

# Feminist Research and Representations of Gendered Service Workers

## Examining Resistance, Agency, and Positionality<sup>1</sup>

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“If we’re gonna go out, if they’re gonna fire us, we’re going down fighting, honey. We’re going down with glory.”

-Janet Hernandez and Cheryl Lane,  
Housekeepers at a small private women’s college (2006)

“Certainly a case could be made for the power of all forms of research to impact people’s lives.”

-Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Diane Leckenby (2004, 222)

### Racial and Gender Issues in the “Real World,” At Work

“I couldn’t write my time sheet because I was nervous, shaking. But I thought, no, I’m gonna lose my job.” Liliana<sup>2</sup> described one morning when her supervisor, Jim, yelled at the group of lead housekeepers. Liliana continued, “The two others left, and then I’m fuming. Then, I turn to him and say, ‘Look, I want to tell you something. I’m not taking this from you. You don’t yell at me. I’m a human being. I’m your worker. I don’t want to take your job. I’m here to help *you*, and *you* need to respect *me* in this job the same way I respect *you*.’ Well, he didn’t like that. The other [supervisor] is telling me to shut. I say, ‘I’m not shutting.’” Liliana, looking triumphant, finished the story describing how she stood up for herself at work. “It’s disrespect; that’s what it is.” Cheryl added. Janet nodded in agreement, “That’s what it is.”

Liliana had been a lead housekeeper for 12 years, and because she stood up for herself to her supervisors, she was threatened with being fired. Even though Liliana was able to assert herself, while acknowledging her subordinate status, (“I’m *your* worker”) she continued to worry her job was at risk after this harrowing exchange with her superior. Why are low-income service workers so devalued and unappreciated in their jobs? Liliana, Cheryl, and Janet are members of an all-female group of housekeepers who strive to maintain their dignity and self-respect on the job. These women workers constantly resist attempts by management to increase their work loads, to require extra duties and tasks, and to devalue their important contributions.

There are three important questions raised by Liliana’s experience: 1) How are the ideological understandings of gendered work shaped and reproduced under patriarchal power relations? 2) How is the devaluation of traditionally female-dominated positions manifested? and 3) How do women workers respond to and resist characterizations of gendered labor? I argue the resistance efforts of women workers function on both the material and the ideological levels. That is, as women resist gendered discrimination at work, their efforts signify resistance to the broader, cultural discourse of gendered, devalued labor.

Women service workers are also devalued in the labor market through trends of

occupational segregation and through the wage gap. For example, housekeepers earn particularly low wages despite performing exhausting, repetitive, gendered, and racialized work. On average, service workers earn substantially lower wages than all other occupational categories classified by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2005). Women comprise the overwhelming majority of housekeepers at approximately 88%. However, women experience gendered wage discrimination within many industries. This discrimination is manifested in women earning significantly lower wages than their male counterparts. On average, women housekeepers earn \$8.20/hour, while male housekeepers earn \$9.75/hour.<sup>3</sup> Women housekeepers face further devaluation through verbal abuse and poor treatment. Despite facing these obstacles, women actively resist gendered discrimination on both the practical level and the mediated discourse around gendered, devalued work on an ideological level.

In this paper, I examine the questions relevant to women service workers and offer ways to think about gender representation and resistance. For my research, I interviewed an organized group of housekeepers at a private women's college in Massachusetts. Based on my findings, I offer ideas on how to approach future, feminist research projects.

### **Situating My Research Within Relevant Literature**

A vast body of literature exists on the topic of women's experiences of labor, dynamics of service relationships, and race and gender discrimination in the labor market. Of crucial importance to the devaluing of what is traditionally understood as "women's work" is the historically racialized process that affects certain jobs, specifically low-wage and devalued reproductive, caring, and service labor. This process of occupational segregation by race stems from its historical roots in ethnic and gender discrimination, and persists today. Evelyn Nakano Glenn stresses the need to examine the "interlocking, interactive nature of systems of gender and racial oppression" by presenting a historical overview of the racialized, gendered division of reproductive labor and its implications for feminist politics (1992). Glenn argues, "Understanding race and gender as relational, interlocking, socially constructed systems affects how we strategize for change." She also cautions against employing universalizing "solutions" that maintain privilege for certain groups of women, while discriminating against others (1992, 35).

Similarly, Barbara Reskin and Patricia Roos focus on the changing gender and racial compositions of occupations as more women enter the labor market, noting that women of color typically occupy positions of lower prestige, less control and autonomy, and lower pay (1990). James Elliot and Ryan Smith also examine the implications of race and gender on workplace power and the mechanisms that perpetuate inequality. Racialized and gendered barriers persist, even when women are employed in positions of greater authority and autonomy than are held by the housekeepers (2004).

Regarding low-wage service work, Judith Rollins' foundational study of the inequalities between African-American domestic workers and their white employers gave voice to these ordinarily "invisible" women workers and to the longstanding tradition of racialized, domestic relationships performed by African-American women (1986). Bonnie Thorton Dill explores how African-American domestic workers "negotiated the employer-employee relationship to gain the respect of their employers and construct their own sense of self-worth and personal dignity" (1988, 5). Dill argues that these women's acts of resistance on the job move beyond the individual, private realm and have significant, collective effects for women performing domestic labor and, for the job itself (1988).

Various groups of women have organized into unions to combat race and gender-based discrimination. Sara Mosle studied a group of racially diverse, immigrant housekeepers

in Las Vegas who fought for union recognition to better their working conditions and to bring dignity to their work (1996). More recent feminist research has examined similar relationships in various contexts and with differing racial dynamics. Noting various ethnic groups' relationships to their employers within similar domestic settings, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo examines the experiences of Mexican and Central American domestic workers employed in the homes of affluent, white women (2001). Grace Chang discusses the plight of immigrant, Filipina women employed as domestic workers. Chang criticizes immigration laws for their continued exploitation of workers vulnerable to employer threats and deportation (2001). Rhacel Salazar Parreñas highlights the global structures in place within migration patterns of women workers by taking into account gender, ethnicity, race, power, and class within women's work (2001).

Just as each of these situated ethnic, racialized, sexualized, and gendered work relationships operate from particular social, economic, and cultural tropes, so do the questions of resistance that I examine throughout this paper. In this sense, I want to clarify that I do not define resistance to mean one particular concept that applies universally to all women workers. On the contrary, I examine a particular construction of gendered work through my interviews and argue these women are performing everyday resistance. However, this notion of resistance could not be wholly transferred onto another genre of workers.

I advocate for an intersectional approach to feminist research by studying the interlocking nature of systems of oppression, including gender, race, patriarchy, and capitalism, and the mechanisms by which these systems specifically affect the experience of women in the workplace. My approach to research embraces that of Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei, who advocate utilizing an intersectional analysis. Amott and Matthaei note, "Recent feminist research and activism have taken up the necessary and overdue project of examining racial-ethnic differences among women and begin to break down the problematic feminist view of womanhood as a universal category and of women's oppression as a common, shared experience" (1996, 5).

### **Research Methods: "Getting the Word Out" and to Whom?**

In order to employ an intersectional approach to feminist research, I interviewed a small group of women working as housekeepers on a college campus, an institutionalized setting. I interviewed four housekeepers and spoke in-depth with only three. The three housekeepers I interviewed were not racially representative of the majority of women who occupy low-wage, service positions. Though Liliana is Latina, the other women are white, and the majority of the shop is comprised of white, women workers. While the overall racial composition of this group of housekeepers is atypical, I argue that the experiences of devalued work performed by these women offer researchers important ideas about how women resist the devaluation of their work. However, I qualify this claim as particular to the specific set of women workers I interviewed for this study.<sup>4</sup> My future work will focus on ethnographic research with a broader group of women of color who perform devalued housekeeping labor. This research will broaden my focus to include investigations of race, ethnicity, nationhood, and gender in the workplace.

Through my own experience with and membership in labor unions, I gained access to women to interview for this study. For the past two years I have served as a member of the Joint Council for our union's Local, representing our Graduate Union among fourteen other shops. Through my Joint Council interactions, I was able to speak with the housekeepers' servicing representative about conducting interviews. Out of six active union members from a shop of approximately twenty women who work at the college, three women agreed to speak with me about their work experiences. In late October, after several phone

conversations, I met with the three women at one of their homes. We talked for nearly three hours at this usual, after-work gathering place.

During our conversation,<sup>5</sup> I asked questions and listened to Cheryl, Liliana, and Janet talk about their duties and experiences in the college dormitories. I took handwritten notes and recorded their stories with an unimposing recording device.<sup>6</sup> I often nodded and openly agreed with their frustrations with management. I shared in their disgust at the divisive strategies of their bosses. I voiced my support of their strong belief in the union and admired their reliance on each other and collective resistance efforts. I was completely subjective, explicitly attempting to connect to the housekeepers, rather than trying to “become objective” or “escape the thwarting biases that subjectivity engenders” by recognizing my various subjectivities, as Alan Peshkin admonishes researchers to do (1988, 5). However, because of this expressed interest and my status as a white, college-educated graduate student not performing devalued labor, the housekeepers viewed me as a link to the outside, i.e. a way to “spread the word” about the verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and disrespect they face on the job.

### **Theories of Resistance and Power: Connecting the Abstract and the “Everyday”**

While ideologies of gendered work are prevalent within the policies of social institutions, including the college where the women clean, there is room for agency within these institutions and their practices. Gender shapes the institutions that French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser coined as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). ISAs include the family, the labor market, unions, religious organizations, schools, the political system, and other important social institutions (1977, 143). Althusser argued these ISAs operate to reproduce ideologies, and so propagate a gendered division of labor within our advanced capitalist system.<sup>7</sup> However, I have argued that housekeepers and other low-wage service workers practice everyday resistance to discrimination and poor treatment on the job. As postcolonial feminist Chandra Mohanty asserts, “Feminist struggles are waged on at least two, simultaneous, interconnected levels: an ideological, discursive level that addresses questions of representation (womanhood/femininity), and a material, experiential, daily-life level that focuses on the micropolitics of work, home, family, sexuality, and so on” (2003, 64).

Therefore, what shape do these feminist struggles take, and which actions, thoughts, and ideologies can be defined as acts of resistance? Understanding theories of resistance can help to contextualize these specific feminist struggles in the workplace. Must housekeepers’ actions of resistance be well-planned, strategized acts of civil disobedience and public demonstration? Or, can resistance take place on an everyday basis through quieter, subtle reactions?

French philosopher Michel Foucault asserts, “Where there is power, there is resistance” (1990, 95). Foucault further states that power is organized like “a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them” (96). Fluid sites of resistance correspond to the equally fluid sites of power, and are therefore plentiful. That is, resistance is widespread and embedded within discourses and interactions. Media theorist David Gauntlett interprets Foucault’s notion of resistance by further suggesting, “[Resistance] might take the form of quiet tensions and suppressed concern, or [of] spontaneous anger and protest,” (2002, 120). Gauntlett argues that within social relationships, “resisting” occurs when one actor asserts her/his power, whether in the economic, cultural, or physical sense. By that resistance, the other actor inevitably resists the pressure of power (Gauntlett, 121).

In the workplace, these exchanges of power and resistance on a micro-level reflect the patriarchal nature of gender relations on a macro-level. The power exchanges between managers and supervisors with rank-and-file workers can result in particularly negative consequences for workers. Negative consequences perpetrated by the supervisor toward her/his employees include extra duties and responsibilities, disrespect on the job, harassment, and lay-offs (Hernandez, 2006). For women workers positioned under male supervisors, as was the case with the housekeepers I interviewed, the employer/employee dynamic is tenuous. Despite the imbalance of power and potentially disastrous consequences, resistance remains a crucial aspect of women workers' actions.

### Getting the Word "Out" And to Each Other

Political scientist James Scott offers valuable insights on the complexities of different forms that "everyday resistance" takes within particular groups. He describes "grumbling" as a general way of communicating dissatisfaction within a broader community without waging an all-out, large-scale insult or complaint (1990, 154). He writes, "The 'grumble' ought to be considered an instance of a broader class of thinly veiled dissent, a form that is particularly useful for subordinate groups" (155).

I witnessed "grumbling" when interviewing the housekeepers. When I spoke with one individual, often the other two would mutter things to each other about what the first person was saying. For instance, Janet described the basic duties of the housekeepers by stating, "We clean common areas, bathrooms, living rooms, stairwells, basements. We do everything but student rooms. We vacuum, we dust, we scrub showers." During my conversation with Janet, Cheryl said under her breath to Liliana, "And it's back to work tomorrow." This exchange serves as a brief example of Scott's ideas about "grumbling." I suspect similar comments are made to one another while they are working. These comments are not directly spoken to management, but are often spoken within ear-shot. Typically, the comments are duly noted by management as, at worst, insubordination, or at best, undesirable behavior.

The housekeepers demonstrate another of Scott's ideas of everyday resistance, gossip. He writes, "Gossip is perhaps the most familiar and elementary form of disguised, popular aggression. Though its use is hardly confined to attacks by subordinates on their superiors, it represents a relatively safe social sanction" (1990, 142). As our interview began, Janet gave brief updates to Cheryl and Liliana about the day's labor-management meeting, who attended, who did not attend, and speculations as to why *she* was not there. During Janet's update to her coworkers, she added comments such as, "I just *knew* she wouldn't show." Each participant can easily disavow the responsibility for the gossip, Scott notes, making it an especially useful tool because it "has no identifiable author" (142). The housekeepers often gossip to each other about important changes in duties or encounters with management, keeping each other aware and informed about current working conditions.

Moreover, Mary Leach draws on Patricia Ann Meyer Spacks' idea of "serious gossip" to understand discussions taking place within small, trusting groups (2000, 229). Leach identifies conversations of serious gossip serving as resources for "the practice of a number of activities: play, moral investigation, self-reflection, wonder, self-expression, discovery, the definition of ideas, the embodiment of solidarity, and the circulation of information" (229). For the housekeepers, their exchange of serious gossip, on the job and after work, in particular, functions to circulate information, to provide a means of self-reflection and self-expression, and to foster the embodiment of solidarity. Leach contends, "Taking gossip seriously gives substance to the idea that the personal is not only the political but is also the basis for the theoretical." Her statement stresses the importance of gossip for these women

as self-recognition of their situations at work and resistance to devaluation of their labor (231, 232).

### **What Resistance Looks like: On the Job, Cleaning Dorms**

For Cheryl, Janet, and Liliana resistance is their everyday work experience through various forms: grumbling, gossip, and rumors against management. They constantly communicate with each other and inform their coworkers about immediate, managerial tactics. They share overheard information or relate individual experiences. They have much of which to be wary. These women, who clean the students' toilets, wipe down their sinks, and vacuum their floors, must frequently utilize these resistance tactics when dealing with disrespectful supervisors who often implement new, divisive tactics.

For example, management's inconsistency is one of the most difficult practices with which the housekeepers deal. They have to move quickly in order to finish all of their daily tasks, and changes to their schedules can be problematic. Each housekeeper is assigned the same group of five dorms to clean every day during the week, except when they are short-staffed. "And then we triad," Cheryl explained. "When we negotiated, it was supposed to be three people, but [their supervisor, Jim] put it down to two," she said. They laughed, joking that a "triad" isn't "two," and Janet added, "But we don't know that. We're only women."

Interestingly, the housekeepers each wear a plastic tag around their necks to work everyday with a message: "Respect, Civility, Honesty, Consistency." The housekeepers view the tag as an important symbol of their commitment to each other and their labor contract with management. They are wary of management's tactics and vigilantly inspect any new, insidious ways their supervisors might try to increase their workload or decrease their power. During our interview, Janet showed Liliana and Cheryl a document management distributed that asked for "ideas for improvement." Janet told the others, "'And if you want,' he says, 'your answers can be anonymous'," to which the three of them responded, "here we go again." These women are quite aware of management's activities. The housekeepers ensure each coworker remains informed so that they may be united in their conversations with management, actions on the job, and resistance efforts. "But [management doesn't] want a union and they don't want us to wear plastic tags. But it's going to come around and bite them in the nose," Liliana added.

In addition to keeping morale high among the employees, the housekeepers view their union activism as a social and political tool that affects their daily lives. Belonging to the union positively influences their experience at work and their feelings of strength against management. However, these women are never naïve. They understand the power management has to constantly change their duties, verbally harass them when no one is looking, switch their schedules, and "ignore" complaints or suggestions housekeepers offer. Still, these housekeepers recognize their protection and power as organized, women workers.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Everyday Resistance and Feminist Research**

Rather than to capitulate to poor treatment and abuse by management, the housekeepers continue to practice everyday resistance to gendered discrimination and devaluation of their work. I have examined women service workers' widespread devaluation in the labor market by looking at occupational segregation and the low wages women earn for performing traditional "women's work" outside of the home. I have examined my positionality within my research process with these women, and I also discussed questions of resistance, power, and agency on the job as a housekeeper.

What, then, are the implications of these housekeepers' stories of resistance for concerned activists, academics, and other workers? Can these experiences affect and improve the working conditions that many women, particularly women of color, face while performing devalued, gendered labor? Perhaps turning to future intersectional feminist research projects can illuminate possibilities for working toward social change.

By privileging women's experiences of work and their efforts to practice everyday resistance, while avoiding the tendency to universalize those experiences and instead situating them in specific contexts with attention to race, class, sexuality, and gender, future feminist research can work to re-value understandings of gendered work on the material and ideological level. In this way, I hope that my next project and other concerned academic and activist efforts, can move toward consistent and reflexive feminist politics, which also "gets the word out" in diverse and productive ways.

## Notes

1. This paper is a shortened version of my Labor Internship paper with revisions for the Graduate Certificate in Advanced Feminist Studies Final Project. Thanks to Professor Eve Weinbaum and Professor Joyce Berkman at the University of Massachusetts Amherst for their useful comments and guidance.
2. In order to protect the anonymity of research participants, pseudonyms are used throughout the document.
3. The difference in hourly wage is equivalent to approximately \$3,200/year less income for females compared to male workers. The annual wages of women at \$17,056/year are well below the poverty line for a family of four, which is \$19,307/year (BLS, 2005).
4. Also of relevance to the racial and ethnic composition of housekeepers at this college is the job hiring process. According to the housekeepers, before the union was established, management was extremely selective and often nepotistic, hiring their friends, family members, and close contacts into jobs at the college. This practice may also have contributed to a high percentage of white, women workers.
5. I met with the housekeepers, again, in April 2007, and we sat and drank ginger ale. We talked about their work situation and discussed the feedback I had received so far on my research paper. I also gave the women copies of the original paper, and we discussed the future of the union, their shop in particular, and their relationship to activist students at the college.
6. This flash machine is a type of non-invasive recording device. With the consent of the three women, I recorded our conversation on the flash machine through a flat microphone placed upon the table in Janet's kitchen. Our discussion was then converted into MP3 format to facilitate transcription.
7. While I think Althusser's concept of the ISA is useful, understanding ISAs as all-powerful and determinative is too reductive. Instead, I use the concept to demonstrate the way that ideology can be reproduced within culture, and how a specific understanding of gender relations can permeate various social groups and institutions.

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