dominant culture.

Hence, the relevance of the social ills of society to what happens in higher education is clear: a large proportion of the voting citizenry, politicians, and future educators receive preparation for their occupations in institutions of higher education. These individuals, in turn, inform and educate society at large. The higher education community has not only played a part in creating the problems that plague U.S. democracy, but it is also in a position to begin doing something about them (Astin, 1997). There is a need to revisit “one of the most hallowed claims and espoused purposes of our colleges and universities: the expectation that higher learning contributes substantially to learners’ preparation for citizenship” (Schneider, 1998, p. 2). If we want students to acquire the democratic virtues of honesty, tolerance, empathy, generosity, teamwork, cooperation, service, and social responsibility, then we have to model these same qualities not only in our individual professional conduct but also in our curriculum, our teaching techniques, and our institutional policies.” (Astin, 1997, ¶ 39)

There is a need to engage students in dialogue around issues of social justice and social responsibility – to help them make connections to people “outside” of the academy and the issues that affect their lives. There should be conversations about the nature of class, conversations that help them to

understand that they live the lives they do because other people have to clean their classrooms, grow their food, build their houses, and sew their clothes under

conditions they do not control for rewards that increasingly do not allow them to meet their own basic needs. (Lipsitz, 1997, p. 20)

Instead, students are taught that everyone is born with equal opportunity and that education is the path to upward mobility. They are taught to “desire riches and flaunt the symbols of wealth . . . [and] that labor is honorable in the abstract but in actuality something to be imposed on others whenever possible” (p. 9). For example, a number of universities currently allow personal residence hall room cleaning services to operate on their campuses. One prominent cleaning service is *DormAid* (2007), a college service company founded in 2004 by a Harvard University graduate. Its slogan is, “Work Hard. Play Hard. We’ll take care of the rest.” The company began as a laundry pickup-and-delivery service but has now expanded to include water delivery, grocery delivery, computer assistance and professional room cleaning. With the click of a mouse, students at over 1800 universities may choose to “take the stress out of dorm living” by arranging personal room cleaning services. The maid service options are: Platinum (twice per week at \$59.95 per cleaning), Gold (once per week at \$61.95 per cleaning), Silver (twice per month at \$63.95 per cleaning), Bronze (once per month at \$65.95 per cleaning), and A la carte (2 hours total for a \$69.95 one-time fee). At this cost, students are guaranteed to have a superior room cleaning provided through the use of a 21-point cleaning checklist. The list includes: vacuuming floors, dusting all surfaces, wiping all surfaces, cleaning floors, consolidating and taking out the trash, folding clothes, organizing displaced items, changing sheets and making beds, scrubbing shower or bathtub, cleaning vanities, cleaning sink and backsplash, cleaning toilets, washing floor and tiles, deodorizing the bathroom, cleaning all dishes, cleaning the refrigerator, cleaning the stove and

microwave, cleaning the oven, cleaning counters, and leaving a chocolate truffle on the student's bed or futon. In addition, students may make special requests, which DormAid will make every attempt to accommodate. Room occupants have the option of leaving the maid alone in their rooms to clean or remaining in the room to supervise their work. DormAid claims to “empower the next generation through the delivery of high quality personal services that increase time and reduce stress for college students” (2007).

Such examples demonstrate the important role higher education environments play in creating conditions for inequality to thrive. This social arrangement, where students employ maids, serves to re/produce systems of domination and subordination:

To make a mess that another person will have to deal with—the dropped socks, the toothpaste sprayed on the bathroom mirror, the dirty dishes left from a late-night snack—is to exert domination in one of its more silent and intimate forms. One person's arrogance—or indifference, or hurry—becomes another person's occasion for toil. (Ehrenreich, 2002, p. 88)

The system of hierarchy and marginalization is absorbed uncritically into everyday interactions. “This is of particular import in education, where our commonly accepted practices so clearly seek to help students and to ameliorate many of the social problems facing them” (Apple, 1982, p. 13). If higher education does nothing to raise consciousness about oppression and inequity, it “locks this hierarchy in place and threatens to make it not an aberration of American society but a norm . . .” (Shulman, 2003, p. 82).

Higher education should be an institution that offers students the opportunity to involve themselves in the deepest problems of society and to acquire the

knowledge, skills, and ethical vocabulary necessary for critical dialogue and broadened civic participation. This suggests developing pedagogical conditions for students to come to terms with their own sense of power and public voice as individual and social agents by enabling them to examine and frame critically what they learn in the classroom within a more political or social or intellectual understanding of ‘what’s going on’ in their lives and the world at large. At the very least, students need to learn how to take responsibility for their own ideas, take intellectual risks, develop a sense of respect for others, and learn how to think critically in order to function in a wider democratic culture. (Giroux, 2003, p. 189)

There is a considerable income gap among those employed to clean the halls and walls of the academy and others who contribute to its functioning such as faculty and administrators. While custodians’ salaries range from an annual wage of \$10,712.00 (McDonnell, 2003) to \$23,826 per year (The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007), the average salary for full-time faculty members is \$73,207 (Millman, 2007), which varies with experience and type of institution. The gap widens more when considering salaries of university presidents: the median compensation for chief executives of public-universities is \$371,548 (Fain, 2007). Among the highest paid are University of Washington President Mark Emmert, who receives an annual compensation package that totals \$718,700, University of Delaware President David Roselle, who earns \$720,522, University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman, who earns \$724,604, (Perry, 2006, ¶ 2), and John T. Casteen III, president of the University of Virginia, whose total compensation for 2006-2007 is \$752,772, including \$200,000 in deferred compensation,

\$21,100 in bonus pay, a \$15,000 car allowance, and a retirement contribution of \$48,672 (Fain, 2007, ¶ 2).

While it may be fair to assert that certain occupations that require rigorous preparation should receive higher compensation, I cannot be persuaded to accept the fact that one's bonus pay can surpass, and nearly double, the annual income of an entry-level custodial worker. It bears repeating: A university president's bonus pay—money he is paid just to show up—is nearly double the earned income of an entry-level custodial worker. How can a university expect dedication to a common purpose with such deplorable income differentials? How, amidst such wealth and prosperity, can a university pay so little to those who make the academy possible? How can the “spirit of inquiry flourish on university campuses when there exists (sic) people in our institutions who barely eke out a livelihood” (Weingartner, 2000, p. 12)? Though many experts on higher education financing generally agree that there is little incentive for colleges to offer higher compensation to lower-end workers (Der Werf, 2001), this flagrant injustice within the academy is of dire consequence. “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (King, 1963, p. 79). Universities as a whole are compromised when all its citizens are not treated justly.

Universities are regarded as knowledge-drivers, made so by the energetic critical thinkers who identify, frame, and foster dialogue around issues facing society. They are important foci of any strategy for change, because they help shape the possibilities that can emerge (Jaquette & Staudt, 2006). The rules of engagement are in the hands of higher education. How it uses this power is a reflection of its values: “This is a

fundamental justice area that universities need to address, or it is going to come back to haunt them . . . Their treatment of workers is part of the report card of how well universities are fulfilling their mission” (Quigley, 2001, ¶ 5).

Academe has the capacity to deal more effectively with its avowed concern for democracy. But is their capacity matched by willingness? Are they prepared to seek reforms which will increase their ability to serve society and democracy? Are they courageous enough to “speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society” (Chamberlain, 2004, p. 211)?

Refusing to take positions on controversial issues or to examine the role they might play in lessening human suffering, such academics become models of moral indifference and unfortunate examples of what it means to disconnect learning from public life . . . Academics should engage in ongoing forms of permanent critique of all abuses of power and authority (Giroux, 2003, pp. 190-191)

because students cannot learn the ways of democracy and freedom from faculty who themselves are not free and fearless (Seymour, 1951). Revitalizing academic and public dialogue around issues of social justice and equality requires mounting a serious defense of higher education as an institution of civic culture whose purpose is to educate students for responsible citizenship.

We really have no other viable choice . . . This need presses down upon us relentlessly, and we will ultimately be judged by how well we meet it, by how

able we are to keep our understanding of the American past - and present - open, dynamic, and responsive . . . ” (Levine, 1996, p. 174)

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Why a Qualitative Approach?

I am interested in understanding the lived experience of women who are employed as custodial workers at a particular institution of higher education. This type of investigation benefits from qualitative inquiry in that qualitative methods are “more sensitive to and adaptable to the many mutually shaping influences and value patterns that may be encountered” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40). It allows the researcher to focus on “how other people live, experience, and interpret their lives . . . [and] demands painstaking attention to the nature and quality of the relationships *between* researchers and research participants” (Tom & Herbert, 2002, p. 591).

This study also incorporates key characteristics of interpretive qualitative research designs as presented by Guba & Lincoln (1981): (1) the researcher strives to understand the meaning participants have constructed about their world and their experiences; (2) the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis; (3) the process is inductive; and (4) it is richly descriptive.

The Setting

Field research took place at State University, a pseudonym for a Land Grant, Research Extensive institution located in the Southwest. It is one of the largest campuses in the nation, with over 5,300 acres. Nearly sixty (60) thousand individuals, including faculty, staff, and students, live and work on the university campus. The institution offers a broad range of undergraduate and graduate programs conferring degrees in over 140

fields of study, and the external support for research exceeds \$600 million. The institution is known for its traditions and its conservative ethos.

Against this background, I gained entry as a graduate student and employee of a similarly situated institution with my research agenda and my “insider” status known to all participants. As an administrator in higher education, working in the area of institutional diversity, my dissertation topic allowed me to combine my academic work with my occupational work by offering a cultural critique while being directly involved in working to impact change (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005).

I was aware that my occupational status would affect my ability to connect with participants and that I would have to work to gain trust as a researcher. On the days I conducted interviews, I intentionally “dressed down” and exchanged my briefcase for a backpack. My occupational status seemed to affect the custodial participants less than it did the administrators; they appeared guarded and occasionally used our time together to present unrelated concerns which they believed I could address in my professional capacity. It was a complicated position to negotiate.

Indeed, researching inside the academy is tricky business. Audra Cole (2001) elaborates:

. . . [T]he academy, as an institution, is a politically charged bastion of patriarchal, hegemonic power that has survived for centuries in large part because of the protection offered by its ivy-covered tower. Keeping the public at arm’s length and keeping the research gaze trained outward have helped to conserve, insulate, and protect the university from public intervention and change. By moving the microphone and microscope inside the walls of the academy, there was a

possibility that I might tug at the roots of the ivy and shake loose a few of the tower's bricks. (p. 167)

I suspect the telling of this inside story may reveal truths some members of the institution would rather leave untold. But these stories of lives lived out in the academy, by individuals who literally preserve its foundation, must be told. Thus, I embrace the potential consequences and associated responsibilities. Pseudonyms were used for the institution and all participants involved to preserve confidentiality.

Participants

The participants for this study include six (6) women who are employed as custodial workers at State University, nine (9) university administrators, and two (2) State University employees involved in the community's Living Wage initiative.

The criteria for selection of custodial participants were that they were employed as custodial workers at State University a minimum of five years; represented various ages, ethnic identities, and ranks; represented varying lengths of employment at the university; varied in single and dual income; and demonstrated a willingness to participate in extensive interviews.

The process of selecting the custodial participants began with my soliciting recommendations from employees of State University, which yielded five participants. The final individual was identified by one of the existing participants, a technique known in the literature as "snowball sampling" (Bernard, 2002).

The number of custodial participants was limited to six (6) to facilitate deep, thorough analysis of the individual women's stories and the events that shape their paths, experiences, and destinies. The inclusion of additional participants would have

prohibited such intensity. Three (3) of the participants were African American, two (2) were White, and one (1) was Hispanic. They ranged from 52 to 60 years of age and their lengths of employment ranged from seven (7) to nearly thirty (30) years. Added together, these women have worked at State University approximately ninety-nine (99) years.

Within the ranks of the custodial staff, they represented: Custodial Worker I, Custodial Worker II, Custodial Worker III, and Supervisor. Four of the participants were the single wage-earners in their households, and two had dual home incomes. In addition to the formal interviews, I communicated intermittently with several of the custodial participants to assist them in obtaining resources such as educational opportunities available at their university, written policies they had inquired about, and financial support information.

The criteria for selection of administrator participants were that they worked in decision-making capacities, served in roles that directly impacted custodial employees, represented different levels of authority within the organization in which the majority of the custodial participants work, represented different administrative areas of the university, and were willing to commit to one ninety (90) minute interview.

Areas of the university represented in the study included: facilities, finance, student affairs, diversity, and human resources. Administrator participants, comprised of women and men, have worked in their respective capacities from one (1) to thirty (30) years.

The two individuals who were involved in the Living Wage Initiative were identified through the university's student newspaper and university archives. They were

both employees of the university who became part of a coalition comprised of local churches, civic organizations, and interested State University faculty, staff, and students. The coalition formed independent of the university but based its work on the university campus because State University is the largest employer in the community. The group led a campaign to raise awareness regarding low wage-earning workers by calling for a living wage and a commitment to the dignity and self-sufficiency of all university employees.

Data, Data Collection, Data Management

The data included interview transcriptions (transcribed from audio recordings to text), archived information, university procedural manuals, wage and policy data, field notes, and my reflexive journal. Most data were collected through interviews and archival searches. The methods of data collection are based on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985). The approach to gathering data was customized to each set of participants, as they required different treatment.

For custodial participants, the written Informed Consent was combined with an audio taped version which allowed participants to follow along. This approach preserved the dignity of participants who may have had low-literacy skills. Informants participated in three (3) 90-120-minute, semi-structured interviews. Each interview took place on separate dates, in a private room reserved on their campus, outside of their scheduled work hours. The interviews focused on the women's histories, paths to custodial work, and their lived experience as employees of State University. Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted verbally at the conclusion of each interview and each participant was offered copies of her audio recordings for review and verification.

Participants were each paid fifty (50) dollars per interview from my personal funds, bringing their total compensation for three interviews to one hundred fifty (150) dollars.

I communicated with Administrators via e-mail to invite their participation. Once they agreed to take part in the study, I phoned them to address any questions they might have and then followed-up once again via e-mail to provide them with the Informed Consent for review in advance of our meeting. Several informants, who may be characterized as “middle managers,” were compelled to obtain the permission of their supervisors prior to agreeing to participate in the study. In preparation for the interviews, I located and reviewed each of their current job descriptions, examined relevant structural, procedural, human resource, and policy decisions made during their tenure, and used this information to craft the interview protocol. Each administrator participated in one 60-90-minute, semi-structured interview that focused on their job responsibilities as well as their understandings of the role and “place” of custodial employees. These interviews took place in each of the participants’ campus offices. To facilitate member checking, an electronic copy of the transcribed interview was made available to participating administrators. Several administrators declined the opportunity to review the text, indicating a preference for reading the finished product; others received, reviewed and offered clarifications to their transcripts. One participant requested a section be deleted as a result of feelings of vulnerability and this request was accommodated without question. Though the retracted information would have enhanced understanding of the organizational and institutional culture, I do not believe its absence diminishes the overall findings.

All interviews were audio recorded with the written consent of each participant, and verbatim transcriptions were produced for analysis. I relied on a professional to transcribe audio recordings to text. Once in hand, I read each transcript while listening to the corresponding audio recording and made corrections as necessary.

I maintained a reflexive journal through which I critically reflected on the research process and myself as the research instrument, paying particular attention to my assumptions, passions, and personal commitments. The use of multiple data sources provided considerable saturation and triangulation of the data.

I used the qualitative software data management program, ATLAS.ti, to code and manage the considerable data. The program allowed for sophisticated coding techniques, the linkage of memos, and rapid retrieval of data.

Theoretical Framework

Critical feminist theory provided a guiding lens for my research. It allowed me to analyze mechanisms of power by exploring the ways in which the women's lives are mediated by systems of power and oppression such as classism, racism, sexism, and horizontal hostility. Kincheloe and McLaren (2005), in their chapter on "Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research," define a criticalist as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions:

that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or

fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness); that certain groups in any society and particular societies are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable; that oppression has many faces and that focusing on only one at the expense of the others (e.g. class oppression over racism) often elides the interconnections among them; and finally, that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender. (p. 304)

While this “criticalist as researcher” theory provides considerable analytic power, it is strengthened with the additional lens of critical feminist consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 2000; Garcia, 1997; hooks, 1994 & 2000; Hurtado, 1996; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), which allowed me to pay attention to the workings of gender and make visible the complexities of gender ideologies. It engages the “politics of empowerment” by “empowering those involved to change as well as understand the world . . . [Here, the word empowerment involves] analyzing ideas about the causes of powerlessness, recognizing systemic forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives” (Lather, 1991, p. 4.). It adds “catalytic validity” (Lather, 1993), if you will.

This project also has genealogical concerns. Genealogy as methodology allowed me to explore historical and existing power relations among the ranks of the custodial

staff as well as power relations between the custodial staff and the administration of the institution. More specifically, it allowed me to investigate issues of social regulation, discipline, surveillance, and the ways in which “classification” serves as a social marker (Foucault, 1972).

Analysis

The use of grounded theory provided a means for understanding and explaining complex experiences where existing theories are limited (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The iterative process of unitizing, constant comparison, and linking emergent categories together in theoretical models (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) produced substantive theory that emerged from the “ground” up.

Additionally, I incorporated narrative analytic techniques to monitor the text of university policies, paying attention to how they are framed and constructed on the bases of certain interests and how the writers negotiate particular webs of cultural, political, and social constraints. My goal was to critically analyze these texts and place them within social contexts (Scott, 2000).

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Overview

In this chapter I explore the lived experience of six women employed as custodial workers at State University, a Research Extensive institution located in the Southwest. These women's lives are largely unremarked and undocumented, and the ways in which their work serves to make the academy possible have been unacknowledged. The nature of the academy, the ethos and operation of State University, and the interlocking systems of classism, racism and sexism fuse together arrangements of power that simultaneously obliterate and render these women agonizingly visible through markers of marginality.

This chapter will offer detailed information about the context within which these women work, their daily responsibilities, and the meaning they assign to the work they perform. I will also discuss the indignities to which they are exposed, the impact that these and other hidden operations of power in the academy have on their lives, and the manner in which the women negotiate, internalize and resist messages of marginality.

By way of introduction, I begin with excerpts of each of the women's interviews. Passages are selected based upon the most pressing story each woman wanted to tell, as well as their relevance to the focus of the research and the key themes that flow from them. The context, culture, and systems within which they work are viewed and storied from the vantage point of women who are systemically and culturally disenfranchised, yet determined to survive.

Cleo, Martha, Juanita, Agnes, Clara, and Diane invite you to hear their stories, in their own words.

Ms. Cleo

“I Used to Like Working Out Here.”

At one o'clock on one scorching hot August afternoon in the Southwest, Ms. Cleo found herself moving swiftly toward the big, green dumpster just outside of the building she cleaned. The subtle limp of her casual pace was more pronounced as she hurried. When she reached the trash container, she slid the door open with a look and feeling of disgust. “Lord, I can't believe I'm gonna have to get in here,” she said aloud to herself. She took in one last deep breath of fresh air, held it in as if she were about to go under water, and climbed into the trash receptacle. Alternating between praying and cursing, she searched its contents. She would pick up a bag, shake it, listen for the sound of keys, and hearing none, throw it over her shoulder. Then she'd grab another and start over again. She was overwhelmed by the volume of foul-smelling trash she had to rummage through and regretted having to breathe the sour air while she was in there. Forced to take another breath, she covered her mouth with the collar of her uniform, inhaled and exhaled a few times, and then held her breath again.

Thirty minutes went by--still no keys. She was lucky that most everything was in a trash bag, but she would occasionally come across loose, nasty, sticky things: leftover bits of pizza, empty Coke cans, and random pieces of soiled paper here and there. She was focused on the task at hand until a bug rushed toward her. She screamed and tried to squish it, but it got away. She knew she had to redouble her effort because “where there's one bug, there's plenty more.” So there she was: thoroughly agitated, waist-deep in garbage, stooped over, trying not to breathe, heart racing, dripping sweat, praying and cursing, searching and digging – for keys.

One hour later, she thought she saw a red flyer she'd discarded earlier that morning, barely showing through a clear plastic trash bag. She hurried over to it, shook it and heard a jingling sound, like the sound of keys. She ripped the bag open, rifled quickly through it and, ah, her keys at last! "Thank-you-Lord!" she exclaimed. "Thank-you-Lord!" she said again, as she plucked her keys from the trash, shook them off, and held them tightly in her hand as she made her way out of the dumpster.

Cleo: I was so happy to see them keys, chile'!

I had to find 'em. I knew I had to find 'em 'cause they say, "If you lose your keys, you lose your job," and I needed this job. I had accidentally throwed 'em away. I swear I'll never do that again!

Petitt: That sounds like some ordeal. You searched for a whole hour. How come you didn't ask anybody to help you look for them?

Cleo: Chile', I didn't even think about it. Soon as I realized what I did, I went to lookin' for 'em by myself. Wasn't even thinkin' 'bout asking for no help. I'm sho' glad I found 'em.

Though Cleo vowed to never again be reckless with her keys after this mishap, as she has aged, she has grown a little forgetful. At 58, she sometimes forgets and leaves her keys in a door or on somebody's desk or on a shelf in someone's office. The building occupants who find them often joke with her when she returns to retrieve them. Dangling them high in the air in her direction, they ask, "Do these belong to you?" smiling as they hand them to her. She has even inadvertently locked her keys in certain offices, forcing her to locate her supervisor to borrow keys to retrieve her own. Her absentmindedness brings a grin to her dark, chocolate-colored face.

Cleo and I met in a building on her campus. We arrived at the same time, so together we walked toward the room that had been reserved for us. She asked how my day had been and initiated other rapport-building questions as we approached the room. I

canvassed the room quickly, attempting to visualize the space I could create for our conversation, but before I could gather my thoughts, Cleo took hold of one end of a table and said, “There, now you grab the other end, and we can move this right here and put the chairs right here.” Coincidentally, the space she identified was right next to a power source I could use for my recorder. “Perfect,” I said. As I unpacked my backpack, I noticed her place her forearm on the tabletop and use the sleeve of her uniform to wipe it clean of the tiny dust particles on its surface. She then yawned, settled into her seat, folded her arms in front of her and waited patiently for me to get situated. Cleo was not interested in the details of the Informed Consent; she didn’t want to hear the pre-recorded, audio taped version of the form and she hurried me along with a wave of her hand as I attempted to explain it to her. She reached for my pen, signed both copies, one for my files and one for her to keep, then took her copy, folded it three times and placed it in her pocket.

She recounts a complicated life that began “kinda’ on the rocky side.” She and her twelve siblings had a “good life” growing up. They were poor, but they always “ate good” because her parents made sure they grew things on the farm so they would have enough to eat and some to share with the neighbors. “When we would kill a pig, everybody ate, all of us kids, neighbors, everybody,” she said. Though she used to get whippings all the time at home, mostly for staying out “past dark” and “letting the sun catch her” or for playing around in the cotton fields and not picking her mother’s expected minimum of one hundred pounds, she loved growing up with her family and playing games with her siblings. It wasn’t until she became pregnant in the eleventh grade that she left home to be with the father of her firstborn. He showed signs of

“having a temper” early on, which she tolerated until one particular day. They were sitting in his car fighting and, when he reached over to hit her, he knocked the gear into reverse and accidentally ran over and killed their child, who had come running out of the house unbeknownst to them. She couldn’t live with him after that, so she left him for another man who, unfortunately, was violent, too. This man drove her to her knees and she found herself begging him not to shoot her with the gun he held to her temple. This pattern of seeking, finding, connecting with, and then leaving abusive men would be cyclical for Cleo, until she met and married a man twenty years her junior. This man “had some sense,” and they have a stable life together today. He does not work due to a recent disability and didn’t father any of her six children, but he “loves ‘em like they his” even though “they can be some bad-ass-children” from time to time.

By the age of eighteen, between relationships, Cleo “found herself on Welfare.” She was motivated to get a job when one day it dawned on her that if something happened to her, her kids would not be properly cared for. So she began cleaning apartments and private homes until one of her sisters “hooked her up with a good job, a job with benefits” at State University. In fact, Cleo’s sister, Nona, demanded they give Cleo a job at State University. Nona had a good rapport with a number of people, and she knew the hiring manager well enough to joke with him. “She told him, she said, ‘You better give my sister a job out here, or I’m gon’ bust you upside yo’ head with my fist’ she told him <laughter>.”

Cleo: And I’ve been out here ever since. Yeah, I been out here ‘round ‘bout twenty-eight years. A lot of my sisters worked out here, too--all and all, there was ten of us out here. Two of ‘em left away from here sick, you know, they been workin’ so long, they got back problems and leg problems and stuff.

Petitt: Do you have any problems?

Cleo: Naw. I just think my age startin' to get next to me. See, my buildin' ain't got no elevator. And after all this time in the same buildin', walkin' up and down them same stairs everyday, my legs start a botherin' me. Look like I have to drag this leg here <tugs at one of her legs> out of bed in the morning. I say, "Come on here, leg."

Petitt: Did you ever go to the doctor for that?

Cleo: Naw. Just old age, age gettin' next to me.

Petitt: And you said you've been in the same building the whole time you've worked here?

Cleo: Nearly 'bout. I have to go help in other buildin's sometimes, and I've been here and there, but mostly in my same buildin' most of the time. And if they try to move me or something, to another buildin', you know, the people in my buildin' now, they go to writin' letters to the people and stuff and askin' for them not to move me. And I don't wanna move neither. Why they gonna wanna move me after I done been in the same buildin' all these years, and my people know me and they like me?

Petitt: So you've been here for quite a while. What has it been like? What was it like when you first started working here?

Cleo: When I first started here, at first, matter of fact uhm .. we used to work at night. You know, back then we were workin' at night--we started workin' at like four in the afternoon till twelve at night.

And I liked it then. We used to be able to sit outdoors on our breaks and stuff, barbecue outside on the grills and stuff.

Didn't have all these people watchin' you and stuff, like now. Now, we can't hardly do nothin'. Folks just always watchin' everything you do.

We used to sit out there on the stoop and eat our lunch and talk, laugh, crack jokes. And we used to see some strange things goin' on at night.

Petitt: Like what, for example?

Cleo: Well, like sometimes we would see kids .. um .. these boys .. runnin' round butt naked and carryin' on.

Petitt: Really? How often did you see that happen? What do you think they were doing?

Cleo: I really .. I don't know. These students, they'll do anything just about out here. Boys just running around butt naked, their thangs be just hangin' down, danglin', and they runnin' 'round laughin', hollerin' and carryin' on. I think maybe it was .. what they call it .. uh, uh, .. initiation or somethin' like that. Then it was always some boys chasin' after the naked boys tryin' to catch 'em to throw 'em off in that water over there <laughter>. It usually be them White boys.

And this one time, uh, this one time they had drew a big ole man's thang on the sidewalk outside my buildin'. I knew it wasn't there when I came to work, so they had to do it at night when I was inside. Great, big ole man's thang and they had the nerve to draw the balls up underneath it and everything. Pretty good drawin'. And the next mornin' I had to get some soap and water and get that up 'cause somebody had called about it and said they wanted it gone right away.

Yeah, we would see some weird things at night. Like, some homeless people and stuff, but they be gone, come mornin' time.

But I liked workin' at nights better, 'cause the men would come and do your floor back then; they had men doin' the .. doin' the floor, the buffing and all that. And I liked that. And now you have to do it yourself. That's some heavy stuff for us ladies to do. And I used to have a buffer for each floor; now, they done got so cheap, I have one buffer for my whole buildin'--and I have to drag it from floor to floor. That's hard on me. Got to do everything yourself now. I liked it when they had somebody come out and do the floors and keep them shinin', but now, you got to shine 'em up yourself.

I wish a lot of things would be like they used to be back then.

Petitt: Like what?

Cleo: A lot of things. Like I said, I wish we could still work nights out here. I liked it when folks used to sit down at the table and eat together, and say grace before they eat. Nowadays, folks just eat all over the house and things. I liked it when neighbors used to share. We had good neighbors back then, and the streets was safe. I liked it when things was cheap. Like, back then, back then, an ice cream cone was like five cents. Chips was like five cents. You could go to the store and get some crackers and sausage for a quarter. You could get a lot to eat back then. Now, you can't even go to the store with that and get nothin'.

And I liked that the teachers whipped you in school if you didn't learn. They cared about you back then. These Whitefolks don't care nothin' 'bout our kids now.

Petitt: Did you ever get whipped?

Cleo: Yeah, sho' did. I got quite a few, 'cause I wasn't too smart going through school. I did pretty good in like the first grade and second grade. But when it got up to .. when we got up there in like ninth and tenth, I wasn't .. they had that algebra, and I didn't like arithmetic at all. I didn't make too good a grades in arithmetic. I used to stay at the blackboard for at least about an hour, trying to get a problem right, because I didn't know. I was just .. didn't like math at all. Matter of fact, I used to try to hide behind students' backs to try to .. so the teacher wouldn't call me up there. But she would see you tryin' to hide, and she would call you up there anyway. But I sho' did, always try to hide behind somebody back, but she would always call me up there to work a problem. And I just didn't like that. I could add good; but when it come to subtraction and multiplication, I didn't know how to do that too good. But adding was okay. But multiplying, that algebra, I didn't know nothin' 'bout that. And the teachers would hit you if you didn't get stuff right. And, I mean, we got a whippin' at school. Like spelling, like if we had a spelling test and you didn't .. you missed words and stuff, like, if you made a failing grade, we had to get in a line. We used to line up to get our whippins'. They cared.

Petitt: Did whippings help you learn?

Cleo: Showed that they cared 'bout you tryin' to learn. Black teachers back then cared 'bout kids. This teacher, the one that always called on me, she was 'round 'bout your color, she was high-yella', like you. She was a light skinned lady, [and] she cared 'bout us. These Whitefolks don't care.

But, like I say, I wish it was like that now. I think they should whip kids nowadays, too. I think that made us better kids back then. Now, folks gotta worry 'bout "child abuse." Can't hit your kids and make 'em mind no more. Shoot.

Petitt: So you miss a lot about the way things used to be. Is there anything you don't miss? Are you glad some things have changed? Like, did you experience segregation?

Cleo: Oh, yes. My mom and I, we used to go to town shopping. And we would go in and they would have a sign that said "White Only" and one that would say "Black Only," and we had to use the Black restrooms,

water fountains and things. And, like, we had to go around through the back. The Blacks had to go around through the back to get in. And, like, when you would get ready to make your order, order a hamburger or somethin' like that, we would go up there and somebody else, a White person, they might come in and they might get in front of you.

And sometimes people would just look at you all funny and stuff, scare you with they looks.

And I remember when we had to sit at the back of the bus, couldn't sit up front. Yeah, I remember those days. It was really rough. But we have rights now.

Petitt: Were you ever called the "N" word?

Cleo: Naw. I heard about folks who had that done to them. But it never happened to me.

Petitt: Have you ever experienced anything like that here at State University? Any racism or people trying to scare you with their looks?

Cleo: Naw.

Petitt: Did you ever see the "N" word scrawled on a bathroom wall or anything?

Cleo: Nope.

Petitt: So, you've worked at this university nearly thirty years and never experienced any racism at all?

Cleo: <shaking her head from side to side, her eyes fixed firmly on mine>.

Reflexive Journal note: Cleo had a strong reaction to my persistent questioning about her experience with racism. Chills went down my spine when she didn't answer after I'd probed for, I think, the fourth time. She gave me a threatening glare, one that let me know our connection could be lost if I kept pursuing the issue.

I've seen this look before in my mother's eyes. As a child, when I would press her about one thing or another, she had this way of telling me with her eyes, and slight lowering of her head, "We're done here, lil' girl." It would be enough to send me scurrying away.

Cleo's reaction suggests there is something there. Maybe it's just unsayable.

It took me a second to recover from this reprimand, but I continued, changing the subject, of course.

Petitt: So let's talk about working at State University today. What is your experience like today?

Cleo: I used to love workin' at State University. Just happy to come to work out here, but I don't now. They puttin' too much work on you now. It's hard on folks now. And then I have high blood pressure too. I'm takin' pills for that. So, I think I need to retire. I been talkin' bout looking into it, but I haven't did it yet.

And some of these folks out here, look like they get dirtier and dirtier. Some of 'em do. For the most part, I got good people in my buildin'. But this one lady, she messy. Just messy. She eats .. eats .. she likes junk food, and she .. she eats and she have crumbs all over her desk, all on the floor, all over her computer, everywhere. And I have to go get this little brush to clean her keyboard 'cause she get crumbs all off down in there. And I mean, you know, I like her, but she's very messy. And see, I have to spend more time in her office, because she got this glass .. she got this glass desktop and, you know, .. crumbs get up underneath that thing. And she'll eat, like .. uh .. eat them peanut butter crackers, or chips and then she got them all over. Sometimes she'll eat fruit and the juice from the fruit be all over her desk, and I got to clean that up. She just messy.

And like, most of the time, like if I have to get down on my knees to clean up her mess, like, most of the time if I find a penny or a dime or somethin' like that in the offices, I'll put it on they desk. But like in her office, if I be down there on my knees cleaning up after her messy self and, like if I find a penny or some little change, sometimes I think about keeping that. That oughta' be my tip for her being so doggone messy. I guess I spend 'round 'bout, at least fifteen minutes on her desk by itself every day.

And she just built a house last year .. no .. year before last or somethin' like that. A brick house. I can just imagine. I say, "Oh, Lord, I wonder do she keep her house like she do this office?" Because she bad, man. I say one time I'm just gon' drive 'round her house and see if it be as messy as she keep it up here <laughter>. I'm surprised she ain't got rats up under her desk.

Petitt: <Laughter>.

Cleo: Yeah, she somethin' else, that lady there.

Petitt: What is her ethnicity? I'm just curious.

Cleo: She a Black lady. A Black lady.

Petitt: How about the other people in your building?

Cleo: Most of 'em treat me pretty good.

But there was this one time, this guy .. well .. he come from another buildin'. Anyway, he was new when he came to my buildin', and I know I do a good job every day. I know myself I do a good job, but he came in with a lil' attitude. He wanted his office vacuumed every day, and he wanted things done like this and like that and don't move none of his things .. and he started complainin' about "this wasn't done" and all like that. And I just got a lot of complaints from him, and I mean I .. I .. got to the point that I was just really upset. And they would tell me "Don't worry," they said, "Don't worry about him."

And then one day something .. uh .. this lamp had got broke in his office. It wasn't me. I was off work when it happened and he accused me of it. I was so mad at him. And he wanted another lamp. He want another lamp, wanted them to buy him another lamp, but they didn't buy him 'nare. So he was lookin' at me all funny and strange and stuff. So I just ignored him till he sort of come around and got to know me and stuff, you know.

Like this other day, like last week, they was fixin' to go somewhere and he .. he had on a pretty suit, so I said, "Oh, I sure like your suit." He said, "Thank you, I need to wear it more often." But it was a pretty suit, it was striped, I think it was like brown, but it was pretty. So I just tried to make conversation just to see what his reaction was gon' be. And he say, he was jokin' with me, and he said, "It's not the suit, it's the man, it's the person in the suit," like that.

But he comin' around, you know, when he see what kind of person I am, you know. I'm a real nice person. He see I'm always up there talkin' to them ladies and stuff, and just laughin' and going on, so he see that, too.

But I try to keep .. I keep his office clean, you know. I make sure you don't see nothin' on the floor when I go in his office. I make sure I don't see nothin' on his floor--I make sure his office is real clean when I leave up out of there, but I don't have no problem with him now.

Petitt: So, you have a good relationship with the other people, for the most part?

Cleo: Yeah. I got nice people in my buildin'. There's some that hardly leave me any trash.

They all right, but some people, they just look at you mean. They, like, you know, just like if they have a trash can up under their desk, you know, and it's hard to get to, they act like they don't want to move so you can get it .. so you can get to they trash .. and they won't hand it to you. You know, most people will say, "Oh, am I in your way?" and they'll move or give it to you. This one lady, I got one lady in my .. in my buildin' that--she ain't been in my building too long--when I go to get her trash, she kind of in my, you know, she'll just sit there and she sees I'm trying to get her trash, you know, [but] she won't try to move. She'll make me have to reach over her.

Petitt: Do you ever ask her to move?

Cleo: Naw. I just reach over her and get the trash can.

Petitt: Does she acknowledge you or does she sort of ignore you?

Cleo: She sometimey. She real sometimey. She'll speak to you sometimes if she feel like it and sometimes she won't. She very sometimey. I used to clean her house, too. But sometimes I can walk in there to get her trash, and she'll be sitting there and I'm goin' to get her trash and I'll say, "Good morning." She'll never say a word.

Petitt: What do you think that's about?

Cleo: I don't know if her mind be .. if she got her mind on what she doing or what. I don't know. She ain't got no kids. She got a husband. But I used to clean her house--and she got this cat--and she only paid me like twenty-five dollars to clean her whole house. Just twenty-five dollars for that whole, big 'ole house.

But most people treat me pretty good. They give me a good Christmas. They give me bonus money, gifts and stuff.

Petitt: What, specifically, do you get? Like what are the gifts and how much money?

Cleo: Oh, I get good money 'round Christmas. Like they take up a collection and they put it in a card. Like, this one time I got 'round two hundred dollars. And this other time, I got, like three hundred dollars. Like, sometimes, they'll give it to me all in one card where everybody pitch in. But sometimes, like, certain people give me little envelopes with money in 'em, and they add up. I get scarves, flowers, little candles, and

things. Yeah, they give me a good Christmas, most of 'em do, and I look forward to that every year.

Petitt: Do you ever give them anything?

Cleo: Naw. I don't give them nothin', just give them a good attitude .. smile every day <laughter>.

Petitt: <Laughter>. That's good enough. So, in general, how do you feel about working here? Do you enjoy your job? Is it a good place to be?

Cleo: It used to be. Like I said, I used to love working here. But not no more. I cuts corners now. They done put too much extra work on you. We work hard out here, and they ain't payin' us much a nothin'. Like right now, I just make 'round nine somethin' and I been here almost thirty years.

And look at what they payin' the coach out here and how much the president make. Look at all that money they got, and they won't .. they don't give us nothing .. nothing but more work.

I guess they don't realize how much harder we work nowadays. One time a year, they'll call us all together and have some little food and stuff, and say, "Ya'll doin' such a good job." But they ain't .. they ain't showin' it. I think we need .. I think everybody .. I think all of us custodians need a raise.

Petitt: How much do you think you should be making?

Cleo: 'Round 'bout, at least twelve dollars an hour, at least, for as long as I been workin' out here.

Till 'bout three years ago, I had two jobs. I used to clean houses and apartments. I liked that because it was good money. And when I cleaned the apartments, I would find lots of stuff. These rich kids out here, they just go off and just leave stuff, you know? I found lots of stuff: soap, tissue, a lot of housecleaning stuff, brooms, good mops. And I liked that. And plus sometimes they would leave like change, a lot of change in them drawers, you know? Dimes, pennies, lots of pennies and dimes. And I found a barbecue pit one time.

Now, with my leg, I can't do it no more. I think it's from climbing these stairs out here all these years. My buildin' ain't got no elevator. Now, I still work some events, like if the students have big parties and like, if they offer to pay money for people to go help them clean up afterwards, or games and stuff where they need people to take tickets--I do that

every now and then for extra change. But I can do that when I want to-- it ain't like no second job I have to show up for, you know. They need to pay us more money out here.

But I think they need to get some more people out here too, 'cause it's bad now. Like, they say we ain't 'sposda get trash every day, but that's hard on me .. hard on all us custodians. I mean like, we used to take all the trash out every day, you know but now they say, don't go in the office every day. See now, they say the people in the offices .. the .. the secretaries supposed to take out they trash and put it in the big trash can outside in the hall. But half the time they don't do it, and if they do, it don't be right. They don't change the bag in the trash can. Like, I'll put a bag in the bottom of the trash can, you know, for them to change it. Sometimes they just get their bag out and don't put another one in there; then they just go to puttin' trash in there with no bag in it, [and] then I have to take and wash that whole trash can. Just more work on me. So I still take out my trash and dust my offices every day, but I just don't let my supervisor know it. But I cuts corners and take shortcuts in some other places to make up for it, 'cause it's just too much work now.

Petitt: When did that change happen, and why did it happen, do you know?

Cleo: Wasn't too long ago they told us that, said it had somethin' to do with the budget .. cuts or something.

And now, you have to go help out in other buildin's, too, a lot more. We got less people now, and some people call in sick all the time, mostly the Spanish ladies. They call in sick all the time, and they don't even bother 'bout givin' no good excuse no more. They'll just call and say, "I'm sick." Now, what kinda' excuse is that? "I'm sick." That's all they'll say. "I'm sick."

So, you got to do your buildin', then go out and help out in somebody else buildin'. You know, you have to rush back and do what you got to do in your own area, and you don't know what you might run into, you know, might have a lot of trash, you know. So you never know. Somebody mighta' done made a big mess on the floor you got to vacuum and, you know--so you never know what's in your area when you go in there. So I take short cuts, short as I can. You have to look out for yourself, too.

Cleo is looking out for herself. Though she hates the thought of leaving "her" building and "her" people, she is considering submitting a building transfer request so she can be in a building with an elevator; her leg may not withstand the stairs much longer.

She finds joy in singing and praising the Lord and dreams of one day, “before she leaves here,” being blessed with a good, plank house: “it don’t have to be brick--it can be a nice, comfortable plank house, where it can be warm on the inside when it’s wintertime outdoors and cool on the inside when it’s hot outdoors, you know, central heatin’ and coolin’.”

Martha

“I’m *Still* Here, Thank You Very Much!”

Petitt: Let’s talk now about what it might be like for you to have a conversation with the university president. If you had an opportunity to talk to him about changes you would like to see that may improve the quality of your work life, how do you imagine that conversation would go?

Martha: <Laughter. More laughter. More laughter, still. Laughter so intense, the only audible sound is of her wheezing and gasping for breath. Laughter-filled tears flow from her eyes>.

Petitt: <Laughter>.

Martha: Whoo. Oh, Honey. That’s a good one. <Laughter>. I hadn’t laughed that hard in a long time. That’s a good one. Whoo. Thank you. I needed a good laugh at the end of my day. That’s a good one, I tell you.

Petitt: I take it you believe a conversation with the university president is highly unlikely?

Martha: Yeah. I’m not that important to him. He doesn’t care about me. I’m just Custodial.

I don’t have a PhD or anything. I’m not ever going to get one, which is fine. But they act like the faculty are more important than anything else, but they don’t actually run the university. It’s the staff that runs the place. And you need them.

We count. We matter.

We’re just as good as the faculty. Why are they more important? They’re not. They’re just people. They may have more education and stuff than we do, but that’s all. Some people, you know, they’ve got education, but they’re dumber than stumps. Some of them are.

But the president talk to me <laughter>? That would be the day. It'd be nice but, no, I don't think he'd ever do it. We're not that important to him. I know where his office is and stuff. I know what he looks like. I've seen him.

This one time I saw a Vice President out on campus though. He was, like, getting a Coke or something from one of the Coke machines, and I stopped and talked to him. Well, no. He was just there one day, and I was about to talk to him because he wasn't dressed in a suit and stuff and I didn't recognize who he was at first. But when I noticed who he was, I was going, "What's he doing, you know, down here?"

Petitt: Did you speak to him after all?

Martha: Nah. Didn't want to bother him.

Petitt: Okay. Let's go back to the possible conversation with the university president.

Martha: Oh, the imaginary one? Okay. What you got for me?

Petitt: If you had the opportunity to talk to him about things you would change to improve your work life, what would that conversation look like?

Martha: This is a pure imaginary conversation, 'cause it'll never happen. But I'll play along.

I'm going to tell him, I said, "Read your *Building the Future* document that you wrote out. Read it. Go back over it.

Use it like the amendments and stuff that go to the Constitution." I said, "That values people. It tells them that they're important. It gives them rights and, like, kind of puts them into being. Use that."

If he's going to use the *Building the Future* document, that should work for everything and everybody. Use it for everybody, not just for a few.

I'd like to be treated equal. It's supposed to be for everyone. So, I'm an everyone. I'm not just some inanimate object. I'm not. I matter.

Petitt: So, you tell him, "Use the *Building the Future* document you wrote," and what would he say then? How would he respond?

Martha: <Laughter>. He probably wouldn't even be listening.

Petitt: No?

Martha: No. I don't think so.

Petitt: You think he'd just be sitting in front of you pretending?

Martha: Yes. Some of the presidents and stuff that we've had have always been like that. They are not listening to you. You're, well, I'm not that important to him. I'm not.

Petitt: Talk a little more about that.

Martha: What more you want me to give you? Like I said, I don't think he would be listening, and he doesn't care. I'm not that important, Becky, not to him.

Petitt: You don't think you're important to him because he shows that he values other people more or what?

Martha: Yeah. That's what I'm saying. He values them more. And they're not any more valuable, not really.

I'll tell you. It just looks like that because of all this shuffling we've been doing for the longest. I mean, a lot of the offices have been moved. I mean, lots and lots of shuffling. You've shuffled people around a lot in the last couple of years, about the last two years. And you know, that's scary, you know.

Petitt: The shuffling suggests what?

Martha: You think, "Well, what else are they gonna' do? Who's gonna' be next? What are they gonna' do to me?" And why are they doing all of this shuffling anyway? Why are we doin' it in the first place? After a while you think, "Well, what else are they going to do? What else are they going to get rid of?" And you read the student newspaper sometimes and there's headlines for he's done this and he's going to do this, and this is going to happen, and you're going, "Oh, okay." It gets kind of scary after a while. And you're thinking, "What else are they going to do to us?"

And nobody tells us nothin' around here. We just sorta' find out through the grapevine. They don't tell us nothin'.. or we're the last thing .. the last group to find out.

And we keep hearing rumors that they are going to contract out Custodial too. You've been hearing that over the years. The garages,

they're already contracted out. They're not ours. We don't even own them anymore. And we hear they may contract us out. And it's scary. It is.

It's like we're not valuable. I mean, to me, I'm valuable. To me I am but, you know, some people don't think that we are as a group. We're not very valuable as a group. Not unless something gets screwed up or something and they need us to come clean up right away. You know, they think that they don't need that group, or they're not very important, but people are important. God made us for a reason.

Petitt: How does that affect you – for people to treat you like you are not valued?

Martha: I think they just don't know me very well. I consider it like that. I think, "Well, they don't know me very well, and they're never going to get to," because they've never sat down and talked to me. They act like I'm not there.

Petitt: People act like you're not there?

Martha: Yeah. I know a few people that do, and that's fine. They just kind of ignore you.

I don't even worry about them anymore. I used to. It used to make me so damned mad! Now, I say, "To heck with them."

Petitt: Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Martha: You know, they act like you're just there for them and you're going, "Like heck I am!" You've got people like that. Everybody does. You've got a few people in your life that just think that, you know, you're not worth, you know, two cents.

Petitt: Does it make you feel any less about yourself?

Martha: Sometimes it does. You think, "Damn. You know, I am a person. Act like I am. Act like I'm here <crying>."

You want to kick them sometimes and tell them, I said, "I'm still here, thank you very much!"

Like, they don't want you unless something gets screwed up or maybe sometimes, like, if they need you for a picture or something.

Petitt: People have asked you to pose for pictures?

Martha: Just this one time. I think they just wanted this one politician to have a Custodial person in his picture and we got called over for it. That was the only time.

Petitt: What was the occasion? Do you recall?

Martha: No. I don't remember exactly. He was republican, so I didn't really care. I don't vote republican anyway. Once though, once I got cute. When we heard this dignitary was coming, I decided .. we were cleaning off the rafters 'cause this dignitary was coming .. he was fixin' to dedicate a new building. And I decided that I was going to do some special cleaning. I was trying to detail clean the outside of the building, and I accidentally fell. Didn't get hurt though, but it was pretty funny. Especially since he only passed through <swoosh> and was in and out in under thirty minutes .. him and all his security people.

Petitt: So you do special cleaning when dignitaries come?

Martha: Yeah. We do some special things to make the building look nice. They put new siding out front. They just did all kinds of things. It looked real nice. He came through my building and I saw him and I thought, "Oh crap, I know who that guy is." And he only came through about <swoosh> thirty minutes tops, and he was gone.

And it wasn't nothin' but a bunch of republicans. He went to the uhm .. some school events, and lots of people came out to see him. And you know there's .. there's lots of people there, and most of them would know who he was. So he gave a speech. And, you know, when they come here, they get a lot of votes. That's how he got in office. Well, that helped.

We bring a lot of foreign visitors, too. So you sort of expect to do extra work when they come. We've had a lot of important people, and sometimes I see them. One time we had a former President here this one time, and I was .. I was in there for something like checking to make sure all the trash cans, you know, were empty and the bathrooms were still in good shape and stuff because he was coming, and I saw him.

Petitt: You were assigned to that area that night?

Martha: It was my building. We get this sheet that tells us what's happening in which room, at a certain time and things, you know, so you don't walk in on stuff and stuff. I like having that. It helps me out. You don't walk in on the middle of things. I hate doing that. If you do, they lose their train of thought and everything, and they get embarrassed, you get

embarrassed, yuck. And they've only got, like, a certain amount of time to do their meeting, and that's all they've got. So, you don't do that.

But, yeah, I had that sheet so that's how I knew when he was coming and where he was going to be.

Petitt: So did you go by on purpose?

Martha: No. I was just checking things to make sure everything was nice for him. We get a lot of important people out here. A lot of 'em, I would like to go see, but I'm usually working when they come. Sometimes I get to see what they look like when I walk past, you know, checking bathrooms and stuff.

I see 'em but I don't stop and talk or anything 'cause, you know, they're busy, and the kids bring them out. And that's theirs. And I need to get back where I belong.

They have a lot of little events and things. And I like that because you can learn a lot of things.

Petitt: Like what?

Martha: Well, I've learned things from working for State University because I've .. I've done .. I got to thinking about that the other day because we do things here I've never known about before, like Harvest Moon stuff. We've done Chinese New Year. I've done a Turkish celebration. I've .. we've done a Muslim wedding. Done an Indian wedding one year, and that was cool. That was different. And one time we had this one event where they were .. they had, like, the Sarong on and stuff and they were all gold-flecked. They were real pretty and real colorful. They used the stage in there, and they had flowers and plants and stuff. It was real nice. And they decorated and everything. It was pretty.

Petitt: So, you just observe these things going on in the course of your daily work?

Martha: Well, kind of. We peek in the doors every now and then. We do our work, but we go peek and see what they're doing 'cause sometimes they're doing stuff we've never seen before and you can learn from that.

Martha is passionate about learning and committed to being skilled at doing and being "more than just one thing." She embraces new challenges and enjoys meeting new people, though one would have good reason to doubt this claim upon first meeting her.

When I initially made Martha's acquaintance, I located her in the building in which she works, guided by a vague physical description and a hand-drawn map directing me to the general area she was assigned to clean on this particular day. I found her immediately—kneeling on the floor, bracing her weight with one hand and scraping something from the floor's surface with the other. "Are you Martha?" I ask. Turning her head to look up at me with a furrowed brow, upturned lip and all, her facial expression said: "Yeah! What do *you* want?", as she looked me up and down. What she actually said though, through slightly labored breathing, caused by her rising to her feet, was: "Yeah. I'm Martha. What can I do for you?" She seemed tense, as if she anticipated an unpleasant encounter.

Petitt: I'd like to know if you would be interested in participating in my dissertation research. I would want to talk to you about what it's like to work at State University and ..

Martha: <interrupting> Well, tell me a little bit more about what you need. And if there's a chance I could get in trouble and get fired or something, you can forget about it. I've worked too hard to get this job and to keep my job. And I would have to be .. you would have to make sure you don't use my name and I get to say what I want to say. You can't make me talk about stuff I don't want to talk about. And we'd have to meet somewhere else. Not here. I'll let you tell me a little more about it, but I gotta' get this doggone gum up first! My break is in just a few minutes. Why don't you come back then? Or you can sit over there and wait for me, and I'll come find you when I'm ready.

Petitt: Um, okay. How about I wait for you over here?

Taken slightly aback by her assertiveness, as I waited, I mentally rehearsed the next thing I would say to her to encourage her participation. I also wrote a condensed version of the encounter. The note began:

Field note: This is different. There's something unusual, yet familiar about Martha's energy . . . I wonder if I can establish a connection with her and whether or not she'll make a good informant?

She returned within fifteen minutes and, after receiving acceptable responses to her remaining questions, agreed to participate in the study. Her deportment during our initial meeting turned out to be a defining characteristic. Martha was strong-willed, clear about her boundaries, and unafraid to speak her mind. She “owned” the interview process—and herself. She led me where she wanted to go, at her pace, and on her terms:

Petitt: Okay. The first thing I’d like to do is go over the Informed Consent form with you. If you’d like, I have a tape-recorded version of it that you can follow along with. If ..

Martha: <interrupting> I can read it for myself, thank you very much!

Petitt: Great. I’ll give you a few minutes to read over it, and I’ll address any questions you have once you’re done. Oh, I forgot to mention, I’ll need you to sign two copies of the form. One for you to keep and one for my files. Here’s a pen ..

Martha: <interrupting> I’ve got my own pen. I don’t need that one. I’m good, kid.

Petitt: Now that you’ve finished reading it, do you have any questions?

Martha: No. Everything’s pretty clear. I want to read the thing when you’re done to see how it comes out. Make sure you don’t use my real name, now. I don’t want to go and get fired after working out here all these years. Let me know when you’re done with it, and I know how to go look for it and find it to read.

Now, what do you wanna’ know?

A 52 year-old White woman, born and raised in the city where she now works and resides, Martha enjoys being knowledgeable, self-sufficient, and capable, especially when it comes to “running her own life.” Indeed, she also has a way of conveying that she matters and is not to be taken for granted.

On this day, a Saturday, she wore cutoff blue jean shorts, frayed at the knee, a faded t-shirt, and sneakers. Her blonde hair was secured at the back of her head with a

plain rubber band, her ruddy facial skin was make-up free and she wore a large sports watch that had a conspicuous ticking sound. I noticed it every time she raised her hand to her mouth to bite her fingernails and then flick the tiny trimming from her tongue onto the floor.

I followed Martha's lead through sometimes protracted detours away from the purpose of my study. Nevertheless, she offered powerful accounts of her experience as an employee of State University. "It took me a while to land a job here," she said. "But I got here as fast as I could. I've had a lot of jobs and did a lot of different things before I got this one. And that's good. It's good to be more than just one thing," she continued. Martha's father enforced the "school or job rule." "You either go to school or get you a job,' daddy said." Martha did both. But she went to work first, mostly in restaurants. She waited and bused tables, washed dishes, and became a prep-cook, a short-order cook, and a grill cook. She worked on an assembly line, kept restaurants clean, and stocked supplies. She was "a little bit of everything and each job required a specific skill." Then, she thought she would try something different; she went to work at a hospital as a Nurse's Aide.

Petitt: What was it like being a Nurse's Aide?

Martha: I liked it. I learned a lot. I learned how to do some of those things and that's good 'cause, you know, you need things you can, you know, that you can do, instead of just being one thing.

I'm a little like my sister, Carolyn. She was always independent. She left home first. She did everything. If she'd 'a been a guy, she'd be perfect.

Petitt: Hmm. Can you say more about that?

Martha: Geez. That sounds kinda' sexist, doesn't it? But you know how guys are always more outgoing and stuff. Carolyn was like that, and I got a little bit of that, too. But I wasn't too good at it.

Petitt: At what?

Martha: Well, I was good at being a Nurse's Aide, but then I decided I wanted to go to school .. to nursing school.

Petitt: What was that like?

Martha: Different. OB was not fun. I hated it. I hated just about everything. We had to write papers on the people and stuff. This one woman, oh my gosh. She, like, lived, like, in the back woods. Had no idea, you know? She had a bunch of kids, didn't know a whole lot of stuff, the woman didn't, gosh. Makes you wonder sometimes. You think, "My gosh, how do these people get along in this world?"

Yeah. That was an experience. I left there and went back to work at the Diner.

Petitt: What made you leave nursing?

Martha: I kept flunking <laughter>. I was .. they had some .. the teachers around there, some of them were not .. didn't even have Masters degrees or anything like that. They were going .. they were .. it was kind of like, you know, teaching as they went to school, too. Some of them weren't the best.

Petitt: So, you believe you weren't successful because you didn't have good instruction?

Martha: Well, some of that and some of it was me. I flunked OB, and that screwed it. But some of that stuff, I mean, you had the .. you know, it seemed like you had to take, well, like, a lot of hours and stuff and sometimes that's kind of scary and stuff. And you may not be kind of like, you know. You think, you know, you got enough stuff and stuff, like, and that can be scary, too. So, I went back to the Diner.

Petitt: The same Diner you worked at just before becoming a Nurse's Aide?

Martha: Yep. Same place.

Petitt: And then what?

Martha: Here.

Petitt: How'd you get the job here?

Martha: Golly, honey, do you know how hard it is to get a job out here? My husband's mother worked out here a long time ago as a secretary, and she got me on. My husband works here in Custodial too. Both of them were out here before I was. It's reasonably hard to get a job out here. It takes a while. You kind of, like, you got to know somebody.

Petitt: How do you like working here?

Martha: It's okay. I've been doing it for quite a while. Sometimes I'd like to do something different, but I need some more education to do the other things <laughter>. And I don't have that. But it's still a pretty good job, and it is. I mean, I've got decent hours. I get paid. Me and my husband are doing alright financially.

Petitt: Talk a little more about that – your financial situation.

Martha: Well, we're, you know, we're okay. I can make the payments and stuff, and sometimes we pay things ahead of time to get the interest down. We looked into refinancing our house when the interest rates started dropping and stuff. We said, "Well, let's see what it would cost us to refinance the stupid thing." You know, what would the notes be, what it would run us. Turns out it was a good idea 'cause it was cheaper.

But, see, some people, they never think about doing things like that. And they don't do things like pay ahead of time because they're kind of like, "Oh, they might get mad at me," and I think, "Well, to heck with it. What if they do? It ain't gonna' hurt. I'm not hurting them." It's just showing them that I'm taking an interest in things that affect me, you know, things that we can help out or make them where they're a little better for us. We're the ones paying the bills!

You know, you just have to kind of save up. And then I can go in there and go, "Well, this is what I've got. What are you going to do for me?" You can, you know, have the cash and you can go, "Well, this is what I'm going to pay for it."

Petitt: That's smart.

Martha: Oh, honey! I'm not my dad's daughter for nothing. You save up for things and, you know, you'll have the money or at least you'll have half of it. You can go, "Well, I've got this amount. What are you going to do for me?"

Cash works.

I mean, just because you're a girl doesn't mean that you don't know things and can't get things. They kind of go for the guys first, unfortunately. But they don't realize that the women have the money <laughter>.

I watch the Suze Orman thing 'cause you can learn a lot from watching that. But I was doing a lot of those things before I started watching her though. You know, like, you pay off your highest credit card first. You work toward paying that off, which I've already done. Then you work down from there to the next one. I just pay them a little extra every so often. See, I'm not totally <motions empty headedness> just because I'm a girl.

Petitt: So, would you say you are comfortable financially? Do you earn enough to meet your needs?

Martha: Well, I have money in the bank. That's pretty good, so that's okay. I got me a savings account, too. I could make a little more, but I'm fine. Never got a merit raise. I've got a few state-mandated increases though, but those aren't that much. I used to get upset about the way money works around here and I'd fuss a little, but I keep my mouth shut now. Doesn't do any good, and you can wind up in lots and lots of trouble.

Petitt: So what do you do with your frustration? Where does it go?

Martha: I just mumble for a while to myself. Sometimes I'll get mad and frustrated, and it makes me want to just, you know, you want to sit there and just strangle them. When I first started working here, I was a lot more vocal with them. I got mad and stuff. But I'm not so much anymore. I've kind of, you know, got where I don't say much anymore. I just keep it to myself now.

Petitt: What caused you to change how you dealt with your frustration?

Martha: Working here. You learn to keep quiet.

Petitt: Can you say more about that?

Martha: Don't care to.

Petitt: Okay. I understand. We're actually at a good stopping place. Is there anything more you want to share before we wrap up for the day?

Martha: Nah.

Petitt: Then I'd like to pay you for today's interview.

Martha: Geez, Becky. That sure is a lot of money. Fifty whole dollars for just an hour and a half? That's too much money. Do you have to give me another fifty dollar bill? You got anything smaller? Can you break it?

Petitt: I remembered you were uncomfortable about the fifty dollar bill last time I paid you, so I brought smaller bills today. I have three ten dollar bills and four five dollar bills for you.

Martha: That's better. Fifty dollars still just seems like a lot of money to me. And a fifty dollar bill at that. I don't see those very much. I know it seems odd.

Though Martha was uncomfortable with the amount of remuneration and the fifty dollar denomination, I suspect she has a plan for exactly how she will use this income to her advantage. Having been raised by parents who own rental properties and sizeable land plots, Martha understands a few things about money: that you have to work hard to earn it, that you must spend it wisely, and that having it creates opportunities. She is "good with her money."

Martha's feelings of marginality and invisibility have not dampened her ambition. She is driven to do and become more. Having been a Custodial Worker II for several years, her sights are set on becoming a Custodial Worker III and eventually an Assistant Supervisor. She will stop short of becoming a full Supervisor because it is "just too big of a headache." She has been told she needs stronger supervisory skills to qualify for promotion, but formal continuing education opportunities are beyond her reach. Martha was informed that employee education classes like "Supervisory Training" and "Leadership Development" would require time away from her work day, which is discouraged, and money to support her enrollment, which the University does not have available to invest in employee development. So, to learn the requisite skills to move up

in the organization, she watches her supervisor's day-to-day work habits—again peeking from the margins—and makes an effort to emulate those behaviors as she hopes to be seen, valued, and duly rewarded.

Juanita

“I Was Born to Clean.”

“Ring, ring, ring.”

Petitt: Hello?

Juanita: Hello, Ms. Becky. This is Juanita. I am just calling to confirm our appointment tomorrow. You wanted to meet at one o'clock, right?

Petitt: Right.

Juanita: And you are gonna come to me, right? And we are gonna meet in Room 100 of the [Scott] Building. Right?

Petitt: You've got it. That's correct. I'll see you then and there. Thank you for calling to confirm.

Juanita: And you're really gonna pay me for this?

Petitt: Yes. Fifty dollars for each interview.

Juanita: Okay. So we're gonna start right at one o'clock, right? And I'll be done no later than two thirty, right?

Petitt: Right. I won't keep you longer than an hour and a half.

Juanita: Okay. Good. I'm just asking because I have to go to my second job after we're done.

Petitt: I'll bring a watch to be sure we wrap up in time.

Juanita: Okay. See you tomorrow. Bye.

Petitt: Great. Bye.

I showed up early to our meeting destination the next day, and Juanita was already there waiting for me. We had agreed to meet on her campus shortly after she was

done with her work for the day there. I noticed she wasn't wearing her uniform and made a mental note to ask about that later. She wore polyester pants, a colorful shirt, dangling earrings that moved when she talked, and a gold necklace with a charm, a heart, hanging on it. She also wore make-up: mascara, blue eye shadow, deep red lipstick, and a tiny bit of rouge on her cheeks. She is over sixty but looks like she may be forty. Her beautiful peanut-colored skin glows on the outside and appears to be a reflection of the bright, happy spirit within. She smiles easily and has a captivating personality – one that takes you by surprise, as it emanates from this tiny-framed woman who appears to be barely four feet tall. She is guarded in her responses at times. After our first interview, I jotted the following in my Reflexive Journal: *“Juanita seemed unwilling to share deeply. I'm concerned she is not going to let me know her.”* But she did open up. I had misinterpreted her “down to business – and quickly” manner as somewhat unengaged. Now, I think she was focused on responding to my questions, honoring our time together, and getting on with the rest of her work day. She didn't have time for extra.

Juanita: I was born in Mexico a little over 60 years ago. And my parents, they are farmers; they are still with me, still living. I have six siblings. I'm the oldest one. I'm the only one here in the US. Everybody else is still in Mexico. I had a good life in Mexico. We didn't have a big house; we had only two rooms--one where we slept and the other was the kitchen. We kids slept three to one bed. We were poor people. On the farm, my daddy used a horse. Our neighbors had a tractor. But all we had was a horse to help with the land. We were not rich, but we didn't complain because we always had something to eat. Always food, every day, you know. Because a lot of people didn't have nothing to eat or they didn't have chickens. We always had meat. We didn't eat meat every day. We had to save some. Sometimes we would have only beans and tortillas, but most of the time we had meat. We had it better than some people. Some people didn't have no food at all. We also had a lot of fruit and vegetables. Squash, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, cilantro, peppers, corn, mangoes, avocados and papayas, oranges, a lot of things. My son asked me one time, “Mommy, why my Abuelos (grandparents) don't ever get old? They always look the same age as when I saw them

last time.” And I tell him I think it’s because of the fresh food they eat from the land. Over here we eat processed. I’m lazy now, too. At home, they make fresh mole (spicy Mexican dish) from scratch. Now, I buy “mole de Doña Maria” <laughter>. She already has it fixed for me; I just add my chicken and stuff <laughter>.

But, yeah, we were poor people. We never had two or three pair of shoes growing up--we had one pair. And when they were not so good, we fixed them up until my mother could buy new ones. We didn’t have money, but we were rich because we had a lot of love – enough love.

Petitt: How did you know you were loved?

Juanita: My mother would always talk to me and buy us special treats and make special food for us. At Christmas, we didn’t get big presents, but sometimes she would buy, like, a doll, or something for the hair. And when the people from the city would come selling, like, popcorn or different cookies, she would always buy stuff like that for us. I remember one time I loved the cookies they would sell, like, what do you call them here? The chocolate, like .. the Oreo cookies, that’s it. And, you know, she would buy, like, maybe a pound or two pounds, and she would divide them for us kids. She would say, “This is for you and this many for you,” like that, and I always complained because I wanted more. I usually didn’t mind sharing with my sisters and brothers--I shared everything. But when it came to this cookie, I didn’t like to share. I loved these cookies, and I was never happy with what she gave me. I always complained because I wanted her to buy more.

So one time she bought more and it was a lot, and she sat me at the table and said, “Here, eat. Don’t go nowhere until you finish them all.” She said, “Because you’re never happy with what you get.” And I had to sit there until I finished every cookie, and I got sick. I don’t like them now.

And now I’m not greedy. Now I know to be happy with what I have and not to ask for too much.

Petitt: Talk a little about school. What was school like for you?

Juanita: Oh, I loved school. I really liked language. Maybe I . . . maybe I really liked my language teacher. I had a crush on him. He was so handsome. My mother told me I was listening to too many Novellas (soap operas) on the radio, and I needed to focus on my school. But I was crazy about this man. I brought him oranges, mangos, any little fresh fruit that was growing at the time and I wanted my mother to invite him to dinner because he lived in the city and he just came to the old town to teach. People would have him over for dinner, and I wanted my mother to

make mole for him because mole is a special dish. I hated to leave his grade.

And I had a pretty good life over there, except when I got through with sixth grade. I wanted to go to junior high and, in the old town where I lived, school only went up to the sixth grade. And I was scared to finish sixth grade because I didn't know what I was going to do next, because we didn't have no relatives who lived in the city or nothing. So I didn't know what I was going to do.

Petitt: What did you do?

Juanita: I found a lady in the city. She was looking for somebody to take care of her boy. And I asked her if I could take care of her baby in the morning and go to school in the afternoon, and she said, "Okay, yeah, that's fine." So I moved to the city to take care of her boy so I could finish junior high and high school.

Petitt: So you moved away from your family?

Juanita: Yeah, not too far. My mother would come and get me on the bus on the weekends so I could go home to visit.

Petitt: Was that a hard decision for you?

Juanita: Not really. This was the only chance I had to finish school. My mother went with me to talk to her and look around . . . look around the house, and she said "Ok, if this is what you want, you can do it." So I did.

Petitt: And did you just take care of the child or did you do other things around the house as well?

Juanita: I did everything. I cooked, I cleaned, I took care of the boy, and the kids that came later . . . made sure they did their homework.

Petitt: So you were like a Nanny as well as a housekeeper?

Juanita: I guess you could say that. But they treated me like family. I love the kids. The first boy I was with the longest, he says I am like a second mother to him, and he still calls me all the time on like my birthday and mother's day.

Petitt: What was their ethnicity?

Juanita: Well, the mother is Mexican, the father is White, and I guess that means the kids are mixed. Over there we spoke only Spanish, but the daddy

wanted the kids to learn English. He had family here in the US and he wanted the kids to go to college in the US, so they wanted to move over here and they asked me to come with them. I was in the eleventh grade. I was almost finished with school, and so I didn't want to come at first. But they kept asking me and asking me, "Please, Juanita, we need you, please come with us." So I talked to my mother about it, and she said it was my decision. I was old enough to decide for myself. She told me "You decide. Maybe you'll have a better life over there. If you don't like it, you can always come back home." And I was thinking about it and I lived half my life with them and I consider them like my family, so I said "Yes." But I said two things. I said, "I want to finish school over there and I want you to fix the papers so I can go over legally," because I didn't want to be scared all the time. I wanted them to fix the papers so I could do it the right way. So that's how I ended up here.

Petitt: What was it like leaving Mexico to come here? Was it hard?

Juanita: It wasn't hard. It might have been hard if I came alone, but when you come with somebody you know, you know you have them by your side.

Petitt: Talk about learning English.

Juanita: The kids learned English and, at first, I didn't want or um .. need to learn English. If I ever needed to go to town or something, I just took the kids with me. I didn't really need to learn it till I had my own kids and had to take them to the doctor or something.

Petitt: So how did you learn English?

Juanita: I went to a little program they have for people who want to take classes to learn English. That's where I met my husband. I stayed with this family until I got married. Then I moved in with my husband for a little bit before I agreed to marry him, because we are different. I am Mexican and he is Puerto Rican, and we had different ideas about things. I wanted to make sure we were going to be good together before I agreed to marry him. But it's a good marriage. He is a good man, and we have two beautiful kids. We have been married for twenty-three years. But, yeah, I had to live with him first to make sure we were going to stay together. He changed a lot, in a good way.

Because, like at first, he didn't want to really work, and I told him if he wanted to be with me, he had to work. And then he got two jobs <laughter>. One of his jobs is out here in Custodial, too.

We both have two jobs. Between us, we have four jobs just to have money to live.

Petitt: What job did you have when you left the family?

Juanita: I cleaned homes. I still clean homes. That is my second job. I have been cleaning homes for almost twenty years. In the beginning, when my kids were young, I would take them to the house with me because I couldn't afford to pay babysitters. They would sit there and watch TV, do their homework, or if the people had kids, they would play with their kid's toys while I cleaned.

I have a big waiting list of people who want me to clean their house. I will only take five houses and I clean Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, and I go after I leave State University. It takes me about three and a half to four hours to clean a house, so I have twelve hour days during the week.

I don't clean homes on the weekends. This is my break. So I don't take new houses until somebody moves or dies or something.

Petitt: Talk about cleaning private homes. What is that like?

Juanita: Oh, I love it. I started because I worked for this one lady who was selling houses, and I cleaned for her. And then she recommended me to some other people, and it just started from there. People hear about me from other people. I love cleaning houses.

Petitt: Why? What do you love about it?

Juanita: Well, because first, I need the money. Then they treat me good, but mostly because I need the money. Maybe one day I can quit and just have one job, if my husband can win the lottery <laughter>.

Petitt: So you said the people treat you good. How do they treat you?

Juanita: Well, because they're nice people. They, like, they give me a good Christmas, they give me something for my birthday and they always treat me like family. They never treat me like I'm the one that comes and works for them. So I love that.

Petitt: How do you decide how much to charge people?

Juanita: Well uh .. it depends. I've worked for some people for a long, long time, you know. When I started, like twenty years ago, they paid me twenty dollars for a house.

Petitt: A whole house?

Juanita: Yeah, like a three bedroom. But now, like for the same house, I charge sixty dollars.

Petitt: So did you raise your price, or how did that happen?

Juanita: We just sort of agreed that the price needed to go up, you know, because it's more expensive to live now. And sometimes people give me a raise and I don't have to say, or I don't have to ask them nothing about going up on my price. But most people, they pay me sixty dollars.

Petitt: So talk about working two jobs. How is it that you came to work at State University?

Juanita: Well, I came out here because of the benefits, you know. I worked by myself first. But I decided to come over here because, you know, the insurance is so high when you get it on your own. Is not free here, that's for sure. But it is a little bit cheaper and at least you have better access here than you get outside.

Petitt: So talk about being hired. What was that like?

Juanita: Well, I remember them asking me a lot of questions like, "Is this your first job? Will this be your priority job?" You know, because they tell you're not supposed to work another job, you know, just this one. And they asked me: "Are you sick?" Like, "is something wrong with you?" And they ask me, "Do you have children and how old are they? Are they sick all the time?" Like, they want to make sure that you're not going to miss a lot of days, you know, when you have little ones, if they are sick and you need to stay home with them. They asked me, "Do you have a car?" You know, a way to get to work, stuff like that. A lot of questions like that.

Petitt: Wow. Are you aware that some of those questions are illegal and that they shouldn't have been asking you some of those things?

Juanita: Really? I didn't know that. I just answered because I needed the job.

Petitt: And what has been your experience working here?

Juanita: I like working here. People are nice to me. I like that. When I first started, I worked in one of the important buildings on campus, where important people visit, so we had to detail clean and keep it nice and clean all the time. I like detail cleaning.

I never had no complaints from nobody, except some problems with some of my co-workers and this supervisor one time.

Petitt: Do you feel comfortable talking about that?

Juanita: Well, I had this one supervisor, this Black man, and he didn't give me a raise one time because he said I used my vacation too much, and I argued too much with one of my co-workers, Tess. I used to always get mad at Tess because she would try to come and scare me with the supervisor. Instead of just asking me to help her with something she needed my help with, she would go, "The supervisor says you need to come with me right now." And she is a Number Two, I am a Number One, and she could just say to me, "Juanita, please come and help me with whatever," but no, she comes and says, "The supervisor says," and that makes me mad. She could just ask me in a good way; she don't need to mention the supervisor and try to scare me. So .. uh .. I go when I'm good and ready, and I told her that, and so he said I had too much conflict.

But really, I don't have no complaints, except this and I said, "That's okay, maybe I'll get a raise next year."

Petitt: What about the comment that you use your vacation time too much?

Juanita: He said I did. Like, if I was gonna take off half a day, I would come in and do my work, get it all done as fast as I could and then use my vacation sometimes so I wouldn't have no complaints, and the other times when I have to be off the whole day, I would first make sure there was gonna be somebody there to cover my shift before I asked for time off, but still, he said I used too much time off. That's why I didn't get no raise. But I don't use my time off unless I really need to.

Petitt: How did he treat you other times?

Juanita: Like I said, I don't have no complaints. But this one time, I applied to be a Worker Two, and I got the job. And if you go up for a higher job, you have to move buildings, and I don't like that, but I said I would try it anyway. So I got the new job and I was getting ready to start in the new building and then he told me "Oh, by the way, the hours are going to be different over there." And he had lied to me. He told me I was gonna have the same hours <crying>, but he lied. I said "Well then I can't take the job" because I need to have the hours I have so I can go to my other job, and it's not worth messing up my other job for, like, twenty-five or fifty cents more. So I was upset at him for that, for lying to me.

Petitt: Was that a hard decision for you to have to give back a promotion?

Juanita: Well, not really because I can't .. uh .. with my houses, you know, I need this money. So the choice was easy. I need to work two jobs and I make more money cleaning houses part time than I do here working full time, because here, I only make eight dollars and thirty cents an hour, and I just recently got this much--they gave me like a dime raise or something. So I don't really feel like I had that much of a choice.

I had to stop the GED classes too because when I came over here, I had said I was gonna finish school, I had finished over there up till the eleventh grade, so I was taking the GED classes to finish my last year. And I was taking them and then they decided to move the class time and so I had to quit, because it was in the afternoon when I have to go clean houses, so I couldn't attend.

Petitt: So, a lot of decisions are based on your needing to be available to work both jobs, huh?

Juanita: Yeah, because I need the money.

Petitt: Pretend you didn't have your second job. What would life be like for you?

Juanita: <Gasp>! Golly, I just couldn't make it. I would need to apply for food stamps, or the other stamps they're giving to the people, you know. We just could not make it. I would have to get help. But I like to work and I prefer to work.

But like now, like I said, I have two jobs, and my husband has two jobs. And like now . . . uh . . . we can't even afford to get his heart medicine, even with insurance. We went to pick it up last week and we couldn't get it, you know. You know, like now, how they start it all over in August or September, like you have to start all over again with these big payments in the beginning and then it goes back down to the normal co-pay thing? Well, like now, his medicine, for thirty pills, just thirty pills for his heart, it's like four hundred and something dollars. No. I'm wrong, it was two medicines. Four hundred dollars for two bottles of pills, that's like two hundred dollars a bottle. And my husband got mad and he said to them "Why do I pay insurance?" You know, if it is still going to cost me this much, why do we pay insurance? And he banged his hand on the counter. He was mad that he couldn't get his medicine, even with insurance. And he needs that medicine.

Petitt: So, what will you do since he really needs the medicine?

Juanita: Well, he made another appointment with his doctor for next week and he is gonna ask him for some .. um .. how do you say in English .. when they just give you a little pills until you can afford to get the whole thing?

Petitt: You mean, like, samples?

Juanita: Yeah, that's it. Samples. And we are gonna talk to him about how to make arrangements. Like give us a cheaper pill or something because he needs the pills but we just can't afford it. The doctor said he should be okay without them for a few days.

Petitt: So you think they may try to work out a payment plan for you or something?

Juanita: I don't know. I hope so. If they can't do nothing, we'll just go have to see if we can find a loan or something.

Petitt: How stressful that must be for you both.

Juanita: It really is very stressful. But I thank God I am healthy and I can work everyday.

Petitt: So let's talk more about that. Let's talk about your work. You've said several times that you like cleaning--talk about that.

Juanita: I don't know.

I think I was born to clean.

One day, this lady told me I have a major in cleaning. She would always call me and ask me, "Juanita, how do you clean this, how do you clean that?" And I asked her, "Why you always calling me to ask me these things?" And she said, "You graduated from State University with your degree in cleaning," and I laughed.

But I love cleaning. I'm good at it. I prefer to get a really nasty place so it can look really clean when I finish. My daughter told me one day, she said, "Mommy, you should take before-and-after pictures so people can see the difference," because I clean so good.

Petitt: Is there anything you don't like to clean?

Juanita: Well, I like to do everything. The only thing I don't like too much is windows, the kind that are like, double windows, you know what I mean? Because I . . . if I clean one window and I can't get in between

to clean the other side, they don't look good. I try to clean it several times, but you can't make it look good and I don't like that because it still looks dirty, like you didn't do your job.

And I .. um .. this one time a friend said to me "You do such a good job cleaning out here, I bet your house is really, really, very clean. And I said, "Well, I can't say that because I clean and clean here and then I have the other houses to clean. And when I go home, do you think I still have time to do that?"

Petitt: So your house is not as clean as the other places and spaces you clean?

Juanita: I think maybe not.

But I love to work. The people out here say I'm crazy because I'm always happy. I come to work happy to be here. Happy God gives me strength to work. Like, when .. every morning, you know, a lot of people say, "Oh, I'm tired, I didn't sleep too good, my this or my that hurts." They are just like that all the time you know. And I say, "You need to come happy! You need to be glad to have another day." Nobody wants to see your long face. And I'm happy and smiling all the time and I tell people "I love to work" and they call me crazy. I love to keep busy.

Petitt: Why?

Juanita: It makes my day easy when I'm busy. If I'm not always doing something, I feel like I am wasting time. Some people ask me, "Why you always looking for work to do, why don't you go sit down somewhere?"

And some of them go in the closets and stay for a long time. They take a longer break than they need to and they stay there so people can't see that they're not doing nothing. Not me. I stay busy because there is always something you can clean.

Petitt: So, take me through an average day. What is an average day like for you?

Juanita: Well, I wake up at four thirty, no, three thirty. No, no, no. I'm wrong. Three ten, I always wake at three ten. I leave everything ready the night before, pack our lunch, put my uniform out, everything . . . to make sure I'm not looking for nothing in the morning. Then go straight to the bathroom, I wash my face, dress me and comb my hair. My husband wakes up to go make my coffee.

And then I am ready just in time to go ride with my friend I live by. I ride with her--she works in Custodial, too--I ride with her because we only have one car, and my husband has to drive it up here when he comes.

So, I get here at this job at four o'clock in the morning. And like now, I used to be in one building for a long time, but now I switch buildings sometimes. So I clean wherever I am on this job, and I finish at twelve-thirty here. Then I go to my other part-time job cleaning houses starting at one o'clock.

Petitt: Oh, is that why you take off your uniform, because you leave directly from this job and go to the next?

Juanita: <long pause>.

No, not really. I take it off because I'm tired of wearing the same color everyday, you know. I always wear this, you know. I like the color and I like the uniform, but just for here. I take it off when I'm through here.

<long pause>.

But at least I'm glad they give them to us and I don't need to use my own clothes, you know--imagine if I had to buy clothes to work here. Golly, I already have to pay to park to come to work, and that's a lot of money.

Petitt: Okay. I'm sorry. I interrupted your taking me through an average day. So, you finish up here at twelve-thirty and you start cleaning private homes at one o'clock And then what?

Juanita: Like I said, it takes me three and a half to four hours to clean the house. Then I go home, cook supper, clean my kitchen, take a shower, go to bed for a couple hours, then I wake up to be with my husband for a little while, because my husband works his other job until eleven at night. Most of the time I wake up and I wait for him, and I talk to the kids while I wait for him and then when he comes home, I go back to bed. If, like sometimes, if I'm really tired and I don't wake up for him, he'll say to me, "Hey, what's wrong with you?" And I tell him, "I'm tired."

Petitt: So, how much sleep do you think you get every night?

Juanita: Six hours sometimes. Sometimes less. But I come to work happy and healthy, and I'm glad God keeps me healthy.

Petitt: You're amazing. I think we're at a good stopping place. Is there anything else you want to tell me before we wrap up?

Juanita: Just that I like working here. I think it's a good place to work. You know, you're always gonna find things you don't like. But you can't have everything you want.

So I'm happy. I like it here. I like working with the people, and I don't mind working in Custodial. It's work, you know?

Not everybody is a bright person, you know. Like, we need to have a little bit of everything anyway.

And I like that I get to work around .. uh .. with .. um .. for a lot of bright people.

Juanita is grateful that cleaning has allowed her to support her family. Her oldest child has completed a baccalaureate degree and is moving on to professional school with a full academic scholarship. Her younger child has just enrolled in an institution of higher education to pursue a degree; someone at State University helped them to negotiate the financial aid process and accompanying paperwork. Juanita is thankful for the financial assistance because in the space between our second and third interview, her husband had to quit one of his jobs due to his declining health.

She has called the first person on her "private home cleaning" waiting list to inform them of her immediate availability. She will give up her once carefully-guarded Saturdays now because she has no other choice – her family needs the money.

Agnes

“I Would Love for You to Put This in Your Report! My Challenge Hasn’t Come So Much From the White People as it Has from My Own Kind.

We Just Cut Each other Up!”

Agnes arranged to meet me at the building’s entrance because I did not know my way around. I was immediately struck by the warmth, poise, and self assurance in her stride. She is an African American with short hair, a full, round body, and flawlessly beautiful, coconut brown skin. We walked toward our meeting room, engaging in small talk along the way.

“I parked in the nearest parking space--I’m going to knock on wood and hope I don’t get a parking ticket,” I said.

“Don’t knock on wood, honey. You need to pray for God’s grace to cover you,” she replied. When I notice and comment on the energy drink she is consuming, she offers, “Yeah, girl, sometimes I need a little ‘pick-me-up’ so I can keep on keepin’ on.” We approach an office door and I am baffled that she immediately selects the appropriate door key from a key ring that appears to hold twenty or thirty others that all look alike. “This is my office,” she says. “Come on in.”

Agnes is a supervisor and has managed people for almost fifteen of the thirty-some years she has worked at State University. She has prearranged our seating, and I notice the chairs are set for intimate conversation yet have a safe distance between them. She has defined our space. As I unload my backpack, set up my tape recorder and prepare to explain the Informed Consent, I take in her environment. I notice what appear to be family photos, business cards that bear her name, aged, unframed, motivational

posters taped to the wall, a computer, a printer and a phone. Now situated, my eyes focus on her. She sits before me in a uniform, similar to other custodial uniforms in style and color, but different in that hers is marked “Supervisor” in the upper pocket area, which sets her apart from the other custodial employees and marks her authority. Her arms folded in front of her, she appears anxious yet eager to share. Shaking her head from side to side with her eyes closed, she says, “Girl, I got a story to tell. My testimony is somethin’ else.” She punctuates this statement with a roll and snap of the neck familiar to us Black women.

She had agreed to spend four and a half hours sharing her story (three sessions, each lasting ninety minutes), but our time easily evolved into six hours. When I would notice the time and say to her “I want to keep my commitment to only take up an hour and a half of your time,” she would tell me “we’re okay, we’re okay” and continue to narrate her life, weaving in words from the Bible and what sounded like language from popular self-help books. She was a good storyteller. Unfolding the events of her life’s journey, she would occasionally pause to add an element of suspense: “Before I tell you how that issue was resolved, let me go back. I need to start at the beginning.”

Agnes’ story began with the neglect and abandonment that characterized her early life. She described her parents as “mean,” “unloving” and generally inattentive.

Agnes: One time, I was probably about six, maybe seven, and it was in the summer time, and my mom cooked and asked me to take a pan of biscuits to a relative who lived nearby. I did as I was told. I casually walked down the road to take the biscuits. And when I come back, everybody was gone. They had left town for the day and they took my older sister and my little sister with them. She didn’t tell me to hurry up and come on back. I didn’t know who was going to look after me. And Daddy didn’t get off work until real late at night. I wasn’t told where I was supposed to go. Nobody cared where I was. Now, don’t get me wrong, I’m not bitter toward my mother. I love my mother. She was as

good as she could be because her mama died young. She did put some good things in me. But that hurt. And I never did ask them why they left me. I never understood. I wish I'd had somebody to say, where you at? Where you been? Come in this house! Come eat your lunch! Didn't have that. They didn't do that. And that day stuck with me, you know.

And daddy too. My dad came up real hard. And all he knew was a job, food on the table, shelter over your head. As far as being nurtured, like I see people with their dads - I didn't have that. To be honest with you, I don't remember one time my mom or my dad telling me they loved me. I don't. I don't remember getting a hug from neither one. But I remember feeling like being the black sheep of the family. I remember feeling like my mom loved my older sister more than she loved me and my dad loving my baby sister more than he loved me. They both had their picks and I was in the middle.

I tried to commit suicide the first time when I was 12, because this particular day me and my brother had gotten into it and he said he was gonna tell on me. And I didn't know what stress was. I didn't know what depression was. But I was tired in here <points to her heart>. So I went through the house and I took everything I got my hands on. I took vitamins. I took mama's blood thinning medicine. I took aspirin. Everything I could get my hands on I took some of them. I was just taking. Some of these, some of those, some of those. And you know what was sad about it? Nobody knew nothing was wrong with me. I was falling asleep in the middle of sentences. Two friends of mine came to see me and I was sitting up there talking to them and I just kept falling asleep. This lady was trying to do my hair. Daddy got her to come do my hair, and I was steady falling asleep. Nobody knew me. Nobody knew enough about me to say, "Something is wrong with this little girl. Let me take her to the doctor." Nobody knew to ask me, "What, did you take something?" If my children acted like that now, I would be asking "what's wrong with you?" I need to know. I'm Mom. I'll be Mama till I die. When I die, I'll still be your Mama. But nobody knew me well enough. They didn't know nothing about me.

Petitt: What drove you to that point?

Agnes: That boy telling me that he was goin' to tell on me. I had enough. I was cleaning up, I was taking care of mama, she was real sick at that time, I was missing a lot of school, you know. They expected me .. I was trying to wash, I remember trying to wash. And that was an awful lot for a 12 year-old child to take on, you know. I remember one time I was .. I didn't know what to cook. And I cooked Daddy some .. he was coming home from work and I cooked him some eggs and some ham and some biscuits. He got mad. It was the best I could do, you know?

And so, later in my life, after both of my parents had died, what God put in my heart, especially about my daddy .. it was one Father's Day and I was at church listening to people giving tributes to their dads. And I was like, "God, I don't feel that way about my daddy," you know. And God told me, He say, "You expected him to give you something he didn't have <crying>. He didn't know how to give you love and to nurture you because he never had it." And that released that, you know.

So I accepted the love that God gave me. And I accepted God as my daddy. You know what I mean?

You know, because I can understand, if you don't know how to bake a cake, how can I be mad at you if you don't know how to cook a cake? But if you knew how to cook it then I could expect you to do it, but he didn't know. And I just assume that Mama gave me the best she had. And being married and dealing with men, you look and go, "Huh, she did the best she could under the circumstances" <laughter>. That's why I am so grateful for God being in my life. I don't know where I would be without him. Dead, probably.

Agnes holds her parents responsible for their neglect but does not "harbor any resentment." She "released it," resolved to be a better parent when she had kids, and turned to God for love and direction. Knowing she is a "child of God" offers a sense of mattering and love she had not experienced. This knowledge covers Agnes and allows her to negotiate life with the promise that, no matter what, God is on her side because "He takes good care of his kids."

Petitt: Was there anyone in your life who showed care and concern for you? A teacher at school, maybe?

Agnes: No. Not really. School was okay. I have .. since I've been grown I found out I'm dyslexic. And so I went through all my school thinking I was dumb and I actually was dyslexic. My mind stops . . . I have to really focus on reading left to right . . . But in school I didn't have a favorite subject--kids made fun of me a lot.

Petitt: How come?

Agnes: Well, I actually don't know. One thing was, uh, I thought I was fat, but when I realized one day recently that I am fat now, I looked back--I

wasn't fat <laughter>, I thought I was fat, uhm .. they said I had buck teeth, because I do, I think you can tell, I probably did, uhm .. and then I had a deformed foot, and they called me "Steptoe"--well this one particular boy did--but I think my brothers beat him up. I didn't fit, Becky, I just didn't fit. I didn't. And I was in remedial classes, which I was good at that stuff but the teachers didn't care. They would turn this machine on that would show you one word at a time and then walk out of the room. So if the teacher walked out the room, what do you think us kids did? Nothing. And that probably woulda' helped me with my dyslexia. So I passed all the way up 'til the 11th grade, and I quit. I quit.

Agnes quit school to care for her first child, borne of an incestuous encounter from which no one protected her. To this day, she lives with deep-seated guilt around this issue and wonders if this, combined with the extreme neglect she experienced as a child, contributed to her early feelings of worthlessness and bad decision-making. She regrets having married a man against her better judgment. But he said he loved her and she believed she would grow to love him. Instead, she would grow to fear him because, "when he would get in his moods," he beat her mercilessly, even when she was eight months pregnant with their child.

Agnes: My first husband claimed he loved me, but he didn't. He beat me all the time. He even beat me when I was eight months pregnant. Oh girl, I ran down the road, and I ran in front of houses, uh .. the ooh, it got real bad this one year, it got real bad, uhm .. it was just .. he would ap- apologize and fight me, apologize and fight me, and so that is why I tell people, it ain't gon' get no better .. if .. if he fights you one time, he'll fight you again; and, each time you go back, it gets worse. All battered women's stories are the same--the names are different, the addresses are different, and the nationality is different, but the patterns and the process of the abuser, they're all the same. And so this one time, I don't know what happened to his mind. He wanted me to tell him about everybody I had ever--this went on for one solid week--everybody that I'd ever been with. I would get home from work, I'd cook, I'd see my kids for like one hour before he got home, and he would lock me in the bedroom and torture me. "Tell me this, tell me that," beat me, and sexually and physically abuse me, and that went on for a whole week. That Friday night--I had bought him a set of clippers, for his birthday--he cut the cord off the clippers, he tied about four or five knots in the cord, and he beat me with it . . . And I had grown to the point where I thought he was

gonna kill me eventually. And so uh .. I called the police and they told me about a local women's shelter. So I called my Daddy, and my Dad come and met me on the corner, picked me up. I took my uh .. my mind was so scattered at that time, I couldn't even formulate or process to get panties, socks, shoes, matching shorts. I couldn't pack. I grabbed one shoe. I just grabbed stuff. And I stayed there for a while, and I eventually went back to him. The last time, when I knew that was it, we had been arguing about something and he grabbed me. I was laying in the bed, he come through there, he grabbed me by my feet and he drug me out of that bed, and he bounced me on my head, and when I came to all I remember is this side of my body was numb all the way down, and this side of my face, and I knew then .. that was close. I was in really bad shape because he'd beaten me so badly. And so I had washed my clothes, I had washed my dress, my pantyhose, everything, but I didn't get to hang it up 'cause we didn't have a dryer and because he was acting up so badly. Uhm .. this is paraphrased--much happened from beginning to end, but this is how it all ended. I got up that next morning, and I realized that I hadn't hung my clothes up, and I put them clothes on wet, everything, everything I had on, every stitch except my shoes was wet. I walked out into the living room, and he was sitting there and he said, "Why don't you stay at home today?" I said, "You know I done missed all them days," well from before, when he beat me, you know, and I missed work so I said, "I can't. I can't miss no more days," and in my heart I was praying "dear God, just let me make it out of this house and to the car." Well, I made it to the car and to work, and I went straight to the phone and called the women's shelter again and I said, "Hey," I said, "I know y'all gonna say "I told you so," I said, "but I need y'all to come get me." And they picked me up from work and put me to bed. And I can't remember if it was three days, two days, four days, but I remember sleeping and sleeping. They took me to the doctor and the doctor told them I had been emotionally and physically traumatized. And I thank God for that women's shelter. I still remember the number today: (777) 777-7777.

Reflexive Journal note: I am embarrassed to admit that I researched this number. It's not that I did not believe her; I think I wanted to be able to convey the power of this experience – that after almost ten years, she could recite this number from memory. I know it's not my role as researcher to verify information. Yet, I did. Agnes recalled the number to the women's shelter precisely.

With the counseling I had gotten and the strength I was gaining, at this point I was learning to start saying "no." I had given my power, I had given my authority over to him, and I had been abused for it. I felt like God gave that power to me--that was the power that I was in charge of, and I'd given it away. I allowed somebody else to take my power. So I

got my divorce for \$108 through Legal Aid, and I started out on my own. After I had left him, he told people in town that I trembled when I saw him. And I *was* still kind of scared of him--but he told people I would tremble when I saw him or heard his name--and you know what, I had to get courage, Becky, for everything, every mile marker that I went through with him, took courage, and I had to get the courage to tell him to stop calling me and begging me to come back. I had to tell people to stop telling me things he was saying. And then one time this girl came up to me trying to tell me something he'd said, and I told her, "Next time you see him, you tell him"--see, I'd went and bought me a pistol--and I said, "there are six bullets in this gun. There are six letters in his first name: J-E-S-S-I-E." I said, "Tell him I'm gonna empty every one of 'em in him if he tries to mess with me." And I meant that, you know. I have been through so many things and while I was on this job, too. I thank God I had insurance and I had a way to take care of myself and my babies through all of that madness.

Petitt: I'm glad you found the strength to leave that relationship.

Agnes: I give God the glory.

Petitt: Since you started talking about work, let's talk a little bit about your path to where you are today, a supervisor.

Agnes: I give God the glory. God put me here because I didn't have what it took, but God put me here.

Petitt: Talk about that.

Agnes: Well, I was cleaning private homes at the time, you know, no benefits, people asking you to do extra things and not paying you no more. And a friend of mine told me, "Girl, you oughta' come get you a job at State University." She worked here at the time. She said, "They're hiring, and they offer benefits."

And I came and I put in the application at the main office. And Mr. Johnson was the hiring person at that time. I don't know if he was the supervisor or what, but he was the hiring individual. And he had told me to come back Thursday. And so I came back Thursday, me and this other lady named Shirley Wilson. So Shirley and I came back--and he was going to hire Shirley, but he wasn't going hire me! And I told him, I said, "Uh-uh, you told me to come back Thursday!" I say, "I'm here. I want a job." And he snatched my application up off that desk and said, "Come on," kinda' mean-like with a scowl on his face. And I have been here ever since. I almost didn't get in.

Petitt: <laughing>. So you demanded a job and got it?

Agnes: Yes. Because he told me to come back. And so, I got on. And they put me in Mr. Samuel's crew.

Petitt: Did you have an interview?

Agnes: No. I didn't really have an interview. We just asked him. I put in an application, and we came back and we talked to him about getting on. He said come back Thursday.

Petitt: There was no interview?

Agnes: I don't remember having an interview, per se. There were no questions or processes like we have in place today. Just filled out the application and said I wanted a job here.

Petitt: Talk about your early experience.

Agnes: Well, when I first started, we were working nights. Without adequate supervision, we were a little out of control. We would wash our hair, get perms up here at work. I remember getting my hair done. Ooh, one time, this girl washed my hair so nice. And we would braid hair. I remember one time, we had done our little work. We had eaten, and I found some .. we had what we called multifold paper towels, and I found me a sheet in the clean linen basket. And I took those towels and made me a pillow, and I stretched out and just was sleeping good. And my supervisor .. when you would hear Mr. Samuel, you'd hear them keys. Jink, jink, jink. Girl, Mr. Samuel walked in, walked right past us, walked right back out. He never said a word.

Petitt: He saw you?

Agnes: Yes. Our work was done. We had swept those offices. We did not vacuum. Never did vacuum. This lady took me in the bathroom on my first day to clean the bathroom. We cleaned *at* the commodes, we cleaned *at* the mirrors, and we cleaned *at* the sink. She took some floor finish and poured it in the mop bucket, wet her mop with that stuff and started mopping--with just that solution. And she told me "This is how you mop." Inside of me I knew "this can't be right." You're supposed to mop with water and soap. We pretty much just went through the motions of doing our assignments. As long as we would pull the trash, wipe up a little bit, our supervisor was satisfied. And our vacuum cleaners, they just stayed in the closet. Instead of vacuuming we swept and used dust pans.

Petitt: Why?

Agnes: We thought it was easier.

Petitt: That seems like more work.

Agnes: It was. The problem was that we didn't have a training program like we do now. See, now we spend the whole day training, but back then when I came they just put you with somebody and they showed you what they did and you mimicked them, you know. There was no chemical safety training, there was no procedural training, so they got some new people in the office and these people actually went out and inspected the buildings and looked at the quality of the work.

And then they determined that custodial crews could be better managed if they moved us to days. And so they broke our little playground up and brought us all to days, and that's where I met Virginia Watson. Virginia knew cleaning. She knew what good cleaning was. And when Virginia came, guess who had the task of undoing all of the bad, shoddy work we'd been doing? Me.

It fell to me to strip all that old floor finish we had applied incorrectly. Dirt was grounded down in it. Oh, it had dirt and hair deep inside the finish. And it turned black around the wall and in the grout. I worked so hard to undo that work. My knees were peeling because when Virginia came, we had to clean baseboards--hadn't ever done that before. We stripped--nobody never showed me how to strip an elevator, how you strip all that oil off that elevator. You can strip it down to the bare stainless steel and then you reapply it. And that's why they shine so pretty. Whenever you go somewhere and you see an elevator shining so pretty, that's how they take care of it. The tracks in the doorways of an entrance, and the doorways of the elevator, we had never cleaned that. Honey, I learned so much about .. you'd be surprised what glass cleaner can do. And the tables .. this is how they used to clean the marks off the table: You know the green soap in the restroom? The real stinky soap? It's very, very concentrated. They'd have the spray bottles full of the concentrated soap and if there was a pencil mark on the table, they would spray the soap in a rag and wipe the mark off. Those tables were just covered with years of soap. When Virginia came, Virginia discovered that. We had to use the wedge heads and straight glass cleaner, and you wiped those tables until you got every ounce of that soap off those tables.

And that's when they coined the phrase "learn to work smarter, not harder." Because in doing that, we had to work harder to get it off. You know what I'm saying? That was partly the administration's fault because they didn't have a training program, and they just hired people

and you'd just go in and clean. You didn't know what to do, you know? We started cleaning things I didn't know had to be cleaned, tiny crevices and things. Whoa! I'm like, "This woman goin' kill us." She bought this long pole, tall as the door, and it was made like an "L," you know. Okay, this is the pole. And then it had a long flap that you put a real thick dust mop on it on the end of it. You tied it on to it. And you soak that in glass cleaner, and you flip it up on top of that big old tall shelf and just walk. And when you walk to the end and pull it out, you would not believe the dirt that was on that mop. Some of the lint would be about two inches thick--had never been cleaned. Had never been cleaned. Carpet was so full of soap, we had to use a de-foamer, and you had to clean one particular area about five times just to get all the soap out. So it was partially the administration's fault that they did not have a training program to teach us the dilution of the chemicals. They did not teach us that two ounces is better than five. Because two ounces is actually the designated amount you need. They didn't teach us "use this amount to clean this type of soil" or to add more for heavy soil, and if you add this much, it'll do this, but you got to rinse it. They didn't teach us that. We didn't know that. We didn't know that some of the chemicals we were breathing were hazardous, especially if you were pregnant. Now, I talk to my staff about safety. I tell them, "You need to wear gloves." Because when you put lotion on your hands, the lotion don't stay on top of your skin; it absorbs into your skin and keeps it moist and protects it. Same thing with chemicals. I say, "And when you use chemicals, especially the ones that say, wear protective gear, what do you think is going to happen if you don't wear gloves? Where is the chemical going to go? It's not going stay on the surface. It's going to absorb into your skin." And some of the bottles will actually say, "Will affect internal organs such as kidney and liver." So you need to follow precautions, and I make sure that they know that because I didn't know that. So everything that I've learned the hard way, I use it with my staff. I use it to help other people or to teach other people.

Petitt: When Virginia came and you had scrub and clean things you had never cleaned before, getting on your knees and stuff, how did you feel about that?

Agnes: I was so excited. I learned that people like structure, they like structure. She brought structure. And we just hit it off. I liked her. You know, she was so full of life. She was so full of--whoa--she was like a computer, just full of information. You could go anywhere. If you asked her something, you got solid nuggets back. She just wasn't full of junk. Me, I was .. all I saw was junk. All I was used to was junk, you know. And that's another thing I tell my workers. "Rise above it," you know. Don't stay right here on the norm with everybody. Some people, that's all they know, bickering and fighting, and "who-shot-John." Rise

above it. There's actually stuff above that. You know what I'm saying? If you sit down at the table, and you can't talk unless you talking about somebody, something is wrong. And that's the way I talk to them. But Virginia was different from what I'd been exposed to. See, my mama died when I was 13. So I learned everything by bumping my head. But when Virginia came, ooh, it was like a firestorm come through. I bet the first six months that she was our supervisor, we worked so hard. We worked uh .. we cleaned wall carpet uh .. we'd never done that .. the brick, you know, the brick on the outside of the buildings? Who you think cleans that? We had never done that. We've never cleaned the tracks of the elevator. I worked so hard that my knees peeled from scrubbing and rubbing and my hands was crinkled from working so hard.

Petitt: Did you have to get on your knees to clean?

Agnes: In order to clean what we needed to clean, yeah. We uh .. not that she demanded that we did, but that was easier for me. She did provide us with wedge heads to put under our knees and stuff, a thick, thick dust mop that we use.

Petitt: Oh, like kneepads?

Agnes: Yeah, like kneepads. But I learned so much about cleaning. And that is when I first realized that there was leadership, and I really didn't recognize what that was at that point because that was the first time I had a supervisor that explained what was expected, that explained where we were going as a unit. Virginia was a blessing in so many ways.

But before I tell you that whole story, let me tell you about this other woman who impacted my life, Maria Torres. She was our Custodial Worker II in the daytime. And Maria, that's when I first .. ooh, she said stuff that built me. She would talk about the night people, cuz there were still a few people working nights. She would say, "Ooh, they just drag like they're dying." And she would walk real fast.

And I observed how she would go in. If we got a special call to go into somebody's office, I observed how professional she was and how nice she was to those people. I didn't .. hadn't nobody taught me that. And how quiet .. she taught us how to be quiet, how to wear your uniforms like you are supposed to and how you're supposed to carry yourself. I learned that type of stuff from Maria.

You know, I just watched her and how she talked to people. And when we would get reports back from the building proctor and stuff, letters to our supervisor, and I think I still got some of them. They would be

about how good we did, and how professional we were, and how efficient we were. And I was grateful for the things she added to me.

Now back to Virginia. She was a good supervisor. Like I said, she brought structure and had expectations, and I bought into what she was saying and she wanted this to stop and she wanted this to start, so I kind of bought into that. And the leadership that was in me, I guess she recognized it. And when I met her, I was a Worker One. Never had been a Worker Two. Like, the procedure was Worker One, Worker Two, Leader. I made from Worker One straight to a Leader.

Petitt: Wow. Was there an interview or an application process?

Agnes: No. I was just picked for it. And I could not .. Becky, I could not drive. I was almost thirty, and I did not have my driver's license. I did not have my GED. I had a lot more supervisors before Virginia, probably about seven or eight. But you said to highlight some of the good turning points, and this was a turning point in my life when I met Virginia. We had what we called a "sanitary route," which we'd go and fill up all the sanitary machines all over campus. Well, that assignment was given to her and she picked me to run it. Man, I went to some buildings--I forgot all the buildings because they've all changed, you know, there's so many other buildings now. But I went to every building on campus that had a sanitary machine, and that assignment carried with it knowing how to drive a stick. And I told her, I said, "I can't drive no stick." And she said, "Oh, yes, you can." And there was this part of me that was so immature, and I had such low self esteem. I thought I was really dumb, to be honest with you. I thought I was really dumb. I did. I was suffering from stinkin' thinkin'. And when that woman said, "Yes, you can." I was, like, "She thinks I can." And by her saying that, it just did something to my mind, and I was, like, "Okay." So we got in the little Daihatsu--we called it a scooter. She drove me to the airport, and she said, "Okay. This is the clutch, this is the gear, you mash this and pull this and you ease up off of this gradually and then you go. You mash the gas, and when your foot come off of this and you mash the gas, you go. And this is reverse, this is first, this is second," because there were just three gears. "Okay. Now, get in and drive." I'm like <gasp>! She made me drive all the way from the airport back to campus. I could not believe it. I was ecstatic. And so I learned to drive the Daihatsu.

Then came the truck. She called me over to the office one day, and she said, "We need to take these wedge heads over to such and such building." She said, "We." I should have remembered when I used to clean private homes that when they say "we" they mean "you!"

She said “we.” I was, like, okay, “we.” She’s gonna drive, I’m gon’ ride. We loaded the things on the back of the truck, And then she climbed into the passenger’s seat and said, “Okay, let’s go.” I said, “I can’t drive this truck.” There were those words again, “I can’t.” She said, “Oh, yes, you can.” There were those words again. They were competing with each other. And so she said, “Okay. This is first, this is second, this is third, this is fourth, this is reverse. Same as the scooter, okay?” So, girl, I rocked and I rolled all the way to the building, but I made it <laughter>. That’s when I learned how to drive a stick shift truck. In fact, my first car that God blessed me with was a stick shift.

Then one day Virginia came and she said, “Some supervisor’s positions are opening up, and I want you to apply for one.” She never gave me the option to back out like a crawdad. She never did give me the option to back out. She said, “I want you to apply for one.” And I always looked up to her. She was 34 years old, and in my eyes, she could do anything. Anything that woman put her mind to, it would happen. She would make it happen. And that encouraged me.

Petitt: What was her ethnicity?

Agnes: She was White. She was a White lady. And she said, “You’ve got to get your driver’s license. I’ll give you two weeks to get your driver’s license.” Ok, so I got the book, I studied and I had already been kind of driving. So I could drive, but I didn’t know about that test, you know. And so I didn’t even have a car but I borrowed somebody’s car, I took the test, and I passed, praise God!

So I come back to work and she said, “Okay. Now, you got to get your GED.” I was, like, that was the ultimate no-no. I was too dumb to get my GED. Becky, I was so nervous, and I was so uh .. no self esteem and just lost in that area that I couldn’t even think. I just couldn’t think. Stuff that I knew I convinced myself I didn’t know.

Petitt: Did you have to have a driver’s license and GED to move up?

Agnes: Yes. You had to have your driver’s license to be able to fulfill the role of the job, of driving around on the routes, and you had to have your GED to be a supervisor. So, I uh .. uh .. I took my GED test through the university and to my surprise, I passed everything but math and I missed it by two points. So I had to go back to the GED class and I was just .. I was going through marital problems at the same time that all this good stuff was happening. Things were getting bad at home and in the class .. in the class, there were other people taking the class who made it harder for me. When the teacher was teaching and she would ask a question, for me to expose myself and open up and then get shot at, it hurts. Now, the

teacher was good. Mary Parker, another White lady, was our teacher. But the Black people that were there in the class .. this has been my challenge at State University.

I would love for you to put this in your report. My challenge hasn't come so much from the White people as it has from my own kind. We just cut each other up.

And it is so discouraging and so disappointing, and they would make fun of you. And I already got all this going on at home, and folks don't even have sense enough to know each other or, or to care uh .. uh .. uh .. "a village is a family," you know what I'm saying? "A village takes care of each other"--it wasn't like that .. it's not like that. So that made my problem compounded. So when time come for me to go take a prac-- because you had to take a practice test in order to take the test--I couldn't even think. Ms. Parker told me, "I know you know this stuff." She said, "I know you know it. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. You come over here every day at your lunch break away from them." She was good. You could tell she was a good teacher. God made her a teacher because I didn't tell her what I felt. She recognized it in me <crying> and she could tell the problems I was having with those people in the class. She pulled me out of that environment and took me in her office on her lunch break and she tutored me and she told me, she said, "You know what, I know you know this stuff." She said, "I'm going to send you over without a practice test." She said, "And you take that test, if you have to take three Valiums," because I was so nerved up from being abused at home too and, you know, <crying> excuse me.

Petitt: It's okay. Take your time.

Agnes: So I took the test and I passed the test and I made supervisor, praise God.

And now that I have my own staff I don't allow nobody, if we're reading something in my area, you don't laugh! And I tell them when I'm training, I say, "It don't matter." And when I give them tests, I say, "You write it to make it look as close to what you're trying to say. I will accept that.

We're not scholars, because if we were, we would not be working in Custodial. We would be running a company somewhere or have our own business.

So just make it look as close to what you're trying to say and it'll pass." And that's the way I treat them. They don't have to spell it out right. They don't have to be intimidated because I won't allow it. You'll get

in more trouble laughing. You're in trouble with me. Don't laugh. It's not funny, and I'll squash that. I don't allow that.

But after I made supervisor I went from worker's ridicule to the other Black supervisors and my employees giving me a hard time. And when I was supervising this one crew, the supervisor before me, they had ran her off. She just up and quit. She didn't even last six months and in this crew, there were a lot of old heads who are not subject to change. And if you buy into the big picture, if you buy into the university's ideals, you're trying to be White, you know, you're trying to be White. Uhm .. and you're kissing their behind because you buy into what their expectations are, you're buying into the university policy, you're not letting folks take toilet paper home, you know, you're keeping things locked up and counting things. You know that type of stuff. And this particular day, to highlight it all, this particular day this other Black supervisor asked me to go somewhere with her at lunch time. So we left and when I came back Barbara, that's my supervisor, a White lady, was sitting in my crew area with my crew. They had called her over there to have a meeting about me. Here's some of the things that they were angry about: because I wouldn't let them use the phone in my office. I told them to use the courtesy phones out front. I told them "this is a business phone." I said, "You wouldn't go over there to those White folks' office and ask them if you could use their phone to call your boyfriend." I would let them use it at first, but then they tied it up with foolishness. One lady was mad because I wouldn't allow them to sit around and eat together and socialize for long periods of time. They wanted to operate like we used to when we worked nights. Well, we had work to do and that was wasting time. You know, it was just a business transition that they didn't want to go through.

And what was so disappointing to me was the fact that these Black ladies that were sitting in this meeting, some of them were old enough to be my mama. Should've been saying, "Baby, you are doing good. I'm so proud to see a young Black woman finally at least in a supervisor's position." May not be in an administrative position, but we are moving up. Because at first it was just White folks in supervisor positions, you know what I'm saying? So I was real angry at Barbara, very angry, because she broke my trust in her as my supervisor. I had no idea what was going on.

Petitt: So let me make sure I understand this. One of your co-workers, another Black supervisor, asked you to leave with her over the lunch hour and when you came back, you found your whole crew in a meeting with your supervisor complaining about you?

Agnes: Yeah. Now, it wasn't my whole crew. It was about seven or eight of my staff, but in that meeting, in that meeting, I'm looking at all Black folks just tearing me down in front of my supervisor.

It was a lynch mob.

They were complaining about the silliest little things they could have talked to me about. But there was this young White girl. Young. Younger than all the rest of them. She was in the room but I couldn't see her at first. She was sitting on the floor on the side of the desk. Her name was Kim. And when Barbara asked, "Anybody got anything else to say?" Kim's hand went up, that's when I noticed she was in the room. Her hand went up. She was real country, talked with a thick drawl, she said, "Well, I don't know what all this is about," she said, "But I can tell you this, I ain't got no problems with Agnes. She's a good supervisor to me." She said that in front of all of them and my supervisor.

And her saying that pretty much cancelled out everything all the Black ladies had been saying.

And that incident helped me in my growth process.

Agnes is undiminished by the trials she has experienced. In fact, they strengthen her. "God uses everything," she said. "He uses everything. Everything bad that has happened in my life, He finds a way to use it for good." Her pain is prelude to her growth. Today, she describes herself as a "successful," "well-liked" and "respected" supervisor, a "God-fearing woman" who is "evidence of His goodness and mercy." She is married to a man who is recently disabled. Thus, she is the primary wage-earner. She is the mother of four children, all of whom have earned baccalaureate degrees. One is now pursuing a master's degree while living at home with Agnes and her husband. While Agnes does not require her child to pay to live at home, she occasionally requests a financial contribution if she "comes up short" when bills are due. She has worked at State University for approximately 30 years and reports an income of \$2,000 per month, which is approximately \$26,000 per year.

Clara

“It’s Racist Out Here!”

Whoa-oo-oo! I feel good, I knew that I would,
I feel good, I knew that I would,
So good, so good, I got you,

Whoa-oo-oo! And I feel nice, like sugar and spice,
I feel nice, like sugar and spice,
So nice, so nice, I got you,
Hey . . .

(Brown, 2005)

“Upstairs” in their bedroom, Clara and her siblings moved furniture aside, clearing a space to dance and threw a towel over the lampshade to create a party-like ambiance. In their pajamas, with loud music coming from the beer joint downstairs and the floor vibrating beneath their bare feet, they laughed and danced and had a good time. Clara liked Saturdays in particular because they had a live band at the beer joint; when they would play a good song, all the kids formed a “Soul Train Line.” In keeping with the dance routine, they formed two parallel lines and created a middle aisle down which participants would take turns showcasing their best dance moves. When it was Clara’s turn, she did her favorite dance—the “slop.” It made her feel special because she could really get down when she was doing this dance as her sisters and brothers cheered her on. Saturdays were lively, indeed; they planned a party every weekend because they couldn’t sleep amidst the commotion.

When the music stopped around one o’clock in the morning, that’s when folks would come “Upstairs.” Some people stayed in the rooming house “Upstairs” for

months at a time, but many would just get a room on Saturday night. On occasional Saturdays, their curiosity would get the better of them and they would pry their door open to see the people stumbling “Upstairs.” They would be fine-looking: dressed all sharp, wearing glittery things with their hats tilted to one side. The ladies had on dresses, and the men wore trousers with suspenders and shiny shoes. They smelled something like cologne, perfume, sweat and liquor all mixed together. When the kids were sure everybody was settled in some room or another they would sneak down the hallway, easy-footed, so they wouldn’t be heard, lean down a little bit and peek through the keyholes to see what they could see. In some rooms they saw folks fussing and fighting, in another they might see people half-dressed, but most of the time they would see people, “you know, doin’ it.” Wide-eyed, giggling and covering their mouths, they would run back to their room, jump in bed and pretend to be sleeping just before they figured their mother would be on her way up to look in on them.

This was “home” to Clara and her family for some years. They lived on the second floor of a two-story house, owned by a distant relative. A beer joint was on the first floor, and “Upstairs” served as rooming quarters. After leaving Clara’s father, her mother moved the family there and worked as a maid and a cook to earn their keep. Clara and her siblings would help her mother wash and clean after school and on the weekends. Clara has fond memories of living “Upstairs.” Life was “fun and easy” then.

Today, she sits before me, a 54 year-old African American woman, “rockin’ a tight wig,” (wearing a very fashionable hairpiece) big, gold, looped earrings, without make-up covering her smooth, soft-looking skin. She graciously extends a “let’s-connect-girlfriend” quality to our conversation, occasionally reaching over, with a flip of

her wrist, lightly tapping my knee when she wants to add emphasis to a statement.

Though I experience her as somewhat satisfied with her life, at times during our conversations, anger appears to rush to the surface as she talks about challenges she experiences in a world she knows is not arranged for her benefit.

Clara: It's racist out here! Becky, I am telling you, it is racist out here at State University.

Petitt: Can you share examples?

Clara: Well, first, me and a friend of mine went to this event sponsored by State University, and this man, we wasn't doing nothin' to him, he just started staring us down, real mean-looking. Then my friend I was with asked them, "What ya'll lookin' at? Why ya'll starin' at us like that?" And then this White man, he was with his wife, or his girlfriend, he said, "Ain't nobody lookin' at yall dumb-ass niggers!" Just like that. And my friend said something smart back to him, and he said, "Shut the 'f' up, you dumb nigger." And we didn't do nothin' to provoke that man. And other people standing around saw that, and they didn't say nothing.

Petitt: So, you just exchanged words, and then you went about your way or did anything else happen?

Clara: We just exchanged words. He kept callin' us "nigger this and nigger that" and then he bucked up to my friend, and when we saw wasn't nobody gonna help us, we said, "Let's just get outta' here before somebody gets hurt," because my friend, she got a temper, and she was about to go upside his head. So we just said, "Let's get outta here."

And then this one other time, in my building, I was going into the restroom. You know how the bathroom gets full sometimes--it had a line.

I had to use the restroom, and I don't care if somebody noticed me.

Now this girl .. I came out the restroom and, you know, no other restroom was open, just the one I came out of, other people were in the other ones, you know, they were occupied. I came out, and you know, that little White girl wouldn't go to the restroom I came out of? She waited till somebody else came out and then went to that one. And I noticed that, sure did. I called that girl all kinds of names to myself, <laughing>, wouldn't go in the one I came out of!

Petitt: Why do you think she didn't go to the one you were in?

Clara: I don't know. I don't know if it was because of being Black, or maybe she thought it wasn't clean. I don't know. Probably because I'm Black.

These White folks out here, I'm telling you. Like on the elevator, if .. sometimes with a student, or even a faculty, you know, or people in the office, they .. they don't want you on there with them--they snarl up at you .. snarl up at you or act like you're not even there. And they won't speak. Sometimes, I'll say, "Good morning," or if it's afternoon, I'll say, "Good afternoon," and they'll turn their head, stick their little pointy nose in the air.

Petitt: How does that make you feel?

Clara: Sometimes I get mad, and sometimes I say, "That's your loss. I don't care." You know, 'cause they don't know what kind of person you are. You know, they think they're better.

But if I let myself get mad all the time, I would just be, ooh, I don't know, upset all the time. Because stuff like that happens all the time.

Like, some people will be lost, like they don't know where they're going, and, now I've been in this building almost eight years, and like this White lady I work with, she only been here a few weeks, and people will walk up to her and ask her, and I'm standing right next to her, "Uh, ma'am, can you tell me where room such and such is?" And she won't even know. Won't even ask me, like don't know nothing. I get mad sometimes. I just walk away, let them be lost. That's what they get for not asking me in the first place. And sometimes, if they do ask me something, they don't say no "ma'am" to me, just start talking at me, don't call me by my name or nothing, and its right here on my shirt.

Petitt: What does your co-worker do when that happens? Does she ever say anything about that?

Clara: No. She'll just laugh and tell me I'm making something out of nothing. And I'll say, "Oh yeah. I'm Black. I'm dumb." I don't know where it's at.

And they'll put stuff on the bathroom walls too. I'm telling you, these people are prejudiced out here. Some restrooms have stuff on the wall, talking about "White Power." It'll say "State University pride is White Pride," and they'll write the "N" word. Yeah. "White power rocks,"

“All ‘N’s’ need to go back to Africa,” and I find it in a lot of bathrooms, not just one, not just mine.

Petitt: Do you usually find it in the men’s restroom or the women’s?

Clara: Men’s. Always the men’s. Never the women’s, in all the fourteen years I’ve been here, always in the men’s.

Then somebody came behind one of them one time and wrote back and said, “White power is gay <laughter>.” These folks crazy. Ain’t got nothing to do but write on the wall about some White Power out here. And we have to order some special stuff to get it off, so it stay up there for a few days. I hate that. If they use permanent marker, you know. And as soon as I see that, I try to get it off as soon as I can.

This one time .. this one time, it was so hard to get these words off this one bathroom wall. I scrubbed and rubbed till my arm and my wrist got sore, and I ended up scratching the door because it wasn’t coming off. I used this cleanser on it I wasn’t supposed to, you know, because it’s kinda’ coarse and I thought that would help me get it off, but it scratched it. I didn’t care. I was gettin’ that off that door that day, and it had a fist on there, too, said “White Power,” with a fist. But I sure did, I scratched that door. I didn’t care <laughter>.

Petitt: When is the last time you saw that written? Was it recent, like this year, 2005, or was it a while ago?

Clara: About a couple of months ago. They still write that stuff nowadays. It’s prejudiced out here, I’m telling you. You can just look in the classrooms. You don’t see nothing but White kids, classroom with three hundred seats in it, maybe one Black kid or one Hispanic kid in it.

Petitt: Does it scare you to know there are racist people around here?

Clara: Well, I know there’s racist people out here, but they don’t scare me. I know they’re racist--that’s why I don’t trust them. You can tell when they give you that fake smile. They’re racist. You know they’ll act like they’re smiling at you, but they’ll cut it off real fast <laughter>. It’s that fake smile. You know it ain’t for real. But I wouldn’t want my kid coming out here. I wouldn’t. That’s bad to say. But I wouldn’t.

Petitt: How come?

Clara: Look at the way they treat the ones that are here. Stuff they write in the school paper, little racist parties they have in the dorms out here, like I heard about some kids having a “ghetto party.” Uh uh, I wouldn’t want my kid coming out here.

And I just see how they look at you. Like the other day this lady, she looked at me, she like rolled her eyes and flipped her little blonde head around, like that <motions a swift jerk accompanied by a look of revulsion>, and I ain't even do nothing to her. Just act like she didn't even want to look at me. Now, my White co-worker, she'll speak to her and talk to her and stuff.

Petitt: Does it make it hard for you to be here when you get all these messages that you're not wanted here?

Clara: I'm here to do my job and get paid, so I don't care how they feel about me.

But if they'll come in my face, you know, call me names to my face, shoot, I got some names for them too <laughter>.

And this .. this is the last one I'm gonna tell you about how prejudiced they are out here, because I see you have a list of some more questions you probably want to ask me <laughter>. This one lady, this one lady, on my floor, she .. she got a grandbaby that's mixed, you know, half Black and half White. And .. uh, at first, she had this picture of her grandbaby up. The little boy that's mixed. She had his picture up for a while, and then one day I found it crumpled up in the trash. She had thrown it away. She is prejudiced. Then in the same frame she took that picture out of, she put up a picture of her all-White grandbaby. And she never put up another picture of that mixed baby. Sure did. These people out here prejudiced. And then they try to smile at you and carry on.

Petitt: So how is it you came to work at State University?

Clara: My sister who works out here in Custodial told me to come and apply, and I did. Got the job the same day. I had worked other places cleaning, here and there, you know, cleaning apartments and buildings; but then I came out here, and I've been here ever since.

Petitt: Aside from the racism you experience, how would you describe working here?

Clara: It's alright. It's work. Can't do that much better since I just finished high school.

It's some nice people out here. A few good people.

But most of the time, folks go creating work for you to do.

Petitt: What do you mean?

Clara: Like they create work for you. Well, first, like, insert day, that day is hard on us.

Petitt: What is “insert day”?

Clara: Insert day is when they insert these little loose advertisements in the school newspaper and, when you open up the paper, they fall all out on the floor and stuff. Whoo, those days are hard on us! We walk around picking up those little papers all day long. Today is insert day. On your way out, just look around. I bet you’ll see them laying all over the floor. Ooh, I hate insert day--that’s a bad day. Especially in the classrooms, you got to bend, bend, bend, picking up those little magazines.

And sometimes they’ll stuff the commode with them. They think that’s funny, yeah, put them in the commode and stop the commode up. Fill the commode with paper.

Petitt: Why would they do that?

Clara: ‘Cause they think that’s funny. I don’t know if they do it for us, for custodial, just a joke, or what. I don’t know.

And in the restrooms too, sometimes you go in there and they got all this tissue around the commode. I don’t know what that’s for. Is that for germs or what? You know, for real, they got tissue all over the seat <laughter>. You go in there and it’s thousands of them tissues all around the seat and some done fell on the floor. What is that for though? You think they tryin’ to protect their behinds or what? <laughter>.

Petitt: Probably.

Clara: That’s silly to me. Can’t catch no germs just sittin’ your behind on the toilet seat. But, now, you can catch something pickin’ up folks’ snot rags. I don’t pick up no snot rags.

Petitt: Where do you find snot rags? On the floor in the bathrooms?

Clara: No. In peoples’ offices. Some people throw their little snot rags on the floor and think you should pick ‘em up. I hate that.

Petitt: So if you come across a snot rag, you just leave it there on the floor?

Clara: Yeah. I don't pick up nobody snot rags. I don't. And if I get in trouble, I don't care.

Petitt: Don't you have gloves?

Clara: Yeah, but I still .. I don't pick 'em up. I don't care.

Petitt: How do you know they're snot rags?

Clara: Huh? How do I know? 'Cause the tissue is all closed up and stuff. And some people, you wouldn't believe this, but some people do it on purpose. They do it on purpose to make you pick it up.

Petitt: How do you know they do it on purpose?

Clara: Because, when they do it more than .. more than one time, they do it on purpose.

Petitt: So, once, you think it may be an accident, maybe they just missed, but more than once, and they're doing it on purpose?

Clara: Yeah, uh-hum. Yeah. And that's true.

Petitt: Can you think of, maybe, any other reason they may miss the trashcan more than once? Like maybe if someone has a disability and they can't reach or something?

Clara: Well, you know everybody in the offices. You know who your people are, and you know if they got a disability or not. Nobody on my floor has a disability. I'm tellin' you, they do it on purpose .. on purpose to make you work. To me, that's what I think, to make you work. You supposed to work, but I'm saying, they just do it for meanness.

Petitt: And who usually does stuff like that? Men, women, students?

Clara: Women. Women in the offices.

Petitt: So, what's the worst thing you've had to clean?

Clara: Boo boo.

Petitt: You mean, like, number two?

Clara: Yeah, that's right. Number two, boo boo, shit, whatever you wanna call it. These folks just nasty out here.

In my building, we got some stairwells, and one weekend somebody had boo bood in all the corners of the stairwell, in the corners; and they had spread it down the rail, they smeared it on the wall, and then, and then, he had left his underwear at the bottom of the stairs <laughter> and some tissue where he had wiped his butt. Oh, that was the most disgusting. That's the worst we ever had. That was bad. All the way .. I'm talking all the way down the stairs <laughter>. I don't understand how he did that, I don't know, 'cause that was a lot of boo boo there, every corner in the stairwell. So it had to be more than one person. They thought it was funny, I guess, just piles of boo boo <laughter>.

Petitt: That's disgusting. So you had to clean the whole stairwell?

Clara: Yeah, it was stinky. Oh, you had to hold your .. you couldn't even walk in the stairway and breathe. But they called people over from other buildings to help get it up, 'cause it wasn't enough of us in my building to get it up fast enough before everybody gets here. The people who had to come over were mad.

But he probably laughed about it. He probably thought that was so funny, probably said to himself, "I bet some custodian is workin' now."

Petitt: Disgusting! You think it was a man because you found men's underwear?

Clara: Uh huh. Yeah, and they were full of boo boo, too. He was sick. He was sick whoever he was <laughter>.

Petitt: Did you say you thought it was more than one person?

Clara: I do. I think it was. I think it was more than one person. No one person can do all that <laughter>. Yeah, we used bleach. We used everything. Everybody in the building and some people from other buildings had to clean that stairwell that day. Just sick to my stomach, just smelling it and cleaning it.

Petitt: Who do you think would do a thing like that?

Clara: <leaning forward, whispering> Those White students <laughter>.

Petitt: White students? Why do you think that?

Clara: 'Cause, I think that's who's doing it. That's not the first time we found boo boo. That was just the worst time. Actually, we find boo boo all the time in places it ain't supposed to be.

I think it's those White students doing it, 'cause you don't find too many brothers that'll stick around for no nasty foolishness like that <laughter>.

Yeah, those White students are the ones playing pranks .. these White kids do--they're the ones that play the pranks really. Black students and Hispanic students, they're here to learn, get their lesson.

Them White kids think that's funny.

Folks just don't know the kind of stuff we have to put up with and don't pay us nothin' to keep this place clean, where folks can work and study and go to school. Don't want to pay us no more.

Petitt: Talk a little about your financial situation.

Clara: That's a big stress for me, Becky, it is. Money is tight. I'm married, but my husband don't work. He is disabled, so it's just my income--and I don't make no money. Can't buy things for my kids when they want, [and] that's hard on me. Hurts my heart. My house is falling down, don't have money to fix nothin' if it breaks, car breakin' down every other month, have to borrow the money to fix that--just everything is a struggle.

And I have gone to the food pantry to get groceries before--I'm embarrassed to say it though. But now I have done that before, shoot, if you just ain't got it, and you need to eat, need to feed your kids. I got family around here, but sometimes I'm too embarrassed to go ask them for stuff. But most of the time I do go to my family and my friends first to help me with stuff. Like I have some friends, and they helped me fix my car. And I paid them the money back little by little--sometimes, they tell me I don't have to pay 'em back. And they helped me get my medicine this one time when the payment went up real high at the beginning of the year. I had got sick, I had got sick, and I couldn't afford to get the medicine I needed. And my friends loaned--no, they gave--me around a hundred dollars just to get that medicine; otherwise, I don't know what I woulda' done, 'cause I just didn't have it. I didn't have the money to get my medicine.

And I used to .. used to .. you could come real early in the morning to park over way across the street in this vacant lot--you could park there for free, 'cause it costs too much to park up here on campus. It costs almost three hundred dollars just to park up here, and we don't make that kind of money, you know. You would have to come real early to beat the students, 'cause the students would park there too since it was free. But then, they took it over and put up some meters, and it was too

expensive to park there. Then we parked over by this church, where it used to be free a long time ago. Well, now they put up meters there, too, and it was mostly custodians parking there because we're the ones who get here really early in the morning, early enough to park there. And a lot of custodians were upset when they did that. And we can't park over by the restaurant--they have a sign there saying they'll tow your car, you know, customer parking only. Now I have to pay for parking, and that puts a real strain on me.

And then I have to find somebody in one of the offices, a friend of mine, to sign me up for the parking, because now you have to do it all on the computer, and we ain't got no computer at home. And we're supposed to have one in the supervisor's office, and we don't have a computer there either. And I'm glad they have it set up so they can take a little money out of your check every month to pay for your parking. If I didn't let them do that, that would be my whole check, there. I bring home four hundred and five dollars every two weeks.

Petitt: Is that enough money to live on?

Clara: No. 'Cause, like, in the summertime the electric bill will get up to three hundred dollars. In fact, it is three hundred in the summer because the air conditioner, you know, it's a window air conditioner, take all the electricity in the house. It's old. So that's one check there. Yeah, so then, you have other bills to pay: I got my, gas, telephone, car insurance, and then, you have to buy something to eat. That's one check. And, Lord, don't let nothin' break down or have something extra come up that I didn't know was comin' up, you know, something that come up on you, like a bill or something you weren't expecting to have to pay. Lord, Lord, Lord. That makes for some hard times there. Like right now, right now, my roof is leaking. When it rains outside, it rains inside my house, and ain't nothin' I can do about it. I can't afford to get it fixed. I just put a bucket up underneath where it's raining. And, like if it starts to rain and I'm at work or something .. lot of times, like if somebody comes over, I'll move the bucket 'cause I'm embarrassed, and, like if I forget to put it back, when I get home, my stuff is soaking wet. Just have to throw some things away, and it makes a lot of big water bugs come in the house. And I can't get insurance on it. They won't let me put insurance on the house; they say it's too old and got too many problems. And, ah, let's see, what else, oh, I have to give my .. and I have to give my baby two dollars for lunch every day.

Petitt: Have you looked into getting free or reduced lunch for your baby?

Clara: I tried. I tried to get it free, but it's reduced. We have to pay two dollars every day. They say I make too much for him to get it free, and I don't

make nothin' but eight hundred and ten dollars a month. That's what I take home. I think they figure it on the gross, and that ain't fair. I don't take gross home.

Petitt: How much do you think you would need to be paid to get by? And what do you think you deserve to be paid for the work you do?

Clara: For being out here fourteen, going on fifteen years, I think I oughta be makin' more than seven dollars and somethin' an hour. I oughta be makin' at least eight, eight seventy-five by now. That's what I think.

But my supervisor, she's a Black lady; I think she is harder on me than she is on the White and Spanish ladies. She never gives me a raise. And she will call the White ladies that work for her "Miss, so and so," and she just calls me "Clara," you know, by my first name, like that. I think she .. maybe she don't want people to think she is showing favoritism toward me because we're both Black, or something. But she sure is way nicer to the other ladies, the Spanish and the White ladies, than she is toward me and the other Black ladies.

And even if, even if they, like this one Spanish lady was talking back to my supervisor, and she just let her talk back to her and didn't say nothing.

And I'll tell my supervisor, "Don't let her talk to you like that. Do something to her. Say something, you know."

But she won't say nothing to them, just let them walk all over her. But let that be me, she'll write me up and get me in trouble so fast.

Petitt: Why do you think that is?

Clara: Why she won't tell them nothing? 'Cause she scared of losing her job. Like, she think the Black people will just take it, but she's scared those other people will go to the office on her, especially the White people. She's scared of them.

Ain't too many White ladies work with us, but the ones that do she just let them act any kind of way toward her. But she, she don't give no respect to me, and I'm older than she is.

Sometimes we talk about her though, talk about her behind her back about the way she treat us Black ladies out here. Look like her job just done gone to her head, and she forgot where she came from.

Won't give me no raise and got us doing .. now .. shoot .. now you're doing double work, you know, since we've lost so many people. And now you're so busy, you can't get nothing done right, because you gotta .. you know, you're trying to keep up. I'm glad they don't do inspections no more.

Petitt: You had your work inspected?

Clara: Yeah, all the time, used to. They would walk around and check your areas, like every month. But now they don't do that anymore, because of the cuts. They know we don't have enough people to keep the areas up. Yeah, but they used to come and look up high, check your corners, check every corner, look at your high and low dusting, and they would check your restroom, the paper towel dispenser, make sure there's no dust in them. And they would check your offices to make sure that the floors were kept up, used to, but not no more.

One time I got a bad inspection. But, um, I knew I had cleaned that office, but I got written up for it this one time. I had cleaned the office and then the maintenance men had been in there and they had .. they went up in the ceiling, and they had wasted something from the ceiling on the filing cabinet. And they said that I hadn't dusted. And it came from the ceiling. The maintenance men did it, but they didn't believe me. And I just re-cleaned it.

Petitt: It sounds like you've had some pretty unpleasant experiences. Have any good things happened to you? Any positive experiences?

Clara: I have met some of the nicest people out here. Some good people, some people I've made friends with, and some students who still keep in touch with me. They call me "Miss Clary," the students, they'll call me "Miss Clary."

I had a barbecue at my house for some students in my building one time. They were just hanging around saying they were homesick and looking all long-faced. And I told them, "Y'all come on to my house one weekend." I had gotten my income tax check, and I barbecued for them. They sat around playing dominoes and stuff. They had a good time. They were just missing their mama's home cooking, so I cooked for them, and I would bring them cookies sometimes.

And I have this one friend in my building now, she'll help me with my parking. And I had one friend when I worked in another building--I liked her a lot. She helped me get my oldest child into college. She told me to bring my kid up here to campus, and I did. We went to her office, and she helped us with the financial aid papers and stuff. And she told

us about that program where once you get into college you can work, and .. um .. what you call that .. uh .. work study .. you know, to help us out financially. And sometimes if I need my check stub printed off, I'll go ask my friends, or, like, if I need something typed up or if I need a copy or something. Yeah, I have met some good people out here.

Some of them give me good gifts for Christmas. Like this one lady I was really good friends with, she gave me one hundred dollars, just by herself. Other people would give me, like, twenty dollars here, twenty dollars there.

And in this other building where I used to work, I liked it a lot there. Me and some of the people there, we would just stand around joking. We were all friends. You know, it was like I wasn't even no custodian, the way they treated me.

Petitt: What is a custodian treated like?

Clara: You know, when you're not even seen. You're invisible. You're treated like you're not even there.

But these people were my friends. When they got ready to move me .. move me to another building, my friends wrote every letter in the world to try to keep me there. They fought hard to keep me. But when I went to my supervisor's office to see if the letters had worked, my supervisor--she was a Black supervisor--she just laughed .. she laughed. She was sitting there, tapping her foot and laughing, and she said, "Yeah, your little letters didn't do nothing for you." And she laughed and was pattin' her foot. But guess what? They moved her the same time they moved me. They sure did. And I was glad that happened to her, too.

But, yeah, they wrote about five or six letters. They wrote a lot of letters, but, see, they didn't write the right .. see .. when they wrote, they didn't write to the right people. They wrote to people right above my supervisor. They should have written to the higher people, see.

Now I know. Now I know who they need to write to if they want to keep them from moving me all the time. I've finally figured it out.

Clara relishes this newfound, important piece of information. Having it, she feels a modicum of control in her work world, but she knows she can never outmaneuver all of the systems that create hardship in her daily life. Her survival system includes securing allies, conserving energy (otherwise, she would "be mad all the time"), doing whatever is

necessary to “make-do,” and dancing, of course. “If you’re still gonna be around this weekend, I’m having a party,” she says to me. “You can come if you want. We’ll just be hanging out in my front yard, under the moonlight, dancing and havin’ a good time.” Her eyes widen with excitement and her soul seems a bit lighter when she mentions “dancing.” I get the feeling “dancing” frees her soul and calls forth memories and feelings of the “fun and easy” days of her youth spent “Upstairs,” when she is surrounded, encouraged, and celebrated by people who love her.

Diane

“It’s Tough Being Poor.”

Diane: It was hard growing up poor. Really hard, because you didn’t have clothes like everybody else. My cousin always handed me down clothes, so I had to stay REALLY thin <laughter>. No matter what, I had to stay thin if I wanted clothes to wear. You never got anything new from the store. At Christmas time you would get shoes. It’s tough being poor. It really is tough being poor. Most people wouldn’t wear hand-me-downs anymore, but we did. And we were proud of it, because that’s all we had.

Petitt: Talk a little more about that.

Diane: Not having the clothes, I mean you couldn’t go to the movies, just didn’t have anything. In our house, we had one light bulb in the middle of the room. We did without a lot of things. When we were little, we had outdoor toilets. We didn’t have all the plumbing inside. We felt rich when we got plumbing inside the house. I was pretty good-sized then.

At school, you’d be ashamed. Like they would have better lunches and stuff.

Petitt: What would they have for lunch? And what would you have?

Diane: They would have store-bought bread. We had home-made bread or whatever we could fix at home. They didn’t have that; they had fancy sandwiches, with chips and stuff. We didn’t have that.

Petitt: So you were ashamed of your lunch. Were there other things you were ashamed of?

Diane: A lot of things. They'd look at you, all the children, kind of make fun of you when you didn't have what they had or you didn't wear what they wore. Children can be cruel, very cruel <crying>. You'd just have to have been there to see them picking and poking fun and telling little jokes about you.

Petitt: They teased you for being poor?

Diane: Yeah <crying>.

Petitt: How did you respond to that?

Diane: I cried. At home.

Petitt: Why at home?

Diane: Couldn't let them get the best of you.

Petitt: Did your teachers ever protect you?

Diane: Sometimes. A little bit. But not really. Usually, they would just turn their backs.

Petitt: Do you still carry the pain of that experience?

Diane: Yes. I remember.

Petitt: When we were talking a bit ago, you said you struggled financially throughout your adult life and that you still struggle to make ends meet today. Have you ever sought public assistance or anything like that to supplement your income?

Diane: Oh, no! Oh, no! No, no, no!

Petitt: Why not?

Diane: I just don't believe in that as long as I can work. You don't ask for help. I mean, I just . . . I don't do that.

Petitt: Even if what you're making is not enough money to put food on your table, you don't feel comfortable going to the food pantry?

Diane: I'm not going to ask for help! No!

Petitt: Talk about that. Why not?

Diane: I'm not gonna be embarrassed. Oh, no!

Petitt: It would be too embarrassing for you to ask for help?

Diane: Yes. I will not do it! Uh-huh. Shoot. No. I'll cut that bean in half and eat a little longer <laughter>!

Petitt: You would rather cut a bean in half than go and ask for help?

Diane: Dang right <laughter>. Shoot!

Petitt: <long pause>.

Diane: Well, like, I'm already doing custodial work. They put us down like we're low-class anyway.

I'm not going to put myself downer -- downer <laughter> -- English, Diane, English! You know. I'm proud that I can work, and I'm proud of being a custodial worker because it's work. Good, honest work.

And, no, I don't want people talking about me. Standing up there in line for government groceries <laughter>.

Petitt: So for you it's about your dignity?

Diane: Yeah. I mean, you know, yeah.

Petitt: I understand.

Petitt: So how do you work with the money you have? Do you make sacrifices because you don't make enough money? Because you talked about health issues. You said that when you have to pay for your medication, when you have to go in to see the doctor and stuff like that, you have to let something slide. Talk about that. How do you decide what you let slide?

Diane: Well, you have to get your basics. I mean, besides the bills that have to be paid, your utilities, and, you know, you've got to have certain things and you know that. So that's the first thing you do. Then you figure out how much more you've got, then you got your doctor bills. Then you see just what you can do and what you can't do with that little bit. And most of the time you do without clothes, you know, buying extra, you know, clothes. Or, you know, you figure out how much you've got to go to the grocery store and that's what you go spend because that's all you've got.

Because I'm not going to put nothing back uh uh! I'm not going to be embarrassed <laughter>.

Petitt: <Laughter>.

Diane: I've seen people get up to the register and go, "Now I've got to put this back and, let me see, I got to put that back." And, no, Honey, uh uh! No. No. No <laughing>.

Petitt: <laughing>. You are too funny.

Diane: I can't do that.

Petitt: You don't want to get up to the grocery counter and have to put an item back?

Diane: No!

Petitt: So how do you calculate as you shop? Do you have a calculator or do you just keep it in your head?

Diane: I've got a pen and paper. And I can tell you almost to the penny. There are no surprises when I get to the counter!

Petitt: How much do you typically have for groceries every month?

Diane: Oh, I don't know, I never thought about it. It's never the same. I mean, because some months are worse on doctor bills because my husband has doctor bills, too. Everything's different. It's never the same.

Petitt: Is there an average amount you typically have available for groceries? Like, once you get everything all taken care of, what's left for you to use for groceries and stuff each month?

Diane: No. I mean, it's true. I mean, like, my check, it'll be like four hundred and thirty something dollars and my husband's is about the same thing. And you put it together, that ain't nothing. I mean, that's every two weeks. So that's like eight hundred dollars or so every two weeks. And that's no money. By the time you pay all the doctor bills, you know. I don't know. I mean that's buying everything, toilet paper and everything.

Because you have to have soap. You have to have shampoo. You have to .. I mean, you've got to keep clean or you couldn't work with the people, you know.

And you've got to eat. It's not a whole lot of money. It's just not a lot of money. And I watch sales. So I never know exactly what the grocery bill is because I'm always trying to buy something that's the cheapest I can get and trying to make it till the next paycheck, you know. So I don't know if I could ever really put a dollar figure on it. But there's not a lot of money.

Petitt: So you make \$7.45 an hour, and you and your husband are barely getting by. How much money do you think you would need to make to be able to have enough to be okay, to not be financially strained?

Diane: I really don't know about that. I may never. But before I get a raise, we need more help, you know <laughter>. I mean that. That's the truth.

I mean I've done without so long. I can do without a little longer.

Just get us some help!

Petitt: So you'd rather have them replace the people you've lost and have more help cleaning the building than have, say, a dollar raise?

Diane: Probably. I mean you're used to already eating like you're eating.

I mean yeah, we all need the money. I mean that's no lie, but right now we're so short-handed. Nobody would understand until they're in here.

Petitt: So you're still not comfortable saying a dollar figure? You're not comfortable sharing an amount you think you should be paid for the work you do and so that you have enough and don't have to struggle to make ends meet?

Diane: What's enough?

I mean, I haven't had any more, so I don't know what's enough.

You know, I've never been burdened with a load of money <laughter>, so I can't tell you what would be enough to where you could go into the store and buy the meat you really want and buy you a pair of shoes and not think about what I'm going to do without next week, you know? And, Lordy me, if they'd be name brand, it'd be even tougher <laughter>.

Diane wept as she shared pains of poverty during her childhood and laughed as she talked about the pain of her financial need in adulthood. I didn't cry with her

because, as I wrote in my Reflexive Journal, “*I needed to maintain my composure to get through the interview.*” I allowed myself to laugh with her, however. Diane’s joking and going to pieces about the painfully funny aspects of poverty reminded me of the summer days I spent with my maternal grandmother who lived in “the projects.” For entertainment, I would join groups of Black neighborhood kids in “playing the dozens” (Lefever, 1981). In this mean-spirited, “ritualized verbal contest” (p. 73), when we were certain we had a sufficient audience, in whose presence we could appropriately affront and embarrass our opponent, we would volley insults back and forth. Most often they were jokes about the other person’s mama and, even more frequently, about how poor she was.

Yo’ mama so poor, when I saw her kicking a can down the street, I asked her what she was doing, she said “Moving.”

Yo’ mama so poor she went to McDonald’s to put a milkshake on layaway.

Yo’ mama so poor, I saw her sittin’ on the corner with a bunch of roaches singin’ “We are family!”

- Original Source Unknown

I thought it was funny then, but I don’t think it is funny today. I realize now, I was Diane’s tormenter. My behavior was especially injurious because I did not live in the neighborhood. When my mama came to pick me up after she left work, I went to my “nice” house in the “nice” part of town. My behavior was hurtful to my playmates because poverty was a very real experience for them. And while I didn’t know it at the time, my behavior was even more harmful to me, as I was taught to believe I was “better” because my immediate family was able to keep poverty at a slight distance.

I also didn't know back then that the face of poverty could be White. Diane is a White, simple-seeming, but very complicated woman in her late 50's. Our interviews were conducted immediately following her work day, so she was still dressed in her uniform, which bore her first name on the upper chest pocket. She also wore comfortable-looking tennis shoes and tiny gold earrings. She has large, swollen hands—a manifestation of an illness she lives with that has no name and no cure. She believes she may have contracted the illness on the job at State University. Doctors “won't specifically say what it is because of lawsuits and stuff like that,” she says and continues, “I never said I want money or anything from anyone. I just don't want to hurt.” She will only take the medication she is prescribed when the pain becomes unbearable because the pills are “strong” and “habit-forming.” Her blonde hair, barely showing three or four strands of gray, is pulled back into a ponytail, making her wrinkle-free, make-up-free face fully visible. Her eyeglasses, yellowed around the rims with age, frame her striking, curious, communicative, blue eyes. When she talks, she appears wary of allowing her teeth to be seen; her lips completely cover them when she speaks and her hand conceals them when she laughs. She describes herself as “restless” and proudly proclaims that she never watches television because “there is always so much to be done. TV eats away at your time when you could be getting something accomplished,” she notes.

With a gracious spirit, a tender heart, ready laughter and tears, she shares pieces of her journey to today:

Diane: We grew up with gardens. We raised everything we ate; we didn't buy groceries too much. We canned everything. We milked cows, made butter, churned it--we did everything.

Petitt: You did that?

Diane: Yes. I can milk a cow <laughter>.

Petitt: And you can make butter?

Diane: Yes. And I can make cheese. All I need is a cow now in my backyard, and I could go. My mom taught me that. She taught me how to make butter, cottage cheese, yogurt, regular cheese, everything. It just depended on what you wanted to do with the product. She taught me everything. I'm grateful to my mom. I knew I could make it no matter what because when you learn from scratch-scratch, you know you can always make-do. She taught me scratch-scratch.

Petitt: Where did the cows come from? Did your family purchase them?

Diane: Oh, we raised cows. You only used the milk for stuff, and then we sold them.

You didn't eat beef because that was the "rich" stuff.

The only thing you ate was chickens or pigs. Beef was um .. you just raised 'em for milk and cheese, and you had some that you could sell. But beef was something you couldn't afford to eat.

Petitt: What else did you raise?

Diane: Oh we raised everything. Turkeys, and ducks . . . Lordy, we raised a lot. We had "Old McDonald's Farm" for awhile.

Petitt: Talk about that. Did you get to go feed them and stuff?

Diane: What do you mean "get to"? You had to. We had to feed and take care of them in the morning and afternoon. And when you got home after school, you had to, too, whether you had homework or not. When it was raining, you still went out there and got your cow.

Petitt: So taking care of the farm came before school and homework?

Diane: Yeah. Because that's what we lived on. No matter what, you had to do your chores.

Petitt: So it wasn't fun for you?

Diane: Zero fun. It took forever to churn butter. You started working around the house when you were tall enough to reach the cabinet. And you'd get in trouble if you didn't do what you needed to do.

Petitt: What would happen if you didn't do your chores?

Diane: Well, you knew daddy would come home <laughter> and, if you didn't have your chores done, he was um . . . likely to pick up a board or almost anything and use persuasive methods.

Petitt: Persuasive methods?

Diane: Yeah. We got spanked, but the worst thing we'd get was either corn in a croaker sack, like, the pointy little things would stick out of the sack or a split log. They would make you kneel on it, and the little pointy things from the corn or the wood would poke and cut your knees.

Petitt: Oh my.

Diane: You'd have to kneel on it and have to stay on it for so long. Like "time out." Except "time out" hurt.

Petitt: And you actually experienced that?

Diane: Oh, I got to try them both out a few times <laughter>.

Petitt: That sounds awful. Was there other abuse in the home?

Diane: Yeah. My daddy was on the mean side. He always had this meanness sort of in him, but I think it got worse as he got sicker. It was like every night, you could never go to bed without some hitting, some fussing and lots of bad words. And he would hit on my mother.

Petitt: What was that like for you, growing up with violence?

Diane: Oh, it's hard on anybody when there's violence like that. You can't ever rest at night because you never know when he's gonna come in and just, you know, slap you, or you never did know. A lot of times he'd even take out shot guns and stuff and be sitting in the kitchen.

When I was little, <crying> I had gone in the kitchen to get some water, and he had a shot gun. And he said it went off accidentally, but it didn't. And it went through the cabinet. And . . . um . . . hurt a lot of dishes and stuff. And I never forgave him <crying>.

Petitt: So you think he shot at you on purpose?

Diane: Yeah. Because he saw me. I love my daddy. But you know you can never forgive somebody for that <crying>. So I left home at fifteen. Quit school and got married to my first husband at fifteen.

It probably wasn't the best decision, but there are a lot of things that make you do a lot of things in this world.

I think there's a lot of things; my father and different things that made you want to get away from home. Sometimes you think "is that why I did what I did?" And I think sometimes the answer is "yes."

That's why you can't tell people what you're gonna do and what you're not gonna do because you don't know.

In my first marriage, we eloped. We were married for almost 30 years and I had three children with him. But when I was with him, I stayed buckled up.

Petitt: What does it mean to "buckle up"?

Diane: You know . . . "whatever you say," just goin' along with it. He wanted me to stay home and be in the house all the time. It went on that way until I had my first little boy. I think I was 19 then. I was having nervous reactions. You'd be depressed, like four walls close in on you. There's only so much house cleaning you can do. I don't watch TV or anything. That's something I've never done--too much to do. And after I had the baby and stuff, I was just feeling nervous and crying all the time. I mean nothing really snapped or anything. I figured if I stayed in the house, something would have probably snapped, just being all cooped up. The doctor said maybe you just need to get a job, get out amongst people. He was right. I got out amongst people and started working. So I went to work, and I've been doing good ever since.

That's why I love to work. I work a lot.

Petitt: I want to come back to talk about work. But first, you said this was your first marriage. How did it end?

Diane: Do you know how you just get so tired, just really tired? I'd just had enough, and I unbuckled one day. He wanted to be waited on hand and foot. Like he would sit there and rattle his tea glass and you'd better fill it or, you know <laughter> . . . and he liked his socks put on every morning before he got out of bed. And if you didn't do it, he'd shove you around and stuff, yell and carry on. And one day I said "This ain't gonna cut it <laughter>." Because by then I had kids and the kids took time, and he still wanted me to do everything for him. I just had enough, and that's why I got my divorce. I unbuckled. I put my daughter on my hip and walked away with just the clothes on my back and the little money I had been putting away for myself for the day I was going to leave him.

Petitt: What was that like--the day you left him?

Diane: It was like being set free. I had my own apartment. Wasn't much of nothing, but I fixed it up real nice and it was like heaven. Starting over without him was very difficult sometimes. But I wouldn't, oh I wouldn't let anybody know that I was having problems or anything. But little old garage sales can do a lot for you <laughter>. And I'd make some garage sales. That's how I got things and fixed things up really cute. You can get some old things and make them very nice.

But money can only go so far and, when you're paying rent, trying to keep a broken down car running and just making sure you get your children fed, it's hard.

Petitt: How were you able to take care of all those things? Let's go back to your working.

Diane: I was still working at the factory. I started out as an entry worker, one of the few women working there, but I kept going up for the bigger paying jobs, heavier jobs. That's where the money was at. Mostly men worked in that area. The harder and heavier the workload, the more money you'd make. But you have to be able to do it. If you can't do it, they get rid of you. I pulled my weight.

I could keep up with the men, and outwork most of the men that were there. The guys didn't like that sometimes. But then they got pretty okay with me.

We had one fellow come in to go to work, and we were doing our work and the heavy lifting and he didn't make it to break time the first day. He said . . . he used some profanities that I'm not gonna say. And then he said, "Ain't no way I'm gon' stay here trying to kill myself doing this!" <laughter> and he left, just walked right out. I outworked that fellow <laughter>.

It was a hard job. But when you need the money to pay the bills, you do it.

They would laugh. When I first went to work there, I was kinda puny. But then I got so much muscle on me, nobody would mess with me. See, I'm strong as an ox. God blessed me with strength.

Petitt: Did you work with men that were mostly White or men of color?

Diane: Most of them of color. Not too many White.

Petitt: How did they treat you?

Diane: As long as I could do the job, they worked right along with me. I just kept working and working there for over thirty years. And then when that place closed, I came to work at State University. And I like it here. I like being around all the people.

I come in two hours early every single day to get started on my work because there is so much to do and we're so shorthanded.

Petitt: Are you paid overtime for the additional work?

Diane: No. They don't even know I do it. But I have to take care of my people on my floor. They tell us to only empty trash on certain days. But I can't do that. I still take care of my people on my floor. Plus, if you let that trash build up, you'd need a truck to get it out. It makes it harder on you in the end. So I take care of them and get their trash every day still. And if I get done in time, I go down and help with the big, downstairs area, you know, pitch in and help out.

Petitt: Is your hard work ever noticed or rewarded?

Diane: Yeah. I guess. I got "Custodial thing of the year" this one time.

Petitt: Congratulations. How did that happen? Who nominated you for that?

Diane: I really don't know how all that works. I don't know if it was the people on my floor or my co-workers. I doubt it was my co-workers. I don't know how it works and who can put you up for it. I just heard I won it.

But thirty minutes after I got back from the ceremony, my supervisor ruined it. When we came back, the supervisor called me in and said there was . . . there was some kind of um . . . charges filed against me. And I said, "What?" And she said this worker that used to be on my floor had filed some uh . . . charges against me. And I said, "Well let's go take care of it." I said, "Cause if it's something involving me, I don't like anything," 'cause I said, "It's not right." She says real nasty and kinda' mean, "Whenever I get ready and I come and get you, you know where we're going." And I said, "I'm not quite understanding this." I said, "Why can't we get it cleared up right now?" She said, "I have paperwork to do. You just go back to work, and then I'll let you know when I want you to come go with me down to the main office." And that's when I took it into my own hands. I had to talk to somebody. So I called my husband, he works out here in custodial, too, and he said, "Do what you have to do. Talk to the people." So then I called the head person over the whole, entire custodial area to talk to him. And his

secretary wouldn't let me talk to him. She gave me pointers on how to take care of it. She explained to me about the chain of command sort of thing, you know, you go to this person first, then this person next. And I said, "Oh, okay." I didn't know about this stuff.

And so then I started over with my supervisor's supervisor and she gave me the run-around too. She told me, she said, "Okay, I'll get back with you." And okay a week passed and she didn't get back with me. And they thought I was gonna just let it go, but it worried me so 'cause I've never done anything wrong. I've never taken anything from anybody or nothing. And I just wanted this cleared up. So I called her up again. And she brushed me off again. So that was the end of it. I just had to let it go. But it was like they were trying to buffalo me, scare me or hurt me or something.

Petitt: Did you ever find out any details?

Diane: No. I tried to ask my supervisor several times, and she kept telling me she had too much paperwork to do.

And when she first called me in her office to tell me, we were in the office alone. And I think she should've had someone else in there, you know, besides me. 'Cause she talked to me crazy. I wanted a witness.

I was just sick over it. I mean because anybody that I work with on my floor or anywhere, they know I don't have sticky fingers, and they know I'll help anybody in any way. If they're packing something, I'll help them. I come in early. I do little extra things for people. I try to be real nice with folks.

Petitt: And your supervisor confronted you thirty minutes after you came back from getting an award for outstanding performance? What's up with that?

Diane: I don't know. But they tried to hurt me. And they really hurt my heart, but they, you know, they didn't break me 'cause I've never done anything to anybody. The worst part was never knowing what it was. And waiting around for somebody to tell you something you did wrong. It just makes you sick.

And I even went and talked to one of the head people on my floor, and I asked her, was there any problem with me? And she said, "No." And she was real nice to me. I have wonderful people on my floor. And I thank the good Lord for that.

But they didn't break me. Didn't make me quit. I'm still working.

Petitt: Why do you think supervisors are so unkind sometimes?

Diane: Uhm . . . I don't know how to put this where it wouldn't hurt people's feelings. But uhm . . . some supervisors wanna show their power, but they're not really too smart <laughter>. I'm sorry. But they're not. And when you're not really smart enough, you can't, you can't uhm . . . I hate to say some of this stuff. They don't have the intelligence to deal with some of the things. I don't mean that in a disrespectful way. It's just that if you listen to some of the people try to give directions, you know, and you know that it's not coming from, you know, somebody smart who knows how to handle things. I hate to talk about folks, you know. But they just want the power, and they're not as smart as they think they are, but they don't want you to know it.

Petitt: Can you share an example?

Diane: Well, it's kind of funny. It's funny if it's not you involved. You just sit back and listen. Sometimes it's the language they use to try to tell you things; it's a lot of little things. And they'll try to tell you how to use a chemical, and you know it's wrong. Sometimes they don't get the measurements right because they can't add.

And you look over at your other co-workers and say "Mmm, did you hear that?" And we kind of laugh at her, but not where she can see us.

One time she had the dilution wrong and she messed this carpet all up and we had to go fix it, took hours.

You just have to sit there and pretend to listen to them but you use your own brain. Don't just jump because they say "jump," you know?

Diane survived this particular supervisor and in the seven years she worked at State University gave "110%" to "keep everybody happy." Shortly after our time together, her doctor ordered her to cease working, as her medical condition had worsened, and continued physical labor would dramatically reduce the quality of life that remained. Since she could not use her body to work any longer she would "just stay home, because when you don't have an education, there are not many other jobs you can get." When she shared this news, I recalled her response to working in her home earlier

in her life, having felt like the “walls were closing in on her,” and silently wished her peace and fortitude.

Though this is not how she envisioned her work life would end, she embraces the “good stuff.” She has God, love, a home, a good reputation, children and grandchildren who cherish her.

Commonalities Among Participants

As there are commonalities across their work experiences, so too are there similarities in their backgrounds and life experiences. With the exception of Martha, all participants were raised in intergenerational poverty; several have known profound poverty. As young girls, they each had to participate in the family’s subsistence farming, helping to cultivate food and resources necessary for daily living, without regular purchases at the local market. As young girls, Cleo, Clara, and Agnes, the three African American participants, picked cotton to help supplement their family’s income. As kids, they were all teased for being poor and for perceived manifestations of poverty written on their bodies, such as severely crooked teeth, eyeglasses held together with tape, or old, tattered clothing. Four of them—Cleo, Agnes, Clara, and Diane—lost their mothers at a very young age due to undiagnosed or untreated illness, inadequate treatment, or the inability to afford necessary healthcare.

Four of the six women, Cleo, Agnes, Juanita, and Diane, did not finish high school. Agnes, having left high school after the 11th grade, obtained a GED years later through a program offered at State University. All of the women have held a succession of low wage-earning jobs that were labor-intensive, including the cleaning of hospitals, diners, corporate buildings, nursing homes, parking lots, and private homes. They all

have or have had husbands and other relatives who work at State University in custodial or other service-related capacities. They have all experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives and as a result of this and other spirit-killing encounters, have made desperate decisions in search of safer ground. As was aptly stated by Diane, “There are a lot of things that make you do a lot of things in this world.” All over the age of 50, four of them, Cleo, Agnes, Clara, and Diane, are married to men who are disabled due to chronic health conditions for which they are receiving minimal medical intervention, if any, primarily because of financial constraints. Five of them are mothers and three are grandmothers.

Added together, these women have worked at State University approximately 99 years, and they all indicated a desire to work at State University until they retire. Diane, unfortunately, didn’t make it that far. Their life histories and encounters with adversity have helped them to nurture adroit survival skills—skills which they draw upon daily as custodial workers at State University.

State University

State University is a pseudonym for a Land Grant, Research Extensive institution located in the Southwest that opened its doors shortly after the era of slavery as an all-male military institution that began officially admitting women and African Americans in the 1960s. As a result of the prevailing ethos of the time of its opening, it was not uncommon for the highest ranking university officials to claim membership in the Ku Klux Klan, for the university to have student organizations called the “KKK’s” and the “Swastika Club,” or to have depictions of lynchings, blackface caricatures, and racially hostile messages throughout the school yearbooks.

When coeducation was first introduced, the campus community was receptive, though as women increased in presence and prominence, hostility toward them manifested to a considerable degree. Misogynistic messages were also conveyed in yearbooks, newspaper articles, and carried out through the university's most sacred traditions.

Today, State University is one of the largest campuses in the nation, with over 5,300 acres. The built environment is comprised of original buildings that were architecturally created in "classical revival style," with tall, fluted columns, recessed doors, and high ornamentation. Recent additions vary widely in architectural expression, with little attention to overarching campus-wide schema. The university literature, however, notes that its buildings have a collective purpose: To evoke a sense of community and shared meaning. When "students and faculty" (note the absence of staff) take in the "impressive grandeur" of the bricked, ornamented buildings, complete with etchings of animal heads, human figures, skulls, bones, and shields, as well as arched doorways, elaborate woodwork and bronze-plated building signage, this symbolic scenery is supposed to evoke and instill feelings of "school pride and reflect the spirit and quality of the students and faculty (note, again, the absence of staff) who inhabit the university²." Additional fixtures such as bronzed statues and framed wall portraits, both primarily displaying images of White men, commemorate former university leaders. These fixtures combine with other symbolic structures and behaviors to send a cogent and sometimes subliminal message about who belongs and who does not.

Nearly 60 thousand individuals, including faculty, staff, and students, study, live and work on the university campus. The institution offers a broad range of undergraduate

and graduate programs conferring degrees in over 140 fields of study, and the annual research expenditures exceed \$560 million. The university is also the largest employer in the community and has a reputation for providing stable employment at “competitive” wages.

State University describes itself as “financially healthy,” with an annual budget of more than \$1 billion and a recent capital campaign that netted over 1.5 billion dollars. Following the unveiling of the dollar amount raised in the campaign, the donors and university officials “paraded through campus to have a group photo taken of university officers and the generous benefactors.” The university has also cultivated charitable athletic patrons. Last year the athletic department reportedly raised over \$35 million.

The president earns over a half million dollars annually, the basketball coach earns over one million dollars, and the football coach earns over two million dollars. Senior faculty and senior administrators earn six-figure salaries. Recent financial priorities reveal a considerable investment in faculty and in the built environment. Millions of dollars were set aside to hire over 400 new faculty members over a five year period. More than \$490 million was invested in new construction and another 9 million in the renovation of a single building.

State University describes its culture as grounded in “patriotism,” “religious belief,” “political conservatism,” and “loyalty to one another and to the institution.” They are deeply committed to promulgating these values through extensive student orientation sessions that inculcate their idiosyncratic beliefs and practices. Those who enter and become deeply invested in State University values emerge as self-appointed guardians of these ideals, constantly reinforcing them and castigating those who treat

them with disregard. Many of State University's traditions are positive; they instill a sense of belonging (for some), foster commitment to fellow State University members, and involve community outreach, particularly when it comes to "helping fellow Americans in need."

Adherence to "tradition," however, by its very nature, suggests a resistance to change. An organization cannot change and remain the same—a palpable tension at State University. While shifting national and state demographics demand greater attention to diversity—which requires change—the "old guard," wielding considerable financial influence, resists such transformation of their beloved university.

Still considered a predominantly White institution (PWI), the university is more diverse today than it has ever been in its approximate 130-year history. The greatest degree of ethnic diversity, however, exists among its lowest paid employees. State University's most prevalent climate issue is racism, as reported in recent surveys of its faculty, staff, and students. Confederate flags and decals are prominently displayed in several residence hall windows and on the back of pick-up trucks and, within the past ten years, three nooses were discovered on the campus. In addition, it is rumored that the university is home to a secret White supremacist organization.

Though unique in its institutional mien, State University joins many of its academic counterparts in upholding long-established, deeply-cherished conventionalities of the academy. Universities have specific, institutionalized, formal and informal arrangements of power to which all who "join" are expected to adhere. For example, an unspoken expectation exists that those who earn doctoral degrees are addressed as "Dr. Last-name-here" in written and verbal communication. This earned accomplishment also

demands the respect of those in subordinate positions. There is no such expectation that deference is extended to a custodian for her or his life achievements. Furthermore, it would be unheard of to have either a faculty member or the custodian who regularly cleans that faculty member's office refer to the other as a "colleague." It is understood that, to be colleagues in the first place, everyone is in a position of equality (Caesar, 2007). The unspoken rule of this asymmetry is: more honor and respect (which translates to more privilege) is conferred on those privileged to obtain higher education, while those who have less education are accorded treatment deemed appropriate to their relative status. This inequity and the many other institutional, cultural and social arrangements of power embedded in the psyche, discourse, and attitudes that privilege dominant groups and oppress subordinate groups across class, race, and gender lines is the subject of this dissertation.

The History of Custodial Work at State University

State University's First Janitor

The first "janitor" employed at State University was former Black slave, Pete Robinson (a pseudonym), who was popularly known as "Uncle Pete" to all who occupied the campus during its formative years. He began working as janitor, chef, herdsman, and carpenter several years before the university officially opened its doors and is credited for laying the foundation and helping to construct the first buildings on campus as well as planting its first trees. Eventually settling into the role of Janitor's Assistant, he faithfully served the university longer than any other employee, working fifty-seven consecutive years during which he was "never late, not even once."

Uncle Pete and all other African American and Hispanic workers were required to carry a “Certificate of Identification” at all times while on university grounds. It read: “This certificate will be carried by the party whose name appears hereon and will be produced when directed . . . No householder, department, contractor, or individual will employ any Negro or Mexican in any capacity whatsoever on this campus unless they have this certificate. . . .” The certificate also provided space for personal information such as the employee’s name, the name of her or his employer, the individual’s employment capacity, the employee’s marital status, age, height, weight, ethnicity, gender, and a detailed “personal description.” Fine print along the bottom reads: “I certify that I am employed by the party or parties mentioned above and that this certificate has been clearly explained to me. And I understand that failure to produce this certificate when directed to do so by the inspectors of the college will cause detention and possible arrest.” Uncle Pete obeyed this rule unequivocally and was so well-trusted he is said to have “returned enough lost watches and jewelry to more than offset the total salary he was paid during his long service.”

When students first arrived at the university, they could expect to be greeted by the “good old slavery day darky” with a “low and gracious bow” as he escorted students and their belongings to their dorms via a horse drawn wagon. Uncle Pete was such a “jovial friend” to the students that he was frequently elected class officer of the students as a playful gesture of endearment. In several yearbooks, “there was no indication that this was an ‘honorary’ or ‘special’ appointment, leaving the impression that he was, in fact, class president.” He was “loved and talked about by generations of students” who would inevitably ask for him when they visited their alma mater. Students recalled being

forced to work under the supervision of Uncle Pete to “work off demerits” they had earned. This was a clear indication that cleaning and exerting physical labor in service to the institution was punishing, and the administration knew it. But the young men said “working with Uncle Pete made it bearable . . . he is humble, ignorant, but withal an inspiration.”

Pete Robinson rightly felt a sense of belonging at State University. He referred to it as “our college,” and he was so connected to the culture of the institution that subsequent janitors were officially called “Robinson Volunteers” and the annual dance held for the Black employees was called the “RV Hop.” As Uncle Pete aged, he became unable to perform his job duties but State University “kept the faithful old negro on the payroll” for some time thereafter. After his death he was eulogized in poetic tribute in the school’s yearbook. The poem boasted that during his employ, Uncle Pete “did the work of ten young niggers” and suggested that even in the afterlife, when the author would “slide clean into heaven,” Uncle Pete would “be there to greet and serve all free of charge³.”

Pete Robinson’s descendants have worked as janitors at State University for six successive generations. I located one fifth-generation individual, currently employed at State University as a “custodian,” a title that evolved from “janitor” at some unknown era. This individual, not a formal participant in this study, is determined to be among the last of the Robinson lineage to clean State University. In personal communication, Uncle Pete’s great, great grandchild noted stridently:

I want something better for my kids. I hope I’m the last to clean out here. Back then, my people used to call State University the “Plantation.” Ain’t much changed since then. No, Lord <shaking her head side to side>. I don’t want this for my kids.

Early Organization

During the latter part of the 1960s, all custodial employees were situated within one large university organization meant to address all facility-related matters including grounds-keeping and maintenance. For the purpose of this study, this organization is called the Division of Maintenance, which was, and still is, the largest non-academic unit at the university in terms of the number of individuals it employs, and within the division, the custodial branch has the largest number of employees. The early custodial workforce was exclusively comprised of African Americans. The custodial branch is responsible for supporting the academic mission of the university by providing clean facilities and has, as part of its written mission, a duty to “delight the customer.”

Employment Process

The initial employment process lacked structure. Many individuals were hired on the spot without formal application or interview and received no structured training to perform the job for which they were hired. New employees learned how to clean by watching and emulating the behavior of seasoned employees, a practice that would later reveal years of substandard, incorrect work left for newer employees, like Agnes, to undo and raise to proper cleaning standards.

New service workers were also required to undergo a criminal background check, a practice reserved exclusively for this group of workers in the early days. Once hired, they were on a “time card” system; a personalized time card kept record of their working hours as they swiped it through an automated machine which time-stamped the card at the beginning and end of each shift. All employees were paid twice monthly. If workers had automobiles they were allowed to park on campus free of charge. Circa 1970, the

university began to require a parking fee of employees who wished to park on campus. In 1980 the annual fee structure was: \$36 for “random” parking; \$48 for “reserved” parking; \$72 for a “numbered spot”; and an additional \$4 for duplicate registration for one additional vehicle. This unanticipated work-related expense encouraged custodial staff to seek free off-campus parking in the surrounding area. Many custodians traveled in carpool, sharing the cost of gas and parking fees. With this awareness, the administration provided advice on “courteous carpooling” in a 1987 departmental newsletter. The column encouraged those providing transportation to “keep up car repairs,” “keep your car clean (the last thing your passengers need is to get out of your car and discover that they are covered with dog or cat hair or that they have gum stuck on their clothes . . . Take time to vacuum your car and inspect it for cleanliness.” The advice column also encouraged carpoolers to “make an effort to get along with others [and not to] provoke arguments or heavy discussions” en route to or from work. Infantilizing advice of this nature is pervasive in university documents that are designed for service workers.

Uniforms

The custodial staff is also expected to dress uniformly. The year in which standardized, state-issued uniforms were implemented is unclear. However, photographs suggest this may have begun in late 1960. Uniforms, described in university literature as an “employee benefit,” also help to “clearly identify employees.” There have been many variations in uniforms over the years. At different points in time, custodians wore all-white uniforms or either a white shirt with darker colored pants or white pants with a darker colored shirt, a choice many custodians deemed unwise because as they cleaned

throughout the day, the uniforms accumulated dirt and stains. Some women tried to preserve uniforms by wearing aprons. One custodian is quoted saying: “I take pride in my uniform, and I want to keep it clean. Wearing the apron keeps the dirt off my blouse.” On the first day of employment, custodians were instructed to take their “certificate of hire” to the uniform department to undergo fitting for uniforms which they would receive within three to five days. Initially, employees were issued one uniform for every day of the week in cotton or polyester fabric, whichever they chose. Names have been displayed on the uniform in various ways. A local embroidery shop personalized shirts with the employee’s first name for some time and then the embroidery service was moved in-house as a cost-saving measure. Employee names have also been displayed through use of a variety of name badges and patches. During colder weather, employees were supplied with matching jackets or coveralls so they could stay warm and “maintain clear identification.” Uniforms were only replaced in case of emergency, a chemical spill, for example, and when women became pregnant and needed larger sizes. When the employment relationship was terminated, uniforms, deemed state property, had to be returned.

Responsibilities and Work Hours

Due to the breadth of campus facilities that require cleaning, custodial employees were assigned to crews that were deployed to specific areas which they clean on a fairly consistent basis. If one is assigned to Crew A, for example, she or he might be required to clean residence halls day after day, Crew B may be assigned to clean athletic facilities day after day, and the “Roving Crew,” as its name suggests, roves from building to building, within a specified area, to quickly “team clean.” In the earlier days, there was a

gendered division of labor. Men were required to perform the “heavy work,” which included moving heavy furniture when it was obstructing an area that needed to be cleaned, and they performed all stripping, waxing, and buffing of floor surfaces as well as carpet shampooing. Custodians were also responsible for cleaning the once artificial turf of the football field. They pressure washed the field, performed extraction, and vacuumed manually. It took 90 hours to go across the field one time.

Employee work hours have varied over the years. Initially, employees lived on campus and worked morning and evening; then they were employed as “day laborers,” expected to live off-campus and work during the day only. Later they were divided into day and night crews, with the bulk of cleaning occurring at night because their work area was unoccupied. Day operations involved cleaning residence halls and other facilities that were primarily used in the evenings. At one point, the day crew worked from 6:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., and the night crew worked from 4:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m. Later, the day crew hours were from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and the night crew hours from 5:30 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. In early 1990, the administration “tested a voluntary policy change” in custodial work hours. The new hours required custodial staff to work from 4:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. four days a week rather than 6:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. five days a week. This change, introduced without employee input, created dilemmas for employees who would have to wake up at 2:00 a.m., find child care that would begin during these early morning hours, and renegotiate carpooling arrangements. Fearing backlash, the custodial workers did not share their concerns with supervisors. Rather, they “congregated in the hallways to express concern amongst themselves⁴.” A professor, overhearing their grievances, intervened as an ally. He wrote a letter, attached a petition signed by seventeen of his

colleagues (not one custodial worker), and submitted it to the student newspaper for publication. After learning of the concern through the campus newspaper, the administration cancelled the program. With apparent disdain, the supervisor is quoted in the student newspaper saying, “It was voluntary. Workers agreed to try out the hours before the decision was made . . . I am disappointed to have read about the workers’ unhappiness in the newspaper. I encourage anyone who is unhappy with a policy to call me up personally to respond⁵.” This angry, knee-jerk response lacked in professionalism and responsive to employee needs. It seemed never to have occurred to them to question why employees did not feel comfortable approaching the administration with their concerns, and there was no mention of their ever having convened the employees to engage them in further decision-making around this issue.

Training, Development, and Recognition

Formal training of the custodial staff began in early 1970, though it was fairly inconsistent. Training would occur for several consecutive years and suddenly stop without explanation. Once employee training was stabilized, new custodians were assigned to the “Training Crew” to learn to apply pesticide, use equipment properly, to apply, measure, and mix cleansers correctly, and to clean and maintain every type of facility on campus. They were (and still are) trained to clean all facilities because, in the words of university administrators, those who control custodial work assignments “move custodians around a lot, which means they need to know how to clean no matter where they are placed⁶” on a given day.

In the early days, individuals were identified and selected for promotion by their immediate supervisor. There was no application and no interview. As the custodial

branch continued to become more formalized in the 1970s, State University implemented promotion processes. If an individual wanted to move from Custodial Worker I to Custodial Worker II, that employee would be required to complete an application and participate in a formal interview. To move from Custodial Worker II to Custodial Worker III, one had to have a general equivalency diploma (GED) or high school diploma as well as a Texas motor vehicle driver's license, because Custodial Worker IIIs were occasionally required to drive a university vehicle. To move to the level of Custodial Worker III, they were also required to participate in the "Advanced Custodial Maintenance" program. This was a self-paced, home study program, where a Custodial Worker II, nominated by her or his supervisor, would be eligible to participate in the program, which promised to "build and reinforce leadership qualities." The course consisted of five units: Power and Equipment, Carpet and Fabric Upholstery Care, Restroom Care, Cleaning Chemicals, and Floor Care. It is worthy of note that these five units appear to focus on upgrading technical job knowledge. None of the units mention "leadership training" though it is a stated outcome of the program.

The Division of Maintenance was the first university unit to offer employees the opportunity to earn a GED while on the job. Classes, taught by university faculty members, were offered night and day, during employee work hours, though employees were expected to make up the time they were in class. The Division of Maintenance celebrated the accomplishments of program graduates by arranging a graduation ceremony, complete with caps and gowns. Graduates are quoted in the division's newsletter saying, "This has really boosted my self confidence. I can do anything now!" and "I feel so much better about myself." One employee, 65 years old at the time she

received her GED, said: “I had always told myself that before I die I want to get my GED, and now I’ve got it!” A supervisor noted, “My employees who are enrolled in the GED class are working harder and faster and it is easy to see they are gaining a lot of self-pride.” It was a thriving program with clear benefit to both the individual and university, yet it has been inconsistent, offered off-and-on, with no public explanation for the off periods.

Another initiative that showed benefit but is no longer offered was routine “employee recognition” facilitated through a monthly division newsletter and at the division’s quarterly meeting. The newsletter promoted employee accomplishments, highlighted employees and teams of the quarter, and shared births, marriages, and information that kept employees abreast of division and university matters.

The “Quarterly Custodial Meetings” created opportunities for management and employees to come together for the dissemination of information and celebration. Hams were given as door prizes; the “Custodian of the Quarter” was honored for superior work performance; the “Outstanding Crew” was awarded based on least number of work absences; and individuals were rewarded for a six-month perfect attendance record. Over the years, outstanding employees were awarded with certificates, briskets, sirloin roasts, potted plants, envelopes of money (\$5), pencil sets, and vanity sets. During the quarterly meeting that fell just before the Thanksgiving break, the grand prize for superior performance was a live turkey.

Early Work Environment

From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, custodians had more freedom in their work environment. Working mostly at night with little surveillance, they completed

their work, in the order they deemed appropriate, at their own pace, as best they could with little to no training, and had spare time to socialize and connect with co-workers. As noted by Cleo, they could “sit outdoors on their lunch breaks” and “barbeque on the outdoor pits.” Agnes noted they even had time to style hair, take naps, and cook. They didn’t limit cooking to the available microwave ovens; some facilities had complete kitchens with conventional ovens, to which they had unregulated access. They cooked stew, chicken, fish, roast, meatloaf, ribs, ham, smothered pork chops, chicken-fried steaks, corn bread, collard greens, macaroni and cheese, yams, cabbage, mashed potatoes and gravy, red beans and rice, green beans, potato salad, and desserts. They said grace before each meal and then dined together in fellowship on a regular basis. If there was a lounge area with a TV, they would gather to watch a TV program, or go outside for rest and recreation. One male custodian who “played a mean harmonica” (meaning, he played the harmonica exceptionally well) would occasionally be joined by a co-worker who played guitar. Students who lived in nearby residence halls would gather around to listen to their music. They enjoyed the harmonica player’s talent so much that they invited him to participate in their annual Parents Day talent show, which he won year after year.

Lest it appear these early employees were irresponsible and unaccountable, bear these two facts in mind: first, according to Cleo and Agnes, the work they were expected to do was completed prior to engaging in other activity; second, and more importantly, the administration created and fostered this work climate. Thus, responsibility is shared among employer and employees.

Working nights, the custodial staff observed events unseen in the light of day. They saw homeless people sleeping in buildings at night. They witnessed the breaking of curfew, and saw students “doin’ it” in classrooms, stairwells, bathrooms, and many other public spaces that were typically vacant by night. They also saw student initiations taking place at night, fights, and “lots of staggering-drunk students trying to make their way to their dorm rooms.”

Another State University-initiated activity that took place from late 1980 through late 1990 was the “Custodial Competition.” Similar to the “RV Hop,” the administration noted that the Competition was offered as “entertainment for custodial staff.” State University custodial teams competed against custodial teams from four neighboring universities. The host site rotated among participating institutions. In competition for a trophy, photo, and “the ability to gloat,” Cleo and Agnes recall the following competitive events:

Tissue Toss: “A toilet seat was mounted onto a small trash can with the lid up. And you had to throw a roll of toilet tissue in, like shooting hoops. You had to get it inside the trash can without the toilet seat lid falling down. If the lid fell, that’s all the tissue you could throw. And you won based on how many rolls of toilet tissue you got into the trash can.”

Soaked Sponge Relay: “You had about five people lined up one behind the other. You had a bucket of water in the front and you had an empty bucket in the back. And they would have to take the sponge and dip it in the front bucket of water and then pass it over the shoulder to the person behind them without looking back or turning around. Then, the last person that got the sponge would wring the water in the back bucket and then pass the sponge back to the front. The goal was to use the sponge to get as much water as you could from the front bucket to the bucket at the back of the line. The team that ended up with the most water in the back bucket won that game.”

Peanut Herding: “Sometimes they would use those fake Styrofoam peanuts and sometimes they would use real peanuts. They would put about 25 peanuts on the floor and you had this obstacle course that you had to drive the peanuts through with a 24-inch dust mop, not losing any peanuts and not going over the

boundaries. And they would judge how many times you went over the boundary and how many peanuts you left. And it was timed. All the races were timed.”

Buffer Drive: “They used the same obstacle course as they did with the peanut herding, but with this one, you drove the buffer through on high speed, and whoever did it the fastest won.”

Window Wipeout: “They would mark up the window with crayons, toothpaste, tape, peanut butter, whatever they could find; they would just really make a mess of the window. It was actually like the stuff we have to clean. This is what we do, you know. They would mess up the window and then we had to use rubber gloves and goggles, because that’s procedure if you were really cleaning with certain chemicals. And we had to use razor blade scrapers because you had to scrape all the tape off. And you just had to clean, clean, clean, clean to get the window as clean as you could before time ran out. Then they would go through and inspect for streaks and smearing.”

Mop Magic: “They would get the floor all dirty with ice cream, syrup, food and stuff, and you would have to go through with your mop and bucket and mop it all up as good as you could within the time limit. The person who had the cleanest floor at the end won.”

Trash Can Relay: “You had about five or six trash cans there, and you had to get some trash bags and put trash bags on every trash can, and the bags couldn’t be torn or ripped and they had to be put on properly, and then you tagged your teammate. Then that person would take all the bags off. And like the other ones, whoever finished first won.”

Room Inspection: “We didn’t do this one all the time. Just this one year the supervisors had a section where they would go into a room and mess things up and you had to go in and find discrepancies or deficiencies in the room and that’s how many points you got. However many things you found wrong, would get you so many points. Like an outlet would be broke, or there would be dust on a picture frame, food or trash down off in the couch, furniture not put back in place, trash not emptied, that type of thing.”

Petitt: How did you feel about participating in these events?

Agnes: It was fun until it became all technical and stuff. And it took up too much of our time practicing and getting ready for the event.

Cleo: I didn’t like it too much. I didn’t join no team cuz I didn’t wanna be runnin’ round’ actin’ silly in front of folks.

Petitt: Who judged the events?

Agnes: Our supervisors. Each teams' supervisors got to judge.

Cleo: Them Whitefolks. Supervisors.

Both Clara and Agnes believe the event came to an end because the workers tired of it. However, two senior administrator participants claim they were part of a decision-making group that discontinued participation in the Custodial Competition because it was “too time consuming.”

Custodial Work at State University Today

Current Environment

The environment at State University today is dynamic. The university president, a self-described change agent, led the university into its current state of dramatic transformation. Indeed, “change is afoot in every corner of the university,” as promised in one of his first public addresses. The president’s replacement of key cabinet members facilitated new governing approaches and philosophies. Most prominently, the academic mission of the university has been emphasized and, financially, the university is run like a business.

To facilitate the accomplishment of university priorities, the president implemented a hiring freeze for staff—not for faculty—that lasted approximately 9 months, and over 35 employees were laid off in a “Reduction in Force” due to budget restrictions and reorganizations. The staff salary savings amassed funded faculty initiatives, clearly the president’s highest priority.

Around this same time, a Living Wage initiative was introduced by a coalition comprised of community organizations, and State University faculty, staff, and students.

The coalition formed independent of the university but based its work on the university campus because “State University is the elephant in the room. As the largest employer in the area, [it sets] the market.” Advocates defined and pursued a living wage, based on local costs, as 130% of the federal poverty level. To meet this minimum standard, starting salaries of non-exempt (hourly) workers at State University must move from \$6.15 per hour to \$9.76 per hour.

In response to the Living Wage Coalition’s compelling and very public campaign, the university president appointed a carefully selected task force to review remuneration of low wage-earning employees. The task force recommended increasing the starting wage from \$6.15 per hour to \$7.57 per hour. The president, against a close advisor’s urging that he not increase wages at all, accepted the task force’s recommendation and went one step further, increasing the amount \$0.20, which raised the starting wage for all new budgeted employees to \$7.77. Funding for the increase was established by reducing the available merit pool for employees. The university also promised to review pay rates for non-exempt workers annually in pursuit of their goal to become the area “employer of choice.”

This modest wage increase appeared a promising gesture to Cleo, Martha, Juanita, Agnes, Clara, and Diane, but hope unraveled when it became clear that the wage increase would set in motion the most basic economic principle of supply and demand: consumers buy less of a product that becomes more expensive. The wage increase made it more expensive for the university to employ custodial workers, so the number of custodial workers decreased. Unlike the “Reduction in Force” that preceded the current financial predicament, workers are not being terminated. Instead, they are working to

“get the budget under control through attrition; workers who leave are not replaced.”

Thus, this creates more square footage for each custodial worker to clean.

The custodial workload in the Division of Facilities is further escalated with the addition of new campus facilities. Today, the daily cleaning area per employee is approximately 41,780 square feet. To offer better perspective, imagine the custodians were cleaning private homes. Divide 41,780 by 2,300, the approximate square footage of a mid-sized home, and you arrive at 18 homes. A single custodian in the Division of Facilities is expected to clean 18 homes within an 8-hour work day. In response to this increased workload, the division administration ordered service reductions. Custodians still clean 41,780 square feet, but they perform fewer tasks and provide other services less frequently. This edict does not sit well with the custodial staff participants, as they believe it reflects poorly on their identity as cleaning professionals.

The fact that our country is at war holds particular significance for this institution as well. Founded as a military college, it is still home to a strong military program which prepares participants for active duty. Upon graduation, a number of students are commissioned to the U.S. military. During this time of war, the university president’s speeches are punctuated with patriotic messages, the faculty is “teaching in a terrorized world” (Lincoln, 2004), and we are all encouraged to remain vigilant and aware of our surroundings as a color-coded terrorist alert system gauges the degree of potential threat to “our homeland.”

Taken together, these institutional and world events create a climate of anxiety and uncertainty for Cleo, Martha, Juanita, Agnes, Clara, and Diane.

Organization of Custodial Employees

In 2007, the largest group of custodial workers was still employed in the Division of Maintenance, which is state-funded. However, over the years, other divisions and departments established custodial units within their respective units to address their particular needs. These units, for the most part, are auxiliary operations which generate their own operating budgets. Examples of independent custodial units exist in Student Affairs, where its administration decided to hire and supervise custodians who work in the residence halls. Also, individuals who manage the university airport hire staff separately because custodial duties for airport employees differ from general custodial job duties. Custodians assigned to the airport work 365 days of the year and clean the interior of all aircrafts, the terminals, and all aviation facilities, including the windows of the control tower and the landing strip. In recent years, additional auxiliary units have discontinued service of university custodial staff, choosing instead to hire contract workers at a lower cost.

Participants in this study are employees of the Division of Maintenance, which currently employs approximately 265 custodians (see APPENDIX A), and the Department of Student Housing (a pseudonym), which currently employs approximately 85 custodians (see APPENDIX B). In general, the women share similar experiences. However, the climate within the respective units points to the major dissimilarity in their experiences. The climate in the Division of Maintenance is described as hostile and tension-filled, whereas the environment in the Department of Student Housing is described as nurturing and considerate. Though the funding sources, work hours and cleaning responsibilities within these two entities differ, they share similar occupational

challenges and the employment processes, compensation, promotion structure, and policies are fairly consistent.

Employment Process

For local and area residents seeking service-related work, State University is a desirable place of employment. The total compensation includes one's salary, paid holidays, vacations, and sick leave, a partially-paid healthcare plan, a retirement program, and longevity pay, which is a financial incentive for long-term employees that adds an additional \$20 to the employee's monthly compensation for each two years of service. Employees also have opportunities to earn "overtime pay" by working special events and responding to emergency service calls.

The university's appeal creates a competitive job-seeking environment. Each of the research participants used networking to gain employment at State University; family members, friends, and acquaintances created opportunities for their employment. Recall Cleo's sister Nona's jocular demand of her supervisor: "You better give my sister a job out here, or I'm gon' bust you upside yo' head with my fist," and Martha's comment that "It's reasonably hard to get a job out here. It takes a while. You kind of, like, you got to know somebody." A high-ranking administrator in the Division of Facilities noted: "We never have had an issue hiring custodians. Never. Because there's always a list of people who want to come to work at State University."

To gain employment as a custodian at State University today, one must apply via an online application system. If the applicant has low technology skills, she or he may visit the university's employment center to obtain assistance completing the application. University officials don't see the technological aspect as a daunting experience because

“typically someone in the family is computer literate and can help them with the application.” Once the individual gains access to the Notice of Vacancy, it will read thusly:

Custodial Worker I: Sweeps, mops, scrubs and applies finish to floors; empties trash receptacles and disposes of properly; cleans and disinfects drinking fountains and restrooms; replenishes supplies, dusts and clean offices and conference rooms; washes windows inside on all floors, and outside at entrance; washes walls, works while standing on ladders, and climbs stairs; removes dirt and lint from upholstered furniture; unstops lavatories and toilets; moves office equipment and furniture for thorough cleaning; cleans and polishes metal hardware; reports damages to structures and equipment; cleans walls and ground adjacent to the assigned building as incidental to other duties; operates various mechanical, electrical and battery operated machines to aid in performing the above tasks. Occasional weekend and emergency duty may be required. Other duties as assigned.

Work involves moderate exposure to unpleasant elements, such as extreme temperatures, dirt, dust, fumes, smoke, loud noises, chemicals, etc. Position requires moderate physical activity. Must be able to crawl, climb, balance, bend, stoop, kneel, squat, reach, handle, feel, talk, hear, see, and occasionally push and/or pull over 50 pounds.

Required Education and Experience: Ability to receive and comprehend instructions in the English language and communicate effectively.

Preferred Education and Experience: High school graduation or any equivalent combination of training and experience.

Compensation: \$6.56 per hour, benefits eligible.

Applications are received at a central location and screened to ensure applicants meet minimum requirements of the job. The entry level custodial job, however, “requires no skill walking in the door,” said one university official.

The position is also “security sensitive,” which means that once interviewed and deemed a viable employee by the hiring supervisor, employment is contingent upon results of a criminal background check. Now background investigations are conducted for all final candidates, not just those working in service capacities because of the

“special trust” placed in the university by parents and students. Candidate backgrounds are searched for felony convictions and whether or not they are registered as a sexual offender. According to a senior university official, if a felony is discovered, they

explore the nature of the felony before dismissing a candidate because we know that the occurrence of felony convictions is disproportionately high for African Americans nationally and so to have a blanket refusal to hire felons would disadvantage a whole group of people who may have been convicted just because of the color of their skin. We don’t know. So we look into it. We look at the nature of the felony, how long ago it was, whether or not it was something that occurred 25 years ago and never happened again. A person like that has paid the debt to society and if they appear to be otherwise the leading candidate we look more carefully at that. Those who commit violent crimes would likely not be hired, because of the special trust.

Employees working in high-security areas, such as federal research laboratories and facilities frequented by high-ranking world leaders, are more closely scrutinized through a more thorough background check.

Interviews are conducted in committees comprised of the hiring supervisor and her/his supervisor. Hiring supervisors do not routinely receive formal training to conduct interviews. They interview based upon how they were interviewed. In rare cases, some have attended a course offered through the university’s employment center that has a brief segment on “hiring employees.” As a result, some job candidates, like Juanita, are asked inappropriate questions.

Once hired, employees are now required to enroll in the direct deposit program to receive their income. This policy forces the employee into a relationship with a banking institution whether they desire it or not. Employee work and leave time is now expected to be tracked by the individual employee via an online system. This online tool is used by the Department of Student Housing but not by the Division of Maintenance; their

frontline employees still use paper and pencil, and someone in the central office enters it into the online system.

Having multiple jobs, which State University calls “outside employment,” is discouraged and one is required to obtain written permission of her or his supervisor to hold multiple jobs. The considerations for granting such a request include “the amount of time and energy the second job will detract from your primary position at State University; the acceptability of the second position in maintaining your image and status as consistent with your primary position; and the possibility of any conflict of business interest.” University administrators in the Division of Maintenance believe State University should be one’s primary job. One mid-level administrator in the division said:

If employees want to have another job, they need to structure it around State University. It doesn’t work the other way around. State University work hours are not structured around somebody’s shift at Walmart.

The cost of parking a vehicle on campus has risen. All staff, regardless of income level, pay the following annual fee if they wish to park on campus: unnumbered, uncovered staff lot, \$240; unnumbered, uncovered, gated staff lot, \$312; numbered, uncovered parking space, \$420; and a numbered garage space is \$516. In the past, Cleo, Martha, Juanita, Agnes, Clara, and Diane all drove or carpooled to work arriving as much as an hour in advance of their shift to secure free off-campus parking. Such parking might be found in the parking lot of a nearby grocery store or restaurant, space surrounding a church or a bank, or vacant land plots. One empty land plot was available for free parking for such an extended period of time, it became popularly known as the “mud lot.” The area was so named because it was simply a large, unpaved lot that became muddy when it rained. Custodians had to “beat the students to the spots because

the students tried to park where it was free, too.” But the slow, steady introduction of new businesses, parking meters, “no parking,” and “towing enforced” signs would eventually force the women to pay to park on campus.

Demographic Information

At present, State University employs a total of 420 custodians. Titles include: Custodial Worker I, Custodial Worker II, Custodial Worker III, Housekeeper, Assistant Custodial Supervisor, Supervisor, and Custodial Crew Coordinator. By ethnicity, the largest group is Hispanic (54%), followed by African American (38%), and then White (8%). The custodial workforce is 84% female and 16% male. The average age of a custodian is 46, and the average number of years custodians work at State University is 12.

Salaries

An analysis of custodial salaries prior to 2005 reveals stagnation. Since then, however, salaries have steadily increased. This forward momentum may be attributed to the 2004 community-driven Living Wage Initiative and the university president’s decision to raise the starting custodial wage as recommended by his subsequently-appointed task force. In the past three years, there has been an overall increase of 26.5%. In 2005, the starting wage for custodians was \$6.56 per hour. This was increased to \$7.77 per hour in 2006, then to \$8.03 per hour in 2007, and in the upcoming fiscal year, the starting wage will be \$8.30 per hour. To address compression issues that resulted from the pay plan increase, employees who made more than \$8.55 saw a salary increase of \$.25 per hour. And to help offset the increased rate of health insurance premiums and parking fee increases, all custodians received an additional \$.29 per hour in August of

2007. In the aggregate, this represents a considerable financial commitment to help enhance the quality of life for those who earn low wages, but the impact on each individual is miniscule. Juanita asked, “What am I supposed to do with a measly \$.20-something cents more? That’s still not going to help me afford to get my husband’s medicine. That’s nothing, really.” TABLE 1 below shows participants’ salaries from 2005 through 2007.

TABLE 1 Participant Salaries 2005-2007

Participant Name	2005	2006	2007
Cleo, CW III	\$12.65/hr	\$12.97/hr	\$13.36/hr
Martha, CW II	\$7.88/hr	\$8.06/hr	\$8.55/hr
Juanita, CW I	\$8.36/hr	\$8.57/hr	\$8.85/hr
Agnes, Supervisor	\$2,850/mo	\$3,012/mo	\$3,200/mo
Clara, CW I	\$7.93/hr	\$8.13/hr	\$8.55/hr
Diane, CW I	\$7.45/hr	\$8.12/hr	\$8.55/hr

Uniforms

Today custodians are issued three uniforms as opposed to five and they have no choice in the type of fabric they wear. Recently, uniforms were changed from button-down, collared shirts with pockets, which had the employee's name embroidered on the upper chest area to t-shirt-like pullovers that all read the same: "Custodian." I asked Martha, Juanita, Clara, and Diane why they thought the uniform changed. Juanita and Clara, the women of color, posited that the uniforms changed to remove the pockets: "They always think we're stealing. They changed the uniforms so we wouldn't have pockets." Martha and Diane, the two White participants, speculated that the decision was financial: "[They are] just being cheap," they said. Uniforms are still deemed state property and must be returned when the employment relationship ends.

Work Responsibilities

When custodial employees are hired they still learn how to perform work duties in a "Training Crew." They are then assigned to a particular crew based on need. Unlike earlier days, there is no gendered division of labor. Women are expected to move heavy objects, operate heavy machinery, and maintain all floor surfaces in their assigned facility.

Research participants agree that the job duties listed in the Notice of Vacancy read accurately, but they all say the job entails so much more. TABLE 2 more accurately captures their work duties based on information shared in our interviews.

TABLE 2 Custodial Responsibilities

Facilities Cleaned * denotes occasional outdoor work	Clean, sanitize, and deodorize	To Perform the Work
Airplanes Airport facilities* Art Galleries Buildings* Classrooms Convenience stores Dining Facilities Experimental research areas (e.g. fire field & wind tunnel) High-ranking official's living quarters Labs (medical, chemical, surgical, animal, etc.)* Large event facilities* Laundry facilities Libraries Lobby/lounge areas Meeting rooms Morgues (human & animal) Museums Offices Police Departments Postal Offices Power Plants President's living quarters Residence Halls* Small and Large Animal Hospital Sports & recreational facilities* Student Health Center Teaching Hospital (Human) Theatres University Hotel rooms	Air vents Animal cages Baseboards Bleachers Blinds Bookshelves and books Ceilings (corners, lights & other fixtures) Chrome fixtures Computer facilities Desk & table tops Doors & door tracks Doorknobs & handles Drinking fountains Dugouts Entryways Elevator surface & tracks Floor mats (in & outdoor) Floor surfaces (tile, carpet, wood, etc.) Furniture and upholstery Glass doors Gym equipment High-contact surfaces (stair railings, hospitals, vending machines, etc.) Lampshades Locker rooms Mirrors Personal office items (plaques, picture frames, etc.) Restroom facilities Sidewalks Study carrels Surgical areas (human & animal) Telephones (office/public) Tile grouting Trash removal & relining Underneath moveable items Wall surfaces (carpet, vinyl, tile, brick, etc.) Windows & windowsills	Analyze Bend Buff Calculate Carry Climb Clutch Dust Extract Flip Grasp Kneel Lift Listen Measure Move Mop Polish Pull Push Reach Rotate Scrape Scrub Squat Squeeze Stand Stoop Steer Strip Sweep Twist Vacuum Walk Wash Wax Wipe

Custodians are also expected to unstop toilets and restock supply items such as toilet paper, hand soap, paper towels and sanitary napkins. In addition, they have the responsibility of maintaining work equipment to prolong its use. This includes replacing or repairing parts, cleaning, and properly storing items.

There are also hazards and risks associated with custodial work. In the process of cleaning restrooms, the student health center, the teaching hospital, the small and large animal hospitals, as well as human and animal labs, custodians come into contact with human and animal cadavers, sputum, fecal matter, urine, and blood, all strong vectors for both viral and bacterial diseases. Due to this exposure, employees are required to have special immunizations, yet immunizations do not offer complete protection from all potentially infectious encounters.

Custodians also clean biological, chemical, and other laboratories that house radioactive or explosive material, and those that emit potent fumes and other noxious substances. Though they now receive chemical safety and procedural training, as well as a host of personal protective equipment such as goggles, back belts, and gloves, there are reported cases of work-related infections and injuries. Study participants also happen upon living and dead snakes, bats, bobcats, mice, roaches, lizards, spiders, scorpions, possums, and skunks. “It comes with the territory,” said one senior administrator in the Division of Maintenance.

I asked Martha to take me on a journey through an “average workday” in the life of a Custodial Worker II. A typical workday is as follows:

“You get to work at whatever your shift time starts and the first thing you do is go to [the control room] and get your keys. The master keys, cuz they keep those locked up and stuff.

And when you're there, you get your assignment sheet for the day; you know the sheet that tells you what's goin' on in your area and stuff that day, if there are events going on, what time they are, who's in the room, when they're gonna get out. And if we're shorthanded or something, that's when you find out if you have extra work to do that day or if you have to hurry up and finish your area so you can go over to another area and help out.

But usually you go straight to your building to your area and get your supplies and your cart out of your closet.

Then you just clean your area, you know, however you've been told to clean it. You know, pull trash first, and then get the bathrooms and stuff, and then you do everything till you get it all done.

If you can clean the restrooms with a coworker, you can get 'em done faster. That way, you're not tying 'em up. People like that better because you're not tying things up.

Some days are harder than others, depending on how much you have to clean up. You know, how dirty it is and if you have to do extra work to get things clean, like if there's a coke spill or gum or something, you got to take and use the machine to do extraction. That adds time to your work and stuff.

You get a break, if your supervisor lets you. They say they can give you a break if they want to, you know, they don't have to. It's a "privilege" <used her fingers to create virtual quotation marks in the air> or something like that. No, it's "at their convenience" <air quotes again> or when it's convenient for them or something like that. But most of 'em will let you go ahead and have a break. Bout' fifteen minutes for your break and thirty or forty-five minutes for your lunch, whatever they decide. It's always different in different places on campus I've worked. It's what they decide.

Then at the end of your shift, you go and turn your keys back in to [the control room]."

This "average day" for Martha, a Custodial Worker II, is identical to that of Custodial Worker Is (Juanita, Clara, and Diane), and Custodial Worker IIIs (Cleo). However, one participant is currently assigned to a Roving Crew, so she team-cleans eleven different buildings throughout the day. There are also occasional "jump-n-runs" where custodians literally jump and run to address emergency situations, such as leaking buildings.

Based upon one's assignment, there are also "priority locations" and "priority people" that require a higher level of detailed cleaning. The President, his office suite and his on-campus residence are considered priority cleaning areas. So, too, are the university governing body's sleeping and meeting quarters. Martha said, of the governing body's meeting space:

It's so fancy. So fancy I don't even want to go in there to clean. Marble floors and real expensive statues and vases and stuff. I don't like cleaning in there, cuz sometimes, I sometimes get reassigned to clean it, you know, when people are absent and stuff. Scared I'm gonna break something and Lord knows I can't replace that stuff.

This "average day" is also similar for custodial employees who work in the Department of Student Housing. However, they also clean, disinfect, and deodorize common area bathrooms (shared by an entire floor of residents) daily and private bathrooms (shared by four residents who occupy one suite) once per week. The weekly cleaning of private bathrooms is considered "preventative maintenance," the cost of which is included in student housing fees. To ensure a harassment-free work environment, the department established the following policy regarding the cleaning of private bathrooms:

Custodial staff will clean private bathrooms once a week and will notify students at least one day in advance when the bathroom is going to be cleaned.

If printed material and/or posters of an offensive nature are displayed in the hallways, stairwells, study lounges, or student's bathroom and create a threatening or otherwise degrading environment for custodial staff, the student(s) will be asked to remove the objectionable item from display or cover the item on the days the bathroom is scheduled to be cleaned (Housing Manual, 2008).

Difficult Times for the Division of Facilities

While the above description charts an "average day," these are not average times for employees of the Division of Facilities. The combination of the hiring freeze, the

increase in square footage, the university-mandated minimum wage increase, and reported lack of funding to hire more custodians creates a strained situation for the division.

Notably, the Division's current custodial cleaning level, at 41,780 square feet per person, falls between "casual inattention" to "moderate dinginess," according to the Association of Physical Plant Administrators' 1998 publication, *Custodial Staffing Guidelines for Educational Facilities*. The association, founded in 1914, sets the standards for custodial and maintenance work for higher education facilities. Appointed levels of cleaning are: Level 1, Orderly Spotlessness at 9,555 square feet per full time employee or full time equivalent (FTE); Level 2, Ordinary Tidiness at 18,208 square feet per FTE; Level 3, Casual Inattention at 32,041 square feet per FTE; Level 4, Moderate Dinginess at 53,109 square feet per FTE; and Level 5, Unkempt Neglect at 87,047 square feet per FTE.

As aforementioned, in recognition of the vast workload, the Division administration reduced the level of cleaning across campus. Trash in entrances, lobbies, corridors, and reception areas once emptied daily is now emptied weekly. Restroom, locker room, and shower doors and walls once cleaned weekly, are now cleaned twice annually; shower partitions once cleaned daily are now cleaned monthly. In classrooms, instead of having furniture dusted and floors cleaned weekly, both are now cleaned monthly. Stairwells considered "high usage" that were swept and mopped or vacuumed daily are now cleaned weekly. Vertical surfaces in laboratories once dusted monthly are now dusted annually. Administrative offices once cleaned daily are now cleaned once per week, including the emptying of trash. Building occupants were encouraged to

discard perishable items in a public area trash receptacle rather than in their individual trash cans to reduce odor and to assist in pest control.

In addition, all high dusting is now done annually as opposed to as needed. Purchase of supplies has been limited to essential items only, and where possible, less expensive products are obtained. Further, the reduction in uniforms, from five to three is a result of the current organizational situation. The state of affairs in the Division of Facilities has an intensely negative effect on the custodial staff, as will be explicated in the section titled “Stressors.”

Reorganization of Work from Night to Day

In early 1980, Agnes noted, it was “determined that custodial staff could be better managed if they were moved to days.” Administrators offered several reasons for the night-to-day shift. They said, “Cleaning quality improves when custodians work during the day. They can see what they are doing.” They also said, “Cleaning during the day provides energy savings to the campus. Cleaning is done when lights and electricity are needed by everyone in the buildings. It is unnecessary to light the buildings at night.” Though the administration claimed “many favorable compliments [were] received due to the change in cleaning from night to day,” this transition marked a major shift in the work world of the custodial staff. The reorganization created increased surveillance and loss of autonomy. It also presented the challenge of cleaning occupied areas and forced custodial workers into contact with the faculty, staff, and students who occupied the facilities by day, making their status discrepancy painfully apparent.

Custodial shift scheduling, administrators say, is largely based upon the needs of building occupants, so there is little consistency. The most frequent shifts today are: 4:00

a.m. to 12:30 p.m., 6:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., and 2:30 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. However, the university is reportedly “trying to move away from the early morning and late evening hours because these hours create a need for management to be present to oversee the staff, and it’s just too much.” Staff members, usually Custodial Supervisors or Custodial Worker IIIs, are on call 24 hours a day, on a rotating basis, to respond to night and weekend emergencies.

Training, Development, and Recognition

New employees, whether hired to work in the Division of Maintenance or the Department of Student Housing, are still initially assigned to a training crew for up to one week to learn how to clean various facilities. Entry level workers are assigned the title “Custodial Worker I” and now, to advance from Custodial Worker I to Custodial Worker II, one has to have a GED or high school diploma as well as a Texas motor vehicle driver’s license, because Custodial Worker IIs are occasionally required to drive a university vehicle. In the past, these qualifications were required to move from Custodial Worker II to Custodial Worker III. Promotion to a Custodial Worker III, Assistant Supervisor, Supervisor or Custodial Crew Coordinator today requires a GED or high school diploma, a Texas motor vehicle driver’s license, and “demonstrated leadership skills.” These are skills one has to acquire on one’s own because there is no structured training through which one might cultivate these abilities. Furthermore, at the time of this writing, the university no longer sponsors the GED program.

University administrators acknowledge the lack of developmental opportunities for custodial staff and have varying responses to my inquiry as to future plans. Administrators in the Division of Maintenance said,

Yeah, we used to do a lot. But it's gone by the wayside. We need to look into that. It's really a job for Human Resources though. But really, right now we can't afford to have staff going to training. We don't have enough of them to clean the buildings, let alone letting 'em go to training. The buildings would never get cleaned. And when they do go, we still have to account for that time. We have a training budget we charge their time to, you know. And right now we can't financially afford that either.

The Department of Human Resources embraces employee development as part of their responsibility. A senior administrator said:

Universities as a whole have been rigorous around faculty development and less so around non-faculty employee development. We do a pretty good job with supervisory, management, and leadership training for the general population and within organizations, we do a pretty good job of skill-based training, but we can do better regarding continuous employee education. We will be proposing continuous learning for all sectors of our employees. That is, something should occur every year to either improve how you're doing what you're doing or get you prepared for either the next higher level or a different career path according to what your desires are. And if accepted, it will mark a pretty significant change. We have some difficulty, I am told, with custodial staff supervisors letting them go. One message we will send is: "To not to let them go [to training] is poor performance on part of the supervisor." It will be an expectation of supervisors that they make this a priority.

In the Department of Student Housing, in addition to skills-based training, the custodial staff has periodic training opportunities which are specifically designed to address their interests, covering topics such as "The Heart of a Winner" and "Promoting a Positive Work Environment." They also have access to monthly staff development opportunities, which they may attend with the full support of the administration. These professional meetings are designed for all employees within the Division of Student Affairs, however. Thus, training is not tailored to the needs and interests of custodians. The meeting content is "over our heads," said the participant who works in the Department of Student Housing, and as a result, custodians rarely attend.

Alternatively, custodians employed in the department have access to Custodial Management Association of Texas (CMAT), a professional organization that offers training and development and an annual conference that facilitates face-to-face relationships with fellow professionals. The \$20 annual membership fee is covered for all supervisors, and a delegation of custodial staff attends the conference annually. It is important to note that none of the custodial participants employed with the Division of Maintenance had ever heard of CMAT. Recognition for all custodians occurs during National Housekeeping Week. The president sends an annual letter encouraging building occupants to show appreciation for their custodian on this special day. Some units offer lunch, post signs, or provide custodians with small gifts; others do nothing at all. The Division of Administration annually offers seven individual awards and one team award for employees who have provided superior customer service. In addition, one “Custodian of the Year” is selected and all are honored at an annual reception, which typically coincides with National Housekeeping Week.

The Division of Administration also holds an “employee appreciation day” during the summer. A senior administrator in the Division noted:

We have this gathering every summer where we invite all of our employees and their immediate families. We go to the campus recreational center and we have organized activities for them. Their kids can go to the pool and we feed them. And they eat a lot <laughter>. I mean they eat and eat. And we tell them they can bring their immediate family but we don't really know if they are immediate family members. Because once, I had this one custodian who came and brought eleven family members. I'll tell you, they can eat. But, this is just another way we show our appreciation.

The Department of Student Housing offers recognition through safety awards, for which recipients are given an insulated cooler, and they also have an “Employee of the Month” award, for which recipients are given a plaque, they are photographed and the

picture posted on the “Employee of the Month” bulletin board in the central office, and the individual is invited to lunch by the senior administrators in the department. The Department of Student Housing has an annual Summer Social for all employees as a gesture of appreciation as well.

Fulfilling Multiple Capacities

The Custodial staff provides much more than cleaning services. They are expected to deliver lost or abandoned items to Lost and Found, and recent internal documents reveal the expectation that they aid in energy conservation: “All custodians are asked to turn off lights in unoccupied offices and classrooms they come across,” the document reads. Custodians also voluntarily perform extra services which are not part of their job duties. They voluntarily offer to help occupants pack if they are leaving or relocating, they hold doors ajar for others, make coffee for office occupants and wash their dishes, and they provide directions to those unfamiliar with the university or a particular area of the campus. They are frequently called upon and hired to clean private homes of other university employees and the homes of local area residents who contact the central office requesting referrals. They are also occasionally hired to provide care for aging parents of university employees.

Cleo, Martha, Juanita, Agnes, Clara, and Diane also report that students and other building occupants often look upon them as “mothers,” as they frequently request cooking instructions, directions for washing clothing, as well as suggestions for cleaning various items. Once, when the administration in the Division of Facilities decided to relocate a custodian, one building occupant wrote: “You can’t move [Lupe]. She has been like a mother to me. She talked me through my pregnancy and was in the delivery

room when the baby came . . . She even came to my house to help me learn how to take care of him . . . You can't move her. She is like family to me."

Custodians also bring breakfast, fresh baked cookies, tamales, and other food items to share with occupants. They supply "their" restrooms with scented candles and air fresheners purchased with their personal funds. "You can get those air freshners, like, two for a dollar at the dollar store," Clara said. They will also use personal funds to purchase more effective cleaning supplies. Custodians also keep their cleaning carts stocked with items others may need. If they find pens, pencils, or scantrons lying around, they will keep these items on the cart and, as Diane notes, "Nine times outta' ten, the children are gonna need it, so you have it there to give to them." Diane also keeps her cart stocked with "lady things (tampons and sanitary napkins), safety pins, band aids, tissue, and lots of other little things" because, she said, "they come to you, you know, because they know we're always there. I have a lot of stuff, you know, I make sure everybody's happy." Clara also reported sharing her money with students who "come up, maybe, a dime or a quarter short if they're tryin' to get a coke or some chips. Sometimes, it'll be the last dime I have, but I'll go ahead and give it to 'em if they need it, you know. I would want somebody to do that for my kid," she said.

Clara shared examples of how she aids in student retention as well. One example is that of the gathering she held at her home for students who were "missing their mama's home cooking." Yet another example is Clara's dispensing of academic advice to students with whom she has become familiar:

Clara: I told him, "don't take that professor there." I said, "I see a lotta' students comin' outta' his office cryin' round' exam time. He hard. Take that other professor 'round the corner. Students like him better. I see students smilin' and talkin' to him and bein' happy when they see

their grades posted outside his door. And he be there in his office when his door says he gon' be in there, you know, I think they call it 'office hours,' or something like that. The good professor, he be in there to meet with the students. The other one, he don't."

The participant who works in the Department of Student Housing also aids in student retention when she demonstrates concern for one student's welfare. She shared:

Participant: I had to go tell the hall director that this one girl hadn't left her room in days. She was depressed, you know. Hadn't left her room in days. Look like she hadn't showered, wasn't eating, missing a lot of class. She was just a mess, so I had to go and tell it.

Martha shared a story about going out of her way to force a student to respond appropriately to a fire alarm:

Martha: The fire alarms had gone off, and we were trying to get 'em to all leave out of the building because they were, you know, just sittin' there and it had been going off for a good while. I told 'em to leave and this one, he asked me why I wanted him to leave. I said, "So you don't burn, little idiot!" Then he said, "Well, what if it's not real?" and I said, "What if it is?"

Petitt: Did he leave?

Martha: Well, it took a while. It took me a little while to get him out of there. But he finally got on out.

Petitt: Did anybody tell you it was your responsibility to get people out or were you just being a responsible citizen?

Martha: No. We were going that way too so we needed to make sure that everybody left 'cause what if they got, you know, what if we'd actually had a fire? Maybe I was probably just trying to be a responsible citizen, I guess. I'm kinda' bossy sometimes though, and I know it.

Custodians provide more than cleaning services, indeed. Highly visible, easily identified by employee uniforms, and located in practically every facility on campus, they often convey a "first impression" of the university, and, occupationally, they (along with

others) literally hold the school's image in their hands. And were it not for their work, the mission of the academy could not be effectively pursued.

The Costs of Cleaning the Academy: Classism, Racism, Sexism, and Other Stressors

Classism

A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry: but money answereth all things.

- The Holy Bible, Ecclesiastes 10:19

Flores' and Deal's suggestion that "[i]ndividuals who work in manual labor jobs such as janitorial or custodial work tend to be overrepresented among low socioeconomic groups" (2003, p. 259) is true of the women in this study. Though Martha, having benefitted from the financial acumen of her family of origin, manages her finances relatively well, and Agnes, a supervisor, earns a higher salary, considering their life circumstances and limitations, they are, one might say, "at the top of the bottom" (Lewis, 2005, p. 240).

All participants entered marriages with men who occupied low-paying service jobs like themselves, but Cleo, Agnes, Clara, and Diane's husbands are now all disabled. Although their husbands receive monthly social security disability benefits, their disablement strains and drains the family income. To support her family of four Juanita and her husband each maintained two jobs (four jobs between the two of them) for a number of years, until a recent decline in health forced her husband to resign from one of his physically demanding jobs. To "pick up the slack," Juanita took on one additional domestic cleaning client. Martha is the only participant whose husband does not have a disabling condition that limits his ability to contribute to the family income. However, he, too, works as a Custodian at State University and earns a salary slightly higher than

Martha's. With the exception of Martha and Agnes, all other participants experience employment-centered poverty—they work full time but do not earn enough to pay for basic life necessities. All participants shared stories of financial and material lack and longing, and they unanimously agree that they work harder than their paychecks show.

Just working at State University comes with a price. Each of the participants drive a vehicle for which they have to pay a minimum of \$240 to park on campus. Luckily, the university permits an “installment plan,” whereby employees may choose monthly payroll deductions to avoid a one-time lump sum payment. Incidentally, when Parking Services (a departmental pseudonym) implemented a policy change to execute a pre-tax payroll deduction, it was necessary to take twice the regular deduction from employee's paychecks. While the change benefitted employees in the long term, this unanticipated extra withholding caused financial strain for several custodial participants who depend on every dollar they earn to address basic necessities.

In addition to the parking increase, the cost of health insurance premiums continues to rise. This increase angers and confuses the participants:

Petitt: Were you affected at all when the insurance rates went up?

Martha: Some. It kind of hurt because I thought, well golly, what do I have to give them the \$100 deductible for? What's it going for? What is it paying for?

Petitt: Are you talking about the increased co-pay for medication?

Martha: Yeah. That was a really wonderful idea. I don't know who thought it up, but it was stupid.

What in the world do they need it for? Whose pocket am I lining? It's like [large insurance companies] if you have like a policy with [a large insurance company] you wonder what in the world are you paying for besides what you're paying for!

Clara's struggle is similar to Juanita's story of her family's inability to afford prescribed medication. Here, Clara questions the increased co-payment amount and talks about her struggle with affordability:

Clara: I don't understand that. Why did that have to go up? 'Cause every medicine you get, you have pay the deductible for every medicine you get. I don't understand that neither. Why do I pay \$200 insurance 'outta my check every two weeks and then still have to pay all that extra just to get my medicine. Why do they do that? And it starts over every year or somethin' like that. Like at the beginnin' of the year, you have to pay like this big ol' amount for your medicines and then it'll go down to where you only pay \$40 for one bottle of medicine or somethin'. I don't understand that, Becky. And they already take money out. That's why my check don't be nothin'.

And sometimes if the medicine too expensive, I can't get it. I just be sick. Have to go without it. Go to Walmart and see if I can't get somethin' that'll help.

Speaking about her employees, Agnes shared:

Agnes: Most of my employees go ahead and get insurance for their families through State University, but some of 'em don't. It's too expensive nowadays for them to carry themselves and their families. They wouldn't have no money at the end of the month, since it's gone up so high.

Matter of fact, I had one employee, Rose Bennett, who was working for me. She passed away and she was still employed, she'd still come to work every day. Wouldn't miss work for nothin'. Like I said, died while she was still working here. Rose was working for 38 cents after they took out her parking and insurance. <Raised her voice> 38 cents! She coulda' retired and got more than that sitting at home! It just don't make no sense.

Work-related costs consume a considerable portion of the salaries of the low wage-earning participants. There are no "sliding scale" fee considerations at State University. Every employee pays the same amount for services regardless of their income.

The Impact of Financial Hardship

Cleo, Juanita, Agnes, Clara, and Diane live paycheck-to-paycheck. When Martha happens to “come across extra money,” she tucks the money away in a modest savings account or uses it to pay creditors “a little bit more to where [she] can get the payment over with quicker with less interest.” They live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty with unpaved roads leading to their properties. Whether it is a mobile home or an older traditional home, all participants say their homes are substandard. Several of them have roofs that leak; Cleo’s tin roof is rusting in spots and all she can afford to do is “patch it every now and then.” She wishes she could afford to live in a home with a “regular roof” because during powerful downpours she is unable to sleep because it “sounds like somebody is stompin’ on the rooftop.”

Ceilings are falling down and fixtures leak to the point of creating visible rust stains. Poorly insulated homes create exorbitant utility bills, and humidity problems lead to condensation and mold. Faulty wiring and “out of code” appliances create unsafe living conditions; one participant’s home burned to the ground due to such deficiency. Another fears her fate will be the same due to “bad wiring” in her home. Every night she goes to sleep, she “prays to make it to the next day.” Roach infestation plagues their homes and most of them have well-used furnishings. Diane commented:

Diane: When you go home, you say, “Oh, Lord!” <raising both arms and tilting her head back in exasperation>.

But it’s clean. That’s one thing. It’s clean.

You know, we may have junk but its clean junk.

And it’s mine.

Diane also noted that she lives in an area where the water is not safe to drink:

Diane: The water where I live is so bad it even eats away at the pipes.

Petitt: What do you mean the water eats the pipes? Is it bad water quality?

Diane: Oh, the water is bad where I live. It's just bad water. You don't drink it.

Petitt: So do you have to buy bottled water?

Diane: Uh-huh, yeah, to drink. Sometimes we boil it. But you still have to, you know, wash with it and all that. It's just bad water. I mean, we buy it. The water is sold to us like, you know, wherever the water comes from, but we just can't drink it. It's not, ooh <shivers>. Just can't drink it.

It is not just the water that is unsafe. Several of the participants live in dangerous, crime-ridden neighborhoods that force them to nail windows shut to keep would-be thieves at bay. They also teach their children defensive strategies to survive the neighborhood:

Cleo: I had to tell my kids how to get 'round out there. Them other folks' children' runnin' round out there sellin' drugs, stealing, and doin' all kinds of thangs. And they try to get yours to do it too. Try to get them in trouble too. And sometimes it work. I have to work hard to try to keep 'em outta' trouble .. keep 'em from goin' to jail.

Clara: I don't even feel safe crossing the street no more. Sho' don't want my kids goin' out there. One of my kids got into some trouble messin' round with the wrong people. You gotta watch 'um.

Because the participants cannot afford the \$25 medical co-payment, at times, they ignore illness or postpone treatment until the discomfort becomes too unbearable. If multiple family members need medical attention at once, they are forced to determine whose need is most urgent. In some cases, illnesses go untreated altogether.

Financial constraint forced one of the participants to sleep in the same bed with her son until he was well into his teenaged years. Sleeping in separate beds was made possible only when a local furniture store generously donated twin beds, which still had

to be located in the same room because their home is so small. Four participants have unreliable transportation which occasionally affects their ability to arrive at work on time, and strained finances create difficulty in paying regular bills by the due date. They have all had utilities and phones turned off at some point due to nonpayment.

Without exception, they all rely on the financial support of family and friends to make ends meet. Were it not for this network of safety nets, several of them would have met extreme hardship and even homelessness, in one participant's case. Agnes recalls overhearing concerns of her employees:

Agnes: I see them straining. For the most part, they have food to eat. Some of them get food stamps and live on HUD. Sometimes they'll come into my office and ask to use the phone and I overhear them calling to ask for extensions on their bills.

I get a lot of phone calls [via the office phone] from rental companies looking to get their payments from my workers. And there was one man in particular, I told him, I said, "Look, I am her supervisor, and I've asked you nicely to contact her at home. You can't keep calling here looking for your money. You're interrupting me, you know?" I know my workers are stressed out from not having enough money.

One of my workers lost her job because she didn't have a way to work. Her husband got arrested and he was the one that drove her to work. She didn't have a driver's license at 30 years old, girl! She missed a solid month of work because she didn't have no way to work but she had a vehicle in the driveway that was drivable, but it was because she didn't have a license, and this was just last year. She couldn't find anybody to ride with and I'm like, "Girl, all you gotta do is get the book, study the book, and get somebody to help you." She was about to lose this job and she was getting behind on all her other bills too. But she didn't want to do it, so we wound up having to let her go.

None of the participants have money or time for recreation. When I asked if they attended any State University activities, they told me that not only could they not afford it, but that they typically work before, during, and after the events. One participant who cleans the athletics area shared:

Participant: I can't afford to go to the State University stuff; it's way too expensive. Besides, I have to work. I clean the football bleachers, and everywhere. You know the boxes the big people sit in? I clean those . . . well, I clean everything, the whole thing, me and my crew members, we clean the whole football thing before the game starts, while the game is going on, and then we have to clean up afterwards. The kids leave lots of popcorn and food and paper all over. Yeah, the football games make a lot of work for us.

Making Ends Meet

The absolute last thing any of the participants want to do is ask for help. The stigma associated with needing and requesting assistance is so powerful it drives participants to suffer in silence and to suggest that they would rather “cut [one] bean in half and eat a little longer” than ask for help, as Diane stated. Yet, Cleo, Juanita, Agnes, and Clara, the four women of color, have all relied on social services at some point while they were employed at State University, as they were without financial means to meet basic life needs.

To “make ends meet” several participants have used small loans and credit cards. During one of our interviews, Clara asked my advice about a credit card invitation she had received via US mail in November, just before the holidays. The \$3,000 offer at a time when she needed extra money for a home repair, and “could use a little extra” to meet the demands of the forthcoming holidays was seductive. It was also exploitive, with an unreasonably high interest rate of 32%, accompanied by deceptively worded fine print. Both Clara and the credit card company knew she had poor credit; they also knew how much they needed each other to survive. Though I pointed out the exorbitant interest rate and shared my concern about the caveats in fine print (abusive penalty clauses, such as the doubling of the interest rates if a payment is late), Clara applied for the credit card. “I

had to take my chances,” she said. “I don’t know if they’re gonna give it to me, but I need the money right now,” she concluded.

Agnes discovered that her husband had fallen victim to predatory lenders, too, when he became disabled. While he was working, he “beat her to the mailbox everyday” and was able to hide the fact that he had taken out loans to cover their costs. Now that he is unable to work, and thus unable to pay the bills, Agnes and her husband began receiving menacing phone calls from lenders attempting to collect money they owed.

To increase the family income: Cleo takes advantage of the opportunity to work overtime at State University and to clean up after their student events for minimum wage pay; Diane has regular garage sales; and Juanita holds two jobs. Juanita even turned down a promotion to Custodial Worker II so she could remain available to work her second job. Upon application, she was told she would be able to continue working the morning shift and thus maintain her part-time job cleaning homes. But later, when she was told she had received a promotion, she was also informed that it would require a shift change, which she could not afford:

Juanita: . . . He told me I was gonna have the same hours <cries>, but he lied. I said, “Well then I can’t take the job” because I need to have the hours I have so I can go to my other job and it’s not worth messing up my other job for, like twenty five or fifty cents more . . .

Petitt: Was that a hard decision for you to have to give back a promotion?

Juanita: Well, not really . . . you know, I need this money. So the choice was easy . . . I need to work two jobs and I make more money cleaning houses part time than I do here working full time, because here, I only make eight dollars and thirty cents an hour, and I just recently got this much—they gave me like a dime raise or something. So I don’t really feel like I had that much of a choice.

Every one of the participants “plays the lottery” in hopes of someday “winning big.” Cleo is most intrigued by the “game”. She excitedly shared:

Cleo: Yeah, I spend quite a bit of money on lottery tickets. Mostly scratch-offs. I gets the “Cash 5,” and sometimes I’ll do the “Pick 3”. But like I say, I mostly get the scratch-offs. You’d be surprised. You don’t know what’s behind it till you scratch it off. That’s the fun part to me. But I know some people who just blessed. They buy them tickets and they wins.

Petitt: What’s the most you’ve ever won?

Cleo: ‘Round \$500.

Petitt: Wow! And do you think you’ve played more than \$500 over the years? Have you put in more money than you’ve won?

Cleo: Sho’ [sure]. They say, “You gotta’ pay to play.” But I hope one day I win big money.

Juanita, “plays” but is far more protective of her hard-earned dollars. She has a predetermined amount she will spend and it causes discord in her marriage when her husband wants to spend more on gambling than they can afford. If either of them wins, though, Juanita’s plan is to quit just one of her jobs, “Probably State University,” she says, because she earns more as a part-time domestic worker than she does in her full time job as a custodian at State University.

Gambling is attractive to the participants because they know there is no relationship between how hard they work and the money they earn. Why not venture to profit *without* working? The most unfortunate consequence of this game of chance is that their earnings are so meager that, when they fail to win, the loss is that much more significant (Levitt & Dubner, 2005).

Another way participants attempt to increase dividends is to extract gifts from building occupants, a strategy consistent with Cohen’s (1991) findings. Though many

building occupants give unsolicited, several participants seek, rely upon, and indeed expect, seasonal gifts and rewards from “their people” (employees and students who occupy buildings they clean). Clara, having become accustomed to receiving up to \$200 from building occupants, placed items on layaway in anticipation of her “Christmas money.” Incidentally, the individual who typically coordinated the annual gift left the university and thus, Clara went unrecognized that particular year. To her disappointment, she had to “let the stuff go back” (to the shelves), as she did not have the money to pay for the items otherwise.

Each of the participants has received numerous gifts from building occupants over their years of employment: cookies, scarves, hats, flowers, and birthday cards. One of the participants once received a color television, another received a watch, and yet another received a rocking chair. Clara received a gift certificate for a pedicure – her first ever in her fifty-some years of living. “I never had no pedicure before,” she said. “It felt good to sit there and let them people take care of me. God blessed me to meet some good people on this job,” she concluded. The participant who works in the residence halls shared that “her students” give her good gifts and regularly decorate the door of her custodial closet on special occasions, including her birthday. One Easter, they decorated her door with an Easter basket made of construction paper and pasted it to the door so the Easter eggs flowed from the basket. Each of the eggs carried special, handwritten messages from the residents. One egg read: “Thank you for all you do, [name redacted]. We know we’re pretty messy.”

The most wished for gift, however, is money, “cold-hard-cash,” Martha called it. There is no better substitute because money may be used to address specific priorities.

Cleo and Clara are the two participants who appear most skillful in extracting money. Their strategy is to respond honestly to the passing question: “How are you doing today?” They share good and bad news: “I’m having a new grandbaby soon and I’m trying to figure out how I’m going to afford to drive down to [nearby city] to be there when the baby comes” or “My hot water heater went out and I don’t know how I’m gon’ pay to get it fixed.” In other words, they don’t ask for money directly; they simply tell the truth and hope for a positive outcome. Cleo considers herself “blessed” because the few times she has hinted that she needed assistance, those who occupy the building she cleans were generous enough to “take up a collection” to help ease her financial burden.

To negotiate demands of everyday living, participants also find ways to loosen financial obligations through programs that reduce monthly payments:

Agnes: Things are tight for us, so one of the things we’ve done is like for our utility bill, you know, like now in the heat of the summer, had we gotten our normal bill, it would have probably been anywhere from \$300 to \$400 a month, and so instead of grasping and trying to pay that every month we entered into a deferred payment program, where they average out your bill over a whole year and you pay this set rate every month. So now we’re paying like \$250 every month, which is a blessing in August, because that’s when we have the highest bill. And so that’s good because we know exactly how much it’s gonna be every month and we can plan for that and know how much that bill is gonna be. We just have to maneuver, you know.

Participants also find ways to save money on meals during the day. They bring lunch from home every day as a money-saving measure and they established a worker-maintained “coke fund” in their crew areas to avoid paying the high price of drinks and snacks from the building vending machines. The “coke fund” works in this way: each custodian wishing to partake is responsible for supplying a designated amount of money up front, and then one person is responsible for purchasing snacks and soft drinks from a

local establishment at a cheaper price. They then consume the goods until depleted and start over again.

The “coke fund” was not without controversy. In fact, custodians had to fight to maintain it because, when the administration in the Division of Maintenance found out about their “little coke fund,” they put a stop to it. “Cash floating around in the crew areas would only cause trouble,” they thought. “What if there was a problem with people stealing the money?” one administrator asked. The custodians’ uprising in protest of this decision combined with the support of one sympathetic administrator permitted the reestablishment of “coke funds” in crew areas. This cost-management system was of extreme importance to the custodians.

No one could take away Diane’s strategy for coping with her financial lack; it exists in her mind. She narrated a story about how she made peace with not being able to buy what she would like to eat, though the desire for more spending flexibility is just below the surface, as demonstrated by her repeated references to beef during the interview:

She initially said:

Diane: Oh, we raised cows. You only used the milk for stuff and then we sold them.

You didn’t eat beef because that was the “rich” stuff . . .

Beef was um .. you just raised ‘em for milk and cheese and you had some that you could sell. But beef was something you couldn’t afford to eat.

Later, during this same interview she said:

Diane: I eat a lot of vegetables. I guess growing up I learned to like ‘em. I don’t eat too much red meat. I don’t care for meat too well.

When I asked her how much she needed to earn so she would not have to struggle paycheck-to-paycheck, she said:

Diane: . . . I can't tell you what would be enough to where you could go into the store and buy the meat you really want . . .

In yet another interview she said:

Diane: When I go to the grocery store, I get no-name-brand stuff <laughter>. It's all you can afford. If you can get something, five for a dollar you sure not gonna spend your little money on something that's two for a dollar. You know, you just can't buy what you want. And you can't get the best brands. You just can't. You just gotta make do with what you can do. Juggle.

And there's a lot of times you, like, look at the ribeye over here and you can't get it. You got go and get the sale stuff on the other isle. You just got to settle on something else, you know. But that's life.

The final time Diane mentioned beef was during our discussion about salary comparison—her salary compared to those who earn substantially more than she does:

Diane: I'm sure they worked hard to get where they're at. I mean, I know they've had educations and stuff, but it's not the same for everybody.

I mean, we all didn't get from the same road, you know . . .

I don't want to make a lot of money. I just want to have enough to where you go to the grocery store and you say, "Oh, I'll have that ribeye this week, and I'll get something different, a different meat, next week," you know?

Diane's strategy, it seemed, was to renounce her desire for beef because it was psychologically less taxing than it was to yearn for something she could not afford (Also see hooks, 2000b). Yet, her deep longing for beef, the "stuff of the rich," was evident in our interviews.

Reflexive Journal note: When Diane talked about being responsible for helping with the family's farm but not being able to eat the cow's beef (they could only use its milk) because beef was for the rich, I wanted to ask her:

“How does it feel to ‘own’ something, knowing you can’t have the best of it?”

I was unable to allow these words to pass my lips because I thought the question would be too painful for her to answer.

I got in the way.

The participants also reported knowing of other less noble strategies that former co-workers employed to draw more income. Some defrauded the government by claiming other people’s children on their income tax, they earned money working part-time jobs which they did not claim on their income tax, and they traded food stamps for cash (\$100 in food stamps for \$50 cash is considered a fair trade) so they could buy necessary, non-food items such as laundry soap. These acts are indisputably illegal, but the real crime, I argue, is that in a country of such wealth and at a university of such means, these women, who work full-time, year-round, are not paid wages that would make lying, cheating, and stealing unnecessary.

Inconsequential Financial Incentives

The rising employment-centered costs that continue to chip away at their “take home pay,” cause anxiety because the participants know they cannot rely on regular merit raises to help cover the costs. Martha, Juanita, and Diane report never having received a merit increase. Rather, they are at the mercy of very modest state or university-mandated increases. And even when they do receive a monetary increase of any kind, merited or mandated, participants say it is not enough to make a positive impact:

Clara: This one time they had gave me a 3% increase, but shoot, 3% of nothin’ still ain’t nothin’!

Diane: One time they gave us all a 20 cent raise. What are you gonna

buy with 20 cents? That's not enough to make a difference in the world <laughter>. Heck, it's not even enough to make a difference in the grocery bag <laughter>.

One of the participants received a university award over 15 years ago. The award came with a plaque and \$500. She still remembers the exact date she won the award and precisely how she used the unanticipated income. "It was a blessing to win that money," she said. And the accompanying plaque? "I don't know what I did with that thang," she said.

The Living Wage Initiative

The 2004 Living Wage initiative that took place on the State University campus began when one woman, a full-time lecturer, who also happened to be a graduate student and social justice activist, became aware of the financial hardship of one custodian with whom she had become friends. She began conducting research on the salaries of State University custodians compared to custodial salaries at other institutions with whom State University is frequently compared. She learned that State University ranked among the lowest in terms of starting wages paid to full-time custodians. Her findings resulted in a comprehensive, well-researched publication that catalyzed the local grassroots, social justice organization with which she was affiliated.

Deciding to focus their efforts on State University, the figurative "elephant in the room" (one of the largest area employers), they formed a Living Wage Coalition comprised of State University students, faculty, and staff, as well as a number of community churches and organizations. The group asked State University to raise its starting wage for full-time employees from \$6.15 per hour to \$9.79 per hour, or \$20,363 annually. This represented a call for State University employees to earn an annual

income above the federal poverty guidelines (130% for this particular community), taking into account local costs of essential living expenses, such as housing and utilities, food, transportation, childcare, and healthcare. The Coalition arrived at 130% of the federal poverty guidelines because an annual income of approximately \$20,363 is close to the cut-off for determining food stamp eligibility. Families that make less than 130% of the federal poverty guidelines are considered poor enough to qualify for public assistance.

The Coalition's strategy was to involve workers in the telling of their stories and to cultivate influential university-based allies. They achieved both through developing an award-winning video featuring State University custodial employees who shared details about their financial challenges, and they gained the support of both Faculty and Student Senates, which passed resolutions in support of the proposed wage increase.

The proposal was forwarded to the Office of the President through the Faculty Senate. The president met with a key advisor who offered the following opinion:

Administrator: We're competitive. We're okay. You factor in the benefits and everything and we're competitive . . .

Our turnover isn't really all that high. The market, from a very hardnosed perspective, is that people don't leave. So if they don't leave and you don't have high turnover, then you don't necessarily have to be competitive from a business perspective.

So, from a purely financial perspective, I said, we shouldn't do it . . .

This coalition is coming in and they are bringing social issues that I don't weigh into . . .

I don't let judgment and emotion creep into my work.

It's just, "show me data." I have to focus on facts, on data. My job isn't to taint decisions in terms of judgments and opinion. My job is just to get and interpret data.

I find a lot of emotional issues around lots of things: “Oh, my gosh, how could you even think of outsourcing [department’s name redacted]? Oh, my gosh!” Well you know what? That’s an emotional argument. And I don’t want an emotional argument. I want to know facts, data-wise why I would or wouldn’t want to do that.

So, I said we shouldn’t do it because the data indicated that we’re okay. We’re competitive.

Armed with this advice and other information, the president appeared in person at the following Faculty Senate meeting to respond, rather abruptly, to the request. His slightly paraphrased response was:

The money to fund such an increase simply does not exist.

It would cost State University an estimated \$5 million each year and the total cost would be closer to \$17 million per year after adjusting the pay of those workers’ supervisors.

Furthermore, if the jobs are so unattractive, why do we have people in them? If we are paying subpar wages, it would seem to me there would be other alternatives that are better.

Outraged but undaunted, the faculty member who sponsored the resolution requested a private meeting between the Coalition and the President, to which he agreed.

Following the private meeting, the president’s posture shifted a bit; he agreed to form his own task force to study the feasibility of a wage increase and to provide him with a recommendation. Like many other universities, the president chose a name for the committee that was not politically or emotionally charged. Instead of calling it a “Living Wage Taskforce,” he called it the “Taskforce on Wages and Benefits.”

One administrator who participated in my study was also a member of the appointed taskforce. He noted that during deliberations, opinions were wide-ranging.

This individual's opinion, however, was that a living wage had the potential to "price custodians out of the market":

Administrator & Task Force Rep: When I was on the Taskforce, I said: Yeah, I want you to make \$20 an hour, but if you make \$20 an hour, pretty soon some efficiency expert is going to come along and say, "Hey, you all could get this done for \$10 an hour. Why are you paying these folks \$20 an hour?"

One of the things this group that goes around talking about we need to pay folks more .. They say we need to pay them \$12 to \$13 an hour. Well, let me tell you, there are a lot of companies out there who are in business because they have proven that they could do the same service at a lower rate. And so you try to get people to understand that they shouldn't become their own worst enemy.

Because what it comes down to is the almighty buck.

As a state university, do we assume that social responsibility to pay them a living wage? And if we did that, does that mean that we will not hire Professor X, who is the next Nobel Prize winner? It gets very complicated.

Though the group opinion was reportedly disparate, the task force, having completed its review of the wages and benefits of lower-paid employees, recommended elevating the starting wage to \$7.57 per hour. But the President, declaring his desire that State University become the area "employer of choice," opted to add another 20 cents, raising the starting wage to \$7.77 per hour. He did not want the institution to appear a temperate leader, just barely making a statement; the university's leadership within the community had to be unequivocal.

This change also involved the elimination of the Custodial Worker I classification because the new starting salary was within the range of what Custodial Worker IIs earned. Thus, every new entry-level employee is hired as a Custodial Worker II. The president also requested that the university conduct periodic reviews of entry-level pay

rates. Funds for the pay increase were allocated from resources that had been set aside for faculty and staff merit increases. The entire faculty and staff received lower merit increases this particular year to provide increased compensation to the lowest paid employees.

This was an encouraging move in the right direction, though Diane was the only participant who benefitted from the wage increase because all others were already paid higher than \$7.77. Diane received an increase of approximately 32 cents, for which she was appreciative, but even with this small increase it was still barely enough to eke out a living:

Diane: I mean, um, you get by. It's not really like what you call living. It's just getting by.

Other custodial workers had mixed reactions to the wage increase. Martha, Juanita, and Clara resented not having their needs addressed. The initial failure to attend to the compression issue seemed unfair:

Martha: I was kind of hoping we'd get a little of it. You know, I've tried to go out for things and get better and some of those people have never tried to go out for things, you know, to go out for being twos [Custodial Worker II] or anything else and they just get to be twos now because of this thing.

It seems like, you know, you're just handing it to them, and you're going, "I can't get one of those! How come they get it?"

And it's going to cause some trouble, and it will.

How come they got a raise out of the deal and I didn't? I make too much money? Ha! I don't make much more than what that is now, and I make too much?

Clara said:

Clara: Shoot. I didn't get nothin' from that Livin' Wage thing, but I know some people who did and that ain't fair. Made them Custodial Worker

twos and they makin' bout as much as me and look how long I been workin' here. That's not fair.

One administrator reported that several custodial employees came to her office imploring, "Take the raise back!" The modest wage increase had unintended consequences for custodial employees who were receiving governmental aid. A higher salary caused a reduction in food stamps, removal of her child from a reduced lunch program and an increase in rent for one particular employee. The administrator reported that this employee said: "It looked like I was gonna get \$20 extra on my paycheck but it wined up hurting me. Now I come up short! This thing ain't do nothin' but cause me trouble! I don't want the money. Take it back!"

Consequently, the small wage increase which one administrator called a "nice treat," was welcomed by some and met with resentment by others. This method of organizational decision-making, where the institution's clearest aspiration was to win, or rather, to become the area "employer of choice," was the result of a competitive approach as opposed to a collaborative process. Had the institution reached out to and engaged in dialogue with community agencies and the workers who would be impacted by their decisions, the solution might have been more nuanced and the overall outcome more beneficial for all involved.

As previously mentioned, this wage increase also caused a domino effect. The Division of Facilities (not the Department of Student Housing) reduced the number of employees on their payroll through attrition so they could afford to pay the higher wage, and the reduction in the workforce created heavier workloads for the remaining staff. The Division of Facilities also later contracted workers from an area establishment at a cheaper cost, and these employees worked without benefits.

*Markers of Class Marginality**Uniforms*

Custodial employees of State University are required to wear state-issued uniforms. Intentionally selected to reflect State University school colors, clearly branded with the official seal of State University and the word “Custodian” prominently displayed on the upper chest area of the shirt, the uniforms carry valuable symbolic information; they represent the values and identity of the organization rather than an individual employee (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). Yet the custodial participants share stories about how uniforms are identity-producing because of the uniform’s ascribed meaning and the corollary impact on those who wear them.

Uniformed custodians are highly conspicuous and easily distinguishable from other non-service workers who are not required to work in uniform. Upon initial encounter,

the first aspect of social placement is that of recognition: Whom does the other purport to be? For the uniformed stranger, the question is answered clearly and almost instantaneously. Socially, he is a one-dimensional man who announces only the status he wears on his sleeve. The ambiguity ordinarily attached to the stranger . . . is absent for the uniform-wearer, whose group membership, and perhaps his rank . . . are proclaimed by his apparel (Joseph & Alex, 1972, pp. 724-725).

The way in which strangers respond to uniformed individuals, the authors continue, depends upon the “relative degree of prestige accorded its group. Where the prestige granted a uniform is low, it may represent a source of embarrassment rather than pride” (p. 720). For the research participants, the uniform functions as a marker of marginality and is cause for disparagement because they perform “dirty work” for low wages. And “there is no quicker way to indicate that a person is barely deserving of notice than to

point out that he or she holds a ‘chump change’ job . . .” (Newman, 1999, p. 95). When people see the women in custodial uniforms, they access preconceived, unfavorable associations and treat the women accordingly. One of the most challenging aspects of wearing a uniform, participants note, is that they wear the uniform all day, every day and there is no respite from the constant information exchange: the uniform continually sends a message, and observers invariably respond—negatively, more often than not.

Foucault (1995) asserts that this hyper-visibility the custodians experience “assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjugation” (p. 187). The uniform, Joseph and Alex (1972) claim, “acts as a guarantee that an upper level in the group will control the members and, in turn, that members will conform” (pp. 722-723). Further, Rafaeli and Pratt (1993) maintain that employees who wear “organizational” attire are more likely to comply with role requirements than are employees who wear “self-selected” attire . . . Highly conspicuous dress, in particular, may be predicted to inspire greater compliance . . . (p. 44).

One possible explanation for this is the greater accountability the uniform facilitates. If one is easily identified, one’s behavior is likely to be more measured and thoughtful. Rather than responding as one might under normal circumstances, the uniformed individual has to “swallow stuff [they] want to say,” according to Martha. All participants know that when they wear the State University uniform, they are deindividuated (Becker-Haven & Lindsfold, 1978) and thus become completely submerged in the organization and its identity. “*Remember that in the eyes of the customers you are State University, so look and act professionally at all times,*”

reads p. 23 of the State University Custodial Training Manual.

Since the uniform symbolizes the servitude and otherness of its wearers, it also functions to differentiate and elevate non-uniform wearers. It allows others to reaffirm their own superiority (Gill, 1990) which can only exist in relation to another (Rollins, 1985). Surely, this self-enhancing tactic was at work when a visiting politician asked Martha and several of her uniformed counterparts to pose for a photograph:

Martha: Like, they don't want you unless something gets screwed up or maybe sometimes like, if they need you for a picture or something.

Pettitt: People have asked you to pose for pictures?

Martha: Just this one time. I think they just wanted this one politician to have a custodial person in his picture and we got called over for it. That was the only time.

Martha interpreted the politician's intentions as exploitative because he didn't bother to introduce himself (they should know him, after all), nor did he ask their names or look them in the eyes. "Pose for the photograph and get back to work" was the message she received.

Even the individual responsible for uniform distribution revealed a bias that those who wore custodial uniforms were "not like her". She was quoted in a 2002 State University Division of Facilities Newsletter having said: "*Those people* [italics added] are neat, cooperative and funny. They like to chat, *just like we do* [italics added]." She clearly expected to have a "they are not like me" experience when she encountered custodial employees, but seemed pleasantly surprised to discover that they were more alike than unlike.

The uniform has no redeeming value, according to the participants; in it, they feel stigmatized and distanced from others, in part, because they literally wear their

socioeconomic status on their bodies. Lott (2002) proposes that distancing is the dominant response to poor people on the part of those who are not poor. Distancing, she notes, is a response of “separation, exclusion, devaluation, discounting, and designation as other” (p. 100) and for the participants, this is a common experience. Diane and Clara shared stories about how they are treated as undesirable elements when students, faculty and staff recoil from them whenever they attempt to share the same elevator:

Diane: When you can tell somebody appreciates your work, it makes you want to do more and work harder than if somebody snubs you or doesn’t even want to get on the elevator with you.

It’s just like, you know, it really hurts your feelings.

I mean you can’t help for working.

And maybe it’s the clothes we’re wearing or something.

I don’t know what it is. But they look at you like you’re dirty or something.

When Clara shared the following story, her experience was both raced and classed:

Clara: These White folks out here, I’m telling you. Like on the elevator, if .. sometimes with a student, or even a faculty, you know, or people in the office [staff], they .. they don’t want you on there with them, they snarl up at you .. snarl up at you or act like you’re not even there. And they won’t speak. Sometimes, I’ll say “Good morning” or if it’s afternoon, I’ll say “Good afternoon” and they’ll turn their head, stick their little pointy nose in the air.

Clara also experiences distancing responses from Black students:

Clara: Some of these Black students out here done forgot where they come from, you know. I don’t know if they think they get better when they come out here, or what, you know.

Thinking they’re higher or they’re embarrassed . . .

They’ll walk by you <motions turning one’s head away smugly> and won’t speak.

I don't know if it's because I'm a custodian or what. Why do they think they're better?

All these Black students' mothers ain't been no secretary or had no big time job. You can't make me believe that. They shouldn't be disrespectful of their own color like that.

Even Agnes, a supervisor whose uniform marks her authority with the words "Custodial Supervisor," cannot escape disregard. "They still just see somebody in a uniform," she noted. In this excerpt, she talked about how the regular building occupants acknowledge her influence as a supervisor and how those who are in the building less frequently treat her as they would any other custodian:

Agnes: The people in my building know me. They all know me, you know.

But the other people who come through, it just depends on that individual person. Because some of them are kind of rude. Some of them can be lost, don't know where they're going, and you can hear them talking, and you could go over to them and say, "Excuse me, can I help you?"

And because of who I am, they're like, "Oh no, no. We got it. We got it."

And I'm going "Okay." And I let them be lost. They're over here in the [Walker] building and they're looking for the [Naylor] building. And I'll try to start telling them that they're way, way off base. The building they're looking for is way on the other side of campus. And, um, I try to tell them the shortest route to get to where they need to be on time and they'll cut you off, "Yeah, yeah. We know. We know." They'll learn eventually, you know. This is a big campus.

But the regular people in the building, the staff, like I said, they all know me. And so, I don't care if I was wearing prison orange. I mean, they treat me like staff and not like I'm a worker.

It is noteworthy that Agnes, a custodial supervisor, acknowledges and accepts the differential treatment she is accorded by the usual building occupants. Her employees, to

whom she refers as “workers,” are not treated with the same level of respect as she, and Agnes appears content with this inequity.

Martha offers an additional example of how her easily identifiable occupation caused the building proctor to treat her with disrespect:

Martha: Oh, honey. Mr. [Stanley] never smiled or anything, that man. He didn’t talk to you unless you had some money.

That’s not good. That meant us Custodians would never get talked to cuz we don’t have any of that stuff <laughter>.

Without exception, all participants shared stories of daily, face-to-face encounters where demeaning behavior caused them to feel unworthy and discounted. None of the women report having ever engaged an individual who treated them with disrespect; they simply walk away. Thus, their inferiority is evidenced and reinforced by their perceived acceptance of the demeaning treatment. Barbara Ehrenreich, in her capacity as an undercover maid, noted: “Work is supposed to save you from being an ‘outcast’ . . . but the work we do is an outcast’s work . . .” (2001, p. 117).

Because the women know they are highly visible, extremely regulated, stigmatized, and under constant surveillance, they learn to monitor and regulate themselves. Agnes, Diane, Clara, and Martha provided examples of self-regulation. In this first example, Agnes talked about how a former supervisor taught her proper deportment when interacting with building occupants:

Agnes: . . . Let me tell you about this other woman who impacted my life, Maria Torres . . . she said stuff that built me . . . I observed how professional she was and how nice she was to those people. I didn’t .. hadn’t nobody taught me that. And how quiet .. she taught us how to be quiet, how to wear your uniforms like you are supposed to and how you’re supposed to carry yourself. I learned that type of stuff from Maria.

When I asked Diane how she prioritized monthly purchases, she discussed the importance of buying “the basics” first, so her body would not offend those for whom she cleaned:

Diane: . . . Because you have to have soap. You have to have shampoo. You have to .. I mean, you’ve got to keep clean or you couldn’t work with the people, you know.

Diane also provided an example of self-regulation as she discussed her desire to safeguard her dignity by not requesting or accepting “handouts”:

Petitt: You would rather cut a bean in half than go and ask for help?

Diane: Dang right <laughter>. Shoot!

Petitt: <long pause>.

Diane: Well, like, I’m already doing custodial work.

They put us down like we’re low-class anyway.

I’m not going to put myself downer . . . You know. I’m proud that I can work, and I’m proud of being a custodial worker because it’s work. Good, honest work.

And, no, I don’t want people talking about me. Standing up there in line for government groceries <laughter>.

Diane attempts to supervise how she is appraised by others when she is away from work.

When not in uniform, she has the ability to conceal her class, and she refuses to make it visible by being seen receiving government assistance.

In this next example, Clara reveals how exposed she feels when dressed in uniform and gives us a glimpse into the energy she expends monitoring herself and her surroundings in the course of a day’s work:

Clara: . . . And then this one other time, in my building, I was going into the restroom . . .

I had to use the restroom and I don't care if somebody noticed me . . .

Clara's visibility made her self-conscious, even when taking a restroom break. She is aware that her presence in the public restroom is incongruent with what people are accustomed to seeing: a custodian 1) not working and 2) using the same facility as they. Clara's "I don't care if somebody noticed me" comment also conveys an unapologetic attitude about her need—and her right—to use the public facility to relieve herself, *even though she is just a custodian*. Clara later admitted that she prefers to take restroom breaks when students and faculty are in class. "I prefer not to run into 'em," she said.

Martha provided the final example of self-regulation. Here she is aware of and complicit in her own class marginalization:

Martha: This one time I saw a Vice President out on campus though. He was, like, getting a Coke or something from one of the Coke machines, and I stopped and talked to him. Well, no. He was just there one day, and I was about to talk to him because he wasn't dressed in a suit and stuff. And I didn't recognize who he was at first. But when I noticed who he was, I was going, "What's he doing, you know, down here?"

Petitt: Did you speak to him after all?

Martha: Nah. Didn't want to bother him.

When Martha believed she was encountering an "ordinary" person, she was inclined to greet him, but upon recognizing the individual as a high-ranking university official, who was not wearing his usual suit, she withdrew. Martha was responding to an internalized message that it would be transgressive for a subordinate to initiate the crossing of class boundaries.

When boundary-crossing does occur, it is typically at the initiation and invitation of building occupants who reside in a more privileged class location. Once lines of communication are established, interactions are often brief and devoid of substance.

Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) appropriately names these exchanges “fleeting greetings” or “touching base-type” (p.180) conversations, largely because custodians and other building occupants experience and inhabit very different worlds along class lines. Diane offered the following illustration:

Diane: I mean, you’d be amazed how many will just take your Rubbermaid and just push it around or something, you know, just playing with you, or just .. I don’t know. Just maybe .. it’s just little things that they’ll do to make you just feel like, you know, you’re at home instead of at work. You know? I don’t know if that sounds right.

Petitt: Do you mean people in the offices like to joke around with you?

Diane: I have some students and I have professors that play with me. I mean, you know, talk to me and kid me about the weather and different things, you know. Because I’m a quiet person I don’t know how they got me to talking with them so much. I mean they had to work harder at it than I did <laughter>.

Petitt: You said they take your Rubbermaid and play around with it? Is the Rubbermaid the trashcan you use?

Diane: Oh, yeah, the Rubbermaid is the trashcan. I’ll be pushing it, and then I’ll turn around and they’ve scooted it back. They’re just, you know, playing and doing things.

Though these connections are delicate and superficial, Diane is grateful to be deemed worthy of engagement.

Accused of Stealing

None of the participants have ever stolen from State University, yet they have all been accused of stealing. Custodians are almost always the first suspects:

Administrator 1: Whenever things come up missing custodians are the first people they look at because they have master keys to every area and they are in there around people’s personal, unsecured belongings all the time.

We get complaints filed against custodians all the time and in

all my years of being here [approximately 8] it has never been a custodian that actually did it.

Administrator 2: Accusations about custodians stealing? Many. Lots of accusations. Too many to count. How often are they the ones who have been guilty of it? Very rarely.

When Clara was interviewed for her position, she recalled the interviewer asking:

“Would you steal? If you if you are in anybody’s office, would touch anything that doesn’t belong to you?” She also recalls being questioned by an armed university police officer when a CD player was missing from one of the offices she cleaned:

Clara: These graduate students had a CD player missing and they told the police, “somebody with a key had been in there,” and they were my offices, you know, the offices I clean. So they were saying I stole it. Oh, was I mad at them! I do not need no CD player. I ain’t losing my job for no CD player . . . And the bad thing about it was that it happened at night. And I ain’t even there at night. It’s my floor but I don’t work nights. So why was they talking to me? And it made me mad. People just go accusing you and you have to defend yourself and try to keep your job. And I said, I explained, I said, “I ain’t stole nothing!” Accusing me just ‘cuz I got a key!

Though Clara clearly resented the accusation, there *are* a number of reasons employees steal. Greenberg (2002) posits that “perceived unfairness” is among the most potent. He writes:

Research has shown that employee[s] are inclined to steal company property when they feel underpaid for the work they do . . . In keeping with equity theory (Adams, 1965), this behavior effectively raises outcomes believed to be deserved, but that were denied. Such behavior also is in keeping with research showing that people are inclined to reciprocate the deviant behavior (underpayment, in this case) of their superiors (Kemper, 1966) . . .

Previous studies have established that interpersonally insensitive treatment on the part of organizational authority figures provides additional justification. Indeed, considerable research has shown that people who feel underpaid are inclined to steal and to engage in other types of deviant behavior when company agents display indifference regarding the suffering they experience as a result of the underpayment (p. 986).

Hence, might this be the origin of frequent accusations that custodians steal? Is it possible that the majority of State University employees know that custodians are overworked, underpaid, and poorly treated, and therefore have probable cause to steal, or to “seek equity,” in Greenberg’s words?

Regardless, the widespread belief that the working-poor are most liable to steal weighs heavily upon the custodial participants, for they know they are first, and indeed, always suspect when items go missing. Though none of the participants admit to ever taking anything while working at State University, two of them know of former employees who took items – gradually. That is, a lost or abandoned item was held in a custodial closet for a certain number of days and when no one returned to claim it (presumed abandonment, an act of divesting), they took it home. In one case, the employee who took possession of an abandoned item, a coat her child desperately needed, was a woman who, after withholdings, took home \$21; it was all that remained of her bimonthly paycheck, which she had to utilize to feed a family of four. The second former employee kept a calculator, an article her child needed for school, which she was unable to afford. It was the former employee’s observation, the participant reported, that: “These rich kids out here just go off and leave things and don’t come back. They just go and buy another one. Besides, how come State University can keep it and we can’t? We the ones that need it!”

This former employee was referring to State University’s “Lost, Found, Stolen or Abandoned Property” rule, whereby the university holds lost or abandoned property in a certain location for a period of 120 days and should the rightful owner fail to come forth to claim it, the item becomes State University property. The University then sells the

item in its biannual “Lost and Found Auction” for which the advertisement reads: “Here is your opportunity to buy back your valuables.” The funds received from the sale are used “for the benefit of the student body.”

So, when a custodian takes possession of a lost or abandoned item which she is unable to otherwise afford, it is deemed “dishonest appropriation of property belonging to another” (Hickey, 2006, p. 58). But when State University does the same, and then profits from the resale, the act is permissible and proper because 1) according to Pollock and Wright (1888), State University becomes the rightful owner of said property:

The possession of land carries with it in general, by our law, possession of everything which is attached to or under that land, and, in the absence of a better right elsewhere, the right to possess it also. And it makes no difference that the possessor is not aware of the thing’s existence (p. 20);

and 2) the proceeds are “used for a worthy cause.” This is a perplexing situation, indeed; through university rules and legal authority, it bears out the axiom: “The rich get richer while the poor stay poor”.

Money

Relating to Money

Given this exploration of the ways in which classism impacts the lives of the participants, I thought it important to explore their relationships with money. How do the women think about money and relate to money, I wondered?

Martha is the only participant who does not struggle with day-to-day financial exigencies. Unlike the others, she is able to plan ahead and “save money for a rainy day”. She has both checking and savings accounts, a burial plot toward which she pays monthly installments, and a small amount of discretionary funds that allow her to follow the advice of Suze Orman, whose television show she watches weekly, by occasionally

paying more than the minimum amount due on monthly credit card bills and other loans.

Cleo, Juanita, Agnes, Clara, and Diane, on the other hand, live paycheck-to-paycheck.

They are each one unanticipated crisis away from severe financial hardship.

Curiously, two of the women who struggle financially are also generous with their earnings. Clara uses her income to enhance the quality of life of building occupants with whom she has formed friendships, and Agnes shares hers with poverty-stricken children abroad:

Clara: I had a barbecue at my house for some students in my building one time. They were just hanging around saying they were homesick and looking all long-faced. And I told them, “Y’all come on to my house one weekend”. I had gotten my income tax check, and I barbecued for them. They sat around playing dominoes and stuff. They had a good time. They were just missing their mama’s home cooking, so I cooked for them and I would bring them cookies sometimes.

As previously mentioned, Clara also shares her money with students who “come up short” when they want to make a purchase from the vending machine. “Sometimes, it’ll be the last dime I have, but I’ll go ahead and give it to ‘em if they need it, you know. I would want somebody to do that for my kid,” she said. Clara is also the participant who uses personal funds to purchase scented candles and air fresheners for the restrooms on “her” floor.

Agnes considers it part of her Christian ministry to help children in need:

Petitt: A minute ago you mentioned that you sponsor Feed the Children. Can you talk a little about that?

Agnes: I just send in donations.

Petitt: How did that come about? Did you see a commercial and decide to help?

Agnes: Yes. I saw one of those commercials and it broke my heart! I just had to help. Even if .. some people say that the kids don't get the money but I, I kinda' trust Larry Jones and his wife.

They have a nursery overseas where they take in babies whose parents have died from AIDS, and if a few dollars can give a baby a clean bed and a hot meal and some medication, then I don't care, you know, it just broke my heart, you know?

Petitt: So, who's Larry Jones? You said you trust him. Is he a TV personality or somebody you know?

Agnes: No. I don't know him. He's the sponsor over Feed the Children on TV, you know, him and his wife.

Petitt: Oh, okay. How much does it cost you to sponsor a child?

Agnes: It's whatever you, whatever I can afford to send, you know, \$10, \$15, \$20, like, the brochure, I got it in my purse. It says "\$21 will send 150 pounds of food," <raises her voice> \$21! I'll spend that if my family and I eat hamburgers we'll spend that much. We spend that much, just on McDonald's or Dairy Queen, for dinner, you know. So they can have that much from my paycheck.

Petitt: So, you send them how much every month?

Agnes: \$20, or \$10. It depends, 'cause like I said, my husband hasn't been working, so sometimes it's \$10, sometimes it's \$20.

Petitt: Do you ever skip if you have to?

Agnes: Yes I do. I have to. Yeah.

Both Agnes and Clara recognize the value of money and know how vital it is to their survival and even though they do not possess great wealth, they are willing to share their money to improve the quality of life for others. "It's not good to keep your fist closed too tight," Agnes offered. "You block your blessings when you do that," she concluded.

Toward the conclusion of our interviews, since it was clear that the participants believed they were underpaid as custodial workers at State University, I asked each of them, "How much do you think you should be paid for the work you do at State

University? Their answers were intriguing. Cleo, who, at the time earned \$12.65 an hour, (though she reported earning “nine something an hour”) said:

Cleo: I think I should be makin’ ‘round ‘bout, at least twelve dollars an hour, at least, for as long as I been workin’ out here.

Martha, who, at the time of our interview earned \$7.88 an hour, said:

Martha: I’d like at least about maybe a dime more.

Petitt: A dime more?

Martha: It’d be pretty good. That’s pretty good pay, really. That’d make it a little bit better. That’s a lot around here.

Juanita, who, at the time of our interview earned \$8.36 an hour, said:

Juanita: For only one job? If I want to have one job? They would need to pay me at least \$12 or \$13. That would be the only way I could make it.

Agnes, who, at the time of our interview earned \$2,850 per month, or \$17.81 an hour, responded on her and her staff’s behalf when she said:

Agnes: For the amount of hard work and the sacrifice that we make with our bodies, base pay should be \$10 an hour. Because when you consider you gotta’ pay for your parking, and then insurance premiums are going up every day, and if you put your husband on your insurance, you ain’t gonna’ eat.

The people in physical plant and area maintenance [predominantly male workgroups] are making like \$17 an hour, not supervisors, regular workers, and they just ride around in their trucks. Now I know they probably fix stuff, but for the most part, they just ride around in the truck. And I’m like, “Well come on now, give us some of that money,” you know.

And I think they should at least put us up to or close to where the other schools are paying. Don’t let us be the broke downs. They are always hollerin’ about State University pride this and State University pride that, and they are so proud.

But when you look at how they’re taking care of their workers, you know, you gotta’ ask, do we measure up the same everywhere?

We may measure up in academics; we may measure up in athletics; but do we measure up everywhere?

What about the people who work in food services? What about your custodians? How well are you taking care of the inside?

We are the people behind the scenes. We are the ones that make you look good. When [a former President of the United States] comes to visit, and his quarters over there at the library is sparkling, who does that? Who helps you make a good impression? How good are you taking care of those folks? You see? These important people from around the world come here and somebody in custodial and somebody in food services made State University look awfully good.

Do you take care of them folks? That's what I'm talkin' bout'.

Clara, who at the time of our interview earned \$7.93, said:

Clara: For as long as I've been working here, I think I oughta' be makin' more than \$7.93. I oughta be makin' at least \$8.75 by now.

And Diane, who at the time of our first interview earned \$7.45 and later, after the across the board salary adjustment, earned \$8.12, said:

Diane: I really don't know about that. I may never. But before I get a raise we need more help, you know <laughter>. I mean that. That's the truth.

I mean I've done without so long. I can do without a little longer.

Just get us some help!

Petitt: So you'd rather have them replace the people you've lost and have more help cleaning the building than have, say, a dollar raise?

Diane: Probably. I mean you're used to already eating like you're eating.

I mean yeah, we all need the money. I mean that's no lie, but right now we're so shorthanded. Nobody would understand until they're in here.

Petitt: So you're still not comfortable saying a dollar figure? You're not comfortable sharing an amount you think you should be paid for the work you do and so that you have enough and not have to struggle to make ends meet?

Diane: What's enough?

I mean, I haven't had any more, so I don't know what's enough.

You know, I've never been burdened with a load of money <laughter>, so I can't tell you what would be enough to where you could go into the store and buy the meat you really want, and buy you a pair of shoes and not think about what I'm going to do without next week, you know . . .

Cleo, Juanita, and Clara, who all report that their wages are insufficient to meet their families' needs, and who are the principal wage-earners in their families, requested from 81 cents up to \$5 per hour more in compensation for their work. Agnes, a sole wage-earner as well, wanted parity with the individuals on her campus who work in maintenance (primarily comprised of men) as well as custodians at comparable institutions to State University. Martha, whose salary is combined with her husband's, wanted only a dime more per hour. And Diane, having survived extreme poverty and getting by with life skills of "making do from scratch-scratch," was unable to articulate an adequate wage.

Their responses are profoundly classed and clearly demonstrative of the ways in which class is reproduced. Having been employed in a series of low wage-earning jobs, with little access to opportunities to acquire more marketable credentials, constraints press upon them and influence their pursuit of material wellbeing. Their answers are rooted in their current reality and in the cultural messages they have internalized. If they are unable to dislodge either of these, their futures may continue to look like their present.

Martha is the only participant who talked about her attempt to transcend the low-wage work world. She pursued nursing school. Martha acted on the belief that she could be successful, but found herself disoriented:

Martha: Well, I was good at being a Nurse's Aide but then I decided I wanted to go to school .. to Nursing school.

Petitt: What was that like?

Martha: Different. OB was not fun. I hated it. I hated just about everything . . . That was an experience. I left there and went back to work at the Diner.

Petitt: What made you leave the nursing area?

Martha: I kept flunking <laughter>. I was .. they had some .. the teachers around there, some of them were not .. didn't even have Masters degrees or anything like that. They were going .. they were .. it was kind of like, you know, teaching as they went to school too. Some of them weren't the best.

Petitt: So, you believe you weren't successful because you didn't have good instruction?

Martha: Well, some of that and some of it was me. I flunked OB and that screwed it.

But some of that stuff, I mean, you had the .. you know, it seemed like you had to take, well, like, a lot of hours and stuff and sometimes that's kind of scary and stuff. And you may not be kind of like, you know. You think, you know, you got enough stuff and stuff, like, and that can be scary, too. So, I went back to the Diner.

Petitt: The same Diner you worked at just before becoming a Nurse's Aide?

Martha: Yep. Same place.

I asked Martha if she would ever try nursing school again, and she said "No." Since she had "landed a good job at State University," she planned to retire there. However, she would continue trying to move up in the custodial ranks. Outlining her future, she said: "I'll go out for a three again [Custodial Worker III] and then, I would like to be an Assistant Supervisor. I don't want to be a Supervisor, Supervisor. It's just too big of a headache. Yuck."

Receiving Payment

Though I pride myself on my sensitivity, I admit I approached the financial aspect of this project with less care than it deserved. In preparation for the interviews, I used my lunch hour to run to the bank to get cash to pay the participants. “How would you like these bills, ma’am?” the teller asked. “\$50’s, please,” I responded. Having the teller provide me with \$50 bills expedited the transaction and allowed me to move quickly to my next task. I gave no thought to how the participants would react to a fifty dollar bill. Here is how they responded:

Martha:

Martha: Geez, Becky. That sure is a lot of money. Fifty whole dollars for just an hour and a half? That’s too much money. Do you have to give me another fifty dollar bill? You got anything smaller? Can you break it?

Petitt: I remembered you were uncomfortable about the fifty dollar bill last time I paid you, so I brought smaller bills today. I have three ten dollar bills and four five dollar bills for you.

Martha: That’s better. Fifty dollars still just seems like a lot of money to me. And a fifty dollar bill at that. I don’t see those very much. I know it seems odd.

Juanita:

Juanita: Wow! A \$50 bill! Haven’t had one of those in a long time. Do you need me to do some more interviews? Easiest \$50 I ever earned sitting here and just talking to you. Wow! Thank you! Hope I don’t lose it.

Clara:

Clara: What? You about to give me that right now? Whoa! Hold my money, Becky. I don’t wanna take that right now. Can you hold it? I mean, keep it till we all done and then go ahead and give it to me all at once? Can you do it like that?

And Diane:

Diane: <Gasp>. Can you break that, Becky? If my husband sees me with a \$50

bill, he's gonna wonder where I got it from. I don't want my husband to find out.

Fifty dollars for an hour and a half of "just talking" seemed overly generous to the participants, and the fifty-dollar denomination clearly caused discomfort. I overlooked the significance of this up-front, unrecorded, unencumbered sum of cash I provided to women for whom money is critically important.

Agnes is the only participant who accepted the payment simply saying "thank you." This response marked a subtle change in her demeanor. During our interview, she was comfortable speaking intimately about money but when it came to accepting it, I observed distancing. Perhaps being a supervisor has exposed her to middle class mores which suggest that one does not discuss or express perceptible emotion about money (Kiyosaki & Lechter, 1997).

Agnes' response to receiving money may also explain the difference in how she handled the money. As I completed the last round of interviews, I met first with Cleo. As usual, upon concluding the interview, I paid her \$50 and noticed, for the first time, what she did with the money after I placed it in her hand: She folded it half and tucked it in her bra. Subsequently, I paid attention to what the other participants did with the money after I handed it to them. Juanita and Diane placed it in their bras, too; Clara put her money in her sock; Martha kept hers clasped tightly in her hand until she faded from my view; and Agnes placed hers in a wallet, which she then placed in her purse. The women who narrated the greatest financial need placed the money close to their bodies. Agnes, the participant who earns the highest salary, placed physical distance between herself and the cash.

Whiteness and Racism

Whiteness

Racism and whiteness as social expressions of power have a deep impact on the daily lives of Cleo, Martha, Juanita, Agnes, Clara, and Diane, though the consequences manifest differently across racial lines.

Race has been and continues to be a valuable social, political, and economic resource for white Americans. It grants them easier access to power and resources and provides them better insulation from negative prejudgments . . . (Lawrence, Sutton, Kubish, Susi, & Fulbright-Anderson, 2004, p. 17).

Martha and Diane, the two White participants, both benefit from and collude with the systems of racism and whiteness in their daily work worlds. For example, a custodian moving from building to building at the behest of the administration is a common occurrence. Somewhat less common is to have a request to be moved emerge from the custodian. However, over the course of their years of employment, each of the participants has asked to be relocated for various reasons. Martha and Diane are the only two to have had their requests honored. All others were denied.

In yet another example, Diane, when confronted by her Black supervisor for the aforementioned unnamed offense, engaged the system of whiteness as a leveraging tool. She found an ally in a White woman who held a more highly regarded position:

Diane: I was just sick about whatever the charges were. My supervisor wouldn't tell me and I kept getting the runaround from [the main office], so I just went to Ms. Mary's office, the head lady on my floor, and I asked her was there a problem with me, you know, I wanted to know if we were okay. And she said, "No. There are no problems. Not that I know of. You're doing just fine and if anybody asks me, I'll vouch for you."

She was real nice and I was glad to have her on my side, because she's higher, more important than my supervisor, kind of, you know. So if it ever came down to any complaint, if I had ever found out what the

charges were, I woulda' had her pulling for me, and I thank the good Lord for that.

Petitt: Is Mary a White woman?

Diane: Yeah. She's a White lady.

Here, Diane has both the systems of racism and classism working in her favor. Mary, as a White senior secretary, has the capacity to undercut, if not completely nullify Diane's supervisors' authority and credibility by "vouching" for Diane in speaking with the supervisor's supervisor, who is also White.

This power solidarity, the closing of White ranks (Hurtado, 1996), is also apparent in Agnes' story of the "lynch mob." As a group of Agnes' Black employees sat with Agnes' White supervisor complaining about Agnes' leadership, it was the lone voice of Kim, Agnes' only White employee (who, interestingly, was sitting on the floor, a figurative place of subordination) that saved Agnes when she contradicted the Black women:

Agnes: They were complaining about the silliest little things they could have talked to me about. But there was this young White girl . . . And when Barbara asked, "Anybody got anything else to say?" Kim's hand went up . . . she said, "Well, I don't know what all this is about," she said, "But I can tell you this, I ain't got no problems with Agnes. She's a good supervisor to me." She said that in front of all of them and my supervisor. And her saying that pretty much cancelled out everything all the Black ladies had been saying.

Kim, this same employee, also invests energy in protecting whiteness. Agnes explains:

Agnes: You don't get very many White people applying for custodial -- very few.

Petitt: Why do you suppose that is?

Agnes: 'Cause it's cleaning.

Petitt: And White people don't view cleaning as their work or what?

Agnes: That's probably it. Maybe they think it's beneath them or something. Kim, the White lady that was working for me, like when we'd have parents around during the summers, you know how they come for visits and stuff? Well, when the White parents would come around, she'd hurry-up and run and hide behind a post or a wall and wait for them to pass by before she'd come out. She didn't want them to see her <laughter>.

Study participants also identify whiteness as it is evidenced in those who intentionally create work for them. "Pranks" such as the depositing and spreading of bodily waste in places other than the commode, stuffing the commodes with newsprint, microwaving rats to the point of explosion, and covering the walls with graffiti, without exception, are attributed to White, male students – more specifically, White fraternity members. When asked "What makes you think it's the White fraternity men?" they said:

Cleo: 'Cause these White kids do just about anything out here. I be seein' 'em do stuff sometimes.

Martha: 'Cuz they're the ones who get bored most of the time. Start lookin' for somethin' to get into. Kids just bein' kids. You were probably that way when you were 20 years old.

Juanita: Because I see them. I worked in a lot of different places on campus and I see them.

Agnes: In my almost 30 years of working out here, I know. I am around them so much till I just know who's doing it.

Clara: Yeah, those White students are the ones playing pranks .. these White kids do, they're the ones that play the pranks really, Black students and Hispanic students, they're here to learn, get their lesson. Them White kids think that's funny.

Diane: Because you just know. You have to clean up after 'em and sometimes you see 'em. You just know who's doin' it.

These White, male, students may safely rely on their "triple privilege" (Sacks & Lindholm, 2004) to keep the consequences for such behavior at bay. Triple privilege

involves “a specific combination of identities that curry societal favor in terms of race, class, and gender . . . [Their] combination of identities are congruent with and rewarded by the dominant culture” (p. 130). The impact of possessing three advantaged identities creates multiple layers of privilege, protection, and feelings of entitlement that allow these students to behave as they wish and to ignore or to simply not see how their behavior impacts the lives of custodial workers.

Whiteness also presented itself in my interviews with Martha and Diane. I asked each of the participants to share their most challenging experience as an employee of State University. Cleo, Juanita, Agnes, and Clara, the women of color, all shared their stories without hesitation. Martha and Diane, the two White participants, refused to verbalize theirs. They wept instead.

Martha: <Long pause>. Nah. I don’t want to talk about it. Don’t care to <crying>.

Diane: <Shaking her head from side-to-side, crying>. I’d rather not say. I’d rather not say <crying>.

As White women engaged in a sensitive conversation with a woman of color, they used their tears, and their privilege, to control the direction and depth of our conversation (Accapadi, 2007; Bell & Nkomo, 2001). Kottler & Montgomery (2001) assert that “when examined in an interpersonal context, crying appears to communicate a number of distinct messages that either invite people to offer support or to back off. As such, it is a distance regulator in relationships” (p. 12). Martha and Diane’s language of tears, together with their body language, told me to “back off.” Our social intimacy had its limitations and their deepest pain was not for me to know – at least not completely, as

their tears conveyed a portion of the story; their tears “commanded attention in a way that words could never touch” (p. 11).

Yet another way whiteness shows up is in portions of Martha’s story where her white privilege is undermined by classism:

Martha: You want to kick them sometimes and tell them, I said, “I’m *still* [emphasis added] here, thank you very much!”

This passage suggests that at times she is visible and at times she is not. When you connect this statement with the following thread, it becomes apparent that her marginalization is tied to her socioeconomic status as a custodial employee:

Martha: It’s like we’re not valuable. I mean, to me, I’m valuable. To me I am but, you know, some people don’t think that we are as a group. We’re not very valuable as a group. Everywhere else I’m treated, like, *regular* [emphasis added].

Since Martha was able to notice, but not explicitly name this experience, it was in this moment I had to reign in my desire to teach and help her create connections between her feelings of marginalization and the times in her life when she actively marginalizes others. The “teaching example” I wanted to use was her story of school integration:

Martha: We integrated when we were, like, in seventh grade. I guess I was about 11 years old. That’s when we got moved. They moved all the White kids over to the Black neighborhood. That’s where they put us. Man, it was scary. They had fights all the time. My friends would call ‘em the “n-word,” and that would start ‘em fightin’.

Petitt: Talk a little more about that.

Martha: They just had fights all year long. Lots of ‘em. Had to have security guards and the police sometimes, too. See, we got bussed to the Black schools. They didn’t make them come to our school. We had to go down there.

<long pause>.

Petitt: Go ahead.

This was a tension-filled moment during the interview for Martha and for me. In her racialized story, we both knew I was the “other.”

Martha: It just feels kinda’ weird talking to *you* about it, though <laughter>. You know. Because that was an awful long time ago. Nowadays, you can’t be like that anymore. It was really redneck back then. And you have to understand, we lived in the all-White part of town. And I’m sure you didn’t have to experience that ‘cuz you’re younger than me. You didn’t have to go through that. It was kinda’ scary.

Petitt: It’s okay for you to talk about it, unless it makes you too uncomfortable.

Martha: Well, you just thought “Oh crap what have they done to us? I was just so scared, being shoved off down there. Scared and mad. I didn’t even know [the school] existed because I hadn’t ever been back on that side of town. The school is off on that side where the zoo is, is where it’s at. It’s a good ways off, way on the other side of town, um, where the projects and stuff are. And I didn’t even know about it because we never did go over there. Never had a reason to go over there. We didn’t have anything over there on that side of town until the zoo existed. All we ever went over there for was to the zoo once it got built. And it was scary just to go over to the zoo, drivin’ through those neighborhoods to get to it. But that’s where the school was that they moved us off down into.

Petitt: Hmm. What was your experience like at school beyond the fear and fighting?

Martha: It was kind of scary ‘cause it was .. I mean you get shoved off down in there and you’re going, okay, now what?

And my other school was better. The building was better. The food was better. I had all my friends back there and we got split up.

My teachers were better at the other school, too. The only thing I can remember about this one Black teacher is that she filed her fingernails while class was going on. Didn’t consider her much of a teacher. But like I said, it’s different nowadays. Because it’s all integrated. Now people probably don’t think much of it or anything since it’s been that way so long.

I don’t see it that way anymore. You’re not supposed to .. you can’t say .. it’s taken me a while to get used to doing that .. but you can’t .. you’re not supposed to see any difference now. That sounds strange <laughter>.

Petitt: Are you talking about being colorblind?

Martha: Yeah. Colorblind. I mean I don't .. I try not to, like, you know, you're not supposed to see people for what color they are. You're supposed to just get past it.

Martha, very honestly, narrates herself as a recovering racist, with the power to render people of color visible or invisible. It is to this point I wanted to create a linkage to her experience with classism and others' protection of whiteness. Having revisited my Reflexive Journal, I am glad I did not go down this path, foremost, because I, as a Black woman, was triggered by the zoo story and the disparities in access to equal education and I lose clarity when I am triggered. Furthermore, Martha characterized herself as the victim in her story and did not see herself as a perpetrator. This "teaching detour" would have taken us down a path of my choosing rather than staying with her on her own.

Racism

Racism, the system of advantage or disadvantage based on race, presents itself in the lives of the participants through institutional structures, policies, practices and through the attitudes and behaviors of countless individuals whom they encounter in their daily work. The custodial staff is comprised of 92% people of color and is 8% White. While the two White women invoke their whiteness on occasion, because they are a minority amongst a majority of people of color, they, too, are accorded treatment reserved for people of color in our racialized society. They are, at times, treated as "wiggas," or "white niggas" (Beattie, 2000), if you will.

However, racism shows up most notably in the lives of the Black and Hispanic participants, with the experiences of the Black participants being the most brutal and dehumanizing. State University was and still is referred to as "The Plantation" by some

employers as well as the people of color who work in service positions under perceived “slave-like” conditions. Agnes, one of the participants who has been at State University the longest, recalled being told the following by a White employer during a brief employee orientation:

Administrator: Do not, I repeat, do not come here and think you can be lazy on the job. You are here to work, and if I have to, I’ll crack that whip!

You cannot receive phone calls while you are here at work. So don’t give out the office number. You get a break at a certain time but if you have to go to the bathroom before or after your break, do not stay in there a long time. Do your business and get back to work. I don’t care if you ate a lot of watermelon the night before. You hold it, or just eat less watermelon <laughter>.

And do not miss work without calling in to tell us or you’re off the job. I don’t care if you are in jail or whatever. We need to be the first ones you call. If we don’t hear from you, you’re off the job.

The “Custodial Competition” that existed from 1980 through late 1990 is also shamefully reminiscent of the objectification of Black people through slave entertainment and minstrelsy (Strausbaugh, 2006). The predominantly Black custodial staff of State University competed within the university as well as with surrounding universities in contests where work was deliberately created for their jubilant, competitive cleaning, complete with a cheering crowd of spectators. It was disheartening to learn that this activity ended because it was “too time consuming” rather than having been put to a stop due to its mockery and exploitation of employees.

Hate is written on the walls, too—literally. In their combined 99 years of service, the most frequent graffiti the participants find inscribed on campus surfaces is “Nigger.” Occasionally, “Nigger” is accompanied by “White Power,” “White Power Rules”

(sometimes coupled with the drawing of a fist), “State University pride is White Pride,” “Niggers go back to Africa,” and “Aim here if you hate Niggers,” strategically written above the urinal in a men’s restroom. These epithets are occasionally found in open spaces such as in an elevator, on a bulletin board, a classroom chalk board or on the side of a building, but most of the time they are found in men’s restrooms. According to the participants, there is writing on the walls in the women’s restrooms (“so-and-so is a bitch,” or “for a good time call Courtney”) but in all their years of employment, they very seldom have seen “Nigger” written in a women’s restroom; they can only recall two occurrences between the six of them.

The highest ranking administrators in the Division of Facilities are aware of the racist graffiti:

Petitt: As I was visiting with the custodial staff, I learned that they see quite a bit of racist graffiti around campus. What can you tell me about that?

Administrator: Yeah, I know people write racial things on the wall, you know, “nigger this and nigger that.” And a lot of the times it’s an African American person cleaning it. We have a good number of African Americans, so, yeah, they are going to come across that.

And this one time Dr. [Jones] made an issue of it. He brought it up at a meeting, so we went and we asked the person, we asked the custodial person in that particular situation “Well, how do you feel about this?” And she said “Hey, it is my job to clean this restroom.” She said, “I do not pay any attention to those stupid people who write that kind of stuff.”

Does the university get real upset about that kind of stuff? Not really. Well this one person who complained did, but those of us who are in that custodial chain, no. We don’t like it, but we know it comes with the territory.

We expect our people to clean it up because it comes with the territory.

And the best way to handle those kinds of things is to get rid of it real quick so not too many people see it. See, people mimic other folks. And so you don't want it to start to get to be a big thing around the campus.

The most striking aspect of this response is the remark “it comes with the territory.” Though they “don't like it,” the administration does nothing to address the intent of the perpetrators or the impact this persistent behavior has on custodial employees. By definition, this is, in part, work-centered harassment, which, according to Einarsen, (2000) is a situation where a worker is persistently and systematically mistreated and victimized through repeated negative acts such as hateful remarks and ridicule, verbal abuse, offensive teasing, isolation, and social exclusion, or the constant devaluation of one's work and efforts. These acts are intended to “torment, wear down, or frustrate a person and they ultimately provoke, frighten, intimidate, and bring discomfort to the victim . . . through petty tyranny” (pp. 380-381). The fact that the most frequent graffiti involves racial epithets directed toward Black people adds another layer of injury through active racism. Such actions “have as their explicit goal the maintenance of the system of racism and the oppression of those in the targeted racial groups” (Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, & Love, 1997, p. 89). That this unrelenting workplace-induced hatred and hostility is not cause for more meaningful institutional intervention and mitigation—other than cleaning it up as though it never appeared—is deeply troubling.

Additional acts of hatred are presented in the form of objects and images. Agnes is the individual who found a Black doll hanging from a noose that was affixed to the door hinges of her custodial supply closet; she received it as a direct threat and worked in fear for weeks and months following the incident. And the participant who works in the Department of Student Housing reported encountering Ku Klux Klan paraphernalia and

posters in residence hall rooms she entered to perform weekly bathroom cleaning duties. The relatively new “Offensive Printed Materials” policy now requires that students temporarily cover up or remove offensive material on the days they know the bathroom will be cleaned. While this policy was created to offer a hostile-free work environment for the custodial staff, there is an implicit message herein: “put offensive material away while *they* are around, but once they leave, you may safely display racist, sexist, hate-filled material. Backroom bigotry is permissible.” Custodial participants also report seeing confederate flags in private offices and residence hall windows (the flags are exempt from the aforementioned policy, as they are considered “free speech”), and they witness, and clean up after, so-called “ghetto parties,” where students stereotypically portray black people as gangsters, rappers, overweight women, etc. as part of the party’s theme.

To add to this, Cleo, Agnes, and Clara, the three African American participants, attribute the majority of “mean looks” or “hate stares” (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 2006) they receive to racism. “White people just give you them mean looks,” said Cleo, and they “snarl up at you,” said Clara. And while Clara initially couldn’t discern whether it was her occupation or her ethnicity that caused a young woman to stand and wait for the next available bathroom stall, the more she thought about it, she associated the behavior with her blackness:

Petitt: Why do you think she didn’t go to the one you were in?

Clara: I don’t know. I don’t know if it was because of being Black, or maybe she thought it wasn’t clean. I don’t know. Probably because I’m Black.

Horizontal Racism and Horizontal Hostility

*When the axe came into the forest, the trees said
“the handle is one of us.”*

Bumper sticker in Alice Walker’s
Possessing the Secret of Joy

White people are not the only vehicles of racial antagonism. People of color disperse it within and between subordinated groups as well. Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love (1997) define this as “horizontal racism”:

The result of people of targeted racial groups believing, acting on, or enforcing the dominant (White) system of racial discrimination and oppression against other targeted racial groups or individuals. Horizontal racism can occur between members of the same racial group (an Asian person telling another Asian wearing a sari to “dress like an American”; a Latino telling another Latino to stop speaking Spanish), or between members of different, targeted racial groups (Latinos believing stereotypes about Native Americans; Blacks not wanting Asian Americans to move into a predominantly Black neighborhood) (p. 98).

Horizontal racism is most apparent among and between Black people, as reported by the Black participants as well as Juanita, the one Hispanic participant. The following examples show such aggression perpetrated from supervisors to subordinates and from employee to employee.

Clara’s experience, shared previously, clearly points to black-on-black hostility:

Clara: When they got ready to move me .. move me to another building, my friends wrote every letter in the world to try to keep me there. They fought hard to keep me. But when I went to my supervisor’s office to see if the letters had worked, my supervisor, she was a Black supervisor, she just laughed .. she laughed. She was sitting there, tapping her foot and laughing and she said, “Yeah, your little letters didn’t do nothing for you.” And she laughed and was patten’ her foot.

At the time of our interview, Clara’s supervisor, another Black woman, was unkind to Clara, compared to her non-Black counterparts:

Clara: My supervisor, she’s a Black lady; I think she is harder on me than she is on the White and Spanish ladies. She never gives me a raise. And she

will call the White ladies that work for her “Miss, so and so,” and she just calls me “Clara,” you know, by my first name, like that. I think she .. maybe she don’t want people to think she is showing favoritism toward me because we’re both Black, or something. But she sure is way nicer to the other ladies, the Spanish and the White ladies, than she is toward me and the other Black ladies.

Juanita also observed her Black supervisor displaying harsh behavior toward a Black employee:

Juanita: We have a Black lady that work with [us] and she’s a good lady. She never complains or says nothing. She don’t complain. Not like me. If he did me like he does her, I would complain. Our supervisor, he is a Black man, and like, he gives her a lot of work to do. I mean a lot. She has way more area to clean than anybody else, and I don’t know why he does that to her. She works hard, hard, and he won’t let nobody else go over and help her or take some of her area. And I think that’s not fair. She got a lot more than other people. But like I say, she never complains about nothing. You can see her working really hard trying to get it all done.

Perhaps, as hooks (2000) writes, some Black folks in charge

. . . enjoy their role as mediators between the black masses and the white folks who are really in charge. They openly espouse their contempt for less-privileged black folks even as they need that group to stay on the bottom so they can measure how far up they have gotten by how far down the black masses remain (p. 91).

In yet another example, that dates back before Agnes became a supervisor, she shared accounts of her challenges with Black coworkers:

Agnes: I would love for you to put this in your report. My challenge hasn’t come so much from the White people as it has from my own kind. We just cut each other up and tear one another down.

And it is so discouraging and so disappointing how Black people work against each other around here.

Petitt: Why do you think that is? Why do we work against each other?

Agnes: I really don’t know, you know? For one, we don’t have enough good role models of how to be loving and compassionate and supportive of each other, you know, being kind to one another, helping each other out.

We're either jealous of each other, we talk about each other, we backstab each other, and if like, let's take you for example, if you were to just hang around some people I know, and just be Becky, like you are, the way you look, your skin color, the way you talk and carry yourself, and your work, they would say "Oh, she think she White." And I get that sometimes, "She think she White" or "She actin' White." And I hate that. I'm just being professional and you know, using proper English. I'm not trying to be White. You're out here on a job, you know. Act like you have some sense. We should want to be better.

Some of them are just stagnant. They are right here on this level <motions a low level> and they just stay there. Can't see themselves moving past some of that junk. They need to surround themselves with positive people, positive thoughts, and things that bring life.

But every crew I have worked in here, from the time I started working here, Black folks, our main thing is we're just like crabs in a bucket. When one of us is moving up, another one will reach up and pull you down.

In this next instance of horizontal racism, Clara is the perpetrator. She, as a Black woman, sought solidarity with her Black supervisor by turning on a Hispanic coworker:

Clara: Like this one Spanish lady was talking back to my supervisor, and she just let her talk back to her and didn't say nothing.

And I'll tell my supervisor, "Don't let her talk to you like that.

Do something to her.

Say something," you know.

This reminds me of the scene in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), when Harpo, Celie's stepson, asks her "How to make Sofia [his wife] mind" and Celie, a survivor of brutal domestic violence herself, advises Harpo to "beat her" (p. 35) into compliance.

Like Celie, Clara knows from past experience what it takes to break someone's spirit to the point of submission, and she advises her supervisor to use the same painful strategy to achieve respect and obedience from her non-Black employees.

Toni Morrison draws upon the *Cinderella* fairy tale to describe this contemporary phenomenon of women using their power to harm other women. “What is unsettling about that fairy tale,” she said of the stepmother and stepsisters taunting and tormenting Cinderella,

is that it is essentially the story of a household—a world, if you please—of women gathered together and held together in order to abuse other women . . . I am alarmed by the violence that women do to each other: professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence. I am alarmed by the willingness of women to enslave other women. I am alarmed by a growing absence of decency . . .” (p. 658).

One might think these women of color, bound together in vulnerabilities of classism, racism, and sexism might turn to one another for support, but this is not the experience of the women in this study. They have a very small circle of those whom they trust to “watch their backs” at work, and the angst they feel as marginalized women is occasionally projected onto one another.

Institutional Racism and Horizontal Hostility

One clear example of institutional racism was presented by one of the administrators of the Division of Maintenance when she/he spoke about the “Spanish Speaking Crew.”

Petitt: How do you negotiate language and literacy issues? Let’s take language first. Looking at the data, it appears a majority of the custodians are Hispanic now, whereas the workforce used to be primarily African American, right?

Admin: Right. That’s correct. A lot of folks don’t realize that several years ago, most of my custodians were African Americans. And like you said who are most of my custodians today? Hispanic women.

And guess what? Why are my Hispanic custodial women working? You say, “Oh, well, they’re working for the money.” Yeah, bah humbug! They’re working for their children, for their children to have health insurance. Yeah, they need the money too but as you know,

many of my Hispanic employees have three, four, five, six children and health insurance is at the top of their list. Then it's salary.

And you know something else? They are darned good workers. And a lot of them speak very little English, broken English, but they are some of the best workers we've ever had.

Petitt: So, how do you address that – the language issue? Do their supervisors speak Spanish?

Admin: Okay, one thing we've started just in the last few years is we interview in English. So, if they can't get through the interview, then they can't work here. And they need to know that when we are having meetings, those are going to be conducted in English. But they are welcome to speak Spanish to each other when we are not in a formal meeting.

At one time there was a program where it was a Spanish-speaking crew, and they'd be working in the evenings, so they wouldn't be interacting with the general public. But that kind of went by the wayside, so we ended up with a lot of people that don't understand or speak English in our workforce. So, we had to start hiring bilingual employees so they could translate for us. And now some of our supervisors are bilingual.

This carefully planned spatial racial segregation (read: ALIENation), rooted in language discrimination, isolated Spanish-speakers from the English-speaking “general public” presumably because of their “language handicap.” So “not only were they set off from the upper levels of society by class, as they had been before, but now they were separated also from others in the lower levels by race” (Acuña, 1988, p. 127) and language. This “border work” (Weis, 2004), or dictation of time and place of the “other,” was most convenient for the university. Their need for cleaned space was met while they abdicated responsibility for fully integrating these essential employees into the State University environment. Had this segregated workforce continued, the Spanish-speaking custodial employees would have remained marginalized and isolated, they would have been deprived of the benefit of knowing or being known by other non-Spanish speaking

employees, and they would have remained invisible to the “general population” whom they serve.

As Latinas grew in number in the custodial workforce, prevalence of the Spanish language increased. Though speaking Spanish among and between Spanish-speaking employees was permitted by the administration, it caused tension for some non-Spanish speaking supervisors and coworkers. Employers asserted, “All job interviews and official meetings will be conducted in English.” Therefore, it is up to the would-be/employee to demonstrate English survival skills if they wish to be hired or remain employed at State University. Though the administration knows a considerable number of Spanish-speaking employees have limited understanding of English, all meetings are indeed conducted in the English language and very few written materials are offered in Spanish.

This one-sided expectation of cultural adaptation (that the Spanish-speaking employees adapt to the communication practices of the institution while the institution is unwilling to adapt to theirs) is expressed with brutal clarity by a senior administrator in the Division of Maintenance:

Admin: Well, I can tell you right now I’ve got a lot of custodians that do not speak a word of English. But the question is can we communicate with them enough so that they can do their job. And the answer is “Yes.” Would we prefer that they spoke English? Yes. But in many cases you always find somebody that can speak Spanish so we can work through them to communicate.

Part of the problem is that a lot of our custodial families have kids. The kids go to their schools, in particular in [a neighboring city comprised largely of ethnic minorities], and no one in that family - no adult speaks English. So when the kid goes to school, he is in an English environment. He goes home and he is in a Spanish environment. Parents cannot help the kid, José, do his homework or write his papers. His papers have to be submitted in English. I mean, I talked to someone

who works in [the school district where a majority of custodial staff live] and when they call home for something, most of the time they have to talk to the kid. They can't talk to the responsible adult, the mother or the grandmother, because they do not speak English.

So if you are going to, and I do not want to sound like a conservative politician, but the fact of the matter is if you are going to live and prosper in the United States of America, you have to learn how to live in this environment and how that environment works. You cannot bring Mexico to the U.S. and expect to prosper as a U.S. citizen, you know. If you want to be a U.S. citizen, shouldn't you be able to read the Constitution in English, because that is our language? Now that may sound harsh, but shouldn't you?

<pauses for my response>

Petitt: <Silence>.

Admin: Shouldn't you be able to read the laws and understand the laws? Because that's what we say. That's what you are going to have to live and abide by.

<pauses for my response>

Petitt: <Silence>.

Admin: Now, do we kick out all the illegal aliens and particularly the ones who do not speak English? No. But we have to come up with a program so we can get them to a certain level, because the shift in our economy says that there is still a lot of room for services kinds of people.

But those are the people who will continue to be at the low end of the totem pole.

They should learn the basics of saying things like "Hello," "How are you doing?" "May I have this?" "May I do this?" and things of that nature.

With this type of "leadership," it is no wonder that many who work in the Division of Maintenance take their cues from the "top" and, therefore, assume that they, too, have the right to perpetuate this system of language discrimination.

Juanita shared an experience where her Black supervisor and coworkers tried to force Spanish-speakers to speak English:

Juanita: Sometimes they complain. In our crew, it's more Mexicans than Black people. And sometimes they complain, and they say: "Why do you have to speak Spanish?" And my supervisor, too, because he is Black and he don't know Spanish. They say: "Why do you have to speak Spanish? Why don't you speak English? You are here in America." And I tell them, this is my language, you know.

Petitt: Why do you think they want you to speak English?

Juanita: So they can know what we are talking about. Because they think we are talking about them <laughter>.

And I say to them, "Did you hear your name? Well, if you hear your name, I'm talking about you. If you don't hear your name, don't worry." And I tell them, "If I'm going to say something about you, I'll tell you in your face to make sure you know what I have to say! When I want to talk to you I'll speak English to you," you know.

Borrowed Power

"Borrowed power" has been discussed by Ziff & Rao (1997) in the context of cultural appropriation—the "borrowing" of cultural expressions, intellectual property, or artifacts from a culture that is not one's own—and, in Kayden's 1990 book titled *Surviving Power*, Kayden uses the concept to describe the life of politicians, wherein "appointees" hold power at the pleasure of the "final authority." Kayden offers the analogy of driving a borrowed car to describe "borrowed power": "It goes down the road just as quickly and comfortably, even if it can be taken away in a moment" (p. 95). In addition, the author notes that with the right to exercise borrowed authority ". . . also comes the danger of being cut off by those closer to the throne: the special assistants who are there, in part, to keep you in line, and all those groups and individuals on the outside who have the capacity to go around you to the Final Authority . . ." (p. 98).

Using Kayden's premise, I reconceptualize "borrowed power" in the context of race relations in the United States: As long as we live in a racialized and racist society,

people of color can only hold borrowed power because there is—and will always be—a Final (White) Authority. Agnes' story of the “lynch mob” is again a useful illustration. Her Black employees undermined her authority by going “over her head” to complain to her White supervisor who held the final authority in this particular situation. Also, recall Clara's story of how her Black supervisor allows the White and Hispanic employees to “walk all over her” in seeming recognition of the impermanence of her power:

Clara: She won't say nothing to them, just let them walk all over her. But let that be me, she'll write me up and get me in trouble so fast.

Petitt: Why do you think that is?

Clara: Why she won't tell them nothing? 'Cause she scared of losing her job. Like, she think the Black people will just take it, but she's scared those other people will go to the office on her, especially the White people, she's scared of them.

Ain't too many White ladies work with us, but the ones that do—she just let them act any kind of way toward her . . .

And this one time this White lady that work with us—you know what she told me one day? She say, “Clara, I braided my little girl's hair last night, and she looked just like a little nigger. Just like a little jigaboo.” And I went and told my supervisor she said that and that me and the other Black ladies had got mad about her saying that because that was racist.

And, I'm tellin' you, she just let her get away with saying that because she scared of losing her job. She scared them White people gon' go to the office on her if she do somethin' or say somethin' to 'em, so they just treat her any kinda way, and she let 'em.

The final example of borrowed power presented itself in the aforementioned situation where Diane, a White participant, went around her Black supervisor to secure racial solidarity with a White woman who was a secretary on the floor she frequently cleaned. In our racialized world, Diane knew the word of a White secretary would hold sway over that of her Black custodial supervisor, and, as a Black custodial supervisor,

Agnes knows this, too. Though she is constantly guarding her back against knives flung from the rear by the hands of her own people, she is well aware of her vulnerability as a person of color: “I know my place, you know, by how some of them treat me because of this <uses her hand to rub her Black face>.

Sexism

The participants did not explicitly name sexism as an independent system of oppression operating against them in their work worlds. Agnes made one reference to gendered wage and labor inequality:

Agnes: The people in physical plant and area maintenance [predominantly male workgroups] are making like seventeen dollars an hour—not supervisors: regular workers—and they just ride around in their trucks. Now, I know they probably fix stuff, but, for the most part, they just ride around in the truck. And I’m like, “Well, come on now, give us some of that money,” you know.

Clara discussed behavior that may be characterized as horizontal hostility (subordinated groups turning on each other) when she noted that the “women in the offices” [women who occupy the spaces she cleans] create more work for her:

Clara: [S]ome people—you wouldn’t believe this—but some people do it [generate trash] on purpose. They do it on purpose to make you pick it up . . . I’m tellin’ you, they do it on purpose .. on purpose to make you work. To me, that’s what I think: to make you work. You supposed to work, but I’m saying they just do it for meanness.

Petitt: And who usually does stuff like that? Men? Women? Students?

Clara: Women. Women in the offices.

Petitt: Men are cleaner?

Clara: Well, the men’s bathrooms be nastier. But that’s just how they are: they miss and stuff. The men, they mostly play basketball in their offices, and that’s why trash be on their floor sometimes: from playing basketball and missing the trashcan. You know, lil’ balled-up papers. You can tell they been tryin’ to shoot hoops. But the ladies in the

offices, they just put stuff and do things to make you work on purpose. The ladies have way more trash. Look like they just wanna make you work hard.

It is interesting that Clara assigned spiteful intent to the women's trash-making, but suggested a "boys will be boys" attitude toward men making trash by "missing" in the restroom and attempting to throw balled paper into a wastebasket as a form of entertainment in the workplace. This alludes to a belief on Clara's part that women should know better and ought to extend more courtesy. The horizontal hostility discussed in the "racism" section may also have elements of sexism. However, the intersectionality makes it difficult to ascribe experiences to one system of oppression over the other.

The custodial participants did not note concern about the fact that they, as women, are concentrated at the lowest levels of the organization and economic bracket while the university leadership is largely occupied by men, who earn significantly higher salaries. There was no acknowledgement that, occupationally, there are more women custodial employees compared to men: a ratio of 84 percent to 16 percent, to be exact. They did not speak about how their occupational and social stratification isolates them from decision-makers: an entry-level custodian in the Division of Facilities is ten levels removed from the leader of that organization and twelve levels removed from the President of State University.

Cleaning is considered the domain of women (Amott & Matthaei, 1996; Browne & Misra, 2003; Chant, 2006; Dill, 1994; Ehrenreich, 2002; Higginbotham & Romero, 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2002; hooks, 2000a; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1997); the work is servile, stigmatized, devalued (Cohen, 1991; Ehrenreich, 2001; Ehrenreich, 2002; Rollins, 1985), physically dirty, demanding, and hazardous. Those holding such jobs

have little occupational mobility and tend to move laterally between jobs that require similar skill sets (Chapple, 2002). While the participants were aware of these realities, they did not talk about how these cumulative disadvantages are held together by the institution of sexism.

The knowledge the women assert is deeply influenced by the social locations they inhabit. Racism was most salient in stories of the women of color; classism was prominent in the White women's stories; none of them pointedly presented concerns about sexism. Yet their experiences are profoundly shaped by institutionalized beliefs, practices, policies, and structures that systematically adversely affect women as a group. The participants appear to be entrenched in our hegemonic culture as there is a conscious or unconscious psychological and social agreement to accept their marginality, even when such collusive behaviors are self-immolating.

Administrators See How Sexism Impacts the Women

While the custodial participants did not note sexism as a system of oppression affecting their work worlds, State University administrators did talk about how gender discrimination impacts the women custodial employees.

A senior administrator in the Division of Maintenance, whom I call “Understanding Administrator” for her capacity to recognize and address issues affecting the women, said:

Understanding Administrator: I think these women have a hard life. I really do. One of the things I've been yelling about is that custodial workers ought to be paid at least the same as the ground maintenance people because there has been historically, like, a fifty cent difference in their pay, and they said, “Well, you know, the people in landscape—well, they work outside. They're out there in the elements.” That's exactly true, but the custodial workers have to

clean feces, they get needle sticks, so, yes, it's a different kind of working environment, but they ought to be paid the same.

So, I raised the issue with some of my colleagues, and they said: "I don't have a problem with paying custodial staff more. We don't really know why there's a difference."

I'll tell you why there's a difference. It's because custodians have historically been women and landscapers have historically been men! It's flat out sexist!

A senior university administrator, whom I call "The Advocate" because he, better than any administrator participant, genuinely understands and serves as an advocate for those traditionally marginalized, said:

The Advocate: Some people have said State University looks and operates like a plantation <laughs>. I've heard that from colleagues outside of this institution as well as those who work here. And, on the surface, I can't really argue with that perception. Most of the low-wage earners are people of color and women, and most of their supervisors or administrators are White men.

And at this institution, like many large institutions, much of the administrative decision-making is top-down; therefore, you tend to find that the real needs and real concerns of those in the lower echelon are not well addressed. You'll have a Vice President discussing a policy, you'll have a Director of Human Resources discussing a policy, et cetera, but then the policy makes it pretty far along the food chain before it ever is discussed with the lower-wage workers. Those members of our organization are far removed from administrative decision-making. There is no real effort to examine the impact some very important decisions make on those at the lower level.

The custodial workers—they're mostly women, right? I saw the data the other day, and I know that the custodial workforce is largely comprised of women. I don't remember the exact numbers. But they are relatively invisible, and that invisibility does not bode well for them. Their voices are relatively muted. This sense of invisibility combined with the kind of work they do present them in a valueless way.

We take them for granted. We know that this work is done, but we have no idea who does it and clearly no personal relationships

with those individuals. The lights stay on, and the place stays clean; services are delivered: but it's taken for granted.

So, I see them as somewhat powerless. They don't have a staff senate that represents their interests, and they won't come forward as individuals because they're afraid of losing their jobs. They are expendable, and they have no power as a group. And, again, since the custodial staff is female-dominated, that brings gender bias into this conversation. We have a large group of women that are disenfranchised.

A mid-level administrator in the Division of Maintenance, whom I call "The Ruler" because she appears to be intoxicated by her authority, said:

The Ruler: Our university daycare came into existence because of the concern of one custodial worker who had issues with childcare. Many of them commute to State University from [a city nearby], and this woman had to leave home at 5 a.m. to be at work by 6 a.m. What childcare facility opens at 4:30 or 4:45 in the morning? So, she raised that concern, and we started working to address our workers' needs, and that's how our daycare came about.

But you want to know the irony of it all? The custodians can't even afford to have their kids there! The cost is way beyond anything they'd be able to afford. Plus, they're not open during hours that are sensitive to their schedules anyway. It's really a shame. A lot of the women have a really hard time finding affordable, safe childcare. It doesn't affect our men in the same way.

Lastly, a mid-level administrator in the Department of Student Housing, whom I call "Team Leader" because he values and treats the custodians he supervises like colleagues, said:

Team Leader: Yeah, we've had situations where some of our male students think it's funny to flash the female custodians. You know, remove his bath towel in front of them on purpose to get a reaction. And in the past we had a real problem with pornography on the walls. Our custodians go in and clean the bathrooms once a week, and students would have porn—you know, pin-ups of naked girls—or racially offensive things on the walls in their rooms. And they can do that because it's their

room. But we've had this new policy in place for a few years, and now we tell them, if they want their bathrooms cleaned, they either have to cover it up or take it down because that was upsetting our staff, and we consider that like creating a hostile work climate. If the students don't comply, and they just won't get their bathrooms cleaned.

Once again, social location shapes our views. The administrators occupying more privileged positions were able to identify institutional arrangements, policies, and behaviors that systematically subordinate women. Their ability to notice and name gender-based inequalities was at first encouraging. However, the fact that only one of them—Team Leader—used his formal authority to explicitly intervene by instituting a “harassment-free workplace” policy is unacceptable. This collusive behavior fosters an environment which maintains and reproduces gender inequality.

Other Work-Related Stressors

Increased Workload

One stressor that weighs on all participants is that of an increased workload. There are multiple factors that contribute to their work intensification. To begin, in 2002 the University President introduced the “Faculty Reinvestment” initiative, which aimed to increase the faculty by over 400 individuals over a five-year period. The initiative was accompanied by financial restructuring that negatively impacted the resources of the Division of Facilities. Then, in 2003, the president announced a staff hiring freeze that had adverse ramifications for both the Department of Student Housing and the Division of Facilities workforces. In 2003, the president also implemented a “Reduction in Force” that further strained staff resources in both areas. Both the staff hiring freeze and the reduction in force generated salary savings that would help fund the president's faculty

initiative. The Living Wage initiative followed in 2005, causing wages to increase and the number of employees to decrease.

To add to this, the University continues to expand its undergraduate enrollment: the increase in bodies (faculty and students) invariably increases the custodial workload. Both organizations also continue to see the addition of new facilities that must be cleaned by a now extremely lean staff and the aging of existing facilities that are increasingly more difficult to clean (some older buildings leak, etc.). In addition, overextended budgets prohibit investments in new cleaning equipment. These circumstances converge to create hardship for the participants. In this first excerpt, Diane talked about coming in to work two hours early every day:

Petitt: Earlier, you said you come in early. Talk more about that.

Diane: I come in two hours early every day to get started on my work because there is so much to do and we're so shorthanded.

Petitt: Are you paid overtime for the additional work?

Diane: No. They don't even know I do it. But I have to take care of my people on my floor. They tell us to only empty trash on certain days. But I can't do that. I still take care of my people on my floor. Plus, if you let that trash build up, you'd need a truck to get it out. It makes it harder on you in the end. So, I take care of them and get their trash every day still. And, if I get done in time, I go down and help with the big downstairs area. You know, pitch in and help out.

Petitt: Can you say a little bit more about why you come in two hours earlier every day? That's a lot. I mean, that's a pretty big commitment to put in ten extra hours per week and not be compensated for that.

Diane: Uh, because I guess I love the people that I work for—with—or .. you know. And, since they've cut us down on people, I can't get as much done, and it's like the work doesn't get done, and I feel bad because the people have to go in there and look at that, and that's why I try to make it look nice for the people on my floor: because they're nice to me. And I come in early so I can get in the office to do what I want to do. I mean, I have like 145 offices on just my floor. It doesn't look like it's that

many because all you see when you walk down the hallway is the big front door. But, shoot, that's nothing. Open them doors, and there's a bunch more doors to open and—ooh, offices, offices.

And I have a faculty floor. You know how faculty are. They always have paper all the time: tons and tons of paper. They make lots and lots of trash. And, around the end of the semester, when they're getting rid of student's papers or anything, or stuff, it's bad. It's just like piles and tons of stuff.

And then, in the graduate student offices, there's three or four desks that have their own trash can.

Just to straight away pull trash on my floor takes me two hours—doing nothing else but pulling trash.

We work really, really hard, you know. I mean, we're running. We sweat a lot, and we're always moving. I mean, it's not like you don't sweat <laughter>. Sometimes I'm wringing wet, we just run so.

So I got to come in early to get it all done to keep it nice for the people on my floor.

Petitt: Do they appreciate it?

Diane: Some of them. Not that it matters, I guess.

Clara shared her frustration regarding her increased workload and the fact that there was no financial recognition of the escalated output:

Clara: It's never enough people lately. I have to go to other areas and other floors to help out and go pick up paper and stuff that's not on my floor 'cause, if I didn't, it'd be really bad. That used to be a whole other person's job, and now I'm doin' my job and theirs, too, and they ain't payin' me no more to do it! All this didn't happen till the budget cut come. Now you have a lot of work, way more work than we used to. Now you're doing double work.

Petitt: So how many people did you lose?

Clara: We lost a bunch across campus. But in my building, we lost around 7 people, and they say they ain't gon' replace 'em. And, like I say, they ain't give us no raise neither. Mr. [President] didn't give us no raise .. say they ain't got the money.

It make me mad though because you can't get nothing done right. You gotta' try to keep up. You know what I'm saying? You can't keep your area up 'cause you got too much different things you got to do.

Juanita, who considers herself a “cleaning professional,” was upset because the increased workload meant she could no longer provide high-quality cleaning:

Juanita: One thing that bothers me now is that, like I told you, I love to do detail cleaning. But now we have so much area to clean and we are so short on people that we can't stay too long in one area, they are always telling me: “Juanita, don't do that. You need to move on to clean the other areas. Hurry, hurry. You can't do that no more.” And I don't like that because I can't clean the way I want to clean.

One mid-level administrator in the Division of Maintenance, whom I call “By-the-Book,” for her unreserved inflexibility, shared information that spoke to the custodial staff's sense of professionalism and their commitment to first-rate service:

By-the-Book: Our employees have a lot of pride in their work and when we started cutting back and giving them more area, we had some workers who [would] sneak back on this campus to clean after their shifts were over.

And they brought products from their homes, or used their own money to go buy products at Walmart, so they could make their area look good, you know—that's how much pride they have.

Since we had our budget cut so bad, we had to cut down on supplies, too.

And we were trying to make a point to the Deans and everybody when the cleaning levels were reduced and everything. We wanted to bring their attention to our situation but our workers would go to WalMart and just fill in the blanks.

And several of 'em brought their husbands up here to help them clean <laughter>. They wanted to make sure their areas were cleaned. When the first cut happened, it was such a shock to them and they were going, “Uh, uh. I'm not gonna have dust in my area.”

And we had to say, “No, you have to leave campus.” I had to tell a few of ‘em, “If I catch you on this campus after I know you’re supposed to be off, I am gonna write you up <shaking her finger>!”

Here, we see tension between management and custodians. An employee of the Division of Administration admitted to “using” the custodial staff to make a point to upper administration. Yet, to preserve their sense of professionalism, custodians like Diane and Cleo resisted and found ways to continue to deliver quality cleaning, even under the threat of being “written up”.

Frustration about deteriorating equipment was apparent in Diane’s comment:

Diane: They need to get us some better equipment, too. These old buffers and this old antiquated stuff, is just, whoo! We have some raggedy stuff to work with. The buffer that I’ve got on my floor right now, you can’t barely push it. You have to kick the wheel to make it go.

We know what to do with them because we’ve worked with the junk for so long. We know how to make do.

But they keep saying there ain’t no money, so we don’t get better stuff to work with. And it makes it harder on us trying to work with that old equipment.

And, this is funny <laughter>, they started buying these cheap trash bags. They’re so thin you have to use two or three of ‘em to hold all the trash <laughter>. They’re trying to be cheap and save money, but in the long run, it’s got to be costing them more, because we have to double up and triple up so the bags don’t fall apart on us, you know what I mean?

What is interesting about this situation is that the administration appears to rely on the resourcefulness of the custodial staff. Old, worn equipment is not replaced, and yet they expect the staff to access and utilize survival skills of “working with what you have” to get the job done.

When someone is out sick or on vacation, it exacerbates the problem. “They go to splitting up that person’s work. Now you gotta’ do your area, all the extra work you

got put on you now since we done lost folks, and *then* you gotta' do the absent person's work too!" said Cleo.

This intensified workload, the cleaning decline, inconsequential wage increases, and overall failure to address the consequences of these problems takes a toll on staff morale:

Diane: This whole thing is affecting the morale in our crew. It used to be so much better. Now, I guess everybody's so overworked till everybody's just at each other's throats.

I wish we had a morale picker-upper or some way we could have something where everybody would get to feeling better or, you know, enjoy working around each other. It's not the same anymore. It's a lot of agitation and irritation because we're all so overworked. I mean, you come in here and you've got 19,000 things to do and then, oops, somebody else is missing and there's more work. And if there is a piece of paper on the main floor, now, some people will just walk right on by it and say "that's not my job." You know, they won't pitch in and help out anymore.

The women are working faster, more strenuously, and they are taking on more square footage. The incremental financial increases they receive appear negligible compared to the additional demands foisted upon them.

Strangers at Home

Cleo, Martha, Juanita, Agnes, Clara, and Diane all experience a sense of dislocation at State University. Leaders of the university are fond of characterizing those affiliated with the institution as members of the "State University Family," but the custodial participants receive mixed messages.

Like all other members of the State University family, the custodial staff is invited to attend various university-sponsored events. But, in reality, they are often unable to afford the cost of attendance, and many custodial staff "work" these events. As Juanita

noted, she works before, during, and after home football games. And though Clara would like to attend home football games, she “ain’t got no money to spend on no football games” when she can “barely keep [her] electricity from being cut off.” Both Juanita and Martha talked about how they “peek in” on events during the course of their work shifts. They see the flyers announcing events and inviting participation, but they know their attending is highly unlikely. Martha captured their collective sentiment when she said, “That’s theirs. And I need to get back where I belong.” The participants see invitations to attend state-sponsored events as disingenuous and often beyond their reach.

Of the participants, Martha spoke most strongly about her sense of marginality and invisibility. During one interview, I asked her what she would say to the university president if the opportunity presented itself, and she shared that she would encourage use of a visionary document to “put her into being”:

Martha: Use [the university document] like the amendments and stuff that go to the Constitution . . . that values people. It tells them that they’re important. It gives them rights and, like, kind of *puts them into being* [emphasis added]. Use that.

If he’s going to use the *Building the Future* document, that should work for everything and everybody. Use it for everybody, not just for a few.

I’d like to be treated equal. It’s supposed to be for everyone.

So, I’m an everyone.

I’m not just some inanimate object. I’m not. I matter.

Like the Constitution, the university’s *Building the Future* document provides a framework for governance and guarantees certain rights to the people, according to Martha’s reading. If given the opportunity, she would implore the president to make good on this promise by seeing her and acting in ways that make her feel genuinely

included and valued.

Yet another way custodians receive mixed signals about “belonging” is through use and allocation of space. Without exception, the participants referred to the buildings in which they clean as “my building.” They referred to the specific areas they clean as “my floor,” “my area,” or “my space,” and those who occupy the area which they clean, they called “my people”. Their language suggests “ownership,” yet there is a degree of impermanence because custodians are subject to being moved to another floor or building on a moment’s notice. “They are trained to clean every kind of building on campus,” said a senior administrator in the Division of Maintenance. “They need to know how to clean the recreational facilities as well as they know how to clean the student health center facilities . . . we need to be able to redistribute and redirect our workers as necessary,” he concluded. Their sense of connection and ownership can be obliterated at any moment, without as much as a day’s notice. When they are relocated, not only are they uprooted from familiar people and surroundings; at the same time, they are thrust into new spaces with a whole new set of occupants whose trust they have to work to earn. “Who is this new custodian that has complete access to my office and personal belongings?” the new, suspicious faces appear to ask.

Clara’s story of relieving herself in the public restroom of the building she cleans is again a useful illustration of the participants’ feelings of dislocation. Her comment “I had to use the restroom and I don’t care if somebody noticed me” suggests an awareness of other’s belief that she is out of place.

Custodial break areas and supply closets are also subject to removal. In early 1990, custodians asked for the provision of “hazard-free” break areas; in the past, they

had to take breaks and eat lunch in the same area in which cleaning supplies were stored. Now, to the extent possible, they have separate facilities for breaks and for the storage of supplies. However, when space is needed for a “higher priority,” theirs is the first to be “reclaimed” and “reconstructed”. Cleo’s custodial supply closet was reconstructed into a faculty office, so now she has to store her supplies in cabinets in the restrooms on “her” floor. Clara and her crew members lost their break room. Thus, they have returned to “taking lunch” in the same area in which cleaning supplies are stored.

To further illuminate their sense of uncertainty about their organizational membership, Juanita, Diane, and Martha offered the following:

Juanita: And I like that I get to work around uh .. with .. um .. for .. a lot of bright people.

Diane: . . . I love the people that I work for .. with, or, you know.

Martha: We host a lot of really neat events. I mean they host ‘em. I mean, I guess it’s ours <laughter>. But they keep moving that thing every year. I don’t know where they had it this past year. I was tryin’ to find out.

These statements speak to the participant’s ambivalence regarding their kinship to the “State University Family.” Their statements appear to search for language to define a relationship they find elusive. They know they are not embraced as “equal” members, yet they feel some sense of connection to the university.

Perhaps this uncertainty explains why they all refer to State University with the distancing term “out here”:

Cleo: I used to love workin’ at State University. Just happy to come to work *out here* [emphasis added], but I don’t now.

Martha: Golly, honey, do you know how hard it is to get a job *out here* [emphasis added]?

Juanita: Because, like at first, he didn’t want to really work, and I told him if he

wanted to be with me, he had to work. And then he got two jobs <laughter>. One of his jobs is *out here* [emphasis added] in Custodial, too.

Agnes: I'm glad they issue us uniforms *out here* [emphasis added] cause I imagine if I was wearing my regular clothes doin' this kinda' work, I would tear up some good clothes <laughter>.

Clara: It's racist *out here* [emphasis added]!

Diane: I called my husband, he works *out here* [emphasis added] in Custodial, too.

“Out here” appears to describe a location away from “home”. The paradox is that they are “home”. They each consider themselves fortunate to have “landed good jobs” at State University, and they all planned to work at the institution up to retirement.

Cleaning Occupied Areas

Findings in this area are nearly identical to those cited in Jane Hood's 1988 publication titled *From Night to Day: Timing and the Management of Custodial Work*. Hood, who conducted a longitudinal study of custodians that experienced a major shift change (from night to day) as employees of an urban university, wrote:

The shift from night to day created two general sets of problems for custodial workers. First, day work brought about a number of significant changes in the organization and supervision of their work. These changes included both a weakening of job control in specific work areas and an increase in direct supervision. Second, day work meant that custodians had to do their work among and around the building's daytime occupants. This change produced a number of problems ranging from increased social visibility to difficulties in completing work because more people were in the way. Overall, custodians experienced diminished control over both their work and its setting, found it more difficult to take pride in their jobs, and were more affected by the stigma of doing dirty work after moving to the day shift (p. 99).

Like custodians in Hood's research, longer-serving employees such as Cleo and Agnes, who experienced night work, said they preferred working nights as well, because,

unobserved by the buildings' occupants, they had more control of their work and the terms of their labor:

Cleo: Didn't have all these people watchin' you and stuff . . . Now, we can't hardly do nothin', folks just always watchin' everything you do.

Agnes: The main problem with moving us to working days was that now folks were in our way. We had to be worried about cleaning quietly and working around people and their little ways, their preferences and things. It was a big adjustment.

This reorganization of the workforce represents an “institutional arrangement that facilitates a predilection to discriminate” (Browne & Misra, 2003, p. 502). Day work heightened status dilemmas, since custodians now cleaned around higher-status daytime occupants who dishonored both their work and their integrity. “‘Clean work’ done at one time became ‘dirty work’ when done at another” (Hood, 1988, p. 96). Cleaning while buildings are occupied rendered participants both invisible and hyper-visible at the same time. At times they were completely ignored (“won't even say good mornin' to ya',” according to Clara) and at others they were treated with utter contempt (“they look at you mean, like they wanna' say something ugly to you,” said Cleo). It is resoundingly clear that all six women frequently encountered situations where building occupants behaved in ways that left them feeling demeaned, discounted, and excluded, oftentimes through blatant face-to-face affronts. Through the custodian's interactions with more privileged building occupants, race, gender, and class-based intolerance became more evident. And not only that, but those who used the buildings by day became extra bosses to the custodians. “They all think they can tell us what to do,” said Diane. “Your supervisor can tell you to do this and this, and you'll go do it like your supervisor says. But let one of them people in the offices get mad and call about something. If they call the office

and they're upset about something, you better go and do it the way they want it!" she concluded.

I probed further to determine if the participants experienced differential treatment from faculty, students, and staff and I learned that they did. Regarding students, they reported having both "good" and "bad" experiences. Some treated them well, and some treated them with indifference or rudeness. The participants think many students are "spoiled little brats who have always had someone to clean up after them." Clara likened the large student lecture hall she cleans to a "hog pen." "They eat food in there, and they leave the trash just all over the classroom. Old, dried up ketchup and stuff be on the desks, they throw the newspaper on the floor, they use that [tobacco] and just leave their little spit cup right there, and sometimes you knock it over and then you gotta' clean that up. Whew. Them some dirty kids," Clara said. Diane called the graduate students on her floor "messy and careless": "Wherever they drop something in their little offices, it stays. They just leave it there." Though sometimes the students help out:

Clara: Some students, like if they know you're walking around picking up paper and they're sitting there beside the paper, they'll reach the paper and give it to you. Now some students won't move, but some students will.

Diane: . . . Sometimes you even have students get down and, if it's a big mess, they'll help us clean it up.

And they don't have to do anything but sit there, and they will get up and help if it's real, you know, bad. I've had that several times where they'll pick up stuff and hand it to me.

I am struck by their implicit belief that students are not responsible for cleaning up after themselves and their idea that students are "helping" when they take a moment to "get down," retrieve an article of trash, and then hand it to them. Students do not even place

trash in receptacles themselves—they hand it to those whose responsibility it is to deal with the trash. This unspoken agreement between students and custodians is yet another means by which dominance and subordination is quiescently reinforced.

The custodian's chief concern regarding student behavior is the additional work they create through pranks and the intentional destruction of property, which will be discussed in the section titled "The Realm of Indignities."

Faculty, more than any other group at State University, treated participants with indifference. This is not to suggest they were rude, but rather they appeared too preoccupied with themselves and their work to devote time or attention to the custodians. Many faculty members conveyed appreciation for their work and, with some, participants even formed friendships. However, their invisibility was most apparent with the faculty. Faculty offices and classrooms were cleaned without much interaction at all.

State University staff members who held positions above the level of service workers were most vicious. They were responsible for the majority of the "mean looks" participants received:

Cleo: They all right, but some people, they just look at you mean.

Martha: You can tell when they don't want you just by the way they look at you, you know. Sometimes they have a sorta' scowl on their faces.

Juanita: You can see the face, you know, like they don't want us to bother them. They don't like us around. They roll their eyes and look like they say "Oh, *they're* here again!" So when we got time, we go early before they come. In this case, we don't bother them.

Agnes: Some folks kinda' rude. A lot of times it's the visitors who don't know me. But this one time I had an issue with a staff member in my building. I have been cleaning for him for I don't know how many years now. And he got a little promotion and started treating me different, like he was better or something.

And I had to find a way to tell him, “Don’t go up there! <laughter>. Now, I’ve been making you and your area look good all these years, don’t start trippin’” <laughter>.

Clara: They snarl up at you .. snarl up at you or act like you’re not even there. And they won’t speak. Sometimes, I’ll say “Good morning” or if it’s afternoon, I’ll say “Good afternoon,” and they’ll turn their head, stick their little pointy nose in the air.

Diane: Some of the people in the office look at you like you’re dirty. They look at you like you’re in the way or something, you know. Like, I guess they’d rather have a mess.

Participants are forced into spaces where they are subject to the moods and behaviors of occupants. Agnes tried to be friendly to all office occupants but she “tiptoes” around [Ellen], a senior bookkeeper, because she is “thorny”:

Agnes: Sometimes I just walk in like my usual friendly self and say “Good morning [Ellen],” and, depending on what kinda’ mood she’s in, she’ll stick you and hurt you.

And so I know I have to be nice and cordial. And when I detect in her voice she’s not herself, I say, “Well, okay, I’ll talk to you later,” you know, and just leave it at that.

As subordinates in relationships marked by power asymmetry (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2002), the participants felt incapable of saying or doing anything about these situations. Clara and Diane employed the language of labor to slough it off:

Clara: I’m here to do my job and get paid, so I don’t care how they feel about me.

Diane: It really hurts your feelings but you can’t help for working.

These frequent, unpleasant interactions with students, faculty, and staff remind custodians of their lower status and their stigmatized occupation.

Unfortunately, they have internalized some of the messages they receive, as evidenced by referring to themselves as “just custodians” and their perceived acceptance

of their inferior treatment as “just the way things are.” Agnes, in an attempt to boost the confidence of her employees, offered the following:

Agnes: Like if I’m having a training for my staff or if I’m testing them on new procedures, I don’t allow nobody to laugh at nobody. And I tell them when I’m training, I say, “It don’t matter.” And when I give them tests, I say, “You write it to make it look as close to what you’re trying to say. I will accept that.”

We are not scholars.

Because if we were, we would not be working in custodial; we would be running a company somewhere or have our own business. So just make it look as close to what you’re trying to say and it’ll pass.” And that’s the way I treat them. They don’t have to spell it out right. They don’t have to be intimidated by that because I won’t allow it. Don’t laugh. It’s not funny, and I’ll squash that. I don’t allow that.

Not only is Agnes providing her employees the encouragement and learning environment she longed for years ago, but the message she attempted to convey here, I believe, is “do your best and you will find acceptance here.” This finding represents one of few instances when a custodial supervisor, or anyone for that matter, intentionally created a safe space for a group of custodial employees.

Cleaning occupied areas comes with inherent risks, however. Custodians are in intimate contact with people, their property, and their products. “While they clean, they must respect the layout of the office and the placement of its content even though in many cases it complicates the performance of their work” (Aguilar, 2001, p. 244). Mistakes were not uncommon, however. During the course of their cleaning, participants have thrown away trash that was not really trash. In one case one of the participants discarded the only copy of a faculty member’s research project; he had inadvertently placed it on the floor right next to his trash receptacle. In another case a participant erased a chalkboard that clearly read “do not erase.” She didn’t see the note until she had

erased half of the mathematical formulas. Liquid-filled glasses left on desktops were accidentally toppled over, ruining keyboards and important work; pictures and clocks have fallen off walls and cracked due to a misdirected broom or mop handle; vases, candy dishes, lamps, “favorite mugs,” and trinkets have been knocked to the floor and destroyed; and computer cables have been damaged by having heavy, industrial vacuum cleaners roll over them.

When they made a mistake, the participants consistently responded with fear and apprehension because they feared consequences would be harsh. One participant hid a broken object in her supply closet for days until she could “work up the nerve” to confess her mistake. Another sat waiting outside an occupant’s office door with broken parts in her hand and was prepared to offer cash for what she believed was the estimated value of the broken article. When the occupant finally arrived (“it took *forever* for him to get to work that day,” she said), she said she “shook all over” when she shared the news because the object seemed to hold personal value to the occupant. In many cases the occupants dismissed mistakes; however, some sought reimbursement. Every time participants accidentally damaged someone’s property, they were left feeling remorseful and a little less trusted.

A latent finding appeared when I coded for “protection.” The participants who attempted to protect themselves from mistakes were the two White participants, Martha and Diane:

Martha: If they have things spread out across their desks, I’m not touching that! They may be in the middle of something so you just don’t bother anything. So I’ll tell them, if you want me to clean your desk, you’ll have to clear it off and then I’ll come back and get you.

Diane: I ask the people on my floor if it’s like boxes or something to write the

word trash, don't - don't have me guessing because I'm not gonna' move it. Cause, you know, it could be important papers because some of the professors leave their stuff in boxes. And you don't wanna' throw away anything. So I ask them if you would just write the word trash on these big boxes of stuff, I'll get rid of them.

What stands out is that Martha and Diane engaged the building occupants and enlisted their cooperation. Since they share the same race as many other employees, this racial commonality may lend itself to a greater degree of comfort.

Lastly, cleaning occupied space means their work is never done. Diane said "By the time you get from this end down to this end, that end's done a mess, you know. We never finish." The work is continuous. Building occupants are "active destroyers of work products that have to be managed" (Hood, 1988, p. 104). When Cleo and Agnes cleaned at night, they took pride in leaving a completely clean area at the end of their work shifts; they could see the results of their work. With visitors, students, faculty, and other staff constantly rotating in and out of spaces they clean, it is hard for them to feel like they have fully accomplished their work. Martha shared a concern about a high-usage space in the student center:

Martha: Boy, that [student center]! You go in it, like, three or four times a day and pick it up. I'd go get it when I came in, Cynthia would get it when she came in, we'd both hit it again around seven o'clock or so. And then I'd get it one more time before I left for the day. And it'd still have kids in it, so you knew they'd mess it up some more. We can't hardly ever keep that room clean. It's a pretty busy place and pretty messy too.

Martha also talked about how she used her body to protect work she had completed:

Martha: When you just clean your bathrooms and stuff, you know. You try to tell them, "No, no, you can't go in there, it's gettin' dry," and they'll just brush right past you.

And sometimes you put out your "wet" signs, and they just walk right on past those, too. You've got to have it blocked off pretty good to keep 'em out.

Sometimes, I try to hold out my arms <motions fully outstretched arms>, and you know, block ‘em from coming, but they come on in anyway.

“We own this space. You do not.” is the unequivocal message the participants receive from building occupants on a daily basis. Custodians are expected to always respect and accommodate occupants’ time, space, dispositions, possessions, and products, which places them in extremely vulnerable positions—permanently.

A Culture of Fear, Control, and Indifference in the Division of Maintenance

Not only are the participants controlled by the “mean looks” they receive from building occupants, those employed within the Division of Maintenance work within a culture of fear, control, and indifference. As previously mentioned, State University is occasionally referred to as “The Plantation” by its service workers. I traced the origin of this depiction to State University’s Food Services department and to the Division of Maintenance. The so-called plantation-like feel may be derived, in part, from the fact that administrators within the Division of Maintenance refer to their leadership structure as the “chain of command”—which is rigidly enforced—and to employees in possessive terms such as, “My custodians,” “My people,” and “My folks.” According to Agnes, they do not treat “their” people well. They display little compassion for individual circumstances and instead treat them like “cattle,” or “UIN numbers” [an internal, university-issued identification number assigned to each employee].

Administrators also routinely uproot employees and “ship” them off to unfamiliar environments, unexpectedly and often against the custodian’s will. The administrators justify the moving of a custodian from one building to another as a business necessity. They “reserve the right to move custodians where and when they are needed to best meet

the needs of the organization.⁷ While understandable, a little forewarning and consideration of the gravity of this decision is warranted. When custodians are moved, they leave familiar surroundings, routines, and people. And when they enter new buildings, they are thrust into new cultures and have to work to earn the trust of those who occupy the space. The extreme vulnerability participants feel, not knowing if they will be relocated from one day to the next, is underestimated.

The participants are also highly regulated. Keys, managed through the “control room,” must be signed for at the beginning and end of each work shift, and a daily “Housekeeping Report” informs employees of daily assignments. They do not stray far from assigned areas for fear of reprisal:

Martha: Oh, honey, if my boss would have ever caught me over there she would have killed me! If she would have caught me trying to go and see and do other things, that would get you in a lot of trouble.

Petitt: So how is it you were able to get away with it?

Martha: Well, it’s not like I was doing anything wrong or illegal. I don’t know why it’s such a big deal. My work gets done. But basically I knew she didn’t come that time of day. She’d come, like early, and then she’d leave. She’d be gone by a certain time every day.

But there’s some people, you know, they’re going to get you in trouble no matter what you do.

In addition, although the custodians work eight hour days, supervisors are at liberty to shorten the lunch hour to thirty minutes, unlike other State University employees, who are allowed a full hour. Breaks are also optional, permitted at each individual supervisor’s discretion. Supervisors also dictate where breaks can be taken—preferably out of sight of other employees and building users. A high-ranking

administrator in the division, whom I call “The Commander,” because he is very close to the final authority, said the following:

The Commander: If my people are standing around, people notice it right away. You see one them standing around holding up the wall, you notice that, so we ask them to take breaks, if they are on an official break, to go to a break area.

Even the understanding administrator in the division participated in promoting their invisibility by drawing strict parameters:

Understanding Administrator: One of the things I heard from them was, “I’m not allowed to have my cell phone with me and, what if I have a sick child?” or in a lot of cases an aging parent. “And if someone needs to reach me in a hurry, they have to contact my supervisor through the radio and then they contact me by radio, and there’s a time delay and in some cases it could be an emergency situation.” And there was a lot of anxiety about that.

And so we changed that rule and said, “You can have your cell phone with you.

Keep it on vibrate and we don’t want to see you walking down the halls, dusting or vacuuming, talking on the phone. You know, we can’t have that.

But if there’s a true emergency, you know, you can feel the vibration, then go into a vacant area and speak.”

This expectation that custodians not be seen using communication devices while working is a double standard, as higher-ranked employees at State University habitually use handheld communication devices while in business meetings; if it rings, they answer it, and they also send and receive e-mail and text messages while business meetings are in progress. One administrator even took a personal phone call (about what time to retrieve a pet from the veterinarian) during our interview time.

The participants also endure constant surveillance. Their work is routinely inspected by supervisors, who appear at random, to scrutinize levels of cleanliness. Furthermore, building occupants are randomly selected to periodically evaluate the custodian's performance. Approximately 40 surveys are distributed each month. Administrators say this type of feedback assists in enhancing the performance of the overall organization. It is noteworthy that no other group in the Division of Maintenance is evaluated in this manner. This practice, reserved for custodians only, assuredly produces feelings of susceptibility and self-consciousness one feels when one is always on stage.

Close watch is also maintained through use of radios. Administrator By-the-Book said that "radios provide instant communication. We go back and forth on those constantly. We know everything that's going on. Whatever is happening, we make sure we follow the chain of command. If we happen to pick up on a call here, it goes back down the chain of command. We want them to handle it at the lowest levels first, before it comes to us, but we always want to know everything going on."

The following of the chain of command is indeed pervasive in the organization. They have strict grievance procedures. An employee who wishes to lodge a complaint must begin first with the next highest ranking individual in their chain and work up from there. They are not allowed to "leapfrog all the way to the top" without first filing a complaint through the appropriate channels. The closer one gets to the final authority, the more roadblocks they face. Recall Diane's story about how she "got the runaround" when she attempted to get to the bottom of mysterious charges leveled against her:

Diane: I called the head person over the whole, entire custodial area to talk to him. And his secretary wouldn't let me talk to him. She gave me

pointers on how to take care of it. She explained to me about the chain of command sort of thing, you know, you go to this person first, then this person next. And I said, "Oh, okay." I didn't know about this stuff. And so then I started over with my supervisor's supervisor, and she gave me the runaround, too.

Whether or not one's concerns warrant the attention of the final authority is determined by his or her immediate subordinate, who then will facilitate the securing of an appointment. "They have to meet certain criteria to get to [the final authority]," said administrator By-the-Book. Several participants report having never had the opportunity to visit with the final authority about their concerns. The gate-keeping behavior was prohibitive and exhausting, so they simply gave up.

The custodial participants also report being forced to comply with division and university policies. The policy that had the greatest impact was "direct deposit." All existing employees were coercively encouraged to enroll in the program, and all new employees would be enrolled automatically. This measure provided employees with "prompt, accurate and efficient delivery of earnings on payday," and it "eliminated the difficulties of lost, stolen or damaged checks, or time-consuming trips to make paycheck deposits," the policy read. The Commander explained in this way:

The Commander: We encourage our folks to use the banking system, direct deposit, so that they have better control over their money that goes into an institution where they can go and get it out, rather than going and cashing the \$300 check and have all the money and losing it or something.

Any new employee who comes along, has to use the direct deposit system.

That is just one of our criteria if you want to work here.

Now, I mean there is a positive side to this direct deposit, because it helps people learn how to manage their money.

Some folks have never written a check in their lives, or never had an ATM card. And so this forces them into that mode.

Note the paternalistic nature of the message. It is almost as if the administration believes the custodians need parenting or life preparation skills. There seemed to be very little recognition of the loss of autonomy this introduced or the complications it imposed, such as the need for one to have transportation to and from a bank, as well as potential complications for those who may have low literacy skills. Searching for the “official” rationale for this edict, I asked each participating administrator for a justification of the direct deposit mandate. They all talked about its benefits to the employees. Curiously, no one mentioned the time and money this initiative undoubtedly returned to the institution.

Participants who work in the division also know they are not trusted. Take the receipt of gifts, for example. Custodians who wish to receive gifts from occupants must obtain a written note of verification, or the item may be presumed stolen:

By-the-Book: If they tell us somebody gave them a gift, we have ‘em ask for it in writing to protect them from accusations of theft.

Because you don’t know where the gift is coming from. You don’t know whether it was bought with state money. You don’t know if they have the right to give it away. Or if there was some misunderstanding about whether it was a gift or a lot of things. So we allow it at Christmas time. That’s no big deal. What I’m talking about is, “Oh, here take this.” Like if someone is leaving or cleaning out their office and they say, “Do you want this?” You know? We have to be very careful about that. So, in a situation like that, the customer will write a note, and that’ll clear everything.

The note has to say “I’m giving this to Maria Lopez as a gift.” They take that note to their supervisor, it goes up the chain, and when it comes to us, we file it. Somewhere along the chain someone verifies it.

Indeed, in the absence of a witness that a particular custodian was told that she was welcome to have a Coke from the refrigerator of a break room she cleaned, she was fired. “She said somebody told her she could have it, but she didn’t have any witnesses, so she was fired,” administrator By-the-Book said. “We tell them, ‘Don’t touch anything that doesn’t belong to you.’ You know? So we dismissed her on the spot, because if you take a Coke, where are you gonna draw the line?” she concluded.

Participants also contend with arbitrary rules and ambiguous rule-makers. When they talked about negative consequences, in particular, the women began sentences with “They say.” When pressed for a description of who “They” were, no one could clearly identify a source. When Cleo conveyed the story about having lost her keys, her continued employment was contingent upon finding them because “They say, ‘If you lose your keys, you lose your job.’”

The most consequential rule “They” invented was that of “unplanned leave.” Every single participant who worked in the Division of Maintenance spoke of the negative impact of “unplanned leave,” yet not one administrator in the division claimed to know anything about it. The punitive policy requires each custodial employee to request personal leave a minimum of three days in advance. Failure to do so resulted in an “unplanned leave” action. Astoundingly, not one of the custodial employees knew the actual consequences of “unplanned leave.” They only knew it did not bode well for their terms of employment. Clara and Diane offered the following:

Clara: If you get a unplanned, it go against you some kinda’ way. I don’t know what really happens, but they write it down and put it in your file and something will happen to you if you get too many.

Diane: If you get an unplanned leave, it goes on your record. I think it affects if you get raises and stuff, you know, ‘cause it goes against you somehow

or another. I don't really know because I've never gotten one. I always ask for leave in advance like they want us to, so I've never been written up for that. They say it even goes on your timesheet. And then I guess they add it up or something. So they know how many unplanned things you have and stuff. They write it in their little book.

Supervisors introduce complications as well. Clara shared a story about how one supervisor invented and forced her crew to sign a “no gossiping” agreement. Refusal to do so would result in disciplinary action up to and possibly including termination:

Clara: That woman was hard to work for. If you were a minute late, she would give you a late slip. One minute! And she made us sign a paper one time about gossiping. It said on the paper, “I agree not to gossip and, if I do, I know I can be written up,” or something like that. If you gossip, she'll write you up. Ain't nobody never heard of that. I asked around and wasn't no other crews doin' that. Our crew was the only one that had that. She'll write you up for gossiping. And we had to sign a paper and other people was telling me, some of my friends said we shouldn't have signed it. But this one girl who wouldn't sign it, she got transferred. Sho' did.

She say we can't work if we're gossiping. How can you do your work if you gossiping, she say. But me, I think if you have stuff to talk about and you get along, you work better. But she thought we was gossiping.

Petitt: What did she think you were gossiping about? Each other?

Clara: Naw, girl! She thought we was gossiping about her <laughter>, 'cause sometimes we was <laughter>. Nobody liked her.

Supervisors occasionally cultivate allies by showing favoritism. Participants report that the favorites receive leniency, more frequent and higher raises, and when custodial relocations are called for, favorites are the last to go. The “unchosen,” or employees least-liked by the supervisor, are first on the list to be moved to another area.

The participants also expressed concern about being the “last to know” important information that impacts their work lives. For example, after the successful Living Wage initiative—or the favorable decision of the President and his Taskforce on Wages and

Benefits, the university would prefer to call it—all those holding the rank of Custodial Worker I (CWI) were converted to Custodial Worker II (CWII), without explanation. For years, a CWI had to work hard to earn the rank of CWII, and now, since the entry-level salary would be elevated to the typical salary of a CWII, an administrator in Human Resources (not the President, as most participants believed) reclassified all CWI's to CWII's. Needless to say, this left many custodians angry, confused, and in the dark.

Participants did not understand the staff hiring freeze or the reductions in force either. To further illustrate how uninformed participants were, Martha was under the impression that the university, as a whole, ceased the awarding of merit increases the year she was hired, because that was what “They” told her. Those honored with Division or University-level awards did not know how they were chosen or who was eligible to nominate them for the awards. Participants were also kept in the dark about major institutional shifts. The university's Faculty Reinvestment program and the associated addition of bodies created the need to physically reposition faculty and staff offices. The women learned about this major change by “reading” the trash. Boxes upon boxes of trash began piling up, and then they started putting pieces together through what Archer, Hutchings, and Ross (2003) referred to as “hot” knowledge—credible knowledge acquired through the grapevine from one's peers. Martha thinks the administration withholds information because they doubt their ability to comprehend:

Martha: They think we won't understand how to do it and that seems kind of like, you know, some of us have got a good bit of education, and some of them don't. It's just like everywhere. You got people that are real smart and you got some people that aren't. But they think we don't know anything. They're just slowly getting us up into the 20th Century, but it's just taking them a long time—and I don't mean the 21st Century! They just think we don't know anything, so they don't tell us things. We're the last to know or we're the last to get things.

One item the custodians were promised but some never received was an area computer for their use. The Division created a map indicating where computers would be located in crew areas. With this map in hand, I spot-checked the designated locations to see if computers were actually there. In a little over half of the crew areas, there existed a sign that read “Computer Here,” and yet there was no computer. One employee, not a formal participant in the study, laughed and told me the sign had been there for over a year. “Did they tell you when you might expect the computer?” I asked. Looking over at two other custodians standing within earshot, hearty laughter erupted among them. “Come back in another year,” one of them chuckled. Without a computer and computer literacy, employees relied on their supervisors to print the now-electronically-distributed check stubs, which supervisors produced when they “got around to it.”

Juanita did have a computer in her area, but it was of little use without necessary training. The Ruler, a mid-manager in the division, seemed to believe “the computer thing would fix itself over time” because they are hiring younger employees who enter the workforce with some level of computer proficiency. Training of current employees was not a priority. Martha spoke on this topic:

Martha: I kind of wish that they would let us get at some of the computer classes and stuff that they offer. But they say for just one day they’re like 100 bucks. That’s a lot of money.

And all the classes are at times I can’t go ‘cause I’m working. I think my supervisor should pay for me to go or they need to make it a discount or something ‘cause we work for them. That wouldn’t hurt them. Wouldn’t you like to have some of your people that they could move up and do other things for you and still work for you and have been working for you for a long time? And you get to keep them, and you wouldn’t have to retrain so much?

But the main reason I can't go is because I can't afford to pay for it and my supervisors, they keep saying they haven't got any money. That's the first words out of their mouth.

Sometimes they just act like, you know, it's like, you know, they just don't want to. That seems sad though that you wouldn't want somebody to have something a little bit better and to, you know, learn new things.

It's not a crime or anything to learn something. It shouldn't be.

And when they say they don't have the money, you're thinking, "Well, if they don't have the money to pay for my classes, why are they spending it for this and that and all this stuff?" You go, "Where'd they get the money for that?"

A final threat that keeps the participants in fear is the constant risk of "being outsourced." There have been frequent conversations about "outsourcing" custodial services, using a vendor who would provide cheaper labor. Private contractors vie for State University's business, because the size of the institution means the alliance would be profitable. Shrewd business owners research the cost of custodial salaries and promise to deliver the same services at a considerably lower cost. They can do so because they often withhold benefits from their employees. The threat level rose with the emergence of the Living Wage initiative. One participant told me that The Commander stood before a group of custodians and said: "You all are asking for trouble. You want to make \$12 and \$13 an hour, some contractor is going to come along and say they can do it cheaper and you will all be out of a job because the university will do what is in its financial interest." The warning that asking for fair compensation could mean job loss altogether caused some custodians to fear and speak against a living wage, though it was at their own peril.

In summary, the participants who work in the Division of Maintenance are highly regulated, controlled, manipulated through fear—often fear of the unknown—and made

to feel unworthy. They know they are expendable because, as The Commander said, they “never have a problem hiring custodians at State University.” They have “people just waiting for the opportunity.” Therefore, the participants, employing the language of pedagogy, said they learned to “roll with the punches” and to just “keep quiet.” To be unambiguously clear, these women endure various forms of “psychological terrorism” (hooks, 2000b, p. 95) on a daily basis.

The Realm of Indignities⁸

This section covers treatment the participants have experienced from the most flagrant abuse, such as being forced to clean excrement that has been intentionally deposited in places other than a commode, to cleaning up after student pranks, such as the intentional explosion of a rats and mice in microwaves.

The women accept the fact that their work is often unpredictable. Rain, for example, creates additional work because people come in from the rain and “shake off like a wet dog,” to use Martha’s words, and then drip water from the door to their destinations. Buildings leak as well and not just older ones. One participant reported that a multi-million dollar facility, erected one year prior, constantly leaked water. Custodians, also responsible for ensuring public safety, have to place “Wet Floor” signs in highly visible areas, and spend a good portion of their work shifts mopping and re-mopping floors when it rains.

Special events, of which custodians may or may not be aware, routinely create additional work. State University has a sizeable and very active student body. College students host numerous events and invite countless others to campus to partake in their events. They occasionally invent ways to have fun (Peter, 2007) that inadvertently have

an adverse impact on custodians. At State University, in preparation for a big annual event, students would throw furniture from residence hall windows. This event also required a good deal of outdoor activity, so students would enter buildings and residence halls “caked in mud,” which would flake onto the floor’s surface little by little while they were en route to a specific destination. State University students held this event as one of their most sacred, yet custodians recognized it as an occasion for additional toil.

Students who live in the residence halls introduce unique challenges in the creation of additional work as well. They use tissue and newspaper to overflow the commode, have shaving cream fights, food fights, and toilet paper wars; they play basketball with paper or beer bottles and have been known to “experiment” with blowing up objects in the microwaves, including mice and rats. Once, a newly-killed deer’s head was left in a men’s common area bathroom. The most infamous incident, however, was “[Banks Hall] Road Kill”. Residents of [Lewis Hall], trying to outdo the rivaled [Banks Hall], collected dead carcasses of squirrels, possums, armadillos, cats, raccoons, skunks, etc., and scattered them around [Banks Hall], placing the most foul-smelling carcasses in air ducts to introduce a noxious smell into the air. After the university’s hazardous waste disposal team removed the carcasses, custodians were left to clean remains.

Fortunately, the Department of Student Housing has a way to discourage this behavior. When students intentionally damage property through horseplay or pranks, they are assessed charges for “common area damages.” The cost of the actual damage, as well as the staff time and resources used to clean up, is added together and then divided equally among residents of the affected area. What the housing department counts on is that uninvolved parties, in an effort to avoid paying for damage they did not cause, will

“squeal” on perpetrator(s). Though custodians do not benefit in any way from this punitive measure, the participant who works in the Department of Student Housing receives some degree of satisfaction that students are held accountable for their behavior. The “Common Area Damage” policy has inherent drawbacks for the custodial staff, however. To have this policy engaged, someone has to “rat” on the students and the suspected “rat” is almost always the area custodian who has to spend extra time and effort cleaning the disarray. Once, to exact revenge, students who lived in a male residence hall locked a custodian in the custodial supply closet. Her absence was not noted until she failed to show up for her lunch break, some three hours later.

Graffiti, written or drawn onto multiple surfaces, created extra work as well. Markings carrying hate-filled messages of racism and sexism troubled participants most, as previously addressed. Then, there is the hazardous component of the job. Custodians clean both human and animal waste everyday, but when human behavior is deemed careless or “mean” they find it upsetting. Such instances involve women neglecting to place used sanitary items in the appropriate containers (they leave them lying on the bathroom floor instead); older faculty and staff members failing to place adult undergarments in the trashcan (some leave those lying on the bathroom floors, too); occupants neglecting to dispose of used needles into appropriate containers (when discarded into a regular trash receptacle, custodians encounter needle sticks); men leaving used condoms lying around residence hall areas; and students leaving urine-filled cups in large classrooms.

The most repugnant cleaning job is that which forces custodians into intimate contact with others’ displaced excreta. The women clean dislocated “number two, boo

boo, shit, whatever you wanna' call it," to use Clara's words, on an alarmingly consistent basis. On average, participants reported cleaning displaced excrement once per week. The women expect to clean fecal remnants normally left in toilet bowls, but they find it abhorrent, sickening, and mean when it is found elsewhere. They have found it on the bathroom floor just beside the toilet, smeared on bathroom doors and walls, in rows of seats in large lecture halls (fifteen consecutive seats, on one occasion), on classroom chalkboards, immediately in front of a professor's podium (where her or his feet would be planted), in building basements, in residence hall bathtubs, and in building stairwells (on one occasion piles of feces appeared in every corner from the top of a seven story building stairwell all the way to the bottom of the same stairwell, with smeared feces along handrails, and a pair of men's feces-filled underwear at the end of the trail). On several other occasions violators created "art" with excrement. Murals have been drawn, and structures erected. Diane recalls someone creating a tall volcano with a wooden flag on top. Upon further investigation, I learned that these incidents occur for the most part, but not in all cases, in what State University calls "open access buildings," that is, buildings left open and available to the students 24 hours a day. Diane and Clara talked about how they are impacted by this behavior:

Diane: I had to clean it up just this past week, and I was so mad! I had to use tons of germicidal to scrub that.

We don't have an easy job.

It's a nasty job, a filthy job. People think it's just a little dust here and there, but it's not.

Just made me sick!

I wish the president could see it. It's already got nasty on the floor—he would throw up and have that to clean up, too <laughter>.

And it's no quick clean up job either, depending on the surface. Say, like, if it's in the chair or on the tile, that'll come up pretty quick, but it's when it's in the carpet that it takes so long. You have to really kind of work with it for a while because you have to get the stink out and then you have to spin clean it.

And you know it's a bunch of people doing it, because no one person could produce all that. Somebody conjures it up and they get a bunch of people to go along.

Petitt: How does that make you feel having to clean up somebody else's crap?

Diane: It really hurts your feelings. Like, why are they doing this to me?

Maybe they think we're just nobody, you know.

It makes you wonder who did it to you.

Like, do they know me and is this on purpose or what?

Well, I don't think they know me.

But maybe, I don't know, maybe they're trying to be funny, I guess.

I sing the whole time I'm cleaning it.

Clara, the staff member who had to clean the stairwell-filled feces, said the following:

Clara: . . . It had to be more than one person. They thought it was funny, I guess, just piles of boo boo <laughter>.

. . . But he probably laughed about it. He probably thought that was so funny, probably said to himself, "I bet some custodian is workin' now."

. . . Just sick to my stomach, just smelling it and cleaning it.

People who deal with "waste" typically do not have a high social status, and because of society's taboos toward excreta, those responsible for cleaning it develop "rituals of detachment" (Norton, 2004, p. 89). Note Diane's strategy to detach from her emotions in her comment that she "sings the whole time" she cleans feces.

The participants' framing of dislocated excrement as a "joke" or "something funny" can be understood in the following passage. Though the context within which this quote is used offers a glimpse into Primo Levi's initial impression of the Auschwitz concentration camp, I am in no way suggesting a parallel to these atrocities. The excerpt provides an analytic lens through which victims, in search of an explanation for the inexplicable, surmise that it must be a joke:

There is something about human cruelty that Levi cannot imagine. And of course, something else about human cruelty – the joke – that he can. People can joke about such things, but they could never do them . . . [T]hat there are jokes and jokers in the world makes this experience, at least initially, intelligible to him . . .

[T]he only way of explaining this deranged and brutal world he has found himself in is that it is someone's joke; that they are all there being laughed at. And the reason that this is at once grotesque and intelligible as an assumption and an explanation is that *when one is being laughed at one is giving someone pleasure*. Someone is, as we say, getting pleasure at our expense. The only reason people could possibly do all this to other people is because it gives them pleasure; and the specific pleasure is that these people get to laugh at people . . . And mocking people is so compelling as a form of satisfaction that people will clearly do anything to achieve it . . .

The preconditions for . . . mockery are, firstly that there is no equality between the jokers and their victims (they don't share a sense of humour); secondly they must be kept in a state of total ignorance about what is really going on, and about the mentality of the jokers; thirdly that they should feel sufficiently intimidated to submit to the joke in question; and fourthly . . . they must be unsure whether it is a joke they are in, whether or not they are actually being laughed at. After all, if they are not, if they are not giving anyone pleasure by their utter abjection, then the so-called human world is even less intelligible than was previously assumed. (Phillips, 2002, pp. 33-35)

All of the participants, in their combined 99 years of employment at State University, speculate that male students are responsible for this “disgusting,” “out of control,” “wild,” and “mean” behavior. That college students would be susceptible to pranks is not uncommon. Millar (2007) maintains that there are some who believe pranks enhance the quality of a student's academic experience and that the more audacious the stunts, and the higher the degree of technical difficulty, the more fun. Accessing the inaccessible and making possible the improbable add to a sense of accomplishment, Miller believes. Tom Peter (2007) holds that despite any potential friction pranks may cause, good practical jokes serve an important role in higher learning. They engage the creative use of organizational, social, and technical skills, he maintains. Yet, this particularly malevolent behavior of leaving one's excrement for someone else to clean up, “all in fun,” goes well “over the edge of human decency” (Willing, 2004, p. 74).

The excrement, like graffiti, and many other intentionally disruptive elements, disappears before other building occupants ever encounter it. Custodians, who work the

early shifts, beginning at either 4:00 a.m., or 6:00 a.m., do their best to remove substances before other employees begin showing up around 8:00 a.m. When necessary, the administration will temporarily redeploy teams of workers to rectify a situation so they may ensure the availability of a clean, hazard-free environment upon others' arrival.

In conversation with State University administrators, I was troubled that this specific form of deliberate, thrill-seeking, deviant, aggressive, obstructive, aberrant behavior was not cause for alarm. Not only do custodians have to remove elements that are physically hazardous and psychologically injurious, but the energy they expend on this preposterousness detracts from productive service they could otherwise provide. Harris and Reynolds (2003) talk about how the lives of long-serving staff are significantly affected by unrelenting dysfunctional customer behavior. "Exposure to sustained dysfunctional customer behavior has lasting effects on the well-being of the employee – effects that last well beyond the occurrence of the customer's behavior" (p. 149), they write. Prolonged exposure to inappropriate customer behavior may lead to sustained feelings of degradation, worthlessness, and humiliation well after the incident, the authors believe. Harris and Reynolds also found that longer-serving employees claimed to become hardened to emotional distress experienced on the job, yet they could recall instances from many years back, which was an indication that they had not yet fully recovered from the injury. "Such feigned emotions constitute what has become known as 'emotional labor' (p. 150), an unfortunate, additional tax on custodians who make higher education a safe place for other's learning and development while, at the same time, they are robbed of the dignity and peace we all deserve.

Body and Soul

*In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh . . . They don't love your eyes . . . No more do they love the skin on your back . . . And O my people they do not love your hands . . . Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. **You** got to love it, **you!** And no, they ain't in love your mouth . . . What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear . . . No, they don't love your mouth. **You** got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up . . . More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air . . . hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.*

- An excerpt of a sermon delivered by the “unchurched, uncalled, unrobed, unanointed” preacher, Baby Suggs, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988, p. 88).

Though Baby Suggs’ sermon was offered in the context of her lived experience of enslavement, her message about loving our bodies—especially when others do not—offers a powerful framing of the women’s experiences. As previously stated, the women survived girlhood, having been teased about numerous physical aspects of their bodies. As the women shared names they were called, it was apparent that many insults were about characteristics toward which the more financially privileged would direct “corrective” medical attention, such as misaligned eyes and teeth, and severely disfigured feet. Though they talked about teasing as a thing of the past, related emotions reemerge in their current work environment. One participant, whose pseudonym is withheld to further preserve her anonymity, shared the following:

Participant: Sometimes when people look at me funny I wonder if it’s because of how I look <pointing to her physical disfigurement> or because I’m a custodian and they think I’m dirty. But they just look at you Like they don’t wanna be around you, you know.

In addition, participants experience marginalization grounded in the social stigma associated with subordinated class, race, and gender status that is “read” on their bodies. Their bodies exist politically in ways they cannot control. Yet they are controlled and manipulated through contradictory messages of “we want you to remain visible,” and “disappear.” Recall, the workforce was reorganized so the bulk of custodians worked during the daytime and could therefore, be “better managed.” “We switched the work shifts around because if you have custodians here, management has to be here, too, to provide oversight,” said Understanding Administrator. But at the same time, they are told to “disappear”: “Go into a vacant area and speak,” said Understanding Administrator, and “Take breaks in a break area” out of public sight, ordered The Commander. A near thirty year-old, archived, custodial employee handbook promoted acceptance of the culture of invisibility:

Our presence is seen everywhere on the university campus, yet it would sometimes appear that we go unnoticed. Indeed, this is often a compliment. When people do not notice our activities, it means they are comfortable in their surroundings – free to pursue their goal at this university – that of learning, teaching, and research. It means we have done our job well,⁹

read the handbook. Though I was unable to locate current documents that conveyed this sentiment, the women hear this same message repeatedly. The participants, whose life experiences prepared them to constantly adapt to the expectations of others, navigate this duality with facility.

Earning a living as custodians at State University is not a temporary way station for the women; they articulated their intention to spend their remaining working lives at State University. Therefore, it behooved them to learn to “roll with the punches,” to borrow Diane’s words again. Having worked at the university a combined 99 years, the

women have been dealt significant physical “blows” to their bodies. Between the six women, they have endured multiple knee surgeries, numerous back injuries, one rotator cuff surgery, countless repetitive stress fractures, one carpal tunnel surgery, and several medical interventions to heal internal and external infections contracted through work-related substances. Cleo, Martha, Agnes, Clara, and Diane all take prescribed medication. Juanita is the only exception. Though she, too, has been injured on the job, she describes herself as “healthy as a horse.”

Although custodial employees receive immunizations and are issued protective work gear, such as gloves, back braces, and masks, these preventative measures do not guard against all possible job-related injury. The walking and standing on hard concrete all day, the bending, stooping, twisting, and lifting of heavy objects takes a toll on their bodies. Aged facilities and work equipment also complicate the workload. According to the women, the older the building and the older the cleaning equipment, the harder they have to work to produce high-quality outcomes. Add to this, regular exposure to harsh chemicals—chemicals used for routine cleaning and those found in the various labs and other facilities which they clean. In the course of a workday, the women are also exposed to loud noises, foul and noxious smells; they sweat and, predictably, accumulate dirt on their bodies as they “work like dogs,” in Clara’s estimation.

As participants talked about work-related illness and injury, here is what Diane, Cleo, Clara and Agnes shared:

Diane: I get real concerned about the chemicals in the stuff that we work with. A lot of stuff we use is not real good for you. And they keep changing to cheaper products and stuff, which is good to save money. But some of the fumes of some of the things that we have to deal with is really bad, and it’s harmful, you know, even with the mask on. You don’t know exactly what it will do to you in your body, but a lot of the

finishing stuff is really very potent and you spend four or five hours putting that down and you're breathing that all the time, and that's bad.

Petitt: So do you think any of the chemicals and stuff you've come into contact with have anything to do with your illness?

Diane: It's no way to know anything for sure.

But there sure are a lot of sick folks out here in Custodial, isn't there? Everybody I know has got something. You know, headaches, breathing problems, bone problems, everybody's limping or something, because I even got a limp from standing on this concrete all day.

Cleo said:

Cleo: Sho [sure], I think my leg and stuff botherin' me from workin' out here all these years. All this lifting heavy stuff and climbing stairs and runnin' round here and there and cleanin' up after these folks. Sho [sure], it's from workin' out here.

A lot of my sisters who worked out here left away from here sick.

A lot of people leave from out here sick <laughter>.

Clara said:

Clara: This some hard work out here, Becky. It'll get next to you. It'll wear you down. I knew this lady [who] used to work here a long time, like thirty years or something, and she worked out here all them years and she didn't enjoy her money because she died from workin' so hard out here all them years.

I think being around chemicals all them years, it .. it do somethin' to your body. And, you know, just walking all day to different places. Walking and all that stuff. Walking suppose to be good for you but when you're bending and picking up heavy stuff, that get next to you in the years.

Agnes spoke about how she talked to her staff about taking precautions:

Agnes: I talk to my staff a lot about proper lifting techniques. And I stay on them about wearing gloves, and I tell them that, just because the Material Safety Data sheet said that there are no known side effects, that it will not affect you, you still need to wear your gloves. Just because they don't know what harm can come, doesn't mean you should take chances with your body.

Like this new product I was telling you about, this guy who sold it to us told us “It is absolutely harmless. You could put it in your mouth and you’ll be fine.” Now, what kind of thing is that to say to us? First of all, why would we want to put that stuff in our mouths? I understand he was trying to make a point but, come on.

And I told them, I said, “My common sense tells me that if it’s supposed to kill AIDS, hepatitis, and all that stuff, it ain’t supposed to go in my body.” So I tell them common sense is your best friend.

And when I see them dumping garbage, even if they are just pushing the cart that’s got trash in it, I tell them, “You need your gloves on. Please wear your gloves.”

And I talk to them about using proper lifting techniques. “Wear your back brace if you know you’re gonna’ be lifting. You wear the proper gear. If I see them about to move a heavy piece of furniture, I’ll tell them “Ladies, count to three, please.” Count and move simultaneously. Like, if they are lifting a heavy sofa, I want three women, one on each end and one in the middle. Count, “Okay, ready one, two, three - move.” They wanna just grab it and go. And I tell them they need to protect themselves and their bodies. Ain’t got but one body.

I’m telling them from experience, using what I’ve learned. This kind of work is hard on your body.

That’s why we should all be paid more because of the sacrifices we make with our bodies.

While on the topic of sacrificing one’s body, an interesting finding was that all of the participants still report to work, even if they are sick. Diane reported that after an appendectomy, she only took two days off and then returned to work with stitches in her stomach. Martha said one day she reported to work sick and her supervisor told her: “You look like death! Go home. Don’t be coming in here and getting everybody else sick!” One of the participants, having dislocated her kneecap, reported to work on crutches with a partial cast. Between the six of them, they have accumulated hundreds of hours in sick leave because they rarely call in sick. “I have to be really, really sick ‘fore

[before] I call in,” said Cleo. When I asked her why, she said: “I don’t know. I just come on in to work. What I’m gon’ do at home?” Juanita and Diane said they reported to work even if they were ailing because the movement helps to mitigate their pain; sitting still, the ache settles in, so they “just keep moving.” Though it did not emerge in the women’s stories, it is possible the class-conscious belief that “idleness and self-sufficiency do not go together” (hooks, 2000b, p. 14) could be engaged here as well. Whatever the case, the women working through pain is ill-fated, because when sick or injured workers show up for work, their health may worsen. Such individuals may eventually develop more serious medical problems that require more aggressive medical treatments, and they could possibly develop long-term disabilities (Flores & Deal, 2003).

All of the women take advantage of the employment-based health coverage offered by State University, to varying degrees. When employees invest in coverage, a portion of the monthly insurance cost is deducted from each paycheck. Thus, several participants only have “basic” coverage for themselves their spouses and dependents. They are uninsured for vision and dental care because it helps to keep monthly deductions to a minimum.

Having a low income impacts their bodies in other ways as well. The women can not afford nutrient-rich foods. Even, Agnes, the highest paid among them, talked about buying the least expensive food items, some near the “pull date,” and buying dinner for her family from restaurants that are notorious for serving inexpensive food, that has little or no nutritional value. Martha admitted to waiting around after university-sponsored events hoping to be offered leftover food items. “When I worked over in [Rice] hall they used to give us food and stuff that got left. Where I am now, over in [Griffin], they

hardly have any food left. They don't feed you over there," she said. The participants also cannot afford appropriate occupational footwear. I noticed they all wore well-used tennis shoes to our interviews, a likely contributor to the back pain several of them spoke about.

Working as custodians at State University is also soul-wearying. The racism, classism, sexism, hostility, control, fear, and the many other indignities they experience weigh heavily upon their spirits. In addition, their jobs leave little room for creativity or adding a "personal touch"; their suggestions are unsolicited and unwelcome; they are kept in the dark about important work-related matters; constantly watched and told far more often about what they do wrong, rather than what they do right; their work is devalued; and they are justifiably in constant fear of the known and unknown consequences of their every move. The weight of it all sometimes manifests itself in their bearing. Several of the women present their bodies in a deferential matter. They walk with their heads lowered; they avoid eye contact, speak only when spoken to, and yield floor space to other building occupants.

This constant subordination, fear, and insecurity causes the participants to internalize negative messages and to suppress self-expression. Martha's frustration is tempered by her vulnerability, so she "swallows" her emotions, which at times gives her a headache. When Clara is made to feel unwanted or unworthy, she "shakes it off," because if she did not, she would be "mad all the time". Diane appears to be most inclined to internalize negative messages. When I asked her how she recognized trash she replied: "When you take a job like this, you know trash," inferring that those who clean for a living have a higher probability of "knowing" garbage. The unhealthy culture

within which the women work is constructed and reconstructed through daily social interactions that instill insecurity and self-consciousness, and robs the women of meaningful participation in an establishment that holds “improving the human condition” as one of its highest priorities.

Financial worry or “money sickness” (Ricciardi, 2008) was also prevalent in the women’s stories. “Money sickness,” according to Ricciardi is the detrimental association between money and emotions that causes negative feelings such as nervousness, worry, and stress. The author also contends that women, in general, worry more about their finances and express lower levels of well-being than men. Women spend more time worrying and thinking about how they “might respond to a specific condition or judgment that causes anxiety, depression, dread, concern, or unhappiness” (¶8), the author notes. “I’ve got a lot of things that keep me up at night,” said Diane. “I mean, I got regular bills to pay, both me and my husband have medications we have to pay for, we have to pay taxes. Lordy! Sometimes when I get to thinking about it, I can’t sleep. I’m hurting,” she concluded. The impact of the women’s financial hardship was presented at length in the “classism” section. I reintroduce the topic here to emphasize how inadequate wages negatively impact the women, body and soul.

Survival Strategies

We ain’t got nothin’ to do but make it!
- Agnes, Research Participant

The participants devised very effective strategies to negotiate, divert, and accommodate workplace-centered challenges. These strategies include: focusing on the positive aspects of working at State University; constructing the lives of occupants and piecing together information to understand university events that impact their work

worlds; elevating their status while putting occupants down; cultivating allies; extracting gifts; engaging in passive resistance; focusing on the ends; and trusting God. In addition, toward the conclusion of each interview, I asked every participant to imagine I was the president of the university and to engage me in conversation about changes that would be necessary to improve their work environments. They did so, and I titled this section “The Rehearsal of Liberation.”

Focusing on the Positive Aspects of Working at State University

The women report many positive aspects about working at State University. Foremost, they appreciate the “good benefits.” Though several of them do not take advantage of the full benefits package offered because they want to keep monthly costs low (several do not have dental coverage, for example), they all ranked “good benefits” among the most important and most positive aspects of working at the institution. While they experience a considerable degree of marginalization, many building occupants embrace the women and work to create a positive environment for the participants.

Diane, Juanita, and Agnes spoke to this:

Diane: I’ve gotten attached to so many people here. It’s more like family now. You look forward to coming to work.

I mean, you’re working your tail off and yet some of them, they just smile and they joke with you and laugh with you. And I’m not an easy one to get to know .. to laugh and joke with, believe me. And some of them have gotten really close to me and they make me feel like, you know, it’s a good place to be. You get your share of ugliness, but I like to think about the good people, the ones that are nice to me.

Juanita said:

Juanita: I love working here. Some of the people are mean, but a lot of them are really good to me. They don’t treat me like I am the one who comes to work for them. They treat me good and they help me out a lot when I need to know things like about how to get my kids into college.

Agnes said:

Agnes: State University has been good to me. I have met many angels here. God has blessed me to meet so many angels. It's not an easy job, but the Holy Spirit intercedes and blessings flow. I grew up here. I grew more into myself, thanks to God placing certain people in my path and their nurturing me into the person I am today.

I got a lot of issues with State University. They kinda' cocky and arrogant and a little high-minded. I think they need to come down a notch. They need to be a little more humble in my opinion.

But, like I said, it's a good place to work. I choose to focus on the positive and the good aspects. I don't dwell on the negative. I'm bringing all this stuff up because you are asking me about it. I don't dwell on negative, "stinkin' thinkin'." You know, today's thoughts are tomorrow's actions. If I sat around and thought about all the bad things, I would just be down in the dumps and I am too blessed to dwell in negativity. State University has been good to me.

Many occupants also know the women by name, have nominated them for awards, invited them to office potlucks, and included them in departmental newsletters. For example, when Diane won the "Custodian of the Year" award, it was featured in the Department of [English's] monthly newsletter. And when Cleo was away for a lengthy period while recovering from a surgical procedure, the Department of [Student Activities] printed a "Get Well Soon" note in their newsletter to acknowledge her absence. Cleo and Agnes have also won division and university-level awards. The women find it rewarding to be recognized for their contributions; it fosters a sense of pride and helps them to feel as though they genuinely matter.

The women also spoke with pride as they referred to their cleaning areas as "my floor" occupied by "my people." They derive satisfaction from maintaining high levels of cleaning in their assigned areas and keeping the area occupants happy.

With the exception of Clara, all of the women appeared satisfied working at State University overall. They, like Agnes, recalled unpleasant aspects of the job because several of my questions probed for challenges. The women accept the displeasing aspects of the job and choose to focus their attention on the positive features of the work environment as a strategy of self-preservation.

Constructing the Lives of Occupants and Piecing Information Together

To better understand and negotiate their work environments, the women developed acute skills of gathering, assessing, and employing information. They spoke primarily of gathering information that would help them to better understand and accommodate the occupants, and that would enlighten them as to university-level decisions and events.

Cleo, Clara, and Diane shared stories about how they construct the lives of occupants and use this information to inform their approaches to work:

Cleo: I pays attention to how people like they offices. You know, do they keep it neat and clean, and where certain things is on their desks and stuff. You can kinda' tell if they be real neat, and I try to keep they offices real clean if I can tell they like that.

Clara examined occupants' trash and constructed the following stories:

Clara: This one lady, this one lady, on my floor, she .. she got a grandbaby that's mixed, you know, half Black and half White, and .. uh, at first, she had this picture of her grandbaby up. The little boy that's mixed. She had his picture up for a while and then one day, I found it crumpled up in the trash. She had thrown it away. She is prejudiced. Then in the same frame she took that picture out of, she put up a picture of her all-White grandbaby and she never put up another picture of that mixed baby. Sure did. These people out here prejudiced. And then they try to smile at you and carry on.

Clara used this information to protect herself from potential harm. If the trash whiffed of racism, it must follow that the occupant is racist, too, she believed. In yet another instance she said:

Clara: This one lady, she was my friend, and she had told me she was divorcing her husband. She said she didn't love him anymore, she wanted the divorce but she sho' was sad. She started losing a lot of weight. Like she used to eat at [a local fast food restaurant] every morning because I would see the bags in her trash but when she was going through that divorce, she didn't eat at [the restaurant]. There wasn't no bags from there in her trash no more and she was losing a lot of weight. She got real skinny. I felt so bad for her so I would try to be happy when I went in her office to get her trash, try to cheer her up when I would see her.

She used information the occupant shared as well as that she gleaned from the change in the occupant's waste disposal to determine how she could lift the spirits of a her friend who was going through a rough time. Diane also talked about how knowing the occupants' dispositions helped her negotiate her duties:

Diane: You get to know your people. You know, what they like and don't like, you know, because you have to clean up after 'em. You just get to know them and their personalities. You know which ones are friendly and which ones would just rather not be bothered. The one's that act funny, you try to go in and get their trash before they get here in the morning or when you know they're teaching or in a meeting or something.

In addition, since the women report that they do not receive important information, they use fragments of information they come across to construct a broader understanding of university happenings. In an attempt to understand and rationalize the "Reduction in Force" Martha said:

Martha: I heard they're letting a lot of people go. They say they ain't got no money, so they just picked some people and let 'em go. I guess they think they don't need those. If they do that to them, you know, those people, what's next? What are they gonna do to us? I think they're starting on that end of campus and then they'll make their way across. I picked up the [student newspaper] and it said he was doing this and cutting that, so I put two and two together.

To understand why all Custodial Worker I's were converted to Custodial Worker II's,

Juanita said:

Juanita: I just came to work one day and they said to me "Here, this is your new uniform top," it said "Custodial Worker II" on it, so I just put it on. They changed the papers and everything, you know, all of my papers said Custodial Worker II and I don't know why they did this. I asked around and nobody else knew. Somebody said the president made the decision. The president said to change us all over, so we just went with that, and we said he must have his reasons. But nothing else changed. My pay stayed the same and I stayed in my same crew.

When Agnes' supervisors decided to relocate her, missing cleaning supplies served as her notice:

Agnes: I came to work one day and all of my supplies had been moved. I had no idea what was going on. I asked around and found out I was being moved. My self-esteem was so low, I thought they were throwing out the garbage, you know, getting rid of people they didn't want and throwing us in this other area. Little did I know, it was because God helped somebody see my potential and it was a better situation.

The accumulation of trash was also often an indication of change. Once trash began to mount, the women knew transformation was afoot:

Cleo: How I know when they be movin'? I be seein' a lot of trash pile up outside their door and thangs. Great, big piles of stuff they be throwin' away. When they go to throwin' thangs away, that's when I know something be happening. Then I start askin' around to see what's going on.

Martha: I know they're gonna start shufflin' people around when they start packing and when they come to me and ask me to save boxes for 'em and stuff. You know, like, they know some people throw away boxes and if we come across 'em, they want us to keep 'em for 'em so they can pack. But most of the time you just see them start throwing old things away and then you can pretty much figure out what's going on.

Clara: When people move out of their offices they pile up a lot of heavy books and left over papers and stuff. They really should tell us when people [are] gonna be moving so we can get more people to help us with their trash. They don't tell us. We just get here to our shift and it be a lot of

papers and stuff for us to haul away. They should tell us when people be moving. You know they know.

In the absence of clear, direct communication, the women relied upon keen observational skills and they gathered “hot” knowledge (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003) – that is knowledge acquired through the grapevine, to help them understand and navigate their work environments.

Elevating Their Status While Putting Occupants Down

Consistent with the findings of Cohen (1991), Hood (1988), and Kidder (2006), the women in my study, deprecated for their occupation, also elevated their own importance while putting others down as a status management strategy. As “dirty workers, [they overcame] the physical, social, and moral taint of their occupations by reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing the stigma of outsiders . . . [They also] neutralized negative messages [by] condemning the condemners” (Kidder, 2006, p. 32).

When Martha talked about being made to feel less important than faculty, she said:

Martha: We’re just as good as the faculty. Why are they more important? They’re not. They’re just people. They may have more education and stuff than we do, but that’s all. Some people, you know, they’ve got education but they’re dumber than stumps. Some of them are.

Cleo, feeling underpaid and underappreciated compared to faculty and higher-ranked staff, talked about how she perceived their jobs as “leisurely” and she appeared to suggest that their work was not “real” work:

Cleo: The people in the offices, they nice enough, but sometimes look like they don’t really do no work. Just sit at they desk and type on they computer and they get paid big money for that. I don’t understand that.

In Cleo's line of work, and from her perspective, hard work is evidenced by tangible results, such as a dirty space that has been transformed into a clean one, and bodies that had accumulated sweat and dirt by the end of the day – both of which were not apparent in her conception of the occupant's "labor."

Cleo also judged "dirty" occupants. She joked about a woman who generated large amounts of trash for her to clean. In this particular case, Cleo interpreted the occupant's never-ending trash as an act of aggression:

Cleo: For the most part, I got good people in my buildin'. But this one lady, she messy. Just messy. She eats .. eats .. she likes junk food, and she .. she eats and she have crumbs all over her desk, all on the floor, all over her computer, everywhere. And I have to go get this little brush to clean her keyboard 'cause she get crumbs all off down in there. And I mean, you know, I like her but she's very messy . . . And she just built a house last year .. no .. year before last or somethin' like that. A brick house. I can just imagine. I say "Oh, Lord, I wonder do she keep her house like she do this office?" Because she bad, man. I say one time I'm just gon' drive 'round her house and see if it be as messy as she keep it up here <laughter>. I'm surprised she ain't got rats up under her desk.

Me and the person who work on her computer, his name [Chris], me and him laugh at her because he say he have to shake all them crumbs outta' her keyboard sometimes, too, just so he can work on her computer. We laugh and carry on about how messy she is <laughter>.

She know she ain't gotta do us like that.

The other participants othered people who generated large quantities of trash as well by calling them "dirty," "nasty," "messy," "disgusting," and "trifling," people (behind their backs and only among co-workers, of course).

Diane directed her ridicule toward a "power-hungry" supervisor when she said:

Diane: Well, it's kind of funny. It's funny if it's not you involved. You just sit back and listen. Sometimes it's the language they use to try to tell you things; it's a lot of little things. And they'll try to tell you how to use a chemical and you know it's wrong. Sometimes they don't get the measurements right because they can't add.

And you look over at your other co-workers and say “Mmm, did you hear that?” And we kind of laugh at her, but not where she can see us.

A final example of the participants putting others down was shared by Agnes. When a longtime occupant was recently promoted and began acting in a manner Agnes found demeaning, she attempted to regulate his self-importance:

Agnes: But this one time I had an issue with a staff member in my building. I have been cleaning for him for I don’t know how many years. And he got a little promotion and started acting all different, like he was better or something. He always called me by name and then I overheard him tell somebody: “Ask the *custodians* to clean that mess up for you!” I’m like “Since when am I just a *custodian*? What changed? You was calling me Agnes last month, and now I’m ‘*the custodian*?’” And he was just acting puffed up.

And I had to find a way to tell him, “Don’t go up there <laughter>!

Now, I’ve been making you and your area look good all these years, don’t start trippin’” <laughter>.

I told ‘em, “Come on back” <laughter>!

Act like he had lost his mind and forgot who brung ‘em! Getting’ too high on himself.

The women also criticized the university for its perceived patterns of extravagant spending, consumption, and waste. Clara threw her head back in laughter when she talked about a new building that leaked: “Spent millions of dollars on that building and won’t give us no raise, and it leaks, too <laughter>!” Martha commented about the money invested in new facilities: “This building is going up and that building is going up! Where do they get the money for that? They keep saying they ain’t got no money to pay us more, do they think we’re stupid and can’t see with our own eyes where the money’s going? They’re the ones ain’t thinking straight. What do we need all of this stuff for?” And Cleo talked about the significant amount of food that is wasted after

events and called the students “spoiled lil’ brats” who “go off and just leave coats, backpacks, ipods,” etc. laying around because “they know they can just go get another one.” She also said, “They [the university] waste so much food ‘round here, till it ain’t even funny. It’s a shame, is what it is. Don’t make no sense [that] they throw so much food away after their events. It be so much food in the trash!”

At the same time they criticized those who made them feel inferior, they elevated their own status by referring to themselves as “cleaning professionals,” and “cleaning experts,” and several of them referred to the closets, which doubled as both a supply storage unit and a break area, as their “offices,” a finding identical to one found in Hood’s 1988 study. When I asked Agnes what she was expert of she said:

Agnes: Cleaning! Everybody think they can clean. They think you just dust this and mop that. It’s a lot more to it than meets the eye. We have to have classes to learn how to use some of these products, chemicals, and machines. I’d like to see some of these people try to go clean some of the things we have to clean. It ain’t as easy as it looks <laughter> believe me.

Cultivating Allies and Extracting Gifts

The participants also noted that the rapport they established with the building occupants helped to make the workplace enjoyable. They engage in what Taylor et al called “befriending,” that is, the creation and maintenance of social networks that may aid in one’s endurance. The allies they secure are often staff and faculty who occupy higher status jobs, and are in a position to use their privilege and authority to the participant’s benefit. After “feeling out” the occupants, they come to know which individuals are approachable and they actively work to establish connections with them. Cleo shared a story about how she established ties so close, she was able to joke with individuals on “her floor”:

Cleo: Yeah, I got some nice people on my floor and we joke and carry on. One time, it was April Fool's and I fooled a lot of people in my building on April Fool's day, even the student workers. They had got to know me real good, too. I walked in to clean this one lady office and I just say, "Oh, look at that lizard going up that wall there." She said, "Where, where?" And then I said, "April Fool's." She said, "Aw you got me." Then I was workin' in another man office and I say, I say, "You got a big old black spider going up that wall there!" And he was like "Where, where, where?" I said, "April Fool's." He say, "Cleo, you so crazy." I had fun that day. And then I got the little student worker that day, too. I say, "You got something crawling in your hair." And she jumped all around and said, "Wherebout? Wherebout?" I said, "April Fool's" <laughter>.

But then they got me! This man who worked on my floor come and got me. He say, "Cleo, Cleo, you gotta come over here, the water is overflowing, hurry up and get your supplies and come quick!" And I run to the closet and get all my supplies and run to where he say the water is and all the people I had got, all the people I had played April Fool's on, they was all standing around and they say, real loud "April Fool's! We got you back." And they did, too. They got me back good. We just laughed.

And when they tried to move me, the ones who I would joke with and had it in good with, they would write letters so they wouldn't move me.

In fact, all of the women talked about how their allies would write letters to the administrators when they attempted to move them. Their allies also helped them to understand and negotiate complex processes, such as college admission and financial aid processes for their children; they helped them to decipher legal jargon in non work-related paperwork they had received; allies provided advice on financial matters; they searched the internet to find information the women needed upon their request; they made copies of forms when necessary; and most importantly, they spoke out on their behalf if any of them happened to be falsely accused of some infraction.

Allies are also those occupants who participate in gift-giving. As I discussed at length in the *Classism* section, the women intentionally extract gifts from building occupants as a leveling strategy. This, again, is consistent with Cohen's (1991) and

Hood's (1988) findings. Allies are those individuals, who initiated gift-giving when celebratory occasions arose by requesting financial contributions of all area occupants. They are first to offer money when the women share financial hardship of any kind, and it was an ally who sparked the idea for the Living Wage Initiative because she became aware of the serious financial hardship of one full-time custodial employee.

The women know how crucial a higher-ranked ally can be in times of trouble and the important role they play in making the day-to-day work environment as pleasant as possible. Therefore, they seek, cultivate, and protect these relationships.

Engaging in Passive Resistance

The women also engaged in passive resistance to level off unbalanced situations. This finding coincides with those of Aguiar (2001), Cohen (1991), Ehrenreich (2001), Gill (1990), and Rollins (1985). They bend the rules by reorganizing work tasks according to their own preferences, they "cut corners" since they are so overworked, perform only minimal cleaning in offices that belong to people who treat them with disrespect (while doing "a little extra" for those who are kind), and because they have become accustomed to receiving "mean looks" or being ignored, they avoid eye contact to spare themselves this disregard.

One tactic the women employed that was a powerful, though temporary, equalizer is that of allowing students, visitors, and others who are unfamiliar with their buildings to remain lost.

Rebuff my offer to assist in finding a location?

Fail to ask me for directions because they think I'm not smart?

Then "let them be lost!"

When the participants' kind, customer-centered gestures are rudely rejected, the psychological counterassault they launch—knowing the offenders will remain lost—brings the relationships a little closer to symmetry: “You took something from me (my dignity) so I held on to valuable information (a direct route to the location you seek).

Trusting God

Faith in God served as a foundation for all of the women. They viewed God as a compassionate friend, healer, liberator, provider, redeemer, and an omnipresent force in their lives. During trying times on the job the women turned to God:

Cleo: I can't let this stuff get to me. The Lord will take care of things. I love praising the Lord. He'll make everything alright. God wake me up every morning and start me on my way. And He bless me to put food on my table. And He just a good God. Without God, you can't do nothing.

Agnes: Man, He's done so much in my life. He's taught me about having hope and not being in despair. And even when I am feeling hopeless about something and feeling like there is nothing I can do, I realize there is something I can do. I can pray. And when you pray, the situation may stay the same but you have hope, you have courage to go ahead and walk through it even though it's a hard place that you're facin'. Prayer has gotten me through many days on this job. I credit God for my being here, for my growth on the job and for giving me the strength to get through the rough times. He works in mysterious ways, but sometimes through practical ways, too, like through good people.

Clara: I can't be always worried about what's goin' on 'round here. I got too much other things to be worried about. Too much. I just pray that God take care of me. God done blessed me with meeting some good people out here, people who help me out, you know. That's God.

And this [condition] I got from workin' out here, I'm trustin' God to heal me from it. I don't wanna go up under that knife too many more times. I'm just hopin' God'll heal me. I just pray.

Diane: He wakes us up every morning. All you've got to do is talk to Him and He's gonna make it better. He's made my life better. He's answered a lot of my prayers. If you pray and talk to God, He's gonna make it better. Sometimes it takes Him a little while, 'cuz that's a lot of folks, you know. But it gets better. Everybody's got to believe. Just pray and believe. He has always answered my prayers. Sometimes maybe He

fixed it in a different way than what I prayed for, but He fixed it better. In the long run He fixed it better. He fixed some situations out here [on this job] better. Everybody's got to believe. Just pray and believe. God will make it better.

They all referred to God as a man. When I probed further, they described God, more specifically, as a White man with a long beard. Agnes is the only participant who extended this representation by saying God also looks like many other peoples and He looks like "love."

One of the participants works in a crew that begins its day in prayer:

Participant: In our crew area we read "Starting Your Day Right" by Joyce Myers. After we get our assignments for the day, somebody reads from the book. And we all bow our heads, close ourselves off, and get quiet when somebody is about to read the Word. And people say "Amen," and "I know that's right," and "This is a blessing to me. I needed to hear this message today." And it's helps people get through their day when they start it off in prayer.

The women drew upon their spiritual resources as a survival strategy. Since "women's spirituality is about connectedness" (Borysenko, 1999, p. 9), knowing that God, the most powerful ally that exists, according to their beliefs, is on their side, offers comfort and strength and facilitates optimism (hooks, 2000b; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Wortham & Wortham, 2007). The other participants are in agreement with Agnes that "Reaching out to God through prayer is the way out. You can't trust man, period!"

Focusing on the Ends

The final coping strategy I will present draws attention to the fact that the women preferred to focus on how their work enhanced the quality of their lives rather than the means by which they earned their livelihoods. When I asked questions to gauge their attitudes toward cleaning, they talked about what the job has allowed them to accomplish or obtain rather than concentrating on the unpleasant aspects of cleaning for a living:

Petitt: How do you feel about cleaning?

Cleo: Oh, I like it. I like it because I do the same thing everyday, pretty much, plus it put food on my table. It's a good job.

Diane: How do I feel about it? I mean, it's got to be done. I mean, I don't mind doing it. I mean, we have some pretty horrendous things that we have to clean up, but we do it. Pays the bills.

Martha: Well I need some more education to do the other things <laughter>, but I don't have that. So, it's still a pretty good job, and it is. I mean I get decent hours and I get paid. Get to do things and take care of things with my money.

Juanita: I think I was born to clean . . . I love cleaning [and] I'm good at it . . . With this job and my other housekeeping job, I can send my children to school and my children are doing great. They are happy and both in college.

Clara: Well, I'd rather be doing something else. But I been doin' this so many years [that] I'm used to it now. Pays my bills. Help take care of my family, [as] best I can.

Agnes: How do I feel about cleaning? Well, you know what? I've been cleaning for so long, I don't think of it negatively. I look at it like this:

I got [several] kids that have all graduated from high school. One has a degree and two of them are about to get theirs. That's cleaning.

I bought my first car from [*Superior Pontiac*]. It was a [standard gear transmission automobile] because Virginia showed me how to drive a stick. And since then, I've bought several other cars. That's cleaning.

Me and my husband are paying on a house. That's cleaning.

I came here as a wageworker, and look at me now. I'm a supervisor. When I first come out here, my self-esteem was in the gutter and God blessed me to meet some good people here. I never thought I could be a supervisor. Never crossed my mind. Got my GED while I've been working here. That's cleaning.

People don't think much of what we do for a living but I'll take cleaning out here any day. So that's cleaning to me.

Though others view their occupations less nobly, the women regard cleaning for a living more highly because of what the work enables. In other words, the ends justify the means.

Rehearsal of Liberation

As we brought closure to our interviews, having heard numerous work-related concerns, I asked the women to imagine I was the State University president and to talk to me about what would be necessary to improve the quality of their work environment. I began Martha's introduction with a detailed account of how she responded to this question. She erupted into uncontrollable laughter at first. Once she was able to move beyond her laughter, an interesting discourse emerged. She spoke in past tense as if she had already rehearsed this hypothetical conversation with the president in her mind:

Martha: . . . I'm going to tell him, *I said* [emphasis added], "Read your *Building the Future* document that you wrote out. Read it. Go back over it.

Use it like the amendments and stuff that go to the Constitution." *I said* [emphasis added], "That values people. It tells them that they're important. It gives them rights and, like, kind of puts them into being. Use that . . . Use it for everybody, not just for a few."

The way Martha couched her response provided the inspiration for this section title. My question allowed the women to share their truths while speaking directly to the university's highest authority figure and to rehearse what they might say if they were at liberty to do so. With the exception of Agnes, who is accustomed to having access to higher-ranked university officials, the women responded with a mixture of incredulousness, laughter, shock, and reservation. They gave considerable pause and thought carefully about what they would say to the president as well as how their message would be delivered and received. Cleo, Juanita, Clara, and Diane displayed

nervousness I recognized in our first interviews; there was visible discomfort and palpable hesitation. As Diane prepared to talk to the president, she sat straighter in her chair and used her hand to smooth the front of her shirt. Martha and Agnes, on the other hand, projected attitudes of righteous indignation.

If given the opportunity to speak directly to the president: Martha would ask him to deliver on the promises made in his *Building the Future* document, to be valued rightly and treated equal to higher-ranked faculty and staff, and to be better compensated; Clara would point to the sacrifices she has made with her body in service to the institution as justification for better pay. She is “not looking for no handout,” she said. She merely wants what she deserves; Diane would ask for more staff or more money – “either put some more people back in the building or pay me more for having to do more work,” she would say; Cleo would ask for better pay, better equipment, more vacation days, more recognition for her hard work, and that every building with multiple floors be equipped with elevators; Juanita would ask for better pay, and interestingly, she would like to know more about him. The only thing she knows about him is that he is president and what he looks like from pictures she had seen. “Does he have a family?” she wanted to know. “Is he a good guy?” “Do people like to work for him?” “Does he laugh and joke?” She merely wanted to know the president better; Agnes, would like to see more men working in the custodial ranks—they need to be around to do some of the heavy lifting, she wanted to be treated and paid as well as her counterparts at their comparator institutions. She, too, wanted the president to recognize the sacrifices the custodians make with their bodies through better compensation and she would request that their compensation keep

up with the rate of inflation. Finally, she would invite him to “walk a mile in [her] shoes for just one day” so that he could see, first-hand how challenging her job is.

Of equal interest is how the participants anticipated the president might respond to their requests and the strategies he would employ to avoid acting on their behalf:

Cleo: He would say, “Why do you think you deserve more days off? Why should I pay y’all more? Well, let me think about it for a little while and I’ll get back to you.”

He would tell me that just to shut me up <laughter> [and] keep me thinkin’.

And then he’ll take a long time getting’ back to me.

And then he’ll probably make up an excuse to not do it.

I wouldn’t get what I asked for.

He just don’t care.

Martha: <Laughter>. He probably wouldn’t even be listening . . . I’m not that big of a deal . . . He’d sit there and pretend to listen.

Juanita: Maybe he’s a good guy, but I think he don’t cares about custodians.

I think he would say “Let me think about it” <laughter>.

And he wouldn’t come back to me. He wouldn’t think about it anymore because he wouldn’t see me again. He only cares about the teachers and the students, really. Nah, I don’t think he cares too much about the students either, just the teachers.

The only thing he wants is building more buildings and bringing more professors.

I don’t think he would listen to me or give me more money. He has too many other things to do. He doesn’t know nothing about custodians. But it’s okay. I’m still happy.

Agnes: I would hope that the things I was able to share would touch his heart and he would do the right thing. I just don’t think he really understands

how hard we work. He just needs to make himself available so we can speak some things into his hearing. But I think he has higher priorities right now.

Clara: I hope he don't say "You fired. Find you another job" <laughter>.

And if he decide to contract us out instead of pay us more money, that would show what kind of person he is. That ain't helpin' nobody. They don't give them people [contract workers] no insurance.

I don't think he care. And to tell you the truth, I don't think I would ever get the chance to talk to him. He would keep rescheduling the meeting and I would never get to talk to him <laughter>.

Diane: He's probably going to tell me he can't afford to pay us more or get more people.

I don't think he would take much stock in what I would say. It'd be like talking to a brick wall. I really don't think he cares.

I just hope he doesn't fire me for saying all this stuff <laughter>.

None of the participants expected a positive outcome. They believe the president would: avoid visiting with them, feign interest if he were to find time to listen to their concerns, respond to their requests with his own requests for more information, reschedule meetings, draw out his response time, create excuses, and threaten to fire them for their outspokenness.

The participants did not arrive at these perceptions uncritically; they are informed by powerful institutional arrangements that are operationalized on a daily basis at State University. The inherent risks in their libratory speech outweigh anything they ever hope to gain from it. Unfortunately, the rehearsal of liberation may remain just that: a private exercise for a public opportunity – that never occurs.

The Role and Place of Women Custodial Workers as Articulated by State University Administrators

I spoke to nine State University administrators. As previously mentioned, the criteria for selection of administrator participants were that they: worked in decision-making capacities, served in roles that directly impacted custodial employees, represented different levels of authority within the organization in which the majority of the custodial participants work (the Division of Maintenance), represented different administrative areas of the university, and were willing to commit to one 60-90 minute interview. Areas of the university represented in the study included: facilities, finance, student affairs, diversity, and human resources. Administrator participants, comprised of women and men, have worked in their respective capacities from 1 to 30 years.

More specifically, participants were:

1. **Bottom Line Administrator:** This senior-level university administrator is so named because all of her/his decisions are weighed against bottom line dollar amounts and how revenues and expenses impact the institution.
2. **By-the-Book Administrator:** This mid-level administrator in the Division of Maintenance is so named for her/his unreserved inflexibility.
3. **Fresh Perspective Administrator:** This mid-level university administrator is so named because she/he is relatively new to the university and her/his judgment is not affected by “what was.”
4. **Socialist Administrator:** A senior-level administrator in the Division of Maintenance is a self-described socialist who believes that society and organizations should be run democratically to meet the needs of the public.

5. **Team Leader:** A mid-level administrator in the Department of Student Housing, so named because she/he values and treats the custodians whom she/he supervises as members of the team.
6. **The Advocate:** A senior-level university administrator, so named because she/he, better than any administrator participant, genuinely understands and serves as an advocate for those who are traditionally marginalized.
7. **The Commander:** A senior-level administrator in the Division of Maintenance who is so called because, being very close to the final authority, her/his opinion holds considerable sway.
8. **The Ruler:** A mid-level administrator in the Division of Maintenance, so called because she/he appears to be intoxicated by her/his authority.
9. **Understanding Administrator:** A senior-level administrator in the Division of Maintenance, so named for her/his capacity to recognize and address issues affecting the custodial staff.

As I analyzed the administrator transcripts, I directed particular attention to the ways in which their discourses, behaviors, policies, and norms serve to create, maintain, and reproduce the context within which oppression is able to emerge. I read for an overarching, “master narrative” (Lyotard, 1984) that would shed light on the truths the custodial participants shared.

The “Role” of Custodial Staff

The administrators agree that custodians play a critical role in enabling the mission of State University. They described them as “hardworking” (Socialist Administrator), “dedicated” (Understanding Administrator), and “essential staff” (The Advocate). The Advocate went on to say: “Were it not for custodians, we couldn’t do our jobs. Faculty could not teach in filthy classrooms. Students would not be able to learn in unclean environments. We rely heavily upon them to facilitate our work.” Not one administrator would disagree with this assertion regarding custodian’s role in the academy. They do, however, differ in how they articulate the “place” of custodial staff.

The “Place” of Custodial Staff

This discussion addresses how participants in central administration, the Department of Student Housing, and the Division of Maintenance view the “place” of custodial workers as evidenced in their financial decision-making, the value they place on the custodial staff, and in everyday relations of power at State University.

Financial Decision-making

Several administrators (Bottom Line Administrator, By-the-Book Administrator, Fresh Perspective Administrator, Socialist Administrator, The Commander, The Ruler, and Understanding Administrator) articulated what seemed to be the institution’s official response to calls for State University to “raise the floor” by elevating entry-level wages of its service workers. They all said something along the lines of: “If we continue to raise entry-level wages, it will price us out of the market and pretty soon, some efficiency expert will come along, conduct an analysis, and force us to ‘contract out’ because it would allow us to save money.” On the other hand, and seemingly unaware that they had

delivered multiple messages in our single conversation, they boasted that State University was the local area's market-setter, the figurative "elephant in the room." Other local employers compete with them; not the other way around. Therefore, State University is in a position to make wage and benefit decisions according to its own values and capabilities. The public narrative, which suggests that higher wages could "price custodians out of the market," appears to be a fear-laden strategy intended to contain and manage the economic hopes and expectations of low wage-earning employees. As I probed deeper into the institution's public budget, however, it revealed a counter narrative. That is, while these same administrators advanced this storyline about low-wage employees, their financial resources continued to accumulate. For example, between September 2007 and September 2008: Bottom Line Administrator received an additional \$20,000 in compensation; Fresh Perspective Administrator received an additional \$23,000 in compensation; and The Commander received an additional \$13,000 in compensation – from the same central funding source that distributes the custodial salaries. Might their positions be rooted in self-preservation? If more money from this central source is allocated to low wage-earners, less would be available to award these handsome merit increases. This strikes me as a way the administrators, consciously or unconsciously, act to preserve their power and privilege by placing their financial wellbeing above that of the custodial staff.

They know the custodians struggle financially:

The Commander: I know my custodians have one, sometimes two extra jobs. I wish I could pay them more but my hands are tied.

They work here and in many cases this is not the only job they have. You know, they'll go and work at [*SuperMart*] and clean [*SuperMart*] at night for four hours, okay, and

[*SuperMart*] is the person who really takes advantage of them because they may pay them \$6.00 an hour and no benefits or anything. They figure, they don't need benefits because they get benefits here. But [*SuperMart*] then extracts four to six hours from them and for the women, that's the money that they have to buy clothing and do something for their children or for themselves.

So, it's not a good life and a lot of them are on food stamps and other government programs, in addition to coming to work.

As I said, my hands are tied. We are a business. We get a budget and the expectation is that you don't exceed your budget, because if you do you're in trouble. So that's part of managing your resources.

And so you accept it for what it is.

In addition, Socialist Administrator pointed to "low wages" as a reason for high turnover:

Socialist Administrator: We have such a high attrition level in fields like custodial. As with all of our lower paid positions. They are always seeking other opportunities to make more money.

And By-the-Book Administrator discussed how she supports their efforts to earn additional income:

By-the-Book Administrator: A lot of times they'll come in and say, "You know, I need some overtime. I'm having money trouble, is there anything I can help out with?" These are the ones that really wanna work the football games or work for the parking department, you know, to direct traffic during football season. They just need to earn some extra money so they come looking for opportunities. And when we know about extra things, we pass that on to them.

A lot of times people call here wanting a housekeeper for their homes. We help out with that, too. We'll post a sign here in the office and sometimes they get picked up to do in-home cleaning, you know.

When a key leader within the organization, The Commander, asserts that "their hands are tied," this discourse "does not merely justify inequality; it arrests the

imagination in ways that make inequality appear natural and inevitable” (Schwalbe, 2008, p. 100). The staff who report directly to The Commander are not inspired to consider creative financial solutions on behalf of the custodial workers.

Bottom Line Administrator claims to make all of her/his financial decisions “without judgment.” What she/he really means, it seems, is “without regard for human beings”:

Bottom Line Administrator: I was hired to think about this place like it was a business to the extent that it made sense.

And to me, there is no judgment around financial sense. I am not making the decisions. I give you the bottom line and you decide. I tell the president “here is the financial impact of that decision. Here are some things that you can do to either make money or save money,” and then the president needs to make the decision in terms of policy.

It’s pretty easy for me.

My perspective is pretty narrow.

I can give you the bottom line and the financial impact of your decisions. And I try to keep my staff focused on that. We give financial advice.

I didn’t think we needed to increase wages for entry level custodians. The financial impact of that, weighed against the fact that we don’t have really high attrition didn’t make sense.

Even though I may look like a bad guy, I can give you the bottom line of the impact of that. I gave the president the data and told him I thought we were okay but he decided to increase the wages anyway. He wants to be “the employer of choice.” I’m fine with that. I did my job. I don’t have to deal with social issues.

I don’t get involved in the emotion of it all. Just get me the data, and I will show you the bottom line.

Bottom Line Administrator, a key advisor to the university president, depersonalizes her/his decisions. The custodians are nameless and faceless and regarded only in terms of the dollar amount the university expends or saves as a result of their employment. While the university president decided against Bottom Line Administrator's advice in this case, Bottom Line Administrator's *process* for making decisions, devoid of human interests, may "yield disparities in employee outcomes" (Balser, 2002, p. 137) in other areas and might have adversely impacted the custodians under the leadership of a different university president.

Clearly, the custodial staff's well-being is not high among the priorities of the administrators when it comes to financial decision-making.

The "Value" of Custodial Staff

Administrators in the Department of Student Housing and those in the Division of Maintenance differed in terms of the value they placed on custodial staff. Team Leader, the administrator who works in the Department of Student Housing, regards the custodians, as his pseudonym suggests, as members of the team. Custodians are involved in important decision-making processes; they have unfiltered access to members of the department's leadership; they receive adequate recognition; and they have ample opportunity to pursue professional development. The custodial participant who works in the Department of Student Housing confirmed that the administrators within her department do, in fact, strive to provide a "healthy work environment" where she feels "nurtured, supported, and heard."

In stark contrast, administrators in the Division of Maintenance assert that custodians are "at the bottom of the list." Administrators in the division believe their

organization as a whole is devalued by the university's central administration. Feeling treated as a "stepchild," they note that in times of financial crisis their budget receives cuts steeper than any other division. They also point to their insufficient funding as an explanation for why custodians are frequently moved from one building to another, and for their having to create a hierarchy of importance within their division.

The Commander: I mean, you put your money where your mouth is. It's what's important to you. That's what you make your number one priority. When things are important to you then that's where you put your money and your resources.

We get a chance to go up [to the central administration] and say "Here's what our needs are." Then those folks, the president, CFO, and the provost decides how much money we'll get and we have to live with that. I have to distribute it throughout the organization. That's my responsibility.

And I make those decisions based on our hierarchy of priority. For example, I could not in clear conscious reduce my maintenance technicians, because you have to home-grow those folks. It's hard to find an electrician or a plumber or an air condition and refrigeration specialist. In order for me to get those folks with trades I have to run an apprentice program for them, which I do, and hopefully if I get two electricians I'm going to keep one who will then become a permanent electrician.

In terms of the custodians, where it may take me two weeks to train a custodian, it takes me two years to train an electrician. So I have to make those kinds of decisions. And so, as I say, you know, I look at trades first. I want engineers and trades people and then landscapers and custodians.

I mean, custodians are at the bottom of the list.

It's not a big deal to go and hire custodians because it doesn't take a big skill set like it does in other areas.

Socialist Administrator, who reports directly to The Commander, spoke to this issue as well. But she/he said they prioritized according to the "integrity of the

buildings.” She also offered an explanation as to why the frequency of uprooting and relocating custodians has increased:

Socialist Administrator: They have added several new buildings that are on the E&G budget, but they haven’t increased our budget to be able to take those facilities on. And with the Faculty Reinvestment, with so much of the moving around, we’ve assumed buildings that used to be covered by other areas. Now we have to assume these buildings and absorb the costs. We didn’t get new money to hire custodians to clean this extra space we’re taking on, so we have to move them around. The building I’m in used to have three custodians, now we’re down to just one person who cleans the whole building. We had to move the other two in order to cover the new buildings coming on.

We’re doing the best we can to deal with our situation. This is the hand we’ve been dealt, so to speak. We would do things differently if we had better resources . . .

Let me just say, we have prioritized our work in terms of the long-term integrity of the buildings, and what is the last to be cut is traditional maintenance, making sure that people get in and fix broken things, do the preventive maintenance on the equipment, because that’s where the longest term damage and instability and lack of integrity of the building can come in, if you don’t do that maintenance.

Then after that comes Custodial. Their work is more superficial. Although eventually even that takes its toll, because if you don’t keep up the floors or the carpets then that built-in dirt deteriorates them.

But with our budget like it is, we’ve had to prioritize and so the custodians are sort of low man on the totem pole.

They’re the first to be cut.

The custodians certainly feel less valuable than every other entity in the division. Indeed, they know they are “low [wo]men on the totem pole.” They have few university-sponsored educational opportunities designed for their benefit, and they are not allowed release time to attend sessions that are available:

Fresh Perspective Administrator: I am aware that the Human Resources department has educational opportunities available for service workers but we have trouble, I am told, with supervisors letting their staff go to training.

Fresh Perspective Administrator's information was confirmed by By-the-Book

Administrator as well as The Ruler:

By-the-Book Administrator: When they go to training, we have to charge that against our training budget. We have a training budget. But with our budget the way it is, there's not much money there. So, there's not that much training they can attend.

The Ruler: We can't afford to let them go to training these days. We barely have enough people to clean the buildings! We're already skimmed down to nothing! We need those people in the buildings – cleaning!

Feelings of devaluation impact the custodian's morale, Understanding

Administrator explained:

Understanding Administrator: I think that they are feeling underappreciated right now. They are upset by the cleaning level decline, having, you know, to clean more space. And we don't have money to hire new people. That does not make them feel good because, I mean, they know the reason is because our budget has got some real challenges.

And so they see the university doing renovations and spending a lot of money on other things. You know what I am saying?

And yet they know that the custodial budget is tight, and we have not had uniforms in awhile . . . We are not issuing five sets of uniforms anymore to people. We are going to issue three just as a cost cutting method. I think they get frustrated sometimes.

And they complain about our having to buy cheaper products because of our budget. When I visited this one crew, one of the things they wanted to know was, "Why are we using such cheap trash bags? Some of them were very, very thin. "I'm having to use two or three to line trash cans. And that cannot be cost effective to do that." And so they are pointing out some of those areas, you know.

I wish we could make things better for them but it's the budget, you know.

At every turn, the culprit was the budget. They assumed no responsibility for the situation that has been created for the custodial employees, nor did they assume responsibility for improving their circumstances. They “wish” they could make improvements, but “their hands are tied,” they would have us believe. By pointing to the inadequacies of their fiscal allocations as the reason custodians are not more highly regarded, they attempt to legitimize future acts of resource inequality. However, just as central administration's priorities may be “read” in their resource allocations, so, too are the Division of Maintenance's. Money does not drive nor dictate value systems, people do.

Relations of Power

Finally, the administrators in the Division of Maintenance are well aware that custodians are subjected to racism, sexism, and many other indignities. They also know that what undergirds all of these issues is power. Yet they seem to collude with the systems that marginalize the custodians by creating policies and practices that hold them in their “place.” Here, The Commander talks about the informality of “lunch hours” and “breaks,” and shares that it is “up to the supervisor” as to whether or not custodians are provided with breaks:

The Commander: The lunch hour is up to the supervisor. They can have an hour lunch or sometimes the supervisor can shorten it to 30 minutes. And breaks, that's up to the supervisor as well. If they have time for breaks, they can give them. If they don't have time, they don't have to give breaks.

This formalized informality gives supervisors complete control over the custodian's bodies. Custodians are literally at their supervisor's mercy. Their bodies are also

controlled and “disciplined” through concerns and complaints of building occupants.

According to Socialist Administrator, custodians are also relocated if “employees in the buildings feel that a particular custodian isn’t doing a satisfactory job, or for whatever reason they are just not getting along well in that area.” The concern of a single building occupant can cause a custodian to be uprooted and relocated. To further demonstrate the priority placed on occupants’ needs and interests over the custodians, the custodial manual instructs custodians to give deference to the occupants:

Custodial Manual¹⁰: “Don’t make the staff angry” (p. 37).

“If someone complains about how you have cleaned an area, determine why the customer is not satisfied. Apologize, and then re-clean the area” (p. 42).

In these scenarios, the Division of Maintenance coordinates with others to control govern, and intimidate the custodians. The custodian’s subordination and “markers of relational positions are constructed and reconstructed” (Gregory, 2006, p. 348) through these formal and informal rules. Michael Schwalbe (2008) suggests that we may view this sort of inequality as “an *accomplishment*. It doesn’t just happen, like the wind or the rain; it happens because of how people think and act (p. 36) on a daily basis.

Division administrators are also aware that a culture of fear and insecurity exists within their organization:

Socialist Administrator: I know a lot of our custodians don’t feel comfortable sharing their concerns. When you’re at that level in an organization you don’t have the courage that a lot of us might have and you’re not very outspoken.

It’s been the reputation of the Division of Maintenance, which I believe is not justified, but it’s been the reputation that, you know, if you make waves that your job is in jeopardy and that you could be fired. A lot of those people feel that way.

Petitt: So, you think their feelings of fear are unwarranted? There are no environmental issues that contribute to that?

Socialist Administrator: No, I can't say that. I can't say that nobody has ever .. I can't say that the environment is such that they shouldn't feel that way, because you have pockets, you know, you have some supervisors and custodial leaders who would be very open and receptive but others who feel intimidated when their employees go around them and up the chain. In any large organization you are going to have that because of people at that level not having the confidence that people at our level might have.

If one supervisor retaliates against an employee, that word is gonna spread through the ranks, "Be careful."

Those of us at the top of the organization, our intention is that we want to be receptive to everybody's needs, but I can't say that down the chain, all the way down to the first level employees, that that philosophy has been spread sufficiently.

In addition, Understanding administrator said:

Understanding Administrator: They hear the frequent conversations about contracting out. And I know that concerns them. They get all worked up over it and, you know, who wouldn't? But we can't offer them any guarantees. Because right now the administration has decided not to do it. But administrations change.

There is, indeed, an overarching narrative in the Division of Maintenance that unequivocally places custodians "at the bottom of the list." The cumulative "inequality [the women experience] is created and reproduced by institutionalizing imbalanced flows of socially valued resources" (p. 26) such as money, respect, security, and a sense of wholeness.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, AND EPILOGUE

Anthropology that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore. And I mean it. Really mean it. Because my heart is broken.

- (Behar, 1996, p. 177)

The way forward is with a broken heart.

- (Walker, 2000, p. 195)

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this research project was to understand the ways classism, as it intersects with racism and sexism, affects how low wage-earning women negotiate their work world in the academy and the way the academy functions to create, maintain, and reproduce the context within which oppression is able to emerge. The study was conducted at a predominately white, research extensive state university located in the southwest. The participants included: six women who were employed as custodial workers at State University, nine State University administrators, and two individuals who were instrumental in mobilizing the Living Wage Initiative that challenged State University's compensation practices.

In chapter I, I offered a personal story that influenced my early understanding of the uses of anger and the importance of activism. I also provided a statement of the research problem, the purpose and significance of the study, relevant research questions that guided the study, my personal limitations and location, as well as the design of the dissertation, and an explanation of transcription conventions I employed throughout the dissertation. In Chapter II, I provided a comprehensive review of the literature which

offered a context for the research, and in Chapter III, I discussed the methodology of my research. Specifically, I explained the research design as well as methods of collecting and analyzing the data. I introduced the readers to the participants by presenting excerpts of each of their interviews that helped to illuminate phenomena under exploration to begin Chapter IV. Chapter IV also presented findings and interpretations for the study. In this final chapter, Chapter V, I provide a conclusion that summarizes the previous sections, discussion of the study's implications, and recommendations for future research efforts. I end with a postscript that picks up the thread of my opening story and weaves it into the overarching narrative of this dissertation.

My findings contribute to existing bodies of knowledge that discuss racial, gender, and economic inequality. My research also supports the findings of two studies, situated in higher education, which went beyond issues of wage inequality. These two studies are Jane Hood's (1988) study *From Night To Day: Timing and the Management of Custodial Work*, which discussed issues custodians faced when their work shifts were reorganized from night to day, and Flores and Deal's (2003) study that discussed "work-related pain in Mexican American custodial workers," in an article titled with the same name.

I open new lines of inquiry into the overlapping conditions of gender, racial, and economic marginality as it pertains custodial workers in the academy. I also reconceptualized the notion of "borrowed power" to name the impermanence of the authority which people of color hold in our racialized society.

Findings for Research Question One

What is the lived experience of women custodial workers employed at State University?

The custodial participants were grateful to be employed at State University. Among those seeking service-type positions, to “land a good job” at State University is enviable. The university offers “good benefits,” paid holidays, and a measure of stability—as long as the custodians comply with prescribed written and unwritten rules. They derived satisfaction knowing they performed their jobs with integrity and they valued relationships they were able to establish with building occupants.

Alternatively, they were targets of daily discrimination based on multiple marginalized social indicators such as class, race, and gender. They work within a deliberately hostile environment wherein they are deprofessionalized, devalued, and subjected to unimaginable indignity.

My study included six custodial participants, five of whom worked in the Division of Maintenance and one who worked in the Department of Student Housing. The data revealed a marked difference in the experiences of the women as a result of the organization in which they were employed. The participant who worked in The Department of Student Housing reported feeling nurtured and supported, whereas the women who work in the Division of Maintenance reported feeling disrespected, unworthy, and untrustworthy.

Findings for Research Question Two

What is the role of women custodial workers in furthering the mission of State University?

Custodians help to make the academy possible by cleaning, decontaminating, and protecting the space within which core university activities may take place. In addition to cleaning, their primary responsibility, the women were also expected to unstop toilets, restock supply items, maintain their work equipment, aid in energy conservation by turning off lights in unoccupied spaces, and they were expected to deliver lost items, which they frequently encountered, to the university's Lost and Found area.

The custodial participants performed voluntary roles as well. They helped occupants pack or unpack boxes when they moved; they washed dishes left in office sinks; and they provided directions for those who needed them. The women also aided in student retention by cooking for students, bringing cookies during final examination time; reporting concern about troubling student behavior; providing academic advice and motherly-type advice to students. They also provided parental advice to building occupants who were new mothers; they occasionally used their personal funds to purchase supplies for the buildings they cleaned; they made coffee and brought food to share with building occupants; they watered plants; and they kept their custodial carts supplied with items students may have needed.

The women's roles span well beyond the realm of cleaning university facilities. They enable and contribute to the life of the academy in essential ways that often escape recognition.

Findings for Research Question Three

How do class, ethnicity, and gender affect the experiences of women who are employed as custodial workers at State University?

The women were deeply impacted by systems of classism, racism, and sexism. Below, I summarize their experiences under these categories:

Classism

Cleo, Juanita, Agnes, Clara, and Diane all live paycheck-to-paycheck and are one crisis away from severe financial hardship. Martha is the only participant who sometimes has “a little extra left over at the end of the month” to put money away for a “rainy day” and to pay extra on her recurring bills. Cleo, Agnes, Clara, and Diane are married to men who are recently disabled, which means these women are the sole wage-earners.

Juanita’s husband, struggling with a severe health condition, had to quit one of the two jobs he held, so this placed a financial burden on their family as well. Martha’s husband works at State University in the custodial area as well and earns slightly more than she does due to his longer employment.

Though the university responded affirmatively to the 2005 call from the *Living Wage Coalition* to “raise the floor” by elevating the pay of entry-level service workers, Diane is the only participant who benefitted from this increase because all others were paid above \$7.77 as a result of their longer employment. Following the initial salary adjustment that coincided with the Living Wage Initiative, the university began addressing compression issues, and thus incrementally increased the pay of longer-serving custodians. This modest increase in pay impacted their financial ability to hire new employees and concurrently placed more work on the existing staff.

State University also continues to provide small financial increases year-to-year, which Diane characterized as a “dime here and a quarter there,” but Cleo, Juanita, Agnes, Clara, and Diane still reported that their wages were insufficient to meet their needs. Martha acknowledged that were it not for her husband’s income, she, too, would be financially strained.

In addition, the participants shared concerns about rising work-centered costs, such as regular increases in parking fees and unaffordable healthcare premiums. They talked about their earnings as if they received “negative pay.” That is, they believed they returned money to the institution and were denied access to the full amount of their earnings.

As a result of their low income, the women live in homes that are in disrepair which are located in unsafe neighborhoods and where, in Diane’s case, the water is not safe to drink. They have all had utilities turned off at some point, have been delinquent on bills and cannot afford to purchase nutrient-rich foods. Therefore, to make ends meet, they “robbed Peter to pay Paul,” to quote Diane. They borrowed money from friends and relatives, held multiple jobs, “played the lottery,” and pursued reduced monthly payments on recurring bills. Several of them have also been victims of predatory lending practices where they access loans and credit cards at unreasonably high interest rates that are accompanied by severe late fee penalties.

The women also contended with class-based markers of marginality such as the stigmatization that accompanies the wearing of uniforms, and being frequently accused of stealing. The uniforms render the women hyper-visible and since the uniforms are associated with an occupation that is devalued, its wearers are diminished at the same

time. The women felt “marked” with their class identification and endured associated negative behavior on a constant basis.

All of the women have been accused of stealing though none of them have ever stolen from State University. Since custodians have access to master keys and are viewed as untrustworthy, as most people who live in poverty are (hooks, 2000b; Weis, 2008), when items go missing, they are often the first suspects. Furthermore, if items are lost or abandoned, the women are “absolutely not to take anything home! That would be stealing,” according to By-the-Book Administrator. Yet, State University rules allow the university to appropriate lost or abandoned items and to profit from their resale. State University can take ownership of lost or abandoned property, but if a custodian does the same, she will likely face termination. The women endured so many daily encounters of marginalization and humiliation that they begin to monitor and regulate their own behavior and thus colluded with the system of classism that keeps them “in their place.”

Racism

The data revealed issues of whiteness and racism. The two White participants, Martha and Diane, benefitted from their White privilege on several fronts. For example, Diane was able to “close ranks” (Hurtado, 1996) with a White building occupant and therefore invalidate the authority of her Black supervisor. In another instance, whiteness worked in Agnes’ favor. When a group of Agnes’ Black employees were discrediting her in front of her White supervisor, it was Kim, Agnes’ only White employee, who spoke up on her behalf thereby “cancelling out” every negative thing the Black women had said.

Martha also experienced confusion and insecurity when her White privilege was undermined by classism. As a White woman, she had been taught to think of her life as

neutral, normative, and average (Sue & Sue, 2003) and she experienced dissonance when she was treated with indignity at work, because everywhere else she was treated “regular.”

Another way whiteness presented itself is that all of the custodial participants pointed to White fraternity men as the individuals responsible for the majority of pranks, and for the intentional placement of feces in areas other than the toilet. The literature suggests that these White, male, students may be counting on their “triple privilege” (Sacks & Lindholm, 2004) of being White, male, and economically advantaged, to keep the consequences for such behavior at bay.

The data also revealed systemic issues of racism at State University. The women of color dealt with racism on a daily basis. A review of recent university climate studies suggested that racism is one of the university’s most intractable issues; therefore, it comes as no surprise that custodial staff, comprised primarily of people of color, would bear the brunt of it. However, the racism was most brutal when it came to Black employees. Employers and employees alike, referred to State University as “The Plantation,” a descriptor that dates back to the late 1800’s, when the university first opened its doors; it refers to the inhumane and slave-like treatment of Black subordinates at the hands of White superiors. The most frequent graffiti found on the State University campus is the racial epithet, “Nigger.” And once again, the custodial participants indicated that White males were the most likely perpetrators, as the epithets appeared most frequently in men’s restrooms. In their combined 99 years of working at State University, the participants can only recall seeing this epithet twice in a women’s restroom.

State University administrators in the Division of Maintenance were not alarmed by this behavior because in their opinion, “It comes with the territory.” The dismissive characterization of this behavior as “part of the job” is but one way the institution supports racist behavior. They simply clean it up as fast as they can, never pursuing the root cause or resolution of the hate-filled behavior. Another way structural racism shows up is in the Department of Student Housing’s “Offensive Printed Material” policy. This policy, ironically intended to provide a hostile-free work environment for the custodial staff, inadvertently contributes to a prolonged, hidden racially hostile environment. The policy instructs students to temporarily cover up or remove offensive material on the days they know their residence hall bathroom will be cleaned. After the bathroom is cleaned, they may replace or unveil the offensive material. This behavior, Joe Feagin (2006) calls “backstage racism,” where “Whites have learned to reserve much overt expression of blatantly racist views and stereotypes for backstage arenas” (p. 197).

The women also attributed the majority of “mean looks” they receive to racism. The custodial participant who spoke both English and Spanish shared experiences with language discrimination and administrators in the Division of Maintenance shared that at one point, they had employees segregated by language, employing Spanish-speakers who worked at night so the language barrier would not impact the “general public.” This segregated workforce was an idea of State University’s own creation and presents itself as a key discovery of yet another way State University participates in the creation, maintenance and reproduction of racism.

The women of color also shared stories that revealed how they colluded with the system of racism by, at times, accepting their subordinate status and by extending horizontal racism among their own and other racially subordinated groups.

In this section, the data led me to the reconceptualization of the notion “borrowed power.” People of color, like Agnes, who hold supervisory positions do so at the pleasure of the “final authority” (Kayden, 1990). And as long as we live in a racialized and racist society, people of color can only hold “borrowed power,” because there is—and will always be—a final (White) authority.

Sexism

The custodial participants did not explicitly name sexism as an independent system of oppression operating against them in their work worlds. While they were aware that their co-workers were predominately women, that they, as women, were concentrated at the lowest levels of the organization, occupied the lowest income bracket, were first to feel the effects of major policy changes (Jaquette & Summerfield, 2006) and performed work considered “women’s work,” they did not talk about how these cumulative disadvantages are held together by the institution of sexism. Yet their experiences are profoundly shaped by institutionalized beliefs, practices, policies, and structures that systematically adversely affect women as a group. The participants appear to be entrenched in our hegemonic culture through their conscious or unconscious psychological and social agreements to accept their marginality, even though such collusive behaviors are self-immolating.

The administrators who participated in the study did notice and name the ways the women are impacted by sexism, however. They noted pay inequity between men and

women who work in service capacities; they acknowledged that the women were “low on the food chain”; that university-sponsored childcare was unaffordable; that the women were exposed to sexual harassment; and that they were invisible, powerless, and voiceless. Yet only one of the administrators, Team Leader, an employee in the Department of Student Housing, discussed how he effectively intervened on the women’s behalf to address inappropriate student behavior. Once again, the administrators observed harmful conditions, structures, and behaviors that produced undesirable outcomes for the women but they remained silent, for the most part. Their silence was a response—a response of indifference.

Taken together, these overlapping systems of classism, racism, and sexism combined to produce overwhelming injustice and inequality. The most forceful message the women received was that they were objects to be reacted to. Policies were created to keep them marginally positioned, people went out of their way to cast “mean looks” in their direction, hate-filled messages were written on surfaces to remind them that they were unwelcome, discourse of the academy reminded them that the pecking order is: faculty first, then students, period. Everybody else is there to enable and support teaching and learning. The collective weight presses upon their physical and mental being. The only participant who seemed righteously angry, however, was Clara. Cleo, Martha, Juanita, Agnes, and Diane’s initial anger evolved into uncomfortable acceptance. They all shared categorical distrust for State University, however, because from their vantage point, State University does not have their best interest in mind.

Findings for Research Question Four

What economic and other stressors do women custodial workers at State University face?

The women's economic stressors were discussed in the section above titled *Classism*. Here, I summarize additional stressors the women faced. These stressors were: the impact of the university president's reinvestment in the faculty; an increased workload; being made to feel like strangers at home; cleaning occupied areas; a culture of fear, control, and indifference in the Division of Maintenance; the realm of indignities they are subjected to on a daily basis; and the impact working as a custodian at State University has on their bodies and souls.

The Impact of Faculty Reinvestment

When the university president articulated a primary goal to elevate and "reinvest" in the faculty, funds were redirected to support this priority. There was a university-wide reduction in force (with almost all of the losses in the staff area) and an across-the-board staff hiring freeze. The salary savings amassed from these decisions was directed toward hiring more faculty and improving faculty conditions. The custodians who were in the Division of Maintenance felt the impact of these decisions in human and financial resources. Co-workers, who left for various reasons, could not be replaced, leaving the participants to "pick up the slack," and the division administrators reported receiving less funding from the central budget as a result of the focus on the faculty. The Department of Student Housing was not impacted in the same way because they are considered an auxiliary organization and therefore control their own budget. This is an important finding: when a university organization is state-funded, its purse strings are ultimately

controlled by the president and chief financial officer; the organization has to live with their financial allocations and decisions. However, when the organization is an auxiliary, as is the Department of Student Housing, it has better control of its budget and its internal decision-making. Both organizations, however, responded to the increased wages facilitated through the Living Wage Initiative by allowing their workforces to decline through attrition. Since they had to pay entry-level workers more and address compression issues of longer-serving employees at the same time, both organizations hired fewer custodians in an effort to ease the burden on their budgets. The Division of Maintenance even instituted a temporary internal hiring freeze.

Increased Workload

Since both organizations responded to constrained budgets by allowing their workforce to diminish through attrition, the participants experienced an increased workload. Women who worked in the Division of Maintenance were also forced to accommodate new buildings. “Understanding Administrator” estimated that the women within her “chain” now cleaned the equivalent of 18 large homes within a single 8-hour work day. Expanding student enrollment and occasional coworker absenteeism also added work to the women’s cleaning responsibilities.

With the addition of new space and having fewer people available to share the cleaning responsibilities, the cleaning level predictably declined, much to the women’s dismay. They were unhappy that they could no longer deliver high-quality cleaning so in response, some went to campus and began cleaning several hours before their scheduled shifts and “snuck back up to campus” after their work shifts to continue cleaning. Astoundingly, several women brought their husbands back to campus to help them clean.

It was the threat of being “written up” that caused the women to abandon this coping strategy.

Strangers at Home

Those who attend or are employed by State University are fond of using the phrase “The State University Family” to refer to its community members. The custodial participants vacillate between wanting to regard themselves as members of this “family” and noticing and naming the messages they receive that clearly tell them they are not part of the family. After being assigned to a particular area for a period of time, the women referred to their cleaning assignment as “my building,” “my floor,” and to the people who occupied that area as “my people.” Yet, they were frequently relocated with very little, if any, notice, causing them to expend energy to gain trust of those whose space they now occupied.

Martha felt both essential and invisible. If she had an opportunity to speak to the university president she would encourage him to use the university’s *Building the Future* document to “put [her] into being like the amendments of the constitution.” In addition, the women struggled to define their relationship to the institution and to other “family members,” as was apparent in their search for words to describe these associations. They spoke and then revised sentences in the following manner “I like that I get to work around, uh .. with .. um for a lot of bright people.” Additionally, each of the women used the term “out here” to refer to State University, a distancing term one might not use to describe a place in which they felt completely at home. Yet the women paradoxically, felt both out of place and “at home” at State University. They knew by their contemptible treatment that they did not “belong,” however, they all indicated a desire to

work at State University up to retirement and thus considered the university a figurative “home.”

Cleaning Occupied Areas

When Cleo and Agnes cleaned at night, they did so without the judgment and surveillance of daytime occupants. As the workforce was rearranged so custodians cleaned primarily during the day, they came into contact with higher-status occupants which introduced status discrepancies. These discrepancies were manifested in raced, gendered, and classed relations that subordinated custodians and contributed to a hostile work environment.

On a practical note, cleaning while space was occupied meant that the women’s work was never done. They spent their days cleaning and re-cleaning space under the watchful eyes of numerous “extra bosses.” The data also revealed that of the students, faculty, and staff who occupied spaces the custodians cleaned, staff treated the women harsher than any other group.

Fear, Control, and Indifference in the Division of Maintenance

While the custodial participants shared many experiences in common, the five participants who worked in the Division of Maintenance reported working in an organization where they felt like “cattle,” and “just a UIN” [a university-issued ID number]. The women did not feel considered as human beings who had individual needs. Rather, they were grouped and treated as one body to be controlled. Administrators in the division referred to the supervisory reporting line as the “chain of command”; they referred to the custodians they employed as “my custodians” and “my people”; they confirmed that they move custodians around to meet their business needs, irrespective of

other factors; they endorsed surprise inspections and distributed monthly custodial performance assessments which building occupants were expected to complete; admitted to having a rigorous process in place that custodians had to facilitate to be able to meet face-to-face with the head of the organization; and they treated custodians as if they were children in need of parenting through infantilizing written and verbal communications. Administrators and supervisors in the division also invented rules and regulations that did not exist in written form, and they constantly threatened the women with the possibility of their jobs being outsourced if they continued to pressure the administration to increase their wages.

The Realm of Indignities

The participants reported cleaning remnants of student pranks such as a mouse that had been microwaved to the point of explosion, food fights, toilet paper wars and shaving cream fights. The participant who worked in the Department of Student Housing also had to clean remnants of the infamous “[Banks Hall] Road Kill” incident, where students of the rivaling [Lewis Hall] had strewn dead animal carcasses all over [Banks Hall] as a joke. And while there are many repulsive things the custodians had to clean, the worst, they said, was displaced excreta. On average, they found excrement (“number two, boo boo, shit, whatever you wanna’ call it,” to use Clara’s words) in places other than the toilet on a weekly basis. They all believed White fraternity men were responsible for this behavior as well and provided explanations as to what led them to this conclusion. It is noteworthy that the women cleaned offensive or hazardous material long before other building occupants had the opportunity to see it. They protected others from behavior that would offend or otherwise obstruct the business of teaching and

learning. But as individuals who were first to encounter these disruptive forces on a reoccurring basis, the participants were physically and psychologically impacted.

Body and Soul

Under strict surveillance, the women performed hard, unforgiving labor everyday. As a result, they sustained multiple on-the-job injuries for which they have had multiple surgeries. Cleo, Martha, Agnes, Clara, and Diane all took prescribed medication for job-related or other conditions. Living in or on the edge of poverty, the women could not make healthcare their highest priority. Therefore, they suffered with conditions which the more financially privileged might have used money to alleviate. Their constant worry about money led to a condition which researcher Victor Ricciardi (2008) called “money sickness.”

The women reported that the daily indignities they endured were soul-wearying. As they were targets of discrimination based on their multiple marginalized social indicators such as class, race, and gender, they experienced daily insults and assaults upon their dignity to which they could not safely respond. Their perceived acceptance of such behavior contributed to the belief that their treatment was appropriate and justified.

Findings for Research Question Five

What survival strategies do women custodial workers at State University employ?

In addition to performing work that was devalued the women struggled against multiple oppressive forces simultaneously. To replace their feelings of devaluation and dehumanization, they focused on the positive aspects of working at State University; constructed the lives of occupants and pieced together information; elevated their status while “condemning their condemners”; cultivated allies and extracted gifts; engaged in

passive resistance; placed their trust in God; and focused on what their work allowed them to accomplish rather than the means by which they earned their livelihoods.

Their most prominent survival strategy was that of resistance. Their “resistance weakened the process of victimization, and generated personal and political empowerment through the act of naming violations and refusing to collaborate with oppressors” (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 728). According to Schwalbe (2008),

“nearly every subordinated group creates some kind of oppositional culture. Not only does this allow people to signify contempt for the dominant group and its judgments, it also gives them ways to achieve, among themselves, the status and respect that they can’t get from the dominant group. Oppositional cultures are thus an implicit protest against inequality, but they don’t do much to overcome it. In fact, they often help to reproduce it, because the opposition is largely symbolic.” (p. 256)

Indeed, the women’s acts of resistance frequently escaped notice of the administrators who participated in the study, and thus, were not effective vehicles to affect change. However imperceptible, though, resistance served the women well. It allowed them to navigate their work worlds with some measure of control.

Findings for Research Question Six

How do Administrators at State University articulate the role and “place” of women custodial workers employed at the university?

Conversations with State University administrators allowed for the triangulation of data shared by the custodial participants and also shed light on the context within which the women work, as well as how the university operates to keep custodians on the

margins of the academy. The administrators were in agreement that the custodians played an important role in enabling the mission of the academy; without them, teaching and learning (in a traditional university environment) would be impossible.

Administrators in the Division of Maintenance and in the Department of Student Housing did have divergent views on the “place” of custodians, however. Team Leader, the only participating administrator who works in the Department of Student Housing regarded custodians as members of the team, and this claim was corroborated by the participant who worked in the Department of Student Housing. The Division of Maintenance, however, regarded custodians as property and unequivocally placed them at the “bottom of the list.” Administrators in the division knew their employees worked in constant fear, they knew they struggled financially, they knew about their encounters with racism, sexism, and the many other indignities they suffered. Yet they did nothing to improve conditions or interrupt oppressive forces. Instead, they contributed to their marginalization through written and unwritten policies, procedures, rules, and behaviors that served to consciously or unconsciously, “preserve exploitive social arrangements” (Schwalbe, 2008, p. 181) which kept custodians in their place.

Summary of Findings for Research Questions One through Six

Many important findings emerged from this study. However, the most forceful, and overarching issues are these: The history of an institution matters. State University was established for White males during a time when racism and sexism flourished—unapologetically. Though the university has made strides toward inclusion, vestiges of its beginnings continue to impact the lives of the custodial workforce, comprised primarily of women of color. The culture of the academy also shapes the custodial

women's experiences. In an environment where honor is conferred upon "the educated," the participants, whose opportunities were limited due to their social locations, know they exist on the border of the academy. The women's marginality is reinforced daily, as they are in constant contact with higher-status individuals who perform the raced, classed, and gendered behaviors that are woven into the fabric of our society. Additionally, the custodial participants and the university administrators are locked in a relationship of mutual distrust. State University administrators do not trust the custodians and the custodians do not trust State University administrators. Furthermore, existing at both the literal and metaphorical "bottom" of the organization, custodians are first to feel the impact of major institutional shifts, such as increases in student and faculty bodies, and large-scale economic recovery initiatives. Finally, the data decidedly point to White male students as primary actors and architects of the hostile work environment within which the women work. Administrators who participated in my study were aware of these conditions, but remained silent on the issue of resolution. I interpret their silence as an answer: Indifference.

And yet, without the custodians, the mission of the academy could not be effectively pursued.

Implications

“America’s great research universities are the envy of the world” (Lewis, 2006, p. xi). But many of them, like State University, have failed to examine the ways in which they contribute to the production, maintenance and reproduction of systems of marginality and inequality. Through various intentional (if unconscious) policies, practices, rules, norms, behaviors, and structures that sometimes act in insidious, hidden, ways, the dominant groups’ interests continue to be pursued while interests, needs, and even the very presence of marginal members is ignored. In this way, systems of domination and subordination are institutionalized and validated in the academy.

I have attempted to capture this process in a *Conceptual Map of How Systems of Oppression Flourish and are Re/produced in the Academy* (FIGURE 2). The model is grounded in and is an extension of Bobbie Harro’s Cycle of Socialization (2000) (refer to p. 80 of this dissertation to revisit the model). Harro’s Cycle illustrates the process through which we are socialized to know, accept, and participate in systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism. I “pause” Harro’s model and focus our gaze on the “Institutional and Cultural Socialization” stage. The first phase of my conceptual model mirrors Harro’s “Institutional and Cultural Socialization” stage, where systems of racism, sexism, and classism are firmly rooted in our society, serving as the macrolevel foregrounding. Proceeding clockwise, faculty, administrators, staff, and students who enter the academy do so with biases and oppressive tendencies in place.

Systems of racial, gender, and class inequality combine with long-held traditions of the academy to produce, reproduce, and maintain oppression through hidden and observable policies, norms, rules, discourses, and structural segregation. These united forces create the context for the policing, distancing, devaluation, and intimidation of service workers who sometimes internalize these messages and collude with the oppressive systems that exist in society.

In phase two of my conceptual model, in the absence of behaviors that disrupt these forces, the system folds back on itself, and the targets of oppression become active participants in their own and others' oppression. They internalize negative messages, police themselves, contest disparity in hidden, symbolic ways, and extend horizontal violence. Their perceived acceptance of their circumstances appears to authorize and validate their continued marginality. Thus, the master narrative that legitimizes and fortifies these stubbornly durable relations of power is again returned to society and framed as "the way things are."

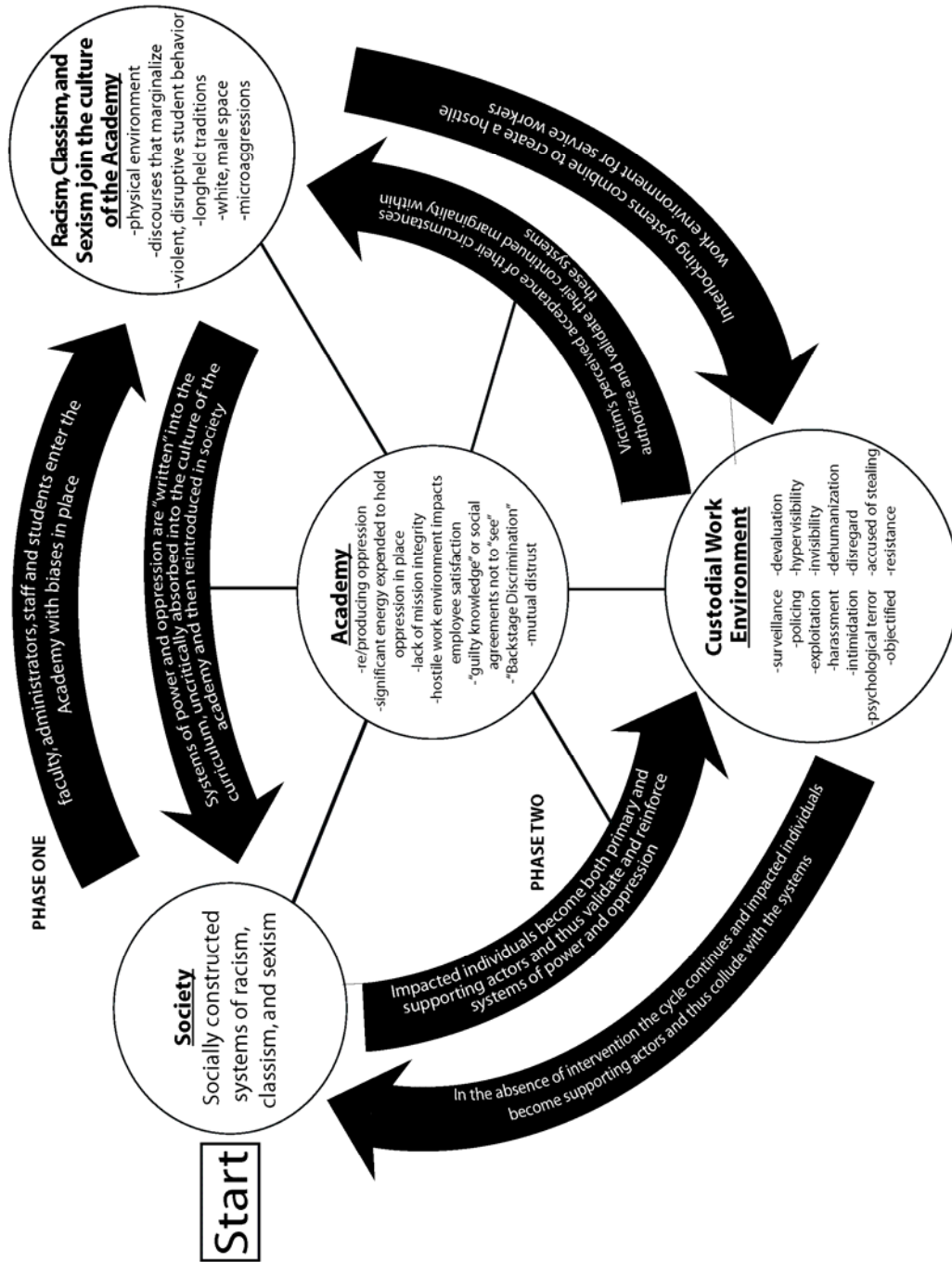


FIGURE 2. Conceptual Map of How Systems of Oppression Flourish and Are Re/produced in the Academy

The center of the model describes how the academy is impacted. Considerable energy is invested in oppression and in governing the behavior of service workers. These forces are matched with acts of resistance and mutual distrust on the part of service workers. Ultimately, this results in a hostile work environment for the custodians and renders the institution and its administrators out of integrity with the university's stated mission. Without intervention, the cycle will persist and the academy will remain a fertile ground within which oppressive systems flourish.

Conclusion

Just as higher education has played a large part in creating and maintaining social problems, those of us in higher education are optimally positioned to help society to unlearn and heal from centuries of oppression, and can begin in our own "backyard." Amidst such financial and intellectual wealth, creativity, restlessness, and vibrant energy, and with remarkable power to challenge and change the world, why have we not taken advantage of the possibilities within our reach?

The solution, I believe, is in the hands of women. "In the search for answers," Elizabeth Janeway (1980) writes,

women have some advantages. Freshness of vision is one. Things familiar and taken for granted in a man's world are seen from a new angle. Second, women's lives are full of lessons in flexibility . . . In everyday life women are prime experimenters and quick learners, pragmatically ready to accept or invent new ways to do things." (Janeway, 1980, p. 20)

Our approach to transforming the academy must be feminist at its core. It should be a multi-issue movement committed to extremely "long-term goals: the ending of

patriarchy; the achievement of economic, political, and social equality for all women; and the creation of a world free from sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ageism, ableism, violence, and environmental exploitation” (Smeal, 2003, p. 542). “For *ourselves* . . . women will have to organize as we have done before—and also as we have never done before” (Paley, 2003, p. 539). We must recognize and name oppression when we encounter it and we must devote time, attention, and resources toward dismantling forces that eclipse and arrest our brilliance. We must also cultivate men as allies. “The sight of women talking together has always made men uneasy” (Greer, 1971, p. 3), so let us invite men into our dialogues and ask that they use their privilege to clear the path for our collective progress. They know best how to disassemble structures built with their own tools.

Those of us who work in the academy must not give up on our imaginations or abandon hope that we can construct a world in which we can all live well and each experience our full humanity.

“If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us. (Morrison, 2007, ¶10)

Recommendations

As these problems are complex, linked, and nuanced, so too must be their solutions. Though several of these recommendations are cross-cutting, I frame them in a way that draws the attention of the most relevant audiences.

The Policy-making Audience

- Periodically subject policies to feminist critical policy analysis (Marshall, 1997).
With an eye toward the impact of policies on women, this analysis, conducted *for* women, would explore the politics involved in policy-making, and policies' congruence or incongruence with the purpose of the academy and the mission of the institution. Attention should be given to unwritten rules and practices as well.
- Implement better social and political integration of the custodial staff. Allow custodians to participate in the identification, definition, analysis, and solution of problems, particularly regarding issues that directly impact their work worlds.
- Establish an interdisciplinary policy research center that would have, as one of its major goals, analysis of the design, implementation, and consequences of State University policies. This panoramic review of policies and the policy-making culture might open up avenues for creative and practical approaches and solutions.
- State University should consider the feasibility of "sliding fee scales" for low wage-earning employees where work-related costs are concerned (parking fees and childcare are two examples).
- State University should consider offering tuition remission for its full-time employees who wish to pursue degrees or other forms of continuing education.

The Practitioner Audience

- Integration and Empowerment
 - Provide educational opportunities and pervasive messaging that seeks to transform and redirect the “master narratives” that hold inequality in place.
 - Implement a Staff Council that genuinely represents and engages voices from the margins. The Council should consider a sub-committee which specifically focuses on the needs of service workers. The Council should also ensure that mechanisms for disseminating essential information to custodial staff and other service workers are drastically improved.
 - Where feasible, integrate custodians into their respective work environments. For example, a custodian who cleans a particular residence hall might be invited to become a member of that particular hall council.
- Financial Considerations
 - Promote the “Earned Income Tax Credit” opportunity, which is a refundable federal income tax credit for low-income, working individuals that serves as a relatively effective redistributive tool.
 - Reinvigorate and stabilize the Living Wage Coalition.
 - Sponsor financial literacy seminars designed specifically for custodians.
 - Consider compensation adjustments that would help to offset rising work-centered costs, such as an increase in parking fees.

- Develop a comprehensive, university-distributed package detailing community support services which may help meet the needs of low wage-earning employees.
- Training, Development, and Support
 - Enhance diversity education for students, faculty, and staff. The focus should be on raising consciousness regarding issues of oppression. Education should focus, as well, on how all members of the “State University Family” should be embraced as full citizens by making custodians visible and highlighting their contributions to the academy.
 - Require mandatory training for custodial supervisors.
 - Reinstigate the General Educational Development (GED) program and the English as a Second Language (ESL) program offered by the Human Resources Department years ago.
 - Institute a Certificate Program, which would pursue learning outcomes that are comparable to advanced degrees.
 - Ensure that custodial job descriptions identify continuous learning objectives.
 - Implement a career ladder program that would assist custodial staff in finding successively better jobs within the institution. This would require collaboration between a number of departmental units.
 - Develop continuous learning opportunities for custodians, offered during the workday, and provide paid release time for their attendance.

- Though the custodians possess adroit survival skills, several designated individuals, professionally trained in “wellness,” should be made available to offer support and assistance to the custodians.
- Promote the regional professional custodial organization and pay the \$20 membership fee for those interested in membership.
- Department of Student Housing-specific
 - Design continuing education opportunities that meet the needs of custodial staff.
- Division of Maintenance-specific
 - Secure an outside consulting firm to conduct a “Quality of Life” assessment within the Division of Maintenance. Results should be shared within the organization as well as with others who may hold the unit accountable for improvement.
 - Revise the custodial employee manual so it conveys respect for the agency and intelligence adult employees possess.

- General
 - Direct attention, time, and money toward the prevention of the sub-culture of hate and maliciousness, specifically exploring the role of male behavior, whiteness and racism, and the behaviors people engage to get within the perimeters of power (i.e. “othering” in an effort to belong).
 - As State University has an uncommonly strong culture, the ideological, political, structural, systemic, and cultural changes should be anchored in its culture. Changes should seep into the bloodstream of the institution’s body such that new behaviors are rooted in social norms and shared values (Kotter, 1995).
 - Promote results of this study throughout State University as a means to advocate change.

The Qualitative Researcher Audience

- Explore the women’s mental and physical responses to prolonged exposure to hostile work conditions.
- Examine the “hidden (raced, classed, and gendered) curriculum” and its impact on student learning.
- Explore the role custodians’ immediate supervisors play in shaping their experiences.

Epilogue

*Taking My Mother's Place*¹¹

As I take leave of these pages, I end as I began—with a personal story about how deeply my mother influenced my life. The incident at my school was neither the first nor the last I saw of her activism. She frequently “threw her life up against the system and demanded that it fall so something different could take its place” (Reagon, 2001, p. 5). She insisted on renegotiating and rearranging systems so they would be large enough to serve our family well and rightly, with one of her most notable accomplishments being that of insisting that my brother, who is hearing-impaired, be “mainstreamed” into our local school system. Her picture appeared on the front page of our local newspaper, above the fold. There she stood posed with her head held high, a slight smile, and a mixed appearance of righteousness and “think twice before you mess with me!” look in her eyes. She was and still is my (s)hero.

Mama, I honor your life, your struggles, and your memory with this dissertation. Thank you for teaching me when and how to fight injustices. Thank you for helping me to find my courage and to learn to listen to my inner voice. Thank you for teaching me the importance of laughter and the strategies of resistance and resilience. Your spirit lives in me and is often the wind at my back, guiding me toward potential you saw in me that I could not see myself.

I knew the moment I began writing that this dissertation was not safe. But then again, “nothing is safe. That is not to say that anything ever was, or that anything worth achieving ever should be. Things of value very seldom are . . .” (Morrison, 1979, p. 659). I am also aware that “if we authentically commit ourselves to the struggles of our most

marginal citizens, we, too, will become increasingly marginalized . . . There is no career reward within the academy for political engagement of this intensity” (Watts, 1993, p. 247). Yet, this is where my work has taken me. Your fiery spirit is a legacy you left to me. I graciously, humbly, and courageously take your place.

NOTES

¹ The author of this quote is a State University employee whose name is withheld to protect her/his anonymity.

² The State University resource is intentionally omitted to preserve the institution's anonymity.

³ The State University resource is intentionally omitted to preserve the institution's anonymity.

⁴ The State University resource is intentionally omitted to preserve the institution's anonymity.

⁵ The State University resource is intentionally omitted to preserve the institution's anonymity.

⁶ The State University resource is intentionally omitted to preserve the institution's anonymity.

⁷ The State University resource is intentionally omitted to preserve the institution's anonymity.

⁸ I credit Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) for the section title. In her book, *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*, she writes about job dissatisfactions of nannies and housekeepers under a category with the same name.

⁹ The State University resource is intentionally omitted to preserve the institution's anonymity.

¹⁰ The State University resource is intentionally omitted to preserve the institution's anonymity.

¹¹ I credit Alice Walker for this section title. The notion of "taking her mother's place" was included in a lecture she delivered at a conference for African American women.

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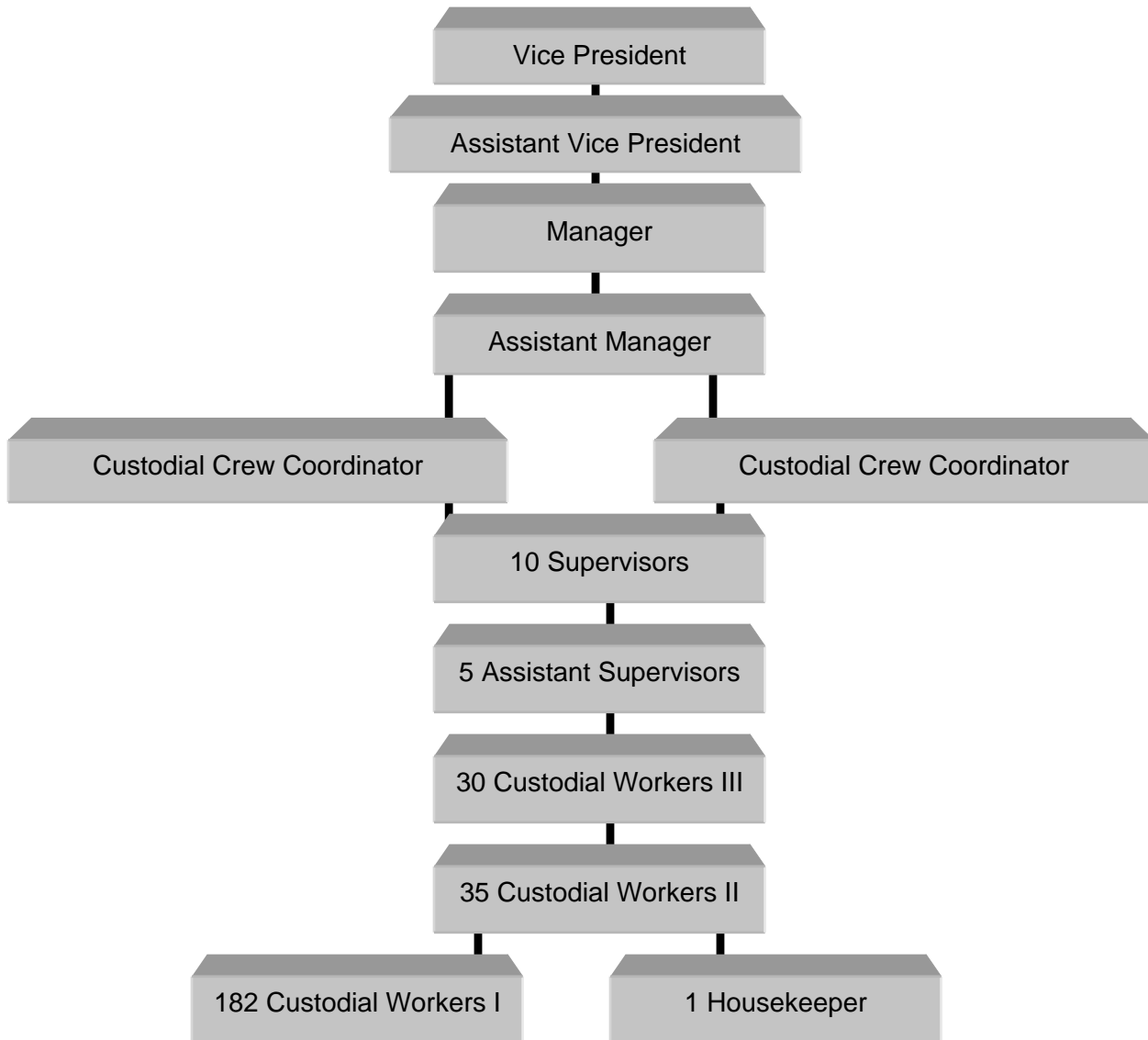
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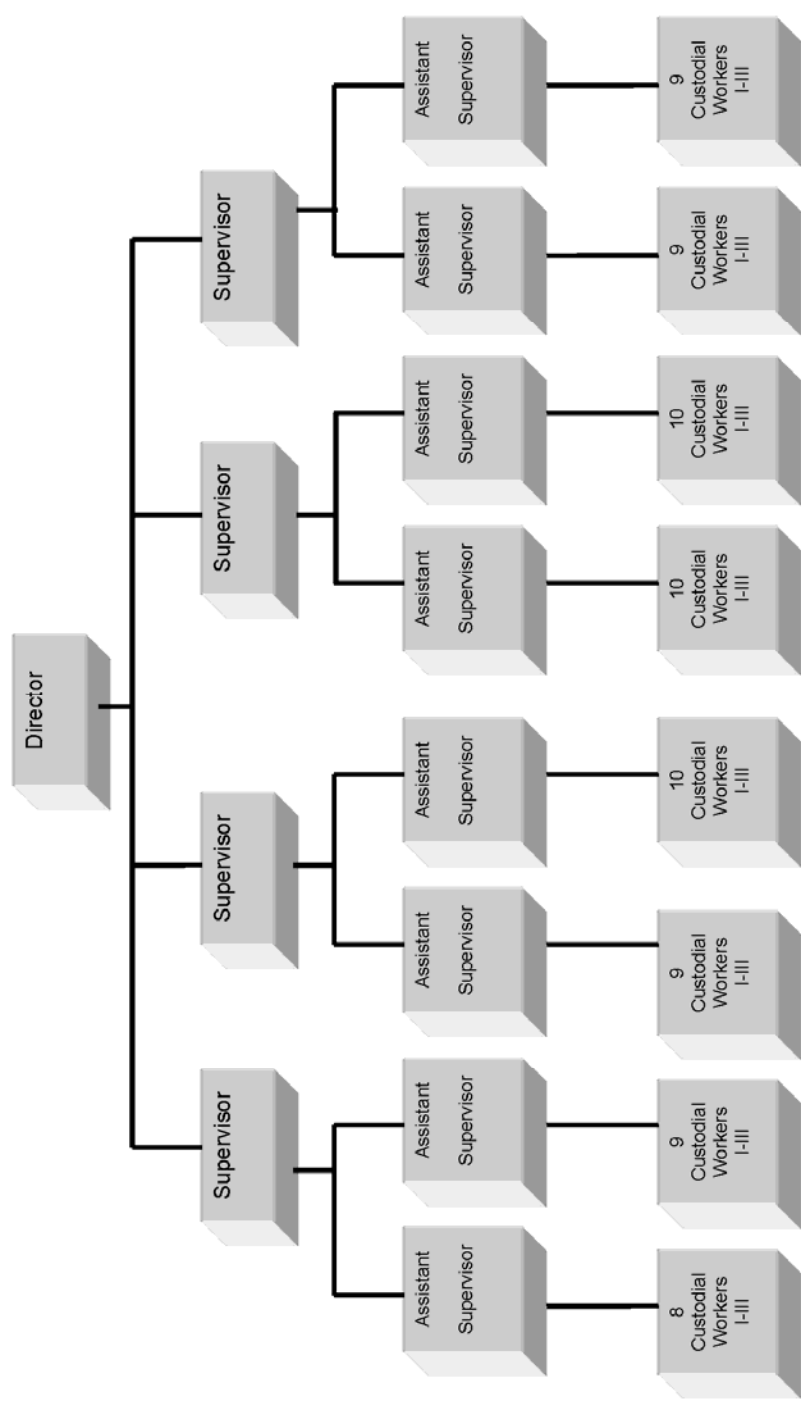
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APPENDIX A

DIVISION OF MAINTENANCE ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



APPENDIX B
DEPARTMENT OF STUDENT HOUSING
ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FOR ADMINISTRATOR PARTICIPANTS

I give my consent to be part of the research study on Women Custodial Employees at [State University] conducted by Becky Petitt, a graduate student at Texas A&M University. This project will involve approximately six women who are custodial workers at [State University] and six administrators of [State University]. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary; I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of my participation, to the extent that it can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the records, or destroyed. The following points have been explained to me:

The purpose of this research is manifold: first, to advance the scholarship on the issue of university accountability as it relates to its low-wage earning employees; second, to explore and describe the lived work experience of women custodial workers at [State University]; third, to explore how the women's lives are mediated by systems of power and oppression; fourth, to explore how they negotiate their work environment; and finally, to explore opportunities for [State University] specifically, and higher education in general, to improve the quality of life for its low-wage earning employees and thus improve the overall education of the larger university community.

I agree to share my perspectives through one individual interview which will last about one and a half hours. How I structure this and what information I choose to share is up to me. This interview will be audio-taped and transcribed; having the interviews tape recorded is a requirement of this study. I understand that my identity will be kept confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless required by law as described below. Information that I share with the researcher will remain confidential (that is, it will not be linked to me by name or shared with anyone in a way that would identify) except for any information about child or elder abuse, or a threat of violence to myself or others. I understand that information in these areas will be reported to the authorities.

The tape recordings of my interview will be kept in the researcher's office at Texas A&M University until they are transcribed. These tapes will be available to the researcher, the transcriptionist, the committee and chairs. In addition, I understand that the research being done here will result in the researcher's dissertation and possibly future professional presentations and publications, but I will in no way be personally identified; a pseudonym will be used to protect my identity.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, either now or during the course of the project. If desired I can receive a report of the findings of this study.

I understand that this research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board - Human Subjects in Research at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding subjects' rights, I can contact the Institutional Review Board through Angelia Raines, Director of Research Compliance, Office of Vice President for Research at (979) 847 9362 (araines@vprmail.tamu.edu). The researcher's committee chairs may be contacted at: Yvonna S. Lincoln, ysl@tamu.edu or (979) 845-2701 and M. Carolyn Clark, cclark@tamu.edu or (979) 845-4086.

I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form. By signing this document, I consent to participate in the study.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FOR CUSTODIAL PARTICIPANTS

I give my consent to be part of the research study on Women Custodial Employees at [State University] conducted by Becky Petitt, a graduate student at Texas A&M University. This project will involve approximately six women who are custodial workers at [State University] and six administrators of [State University]. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary; I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of my participation, to the extent that it can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the records, or destroyed. The following points have been explained to me:

The research project has many goals: first, to advance the scholarship on the issue of university accountability as it relates to its low-wage earning employees; second, to explore and describe the lived work experience of women custodial workers at [State University]; third, to explore how the women's lives are affected by systems of power and oppression; fourth, to explore how they negotiate their work environment; and finally, to explore opportunities for [State University] specifically, and higher education in general, to improve the quality of life for its low-wage earning employees and thus improve the overall education of the larger university community.

I agree to tell my story through three individual interviews, each lasting about one and a half hours. How I structure that story and what information I choose to share is up to me. These interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed; having the interviews tape recorded is a requirement of this study. I understand that my identity will be kept confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless required by law as described below. Information that I share with the researcher will remain confidential (that is, it will not be linked to me by name or shared with anyone in a way that would identify) except for any information about child or elder abuse, or a threat of violence to myself or others. I understand that information in these areas will be reported to the authorities.

I will receive compensation for my participation in this study. Upon completion of each interview, I will receive \$50.00. The total amount I will receive for full participation (all three interviews) is \$150.00. I understand that if I accept payment for participating in this study, the fact that I participated in this study may be obtained under the Texas Open Records Act, even though any information that I gave to the investigator is confidential.

The tape recordings of my interview will be kept in the researcher's office at Texas A&M University until they are transcribed. These tapes will be available to the researcher, the transcriptionist, the committee and chairs. In addition, I understand that the research being done here will result in the researcher's dissertation and possibly future professional presentations and publications, but I will in no way be personally identified; a pseudonym will be used to protect my identity.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, either now or during the course of the project. If desired I can receive a report of the findings of this study.

I understand that this research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board - Human Subjects in Research at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding subjects' rights, I can contact the Institutional Review Board through Angelia Raines, Director of Research Compliance, Office of Vice President for Research at (979) 847 9362 (araines@vprmail.tamu.edu). The researcher's committee chairs may be contacted at: Yvonna S. Lincoln, ysl@tamu.edu or (979) 845-2701 and M. Carolyn Clark, cclark@tamu.edu or (979) 845-4086.

I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form. By signing this document, I consent to participate in the study.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

APPENDIX E
PROTOCOL FOR ADMINISTRATORS

1. How long have you been in your current position at State University?
2. I requested your participation in this study because my review of the organization suggests that your work directly impacts custodial workers. Is this correct, and if so, can you please talk about how your work impacts custodial workers?
3. Talk about the role custodians play at State University.
4. How would you describe the custodian's "place" at State University?
5. Are you aware of any issues custodians face at State University? What do you know about the quality of their lives outside State University?
6. Can you speak about institutional policies or practices that impact the custodial workers?
7. Are you aware of how custodians are compensated?
8. Position-specific questions.
9. Is there anything more you would like to share?

APPENDIX F**PROTOCOL FOR CUSTODIAL PARTICIPANTS**

1. Talk a little about your upbringing. Tell me about your early years.
2. Talk about your road to State University. How did you get here? How long have you worked here?
3. What is it like working at State University?
4. What is an average day at work like?
5. What is the hardest part of your job?
6. What is the best part of your job?
7. How do you manage stress on the job?
8. What is it like to wear a uniform?
9. Does your work affect your body? If so, how?
10. Talk about your pay. Are you paid enough to live well? If not, how do you cope with financial lack?
11. Imagine I am [the university president]. What would you say to me if you had the opportunity to tell me what you needed to make your work life better?
12. Tell me about your future plans.
13. Is there anything more you would like to share?

VITA

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