

THE SHADOWS OF IMMOBILITY: LOW-WAGE WORK, SINGLE MOTHERS'
LIVES AND WORKPLACE CULTURE

by

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To Cynthia Marie Clum,
My Mother

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary American public policies targeted towards low-income single mothers reflect a presumption that steady employment in and of itself, even in the low-wage labor market, is the key to mobility. The experiences recounted in this dissertation challenge that presumption. Based on fifteen months of ethnographic research among single mothers working as nursing assistants at a care facility in southeastern Michigan, this dissertation reveals lives characterized by considerable economic hardships and social strains. Even long-term job tenure does little to diminish these struggles as the job's structure (a structure typical of less-skilled service-sector jobs), combined with conditions in single mothers' home lives, militates against significant wage or occupational mobility. This immobility creates economic and social tensions that permeate these mothers' home and work lives.

In this ethnography of the social experience of immobility, I explore how the immobility of these nursing assistant jobs joins together the economic and social world of the workplace with the economic and social worlds of the single mothers in both predictable and unexpected ways. I document, for example, the quandaries the wages pose for women's home lives and how women handle these. But, uniquely, I also show how tensions engendered by low wages and immobility feedback into and are managed within the workplace. I demonstrate that workers' economic and social struggles are not only recognized by management but are incorporated into workplace practices in ways that help contain and depoliticize their disruptive potential.

I also highlight ways in which neo-liberalism and speculative capitalism (and the market-based, individualized orientations they promote) encourage both the mothers and management to embrace remedies to the immobility of these jobs that depend on individual effort and market opportunities. Within the workplace this can be seen in management's endorsement of extra-work, postsecondary educational endeavors. The improbability of such endeavors for most mothers, however, leads some to devise "alternative" strategies for transforming their circumstances involving on-line dating, membership in a multi-level marketing sales organization, and participation in the subprime mortgage market; strategies that can expose mothers to significant risk. This dissertation suggests the limits of individualized, market-based remedies in ameliorating larger inequalities.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Eviction Notice

Moments after exiting the stretch of interstate that links Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, (an eastbound eight mile trip that swiftly transitions the journeyer from Big Ten college town to the semi-urban, industrialized and de-industrialized corridor of “southeastern Michigan”), I pulled into the parking lot of one of the units of an expansive, moderate-income apartment complex. Buffered from the main road by a lattice of grassy knolls and set on well-maintained and landscaped grounds, the complex had a surprisingly suburban feel. I was there to visit Tye, a 19 year old black¹ woman who was one of the single mothers working as a certified nursing assistant (CNA) at Rolling Meadows, the nursing home in Ann Arbor where I had been conducting research for the past several months.² I had anchored myself at Rolling Meadows with the aim of studying how work

¹ Following Elizabeth Chin’s example, I use “both the terms *black* and *African American* to describe individuals and communities” (2001: 230, *notes*). Like Chin, I found that most of the African Americans I got to know through the course of this research used the term *black* to refer to themselves and to other African Americans in everyday conversation. At the same time, I witnessed occasions on which these same women would invoke the term *African American* to signal a more formal, or externalized sense of the population -- for example, when imitating (for my benefit) how people at the University of Michigan might speak about the “African-American” experience.

² The names of all private individuals have been changed, although I have been careful to retain, as Sherry Ortner puts it, “their relevant ethnic connotations” (Ortner 2002:143). In addition, the name of the nursing home where I conducted my research has been changed and its geographical location slightly altered to protect the privacy of those who work and live there. I have also slightly altered any details of people’s lives or experiences that might identify them to others. However, I have chosen not to disguise the larger geographic setting of my research – that of southeastern Michigan and the towns of Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, in particular. In line with the work of a number of anthropologists and social theorists, the specificities of place and time matter a great deal to the story I can tell (Chin 2001; Duneier 1992).

and family issues -- particularly those experienced by single mothers -- intersected within a workplace in which the majority of employees were relatively low-paid. My plan was to document how workers' family lives intertwined with Rolling Meadows, how conflicts between work and family were dealt with both by workers and management, and how conditions in the workplace, in turn, shaped workers' family lives. Tye had been helping me refine the questions I was using to interview the single mothers who worked at Rolling Meadows.

It was just around 5:30 in the evening, late in November 2004, and with the daylight already extinguished, I felt the damp chill of the evening air as I walked up the sidewalk to Tye's building. I was relieved then when, only a couple of minutes after I had dialed her apartment's entry phone, I peered through the door's side window to see Tye and her 2 year old son, Xavier, coming down the entryway stairs to let me in. As Tye opened the door to let me in, she barely acknowledged me. Almost wordlessly, she turned around and headed back up the stairs. Perplexed, my enthusiastic greeting left hanging in the air, I quietly followed her into her apartment.

Once inside the apartment, seated on the couch across from Tye, I realized she had been crying. Taken aback, I softly asked her, "What's going on?" In response, she began sobbing. After a few moments, she gestured to a set of stapled papers lying atop her glass-topped coffee table. I quickly skimmed the top sheet and saw it said something about a notice of eviction. Holding the papers in my hand, I looked up quizzically at Tye. She said she had come home to find the papers tacked to her door. Returning my gaze to the notice, I read through it more carefully, trying to decipher it, but I found it confusing. The notice referred to a series of dates from earlier in November, court appearances, an

amount of \$794, and the word “eviction.” It didn’t seem as if it were a final notice, but, instead, notice that eviction proceedings had been initiated. As I tried to make sense of the documents, Tye sat mostly mute, and then, every so often, broke into tears again. We sat there awhile, neither of us saying anything. I moved to sit next to her on the couch and put my arm around her back, gently squeezing her shoulders.

I had recently worked on a research project at the University of Michigan in which I had learned about state administered emergency funds available to people facing housing evictions.³ I asked Tye if she had already been to the Family Independence Agency (or FIA, the then name for the state agency in charge of administering those funds) about the notice.⁴ Tye was well informed about the funds and said she wouldn’t be eligible for them because she wasn’t living in “affordable housing.” As she pointed out, the FIA’s funds for housing emergencies were only available to people whose housing costs were less than a third of their monthly income. And although Tye had managed to find a two bedroom apartment that, at \$595 a month, was well below the median price for the area, her monthly rent consumed considerably more than a third of the roughly \$1100 a month she made as a part-time CNA working at Rolling Meadows.⁵

As we continued talking, Tye divulged that the money she owed in rent was only one element of a financial situation that was threatening to engulf her. She was also having mechanical difficulties with her older model Ford Taurus; difficulties that she said

³ I had been employed as a research assistant on a project headed by Dr. Sandra K. Danziger and based at the Program on Poverty and Social Welfare Policy at the University of Michigan.

⁴ In 1995, Governor Engler’s administration changed the name of the state social service agency from the Department of Social Services to the more ideologically charged Family Independence Agency. In 2005, Jennifer Granholm, as the Democratic Governor of Michigan, renamed the agency the Department of Human Services. (www.michigan.gov/documents/Decade_15548_7.pdf)

⁵ With her three years of seniority, Tye was making close to \$11.43 an hour and was working 24 hours a week. The question of why Tye was working a part-time rather than full-time work schedule is an important one that I will address in detail in Chapter 2.

were causing her car to become unsafe to drive. In addition, her phone had been shut off because she hadn't paid the bill for several months. On top of this, she had other debts from a loan and an old credit card about which she was receiving increasingly threatening notices from a collection agency.

Although a potential eviction was a new and frightening element in her cacophony of financial woes, the longer I knew Tye, the more I came to realize that, while the intensity of her financial crises oscillated -- sometimes diminishing to a somewhat more tolerable level and sometimes ratcheting to an overwhelming pitch -- the fact of their existence was a constant. Status quo for Tye involved considerable financial stress. The better I got to know other single mothers at Rolling Meadows, the more I learned that such formidable financial struggles were the norm -- if not comprising the central preoccupation, then, at least, the background noise of daily life.

The Realities of the Low-Wage Labor Market

When Kathy Edin and Laura Lein published their path-breaking study *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-wage Work* (1997) their analysis made painstakingly clear one of the rarely acknowledged truths of the U.S. welfare system: it was not possible to make ends meet relying on welfare benefits alone (Jencks 1997). Instead, as Edin and Lein carefully delineated, single mothers receiving welfare were forced to devise a range of creative, but demanding strategies to supplement their monthly benefits including borrowing money from family, working informally for cash or in-kind payments, trading unused food stamps for other necessities, relying on a boyfriend's beneficence, and playing shell games with overdue bills and creditors, paying off just enough on the most threatening bills by skipping or delaying payments on others.

When welfare recipients were enjoined to leave welfare for the world of work, having a job was constituted as an end in and of itself, regardless of the economic benefits it did, or did not, proffer.⁶ Employment was the issue, not standards of living. Yet, as Edin and Lein pointed out, for many of the single mothers they had interviewed pre-“welfare reform,” successful, even steadfast, employment had done little to diminish the intensity of their economic woes. Indeed, due to the “costs of working,” many of the employed single mothers they interviewed were financially worse off than those on welfare.

As Edin and Lein’s research pointed out, jobs not only bring money into a household, they take money out. It costs money to work outside the home; securing and maintaining a job necessitates buying clothing appropriate to a job, paying for transportation to get to a job, and, most crucially, ensuring for the care of children while absent from the home. In the debates over welfare reform, proponents of the new welfare regime, Temporary Aid to Needy Families, (TANF), argued that these issues would be addressed by the creation of a number of new work supports. Under the new welfare-to-work system, work would be rewarded. The new welfare system would – as the now infamous phrase goes – “make work pay.”⁷

Yet, as I conducted research among the single mothers working as certified nursing assistants at Rolling Meadows, the inaptness of that sentiment seemed remarkable. The single mothers at Rolling Meadows had managed to secure employment

⁶ See, for example, various documents produced by the conservative think-tank, the Heritage Foundation such as, “Welfare Reform: more work to be done” posted on the web on July 11, 2002 <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/WM125.cfm> (accessed 12/28/2007).

⁷ This phrase was associated with Bill Clinton’s 1992 outlining of his plans to reform the welfare system. The phrase became especially associated with his move to double the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). He viewed this boost to the EITC as a way to increase the incentives for working and, ideally, offset hardships poor families might incur as they transferred from cash assistance to the labor market.

in a position that policy-analysts, politicians and welfare-to-work program administrators⁸ were defining as “good” jobs, the kinds of jobs to which welfare mothers were encouraged to aspire.⁹ Many of the proponents of welfare reform would have cheered the single mothers at Rolling Meadows, holding them up as beacons of success; models of what they intended welfare mothers to emulate. And yet, I was struck by both the extent and the degree of economic struggle I witnessed among these women; their good jobs seemed to provide them little economic relief. In fact, it was marked how similar their economic struggles were to those documented by Edin and Lein. At a starting wage of \$10.34 an hour as CNAs at Rolling Meadows, their earnings placed them well above the desperate poverty of welfare recipients,¹⁰ yet their financial strains were still significant and, in some cases, severe.

The financial struggles of the single mothers at Rolling Meadows reflect two important truths about the low-wage labor market that are under-acknowledged by the policy makers, politicians and pundits who have championed the compulsory move of

⁸ The Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), the official legislation that has become colloquially known as “welfare reform,” led to the creation of new job placement programs for welfare recipients. These job placement programs, designed to move welfare recipients quickly into the labor market and administer their work-related benefits, have become known as “welfare-to-work” programs.

⁹ Although the term, “good jobs” is bandied about with considerable frequency in the public policy literature, it is not often concretely defined. Among those authors who **have** defined it, there has been some congruence around the idea that good jobs are those that pay at least \$8.00 an hour (in 2003 dollars) and provide health care benefits (Johnson and Corcoran 2003) or \$9.50 an hour **without** benefits (Pavetti and Acs 2001). Another definition was provided by Gayle Hamilton in a report written for a public policy research institute. In this report, Hamilton suggested that a good job is one that pays at least “25 percent higher than the minimum wage and offer(s) a good chance for stable employment” (“Moving People from Welfare to Work: lessons from the national evaluation of welfare-to-work strategies,” 2002 report for MDRC; <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/52/summary.html#NationalWelfaretoWorkStrategies> accessed 12/28/07).

¹⁰ The dollar value of the monthly benefits welfare recipients in Edin and Lein’s study received varied widely, depending on their state of residence and their household composition. However, the maximum amount allowable, in 1993 dollars, for each city in which they conducted their study was:

Boston	\$767	Charleston	\$492	Chicago	\$652	San Antonio	\$476
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These amounts reflect the combined value of AFDC and food stamp benefits (1997:37).

low-income single mothers into the labor market. The first is that low-wage jobs in the United States – particularly those in the service sector – have become structured in such a way that not only are the starting wages of these jobs low, but they offer very restricted possibilities for wage growth and, in addition, movement from them into higher-paying occupational categories requires resources that exceed what on-the-job skill development or training can provide. The cumulative effect of these conditions means that workers in low-wage jobs in the U.S. are subject to a wage ceiling that is low and largely obstinate.

With their relatively low starting wage and no intrinsic pathway for dramatically improving that wage, the wage and occupational mobility characteristics of CNA jobs at Rolling Meadows typify the conditions found in the larger low-wage service sector. As already noted, the starting wage for CNAs at Rolling Meadows is \$10.34 an hour (in 2006 dollars). While this makes Rolling Meadows a provider of wages that are higher than those paid in many low-wage service sector jobs (and somewhat higher than the national average paid to nursing assistants), this wage still places these jobs solidly in the low-wage labor market.¹¹ And although many of the single mothers who worked at Rolling Meadows were perceived by the administrative and supervisory staff as “good” workers who were dedicated to their jobs and to the residents with whom they worked, these positive evaluations translated into very limited economic reward. Neither positive job evaluations nor sustained tenure results in hefty wage increases. CNA’s that had

¹¹ According to U.S. Government’s Bureau of Labor Statistics May 2004 data (http://www.bls.gov/oes/2004/may/oes_00A1.htm; accessed April 12, 2006), during the time I was at Rolling Meadows, the national average wage paid in other service sector jobs such as child-care worker, food service worker, retail, was anywhere from \$7.40 to \$8.89. For that same period, the national average hourly wage for nursing assistant jobs was \$10.08 per hour.

been working at Rolling Meadows for more than seven years (of which there were very few) made barely more than \$14 an hour.¹²

Combined with the relatively low wage paid to workers is the fact that the promotion structure for CNA jobs (as with many other kinds of service sector jobs) depends almost entirely on efforts external to the job and the workplace itself; there is no internal promotion structure associated with CNA jobs. Advancement from a nursing assistant position to a related position that pays significantly higher wages (such as licensed practical nurse, LPN, registered practical nurse, RN, or physical therapist, etc.) requires further education or credential. No accumulation of seniority, on-the-job training, or skill development, in and of itself, will move someone from a nursing assistant job to a higher paying health-care professional job. The way wages and occupational mobility are structured in these jobs puts the single mothers who depend on them in the position of, as Jane L. Collins has noted, “combining the roles of breadwinner and caregiver on a shoe-string budget” (Collins 2007:13).

Collins’ characterization of these “shoe-string” budgets points to the second truth: it is extremely difficult for single mothers to make ends meet on the wages earned from even a “good” low-wage job, let alone lead what many would consider a socially and economically normal American life. As a result, for many of the mothers I talked to, like the women in Edin and Lein’s study, a chronic gap between their income and expenses engendered a stressful monthly task of seeking out extra resources and/or trying to keep their bills and creditors enough at bay to avoid shut-offs and evictions -- not always

¹² Very few CNAs at Rolling Meadows had held their positions for more than five years of employment. Nursing assistant work is physically demanding work and few CNAs are able to maintain the physical capacities and well-being needed to sustain lengthy tenure. In fact, as an occupation, nursing assistants have one of the highest occupational injury rates of any job category in the United States (<http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/osh/os/ostb1619.pdf>; accessed January 4, 2008).

successfully. Even for those mothers who didn't experience this tension so fiercely or with such chronicity, their safety net was meager enough that any unexpected, extraordinary expense could easily lurch them into financial crisis.

Tye once described living with these unabating financial strains as like being a hamster running on a wheel: a great deal of energy expended without any forward motion. Not only is this an exhausting way to live in the here and now, but envisioning it as an indefinite lifestyle is both hard to fathom and to bear. Yet, for the single mothers at Rolling Meadows, already earning at the higher end of the wages for which they are competitive, without a dramatic alteration in circumstances, there is little end in sight to these struggles.

The Weight of These Worlds in the Workplace

None of this is a secret to the management at Rolling Meadows. Management is well aware both of their workers' on-going financial difficulties as well as the immutability of the conditions that make substantially better-paying jobs such a remote possibility for many. Evidence of these rather grim financial realities abounds within the workplace, suffusing the day-to-day operations of the nursing home. It poses a host of problems, challenges, and, perhaps surprisingly, opportunities that are contended with, in various ways, by staff and management at every level of Rolling Meadows' organization.

During the fifteen months I conducted fieldwork among the nursing care staff at Rolling Meadows I became acutely aware of these tensions and their effects on the staff and the facility's operations. Because I was interested in the day-to-day elaboration of workplace practices, policies, and rules, especially as they related to workers' efforts to balance work and family demands, I was based in the scheduling office at Rolling

Meadows. The scheduling office dealt with all issues related to nursing staff members' schedules, attendance, and performance – in general, with all issues related to ensuring that the facility's care units were adequately staffed for each shift. In this way, it served as the primary interface among the lower-level nursing care staff, the administrative, and the management staff of Rolling Meadows. The office was run by the scheduling coordinator, a white woman in her early 50s named Jill, and her assistant, Michelle, a black woman in her 20s.

In the months I spent at Rolling Meadows, I filled notebook after notebook with instances that were so routine they seemed, at the time, almost banal: a sudden spate of calls into the scheduling office from a CNA (who normally begged off requests to stay for extra shifts due to child-care issues) asking if she could pick up a series of overtime shifts; a request that Jill try to reach someone at her mother's house because she would be staying there for awhile; a call from a CNA telling Jill she didn't have a way to get into work because her car had broken down, or she didn't have any money to put gas in it,¹³ and the requests, usually several per week, to make use of a Rolling Meadows' policy that allowed workers to cash in their vacation hours. Not a week went by when incidents such as these were absent from my field notes, representing just some of the myriad ways in which workers' economic realities translated into the workplace; sometimes just as

¹³ Although Rolling Meadows was served by a public bus route, relying solely on the bus to get back and forth from work was not a viable option for many staff. For a start, there were limitations in the hours the bus route operated (e.g., evening service ended at 6:52 p.m. and weekend service began at 9:15 a.m. and ended by 6:15 p.m.; additionally, using the weekday morning service would mean arriving close to 7:30 a.m., making one 22 minutes late for the start of a morning shift). Secondly, the Ann Arbor Transit Authority (AATA)'s coverage of Ypsilanti and the townships surrounding Ypsilanti is relatively sparse in relation to the geographic spread of the area. For the staff who lived in those areas (the majority of the lower-level staff), they could easily reside several miles from the nearest bus route. Even for those who lived close enough to Ypsilanti bus routes to make them practical, Saturday service was limited and Sunday service was non-existent on most Ypsilanti routes.

background, or contextual information, but often as “issues” that could and did affect work.

The most mundane materialization of these realities was via the clipboard that was never far from Jill’s hands. The clipboard was one of Jill’s most essential daily resources; its thick sheet of stapled papers comprised the phone list with all nursing care staff’s home numbers. Almost as soon as the sheets were updated (roughly every three to six months), the neat, typewritten lines would become marked with jottings: phone numbers temporarily disconnected or no longer in service, new telephone numbers replacing old ones, home phones replaced with cell phone numbers that changed in rapid succession, and new numbers appended with the suffix, “sister” or “mother.” These penciled-in annotations signaled bills that hadn’t been paid, residences that had been re-located, and new avenues of communication that had to be established.

The extent to which these events were explicitly communicated as instances of economic hardship or financial crisis depended on the staff member, or the circumstance, but often enough, in their exchanges with Jill or other, upper-level staff, CNAs’ contextualized these requests with distressed commentary, embarrassed confidences, or matter-of-fact resignation that revealed the bills that urgently needed paying, the rents that had become unsustainable, and, in general, the gaps that had become too-wide between funds and expenses. The regularity of these explanations hinted at the possible economic hardships and financial crises latent in otherwise inexplicably agitated requests for overtime shifts or unanticipated absences from work.

As I’ll detail in a following chapter, information about these instances was not part of a secret storage of knowledge that, in its accretion, was known only to those in the

scheduling office. The logbook where all staff call-ins were recorded, complete with accounts of the reasons given for the absences, was reviewed by the nurse managers, as well as the director of nursing and the facility's executive director. Staff members' requests to cash in their vacation hours had to be approved by their nurse manager as well as the business office. And it was the business office that fielded the change of home address updates, the occasional urgent request to cancel a direct deposit order (because someone's bank account balance was overdrawn or the account had been closed), and the legal orders submitted by creditors to have a staff member's wages garnished.

During that November when Tye's inability to pay her rent escalated into an acute crisis, I had notes recorded in my fieldwork notebook about the day Tye called to ask if she could pick up two overtime shifts for the weekend. I had also copied the note Jill made next to where she had penciled in Tye's name for an overtime shift on a Saturday scheduling sheet, a note reminding Jill that she wouldn't be able to confirm the shift by phone because Tye's phone was disconnected. From another day that month, I had the mention in my field notes that Tye had requested to have her last remaining nine hours of vacation time cashed out. A couple days after I had visited Tye at her apartment, I recorded that she had requested an advance on her paycheck and had also given Jill her mother's cell phone number, letting Jill know she would be using that number for awhile. And I was with Jill in the scheduling office when Jill related that she was worried about Tye because she was so unlike her normally outgoing, confidant self. She was, as Jill noted, "really having a hard time."

This dissertation is centrally concerned with the imprint of these "hard times" -- hard times that involve struggles for economic viability as well as for upward mobility --

on both single mothers' home lives and on Rolling Meadows. In the chapters that follow, I explore the nature of these imprints on women's home lives and the workplace. I document how the obdurate gap between what single mothers working at Rolling Meadows earn and what they **need** to earn to make ends meet, as well as their limited options for altering this gap, manifests in their private, or non-work lives. I chart the complex challenges these financial straits pose and the various strategies single mothers devise to deal with them. In addition, I illuminate single mothers' imaginings of futures in which current unsatisfactory circumstances are either circumvented or transformed and the efforts they undertake to realize these futures.

I am also interested, however, in how these hard times feed back into and are managed within the workplace. The myriad ways in which staffs' economic and social struggles feed back into Rolling Meadow often have complex and potent effects on day-to-day operations. At times, the spillover from these tensions disrupts normal functioning through absenteeism, staff turnover, and low staff morale (which impacts work performance and resident care). How does Rolling Meadows keep the magnitude of these disruptions in check? In effect, how do they organizationally manage the tensions engendered by the low-wages and immobility of nursing assistant jobs?

Through the course of the chapters that follow, I examine how Rolling Meadows deals with these issues. I look closely at how the struggles of its least-advantaged workers are engaged with (or, disengaged from) by the management structure at Rolling Meadows. I show that, rather than encouraging workers' economic and social struggles to be framed as outcomes of collective circumstances, the organizational practices, policies, and mechanisms at Rolling Meadows have the effect of re-articulating these

struggles as individual issues, reflecting individual circumstances. The larger economic inequalities that affect lower-level staff are translated into issues that can be addressed through scheduling, overtime, and benefits. Economic difficulties and the complex social problems these often lead to are recast as issues of attendance and punctuality, recast as behaviors that can be addressed as issues of work performance. I suggest that through these processes, the structured and structural inequalities that underlie the difficulties staff experience are significantly depoliticized.

In delineating these dynamics, I draw critical attention to the ways in which they are bound up with and facilitated by the intimacy of the workplace. Although workplaces are not conventionally conceptualized in this way, Rolling Meadows is, in fact, an intimate social space; a space characterized by frequent and repeated interactions, complicated and shifting dynamics, and alternately affectionate, close, friendly, conflict-ridden, aggrieved, neutral, and indifferent relationships between workers and administrative staff, supervisors and administrators. Rolling Meadows is not unique in this. As Lauren Berlant suggests, as one of the “institutional spaces” that “organize people’s worlds,” workplaces (and work life) are subject to complex forms of intimacy (1998:282). The norms of this intimacy vary considerably among workplaces, but they inevitably involve, as Berlant puts it, some amalgamation or confusion of the “instrumental and affective relations of collegiality” (ibid). Berlant has been among a group of recent scholars who have argued for the relevance of intimacy to social analysis, calling for the need to better understand how intimacy affects different aspects of social life as well as for how it constitutes a sphere of social action and meaning that is

inextricable from larger economic, political and cultural systems (Berlant 1998; see also, Herzfeld 1997; 2005; Shryock 2004; Stoler 2001; Wilson 2004).

The Intimacy of Immobility within the Workplace

In examining the role intimacy plays in the depoliticization of workers' economic and social struggles at Rolling Meadows, I draw on several, related understandings of intimacy. The first is the use of intimacy as a term to reflect physical closeness, or proximity. Working together in the enclosed space of one building, albeit one that is fairly large, brings staff into regular, on-going contact with one another.¹⁴ All nursing care staff eat in the same lunch room, get cans of soda or bags of chip from machines in the same break room, take smoke breaks outside at the same smoke shack. This physical proximity fosters a certain level of contact and familiarity with one another. In some cases, this proximity develops into social intimacies, although, this is certainly not necessarily true. But through interactions over meals, breaks, and smokes, friendships that traverse occupational levels and departments do develop.

The second notion of intimacy has to do with the ways in which staffs' economic and social strains impel the revelation of intimate, personal information to co-workers. As already indicated, the economic and social conditions of lower-level staffs' lives can make it almost impossible for them to keep their "private" lives from entering into the "public" space of the workplace; through their absences, their late arrivals, their requests

¹⁴ This proximity is, perhaps, further encouraged by the fact that Rolling Meadows operates as a "closed campus" for nursing care staff. This means that for the duration of their shifts, nurses and nursing assistants are not allowed to leave the grounds of Rolling Meadows without officially "signing out." The official reason given for this is that it reflects an occupational safety concern. In the case of an emergency, this sign-out list would allow Rolling Meadows to account for the whereabouts of all staff. The fact that only the direct care workers (and not, for example, the administrative staff) must sign out in this way seems to contradict its effectiveness. From my observation and from Jill's account of its logic, in practice, it seemed to serve the purpose of controlling staff member's break time, ensuring that staff could be easily tracked down if their break times extended beyond their allotted time.

for time off, their need to cash out their vacation hours. Unlike in the context of a friendship, lower-level staff do not always have the luxury of deciding what about their lives they would like to keep private and with whom they would like to share this information. To try to access certain work-based resources, to try to avoid work sanctions, or as a result of simply being overwhelmed, lower-level staff are sometimes impelled to reveal intimate details of their lives to Jill, to their supervisors, and to their co-workers that they would often prefer to keep private. This form of intimacy within the workplace is predicated on and reflective of inequalities that structure the workplace. To a significant degree, operating control over what you choose to reveal or not to reveal to co-workers requires possession of sufficient material, social and emotional resources. In addition, in any work-based hierarchy, those at the lower-levels must account for behaviors or events that impact their work performance to those above them.

Finally, there is the intimacy that results from shared social identities. These shared social identities often translate into forms of recognition between individuals, becoming the basis for assumed familiarities and alliances among individuals. I'll discuss the ways in which staff at Rolling Meadows were united as well as divided by these identities, momentarily. In doing so, I suggest it is important to understand how the intimacies these social identities do and do not make possible are implicated in larger economic, political and cultural systems (Herzfeld 1997; 2005; Wilson 2004).

As a result of these multiple forms of intimacy, the workplace brings upper-level staff into an, at times, uncomfortable proximity with the economic, social and cultural worlds of lower-level workers at Rolling Meadows. Most significantly, it brings upper-level staff into an uncomfortable proximity with the ways in which these worlds are

shaped by the immobilities of their nursing assistant jobs. Both through this proximity and in reaction to it, certain aspects of these workers' worlds are incorporated into the workplace, encouraging the formation of particular organizational strategies: particular bureaucratic policies, labor practices, and dispositions towards career development by managers. Although aspects of these organizational strategies – these policies, practices, and dispositions -- are well-intentioned, their effects are not neutral. While at once an acknowledgement of the hardships encompassed in workers' worlds, at the same time, these organizational strategies are depoliticizing, helping to contain frustrations that might otherwise boil over (eruptions that, at the very least, threaten the institution's normal functioning) and working to occlude the role that both working conditions and larger, structured inequalities play in generating the hardships workers experience. Key to this occlusion is the establishment of practices and propagation of orientations within the workplace that individualize experiences -- treating experiences structured by larger economic and social forces as subject primarily to individual control -- and encourage workers to keep focused on the always, almost **possible** rather than the **probable**.

Workplaces and Intimate Social and Economic Worlds

I am not alone in suggesting that the workplace may be an especially potent site for understanding these tensions, emphasizing its salience as a social space in which “the chasm of social difference plays out in close proximity” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001:xi). Three scholars' work, in particular, has helped me realize the significance of Rolling Meadows as an intimate, social space in which upper-level staff encounter intimate aspects of lower-level workers' social and economic worlds – particularly those relating

to their immobilities -- and the knotty consequences of these encounters for both workers and the workplace.

The first of these is Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo who has explored the arrangement of paid domestic work in people's homes in the United States in a powerful book entitled, *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence* (2001). In her book, she lays out the complicated and deeply ambivalent relationships that develop between paid domestic workers and their employers. The second of these is Ara Wilson. Her compelling analysis of the inseparability of "intimate life" (2004:11) and economic phenomena locates the workplace as a key site in which economic, social, and cultural worlds come into contact with each other. Both Hondagneu-Sotelo and Wilson highlight the loaded meanings social identities take on in the workplace. In the workplace, individuals differentially positioned by their existing cultural and social identities and their market locations as workers, customers, managers, and employers interact. Through these embodied interactions, larger economic conditions are made intimate, while, at the same time, their intimate identities shape the economic exchanges in which they are involved. The last of the scholars whose work has influenced the analysis I undertake here is Michael Herzfeld (2005) whose work on "cultural intimacy" (especially in light of his earlier work on bureaucracies) suggests ways in which the workplace is animated by important alliances and divisions among individuals and groups based on commonalities and differences in social identities. His work has been instrumental in revealing how, under certain circumstances, the expression of intimate aspects of social worlds propels forceful and definite reactions by those exposed to them; reactions aimed, in part, at rejecting the validity of these worlds and

denying their basis in any on-going, broadly shared political, social, or economic conditions.

Intimacies in the Workplace: Chasms of Social Difference

Hondagneu-Sotelo's book investigates the modern resurgence of "private paid domestic work" -- the arrangement in which "one individual cleans and cares for another individual or family" -- that has resulted from the intersection of changing gender, labor, immigration, and economic conditions in the United States (2001 *ix-x*). Due to a nexus of demographic and economic factors the arrangement has become one, predominately, between white middle- to upper-class families as employers and immigrant women as employees. Hondagneu-Sotelo focuses on how women are positioned in this arrangement; on the women who act as employers and the women working as the housekeepers and nannies. Such a focus is justified, she argues, by observations during her research that the negotiation of the relationship between employer and employee invariably fell on the shoulders of the women in the employing households.

Hondagneu-Sotelo argues that these relationships between women on different sides of the employer-employee divide are characterized by an awkward ambivalence. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo, this ambivalence reflects the deep discomforts such arrangements raise for "modern" American women. First, there is the discomfort around the gendered division of labor and, what might be considered, the "contracting out" of domestic, or household labor. Even in a society with considerable gender equality such as the United States, social expectations and pressures are such that women still feel responsible for the work of raising children, cleaning a house, and maintaining a household. Replacing one's own domestic labor by paying another woman to do it

engenders confusing and conflicting feelings for many women. However, equally important is the unsettling discomfort the women in the position of employer experience in coming face-to-face both with the inequalities between their social and economic positions and those of the women they employ and with the ways in which these inequalities benefit them. As Hondagneu-Sotelo summarizes it, for middle- and upper-class American women the fact that they can afford to pay another woman to come into their homes and do domestic work “poses an enormous paradox” (2001:x) and forces them to be aware of the “chasm of social differences” between them and the women they employ (2001:xi). As she writes,

Contemporary inequalities notwithstanding, Americans have no titled aristocracy and no feudal past, and the omnipresent ideology of freedom, equality, and democracy clashes with what many American employers of domestic workers experience in their lives (ibid).

Hondagneu-Sotelo documents the various strategies employers engage to deal with their ambivalences about this arrangement, strategies that include avoidance as well as those designed to forge a more intimate relationship with the women they employ. For Hondagneu-Sotelo, these efforts represent employers’ attempts to depoliticize the inequalities bound up in their relationships with their employees (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001:xi)

Intimacies in the Workplace: The Collision of Larger Economic Conditions and Intimate Life

In her book, *Intimate Economies: Tomboys, Tycoons and Avon Ladies in the Global City* (2004), Wilson suggests that one of the consequences of the emergence (and the subsequent entrenchment) of a modern, capitalist economy is that it brings ever greater number of people into the conditions of wage labor and into the institutional

settings in which that labor is orchestrated -- the workplace. One of the ubiquitous features of modern, daily living, it would seem, is to spend large chunks of one's day within the physical and social spaces -- as disparately and variably organized as those spaces are -- of a workplace. In Wilson's account, alongside with and in addition to its role in the bureaucratization of labor, the workplace becomes an acutely meaningful social space, a space of collective life.

Intent on understanding how "intimate life...crosses into the public arena of markets and jobs" Wilson crafts the phrase "intimate economies" to capture this relationship between the intimate and the economic (Wilson 2004:11). She designates intimate economies as an "umbrella term...for the exploration of 'private' issues in 'public' economic spaces" (2004:199, notes). One of the public economic spaces that is particularly key, according to Wilson's analysis, is the workplace.

Through her analysis of five, different venues in which modern capitalism and commercialism are vividly expressed in Thailand -- including a detailed analysis of the historical emergence of the modern department store in Thailand; the economic and social dynamics of relationships between workers and foreign customers at a go-go bar;¹⁵ the social significance of indoor shopping malls; the demands for new kinds of cosmopolitan workers to staff cable television companies; and the popular embrace of new modes of entrepreneurialism promoted by direct sales companies like Avon and Amway -- Wilson shows how the workplace has become a particularly charged site in which intimate realms of life and the larger economic world interact and through which their effects on each other are mediated. In the case of the single mothers working as CNAs at Rolling Meadows, interactions between these domains are anchored, in large

¹⁵ A go-go bar is a type of bar in which women work as hostesses, dancers and companions.

part, by the conditions that have become emblematic of the low-wage labor market – particularly the low-wage service sector – in the United States. As Wilson’s work reminds us, the workplace becomes not only the immediate purveyor of the economic conditions that shape these women’s intimate social worlds, but also one of the key sites in which encounters between these larger economic conditions and intimate worlds are actuated.

Cultural Intimacy

Michael Herzfeld’s exploration of the larger social significance of intimacy has introduced the idea of “cultural intimacy” (2005). For Herzfeld, to describe something as culturally intimate is to describe a phenomenon that is, at once, deeply familiar as well as tied to and exposing of a “deep sense of cultural and political vulnerability” (Herzfeld 2005:14). Herzfeld argues that it is this duality –the simultaneous recognition of a phenomenon as familiar coupled with the discomfort this recognition engenders – that makes something the subject of cultural intimacy.

Through their familiarity, culturally intimate phenomena force uncomfortable awareness of vulnerabilities in which the larger whole is implicated. The phenomena, thus, become signifiers of these larger vulnerabilities. As a result, the familiarity of culturally intimate phenomena is deeply uncomfortable; constituting something that must be disavowed. In Herzfeld’s nuanced attention to the troubling consequences of familiarity -- familiarity with “social experience at the most intimate levels” (Herzfeld 2005:4) – and the deep discomfort this can engender, there is much that is richly relevant to understanding workplace dynamics at Rolling Meadows.

Troubling Familiarities

It is the familiarity of the economic and social worlds of the single mothers at Rolling Meadows that allows them to become both the basis for a “common sociality” (Herzfeld 2005:3) as well as a disquieting presence to upper-level staff. To some extent, upper-level staff are already familiar with lower-level staffs’ social, cultural, and economic worlds. This familiarity is based in commonalities shared between lower-level and upper-level staff. However, through the associations among staff that the workplace both makes possible and unavoidable, upper-level staff develop another kind of familiarity with these worlds, a familiarity that can be disconcerting. As a result of dynamics that are particular to their roles in the workplace, upper-level staff become familiar with intimate aspects of lower-level staffs’ lives that reveal uncomfortable realities.

At Rolling Meadows, almost all of the nursing care center’s upper-level staff were women: the Director of Nursing, the nurse managers, the administrative staff, and most of the business office staff. Many, if not most, were mothers. The Director of Nursing was herself, for a period of time, a single mother, as was one of the nurse managers (who was also, however, the only black woman among the nursing care management staff). As women and, even more especially, as mothers, upper-level staff and the single mothers who worked as CNAs shared the experience of being subject to gendered expectations and obligations surrounding their social roles as mothers, daughters, and sisters. Few were unacquainted with the difficulties caregiving responsibilities could entail: children who got sick; children who had school or behavioral problems; parents, or other family members, whose health declined; loved ones who died. As mothers, daughters,

girlfriends and wives, most knew what it was to experience stresses and strains in their family or non-work lives that could not be contained to non-work time; personal or family issues that spilled over into the workplace. Of course, these stresses and strains were of a different order and kind for the single mothers working as CNAs; not least because the single mothers had less access to the interpersonal and financial resources that can make it easier to manage the dual responsibilities of work and home.

But while upper-level staff could certainly relate to some fundamental aspects of the single mothers' intimate worlds, there were other ways in which the hardships single mothers faced were foreign to them. Although they experienced their own financial stressors (credit card balances, mortgages, car payments, children's college expenses, etc.), upper-level staffs' higher incomes and occupational "capital"¹⁶ largely exempted them from the degree and kind of economic struggles that the single mothers faced. In this way, they were set apart from the single mothers who worked as CNAs.

In addition, with the exception of one nurse manager, the other upper-level staff, as well as the administrative staff and the business office staff, were all white. The vast majority of the nurses were also white -- or immigrants from countries such as the Philippines, Ghana, or Nigeria. The CNA staff, however, was much more ethnically and nationally diverse. The largest percentage of CNAs were African Americans, with a slightly smaller percentage white and a considerably smaller percentage (roughly 15%) immigrants (primarily, from various African and Asian nations). Compounding these differences was the fact that not only was the CNA staff disproportionately black, but, the black CNAs were disproportionately single mothers.

¹⁶ By occupational capital I mean the human capital (the combination of credentials, skills, and experiences) that allow one to have potential to obtain better-paying jobs; to make a sideways or vertical occupational move.

These differences – especially the noticeable absence of more black “faces” among the staff with higher status and authority – had potent resonances among the nursing assistant staff. Some of the black CNAs I got to know perceived particular co-workers and colleagues to be racist.¹⁷ I overheard enough commentary by and witnessed enough interactions involving these white staff to often agree. Even in cases where I wouldn’t have interpreted particular actions or behaviors as racist, I could certainly understand the basis for the perception. From conversations I had with white staff, I knew some were uncomfortable around their black colleagues and perceived certain treatment from them as racially motivated. All the way around, race was a loaded filter through which staff evaluated co-workers’ actions, behaviors, statements, and preferences. And though there were plenty of work friendships and even romantic relationships that crossed racial and ethnic lines, walking into the staff lunch room, or break room, or attending any of the mass staff events, the tendency for groupings to coalesce around race was notable.¹⁸ These distinctions highlight some of the axes

¹⁷ These perceptions were in relation to other CNAs, nurses, and one of the nurse managers who was white. However, I never heard any staff member attribute racism to the other nurse managers (one of whom was Asian-American, the other African American), to Jill, or to Chantal, the Director of Nursing.

¹⁸ At the same time, the patterned ways in which staff were treated by their nurse managers, by Jill, or by Chantal, the Director of Nursing, defied easy categorization by race. On the most superficial level, the white higher-up staff did not treat blacks CNAs’ any worse or any better than their white counterparts. Requests were granted, rules more leniently or exactly applied, exceptions granted or disallowed in ways that seemed, overtly, to transcend race. On a deeper level, however, the intertwining of race and culture makes these ostensible neutralities a little muddier. In his book *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People* (2005), John Hartigan Jr. observes that it is impossible to consider race apart from culture. As he notes, race operates through cultural categories; race both inflects and is shaped by judgments Americans make about whether or not certain people appear to be ‘nice’ or ‘friendly’ or ‘hardworking’ – each reflecting crucial categorical demarcations that ostensibly make no mention of race, but that certainly operate at times in racial registers (8).

Here Hartigan makes the point that it may be impossible to disentangle the interpretive lens through which CNA’s behavior and work performance was evaluated from its concomitant basis in racialized ideas about appropriate disposition. I found that many of the black women I got to know were highly attuned to racialized expectations of what constituted “professional” comportment and were also attuned to the desirability of behaving that way around supervisors, particularly Chantal.

through which lower-level staffs' worlds were both familiar to as well as set apart from upper-level staff.

However, even in the ways in which the experiences of upper-level and lower-level staff were not commensurable with or familiar to each other, otherwise unfamiliar elements of the economic and social worlds of lower-level staff become familiar due to the recurrent presence of these elements in the workplace. Intimate aspects of single mothers' lives were often extant in the workplace. The economic and social vulnerabilities that are, in large part, a product of their low wages and occupational immobility also make their intimate lives more vulnerable to the workplace. When a single-mother's car breaks down and she doesn't have the money to repair it, her economic options condition her ability to keep that information out of the workplace. Frequently without the money to call a cab, or without social networks dense with people who might be able to loan her a car, a broken down car translates into a phone call into work explaining her inability to arrive. The inability to pay for the repair often requires asking to cash out her vacation hours or, occasionally, for an advance on her paycheck.

Through both their common experiences and in their repeated exposure to lower-level staffs' social, cultural, and economic worlds, upper-level staff become familiar with these worlds. At times, this familiarity joins upper and lower-level staff together in a common sociality that coheres them together. This coherence makes certain forms of empathy and identification with each other possible. As I'll discuss in a following chapter, while these identifications encourage loyalties that benefit lower-level staff, they also adhere lower-level workers to the organization and help to enlist them in projects that ultimately benefit Rolling Meadows' organizational goals. Yet, the familiarity of

lower-level staffs' worlds is also a source of discomfort within the workplace; a discomfort resulting from the vulnerabilities these worlds reveal.

While familiarity with another's intimate experiences is commonly thought to bind people together and, thus, promote social coherence, Herzfeld asserts that this familiarity can equally elicit forms of abnegation, as well. The fact that familiarity can propel these negative reactions, reactions that seek to distance the phenomenon in question and invalidate it, can be understood with reference to the important contention of Herzfeld's argument that cultural intimacy is rooted in larger vulnerabilities. What constitutes these vulnerabilities is variable, defined by and dependent on particular contexts. But within the logic of cultural intimacy, what makes familiarity with a given phenomenon uncomfortable is that the phenomenon serves as a signifier of these vulnerabilities.

Vulnerabilities

If what makes something culturally intimate is that it springs from a "deep sense of cultural and political vulnerability," then when vulnerable aspects of lower-level staffs' worlds are revealed in the workplace, these revelations can have troubling implications. On the most immediate level, there is the literal vulnerability of the women. Much of what is revealed in the workplace about single mothers' lives indicates just how imperiled these women are, economically and socially.

The concept of cultural intimacy suggests that the revelation of uncomfortable realities, or vulnerabilities, propels reactions attempting to deny their validity and their basis in any on-going, broadly shared political, social, or economic conditions. Applying these ideas to Rolling Meadows, we might anticipate that when certain aspects of lower-

level staffs' intimate worlds are brought into the workplace, we would find evidence of efforts to disavow these realities; efforts to foreclose recognition that these realities might be connected to conditions shared by the larger community. I suggest that these dynamics can be illustrated through the very different reactions by upper-level staff to two incidents that occurred while I was conducting fieldwork at Rolling Meadows. The first incident revealed vulnerabilities that, though unwelcome, could be seen as politically and economically neutral. The second betrayed vulnerabilities that viscerally signaled the ways in which women's marginalized economic and social status could expose them to literal dangers.

Vulnerabilities of the Body

At the end of September 2004, a white nursing assistant in her early 20s who worked on the second floor of the nursing facility gave birth to a stillborn. Like most pregnancies among staff, Shannon's had been a topic of considerable, happy interest among her co-workers. Staff regularly enquired about how she was feeling and how preparations for the baby were going. When she brought pictures in from her sonograms, co-workers congregated around to get a look.

Late in the pregnancy, however, Shannon began to experience unusual and uncomfortable symptoms. As word of potential complications spread among her co-workers, speculations were traded about what might be wrong. The combination of staff's medical expertise and personal experiences with their own pregnancies resulted in a low-spoken consensus that her symptoms indicated something worryingly amiss. On a visit to her doctor, the worst suspicions were confirmed: the baby had died in uterus. The sad and unwelcome news was transmitted among those who knew of Shannon's

pregnancy. And when Shannon was admitted to the hospital for the delivery of her stillborn child, her absence was noted in solemn, veiled exchanges.

Shannon and her husband, Mike, an employee in the maintenance department at Rolling Meadows, decided to hold a funeral for their stillborn. The announcement of the funeral was met with an outpouring of sympathy from the staff at Rolling Meadows. A number of staff attended and many who didn't contributed to the money collected for Shannon and Mike. The management at Rolling Meadows sent a flower arrangement. Workers known to be close to Shannon and Mike were given explicit permission to reschedule their shifts so they could attend. For those unable to reschedule their shifts, it was implicitly understood they would not be penalized for their absence. And marking an exceptionally rare deviation from the normal operation of the scheduling office, Jill, the scheduler, and Michelle, her assistant, left the scheduling office un-staffed so that they, too, could attend the visitation at the funeral home.

Vulnerabilities of Dependence

In January 2005, Rolling Meadows hired a new weekend receptionist, a younger black woman named Charlene. I saw Charlene only occasionally, either when I dropped by on the weekend, or when she covered an evening shift for another receptionist. Management staff, who rarely worked weekends or evenings, similarly, had limited contact with her, although they seemed to share the impression I had of Charlene: warm and friendly, quick to smile. While I saw Charlene infrequently, I heard of her through others, through staff working on weekends with whom she seemed to forge friendly, easy bonds. As I later learned, Charlene and Nikki, a nursing assistant who had been

employed for a couple of years at Rolling Meadows, had been close friends for years. It was Nikki who had convinced Charlene to apply to Rolling Meadows.

Nikki, a young, extremely attractive, black woman, was well-established at Rolling Meadows. Her brother worked in the kitchen and a cousin was an outgoing and popular member of the physical therapy team. Additionally, having grown up and gone to high-school in Ypsilanti, Nikki was socially connected to a number of staff on different units, through siblings, or friends of friends. So, although Charlene's hours made her peripheral to the main interface of Rolling Meadows, she came into Rolling Meadows already connected to a nexus of staff.

On May 22, 2005, I was walking in downtown Ann Arbor when I noticed a headline in the *Ann Arbor News*: "Mother of 4 shot dead; suspect arrested: Ypsilanti Twp. woman, 25, had recently split with him." The strikingly attractive, black woman smiling for the camera in the photo looked familiar. Curious, I pulled one of the papers out of the rack, turned to the inside page and realized that the woman was Charlene, the part-time receptionist at Rolling Meadows.

According to the story, Charlene had been "hanging out with friends"¹⁹ at her apartment late Friday night. Her two youngest children were asleep in the back bedroom while her two older children were spending the night with their grandmother. Around 4 a.m. Saturday, someone buzzed to be let in and Charlene went outside to the entrance landing to answer the door. At the door was her ex-boyfriend, the father of her two youngest children, from whom she was recently estranged. As she opened the door, he shot Charlene "multiple times just inside the entrance of the apartment," turned and immediately fled, jumping into a waiting van in which another woman, allegedly a

¹⁹ Quotes are taken directly from the Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti newspaper accounts.

girlfriend, was behind the driver's wheel. Charlene apparently staggered back into her apartment where her friends were assembled, collapsed, and died.

The newspaper article went on to say that Charlene had been with her ex-boyfriend "on and off" for five years and had just recently made a determined effort to break things off with him once and for all, "kick[ing] him out of their Ypsilanti Township apartment" just a few weeks before he murdered her. A close friend of Charlene's told the newspaper that the ex-boyfriend had been harassing Charlene for the past two weeks and on Friday "had been calling the victim all day."

As soon as I finished reading the article, I called Tye and asked her if she'd heard the news. She had. A friend and co-worker from Rolling Meadows, Ayasha, had heard the news from Nikki and Ayasha had then called Tye. Tye knew of Charlene's death well before the news hit the Ann Arbor paper.

When I came into Rolling Meadows the next day, I expected the place to be buzzing with shocked and disturbed discussion of Charlene's death. Instead, there was an almost palpable silence about it. When Althea, one of the nurse managers and a black woman, came to visit Jill in her office, Jill pointed to the copy of the Ann Arbor newspaper I had brought in with me. Althea, not having seen the Sunday paper, hadn't heard the news and was stunned by it. As she read through the article, she loudly exclaimed her disbelief over the details of the murder, inhaling sharply when she realized that two of Charlene's children had been at home when their father shot their mother. She repeatedly noted how terrible all of this was for Charlene's children. As Althea read excerpts of the story aloud, Jill mentioned that Rolling Meadows should organize some

kind of in-service about domestic violence, noting darkly that it was a relevant topic for many staff.

I had to leave Rolling Meadows for a couple of hours for a doctor's appointment. When I returned, I asked Jill if I had missed further discussion of Charlene's murder. She shook her head "no," adding, "It was like it never happened."

As the week unfolded, the muted reaction to Charlene's murder persisted. I was finding it hard to make sense of the atomized reactions to Charlene's death and raised this confusion with Jill: "her death seems so invisible -- isn't there, at least, going to be some announcement of the details of her funeral?" Jill speculated that the circumstances of Charlene's death were too "low class" for Rolling Meadows. The details of her life, her abusive relationship, her murder by her ex-partner, in front of her kids: these suggested a life-world incongruous with the middle and upper-class image Rolling Meadows actively cultivates.

The combination of Althea's disquiet at the news of Charlene's death with the fact that she was both a Nurse Manager and the only black woman in a nursing managerial position, made me want to know more about how she interpreted Rolling Meadows's outward abnegation of Charlene's death. In approaching her about this, I got the sense that Althea felt unsettled and defensive about the lack of a more coordinated, official response. She reported that the Director of Nursing, Chantal, had said Rolling Meadows would send flowers to the funeral. But she admitted she was both perplexed and dismayed that no one had yet taken the initiative to organize a collection for Charlene's kids. Althea repeatedly stressed how sweet Charlene was and how terribly

bereft her four children were now. It was clear Althea found the circumstances of Charlene's death deeply sorrowful.

Althea observed that the current managerial response was in sharp contrast to how they had dealt with other tragedies involving staff. She wondered aloud if the conundrum could be explained by the fact that in the case of these other tragedies (the stillbirth described above and another death, the death of a staff member's child) the tragedies hadn't led to the staff member's disappearance – the affected staff had come back to work. In this case, Althea noted, Charlene was gone. Maybe, in her absence, it was easier for Rolling Meadows not to deal with her. Althea confided she was bothered by the apparently discrepant responses.

In making sense of Rolling Meadows' management reluctance to even acknowledge, let alone publicly react to, Charlene's murder, was Althea right -- was it simply the fact that in her death, Charlene became a void around which Rolling Meadows' management didn't know how to coalesce? Nursing homes are subject to high rates of staff turnover and although perhaps experiencing a lower rate of this than many places, Rolling Meadows was no stranger to incidents where a staff member was abruptly fired or just stopped showing up for work. And, on these occasions, the normal routines and rhythms of Rolling Meadows continued with minimal disruption; only rarely did these departures incite much reaction among the staff. Maybe Charlene's death was akin to any sudden absence of a worker: an open slot to fill on the schedule.

It was also true that Charlene, in comparison to Shannon, had not been at the center of the day-to-day rhythms of the nursing care center. She hadn't had much time to forge sympathetic bonds with co-workers or supervisors. And, in fact, during her short-

lived tenure at Rolling Meadows, she had received a verbal reprimand for her uneven punctuality. While evincing a stellar attendance record for the first two months of her employment, in the middle of March she had started, routinely, to show up 6 to 12 minutes late.²⁰ Then, all of a sudden, at the beginning of April she had two weekends in a row where she was exceptionally late. On one of these weekends, she showed up for a shift an hour late. The following weekend, she showed up for a shift two hours late; for the other shift that weekend she was ten minutes late. In retrospect, piecing this pattern together with the information recounted in the newspaper stories, it was very likely that her attendance record reflected the escalating tensions and tumults with her live-in boyfriend. Based on the quotes from her friends and family, Charlene had “kicked out” her boyfriend around April 23rd.

In response to the two weekends where she was so exceptionally late to work, she received a reprimand from her supervisor. After she died, I saw the record of it in Charlene’s file. The supervisor mentioned she had reminded Charlene that such tardiness during her probationary period (the first three months of employment) could risk her job. After receiving that disciplinary notice, the next weekend Charlene showed up exactly on time. This was the weekend right before she apparently evicted her boyfriend from their home. It’s not hard to wonder if the risk of losing her job added to her determination to break free of him.

Charlene’s erratic attendance had likely impaired how she was viewed by management staff. In addition, perhaps there was some way in which the absence created by her death propelled her into a null space that management at Rolling Meadows was

²⁰ Rolling Meadow’s policy was that workers had a grace period of 8 minutes from their normal starting time before it was counted as a “late arrival.”

used to papering over. At the same time, it was hard to shake Jill's claim that Charlene's death brought Rolling Meadows' management into too close contact with a life-world they found discomfiting and unpalatable. Jill had framed this as a public relations issue; that the sordid details of Charlene's death were too at odds with the world Rolling Meadows crafted for residents, or, at least, with the idea of Rolling Meadows as a well-mannered, safe, civilized place.

Yet, it is striking that while both the incidents involving Shannon and Charlene illuminated aspects of intimate worlds subject to disturbing vulnerabilities, it is clear that the implications of these vulnerabilities were of a profoundly different order. In Shannon's case, her situation signaled the vulnerability of the body to biology. And in the crushing potency of that biology, her experience still represented an ostensibly neutral aspect of the human condition, conventionally construed as outside the realm of the social – outside of the political and the economic. The revelation of Charlene's intimate world, on the other hand, exposed vulnerabilities engendered by being economically and emotionally dependent on an abusive man.

The vulnerable economic and social status of the single mothers at Rolling Meadows is deeply shaped by the economic conditions they experience in the workplace: their wages and limited options for improving that wage. Thus, the expression of their vulnerable status also implicates conditions in the workplace. Of course, these conditions are part of larger economic and social structures that do not originate in the workplace. The exposure of the vulnerabilities in these women's intimate worlds does not just implicate the workplace, but connotes the larger unequal arrangements and conditions that structure their worlds and the workplace. The wage and occupational immobility

these women experience, immobility that is potently shaped by the characteristics of their jobs, exposes cultural and political vulnerabilities that are acutely American: the uncomfortable distance (and dissonance) between these women's everyday lives and "American democratic ideals" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001:ix-x) regarding upward mobility and the rewards of hard work.

The Unique Relevance of the Workplace

American society is still considerably segregated by race²¹ and class (Briggs 2007; Iceland, Sharpe, & Steinmetz 2005; Massey and Denton 1993).²² Through the gamut of arenas that constitute adult Americans' everyday social geographies, in their neighborhoods, churches, and leisure activities, Americans still have surprisingly limited opportunities to interact in regular and sustained ways with people who are not like them, particularly across divides of race and class (Briggs 2007). Yet, research suggests such segregation is often less pronounced within workplaces (Ellis, Wright, & Parks 2004). Broadly speaking, workplaces tend to be populated by relatively (and the emphasis on *relatively* is important here) heterogeneous assemblages (ibid).

As a result, compared to the other social spaces of everyday life, workplaces may be one of the few domains in which people from diverse class and ethnic backgrounds routinely engage with each other in an on-going way. This has especially potent consequences in relation to the working poor. The degree of segregation that characterizes much of American life makes workplaces one of the few venues where

²¹ My use of the term *race* here reflects the term used in the literatures on these topics. I further discuss the use of this term in the next chapter.

²² Although residential segregation has been declining somewhat over the past two decades, it has still remained relatively obdurate (Iceland 2002).

Americans can intimately encounter the economic struggles of the working poor.²³ The 1996 restructuring of the public welfare system may have made this all the more so. As the restructuring impelled even the poorest and least advantaged American citizens to enter the labor force, ever greater numbers of low-income individuals are in workplaces and interacting with co-workers, supervisors, managers, and higher-ups who may be dissimilar in their backgrounds. The workplace can thus be understood as one of the rare social spaces in which the economic and social struggles of marginalized American citizens are likely to be intimately visible to and confronted by Americans who are economically (and socially) better off.

This makes workplaces a particularly critical site, therefore, for understanding both the nature, as well as the consequences, of these encounters. How do workplaces, as organizations, manage the economic struggles of their least advantaged employees? How are these struggles experienced by, engaged with, responded to, or ignored by supervisors, administrators, managers and those higher-up the bureaucratic chain?

Based on my fieldwork at Rolling Meadows, I would suggest that one answer to these questions is that workplaces may be an especially potent site for understanding how the larger structural inequalities that shape American society are depoliticized. Rather than encouraging workers' economic and social struggles to be framed as outcomes of collective circumstances, the organizational practices, policies, and mechanisms at Rolling Meadows had the effect of re-articulating these struggles as individual issues, reflecting individual circumstances. The larger economic inequalities that affected lower-level staff were translated into issues that could be addressed through scheduling, overtime, and benefits. Economic difficulties and the complex social problems these

²³ At least, outside of the settings of social service agencies and charities.

often led to were recast instead, as we saw in the case of Charlene, as issues of attendance and punctuality, recast as behaviors that could be addressed as issues of work performance.

Through the Lens of Welfare Reform

I began my graduate studies in the aftermath of the most radical restructuring of the U.S. welfare system since its inception in the late 1930s, a restructuring that brought issues surrounding low-income single mothers, poverty, and work into the American public discourse in new ways. In 1996, the United States Congress, with significant bipartisan support, enacted new legislation that reconfigured how income assistance and other public benefits were to be provided to very low-income families, transforming what had been an entitlement system to one designed to serve only those who met stringent work and behavior requirements.²⁴ Officially entitled the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act [PRWORA], this legislation emerged out of a mounting consensus that those receiving welfare benefits (the vast majority of whom were single mothers) lacked the necessary motivation and incentives to work, and, consequently, became mired in welfare dependency (e.g. Mead 1986, 1992; Rector

²⁴ Prior to President Clinton signing this new legislation, any family that was poor enough was entitled to cash assistance. The main goal of welfare reform, however, was to countermand the perceived entitlement “culture” associated with the welfare system. Thus, the existing system was replaced by one designed to provide only temporary cash assistance and provide it only to those whose employment evidenced their efforts towards self-sufficiency. To maintain eligibility, recipients were required to work a minimum of 30 hours a week (this was later revised to a 40 hour a week stipulation). In addition, the receipt of welfare benefits became time delimited: individuals could not receive more than a lifetime total of five years of assistance (or less, subject to state discretion). As encapsulated in the bill’s official name, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, this legislation reflected a shift in the driving ethos of public assistance from social provisioning to personal responsibility (Waxman and Lambert 2003:3) (see also Quane and Rankin 1998:769; Schram 1995; Seecombe 1999).

1995). As envisioned through this legislation, the solution was to compel low-income single mothers into the labor market.

Underpinning the overhaul of the federal welfare system that became known as “welfare reform” was a surfeit of prejudicially negative ideas about low-income single mothers, ideas that were highly racialized, gendered and classed. As Ange-Marie Hancock has argued, this was hardly surprising as low-income single mothers exist “at the intersection of marginalized race, class, and gender identities.” (Hancock 2004:2) While a sizeable literature has documented the historical evolution of these marginalized identities in the United States and the specific baggage attached to them throughout the debates over welfare reform,²⁵ I am particularly interested in the ways these representations were used to legitimate a wholesale public policy intervention directed almost entirely toward modifying individual-level phenomena rather than larger conditions affecting the labor market (Hancock 2004; Henly 1999; Katz 2001). Through the policy apparatus it brought into being, including the welfare-to-work programs that were tasked with the goal of inculcating participants in the appropriate orientations to the labor market,²⁶ welfare reform institutionalized an understanding of poverty that emphasized the causal role of individual behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics over structural constraints (Mills 1996). That the legislation passed with such overwhelming bi-partisan support was both a reflection of as well as an instantiation of the degree to which, as Michael Katz has written, “poverty...slipped easily, unreflectively, into a language of family, race, and culture rather than inequality, power, and exploitation” (Katz:1989:8).

²⁵ See Linda Gordon (1994), Ange-Marie Hancock (2004), Michael Katz (1989; 2001), Gwendolyn Mink (2002), Alice O’Connor (2001), Jill Quadnango (1994), Karen Seccombe (1999), among others.

²⁶ See Sharon Hays, *Flat Broke With Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform* (2003).

My interest in single mothers' experiences in low-wage work has its origins in these debates. I was particularly influenced²⁷ by the growing number of critiques²⁷ that questioned the presumptions made about low-income single mothers and their experiences in the labor market, presumptions that had an, arguably, questionable relationship to empirical data. Reading through the literature that proliferated in the aftermath of welfare reform, particularly the literature designed to inform welfare-to-work programs, it was commonplace to read assertions that women transitioning off of welfare would need training in the most basic elements of everyday work realities.²⁸ Resource materials produced by the Welfare Information Network (WIN),²⁹ an influential non-profit "clearinghouse" for human service agencies, expressed the concern that many women would not possess the so-called soft-skills needed to navigate the norms of paid work culture; they would need to be taught "problem-solving and other cognitive skills, oral communication skills, . . . work ethic, and interpersonal and teamwork skills" (Relave 2000). As such reports were but one indication, running through the debates over welfare reform (and in its wake) was a tendency to frame low-income single mothers' apparent inability to sustain themselves in the labor market as a consequence of the kind of people

²⁷ See Karen Secombe *"So you think I drive a Cadillac?": Welfare Recipients Perspectives on the System and its Reform*. Boston, MA : Pearson Allyn & Bacon, 2006; Gwendolyn Mink, Gwendolyn. *Welfare's End*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998; 2002.

²⁸ Cecilia A. Conrad. *Soft Skills and the Minority Work Force: a Guide for Informed Discussion*. Washington D.C.: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 1999; Wilhelmina A. Leigh, Deitra H. Lee, and Malinda A. Lindquist. *Soft Skills Training: an Annotated Guide to Selected Programs*. Washington D.C.: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 1999.

²⁹ WIN is now the renamed *Economic Success Clearinghouse*. It is a project of the non-profit, *The Finance Project*, a well-respected entity founded and funded by a number of major grant-making foundations. The Finance Project exists to provide "research, consulting, technical assistance, and training" to those working in what might be broadly defined as the areas of social welfare, or human services. The Economic Success Clearinghouse describes itself "a clearinghouse for developing, financing and sustaining effective policies and programs that support low-income and working poor families." (<http://www.financeproject.org/index.cfm?page=22>; accessed March 30, 2008).

they were (Hancock 2004). Even when the focus was on less subjective qualities than their communication or teamwork skills, the dominant explanation for these mothers' lack of economic self-sufficiency was that it was an outcome of attributes and statuses that were a part of who they were: unmarried, lacking in formal education and marketable skills, in possession of questionable work ethics and, typically, non-white. Their ostensible lack of labor market success was seen, thus, as a population issue rather than a labor market one.

The extent to which analyses of low-income single mothers' economic plights have been preoccupied with population issues rather than labor market ones is reflected in the fact that, until very recently, very few explorations of low-income single mothers' experiences had even incorporated analysis of the conditions of their labor. My dissertation contributes to a recent body of scholarship that seeks to redress this imbalance through careful attention to and analysis of low-income single mothers' experiences as workers and, more specifically, as working mothers. This new scholarship emphasizes the critical role that labor market forces play in structuring women's employment options and opportunities.³⁰ Shifting attention away from the characteristics of low-income single mothers, these scholars instead place greater causal weight on the characteristics of the jobs and the conditions within the workplace – to, among other features, the low wages paid, the limited benefits provided, and the restricted “opportunities for advancement” (Corcoran et al: 2000:258). Through this focus on the characteristics of the jobs, these scholars argue that it is possible to understand low-income single mothers' struggles in maintaining employment and

³⁰Among the most notable of the scholarship in this vein is that done by Julia Henly 2003; Laura Lein et al. 2002; and Elaine Waxman and Susan Lambert 2003.

achieving economic self-sufficiency as outcomes, to a significant extent, of the jobs themselves.

Among the most innovative of these studies has been a set of collaborative projects undertaken by Julia Henly and Susan Lambert (along with their colleagues). The original study for this project, entitled the “Study of Work-Child Care Fit” (SWCCF) examined the experiences of low-income single mothers in low-wage service industry jobs from the vantage point of both the single mothers and their employers (Henly 2003; Henly and Lambert 2005; Waxman and Lambert 2003). While the study relied primarily on interview-based data, Henly and Lambert supplemented the interviews with workplace-based analyses in which they observed the regular working conditions and organization of labor in particular jobs. One of the novel aspects of their research design, which combined interviews with single mothers, supervisors and managers as well as observations in the workplace, was that it allowed them to consider not only single mothers’ accounts of their experiences and employers’ perspectives on these experiences, but, additionally, how these experiences were shaped by contextual factors in the work place. Through this work, Henly and Lambert have greatly improved our understanding of the ways in which specific work place policies and practices are especially burdensome for single mothers. Particularly salient is their delineation of the potent effects of working conditions on single mothers’ ability to both orchestrate and maintain child-care arrangements.

The Tendency towards Dichotomization

As trenchant as this recent scholarship has been, it has suffered from two significant drawbacks. The first involves the kind of data gathered. The primary source

of data has been interview material supplemented with observational data of a very limited duration. While interview data is enormously informative, it can provide only a partial view of people's everyday experiences. It requires people to represent their lives through language in a particular format of question and answer. Even semi-structured and unstructured interviews are limited by the disconnect between people's ability to represent their experiences through language – even if, under ideal circumstances, they wanted to fully represent those experiences – and the lived ontology or embodiment of those experiences. There is a world of meaning between what I *say* I do and what I *actually* do in any given moment. In addition, to really comprehend a research participant's lived experiences requires more than a singular encounter in an interview. It requires immersing oneself in another's perspective, an immersion that involves becoming an “insider” in the contexts and settings that characterize another's life (Harper 1987).

An equally significant limitation, however, is the fact that this scholarship has not been able to capture women's home *and* work lives with a commensurate degree of richness and complexity. Instead, these studies have embedded themselves solely in one domain or the other, either work or home. This mono-domain vantage point lends itself to a dichotomous picture of low-income single mothers' lives. Rather than observing interactions between the two domains, one domain is more fully realized, while understanding of experiences in the other domain is dependent entirely on discursive representations.

In wishing to build on the innovative contributions of recent workplace-based studies, yet avoid dichotomizing single mothers' experiences into that of either mothers

or workers, I designed a project in which I could conduct in-depth, participant observation of single mothers' work and home lives. By observing both the work and home lives of the same women, I was able to trace experiences from the workplace into the home and vice-versa. This allowed me to identify the contextual factors in each domain that were salient, as well as how experiences from one domain shaped experiences in the other.

Methods

I began fieldwork at Rolling Meadows in July 2004 and remained there for 15 months until September 2005. Because my initial interest was in learning how workers' negotiated their home lives at work, particularly in relation to scheduling issues, the Director of Human Resources decided it made most sense for me to start my field work at Rolling Meadows by shadowing the scheduling coordinator for the nursing care facility. Jill, the scheduling coordinator, was the staff member who scheduled all the nursing staff for the nursing home and dealt with any issues related to scheduling. With Jill's permission I began my fieldwork by taking up residence in her office, sharing her space, and becoming inculcated into the daily rhythms of the scheduling and staffing operations at Rolling Meadows.

I supplemented my 15 months of on-site fieldwork at Rolling Meadows with formal semi-structured interviews conducted with single mothers employed in the lower-level positions at Rolling Meadows, supervisors from different departments, and the Director of Nursing, Chantal. I completed a total of 32 of these interviews. I also analyzed policy documents produced by various levels of management at Rolling Meadows as well as documents evaluating employees' work performance. In addition to

the fieldwork at Rolling Meadows, I spent a great deal of non-work time with several single mothers who worked at Rolling Meadows, with them in their homes and their local communities.

Living with Tye

My most in-depth understanding of the home lives of the low-income single mothers working at Rolling Meadows, however, came through my relationship with Tye. In January 2005, six months after I had started my fieldwork at Rolling Meadows, and several months into my friendship with Tye, Tye began looking for a roommate with whom to share rental costs for her two-bedroom apartment. Due to the financial issues that I outlined earlier, Tye was looking to reduce her rental burden by finding a roommate to take the second bedroom. I wound up living with Tye and her son, Xavier, for the next seven months. I moved out roughly in concert with ending my fieldwork at Rolling Meadows.

It was by living with Tye that I fully grasped the importance of the anthropological method; the importance of, as Laura Lein has said, “the kind of learning that comes from being there” (Lein 2008). Even after having established a comfortable relationship and rapport with each other over several months, no amount of casual conversation could have made clear to me the visceral reality of the challenges Tye dealt with on a day in, day out basis. Laura Lein has suggested that ethnographic methods are ideally and uniquely suited to capturing what she has called “complicated strategies” (ibid). These are the kinds of strategies often drawn upon by the low-income, mandated by the circumstances of their lives. It was only by a prolonged period of “being there” that I was able to apprehend the nature and extent of the complicated strategies that

characterized so many aspects of Tye's life. It was one thing to think I had developed a good sense of how hard it was for the single mothers at Rolling Meadows to get to work on time, get their children to daycare or school, and try to make ends meet when they didn't have enough money to pay their bills. It was another thing to repeatedly witness, via Tye, how many phone calls had to be made, how much bartering with family, friends, and acquaintances had to go on, and how many favors had to be asked and swapped to patch things together enough to – more or less -- accomplish these tasks.

Without living with Tye I, additionally, wouldn't have appreciated the shifting fluidity of her position within these exchanges, in particular in relation to her family. Tye was not only a recipient of, but a provider of crucial forms of assistance, especially to her family members. I lived with Tye during part of the long period in which her brother, who lived in the apartment complex adjacent to Tye's, was without a car and had a job at a hotel in Ann Arbor. I was there in the early hours of the morning as he and Tye worked out who needed to be where when so they could decide which one would use Tye's (not very reliable) car to drive the other to work. I was also there during the two weeks when her sister and two teenage nieces moved in, camping out in the living room, because their electricity had been shut off due to non-payment. Observing the shifting roles she took on within her family helped emphasize the dynamic nature of these resource flows; how they flowed both in and out. It also underscored the importance of appreciating the larger, family contexts in which Tye was embedded and the ways in which each family member's situation had consequences for Tye; at times placing burdensome demands on her and, at times, serving as an essential source of support.

Prior to living with Tye I also had not fully appreciated the extent to which inadequate financial and domestic labor resources not only made accomplishing everyday activities complicated and subjected existing relationships to complicated demands, but could lead to series of cascading complications. For example, Tye's mother, Lydia, normally looked after Xavier on Wednesdays, her day off from her job at one of the big box stores. Tye didn't pay her mother for this care, but it was understood that, in exchange, Tye would help her mother with any of the extras she needed -- such as big grocery bills or tickets for bingo nights at the local bingo hall. Because this arrangement was not formalized, however, Lydia's request for these contributions was unpredictable. Sometimes Lydia would need money from Tye when Tye didn't have any to give. In these situations, Tye would call up her sister or her brother and ask to borrow money from them so that she, in turn, could pay her mother. Invariably, arranging to collect the borrowed sum and then get it to her mother involved Tye in complex logistics, especially during the almost year-long period when she and her brother shared her car.

I also would have had much less access to other black single mothers at Rolling Meadows without the more significant relationship that developed out of sharing housing with Tye. I initially found it more difficult to build the kinds of relationships with black CNAs that translated into invitations to spend time outside of work together than it was with white CNAs. In part, this may have reflected my lack of, what social workers call, adequate cultural "competency" (i.e., familiarity with appropriate cultural norms, ways of being, and cultural stores of knowledge). It was also true that I observed black women at Rolling Meadows being fairly circumspect in their interactions with white staff, in general, not just me. My friendship with Tye afforded me entry into a social circle of

black staff at Rolling Meadows to which I had previously not been a part. It certainly helped that Tye began to invite me to the social gatherings with co-workers that she occasionally attended. Additionally, becoming known as Tye's friend seemed to make some black staff more relaxed, open, and inclusive towards me. Living with Tye marked a significant turning point in my ability to build more personal relationships with a number of other, black single mothers who worked at Rolling Meadows.

Not Only Detroit

I decided to base my study in the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area of southeastern, Michigan for both theoretical and pragmatic reasons. Theoretically, I wanted to move away from what had become an almost fetish, within both academia and popular culture, of major urban areas as the sites where poverty and single-mothers exist. In recent decades, perhaps influenced by the aftermath of the urban riots in the 1960s and 70s and the epic urban drug trade and crime rates of the 1980s, research and public policy addressing poverty had become preoccupied with the poorest of the poor who were typically conceived of as urban, African American and set apart from "mainstream" society.³¹ As a result, poor single mothers had become conflated with the urban "ghetto."

Chicago and Detroit had become particularly iconographic of urban poverty. Their paradigmatic status as manufacturing centers left them especially vulnerable in the U.S.'s transformation from a manufacturing centered economy to one propelled by service and technology industries. The dramatic social and economic changes wrought by the transition became vividly etched on their physical and social landscapes. Yet, in many ways, the experiences that play out beyond these urban centers are at least as

³¹ Cf. William Julius Wilson

important to understanding the situations of low-income single mothers as those unfolding in the poorest urban areas.

The preoccupation with concentrated, urban poverty (and, if you were going to talk about the Midwest, Chicago and Detroit) has neglected a vast swathe of non-urban low-income single mothers' experiences. In fact, the experiences of low-income single mothers living in more prosaic settings of medium to small size towns, or in the sprawling suburban, quasi-urban, and exurban settings surrounding many metropolitan areas may signify more typical experiences of low-income single mothers.³²

I also chose Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti as research sites because I wanted to capitalize on the intimate social and cultural knowledge I had gained by living in the area for many years. Before I began my dissertation research, I had been working for a number of years as a volunteer in a variety of social service settings in the greater Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area, most recently as a tutor in an after school program for low-income youth. Through this volunteer work, I had become familiar with the considerable diversity of the area. I had spent time in a wide array of residential communities and was familiar with the local histories of many of those communities. I had gained appreciation for the complex relations between Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti residents, which were often divided along white and black, the University of Michigan and the non-university community, and between the professional class and the working class. I learned ways in

³² For example, of all the female-headed households with children in Michigan, 19% of them reside in the city of Detroit while 29% live in the suburban (or exurban) areas immediately outside of Detroit (the area collectively known as the greater Detroit Metro area, or Southeast Michigan) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey; accessed via the web, June 12, 2008 http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-context=adp&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_DP2&-ds_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_&-tree_id=306&-redoLog=true&-_caller=geoselect&-geo_id=04000US26&-format=&-_lang=en).

which these dichotomizations reflected accurate divides as well as the heterogeneities within those categories that undercut such neat dichotomies.

Analytic Strategies

After completing fieldwork, I spent several months coding the data from my field notes. Following the process outlined by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw in their book, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (1995), I began by reading and re-reading my field notes line-by-line and “analytically coding” them (143). This analytic coding involved identifying and categorizing “any and all ideas, themes, or issues” (ibid) my notes suggested. While doing this, I also began drafting theoretical memos to keep track of analytic insights that emerged from the data.

In devising analytic codes for my data, I looked to identify what was the most “ordinary” data in my field notes and what was the most “extraordinary.” The ordinary data was the data that revealed what were the most commonplace and routine aspects of single mothers’ home lives and of the day-to-day workings of Rolling Meadows. This was enormously illuminating to me. One of the consequences of having become an “insider” in these different venues was that many of these aspects of day-to-day life were not only ordinary and commonplace to my informants, but had come to seem so to me, as well. It was only by aggregating this information that I began to truly question and deconstruct its’ taken-for-grantedness, or as the anthropological theorist Vincent Crapanzano (1992) might suggest, that I began to “make strange” what otherwise seemed commonsensical about it. In making these aspects of home and work life strange, I was able to ask fundamental questions about their meaning and purpose; questions such as “what are people doing,” how, and why, etc.? (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw 1995:146)

I also identified the data that stood out due to its exceptional, or extraordinary status. This data was important for two reasons. The first was that its exceptionalism often helped reinforce what the normal, or expected state of things otherwise was. In other words, through its contrast with normal goings on, it brought the normal into sharper relief. Additionally, however, the extraordinary incidents or events in my field notes sometimes represented not a deviation from the normal state of things, but an exaggeration of them. As the anthropologist James Ferguson contends, such exaggerations can help make underlying dynamics or forces more visible. In making the argument that his case study of the workings of development agencies in Lesotho has validity beyond the unique context of Lesotho, Ferguson draws on the analogy of a color-enhanced photograph:

the unusualness of Lesotho's situation does not in itself make it irrelevant to wider generalization. Indeed, the exaggeration it produces, if properly interpreted, may be seen not simply as a distortion of the 'typical' case, but as a clarification, just as the addition by a computer of 'extreme' colors to a remote scanning image does not distort but 'enhances' the photograph by improving the visibility of the phenomena we are interested in...allowing us to see in stark outline processes that are likely present in [other cases] (Ferguson 1994:257-258).

It was both through the data that stood out for its ordinariness – for its frequent, repeated, mundane presence in my field notes – and through the data that stood out for its extraordinariness that I was able to discern the “informal logic(s)” (Geertz 1973: 17) that governed different aspects of day-to-day life for single mothers at home and at Rolling Meadows. For example, one of the most mundane elements of my field notes from Rolling Meadows was the amount of information I had accumulated related to scheduling negotiations. Rather than the fairly fixed system outlined in the official policy documents

at Rolling Meadows, my field notes showed that the day-to-day workings of the scheduling system were characterized by enormous flux, bartering and negotiation.

On the other hand, the data I recorded regarding how the school schedules of staff enrolled in nursing-related coursework were treated was striking for its uniqueness. Unlike every other category of scheduling request, staff asking for changes connected to nursing course schedules never had to negotiate these requests. Instead, these requests were automatically accommodated. Trying to explain both the normal hyper-activity that surrounded the scheduling process as well as the scheduling requests that received exceptional treatment provided insights into important, informal logics. Analysis of these logics became the basis for the chapters on home and work life that follow. Once I had discerned these informal logics, my next task, as Emersen, Fretz and Shaw (1995) outline, was to cull through the material from my field notes to find examples that most effectively captured, exemplified, and illustrated these logics.

The Plan of the Dissertation

Taking a cue from James Ferguson, at the very broadest level, this dissertation aims to be an ethnography of immobility, an exploration of the social experience of immobility (1999).³³ For the single mothers working as nursing assistants at Rolling Meadows, immobility colors and infuses both their work and home lives. This dissertation explores this experience of immobility by looking at the ways in which it

³³ In his book, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (1999), Ferguson actually undertakes an “ethnography of decline” (a project that has interesting echoes to Katherine Newman’s work on the downward mobility of the middle-classes in the United States (1988; 1993)). Although the women in my study are not experiencing the reversal of status that the miners in Ferguson’s work are subject to, I am intrigued by, as Ferguson is (and as Newman is, as well), the tensions evoked by the “shadow” of immobility within a social and cultural environment in which mobility has become an entrenched expectation for the “normal” course of things.

joins together the economic and social world of Rolling Meadows with the economic and social worlds of these single mothers. It does this by investigating a broad spectrum of phenomena, beginning with how the wage and occupational characteristics of these nursing assistant jobs shape women's home lives, posing particular social and economic challenges for them. For some of these women, the seeming insurmountability of these challenges heightens the appeal of alternative paths to mobility. These alternate scenarios of mobility will be analyzed in detail towards the end of the dissertation. In this way, the phenomena explored within the context of women's home lives serve as the bookends, the starting and end point of an exploration of the circuitous relationship between work and home. In between these two bookends is material addressing how the experience of immobility plays out in the workplace itself. These middle chapters investigate how tensions generated by the low wages and immobilities of these nursing assistant jobs feedback into the workplace, are incorporated into institutional practices, and, in various ways, are depoliticized.

To undertake these explorations, I begin, in Chapter 2, by describing the larger geographical and social context in which the phenomena analyzed in this dissertation took place and in which my observation of them unfolded. The first half of Chapter 2 describes the local economic conditions and the social geographies (particularly as these intersect with class and ethnicity) of the linked city of Ann Arbor and the town of Ypsilanti and the surrounding area in which they are embedded. I discuss the ways in which economic differences between Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti that are complexly interwoven with class, ethnicity, and space result in considerable, informal segregation between inhabitants of the two towns. I highlight the ways in which this plays out in the

commercial environments of each town, in particular, through an exploration of the kinds of commercial spaces thru which Tye and I habitually moved. The second half of the chapter moves on to a description of the physical and social space of Rolling Meadows and my social positioning within that space.

For most of the single mothers working as nursing assistants at Rolling Meadows, supporting their families on their low wages engenders considerable and sometimes overwhelming economic insecurities and social strains. By way of illuminating this, in Chapter 3 I explore these economic and social strains from the vantage point of women's home lives. Given the relatively high cost of housing and child-care and the narrow options for public transportation in southeastern Michigan, single mothers at Rolling Meadows face particularly vexing challenges in securing affordable housing, affordable child-care, and reliable transportation. In addition, this chapter contextualizes the issue of occupational immobility by detailing how the structured conditions of women's home lives constrain efforts to undertake the further education needed for occupational mobility.

I consider how these economic and social struggles play out in the context of one single mother's life in particular, Tye's. I illustrate the ways in which Tye's home life is profoundly shaped by the conditions of her labor at Rolling Meadows. As is true for many single mothers in the United States working in low-wage jobs, one of the economic consequences of these low wages is that they embroil Tye in a complicated relationship with the State. Tye attempts to make ends meet by supplementing her wage income with public supports ostensibly designed to help working mothers like her. Her desire to maintain eligibility for these critical public benefits, however, encouraged her to make

unenviable choices. I highlight the ways in which, ultimately, these unenviable choices result in her greater economic vulnerability.

While these economic and social strains are centrally experienced by the mothers and their families, in Chapter 4, I show how they reverberate and resonate in equally dramatic ways within the workplace itself, encouraging the formation of particular bureaucratic policies, labor practices, and dispositions towards career development by managers. In this chapter, I discuss how workers' chronic need for income greater than what their regular wages provide is a central feature not only of day-to-day interactions among nursing assistants, administrative staff and management, but of the very structure of the workplace. I show how the chronic gap between nursing assistants' income and expenses is not only recognized -- both implicitly and explicitly -- by the nursing home management, but is assimilated into bureaucratic and labor routines in ways that, ultimately, benefit operating costs.

Chapter 5 takes the ideas developed in Chapter 4 and extends them into an analysis of the way in which tensions surrounding the occupational **immobility** of nursing assistant jobs is, to some extent, deflected by management's express encouragement of the pursuit of extra-work, postsecondary educational trajectories. Nursing assistant jobs are enveloped in what might be considered a layered immobility. The occupational structure of nursing assistant jobs combined with the structured characteristics of many of those employed as nursing assistants creates a dual immobility that is difficult to surmount. In the face of this, I suggest that management's active investment in staff's postsecondary educational efforts both feeds off of and lends support to an ethos of social and economic mobility in which structural impediments are downplayed and even

overshadowed by an embrace of the individual's capacity to surmount obstacles, regardless of how difficult. Keeping attention focused on the always, almost possible, management's disposition towards staff members' educational efforts helps to depoliticize the larger inequalities that structure these workers' potential for mobility -- to individualize their situations and mitigate more direct acknowledgement of the conditions that structure their mobility prospects.

Finally, Chapter 6 is dedicated to analysis of the (non-educational) extra-work efforts of several single mothers at Rolling Meadows to secure a more comfortable, stable future by circumventing the constraints of their current circumstances. These attempts to transform their circumstances engage them in phenomena as varied as on-line dating, membership in a multi-level marketing sales organization, and the subprime mortgage lending market. In analyzing these efforts, I pay particular attention to the ways in which the women "rely on and reformulate conventional gendered, class, and ethnic identities" in pursuit of their "entrepreneurial dreams" (Mills 2005:4036). I suggest that the extent to which these efforts have a quixotic quality indicates how limited these mothers' options are for otherwise overcoming the constraints they face. Several of these strategies expose women to financial entities that employ, arguably, questionable business practices. In discussing the women's involvements with these entities, I highlight changes in larger political and economic structures that have encouraged businesses like these to see lower-income populations as particularly profitable markets.

CHAPTER 2

LOCATIONS

This chapter details the larger geographical and social context in which the phenomena analyzed in this dissertation took place and in which my observation of them unfolded. The first half of the chapter describes the local economic conditions and the social geographies (particularly as these intersect with class and ethnicity) of the linked city of Ann Arbor and the town of Ypsilanti and the surrounding area in which they are embedded. I discuss the ways in which economic differences between Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti that are complexly interwoven with class, ethnicity, and space result in considerable, informal segregation between inhabitants of the two towns. I highlight the ways in which this plays out in the commercial environments of each town, in particular, through an exploration of the kinds of commercial spaces thru which Tye and I habitually moved. The second half of the chapter moves on to a description of the physical and social space of Rolling Meadows, the workplace that is a major focus of this study, and my social positioning within that space

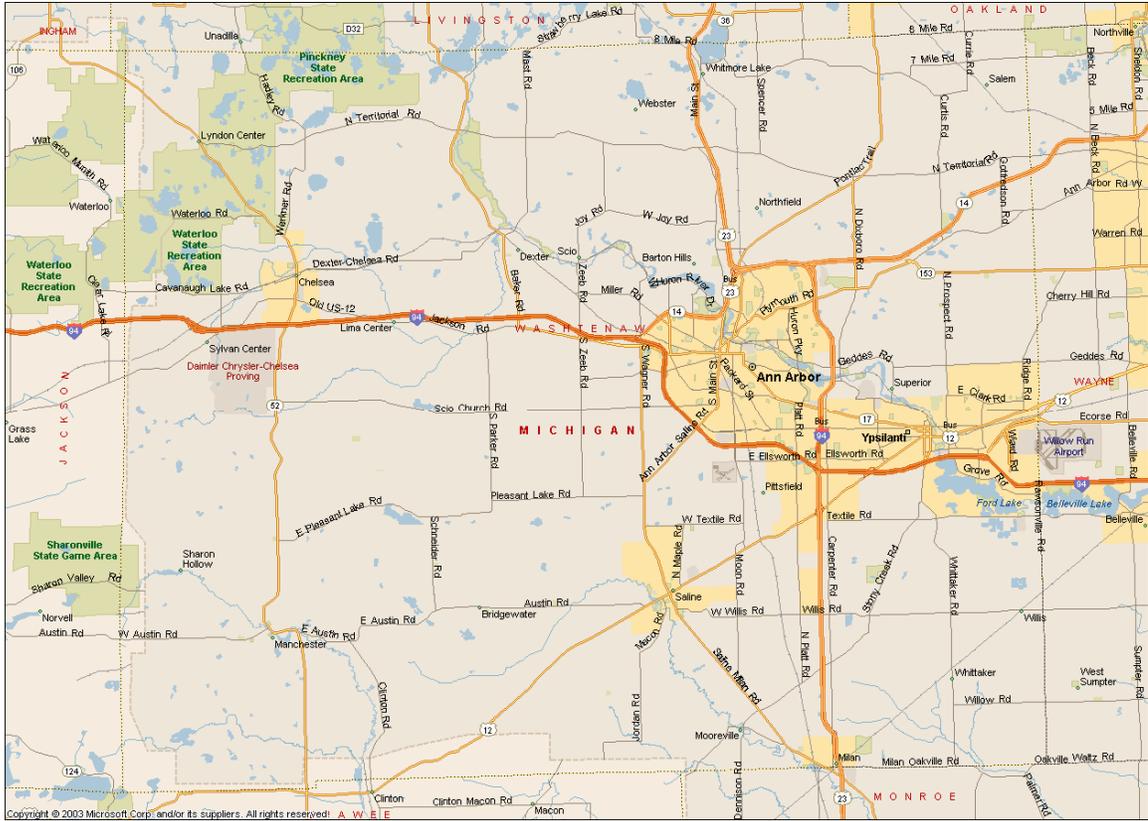


Figure 1: Map of Washtenaw County, Michigan

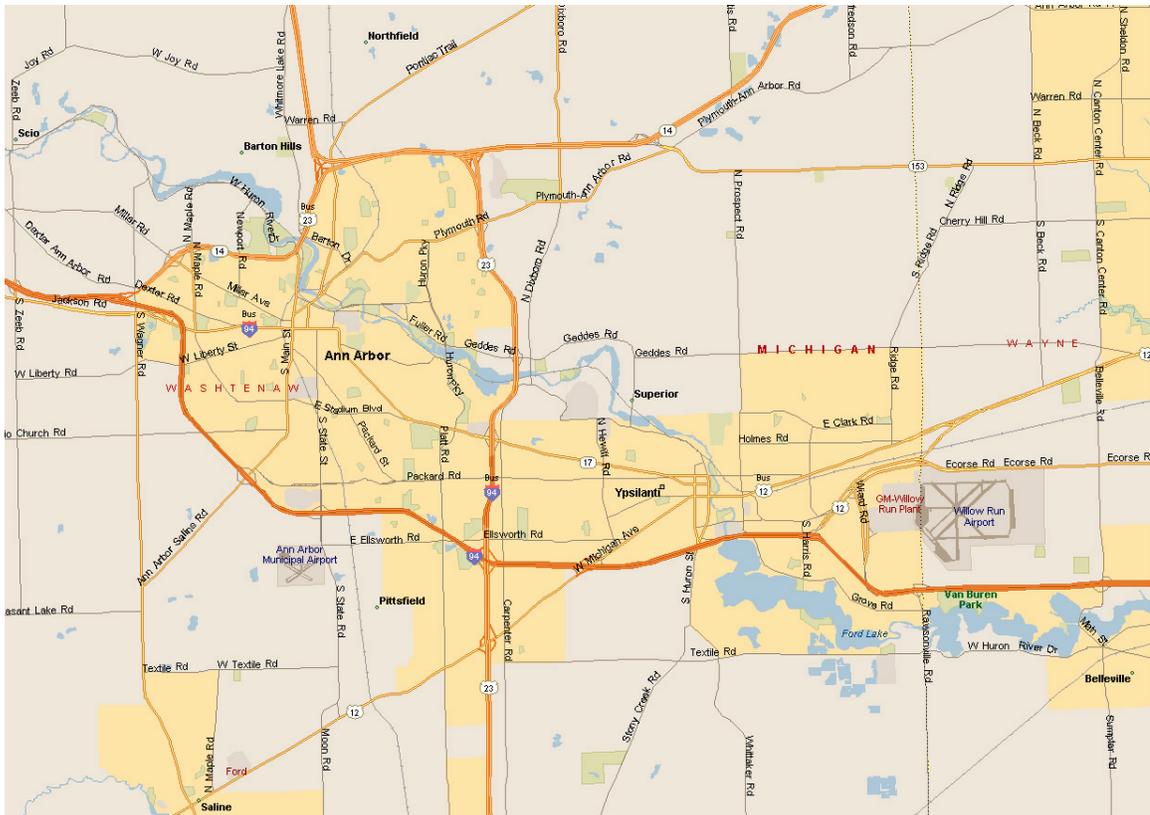


Figure 2: Map of Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti and the surrounding townships

Ann Arbor - Ypsilanti

Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti are the two largest towns in Washtenaw County, Michigan, a county whose make-up reflects, in miniature, the polarized composition of the state. From east to west, the county transitions from the densely populated, industrially and commercially developed, ethnically-mixed landscape of the metro Detroit area to a middle swathe dominated by a rapidly suburbanizing landscape of high-end new housing developments and strip malls, to a western landscape of villages, farmlands, and small lake communities home to an almost exclusively white population.

In the middle of the county sit Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, two towns that merged into a single mass several decades ago. Parallel to each other along a north to south axis, Ann Arbor (the bigger of the two) looms over the western edge of Ypsilanti. While

spatially contiguous, on a number of important economic and social indicators, Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti are markedly dissimilar places. Their geographic hyper-proximity puts these economic and social contrasts into sharp relief.

Although both are home to substantial state universities, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor has a full-time, non-student population over five times that of Ypsilanti's, 114,024 compared to 22,362.³⁴ Other demographic distinctions equally stand out. In 2000, Ann Arbor's population was 74% white and 9% African American while Ypsilanti's was 61% white and 31% black.³⁵ In addition, median income for a household in Ann Arbor was \$46,299 with approximately 16% of the population living below the official poverty line. In Ypsilanti, the median income for a household was \$28,610 with more than 25% of the population living below the poverty line.

These demographic dissimilarities between Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti are vividly expressed in their built environments, particularly their commercial and residential landscapes. Ann Arbor designates itself as "Tree City," a designation that seems fitting as one drives along the city's roads. The hem of trees lining the streets forms a virtual canopy of green over many roads. This greenery is noticeably absent as one drives into Ypsilanti and continues eastward. With the notable exception of the residential area near Eastern Michigan's campus (historically home to a number of professors and university

³⁴ Demographic data is taken from the 2000 U.S. Census (<http://censtats.census.gov/data/MI/0602616189160.pdf>; accessed March 18 2007)

³⁵ Absent from this discussion of the racial, or ethnic composition of the two towns is the fact that Ann Arbor is also home to a relatively high percentage of Asian Americans (12%) while Asian Americans constitute only 3% of Ypsilanti's population (the population of Latino residents in both places is roughly the same, just around 3%). Without reducing "race" to a conversation about white vs. black, I would contend it is critical to focus particular attention on residential patterns associated with these two groups. There is a long history of conflict, discrimination, and inequalities between white and black inhabitants of southeastern Michigan that lends a particular salience to the contemporary situation of white and black residents in this area (Sugrue 1996; Thompson 2001).

administrators) and its proudly preserved but modest-sized historic district, Ypsilanti and its eastwards sweeping corridors represent a landscape in which nature was long ago subdued by the forces of industrialization and commercialization, forces though that now seem conspicuously in decline.

The visual dissonance of their townscapes reflects disparities linked to their distinct economic histories. Ypsilanti is a town built around the auto industry while Ann Arbor is built around, what has come to be characterized as, a knowledge-based economy, showcasing a number of technology and research & development companies. In many ways, Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor exemplify geographies shaped by the so-called old and new economies. Their respective fates as places are strongly shaped by the decline of industrial production in the United States and the rise of a technology-informational-service-based economy. Comparing them side-by-side draws attention to the spatial, or geographic, aspects of this transition.

Ypsilanti represents an almost paradigmatic case of an auto-industry town, its landscape marked by the rise and decline of that industry. Starting in the 1930s, farmland was rapidly transformed into auto factories, commercial enterprises linked to auto production (tool and die shops, auto parts suppliers), thoroughfares linking producers to the expanding highway system, and businesses that served those employed in the industry (Peterson 2002). As the American auto industry continues its seemingly relentless decline, the empty storefronts and barren blocks of concreted land stand as testimony to that decline. In their place, businesses that reflect the changing incomes and consumptive practices of residents have emerged: used auto parts stores, used car dealers, rent-to-own stores, check-cashing outlets, dollar stores, and storefront ministries.

Ann Arbor, also, might be considered exemplary of a significant economic phenomenon: the emergence of a knowledge-based economy. Capitalizing on the University of Michigan's deliberate cultivation of partnerships between its researchers and industry, Ann Arbor has witnessed significant growth in technology, research & development, and information-based jobs (Dolgon 1994). As greater numbers of so-called new economy companies set up in Ann Arbor, there has been growing demand for highly skilled and highly educated workers. As a result, Ann Arbor counts a disproportionate number of residents with university degrees among its population.³⁶

These changing demographics are significantly reflected in Ann Arbor's built environment. Since the 1990's, Ann Arbor has become a high-end shopping and entertainment destination for the surrounding area: medium to high priced restaurants line the downtown area, along with retail shops catering to customers with plentiful disposable income. Most of its residential neighborhoods showcase well-maintained and relatively expensive homes. And even in the face of a larger, state recession, considerable new construction is going on within the city limits in the form of pricey new housing developments, office buildings, and retail spaces.

As Ann Arbor's economic growth fashions its terrain in new ways and attracts greater numbers of highly skilled and highly educated workers, Ann Arbor becomes a progressively exclusionary place in which to live and to consume. Until the very recent slump in the housing market, the increased demand for housing, as well as the growth of a population able to pay higher prices had pushed housing costs in Ann Arbor to some of

³⁶ From the U.S. Census Bureau's *American Community Survey (ACS)* 2003; (<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/Profiles/Single/2003/ACS/Narrative/050/NP05000US26161.htm>; accessed March 17, 2007)

the highest in the region.³⁷ Those with lower-incomes have been increasingly priced out of Ann Arbor's rental and housing market. Instead, what affordable housing exists in the area exists in Ypsilanti and the surrounding townships. This residential segregation of lower-income residents from Ann Arbor has particularly significant consequences for African American area residents who are disproportionately lower-income. As Ann Arbor's economic development has accelerated, its whiteness in relation to Ypsilanti has increased.

The commercial entities fostered by the relative economic boom in Ann Arbor similarly economically disenfranchise those with lower-incomes. Commercial entities develop in line with the consumptive needs and desires of a population (or, at least, with the perceptions of these). As Ann Arbor continues to draw highly educated, higher income residents to it, the kinds of stores, venues, and services that emerge are increasingly targeted to what might be considered bourgeois customers. Ann Arbor is full of businesses that cater to a well-educated population with significant disposable income: bookstores, restaurants, cafes, hair salons, spas, wine stores, gourmet food stores, expensive clothing stores, and art galleries.

The cumulative effect of these differences has created a relatively dramatic polarization between the two towns in employment, housing, and commerce. Most of the better paying jobs are in Ann Arbor, while almost all of the lower-priced housing is in Ypsilanti. And virtually all of the high end commercial outlets are in Ann Arbor while most of the low-cost venues are in Ypsilanti (or, on the borders of Ann Arbor). As a result, where residents work, live, shop, and spend leisure time is significantly segregated

³⁷ Washtenaw County Affordable Housing Needs Assessment "Executive Summary," accessed as a web document http://www.ewashtenaw.org/government/departments/community_development/index_html (accessed January 18, 2008).

between Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti by class and (due to the ways in which class in the United States is racialized³⁸) by race. For two towns so physically meshed together, the extent of social and spatial segregation between the populations is striking.

My fieldwork led me to become particularly attuned to the ways in which this segregation played out in the commercial landscape and in residents' engagement with that landscape. People's use of particular commercial outlets or venues is determined, to a significant degree, by their economic circumstances, and by their "tastes," or preferences for particular kinds of goods. As Bourdieu and scholars such as Daniel Miller, among others, have argued, individuals' preferences for consumer goods are bound up with the social meanings of those goods, meanings that are complexly shaped by class and culture (Bourdieu 1984; Miller 1998). Without getting into the enormous literature on consumption and consumer desire -- and the issues of commodification, agency, socialization and structures of inclusion and exclusion that entails -- it is possible to assert that consumer choices reflect elements of economic necessity as well as cultural dispositions, dispositions that Bourdieu stresses are profoundly shaped by class.

At the same time, people's preferences for goods are also shaped by the ways in which the providers of goods translate economic distinctions into social ones, creating social, or commercial environments in which certain goods are available and others are not, certain tastes are catered to and others not, and in which people feel more or less welcome. During my fieldwork, I was struck by the extent to which, from the vantage point of many Ypsilanti residents, particularly African American residents, commercial environments in Ann Arbor were racialized and classed not just through the relative costs

³⁸ See Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993) for one particular view on and historical accounting of what might be called the "racialization" of class in the United States.

of goods they supplied, but through the tastes and distinctions to which they appealed (Bourdieu 1984) and, as a result, felt exclusionary. Based on my fieldwork, I would suggest that the kinds of commercial spaces that are encouraged by (and then play a role in the continuance of) the respective economic conditions of Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti are both fed by and reinforce certain distinctions among inhabitants that are shaped by class and ethnicity. Much like the stark contrasts Elizabeth Chin observed between the commercial milieu of Newhallville, an “inner-city” neighborhood in Newark, and Newark’s downtown shopping area in her study of the consumer worlds of low-income black children in *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture* (2001), I found that the consumptive possibilities offered within Ann Arbor versus Ypsilanti – the consumptive practices catered to within each town -- were linked not just to needs, but to *tastes* that were critically racialized and classed (Chin 2001).

These distinctions were expressed particularly forcefully in the business strategy undertaken by one locally-based grocery store chain. For a period of time, the company crafted two, different versions of itself, one for the Ann Arbor market and one for the Ypsilanti market. In the early 1990s’, the Ann Arbor-based grocery store company, J & C Family Foods, Inc., planned to expand its existing base of 4 grocery stores in the Ann Arbor area to include two new developments. The first of these, like its existing stores, was to go under the family name, “Busch’s ValuLand.” The second, in the Ypsilanti market, was to go under the more winnowed-down moniker, “ValuLand.” At the time, the plan to open these two new stores was reported on in Crain’s Detroit Business.³⁹

According to the article,

³⁹ Constance Crump, “Independent Grocer Plans Two New Stores by Fall,” *Crain’s Business Detroit*, Jun 1, 1992. <ProQuest: proquest.umi.com>.

The 36,000-square-foot Ypsilanti store is scheduled to open in late July or early August with a modified warehouse format. Walls will be concrete block, to keep construction costs down. The new Ann Arbor store will be small but luxurious, with Corinthian columns, hand painted murals and contemporary aisle directories.

The ValuLand that the Busch's family opened in Ypsilanti was the closest grocery store to where I lived during my fieldwork and I can attest that its physical aesthetic reflected its low-cost design. Its structure, however, was matched by a similarly low-cost ethos in its goods and selection. It carried some mainstream brand-labels, but its shelving space was predominately given over to Spartan-brand (a national low-cost, "generic" food producer) versions of items. And, unlike its sister-Ann Arbor store, it carried no gourmet items. It did, however, stock specialty stock meats and cuts that tend to be more popular in black and Latino working-class areas such as pig's feet, intestine, and neck bone.⁴⁰

On one level, the distinctions between the stores J & C Family Foods opened in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti are a response to (at least, the perception of) differences in income levels as well as food preferences of potential customers in the two localities. But, as the Crain's article suggests, the respective consumer environments the company created were socially loaded. The different environments created distinctions more meaningful than variations in the kinds of good stocked. The focus on opulence in the Ann Arbor store and the spared-down aesthetic of the Ypsilanti store created certain kinds of social environments that both catered to as well as promoted different sorts of embodied dispositions and consumer tastes (Bourdieu 1984). Both through the actual goods the two Busch's stores carried as well as the social environments they created, the

⁴⁰ In the mid-2000s', the Busch family sold on its Ypsilanti store to another local, business entrepreneur. This businessman is of Middle-Eastern descent and while the shelves are still stocked with plenty of Spartan-brand items, it now also carries a significant percentage of middle-eastern specialties.

stores furthered the polarization of and the spatial segregation of those tastes and, by extension, the populations associated with them.

The ways in which this polarization was simultaneously produced by as well as a producer of economic, cultural and spatial distinctions was made particularly meaningful to me as a result of living with Tye. During the seven months I lived with Tye and her toddler, Xavier, while I often traveled back and forth between Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, this was an uncommon practice for both my Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti friends.⁴¹ I made these journeys not only because I maintained some social connections to Ann Arbor, but also, as the above discussion of the Busch's stores suggests, because most of the food I liked to eat was only sold at stores in Ann Arbor.

The occasion of my bringing my first bags of groceries from those Ann Arbor stores into Tye's apartment sparked off the first of many interesting conversations between Tye and me about food; in particular, about differences in our preferences that seemed potently racialized and classed (Bourdieu 1984). My trips to the Ann Arbor grocery stores prompted amused commentary by Tye that became a sustained topic of good-natured teasing. What I ate for breakfast, lunch and dinner became the subject of considerable amusement among Tye, her friends, and her family. I became the living symbol of a very racialized and classed "organic food eater."⁴²

⁴¹ In fact, few of my Ann Arbor friends ever ventured into Ypsilanti except, occasionally, to dine out at a well-known restaurant bar in the historic district of downtown Ypsilanti, Depot Town. Equally striking was that the vast majority of Rolling Meadows' lower-level staff members (white or black) I talked to had visited the downtown area of Ann Arbor no more than handful of times, if at all, over the course of their lives.

⁴² Tye thought the cereal and the bread I ate were especially unappetizing, but when she ran out of her own brand of cereal, she sometimes "broke down" and ate some of mine. I would also offer her sandwiches made on the organic, wholegrain bread I bought that she would occasionally be willing to try. Her reviews of the relative "weirdness" or, surprisingly, appealing taste of this food would be shared, conveyed with animated and humorous descriptions, at the lunch table during lunch breaks at Rolling Meadows. Her friend Ayasha who was a black Muslim and also had her own, unique dietary preferences and restrictions

The kinds of foods I preferred (organic, vegetarian, gourmet, health-food) weren't sold in stores in Ypsilanti, or, if they were, they were sold at prices even more inflated than in Ann Arbor. Instead, as the ValuLand store signaled, the grocery stores in Ypsilanti specialized in mainstream, national brands and lower-cost generic versions of those brands. They also sold a preponderance of heavily processed and snack foods. The grocery bags I brought back from my Ann Arbor shopping trips symbolized (and materialized) a very profound difference between Tye and me, not only in our tastes and spending practices, but in the landscapes, or geographies, these tastes and practices moved us through.

Like most of the women I came to know through Rolling Meadows, for Tye, residential, familial, leisure and commercial life centered on the corridor surrounding Ypsilanti and fanning east. Tye never went into Ann Arbor, except to work (at the nursing home or in private clients' homes) or visit her sister and, even then, both the nursing home and her sister's low-income apartment were on the very periphery of Ann Arbor. Instead, accompanying Tye on errands we traveled commercial corridors that were distinctly counter-posed to those in Ann Arbor; there was nothing tree-lined, or bourgeois about them; they took us past no trendy cafes, bookstores, expensive restaurants or art galleries. Spending a day off of work with Tye involved going to the lowest cost grocery stores (for Tye, even a national discount chain like Meijers was relatively expensive), the strip malls which housed African American hair stores and dollar stores, the credit union where she repaid a loan she still owed, the DTE bill center where customers could pay their utility bills in person with cash, money order or check,

would sometimes, laughingly, "defend" me saying that my bread wasn't "so bad" and she liked some "funky" stuff, too.

the gas station near our apartment complex where the gas station owner let Tye cash her work checks, or the bingo hall where she might join her mom for Thursday night bingo.

In large part, the fact that Tye's trajectory rarely crossed into Ann Arbor was economically determined, reflecting the commercial segregation of businesses catering to the low-income versus the higher-income between the two towns. But it also reflected the ways in which economic distinctions create certain kinds of social, or cultural spaces that are racialized and classed and feel more or less comfortable to inhabit (Bourdieu 1984). This was made particularly (and somewhat painfully) evident to me when our ongoing teasing, back and forth about our different preferences for food led me to playfully goad Tye into coming with me to see what Wholefoods was all about for herself.

Stepping foot into the large, open area where the bins and cooling units were stocked high with piles of organic produce and moving into the seafood and meats section, Tye's discomfort was palpable. The extravagant price of goods was off-putting to her, as was the "feel" of the place, perhaps, most noticeably, the skin color and dress of the other customers. She was quick to observe how overwhelmingly non-black the faces of the other shoppers were and noted that even the few black customers stocking their carts full of goods were obviously well-off. She made some wry observation that this was the kind of place where the only people she would see like her would be sweeping the floor or working the registers. To Tye the whole consumer aesthetic of the place and the embodied dispositions of the customers as well as the costs of the goods broadcast the economic and social divide between her and them and between this commercial world and the one to which her economic situation normally gave her access.

The journeys on which I accompanied Tye and the ones on which she accompanied me made me realize that, even as we shared the same living space, if I mapped out a typical day of errands and activities I undertook and a day Tye undertook, the map would show we barely moved through the same physical spaces. The striking spatial disconnect of our typical trajectories reveals not only deep differences in our individual tastes and needs, but how those differences structure our experiences sociologically and geographically. The Wholefoods grocery bags I brought into Tye's house represented the incongruities in the nature of activities we normally had to accomplish, the kinds of goods we desired and/or needed and could afford, and the locations of those goods and activities. Part of what this means, I would suggest, is that as a result of the complex interplay of economic, social and cultural factors and ways in which these become instantiated on physical and social landscapes, many middle and upper-income white people in Ann Arbor (and, arguably, the United States, more generally) can go through their daily lives with no more than passing contact with those who are economically and ethnically different from them. This makes the sites where these encounters do occur that much more meaningful.

Shifting focus, now, from the more macro perspective to a, perhaps, "meso" one, I turn from the larger, community context to the next strata of analysis, the organizational. The next layer of context is the place where I first met Tye and where I conducted my workplace-based fieldwork, Rolling Meadows.

Rolling Meadows

Rolling Meadows is a “continuing care retirement community”⁴³ situated on an expansive campus on the outer edges of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Surrounded by green, still relatively undeveloped land and buttressed by two highways that serve as boundary markers for the city of Ann Arbor, it seems to occupy a more remote location than, in fact, it does. While, in actuality, it sits only two miles from one of Ann Arbor’s main shopping districts, the disconnection from any tangible neighborhood gives it an isolated feel. The detachment from identifiable surroundings imparts a certain placeless-ness to Rolling Meadows, an anonymity that seems heightened by its traditionally ordered and cultivated grounds.

Reflecting a general trend in the provision of older adult care, Rolling Meadows provides a full spectrum of living environments for older adults. On one campus it contains a condominium development for fully independent residents, an assisted living facility for residents (who live quasi-independently in self-contained apartments but receive meal provision, limited medical care and housekeeping services), and a nursing care facility that provides both acute, rehabilitative care as well as long-term, permanent care options to a total of 163 residents. Although they are run largely independently of each other, with two separate management structures, the nursing care and assisted living facilities are joined together by a multi-floored corridor. The corridor that connects the two facilities houses functions shared between them: the facilities’ kitchen, staff cafeteria, administration offices, non-denominational chapel, beauty salon, gift shop, exercise room, and two large multi-purpose rooms in which activities and events for staff and residents are held. The latter spaces are open to everyone: residents, staff, and

⁴³ The phrase comes from Rolling Meadows’ website.

volunteers. The connecting corridor creates a buffer space between the dependent and quasi-independent populations, while also mediating occasional interactions between them in the common spaces. Walking down the long, windowless corridor, it's hard not to feel as if it also serves a symbolic function, transitioning one from independence to dependence.

Unlike the condominiums and the assisted living facility, the nursing care facility is not visible from the road. Instead, it comes into view as you drive into the secondary entrance for the campus, past the large staff parking lot and down a short slope that ends in a smaller parking lot abutting the visitors' entrance to the nursing care facility. The visitors' entrance, frequented by residents' families and other of their guests, volunteers, and members of various community groups, is somewhat secluded; a fair distance from either the staff or ambulance entrances that are up the hill, around the other side of the facility. The sequestering of the public entrance to the facility from signs of certain pragmatic components of residents' daily life – the entrance and exit of staff who bathe, feed, clean and care for residents, the ambulance visits that signal new arrivals, medical needs that exceed the facility's capacities, or final departures –denotes a desire to emphasize, perhaps, the sense of a residential development rather than a medical one.

Once through the double set of sliding glass security doors, the visitors' entrance brings you into an open reception area evoking both the elements of a formal living room and a professional office area. Although smaller and less ornate than the assisted living facility's entrance area, it seems clearly designed to both impress and reassure visitors of the professionalism of the care administered here. The reception area is flanked by the offices of the Director of Nursing, the Director of Admissions, and one of the three nurse

managers, serving to both showcase their importance to the facility and signal their availability and, thus, accountability to visitors.

The reception area is decorated in muted, floral tones accented by a richly colored maroon carpet. A welcoming tone is set by the placement of a settee and several armchairs set around a low level coffee table near the reception desk. The reception desk itself is decorated by a large vase of fresh cut flowers. Immediately in front of the desk is a cabinet on which there is an institutional sized coffee maker with hot plates for a pot of regular and decaf coffee and another for hot water. A full provision of hot chocolate, tea, sugar and nondairy creamer packets are laid out. To the right of the entranceway, an alcove contains a darkly stained, highly polished round table around which are set four matching high backed chairs similar to those one would find in a formal dining room. Throughout the reception area, the dark stained, Chippendale style furniture is covered with plastic coated upholstery. The coating serves as a not so subtle reminder of the physical condition of residents and an acknowledgement of the extent to which the elegant appearances of the facility are conditioned by certain practicalities.

All visitors to Rolling Meadows must sign in at the reception desk, noting their arrival and, upon exiting, departure time. Once signed in and given a “visitors” badge, guests can make their way to the residential units which extend behind the reception area to the left and to two floors above. The nursing care facility at Rolling Meadows consists of 4 separately administered units: 1 South, 2 South, 2 North, and 3rd floor. 1 and 2 South are dedicated to long-term residential care. 2 North is the rehabilitative unit transitioning people discharged from the hospital back to their homes or to an alternate, permanent arrangement. And 3rd floor is the long-term residential care unit for residents

with significant cognitive impairments such as Alzheimer's. As noted, all told, the nursing care facility can house 163 residents.

Rolling Meadows is a for-profit institution and while a certain percentage of its residents are covered by Medicare and/or Medicaid,⁴⁴ the vast majority of long-term residents are private pay. Catering to an above average income clientele, its residential costs are among the highest in the area. Reflecting the economic and social demographics of the surrounding area's population its private pay fees ensure that the vast majority of the residents in the nursing care facility are white.

All told, there are 212 nursing, rehabilitative, administrative, housekeeping and cafeteria staff working for the nursing care facility. 60 of these are full or part-time CNAs. As discussed in the introductory chapter, as with many other nursing care facilities, the ethnic composition of the residential population stands in marked contrast to that of the staff. Among the lower-level staff in nursing, rehabilitative care, housekeeping, and food service, more than half are non-white. Of the non-white staff, the largest percentage is African American, but they are complimented by a diverse population of non-native staff, including immigrants from Africa, the Philippines, Central America and South Asia. Among the mid-level staff -- the nurses, physical and occupational therapists and supervisors-- the percentage shifts, with a much smaller ratio of non-white staff, the majority of whom are immigrants. At the upper level, there are only a few non-white employees, a manager in housekeeping who is black, and two nurse managers, one of whom is also black and the other of whom is Asian-American.

⁴⁴ What this means, practically speaking, is that Rolling Meadows admits few people directly from Medicaid (people whose pre-existing income and assets levels have already made them eligible for public health-care benefits). However, it follows a common practice in the industry of allowing residents to transition from private fee-paying to Medicaid status, once their savings and other assets have dropped into the Medicaid eligible range).

First Locations: the Scheduling Office

The scheduling office was on the ground floor down a windowless corridor that came off like a spoke from the hub of hallways linking the reception area, the nursing care units, and the facilities' connecting corridor. The scheduling office shared the corridor with several other administrative offices including one of the nurse managers' offices, the general administrative assistant's office, the supplies office (which dealt with medical equipment and related supplies), the records office (where all paperwork related to residents' care was processed and stored), two medical offices where a visiting dentist and optician held clinics, and the staff break room.

Located just across from the staff break room and just a few yards down from one of the facility's main elevators, the scheduling office was simultaneously removed from the larger goings on throughout the building and adroitly positioned to catch nursing staff as they flowed off and onto their units during breaks or while transporting residents. Jill often took advantage of the flow of staff passersby, calling out to them from her open office door to ask if they wanted to pick up any shifts she had open on the schedule. Her peripheral vision was astounding; she could often spot a staff member she was in urgent need of tracking down while seemingly nose-down in paperwork. Yet, for all the traffic that went by, the combination of its somewhat more isolated location and the intensity of Jill's workload made sitting in the scheduling office with Jill sometimes feel like being in the engine room of a submarine where no matter what chaos ensued outside, all focus was on the furious demands of the tasks at hand.

Although the scheduling office was detached from the immediate happenings on each nursing unit, at the same time, it was a little like sitting in the Piazza San Marco in

Venice; a spot where, according to European folklore, if you sat long enough, you would see all the people you had ever known. Everyone from the nursing staff came to the scheduling office. Although some came much more frequently than others, everyone had to see Jill on a fairly regular basis. Any request to -- come in a little late or leave a little early, take time off, rearrange the days or shifts one worked, see how many vacation days one had left, check to see what overtime shifts were available, ask to swap one's regular shift with a co-worker, verify the holiday rotation one was on, double check that one had gotten fully paid for all the hours worked last pay period -- had to go through Jill.

The scheduling office itself was a narrow rectangular space. The left side was taken up by an array of filing cabinets and shelves stacked with binders and paperwork. An L-shaped desk followed along the right side to the back wall. Jill's computer and two phones occupied the corner at the desk's right angle. It was a small sized office, with barely enough space for the two chairs that were in it. The one nearest the door became mine. Over the next fifteen months, I began most of my days, Monday through Friday, sitting in the chair closest the door. For the first several months of my fieldwork at Rolling Meadows I left the office virtually only when Jill did, shadowing her on her frequent, repeated rounds through the nursing home.

The Dynamics of a Relationship: Jill and Me

Jill had agreed to let me take up residence in her office, in part, because she was happy for the company. Until a year ago, Jill had shared the office with Michelle, the general administrative assistant who was also Jill's scheduling assistant. A year ago, Michelle had been moved out into her own office just down the hall to allow them both to have more space to manage their jobs. Michelle's departure had left Jill somewhat

solitary. Although, on most days, she had a steady stream of visitors, for the most part, her interactions with staff involved either her applying pressure to them or them applying pressure to her. Jill was a highly social person and the combination of feeling a little isolated and the daily onslaught of scheduling stressors made her crave greater social companionship.

Jill was also friendly, abidingly kind, and had an unusually open manner (this latter quality making her not unlike, I suspect, many anthropological “key informants”). She willingly answered my questions and seemed to readily embrace the task of tutoring me in everything from the logistics of scheduling to the histories of interpersonal relations among various staff. Her openness also extended to more personal matters and very quickly our conversations included topics related to our families, non-work lives, and life experiences.

In part because Jill took it on as her duty to help further my study and in part because she liked me, Jill was a great facilitator of introductions. Jill unfailingly introduced me to every person who came into the office or with whom we crossed paths while we trekked through the units as she attended to the countless scheduling issues with which she dealt. She would point out who she knew the single mothers working each shift to be. And, along with her efforts to persuade these staff of some scheduling change she needed made, she would good-naturedly encourage them to talk to me. She had the disposition of a humorous carnival operator in these exchanges; her practiced pitch expertly attuned to her audience, “Do an interview with her – she’ll give you a gift card!”⁴⁵ She also included me in everything she did: inviting me into her meetings with

⁴⁵ Among the social sciences that more commonly conduct research in the United States on U.S. populations it is common practice to pay people to do interviews. For a number of reasons, I followed this

the nurse managers to talk about a scheduling problem or a staff member, taking me along with her to meetings with the Director of Nursing, Chantal, and encouraging me to accompany her as she dropped off paperwork at the business office. In this way, in a relatively short period of time, I came to meet most of the staff members – the nursing assistants, nurses, supervisors and other staff -- whose experiences animate this dissertation.

Being Made Sense Of

In May, before I began my fieldwork at Rolling Meadows, the director of Human Resources, Mary Chivens, sent out a letter to all nursing care staff informing them that I would be conducting research on the premises. The letter stated that I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan and that I was interested in learning about scheduling issues and issues related to balancing work and family, particularly in relation to single mothers. Copies of the letters were posted on each unit at the nursing station and tacked alongside the official notices on Jill's door. As a nursing care facility in close proximity to several universities and medical training programs, Rolling Meadows was accustomed to occasionally hosting researchers and research projects. Almost exclusively, however, these projects pertained to the residents and/ or various aspects of patient care. I was the first person whose project was expressly focused on the staff. In an effort to ensure that staff knew who I was and why I was there, I also pinned my University of Michigan student ID badge to my clothes and, in addition to Jill's

practice. I conducted a total of 32 formal, semi-structured interviews with single mothers from across all nursing care departments including housekeeping and dining services. For participating in these interviews, I paid each single mother \$15 in the form of a gift certificate to one of the local discount retail stores in the area. Working with a population of women who were both significantly economically and time stressed, reimbursing women for their time served two purposes. First, it was an acknowledgement of how much I appreciated their time and their contribution to my project. In addition, without some, even minimal, financial incentive I was likely to recruit a skewed selection of women; women who could otherwise afford to allocate such time to talking with me.

introductions, I would regularly remind staff that I was a graduate student doing research on how mothers, particularly single mothers, juggled work and home demands.

Yet, even with these measures, rumors circulated that I was training either to become Jill's scheduling assistant or replace her. These rumors competed with my attempts to ensure I was read as a researcher interested in learning about staffs' experiences, particularly in relation to home and work. Although it seems somewhat peculiar that my training process would have been so lengthy and downright cruel if it were so I could replace Jill (especially considering how quickly staffing transitions normally proceeded), I think several reasons explain why these rumors persisted. First, the long-term nature of my tenure and my ubiquitous accompaniment of Jill put me into a liminal space at odds with the parameters of familiar and knowable social roles at Rolling Meadows. Rolling Meadows staff were used to interacting with and working alongside non-staff others: residents' families, volunteers from the local community, aides who ran special programs with residents (such as sing-alongs, or life-history workshops) and student nurses who came in large groups for several weeks at a time to do clinical training. None of those roles, however, adequately corresponded to my presence.

This chasm between how I intended to be seen and how I was read by others also reflected important differences in cultural capital between me and many of the staff. Jill, for example, had immediately understood how my roles as student and researcher explained why I was at Rolling Meadows and what I would be doing while there. This was one of the reasons she served as such an effective champion of my project to other staff. Jill was somewhat atypical, though, among the nursing care staff. Few other nursing care staff, apart from the managers, had any direct educational experience with

the University of Michigan or much familiarity with what constituted non-nursing, non-health care academic experiences.

Finally, the plausibility of the rumor that I was training to become a scheduler reflected a widespread conviction that Jill's job was too stressful for anyone to endure indefinitely. This conviction was amplified by staff's awareness of difficulties in Jill's personal life and an assessment, by many staff, that these difficulties were negatively impacting her work performance. Some staff felt the unhappiness in Jill's personal life was causing her to lose some of the drive needed to continue doing the job as effectively as she had. For some staff, the idea that I was a scheduling coordinator in training was a relief; ensuring that either through helping prop up Jill, or by following in her footsteps, the system would continue to carry on as it had.

Whose Side Are You On?

In planning out my fieldwork at Rolling Meadows I was concerned about the consequences of being positioned with the scheduling coordinator. Although Jill had no direct disciplinary or supervisory authority, her position was an administrative one, placing her above the direct-care staff on the occupational hierarchy. I was apprehensive about how being identified with an administrator at Rolling Meadows would affect how I was viewed, particularly by the nursing assistants. Would I be seen as aligned with management and management's interests? As my tenure at Rolling Meadows unfolded, my growing awareness of how Jill's status was understood by staff and my developing friendships, particularly one with a nursing assistant named Tye, helped reassure me that, while my status was not straightforward or conventional, I was not seen as an ancillary to management.

Jill's Side

Jill occupied a surprisingly neutral role between management and staff, neither fully belonging to one nor the other while able to oversee and attend to both groups' interests. Her role as a neutral mediator between management and staff was an outcome of several factors, including her strategic assessment of what made her most effective, her role as the front-line person with whom staff dealt, and her disposition. Jill's willingness to accommodate a considerable number of scheduling requests, even when these requests violated official rules, helped establish her as someone who looked out for staffs' interests in key ways. Other actions enhanced this perception. Time and again, staff saw evidence of Jill's unflagging persistence in trying to find a replacement when someone called in sick, or juggling the schedule so someone could take off a shift they really needed to. While Jill's constant badgering of staff to pick up extra shifts was a source of irritation and frustration, staff also saw it as a sign of how hard she worked to prevent them from having to work short, or being stuck working a shift they really needed to drop.

Another important factor contributing to Jill's ability to be seen as an agent, if not perfectly in concert with staff, at least independent of management, was the fact that Jill was usually the first person at Rolling Meadows with whom staff interacted regarding any personal need or crisis that impacted their work life. When a staff member couldn't show up to work because her car had broken down and she didn't have the money to fix it, her toddler's asthma attack had gotten so severe he'd been admitted to hospital, her teenager had been picked up by the police, her boyfriend had hidden her car keys, or her mother was dying in a nursing home out of state, Jill was the administrative person with

whom they dealt; the person with whom they sorted out the implications for work. This fact combined with the kind of person Jill was – kind, empathic and caring – resulted in a great deal of confiding in Jill by staff of deeply personal, intimate matters. Not all staff were so forthcoming with Jill, nor were these intimacies confided without sometimes self-consciously strategic intent. But, these confidences reflected the fact that many staff genuinely trusted Jill.

Tye's Side

In addition to my status among staff being informed by the positive regard in which Jill was held, I also came to be seen as a close friend of one of the nursing assistants. This friendship accorded me access to one of the main social networks at Rolling Meadows, a network consisting primarily of African American staff that traversed across multiple domains of staffing: nursing, physical therapy, cafeteria, housekeeping and maintenance. In the fall of 2004, several months after I had started fieldwork at Rolling Meadows, I began to become friends with Tye.

I had first gotten to know Tye when she agreed to do a formal, semi-structured interview with me during the summer. During our interview, Tye's warm, humorous and incisive commentary had quickly transformed the formality of our role as interviewer and interviewee and we hit it off exceptionally well. In addition, her candid and insightful critique of both the content and style of my interview questions had encouraged me to ask her for help in revising my questions. After the interview, our relationship became increasingly friendly and familiar. As our friendship grew, I started to join Tye and her group of friends for lunch in the staff cafeteria and visit her on the floor during her breaks.

Tye had a compelling, charismatic personality. She was exceptionally interpersonally adept; developing friendly, jocular relationships with a diverse array of staff, not just across the various occupational domains at Rolling Meadows, but up and down the occupational hierarchy, as well. Joining Tye in the “smoke shack”⁴⁶ one afternoon, I sat on the picnic table bench alongside several other staff including Tye’s nurse manager, Bonnie; the Director of Nursing, Chantal; another nurse administrator, Ellen; an Assisted Living nurse; and some of the men from the maintenance staff. It was a few days before Thanksgiving and conversation turned to holiday plans. Commenting on how infrequently she cooked, Tye soon became the subject of good-natured ribbing from Bonnie and Chantal as she elaborated her idea of cooking: buy food and send it over to her mom to have *her* cook it. Bonnie expressed mock admonishment when Tye, continuing in this vein, asserted that cooking the Thanksgiving meal was her “mom’s job.” Bonnie retorted, “What’s so hard about putting a turkey in the oven?” With her characteristically droll spin, Tye responded that if it were left up to her, Thanksgiving would consist of some Oscar Meyers with a can of gravy poured over it. With barely a beat pause, she observed, “No different than what I hear Dining Services will be serving!” At this, the group broke into knowing laughter, with a few of the assembled affirming the sentiment of Tye’s statement.

This exchange exhibited characteristics that seemed typical of interactions I witnessed between Tye and a wide variety of staff members, patients, and patients’ families: funny, confidant, comfortably holding her own, not intimidated by other’s

⁴⁶The smoke shack was a corrugated metal shack positioned outside the staff entrance to the building. The shack had a roof, three full sides and a half-open fourth side to it. Although it was protected from the rain, it had no heating or air conditioning. The shack served as the designated spot for staff to take smoking breaks. It was a well-frequented spot as a significant percentage of staff from every occupational status and department were regular or occasional smokers.

status. As my friendship with Tye grew and became more visible at Rolling Meadows, a number of other nursing assistants, many of whom were African American, began being more familiar and inclusive towards me. Among these staff I got more “hellos” and smiles in the halls; small talk got more comfortable and frequent; and I began to be included in more of the intimate conversations about their work and non-work lives.

The Shadow of Race

At times, my greater inclusion into a social circle that was predominately African American was the subject of commentary by its members. This commentary involved implicit or explicit meditations on the differences that set me apart from others in the group: my educational status, age, childlessness and, most importantly, my race. Tye was the most frequent initiator of these meta-commentaries, particularly on the topic of race; throwing out observations on how my status as a white person positioned me in relation to conversational topics or interpersonal situations.

One of the key elements of my early interactions with Tye had been her incisive and very explicit observations about how racial (and class) differences affected our interactions. Typically, with other staff, these commentaries came into play in conversations around hair, food, music, and leisure activities. As I noted earlier, what I brought for lunch – usually my very natural-foods style whole wheat bread sandwich -- was a source of amusement and teasing; likewise, my lack of fluency with terms and techniques applied to African American hair and hairstyles. At times, my perceived differences provoked mirthful observations on how much my whiteness stood out. Sometimes, it occasioned the equivalent of a friendly slap on the back; a kind of “you’re okay with us” reassurance. It wasn’t always entirely good-natured, however. Tye

sometimes called me out on social faux pas she attributed to my ignorance of African American cultural norms. One of the most salient, particularly for my role as an ethnographer, was that, in Tye's view, I was "nosier" than what was normal for "black folks." Regardless of how much of my "nosiness" is attributable to my ethnic, or cultural norms and how much of it has to do with my objectives as an ethnographer (or idiosyncratic personality), Tye's assertion that there was a greater value placed on keeping your "business" to yourself among the African Americans she knew rang true to me.

Several of the formal interviews I had conducted with single mothers who were white had involved considerable level of sharing of very intimate, personal information about growing up experiences, relationships with men, and experiences of abuse, among other things. In addition, the conveyance of these intimacies during our interview seemed to translate into a desire to sustain a connection with me after the interview. In this way, I quickly became friendly with two of the white women I interviewed, spending time with them socially outside of Rolling Meadows. On the other hand, Tye had been exceptional among the African American mothers I interviewed in the level of candor she expressed during our interview (and, after). Even though I began to spend significant amounts of time with Tye and several of her African American friends from work, outside of work, in these women's homes, this social intimacy did not develop into the same level of "confiding" intimacy nearly as quickly, or as comfortably (if at all) as it did with the white single mothers from Rolling Meadows with whom I spent time.

The Meaning of “Race”

I'll end with a brief, theoretical reflection of the concept of “race” and my use of it as a term in this dissertation. Among U.S. academics who direct themselves towards the analysis of inequality in the United States, particularly those inequalities patterned around skin color or ethnic origin, references to black and white communities invariably use the term “race.” For many anthropologists, this is an unsettling practice. In general, anthropologists are very wary of using the term race to make distinctions among groups. The misuse of the term to make claims about biological differences among populations reflects an invidious history that anthropologists have long worked hard to counter. As John Hartigan, Jr. summarizes it, anthropologists have been at the foreground of work that critiques “various racialized logics that promote the notion that groups are essentially differentiated – experientially and in terms of innate capacities and dispositions – by race.” (Hartigan 2005:548). Instead, anthropologists tend to prefer the term “ethnicity” to emphasize the historically and culturally constructed nature of the formation of group, or population, identities and the meanings attributed to those.

However, Roger Sanjek, a well-respected anthropologist who has worked on issues of racial inequality in the United States takes issue with the use of the term “ethnicity” in relation to black and white communities in the United States. He argues that on the terrain of black and white politics in the United States, “ethnicity” too easily becomes a gloss for whites’ nostalgic attachment to their “ethnic” heritages (Sanjek 1994). In Sanjek’s view, in the American context, invoking the term “ethnicity” to describe differences between whites and blacks can be a means of avoiding the full

weight of the historical and on-going inequalities implicated by the use of “race” (see also, Harrison 1995).

For U.S.-based and focused scholars like Sanjek, the term “race” is used as a shorthand for “the politics of race” (Kelley 1997). To, again, borrow from John Hartigan, Jr., scholars working from this vantage point emphasize “the necessity of treating racial objectifications in their literal and figurative dimensions, as well as examining the relevance of these objectifications to daily situations and learning from the actual uses people make of them” (Hartigan 2005:4). My use of the term in this dissertation reflects that perspective and the history of scholarship on the politics of race in the United States.

CHAPTER 3

HOME LIFE

This dissertation is centrally concerned with the dynamic relationship between the economic and social worlds of the single mothers who work as nursing assistants and the economic and social world of Rolling Meadows. More specifically, it explores the ways in which the low wages and occupational immobility associated with nursing assistant jobs shapes women's home lives, posing particular social and economic challenges for them, as well as how tensions generated by these low wages and immobilities feedback into the workplace, are incorporated into institutional practices, and are depoliticized. To help set the stage for the further analyses of these phenomena, this chapter highlights one direction of this dynamic – the flow from work to home -- by illuminating, in detail, how the conditions of the job engender particular economic and social dilemmas for women's home lives. Additionally, this chapter contextualizes the issue of occupational immobility by detailing how the structured conditions of women's home lives constrain efforts to undertake the further education needed for occupational mobility.

I delineate the conditions of and in women's home lives through an in-depth account of Tye's experiences. I became the most familiar with the intricacies of Tye's non-work life and, while there are certainly aspects of her life that are idiosyncratic, I learned enough about other mothers' lives to know that the broad contours of her

experience -- in particular, the kinds of as well as the intensity of the economic struggles she faced -- were representative of many single mothers' experiences at Rolling Meadows. In what follows, I illuminate the ways in which Tye's home life is profoundly shaped by the conditions of her labor at Rolling Meadows. As is true for many single mothers in the United States working in low-wage jobs, one of the economic consequences of these low wages is that they embroil Tye in a complicated relationship with the state. Tye attempts to make ends meet by supplementing her wage income with public supports ostensibly designed to help working mothers like her. Her desire to maintain eligibility for these critical public benefits, however, encouraged her to make unenviable choices. I highlight the ways in which, ultimately, these unenviable choices result in her greater economic vulnerability.

“It wasn't supposed to be like this”

As Tye noted to me on more than one occasion, “this wasn't supposed to be the way my life turned out. I **know** my life is better than this.” On that day in late November 2004 when I had showed up shortly after she'd come home to find the notice of eviction proceedings taped to her door, she returned to this phrase again and again, a weary mantra. Sitting across from her in her living room that day, she had stood up and walked over to the bookshelf where she kept a cardboard box full of loose photos. She rummaged through the box, pulling out several photographs she then brought over to show me. One was a photograph of a leaner, very muscular girl in a green and white tank and pair of shorts poised to release a discus, arm fully extended back and above her shoulder -- a picture of Tye taken in high school. As she recounted, these had been glory days for her, a star shot-putter and discus thrower on the track team at Ypsilanti High

School. She had been so good, she said, that both Central and Western Michigan University had talked to her about athletic scholarships. She had dreamed of taking pre-med classes at college.

Instead, towards the end of high school she had gone through a period of partying and drinking heavily. And after one too many drunken nights of having unprotected sex with a guy she knew through school friends, she became pregnant with Xavier. Xavier's father, Carlton, suggested they should get married, but as she sobered up, Tye realized she barely liked Carlton, let alone wanted to be married to him. Tye's mother and step-father were so disappointed and angry and the resulting quarrels so heated, Tye felt she had to leave home. After bouncing around for a few weeks, staying with various people, she was able to gain admittance into a residential program at Father Pat's in Ann Arbor, a home for pregnant teenagers and young, first time mothers. While there, she finished high school by completing her GED.

Soon after Xavier was born, Father Pat's helped Tye establish herself in her first apartment. Once settled in, Tye found a child-care arrangement that worked well enough to allow her to go out and get a job. She was hired at Rolling Meadows, immediately making use of their program to obtain her certification as a nursing assistant. Yet, even having secured a job in an occupation that pays significantly better than most less-skilled occupations and at a work place that pays above the national average for such positions, working as a full-time Rolling Meadows' CNA could not provide Tye enough income to make ends meet, let alone obtain the basic ingredients of what many would consider a normal American life: a home of her own, a reliable car, and adequate resources for her

child.⁴⁷ In these next sections, I show how the combination of low-wages and eligibility requirements for public supports designed to help offset those low wages created particularly challenging obstacles for Tye in relation to affordable, desirable housing, adequate transportation and quality child-care. I highlight how strategies she crafted to cope with these difficulties sometimes subjected her to even greater economic strains; making her vulnerable to the many, often hidden, costs of being poor.

Housing

When I met Tye in August 2004 she was living in an apartment complex just south of the interstate that connects Ann Arbor to Ypsilanti. The complex, Knoll Ridge, straddled a township line that kept the address officially as an Ypsilanti one, while districting youth into the more desirable Ann Arbor public school system. Tye had chosen it for this very reason. It was relatively affordable (a very relative term in the high priced housing market of the surrounding area) and would bus Xavier to Ann Arbor schools when he became school age.

The interstate served as a north-to-south dividing line between Ypsilanti and what had, until very recently, been a historically white, farming community. On this side of the highway, on the southwestern outskirts of Ypsilanti, the landscape surrounding the complex still held vestiges of this recently rural past, with an as yet operating farm-stand a few miles down the road. Although like most areas with open land in the county, new shopping strips and “affordable, luxury” developments of new homes were steadfastly transforming its rural tone. The complex itself was hidden from the road, obscured by an

⁴⁷ The comparison of Rolling Meadow’s starting wage for nursing assistants to the national average comes from <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos165.htm#earnings> (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook. Accessed 12/30/2006). In addition, full-time hours at Rolling Meadows were 37.5 hours a week. Only a small handful of nursing assistants were scheduled for 40 hours a week.

interlacing wall of grass-covered mounds. Artificial ponds home to a number of ducks and geese flanked the road into the development. The complex was anchored by an immaculately maintained rental office that sat alongside an outdoor pool and a tennis court. Across the parking lot from Tye's building was the second of the complex's outdoor pools.

The grounds were carefully tended, the buildings well maintained, and the parking lots full of cars (albeit mostly older models) in good condition. The complex was a quiet place, a place where it felt safe walking around at night, where people greeted one another as they passed in the hallway or parking lot. There was a comfortable sociability among residents, typified by the basketball court that dominated the lawn outside Tye's building where a mix of people from around the area, young to middle-aged, black, white and Middle-Eastern, would gather on long summer days to play spirited, friendly games of basketball, or just hang out. The complex was populated, primarily, by a mix of students from nearby Eastern Michigan University⁴⁸ and low-to-moderate income white, black, and immigrant families. It was hardly a low-income ghetto.

The problem was that at a monthly rent of \$595 for her two bedroom apartment, Tye struggled to afford the rent and the utilities, along with all her other monthly expenses, on her CNA salary. Although with her three year tenure at Rolling Meadows she had advanced to an hourly wage of \$11.43 an hour, on her earnings from this wage, Tye had to pay for rent, child-care, food, non-food necessities (like diapers, soap, laundry detergent, deodorant, toothpaste, etc.), utilities, gas, car maintenance, laundry, occasional purchases of clothing and other essential incidentals, and payments on a loan she had

⁴⁸ One of the two state universities in the county, Eastern Michigan has a large enrollment of, primarily, commuter students, many of whom are from working class backgrounds.

taken out from a local credit union a couple of years previously. If Tye had been working full-time, her \$11.43 an hour wage would have given her a maximum monthly income of around \$1700.⁴⁹ Even with that amount of income, Tye's rent might have been difficult for her to manage.⁵⁰ However, Tye wasn't working full-time. Instead, as a result of a complicated cost and benefits analysis involving her child-care costs and her eligibility for public child-care subsidies, Tye was only working 24 hours a week. On her monthly income from working 24 hours a week, her rent took up approximately half of her wages.

Tye had searched assiduously to find housing that was more affordable, but still "decent" and, ideally, within the Ann Arbor public school system. She had put her name on the waiting list for the public housing developments in Ann Arbor and for Section 8 housing in Washtenaw County (she had decided against putting her name on the waiting list for Ypsilanti public housing because she didn't feel it was a safe environment for herself or Xavier; Ypsilanti public housing had a reputation for being a place where residents were subject to conspicuous drug-selling activity and other forms of crime). During 2005, the wait list for applicants without exceptional priority to get a spot in Ann Arbor public housing was three years; the waitlist for Section 8 housing for similar applicants was seven.⁵¹

⁴⁹ This amount reflects subtractions from her gross pay for taxes and for her health care benefits premium. Unlike many employers in the low-wage service sector, Rolling Meadows provided affordable health coverage to its employees. All employees (after their three-month probationary period) who worked a minimum of 20 hours a week were eligible for these health-care benefits although part-time workers paid more for their coverage than full-time workers did. In other words, the health care plan Rolling Meadows provided to its workers was cheapest to full-time workers and then incrementally more expensive the fewer hours one worked (down to the eligibility cut-off which was 20 hours a week employment).

⁵⁰ At \$595 a month for a 2 bedroom apartment, her rent was well below the median cost of 2 bedroom apartments in the area and the HUD determined Fair Market Rent. See http://www.huduser.org/Datasets/FMR/FMR2005R/Revised_FY2005_SCHEDULEB.pdf (re-accessed April 5 2008). In 2005, the Fair Market Rent for a 1-Bedroom apartment in Washtenaw County was \$713 per month.

⁵¹ Categories of prioritization for publicly-subsidized housing are determined by a variety of factors including homelessness, disability, and numbers of children. Tye first informed me of the lengths of these

She had also tried to get into one of the three low-income housing cooperatives that exist on Ann Arbor's city boundaries. Two of them, besides requiring a better credit score than what Tye possessed, required one-time membership fees of several thousand dollars to buy into the co-ops (the least expensive of the two charged \$2000 for its membership fee). After two years of being on the wait-list for the third co-op, the only one that did **not** require such a down-payment, Tye received the incredible news that a townhouse had become available and she was to be interviewed for the open spot. However, in one of the many complications of circumstance that can make it so difficult to capitalize on the rare opportunities that do come along, Tye received this news mere weeks after she had re-signed a year-long lease at her current apartment complex. Tye's understanding of her lease was that if she were to have broken it, she would have had to pay a penalty (equivalent to one month's rent) and, in addition, would have been liable for the remainder of the lease until the management company found a new tenant. Tye didn't have the financial means to cover this expense even though, in the long-term, having secured indefinite tenancy in an affordable housing community would have more than made up for the possible short-term liability.

Making Work Pay - Public Supports for Working

When the 1996 welfare system was restructured, a number of politicians (President Clinton, among them) and policy-makers had promised that, in its redesign, the new system would "make work pay." Pre-1996, there was wide-spread criticism (from both the political left and right) that the system penalized welfare recipients for working (Bane and Ellwood 1994). Under the old federal system, any income that an

waitlists and I, subsequently, had conversations with employees at a local non-profit housing organization that confirmed these (Avalon Housing, personal communication September 2006).

individual receiving welfare benefits added to their household, including through paid work, was directly subtracted from their cash benefits, reducing the amount of cash benefits they received.⁵² Under the new “welfare-to-work” system, this “disincentive” structure would be reversed and low-income families were to be rewarded for working, in part, through the provision of publicly-funded work supports. In theory, these benefits were made more widely available to working mothers who were sufficiently low-income, not just those who had been receiving welfare benefits. Regardless of one’s view of the policy and program changes wrought by the 1996 overhaul of the welfare system, an unambiguously beneficial consequence has been the provision of these new forms of assistance to low-income women who are working. The most significant and widely deployed of these is the child-care subsidy. Even in its most well provisioned iteration, however, this subsidy has been simultaneously relatively generous and hopelessly inadequate (Michigan League for Human Services⁵³). Tye’s experience with it helps illustrate why.

Rent or Child-care?

Like any single mother, Tye’s ability to work depends on her ability to find and afford child-care. Although a significant percentage of the single mothers I met at

⁵² Under the Reagan and first Bush administrations, states had begun experimenting with their cash assistance programs by applying for waivers from specific federal Aid to Families and Dependent Children (AFDC) requirements. By the early 1990s, momentum for these state experimentations had accelerated considerably. Michigan’s then governor, John Engler, spearheaded one of the more famous welfare reform efforts during this period under a program entitled “To Strengthen Michigan Families.” One of the hallmarks of this experimental program was that it allowed a higher percentage of earned income to be disregarded from welfare recipients’ budgets. In other words, from the early 1990s, welfare recipients in Michigan were allowed to keep a higher percentage of earnings from paid employment than federal rules allowed without having it reduce their cash assistance benefits. http://www.michigan.gov/dhs/0,1607,7-124-5459_7342_7925-15753--,00.html (accessed June 14, 2008)

⁵³ Michigan League for Human Services *Working Hard But Still Poor: an Agenda for Meeting the Needs of Michigan’s Low-Income Working Families* (2004:7; webdocument; <http://www.milhs.org/>; accessed March 13, 2007)

Rolling Meadows could and did depend on relatives to watch their children while they were at work, a substantial proportion had to pay a non-family member for some if not all of their child-care. This was Tye's situation. She didn't have any relatives who were able to provide more than a limited amount of child-care. All the adult members of Tye's family worked either full-time or near enough to it: her step-father, mother, brother, step-brother, and step-sister. She also had two step-nieces, but they were still in high school.

As a result, she had to find a formal child-care provider she could afford who could also provide the flexibility she needed to accommodate her work schedule. As was true for the other single mothers at Rolling Meadows who relied on formal child-care, for Tye the cost of full-time child-care was an expense almost as great as her rent. To help her manage this expense, Tye had been relying on the publicly-funded child-care subsidy.

The amount of child-care subsidy an eligible mother receives depends on a complicated formula calculated according to how many children are in her household, the age of those children, and her total household income. In Tye's case, with one child who was less than 2 1/2 years old, the maximum amount for which she qualified was anywhere from 70%- 95% of \$2.95 an hour, depending on her earnings.⁵⁴ In the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti vicinity where, according to a non-profit agency's survey of licensed

⁵⁴ The maximum hourly reimbursement rate also depends on which Michigan county in which the applicant resides. For a resident of Washtenaw county (the county in which Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor are located), the maximum rate for children from 0-2 1/2 years of age was \$2.95 per hour per child. For a child in Washtenaw County over 2 1/2 years, the maximum reimbursement was \$2.50 an hour. The rates can be found on the Michigan Department of Human Services website http://www.michigan.gov/dhs/1,1607,7-124-5453_5529_7149-21172--,00.html#CDCRate6; accessed July 10, 2007. However, no one receives the maximum rate. Instead, mothers are reimbursed a percentage of this rate depending on their income and the number of children for whom they need child-care. For the poorest mothers, the reimbursement percentage was 95%. For the most (relatively) well off mothers, up to the income eligibility limit, the percentage was 70%; http://www.michigan.gov/dhs/0,1607,7-124-5453_5529_7143-20878--,00.html

child-care providers, the average cost of child-care at a licensed facility is \$4 an hour, the child-care subsidy still leaves a sizeable gap uncovered.⁵⁵

However, the real problem with the child-care subsidy for Tye was not the amount of this gap but the fact that the income eligibility levels were so low. According to the Michigan Department of Human Services' income eligibility chart, once a mother with only one eligible child earns over \$1607 a month, she is no longer eligible for the child-care subsidy.⁵⁶ This meant that when Tye's wage had gone up to \$11.43 an hour (at her three year point at Rolling Meadows), by working full-time, she exceeded the income limits for eligibility. In May 2004, at her first case review after having received her raise, it was determined she now "made too much money"⁵⁷ and Tye lost the government funded child-care subsidy on which she had been relying.

At the time Tye received this notification her two step-nieces were still in high school; one in 9th grade and the other in 10th. The only saving grace in the elimination of her child-care subsidy was that the timing roughly coincided with the start of her nieces' summer vacation. Between June and August of 2004, Tye was able to rely, primarily, on her nieces to look after Xavier while she was at work, using her regular, paid child-care provider only on an intermittent basis. While Tye wasn't able to pay her nieces (and was not expected to, according to the norms of reciprocity and obligation that operated in her family), she bought them food, gave them limited amounts of spending money and occasional small sums of cash when she could. However, in September, when the public school year restarted and she was still without the child-care subsidy, Tye was faced with

⁵⁵ Survey conducted by Child Care Network <http://www.childcarenetwork.org/family.htm>; accessed February 11, 2007.

⁵⁶ http://www.michigan.gov/dhs/0,1607,7-124-5453_5529_7143-20878--00.html;

⁵⁷ Tye's quote from the case review.

an additional monthly expense of over \$500 out of pocket. Although this expense was considerably below the average market rate of child-care in the area, it was still more than Tye had room for in her budget. In addition, the termination of the subsidy had left her with an immediate amount owed to her child-care provider; an amount for which she had no savings or cash reserves to cover but which the child-care provider had been allowing her to pay off, in installments.

That fall, with the weighty extra pressure from this now entirely out-of-pocket child-care cost, Tye's monthly expenses quickly overwhelmed her and she sank into a financial hole, rapidly falling behind on her telephone, utilities and cable bills. Not knowing what else to do, Tye decided it made more sense for her to be eligible for the child-care subsidy by reducing her income than have greater income, but have to pay all her child-care costs out of pocket. As a result, she cut back her hours at Rolling Meadows from 37.5 hours a week to 24. This helped her out of her hole in relation to her child-care expenses and provided her with access to food stamps, but resulted in a significantly reduced income on which to manage everything else. As far as she could figure out, either way, she lost.

Tye and her car

While, arguably, the most important of the new public work supports was the child-care subsidy, the state of Michigan also made available other supports to address commonplace difficulties faced by low-income working families. Among these was help with transportation problems. However, as Tye's experience again illustrates, while the benefit promised to be a significant source of assistance, in practice, making use of it was more complicated.

During my visit to Tye in November, on the day she had come home to find the eviction notice taped to her front door, she told me about the problems she was having with her car. She had a mid-1990s Ford Taurus and it was making odd noises, riding rough and handling poorly on the road. Tye had become friendly with the owner of the gas station located just up the street from her apartment complex, an elderly Middle-Eastern man with a large, extended family in the area. Whenever he was tending the store when she came in, he liked to chat with her and they had a teasing, playfully flirtatious rapport. One of his sons was an auto mechanic and as a favor to Tye, the gas station owner arranged to have his son take a look at the car. The son told her the struts and shocks were badly in need of replacement; if she didn't replace them, he warned Tye, the car would eventually become un-drivable. He told her she could do a partial fix, which would be good enough to get by on for awhile, estimating that would "only" cost about \$400. On her now part-time work schedule, Tye knew that her low-income status made her eligible for a vehicle repair assistance program then being offered through the Washtenaw county workforce development agency, MichiganWorks!. As she related to me, she was eligible for \$900 a year for help with car repairs, or \$1200 towards the cost of buying another car. As generous as that assistance sounded, in Tye's assessment, ultimately, it came with too many constraints to be truly useful.

For a start, as Tye pointed out, applying for the car repair would require her to obtain written estimates from two state-licensed auto mechanics. The gas station owner's son was not licensed (he was, instead, working, informally, at a cousin's shop in a Detroit suburb) so he would not be able to provide her with a formal estimate. And Tye's experience was that licensed mechanics could and would charge for these estimates,

somewhere around \$50, a cost she would have to bear out of pocket. In addition, Michigan Works! would only pay the exact amount stated on the estimate and Tye had found that this discouraged many mechanics from participating in the program. Instead, Tye believed, the best way to get the repairs done was to pay the mechanic yourself, out of pocket, and then get reimbursed by Michigan Works!. But, of course, Tye didn't have the money to do that. Additionally, in Tye's view, the \$1200 available to purchase another used car to replace hers was hardly likely to be helpful. Her car, if fixed, was a better car and in better condition, overall, than any other car she could find for \$1200.

Even beyond the difficulties of accessing mechanics willing to work under these conditions, to be eligible for the benefit Tye needed to show current proof of auto insurance, something she wouldn't have been able to do. Since moving out of Father Pat's and since living on her own with Xavier, Tye had only had auto insurance intermittently. As she pointed out to me when the topic had first come up, "car insurance is a luxury for people like me." Her brother was in the same situation, as were many of her friends; few could afford auto insurance on anything more than an irregular basis. Part of the problem was that Tye, like many of her friends who were also single mothers, was under the age of 25, the age when auto insurance is most expensive. Running the risk of a police stop without auto insurance, current registration, and sometimes, without a valid driver's license, was an everyday occurrence for a number of those close to Tye. As a result, Tye didn't think it was in her interests to pursue the vehicle repair benefit; at least, not until she could afford to purchase basic car insurance. With these potential costly car repairs looming on the horizon and still facing the persistent (and, seemingly,

ever-widening) gap between her income and expenses, Tye decided to take advantage of an unusual opportunity that had come her way.

“Desperate People do Desperate Things”⁵⁸

As mentioned earlier, a substantial proportion of staff at Rolling Meadows are immigrants; these staff come from all over the globe, including Eastern Europe, the Philippines, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. While some of these staff had come to Ann Arbor as solitary immigrants, a few of had either arrived with or, once established, had facilitated the arrival of a number of other relatives. While those employed at Rolling Meadows had legal status to work, some of the others in their extended networks were in the U.S. without legal permission to stay and work.

Tye was very close with a number of the other CNAs who regularly worked the morning shift with her on 2 North; a group of five of them was particularly tight, spending their breaks together, when they could, and occasionally socializing outside of work. One of these CNAs, Jalika, was an African immigrant from Senegal, married to another Senegalese and the mother of three children. Jalika was the linchpin of an extended network of related immigrants, only some of who had legal status to reside in the States and work. Out of those who had arrived on tourist visas and overstayed them were two male relatives who had been able to find work under the table at restaurants in the area. Hoping to remain in the U.S. and avoid potential deportation, they (with Jalika’s assistance) were looking to find a way to secure a more permanent status. With this in mind, Jalika approached Tye and Tye’s friend and co-worker, Ayasha, with a financially enticing proposal: Jalika’s family would pay Tye and Ayasha to marry her two male relatives.

⁵⁸ This is a quote from Tye in reference to the situation described in this section

Ayasha and Tye had a great deal in common. Both were raising their children largely on their own and both were laboriously struggling to make ends meet. Ayasha had two young children (one in elementary school and the other still in pre-school). Her partner and the father of her two children had been in and out of jail over the past several years and, as a result, had been an exceedingly unreliable source of income and practical support. Both Ayasha and Tye appeared on the verge of going under from the unpaid bills and debts they were accumulating. Like Tye, Ayasha had had difficulty paying her rent (and was actually evicted from one apartment) and, at various points, had had her phone and utilities cut off.

The deal that Jalika and her male relatives, Marcel and Nafi, offered involved paying Tye and Ayasha each an initial sum of \$1000 for the marriage and then further payments for every aspect of the immigration process, such as interviews, appointments with immigration officials, and submissions of paperwork. In addition, there would be a final payment of \$2000 once Marcel and Nafi received permanent resident status (or a green card), allowing them to legally work. In Tye's view, the offer promised only gain; she couldn't see any downside to participating in such an arrangement: what did it matter if she were married, on paper, to a stranger, especially when that stranger was connected to her friend Jalika? So, she decided to go ahead; as did Ayasha. Tye married Marcel and Ayasha married Nafi.

Tye eventually found the arrangement constraining and it turned out to be neither as financially beneficial nor as uncomplicated as she had expected. In fact, ultimately, it created at least as many financial difficulties and quandaries for her as it had initially

appeared to resolve. But, in the short-term, it did provide her with an urgently needed infusion of cash as well as some other, valuable side-benefits.⁵⁹

As part of establishing the appearance of being a legitimate couple, Marcel opened up a joint checking account for him and Tye and deposited money into it. He endeavored to maintain a minimum balance of \$300 in it and told Tye that she could use the money from the account if she needed it. Marcel only used the account to deposit money, while Tye, who had been without a bank account of her own prior to this, was able to take over the account as her primary bank account. The account provided a range of useful services to Tye. For example, she was able to have her Rolling Meadows' paycheck directly deposited into it; thus, both speeding up her access to these funds as well as eliminating the check cashing charges she had been used to paying. In addition, the bank issued her with a checkbook and an ATM card. However, even the extra injection of funds from the arrangement with Marcel wasn't enough to adequately bridge the gulf between Tye's income and expenses in any sustained way.

Even when she had been working full-time, Tye had had considerable difficulty making ends meet every month. Now with her reduced income, she found that her economic strains not only mounted, but accelerated exponentially, compounding on each other. Once she fell behind, her inability to pay bills created new costs, expenses and penalties. As Tye's bills quickly mounted, her exposure to the "costs of being poor" multiplied.

⁵⁹As of the date of this writing, Marcel and Tye remain officially married, although Tye told me she has broken off contact with Marcel. Tye came to regret her decision to marry him as she began realizing that having to declare him on her tax returns (especially after he began to record legal, reportable income) caused her more financial difficulties than it solved. For a start, she had not realized (or thought through) the negative implications it would have for her eligibility for college financial aid. The complications from her marriage to and arrangements with Marcel remained unresolved as I went to write this.

It costs money to be broke

As a recent wave of research and analysis has documented, it costs more to be poor (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004; Barnes, 2005; Fellowes, 2006). Compared to people who are able to pay their bills on time and avoid debts, especially debts that accrue interest charges, daily life costs more for the poor than the non-poor. As a number of analysts have recently noted, almost every aspect of daily living is affected by financial penalties when someone's ability to pay for things becomes attenuated (ibid). In Tye's case, the seemingly endless array of financial penalties that accrued as her constant juggling of income and expenses became increasingly strained (and as she accumulated new negative entries on her credit report) touched on a wide array of domains including her utilities, banking account, and the purchase of a computer.

Telephone

As people amass unpaid debts and as their credit scores plummet, certain basic services become much more costly or, even, inaccessible. Tye experienced some of these obstacles. Telephone service, for example, was critical to Tye even beyond the social imperative of staying connected to family and friends. For one thing, having a working telephone number enabled Tye to fully participate in the give and take of scheduling negotiations with Jill, the scheduling coordinator at Rolling Meadows. Jill regularly called staff at home to ask them to swap shifts or pick up extra shifts; often these requests were sweetened with desirable incentives, such as being allowed to drop a weekend shift in exchange for a picked-up shift. The more easily Jill could get ahold of a staff member at home, the more often they were able to take advantage of such offers.

Beyond the opportunity to pick up overtime and earn more money, these offers also provided staff a critical means of making their work schedule more flexible. As a number of scholars have observed, employee-centered flexibility is a vital resource for optimizing employees' ability to balance home and work demands (Henly, 2003; Henly and Lambert, 2005; Waxman and Lambert, 2003). The availability of a home phone was even more critical, however, for child-care arrangements. If Tye had any unanticipated child-care needs, or needed to rearrange hours or days with her child-care provider, having easy access to a phone was vital.

However, once Tye had let her telephone bill go unpaid for several months, the telephone company terminated her service. Reconnecting her service with that company would have required Tye to pay the entire amount owed in full, a significant reconnection fee, and a hefty deposit against future unpaid amounts. Tye was able to reconnect her phone by switching to another service provider but the telephone bill debt she owed meant the new provider was only willing to allow her local service, as a protection against her running up expensive bills. While this was a reasonable business policy, it meant that Tye couldn't make any calls that required dialing a 1 prefix, including toll-free numbers. This severely hampered Tye's ability to deal with any official business from home such as that having to do with utilities bills, creditors, and the Internal Revenue Service.⁶⁰ The electricity utility followed a similar policy. Once an unpaid amount hit a certain limit and a shut off had been initiated, getting service reconnected required not

⁶⁰ Like many low-income single mothers who work, Tye desperately anticipated the refund she received as a result of the Earned Income Tax Credit. As soon as she received her tax forms from Rolling Meadows in early January, Tye took them to H.R. Block so she could get her taxes done and get her EITC sent to her as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, the year in which these events take place, 2005, Tye's tax refund got sent to her via Rolling Meadows where it somehow got lost between departments. This caused Tye to spend a fair amount of time calling up the IRS to get a new refund check re-issued. She had to make all these calls while at work or by borrowing friends' cell phones.

only that the amount owed be paid in full, but, also, that a sizeable deposit be paid against the possibility of future missed payments.

Banking

Due to her unusual arrangement with Marcel, Tye was more fortunate than many in her situation in having access to a bank account. Being unable to afford, or being disqualified from opening, a bank account is a major hindrance for many low-income single mothers.⁶¹ Without a checking account or credit card, all bills have to be paid by cash or money order. Money orders cost money, but are safer than carrying around substantial sums of cash. In addition, the lack of a checkbook or credit card means that bills have to be paid in person. This can create several difficulties for payers. For a start, the payer's availability has to match the business hours of the bill-paying center. Finding the time and the transportation to get to the necessary locations can be difficult. And bill-paying centers tend to have long lines, particularly during their extended, or evening hours. The ability to use a checkbook to pay bills by mail is a considerable advantage, although it also requires taking mail and processing time into consideration to avoid late payment charges.

However, as many benefits as were associated with having a bank account and in as many ways as it made daily living easier for Tye, having a bank account also came with some unanticipated and unpleasant costs. Marcel had opened their account at a large national bank that offered automatic overdraft protection for checking accounts.⁶²

⁶¹ Many banks have a policy that you must maintain a minimum balance to have your account considered in good standing; at the very least, most banks charge (sometimes quite significant) monthly fees and service charges once an account's balance goes below an established minimum. In addition, once a customer has had an account go into negative standing at one bank, other banks may refuse to open an account.

⁶² In fact, according to the bank's website if a customer wants to **cancel** the overdraft protection, she needs to notify the bank in writing by mailing a letter to their head office.

On the face of it, overdraft protection is a service that benefits customers by allowing them to avoid bouncing checks. However, the fees that result from any overdraft transaction are substantial (in Tye's case, \$35 per overdraft transaction) and can quickly accumulate.

Tye was careful and cautious in her checkbook use. She tended to use it sparingly, primarily for large cost items like rent. By calling her local branch or, occasionally, by obtaining summaries from an ATM, Tye kept a fairly accurate tally of her current bank balance; when writing a check she would calculate whether or not she had sufficient funds in the account to cover the check. As a result, generally, it was rare for Tye to bounce a check and incur pricey bank fees that way. But her use of her ATM/Debit card resulted in another story. On several occasions in 2005, Tye mistakenly thought that certain deposits had been transmitted into her account that, in actuality, had not. One incident began when, incorrectly believing she had the funds in her account, Tye used her ATM card to withdraw money. Tye's bank's policy was that even when there were insufficient funds in the account to cover the withdrawal, "point of sale" (POS) transactions still went through by automatically drawing on the account's overdraft. However, the transaction provided no feedback or notification to Tye that she had gone into her overdraft. Because Tye didn't realize that her account balance was now negative, in quick succession, she used her ATM card as a debit card in four additional, separate charges. At a charge of \$35 for each POS transaction that drew from overdraft funds, this one incident cost Tye close to \$200 in bank charges.

Computer Purchase

A history of late bill payments and an accumulation of outstanding debts affects an individual's credit rating. Once someone has acquired a poor credit rating, the ability to purchase consumer goods that cost more than the amount of cash a person has at hand becomes severely constricted. Lower interest rate financing opportunities are no longer available and alternative options tend to be highly constrained and financially exacting.

In January 2005, Tye began taking classes at the local community college, Washtenaw Community College. Hoping, ultimately, to pursue a health-related associates' degree, she started by enrolling in several prerequisite courses. As is increasingly true in higher education, the instructors for her courses incorporated web-based information and assignments into their classes. Tye found it difficult for her only access to a computer to be at school. Her child-care options made it hard to carve out more than a limited amount of time on campus beyond actual class time. While it was possible for her to do well in the classes without having her own computer, Tye wished she had the luxury of working on computer assignments at home after Xavier was asleep or on the weekends when he was with her mother, step-sister or brother. Plus, it was obvious to Tye that having access to the Internet was an increasingly important means for maximizing her connection to desirable social and material resources. The Internet provided a wealth of information about public benefits and community agencies, services, and programs that might benefit her or Xavier. As a single-parent with the work and child-care schedule she maintained and with a less than reliable car, the Internet -- available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day -- was a goldmine of information that might require a prohibitive amount of effort and time to gather in person. The Internet also

helped Tye learn about opportunities beyond her local community; opportunities that fuelled Tye's insistent dreams to craft a better life for her and Xavier than the one she saw immediately in front of her.

But Tye didn't have the funds to be able to buy even the lowest cost computer outright. The only way she could afford a computer was to pay for it in installments. With her poor credit rating, however, there were no mainstream options for buying a computer on credit. Instead, in February 2005, Tye told me that she had ordered a computer through an online company called BlueHippo.

At the time, BlueHippo offered a somewhat unique service to people characterized as poor credit risks by mainstream financial and commercial institutions. Through BlueHippo, a customer with a poor credit score could order a brand new computer with a one-year warranty and pay for it through an installment plan. According to the terms of the installment plan, the customer would make an initial down payment and then "52 weeks of layaway payments."⁶³ After successfully making only 9 weeks of "layaway" payments, however, the customer was rewarded with the shipment of the computer. This arrangement sounded ideal for someone in Tye's situation. And, of course, it came at a price.

The basic computer BlueHippo offered was a non-brand name computer; an upgrade to a brand name computer cost an additional \$200-\$300. For this low-end, non-brand name computer, Blue Hippo charged \$2000. After Tye told me she had signed up for this deal and made the initial payment, I asked Tye for the specifications of the computer she'd be getting. Reviewing the websites of Gateway and Dell, computer companies with reputations for budget conscious options, I noted that their price for the

⁶³ Information taken from the website, www.BlueHippo.com; retrieved July 16, 2007.

same level of computer was around \$700 to \$900. But, as Tye observed, the plan BlueHippo offered was one of the only ways for “someone like me” to get a computer on credit.

Quality Child-care

For much of the first two years of Xavier’s life, Tye had relied on Laura, an elderly, African American woman who offered child-care out of her apartment, to look after Xavier while she was at work. Tye respected Laura and felt indebted for all the understanding she had shown and the accommodations she had made in the face of Tye’s financial difficulties and scheduling needs. However, after Xavier turned 2, Tye began to worry about the detrimental impact staying in Laura’s care might have on Xavier’s continuing development. Tye found Laura to be a loving, kind and gentle older woman and she shared many of the same values and expectations regarding child-rearing and discipline that Tye did. But she was also increasingly frail and tended to rely on the television to provide the children in her care stimulation. Her frailness, which included significantly impaired eyesight, seemed to also result in erratic attention to cleanliness and when Tye would pick Xavier up after work, he was sometimes dirtier than Tye thought was healthy. In addition, for any particular day or period of time it was common for Xavier to be the only child under Laura’s care; Tye worried this provided too few opportunities for playing and socializing with other children. As an only child, Tye was concerned that Xavier spent too much time only in the company of adults; she wanted Xavier to have greater exposure to the rough and tumble of play with other children.

At the same time, Laura charged fees that were well below average for the Ypsilanti-Ann Arbor area. Tye’s mother was able to provide one day of child-care a

week, on Wednesdays, and her step-sister was able to take Xavier on Saturdays and Sundays. This meant that when Tye had been working full-time, she had needed four days of paid child-care a week. She had typically paid Laura around \$500 a month for that care. Tye didn't know of anyone else who would care for Xavier at that price, at least not anyone to whom she would entrust Xavier's care. And \$500 a month was well below what institutional child-care providers in the area charged. In addition, Laura had been very understanding and tolerant of Tye's occasional short-falls in income and had allowed Tye to delay payments when she hadn't had the funds to pay on time.

As Tye knew, options for a child-care environment that provided more education and stimulation were almost exclusively the provenance of institutional child-care facilities. But affordable options for child-care centers were extremely limited. There were a couple of places in the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area with good reputations that accommodated lower-income families, but they had long waitlists and only accepted children over the age of 3. Before age 3, there were very few options for subsidized places. According to Child Care Network, a local non-profit that provides child-care support services to individuals and child-care providers (as well as my own tallies from information gleaned from the Internet) the unsubsidized cost of child-care for toddler to pre-school aged children in Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor averages around \$200 a week for full-time care (up to 50 hours a week of care) or approximately \$800 monthly.⁶⁴

Although Tye would only need part-time child-care, she worked out that the amount of subsidy she received would still leave her with a roughly \$200 shortfall a month that she would need to be able to pay out-of-pocket. Given the strained and overwhelmed state

⁶⁴ Survey conducted by Child Care Network <http://www.childcarenetwork.org/family.htm>; accessed February 11, 2007.

her finances were in already, it didn't seem likely she'd be able to afford an extra, monthly cost like this.

Altering Circumstances through Education

As has become clear through the material presented here, thus far, even with only one child without more affordable housing Tye's wage of \$11.43 an hour was insufficient to adequately cover her expenses. Given how difficult it was for her to significantly reduce her expenses, especially her two biggest, fixed costs – housing and child-care – Tye's only option for improving her financial situation was to earn a substantially higher income; certainly a higher income than what continued tenure as a CNA at Rolling Meadows would provide. With the decline in manufacturing jobs in Washtenaw County, however, there were very few jobs available where someone with only a high school degree can earn a significantly higher wage than what Tye made at Rolling Meadows. Tye's best option for improving her "wage earning capacity" was to obtain a postsecondary degree, an associate's or bachelor's degree.

Most of the single mothers at Rolling Meadows were in a similar position to Tye. And while a number of those working at Rolling Meadows were taking college coursework with the goal of earning an associate's degree in a health-related field, only one single mother, Sharise, had succeeded in this. All observable evidence indicated that Sharise's degree of occupational mobility, climbing up the ladder from a CNA to an associates' RN degree, was truly exceptional. Achieving this level of occupational mobility had involved more than six years of sustained coursework. For these six plus years Sharise had had to stick to an intensely orchestrated and demanding schedule, part of which involved being granted special permission to work full-time at Rolling

Meadows by working three 12-hour overnight shifts. Bundling her full-time hours into three shifts had enabled Sharise to have her mother look after her children overnight and had given her greater flexibility to undertake coursework during the days. For many of single mothers I met, maintaining the schedule Sharise was able to for such a duration was improbable – in large part, because it required access to an unusually reliable, predictable and affordable source of child-care (as in Sharise’s case, a mother who was willing and able to provide this level of care without formal payment). To illustrate just how difficult an endeavor it is to sustain (and, even more so, to finish) a degree course as a working single mother and how exceptionally determined Sharise had been to complete it, I now turn to an account of Tye’s efforts to undertake this path.

It Takes More Than Just a Willingness to

Like many of the single mothers at Rolling Meadows, Tye was a regular and adept participant in the exchange of what sociologists call “social capital,” the informal information transmitted among friends, family, colleagues and well-placed others that helps individuals learn about the existence of and the procedures for accessing important resources and opportunities. While sitting in the common staff gathering areas like the smoke-shack, lunchroom, or break room, standing around the nurses’ station on their unit, or getting together after work, single mothers at Rolling Meadows circulated a great deal of information among each other regarding occupations in related fields, forms of financial assistance for child-care, opportunities at the local community college, and private training institutes that offered vocational certificates. One of the oft-mentioned holy grails was to get a job within the University of Michigan health system: the pay was

not initially better, necessarily, but there were good benefits, exposure to a wider range of occupations, training opportunities, and perceptions of chances for advancement.

Tye was particularly adroit in seeking out and accumulating social capital related to occupational opportunities. Mining conversations with co-workers including senior nurses and attending physicians and making appointments to talk with the local community college's academic advisors, Tye developed what seemed like a well-informed view of her options. From her on-going research, she decided that continuing in a field already familiar to her made the most sense. She narrowed these options down to nursing or radiography assistant. As Tye had made clear to me, she did not have a deep, abiding interest in being either a nurse or a radiography assistant, but it seemed like an obvious direction to go in given her current work. She also determined that having an associate degree in either field opened up ready opportunities for jobs that paid upwards of \$20 an hour, a wage that seemed considerably more sustaining than what she presently earned. In addition, she had discovered that if she pursued the radiology track, these jobs offered more desirable work schedules than Rolling Meadows, including the option of not working weekends. While neither nursing nor radiology seemed like work she was destined for, she knew she would be good at either occupation. And although she was disdainful of what she saw as a tendency among nurses to be hierarchical and dismissive of CNAs' expertise and insights related to patients' treatment, she also relished the idea of having more power to determine the course of patients' care.

With all this in mind, in January 2005, Tye began taking two classes at Washtenaw Community College (WCC), a course in basic chemistry (a course she had failed in high school) and another course in math. These were part of the pre-requisites

Tye would need to pursue an associate degree at WCC in either radiology or nursing. Her ambivalence in setting out on these occupational trajectories was somewhat mitigated by the fact that soon after applying, she had been awarded a Pell Grant for her courses at Washtenaw. The grant more than covered the cost of tuition and books and left Tye with an extra sum she thought she'd be able to apply towards some unpaid bills.

The School Semester

When I first began living with Tye and Xavier in February 2005, I would come home Monday through Thursday evenings to an empty apartment. These were Tye's school nights. On these nights she arrived home from her classes sometime after 9 p.m.; picking up Xavier from her sister's or mother's on her way home, or, on nights she was too tired, leaving him to stay with them overnight. Over the course of the next month or so, though, I came in the door to find Tye at home on several of the nights she had class. As the semester wore on, her class attendance became more erratic and, somewhere between the mid-way and end point of the semester, she officially dropped the courses. Her trailing-off attendance and ultimate decision to withdraw from the classes were an outcome of a constellation of factors that seemed both endemic in Tye's life and revealing of the difficulties she faced in trying to pull herself up by her proverbial bootstraps.

At the end of February 2005, Tye woke me in the middle of the night with the news that she was taking Xavier to the emergency room. Xavier had fallen ill several days before with what seemed to be an ordinary cold that had settled noisily in his chest. That evening, though, his cough had worsened, his breathing had become ragged and wheezy, and he had developed a high fever that caused his body to tremble to the point

that he seemed to convulse. They didn't stay long at the hospital; the ER doctor sent them home telling Tye that Xavier had a bad viral infection, but did not require further treatment.

Back home, though, Xavier's breathing became only more labored. In the early hours of the morning, Tye got a hold of Xavier's pediatrician who asked Tye to hold the phone receiver up to Xavier's chest. After listening to Xavier's breathing over the phone, she told Tye to call 911. The pediatrician said calling the ambulance would both ensure that Xavier received immediate help with his breathing and would be treated with appropriate urgency when he arrived at the ER.

On their second visit to the ER, Xavier was diagnosed with being in the midst of a severe asthma attack, possibly brought on by viral bronchitis. Using a combination of treatments, the ER doctors were able to stabilize his breathing within a couple of hours. To ensure that he tolerated the treatments and remained stable, the ER staff kept Xavier at the hospital for observation for most of the day. By late afternoon, they sent Xavier and Tye home with a nebulizer and a treatment regimen that needed to be administered for the next five days.

The regimen needed to be dispensed at strict intervals. It was also labor intensive, requiring Xavier to ingest medication and then sit with a tube attached to the nebulizer, ideally, in his mouth. The noise of the machine, the misting spray, and the tube's large mouthpiece scared Xavier. As a result, every time Tye tried to administer the inhalant medication through the nebulizer, Xavier cried and struggled against having the tube in his mouth, successively batting it away. This made the several times a day procedure exhausting, unpleasant, and upsetting for both of them.

Tye fretted about whether or not she could return to work while Xavier needed this intensive treatment. Sending him to Laura, her current regular child-care provider, seemed unworkable. Although Laura was a loving and patient woman, Tye doubted she was in the physical condition to battle Xavier if he resisted the medication. She also had a variable number of children in her home. Sometimes Xavier would be the only one for most of the day; other times, there could be as many as four or five other children there. Even if Laura agreed to administer the treatments, Tye didn't think it was feasible. It seemed both too burdensome a task to impose and, practically speaking, she didn't think Laura was capable of managing it. Tye's other option, her mother, was equally problematic. Tye's mother was a heavy drinker, often to the point of drunkenness and although she loved Xavier and was functional even after having had several drinks, Tye was already frustrated by certain ways in which she felt her mother's care of Xavier was neglectful (for example, she bathed Xavier and changed his diapers less frequently than Tye deemed appropriate). As a result, she didn't fully trust her mother to reliably administer Xavier's regimen. So, during the five days of Xavier's intensive treatments, Tye stayed home with Xavier, missing both work days as well as class nights.

Although Xavier's illness was the most dramatic event that affected her school attendance, it was not the only circumstance that interfered with her availability for and attention to her courses. In addition to the week of Xavier's illness, there were another couple of nights when Tye's child-care arrangements with her sister and her mother fell through at the last minute, so she missed a few more classes. Another week, after a temporary break-up with her significant other and some difficult interpersonal tensions at work, she felt too depressed to go to classes. The cumulative result of these absences was

that Tye fell behind in her classes, too far, she feared, to catch up. Already disappointed with the quality of instruction in one of her classes (her chemistry class) Tye became discouraged and dropped out. Although she didn't apprehend this, at the time, this decision had unfortunate, long-term consequences, impacting her ability to receive financial aid in the future. By dropping out during the semester, she had become liable for repaying part of the financial aid money she had received. Until she either paid the money back in full or set up a monthly payment plan that she unerringly stuck to, she would be disqualified from receiving future financial aid.

Balancing school with work and single motherhood requires not only the funds to be able to pay for tuition and books but considerable psychological and social resources: determination, self-efficacy and access to child-care. While some percentage of single mothers manages to do it, their success marks them as the exception rather than the norm. It requires exceptional effort and access to exceptional social support to obtain an educational credential that will actually improve an individual's earning power. Taking the classes, as Tye was, not because she is particularly motivated by the content of the course work, but because it seems like the most practical option, it can be even harder to muster the drive and fortitude required. Add a lack of confidence, feelings of depression or discouragement, glitches in child-care arrangements, and unplanned life events, and the obstacles can quickly overwhelm the best of initial intentions. As I'll come back to in Chapter 5, Tye's experience was far from atypical. For many mothers, altering their circumstances through occupational mobility is a disproportionately burdensome endeavor. The demands of further schooling combined with child-care responsibilities and other stresses in their lives make the path to a significantly better paying job an

onerous one requiring inordinate resources, determination, good fortune, and support from others.

CHAPTER 4

THE DEPOLITICIZATION OF NEEDS IN THE WORKPLACE

Shadowing the Scheduler

On my first day of fieldwork at Rolling Meadows, I arrived at the scheduling office just a few minutes before 7 a.m., as the morning shift started their day and the overnight shift neared the end of theirs. I arrived to find Jill already in a frenzied mode, in the midst of a round of harried phone calls. Jill had started her day at roughly 5 that morning when she had called the overnight charge⁶⁵ to check if there were any new “call-ins” for the upcoming day’s shifts. There had been and Jill promptly started her workday, from home, calling through the names on her staff list to find replacements.

While not every day started this early for Jill, many did. Ostensibly, Jill’s job was set at 40 hours a week, from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., 5 days a week, with one additional weekend a month as the on-call scheduler. However, in addition to those regular hours, Jill was “on call” Monday through Thursday from 5 in the morning till 10 at night. While it was not mandatory for her to check in with the night charge staff before she got to work at 7 a.m., or after she left for the day (usually well after 5 and closer to 6 p.m.), if she didn’t, she would arrive to work blindsided by whatever new holes had emerged on the schedule overnight. Likewise, if she didn’t answer the evening calls the night charge staff made to

⁶⁵ The overnight charge was the nursing staff member who was encharged with managerial responsibility, overseeing all the units, for the overnight shift. One of the duties she would attend to was keeping track of any sick calls that came in.

her home, she wouldn't get a head start on filling emergent scheduling holes for the next morning. And even on the weekends when it was someone else's turn to be the weekend scheduler, Jill's tenacity in and effectiveness at filling scheduling holes created a sometimes irresistible temptation for the on-call person to call Jill to fix whatever mess they couldn't.

The Rhythms of Scheduling

Filling the open shifts on the schedule involved Jill in dizzyingly complex and fast-moving negotiations with staff in which an array of offers and enticements was met with counter-offers and resistances that, even after many months of witnessing, I could rarely fully keep up with and which would propel me, regularly, to seek post-transaction debriefings from Jill. Sometimes, Jill's appeal to a staff member to pick up an extra shift to cover a hole on the schedule would be met with a straightforward assent. More commonly, however, a staff member's agreement to pick up the shift depended on certain conditions being met; conditions that created an almost domino-like effect of rearrangements to the existing schedule and that required Jill to assemble a patchwork of remedies to sort out.

For example, a staff member might be willing to cover the scheduling hole, but not on the floor on which the hole existed. Allowing the staff member to pick up the shift, but work it on her preferred floor (which Jill almost always did) meant Jill then needed to convince a staff member already assigned to that floor to be bumped to another floor. Or a staff member might agree to pick up the shift, but only if she could work only half of it. If Jill was desperate and didn't anticipate finding a better option, she would accept the offer, leaving her to find someone to cover the other half of the shift, or leave

that half uncovered. Or, a staff member might agree to pick up the extra shift in exchange for getting a shift off on another day. While this filled the immediate hole, it created a new scheduling hole that then needed filling. Often the shift a staff member wanted off in exchange was a weekend shift. As weekend shifts were already more likely to experience staff shortages (staff call-ins tended to be higher on the weekends) and were generally harder to fill, accepting these terms propelled Jill into at least as furious a round of phone calls or visits to staff on the floor as she had just sustained in filling the original hole.

Over the course of the 15 months I spent at Rolling Meadows, I gained an abiding appreciation for the incessant nature of her job's demands and to her dedication to meeting them. The job required a relentless energy. In recent memory, prior to Jill taking the position, no one had lasted in the job more than two years. Jill was going on her fifth year in the job.

During the days we spent together, I learned it was commonplace for Jill's evenings and weekends to be interrupted by a phone call from someone at Rolling Meadows to inform her of this or that scheduling emergency. Jill found herself unable to resist responding to these intrusions into her non-work time. She told me of countless times when she had gotten up in the middle of dinner, had skipped part of one of her children's events, or had gone into work on a weekend in order to deal with some urgent scheduling issue. Sitting in her office, I witnessed many occasions in which she forewent a doctor's appointment or a planned social event in order to deal with a last-minute scheduling crisis. Just as she would be putting on her coat and getting ready to walk out

the door, the phone would ring and she would reach for it. Once apprised of the news that so-and-so had called off their shift at the last minute, she was roped in.

The conundrum Jill faced, as she was all too well aware, was that the nursing care facility would not function nearly as smoothly if she hadn't ceded her personal life to work demands as consistently as she did. If Jill hadn't been willing to dedicate herself so wholeheartedly to the task – making ceaseless rounds of phone calls, staying late, working from home -- the floors would have worked short-staffed a great deal more frequently than they did. When Michelle, the scheduling assistant, was in charge, Michelle's unwillingness to relentlessly cycle through the staff phone list or pursue staff on the floor meant that scheduling holes went unfilled. When this happened, staff were left working their shifts short-handed. This led to considerable unhappiness and resentment among staff. Their vexation sometimes translated into a further round of call-ins, as the frustration and exhaustion of working short-handed left people depleted and determined to recuperate. Short-staffed shifts were an easy recipe for creating dissatisfaction among staff. The cumulative effect of repeated short-staffed shifts was not only terrible for staff morale, it also risked the quality of patient care, and exposed Rolling Meadows to potential sanctions from regulators. The whole staffing system, on which much of the organization's ability to function rested, depended on having an exceptional person -- a person like Jill -- doing the scheduler's job.

Under-staffed

That the demands of Jill's job were so onerous and that she had to work as hard as she did to meet them was, in large part, a result of the fact that Rolling Meadows nursing schedule was under-staffed. I learned this by sitting with Jill as she exasperatedly

compiled her monthly labor-hour reports. For these reports, Jill was required to calculate the disparity between the labor hours required to cover all shifts and the actual labor hours available to all shifts according to that month's permanent schedule.⁶⁶ As Jill unfailingly recorded in her monthly tallies, the permanent staff schedule indicated that none of the units had enough regular staff to cover all their shift hours. As a result, the status quo for each unit's permanent staff schedule was one of being short-staffed, even before taking into consideration any staff vacation or sick days.

As Jill would painstakingly tabulate all the numbers, she would shake her head in frustration and grumble about the futility of her task. What was the point of letting management know every month that, every month, Rolling Meadows was suffering from a labor shortage when nothing seemed to be done about it? As far as Jill could tell, neither the business office nor the human resources department responded with any concerted efforts to increase staffing. Beyond the accounting headache this created for Jill, it also meant that the weekly scheduling process had a built in labor deficit that was only exacerbated by the myriad scheduling "holes" created by staff member's planned or unplanned absences. This created a Sisyphean task that weighed most heavily on Jill's shoulders, but permeated through the work lives of all nursing care staff.

⁶⁶ As a state licensed nursing care facility, Rolling Meadows must meet state regulations regarding adequate nursing care staffing levels. The state specifies a minimum ratio of nurses and nursing assistants to residents. Rolling Meadows instituted a staffing policy that exceeded the state minimum, staffing each of its care units with more nursing staff than the mandated state minimums.

The "permanent" schedule at Rolling Meadows was the schedule reflecting all staff members' regular, permanent schedules. This permanent schedule was revised monthly, reflecting various changes in staffing. The permanent schedule was distinct from the weekly schedule which represented all the weekly changes due to vacations, other planned absences, swapped shifts, and already agreed to overtime commitments. The weekly schedule was then broken down into daily schedules which were put out onto the "floor" at the end of each workday, providing the most up to date information on who would be on each floor, for each shift, as a regular staff or fill-in. These daily schedules were sometimes revised mid-day and handed out, again, to each unit.

Every week, Jill was faced with the task of convincing some staff to sign up for extra shifts. As already noted, even when no one had called in sick or had scheduled a vacation day, the labor deficit built into the schedule meant that, perpetually, Jill had scheduling holes she needed to fill. Her first attempts to fill those holes focused on asking existing staff to pick up an extra shift. During the 15 months I spent at Rolling Meadows, Jill's efforts to fill scheduling holes were like the constant hum of a running motor; frequently, her days seemed consumed by the task.

The Pressures of Scheduling

Jill was unflinchingly persistent in these efforts. The effects of that persistence on staff were palpable. As Jill self-consciously noted, filling scheduling holes and ironing out the countless scheduling rearrangements that went along with that required her to almost incessantly badger staff. Jill repeatedly called staff at home during their non-work hours (not infrequently, rousing them from sleep) and serially revisited staff on the floor throughout the day to check -- and recheck -- their availability, "nagging" them to rearrange whatever obstacles impinged on their availability for the shift she needed filled.

One particularly striking example of Jill's persistence occurred in relation to a nursing assistant who was not able to show up for her shift because she was hospitalized with pneumonia. The CNA, an older African American woman named Estelle, called in from the hospital to let Jill know that she wouldn't be able to come in for work. Two days later, Jill called Estelle, reaching her in her hospital bed, to find out what her status was and when she would be coming back to work. Estelle told her then that she wasn't sure because she was having complications and the doctors hadn't told her when she'd be released. Jill called her back a number of times over the course of the next week. On a

couple of occasions I witnessed these calls. Listening to Jill's end of the conversation, I was taken aback by how intently Jill tried to nail down the precise day Estelle would return to the schedule, exerting a not so subtle pressure on Estelle for that date to be sooner rather than later.

The constant badgering to pick up extra shifts created deeply ambivalent feelings among staff. On the one hand, it was alienating, causing considerable disgruntlement. Yet, at the same time, staff perceived it to be a sign of how hard Jill worked to prevent them from having to work short, or from being stuck working a shift they really needed to drop.

The conflicting feelings these tactics engendered were a topic of conversation among staff. This was true one lunchtime as I sat with Tye and Ayasha in the staff lunch room. Ayasha was a young, African American single mother who worked with Tye as a CNA on the same unit and shift. While we sat together at a table eating our lunch, Jill hurriedly rushed in to buy a hot dog from the food cart to take back down to her office (only very rarely did Jill take an actual lunch break). Spotting Tye and Ayasha and with her ever-present clipboard tucked under her arm, Jill made a beeline over to our table to ask Tye if she would be willing to stay over for the afternoon shift. The afternoon shift would be overtime pay, but it would mean Tye would be working a double-shift, straight through. Tye, laughing good-naturedly, shook her head firmly and said "No way!" Jill pleaded saying, "Ayasha is staying over. Don't you want to stay and keep Ayasha company?" This caused Tye to laugh again and then pausing, she dead-panned, "Jill, you're acting like I care about Ayasha." Jill, realizing Tye would not cave, smiled wanly

and turned around, balancing her clipboard and her food as she headed back downstairs to her office.

After Jill left, Ayasha and Tye commented that Jill was “like a bulldozer coming at you,” never taking “no” for answer. In a tone that combined both amazement and chagrin, Ayasha recounted a recent episode in which she had felt the full force of Jill’s unyielding single-mindedness. Just a couple of weeks prior, Ayasha’s son, a first grader, had fallen off some playground equipment at school and broken his arm. After getting the call from her son’s school, Ayasha had rushed to pick him up and take him to the emergency room. The break had been complicated and severe enough that pins needed to be inserted into the bone, a procedure that required her son to have surgery with a general anesthetic. At some point during the ordeal, Ayasha had called Rolling Meadows to explain what had happened. She communicated that she was at the hospital with her son, that he was awaiting surgery, and that she wouldn’t be able to come in for her next morning’s shift.

While Ayasha was with her son in the hospital, waiting for him to come out of surgery, Jill called her on her cellphone. Jill tried to convince Ayasha to come back to work for her next regularly scheduled shift in the morning. Ayasha was astonished by Jill’s apparent insensitivity. She was a single mother (of two elementary school-aged children), without her children’s dad in the picture, and her son had never had surgery before. Jill had said to her, “Couldn’t your mom come up there and sit with him instead, so you could come in?” Ayasha thought Jill was crazy to suggest that she leave her son’s bedside while he was in the hospital.

Tye emitted a sympathetic noise and shook her head in amazement, adding “that’s just like Jill” continuing, “she needs to cut that shit out.” Ayasha concurred, commenting on how aggravating it was to experience that kind of pressure, especially when you had an emergency going on. Tye observed that what made Jill’s efforts all the more exasperating but also ingenious was that she always seemed to know the schedule of all the people who looked after your kids, so when she was trying to squeeze you into taking a shift, she would refer to your child-care provider’s schedule, like, “Isn’t your mom off work tomorrow? Can’t she watch your kids?” Ayasha laughed knowingly confirming, “That’s the truth!” Adopting a more philosophical tone, though, Ayasha observed, “But she always gets the schedule filled.” And Tye agreed, saying that, in the end, it was a good thing and she knew she had benefited from it many times; times when she had really need to get a shift off at short notice, or when Jill found a replacement for somebody who had called in sick and Tye hadn’t had to work a shift short-staffed. They both agreed they were glad to be on the receiving end of Jill’s zealous efforts to fill scheduling holes. Ayasha concluded with the comment that, anyway, Jill **had** to be that persistent, “to make somebody break” -- to convince someone who initially refused, to agree to change their schedule around.

The Scheduling System and Staffs’ Worlds

The scheduling process placed extremely onerous demands on Jill. To meet these demands, Jill resorted to a variety of tactics to impel staff into picking up extra shifts or altering their existing shifts. As noted, however, the unpleasant intensity of both Jill’s job and staff’s experience of being constantly cajoled to accommodate scheduling

imperatives was tied to a structural feature of the scheduling system at Rolling Meadows: its chronic under-staffing.

The fact that Rolling Meadows did not have enough permanent staff to cover all of its scheduling needs raises interesting questions about why this would be so. Clearly, both upper-level management and the human resources department knew of this fact – they received news of it, monthly, in Jill’s reports to them. When Jill would press her higher-ups on the issue, the head of the Human Resources department would complain that it was a tight labor market and they just weren’t getting enough responses to their ads. But, if the management at Rolling Meadows had really wanted to resolve the problem, they could have responded like any rational market actor and raised their starting wages.⁶⁷ Letting a whole staffing system depend on such a precariously balanced arrangement exposed them to certain risks – what would happen if Jill quit, for example? Or, what would happen if Jill’s determined efforts stopped having such effective “just so” results – what if she could no longer cobble together enough remedies to keep most shifts running with mostly enough staff?

In this chapter, I argue that besides the economic benefits Rolling Meadows gained by orchestrating their system this way (an issue to which I’ll return), what encouraged the system to develop as it did and what kept it working – even in the stressed out, overextended and patchwork ways that it did – was a result of way the system resonated with the economic and social worlds of lower-level staff. These resonances were particularly forceful in relation to two aspects of staffs’ worlds: the fact that many were single mothers and the fact that many experienced considerable financial

⁶⁷ Their starting wages were approximately at the median point of what comparable facilities in the area offered, but they were lower than the wages the University of Michigan, the largest health care employer in the area, offered for similar positions.

strains. Through these resonances, a symbiosis developed. The scheduling system was able to function as it did because in doing so, it provided certain benefits to staff that they desperately needed. In particular, the system provided staff with critical opportunities to meet (or, more accurately, attempt to meet) needs having to do with their being single mothers and being financially pressed. Yet, at the same time, the system depended not only on staff needing those opportunities, but on their continuing to do so – it depended on staff members' need to acquiesce to Jill's persistence in order to provide some measure of relief for their cash-strapped state.

In this way, the scheduling system captures something that I contend is core to the workings of Rolling Meadows: the incorporation of aspects of staffs' worlds into the workplace in ways that ultimately benefit Rolling Meadows. Although a particularly vivid example of it, the scheduling system was just one of the ways in which staffs' worlds were incorporated into organizational practices and became, if not the basis of, then an integral aspect of organizational strategies. Management also instituted two bureaucratic policies designed to explicitly address workers' financial needs. The first allowed workers to transform accumulated vacation time into cash. The second allowed workers to obtain advances on their paychecks.

Although aspects of these organizational strategies are well-intentioned, their effects are not neutral. While at once an acknowledgement of the hardships encompassed in workers' worlds, at the same time, these organizational strategies are – to borrow a phrase from anthropologist James Ferguson – “depoliticizing” (1994). They help to contain frustrations that might otherwise erupt (and, in so doing, disrupt the organization's normal functioning) and work to occlude the role that both working

conditions and larger, structured inequalities play in generating the hardships workers experience.

In order to elaborate this argument, I'll delineate ways in which these organizational strategies resonated with staffs' social and economic worlds. In providing staff with vital opportunities to address critical needs, these strategies not only helped to contain the disruptive potential of these needs, but they also helped keep staff locked into practices and behaviors that benefited Rolling Meadows' own interests. I begin by addressing a potent congruence between the scheduling system and the scheduling needs of single mothers, in particular. One of the, perhaps, surprising effects of the understaffed system was that it introduced flexibility to the scheduling process, a flexibility that was often a great boon to single mothers in ameliorating conflicts between work and home.

Following on from there, I turn to an exploration of the symbiosis that existed between the organizational practices related to scheduling and paychecks and staff members' economic needs. But here the picture is more complex. Unlike the condition of being a single-mother, which – although greatly affected by working conditions – is an attribute that exists independently of one's job, the condition of being economically strained is profoundly bound up with the conditions of one's job. It is here where the depoliticizing effects of Rolling Meadows' organizational strategies are most weighty. Consequently, I introduce the section that deals with the enmeshment of workers' economic needs and organizational practices by highlighting Rolling Meadows' role in creating those needs. Because this dynamic is most knotty in relation to the scheduling system, I deal with the scheduling system last and start, instead, with the two policies

Rolling Meadows' management intentionally crafted to help staff members' deal with urgent financial needs.

Scheduling Flexibilities

As the exchange between Tye and Ayasha suggests, as intrusive and unwelcome as Jill's dogged efforts could sometimes be, the regularity with which the schedule needed to be reconfigured and the state of scheduling flux this created introduced flexibility that was also advantageous to staff. The dependence of the scheduling system on staffs' willingness to accommodate changes to their existing schedules gave them implicit permission to lobby for changes that suited their needs. For staff whose job conditions otherwise granted them limited control over when they had to be at work and when they could leave, the flexibility this introduced was invaluable.

On a virtually daily basis, staff members approached Jill with requests to swap a regularly scheduled shift for another shift so they could attend to personal needs. The majority of the time, Jill granted their requests (even when, in some rare cases, this was conveyed to Jill more as a foregone conclusion than an actual request). Complying with these requests added to Jill's already demanding work load, as she would then have to furiously scramble to find someone to cover the vacated shift, or "hole." At first, I was perplexed by Jill's willingness to accommodate these requests when they seemed to cause such obvious hassle. When I asked Jill about this, she explained that the hassle of meeting these requests was easier than the hassles of **not** meeting them. Although the short-term costs could be high, in the end, it was in her long-term interest to try to accommodate them.

Through experience, Jill had learned that stretching the rules to allow staff members to drop a shift they weren't eligible to drop, or according them time off at very short notice was usually a better option than, in a more hardball manner, denying these requests. For a start, Jill had found that if a staff member really needed time off, she would take the time off, whether granted official permission to do so, or not. Staff always had the ultimate recourse of calling in sick for a shift, even if they suffered negative repercussions for doing so down the line. In Jill's estimation, getting a few days, or even hours head start on filling a shift was better than having to fill a shift at the very last minute, or after the shift had already started. In addition, being more lenient with staff accrued good will; it elaborated a circuit of reciprocity in which staff tended to feel indebted to Jill in ways that, ultimately, helped her meet future needs.

The fact that Jill depended so heavily on staffs' willingness to reciprocate the accommodations she made was a result of the staffing conditions I have outlined. These conditions encouraged Jill to develop a particular evaluation of what best served her overall interests. But Jill was not singular in reaching this conclusion. Although Jill often skirted the application of official rules and policies in relation to staff members' scheduling requests, her permissiveness was validated by the nurse managers and by Chantal, the Director of Nursing. Many of the arrangements Jill devised with staff that stretched or contradicted official policies had to be signed off on by the nursing management staff. Although these arrangements occasionally prompted editorializing by the nurse managers or Chantal (sometimes remarking on how lenient Jill was or how lenient, in general, the atmosphere at Rolling Meadows was), I rarely saw a nurse manager or Chantal deny them. Instead, their approval of Jill's various compromises

seemed to coincide with Jill's view that a more rigid application of official rules and policies would have likely made the system unable to function. The consequence of this was a system that allowed staff much greater leeway and flexibility in operationalizing their schedules than officially allowed, or than I would have anticipated based on the literature I had read.⁶⁸

Necessary Flexibilities

Single mothers often faced difficulties surrounding their child-care arrangements. Children got sick. Sometimes, regular child-care providers would be ill or otherwise unavailable. Conflicts with boyfriends or family members caused temporary or permanent breakdowns in their provision of child-care. Occasionally, children's behavioral problems resulted in expulsions from daycare or school. Older children got into trouble with the law. The greater scheduling flexibility in such an under-staffed scheduling system was of immeasurable value in helping mothers manage their child-care needs, especially when unexpected events arose. My fieldwork notebooks are overflowing with instances of staff negotiating shift exchanges with Jill -- agreeing to pick up an open shift on the schedule in order to drop one of their regular ones -- to attend to some aspect of caring for their children. By providing staff with opportunities to negotiate advantageous changes to their schedules, the scheduling system provided staff ways to manage incompatibilities between their child-care and work responsibilities. These incompatibilities were structural problems of daily living that every working mother faced, but that were intensified by the circumstances associated with being a low-income single mother. The flexibility of the scheduling process alleviated some of the daily stress associated with these problems.

⁶⁸ Cf. Henly 2003; Henly and Lambert 2005; Waxman and Lambert, 2003.

From the Structural to the Technical

While the enmeshment of scheduling imperatives and the needs of working mothers (especially single mothers) produced some relatively straightforward, immediate benefits for these women, the enmeshment of organizational strategies and staffs' economic needs had more complicated effects. In fact, I suggest that the incorporation of workers' economic needs into organizational practices was a critical means by which these needs (and the social problems these needs engendered) were depoliticized within Rolling Meadows. Through this incorporation, structural problems staff faced were translated into what James Ferguson would call "technical" ones (1994). Cast, or recast as technical predicaments, problems with deep, structural roots became problems that could be managed within the workplace, bounded by and subject to a logic of logistics, bureaucratic fixes, and patchwork remedies. This translation obfuscated the role that both working conditions and larger, structured inequalities played in generating the hardships workers faced.

Technical Solutions

In his book *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development,' Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (1994), James Ferguson seeks to understand the complicated consequences of large-scale development projects in Lesotho, a "small, land-locked country in Southern Africa, completely surrounded by South Africa" (3). As he observes, starting roughly in the 1970s and intensifying through the 1980s, the amount of aid that poured in and the number of projects designed and implemented created a mushrooming development "industry" in Lesotho. Yet, for all the concerted planning and dedicated work that went into these efforts, by their own evaluations the vast

majority of them failed to produce their desired effects. Rather than get caught up in an accounting of why these projects so routinely and, sometimes, spectacularly failed, Ferguson wants to account for their persistence. What kept the various aid agencies pouring money into Lesotho when these investments seemed to reap such limited returns?

Ferguson argues that part of the answer lies in the conceptual and institutional apparatus that the “project” of development both depends and elaborates on. Through his analysis of reports produced about Lesotho by development agencies such as The World Bank, Ferguson demonstrates that what development agencies achieved with remarkable effectiveness was the transformation of a messy political, social and economic situation into an object perfectly suitable to the kinds of a-political, technical interventions that development agencies are designed to supply. Through these reports, the complicated political and economic history and contemporary realities of Lesotho -- including a corrupt national government that sought to repress its political opposition; an economy largely dependent on the wages earned by the large percentage of Lesotho males who crossed the borders to work in South African mines; and an entangled, fractious economic and political relationship with South Africa - were rendered as a scenario devoid of politics, modern economic development, or external relationships to nearby neighbors. As Ferguson argues, these reports and the projects to which they contribute were both informed by and helped to establish a particular framing – a particular way of seeing Lesotho that is telling as much for what it excludes as what it includes:

By posing all problems and issues that might come up as problems of ‘national development’ – in a country like Lesotho, literally everything is treated as an ‘aspect’ of ‘development’ – the problematic avoids the formulation of any issue, problem, or program for action based on entities other than the state, effectively excluding from the field of view both conflicts within the nation and forces which transcend it (Ferguson 1994:62)

In this way, Ferguson argues that one of the most potent effects, or accomplishments of these development projects and their “problematic” (what he calls, the “development apparatus”) is that “(p)olitical and structural causes of poverty in Lesotho are systematically erased and replaced with technical ones” (Ferguson 1994:66).

Abstracted from the particular context of Lesotho, this describes a process, or phenomenon that Ferguson suggests is endemic to the modern, bureaucratic, or institutional management of large-scale inequalities. According to Ferguson, the transformation of structural problems into “technical” ones is a fundamental way in which larger political, social, and economic inequalities are “de-politicized” and transformed into “socially neutral” problems (256; 264). Through these processes, “certain unmanageable sorts of facts” are translated “into a more acceptable register” (28).

I contend that through processes that have important parallels to the ones Ferguson outlines, structural problems faced by the single mothers working as CNAs at Rolling Meadows are incorporated into the bureaucratic structure and “problematic” of Rolling Meadows and, through this incorporation, are translated into technical problems and depoliticized. Particular aspects of the social and economic worlds of lower-level staff become translated into logistical problems that can be addressed through the day-to-day implementation of particular bureaucratic policies, labor practices and organizational strategies.

Economic and social difficulties that single mother CNAs at Rolling Meadows experience – difficulties that, to an important degree, are produced by their relatively low wages and limited opportunities for mobility – become translated into problems that are

and can be addressed through the organizational mechanisms Rolling Meadows provides. Through this translation, the boundaries of the problems are framed as bureaucratic ones rather than ones with deep, structural roots that transcend the workplace. Their economic struggles become a bureaucratic problem subject to technical rather than political solutions. In what follows, I outline how this depoliticization is accomplished at Rolling Meadows.

The Workplace and Workers' Economic Needs

Workplaces literally determine workers' standards of living through the wages they pay and the opportunities they provide for occupational mobility. At a starting wage of \$10.34 an hour, the regular wages paid to nursing assistants at Rolling Meadows were slightly higher than the national average for the industry and certainly higher than the average wage paid in many other service sector jobs.⁶⁹ Even at this better than average service wage, however, it would be difficult to support a household with children in Washtenaw County (the county in which most workers lived) by relying on wages from a nursing assistant job alone. With many years of tenure, nursing assistants could earn up to \$15 an hour, still not enough, however, to guarantee a comfortable standard of living and still below what is, arguably, a "living wage" for the area.⁷⁰ In addition, nursing assistant jobs allow for very limited occupational mobility. Better paying health care jobs require a further credential and/or degree; as a result, advanced tenure as a nursing assistant does not lead to progression up a career ladder.

⁶⁹ <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos165.htm#earnings> (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook. Accessed 12/30/2006)

⁷⁰ The Universal Living Wage (ULW) organization bases their calculation of a Living Wage on the HUD principle that a reasonable standard of living is one in which someone pays no more than 30% of their income for housing. Based on that premise, the ULW calculate what hourly wage would need to be earned to have the HUD determined Fair Market Rent for a 1 Bedroom and a 2 Bedroom apartment for any given area make up no more than 30% of a household's income in that area. <http://www.universallivingwage.org/> (accessed 2/26/2007).

Given the low wages and limited options for occupational mobility associated with nursing assistant jobs at Rolling Meadows, reliance on regular pay alone creates chronic economic and social needs among staff. Many staff who rely on these wages suffer at least occasional financial crises. But even for workers who, for whatever reasons, have been able to better buffer themselves from these financial strains, the standard of living these jobs make possible is below what has come to be seen as “normal” for most Americans. In this next section, I turn to a discussion of how these economic needs (resulting from the gap between regular earnings and living expenses) are imprinted onto the organizational structure of Rolling Meadows. I focus particular attention on the bureaucratic practices that develop in relation to these needs, the complicated consequences these practices have for staff, and the ways in which these practices produce organizational and economic benefits for Rolling Meadows.

Chronic Financial Crises

During the 15 months I spent at Rolling Meadows, there was abundant evidence that the discrepancy between earnings and expenses launched some workers into semi-regular financial crises. These crises manifest in myriad ways at Rolling Meadows: in phone numbers that were abruptly disconnected; in creditors repeated efforts to track a staff member down at work; in late arrivals or missed work days due to a car repair that couldn't be paid (or a gas tank that couldn't be filled); in a request for time off to attend a court date for an eviction proceeding. My field notes are full of incidents like these. For example, the time Jill fielded a call from a landlord trying to track down a former tenant who had left owing unpaid rent. Or the time when Laquaya called in, in tears, from the auto repair shop where she had just received the news that her car would cost \$1500 to

repair and she had only been able to scrape together a couple hundred. The time when Tye called in to explain she would be absent from work that day because her electricity had been cut off and she needed to make the rounds at various agencies to try to get it turned back on. Or the time when Jaisyn got stuck in Mississippi after she had traveled there to attend a funeral, because she didn't have the bus fare for her and her children to get home. The fact that workers chronically faced gaps in trying to make ends meet was not a secret to management at Rolling Meadows. In fact, management acknowledged these financial tensions in a number of important ways, crafting specific bureaucratic policies and procedures around them.

Paycheck Advances

Rolling Meadows instituted two key policies designed to help ease staff members' financial quandaries. The first policy was that, in cases of unusual or extreme financial need, workers were allowed to obtain advances on their paychecks. In emergencies, this policy was enormously helpful. Its drawback, however, was that it required letting upper level management know your "personal business."⁷¹ In order to deploy this more exceptional remedy, staff were required to elaborate on their reasons for requiring it. The policy necessitated that staff confide the details of their financial need to Jill who then presented it to the Financial Manager, Matt, in the Business Office. Jill was also required to have both the staff member's supervisor and the Director of Facilities, Mary Gordon, sign off on the request. Matt was invariably sympathetic to these requests; even so, it involved considerable revelation of one's personal situation up the official chain of command. In addition, the request -- as well as the personal information regarding what

⁷¹ This phrase was commonly invoked by African American staff, in particular, to indicate private, intimate aspects of one's life.

had prompted it -- remained in your personnel file. The need to disclose this kind of personal information and this permanent recording of one's intimate financial situation made some staff hesitant to utilize this benefit. Discomfort with and dislike of having to let other people know "too much" of your "business" was a commonly expressed concern, especially among African American staff.

When Tye had received notice that her apartment complex had initiated eviction proceedings against her because she had gone more than a month without paying her rent, her efforts to piece together the funds to pay the amount owed involved calling Jill to request an advance on her paycheck. Tye later revealed to me that as desperately as she had needed that advance, she had really struggled with asking for it. Besides the general humiliation Tye associated with making the request, she had become good friends with Sean, the Director of Nursing, Chantal's son, who worked in the maintenance department at Rolling Meadows. Tye was extremely embarrassed by the possibility that, because Chantal would know about it, news of her request would somehow find its way back to Sean. In front of Sean, Tye was the epitome of a self-confident, tough, nery woman. She hated the idea that Sean would find out information about her that made her feel vulnerable and ashamed.

Among the African American staff I got to know, there was a great deal of meaning and importance attached to maintaining an intimate sphere in which one's private actions were not subject to other's judgments, evaluation and commentary. The constituency of this intimate sphere could be a constantly shifting, adaptive assemblage, depending on the aspects of one's life and behavior potentially vulnerable to scrutiny and the likely agent(s) of scrutiny. At times, this intimate sphere could exclude even the most

proximate kin; for example, in relation to a sexual or romantic relationship that was not condoned by family members.

The importance of the boundary between one's private, personal life and one's public life (including domains such as work, other formal settings, and larger social networks of which one was a part) was revealed in a number of ways by the women I got to know. Sitting in the lunchroom with Tye and her group of friends, it was common to hear about interpersonal conflicts sparked by complaints that one person or another had revealed too much of someone's business to others, or, alternately, had "gotten" in someone's business by expressing unwelcome opinions about elements of that person's personal life. These litanies mirrored what I had heard from African American single mothers during my formal interviews.

During these interviews, I asked mothers if they had any close relationships with co-workers and whether or not they socialized with co-workers outside of work. More often than not, I heard from women that they didn't like to mix the two worlds, preferring to keep their work and home lives separate. As Jada put it during our interview, "[B]ecause I mean, it's **enough** seeing you at work. I don't want you all in my business. Hello. No. Because why would I want people I work with all in my -- you know what I'm saying?" In addition, many of the single mothers who worked at Rolling Meadows had to deal with the state agency, the Family Independence Agency, to access various public benefits such as Medicaid for their children, child-care subsidy support, or food stamps. These interactions instructed mothers in the unwelcome power of bureaucratic agents to mete out punitive actions (such as denial or withdrawal of benefits, imposition of monetary fines and even threat of legal action) based on the agency's acquisition of, or

accumulation of information that most Americans consider private, such as one's income from various sources and the nature of one's relationships with children's fathers.

Cashing Out Paid Time Off

The second, more routine, policy Rolling Meadows had instituted to provide financial assistance to workers was to allow them to “cash out” accumulated vacation hours. Every paycheck, workers accumulated a set number of paid time-off hours (PTO) that they could use towards vacation or missed work hours.⁷² Once a worker had worked at Rolling Meadows for more than a year, she could cash out up to 80 hours of PTO per year. Few pay periods went by without one or more staff members coming into Jill's office to fill in cash out requests. Staff cashed out their accumulated PTO to help pay for any number of financial needs, including a security deposit on a new apartment, a car repair, a child's birthday, or Christmas presents. While this provided critical financial relief to staff who needed it, the financial relief came at a cost. Exchanging PTO for cash meant reduced leeway for dealing with any future need for time off. Once a staff member's PTO was depleted, any time off needed to attend doctor's appointments or school conferences, to visit out of town relatives, or to stay home with a child during their school holidays was all unpaid. Some workers with years of tenure were able to accumulate so much PTO, that they had plenty of PTO to spare, even after cashing 80 hours of it out. This was not the case for most single mothers, who regularly relied on their PTO to attend to family responsibilities. While the short-term payout might meet a critical need, for single mothers, who often needed more flexibility in their schedules to deal with family needs, this reduced buffer had potential longer-term costs.

⁷² PTO hours were separate from accrued sick time

In the face of urgent financial stress, however, few single mothers had the leisure of acting like the classic economic “rational man.” As Jenny G demonstrated one July 2005 afternoon when she came into Jill’s office to fill in a request to cash out her accumulated PTO, family needs complicate any economic costs and benefits analysis. Jenny G, an African American CNA and a single mother, presented Jill with her dilemma that she needed to cash out whatever PTO she had available, but would also need to take some vacation days at the beginning of September. Jill fretted over this, reminding Jenny that if she cashed out all her PTO, she wouldn’t have enough vacation hours available for September. Flatly, Jenny said, “I don’t care. I need to do both.” As she then elaborated, her son would be starting high school in September and she was deeply worried about the transition, especially to the big high school he would be attending in Detroit. Although she did not make explicit reference to it, both Jill and I knew from previous interactions with Jenny that her son struggled with some significant emotional and social difficulties, a knowledge that added layered meaning to Jenny’s adamant assertion that she **needed** to be home with him to try to make sure he’d be alright.

Benefiting Rolling Meadows’ Interests

Allowing staff to obtain advances on their paychecks and to cash out accumulated PTO were two official policies Rolling Meadows crafted to help workers manage their financial needs. Rolling Meadows’ institutionalization of these policies is determined by a complex mix of interests. On the one hand, these policies clearly benefit workers and, in that way, they indicate a more humane approach to human resource issues than is conventionally associated with low-wage labor market employers. At the same time, these policies serve Rolling Meadows’ organizational interests in critical ways.

First of all, Rolling Meadows exists as an employer in a particular, local labor market. For the local health care sector, the labor market is dominated by the University of Michigan Health Care System. The U of M Health Care System employs a total of 18,500 workers⁷³ in every occupational category from academicians and other teaching and research staff, to primary care providers, computer programmers, social workers, administrators, food service workers, maintenance workers, security staff, housekeepers, transport workers, and parking staff. To a very real degree, the working and labor conditions at the University of Michigan set the bar for other health care providers in the local area. Both administrative and care staff at Rolling Meadows spoke explicitly of the influence of the University of Michigan's working conditions on Rolling Meadows labor practices.

One small example of the University's shadow effect was that Rolling Meadows felt it necessary to allow nurses (albeit, only a very few) to work 12 hour shifts because the University offered these shifts and some nurses considered them to be more desirable. Rolling Meadows did this even though coordinating these shifts caused a number of cumbersome logistical problems.⁷⁴ Informal conversations with Jill as well as nursing management and human resources staff at Rolling Meadows also made it clear that because Rolling Meadows did not pay quite the same level of wages as the University for comparable positions (Rolling Meadows starting pay for nursing assistants, for example, was approximately a dollar less than the University of Michigan's), Rolling Meadows

⁷³ Information obtained from the University of Michigan Health System's website <http://www.med.umich.edu/careers/about/index.html> (accessed 3/14/2008)

⁷⁴ Rolling Meadows allowed four twelve hour shifts on its nursing schedule (meaning that four nurses could work these shifts). The 12 hour shifts created extra burdens for Jill and the scheduling process, in general, as, in order for them to work, two people had to be exactly synched up, agreeing to work the exact same days. When one of the two was sick, or went on vacation, it created enormous headaches for Jill.

tried to enhance its competitiveness in the local labor market by offering other forms of compensation, including a supportive work environment.⁷⁵

These policies advanced Rolling Meadows' organizational interests, including their profit interests, even if indirectly. As noted, these policies enhanced Rolling Meadows competitiveness in the local labor market and contributed to an atmosphere of goodwill towards employees, encouraging longer tenure among staff. Retaining staff was not only cost-effective, but improved the quality of care that Rolling Meadows provided to residents and helped create a more familiar environment for both residents and residents' families; all of which helped Rolling Meadows maintain a certain reputation among care providers in the local area.

Although these administrative policies have undeniable benefits for staff and, in many ways, can be seen as an indication of the supportive environment Rolling Meadows attempted to construct for its employees, these policies also serve as a potent recognition of employees' financial realities. Through these policies, the ubiquity of workers' financial strain is both anticipated and, in a sense, normalized. At once an acknowledgment of the financial precariousness that characterizes many workers' lives these policies also depoliticize that precariousness. In translating workers' chronic economic needs into the bureaucratic structure of Rolling Meadows, these needs become subject to the "bureaucratic logic" of administration; routinized and regularized in a way that not only reduces their inherent complexities, but neutralizes them, extracting (and abstracting) them from their embedded-ness in larger social, economic and political

⁷⁵ Although, as noted, the pay was lower than for comparable positions at the University of Michigan hospital, in general, labor conditions in nursing homes were considered less stressful and demanding than floor work at hospitals. The ratio of patient to staff tended to be lower. In addition, nursing homes were seen as offering an advantage in that workers could develop more personal, sustained bonds with the patients for whom they cared because of the long-term nature of most residents' tenancy.

realities (Scott 1998). In this way, Rolling Meadows' policies obscure the source of workers' financial precariousness and the role that the nursing home's wages play in producing these financial strains.

This next section is about a practice that had become an essential element of the nursing care center's day-to-day operations, so much so that the human resources department publicly celebrated those staff who engaged it. Yet it was not accorded the explicit status of being an official policy. This was the nursing care center's practice of relying on overtime to compensate for its persistently understaffed operations. The nursing care center's reliance on overtime is perhaps the most explicit articulation of the knotty circuit between the organizational needs of Rolling Meadows and the structured needs of its employees.

Overtime

The chronic labor deficit that impelled Jill to so forcefully pursue staff to take on extra shifts was met with what might be considered a complementary force: staffs' desire to pick up overtime. There were staff who came down to Jill's office the day the new monthly schedule was printed so they could sign up for overtime shifts, calling first dibs on the short-staffed shifts they wanted. Many of these staff were so habituated into regular overtime that they were chagrined and complained bitterly if Jill couldn't offer them their customary allocation of extra shifts.⁷⁶ One of these staff, who regularly picked up 20-40 hours of overtime a week, would melodramatically threaten to quit on the rare occasions when Jill had to cancel her off an overtime shift.

⁷⁶ Overtime at Rolling Meadows paid time and a half for most days, but double time if the shift was on one of the designated holidays: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day. Workers whose regularly scheduled shift fell on one of these holidays also received double time; unless they were absent for the shift that preceded or followed the holiday.

This was one of the most striking ways in which organizational strategies at Rolling Meadows resonated with the social and economic worlds of staff. The basic wages that nursing assistants earned meant that many of the staff who relied on their regular wages for their principal income were occasionally unable to make ends meet and faced financial crises. These crises included car breakdowns, utilities shut off, loan repayments falling into arrears, landlord suits for overdue rent, and evictions from apartments. During these crises, staff turned to overtime shifts to try to make up shortfalls.

However, some single mothers did not only turn to overtime during periods of extreme financial need. Some turned to overtime as a primary income strategy. In other words, these staff used overtime to access an income and a standard of living higher than their basic wages made possible. These included a single mother who used overtime to pay for things ostensibly considered luxuries, another who wanted to improve her granddaughter's educational experience by sending her to private school, another who was investing in goods and services to keep her two high-school aged sons college bound, and yet another who was trying to make payments on a mortgage had become unaffordable (and, arguably, always was). The problem was that, under both these sets of circumstances, overtime was an inherently unsatisfactory strategy. Relying on overtime to address chronic financial crises did nothing to alter the underlying problem of the persistent gap between earnings and expenses. And relying on overtime to achieve a higher standard of living was, ultimately, an unsustainable practice.

However, staffs' reliance on overtime produced positive benefits for Rolling Meadows. Both the staff members whose reliance on their regular wages only

occasionally resulted in acute financial strain and the staff members trying to effectuate a higher standard of living than their regular wages made possible formed a pool of reserve labor for overtime. The chronicity of these workers' desire for overtime made it possible for Rolling Meadow's management to calculate staffing needs with that in mind. The demand for overtime meant management could bank on regularly stretching existing staff to make up for the labor deficit that would otherwise exist on the permanent staff schedule. In this way, Rolling Meadows was able to incorporate aspects of its staff members' world -- aspects that it had a hand in creating -- into its organizational practices in a way that it ultimately benefited from. To illustrate this in greater depth, I turn now to the story of one staff member whose need for overtime exemplifies the operation of this dynamic.

Jenny G

Jenny G was one of the more regular visitors to Jill's office. Although, during those visits, I had exchanged various pleasantries and small talk with her, I didn't develop much of a sense of her in my first few months of fieldwork at Rolling Meadows. When she came into Jill's office or when Jill and I saw her in the halls, she responded to the "hi, how are you?" with a friendly graciousness, but also a hesitancy, a certain reserve. The warm, dimpled smile that lit up her face also had a practiced lift to it, a self-conscious sense of appropriate deployment, in a way that fit with her unfailing politeness.

The first hint I had that Jenny G's life was not quite as equanimous as her manner might suggest was from an exchange in September 2004 when Jenny came into Jill's office asking to pick up some extra shifts. By the end of their exchange, Jenny had agreed to work four double shifts over the course of six days. In the midst of settling this,

the phone rang and Jill interrupted their negotiations to answer it. Jenny remained standing in the narrow space between Jill's and my chair, hemmed in by the chairs and the filing cabinets, waiting for Jill to finish the call. As Jill's phone conversation continued, becoming more involved, I turned towards Jenny, exclaiming, "You pick up a **lot** of shifts!" She laughed, nodding, and then said, "I was off work for three months and I got behind on my mortgage and everything and they're letting me catch up." "It must be tiring to do so many extra shifts," I murmured. "Yeah," she said, "It is."

By the time I met Jenny, when she was in her early 40s, she had been working as a CNA for over a decade. Prior to joining the staff at Rolling Meadows, she had worked for almost seven years at another nursing home in the Ann Arbor area, but she had been let go from that position for accumulating too many disciplinary write ups for lateness. After being let go, she had been unemployed for three months before being hired at Rolling Meadows. This period of unemployment had been the start of a series of misfortunes that created problems for and pressures on Jenny that continued to only escalate over time.

Jenny lived in Detroit with her almost 14 year old son. She had grown up in Detroit and still had most of her family there: a father, several sisters, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles and cousins. A few years ago, Jenny had been able to take advantage of a rare opportunity for someone in her income bracket: through a non-profit housing association in Detroit, Jenny had been able to purchase her own home. The home had been part of a very small new development for moderate-income residents. When Jenny moved in with her son, she moved into a brand new home with a mortgage of \$1800 a

month she was supposed to be able to manage on her CNA wages of not quite \$14 an hour.⁷⁷

What Jenny had not counted on was a period of unemployment. Making her monthly mortgage payments had already been extremely tight and Jenny didn't have any savings to buffer the sudden absence of income. The mortgage lender, however, had been willing to try to help her stay in her home and get back on her payment schedule. After securing her position at Rolling Meadows, she worked out a deal with her mortgage company to make up for the three months of non-payment. Even with the co-operation of her mortgage company, however, at a monthly payment of \$1800 month it was hard to imagine how Jenny could have sustained such mortgage payments even under ideal circumstances, let alone under the circumstances of three months missed income. In addition, the brand new house turned out to be far from the perfect dream home she had envisioned.

The problems with the house had started before she had even moved in, while the builders were still constructing the home. The house suffered from chronically bursting and leaking water pipes. By November, the pipes had broken and her basement flooded several times. The flooding had resulted in a noxious smell, apparently the result of mildew that seemed to be setting permanently into the walls, creating an increasingly dank odor that emanated from the basement and permeated throughout the house. In January 2005, the pipes burst again, again flooding her basement and resulting in such serious water damage that cracks formed on the ceiling. Jenny sought legal advice about what remedies to pursue and with the aid of a lawyer she retained, Jenny found evidence

⁷⁷ Even without taking any taxes into consideration or the cost of her monthly health care benefits, a \$14 an hour wage for a 37.5 hour week would translate into a maximum of \$2275 dollars a month.

that the builders had not had all their proper building licenses and permits and they had never had the pipes inspected to ensure they met code standards. Jenny eventually moved out with her son into her father's small home in a nearby neighborhood while she continued to struggle to resolve the double bind of her escalating mortgage debt and her uninhabitable house.

In the midst of this housing crisis, on an early Tuesday morning in October 2004, Jill finished typing up her weekly call-in sheet by confiding that she was really worried about Jenny.⁷⁸ Jenny had been scheduled to work the previous Sunday's afternoon shift but she had called in early Sunday morning, telling the weekend receptionist she wouldn't be able to make her shift because she was sick with a fever. When Jill had seen Jenny on the floor on Monday, the next day, she said that Jenny really didn't "look herself;" she was downcast and muted, her face puffy. Jill asked her if she was okay and Jenny confided that she had called in over the weekend not because she had been sick, but because her 14 year old son had told her he was feeling so unhappy he "wanted to die." As she told Jill this, Jenny was visibly shaken and tears welled up in her eyes. Jill was deeply moved by this confession, but was also surprised. Jenny had never revealed anything like this about her life before to Jill. But Jill, who had had her own share of personal stresses in the past few months and who knew what it was like to be dealing with a teenage son's unhappiness, expressed a great deal of empathy for Jenny. She

⁷⁸ The call-in sheet was the sheet recording every staff member's absence from a shift during the past week and the official reasons given for their absence. These official reasons were the notes recorded by whoever took the call and were an abbreviated verbatim transcription of whatever reason the staff member gave for calling in. The most typical reason recorded on the sheet was that the staff member was sick or the staff member's child was sick.

spent several minutes comforting Jenny, sympathizing with how overwhelming it could be to deal with a child's emotional suffering.

In recounting this to me, Jill said that she got the impression that Jenny was largely alone in dealing with her son. Jenny did not have a partner; it was just her and her son at home. Jill went on to observe how much harder it must be to manage all of this given how much overtime Jenny picks up. Jenny was always at work: she constantly picked up overtime shifts, often working double shifts. And, on top of this, Jenny commuted in to Rolling Meadows from Detroit. On the best of days, her commute was 45 minutes each way; frequently, it was longer, depending on traffic accidents, highway construction projects and weather. On days she worked a double shift, Jenny was leaving her home in Detroit by 6 a.m. and returning back home after midnight, away from her 14 year old son more than 18 hours.

At the time, I had assumed this would mark a turning point in Jenny's overtime habits, but it didn't. And, in fact, over the next several months, as I started to pay particularly close attention to Jill's bi-weekly tabulations of payroll hours, I saw that, if anything, Jenny picked up even more overtime. I tallied her overtime hours for several pay periods and she hit over 80 work hours a week for three weeks in a row. In November and December 2004, Jenny went through a period where she didn't take a single day off and, for many of those days, was working a double shift. Jill once commented, "It's amazing that Jenny is still standing given how many shifts she picks up."

The primary recourse Jenny had for meeting her monthly mortgage payments and make up for a three-month deficit was this extreme measure of constant, high levels of

overtime. Ultimately, though, this was a limited option, both in terms of her physical capacities and in terms of the total income it could generate. Jenny was stretching herself and her family more than seemed humanly practical, yet, still it wasn't enough.

While evincing concern for Jenny's situation with her son and for Jenny's physical and emotional well-being, Jill continued to turn to Jenny just as frequently as she always had to pick up whatever last minute scheduling holes she needed filled. When an opening appeared on the schedule, Jenny remained one of the first people Jill would ask to fill it. This was the bind of the parallel pressures bearing down on both Jill and Jenny. The never-ending demands of short-staffed schedules bore down with considerable, often oppressive, weight on Jill's shoulders. It wasn't in Jill's interests to cross Jenny off her list of likely overtime contenders. Until Jenny began to say "no" more often than "yes," making it clear she would no longer pick up as many extra shifts as Jill could offer, Jill would continue to approach her. As kind-hearted as Jill was, when it came to the unrelenting urgencies of scheduling holes, Jill's priorities were dispassionately fixed on filling them. And, likewise, the financial pressures on Jenny made it too difficult, for the most part, for her to rebuff Jill's solicitations.

Among the single mothers working as nursing assistants at Rolling Meadows, Jenny G's success in becoming a homeowner, as precarious and fraught with complications as it was, marked her as exceptional (although her desire to have become one was anything but). In Jenny's desire to achieve a standard of living that exceeded her nursing assistant income and in the financial perils and strains she faced in being tethered to what her wages made possible, Jenny exemplified both the ambitions and chronic struggles of many, if not most, of the nursing assistants I got to know at Rolling

Meadows. In addition, Jenny's critical reliance on overtime to access desired social and material goods, attempt to maintain that access, and ameliorate the discrepancy between what she earned and what she **needed** to earn to make ends meet was also typical. Yet, clearly, her dependence on overtime benefited Rolling Meadows. Jenny's financial situation meant she was willing to pick up otherwise unfilled shifts on the schedule. Rather than operate with a labor shortage for a particular shift, Jenny's overtime offset various labor deficits, helping the nursing care department to run more smoothly and meet state regulations regarding staff to patient ratios. In this way, Jenny's economic and social needs helped Rolling Meadows meet its organizational needs. Yet, Jenny faced high costs from this strategy; costs that call into question its desirability and sustainability.

Unsustainable Strategies: the cost of overtime

On occasion, I would walk by the staff break room and see some of the women who picked up the most overtime with their heads down on the table, eyes closed, exhausted. Passing them in the hallways, their eyes were bleary and darkly circled. While overtime provided a critical (and, in some cases, essential) means towards accessing desirable social, economic and material goods, or to just keeping one's head above water, it was also clear that working so many hours took a toll on women's physical well-being and also had other, more hidden costs for their home lives. Even when these costs erupted in a more visible way, however, as Jenny G's story indicates, women did not often have the luxury of putting other needs first.

The economics of overtime: flexibilization

Rolling Meadows' reliance on overtime to meet its labor needs might seem an economically irrational strategy. After all, paying workers time and a half is expensive. Yet, for every new permanent hire on Rolling Meadows' payroll, Rolling Meadows had to pay training costs, health care benefits, payroll benefits (such as sick time and vacation time) and workers' compensation. In its reliance on a "lean" staff rather than a buffer that might provide a surplus of labor, Rolling Meadows' illustrates a trend among work organizations that has been extensively chronicled by economists, other social scientists and business analysts: increasing reliance on flexible staffing practices as a means of controlling labor costs (Capelli 1995; Crompton 2002; Dunk 2002; Henly 2003; Leidner 1993; Smith 1993; 1997). As Rosemary Crompton has observed, flexible staffing practices "are guided by neo-liberal economic theory, which stresses the efficiency gains that come from making the costs of factors of production as flexibly responsive as possible." (Crompton 2002:543-544) Such practices include the greater utilization of part-time, contingent, and temporary workers as well as the incorporation of flexible shift scheduling practices. Flexible scheduling practices, which are particularly prevalent among retail and food service organizations, allow employers to respond to fluctuation in labor needs by reducing and increasing workers hours as needed; providing flexibility at employees' expense. In their most flexible variant, these kinds of scheduling practices can require workers to work a constantly changing array of shifts that vary from week to week. At Rolling Meadows, however, these kinds of scheduling flexibilities are not an option for management as staff are guaranteed a specific schedule that fixes both the number of shifts they will work and the days on which they will work them. Yet, by

operating with a bare bones number of permanent staff, Rolling Meadows can both minimize periods in which it has an “over” supply of labor as well as minimize the number of staff for whom training, health care and payroll benefits, and workers’ compensation need to be provided. Such compensation likely exceeds the costs incurred in the payment of overtime.

The extent to which these overtime practices were neither accidental nor incidental to Rolling Meadows’ operating practices can be evidenced by the overtime lottery the human resources department ran. Every two week pay period, the payroll officer for each department (e.g., Jill for the nursing department and then her counterparts in housekeeping, maintenance, and food service) would turn in a list of names of every staff member who had worked overtime shifts during that pay period. Those names were entered into a pool. Then, once a month, a drawing was held out of which one of those names were selected. The winner of the drawing won a gift certificate of \$100 to a local discount department store. The winner’s name was pinned to various bulletin boards and featured on a slide broadcast over the internal television system.⁷⁹

The Circuit Between Under-staffing and Overtime

The dynamics surrounding overtime exemplifies the complicated relationship between workers’ economic and social needs and Rolling Meadows’ use of and reliance on those needs. The income and mobility ceilings of nursing assistant jobs at Rolling Meadows result in workers who must rely on extra-regular means to secure a more comfortable, normal standard of living and workers who suffer occasional financial crises. At the same time that the ceilings associated with these jobs produce these

⁷⁹ The internal television system consisted of television monitors in several locations where staff congregated. The screens showed announcements of events and information relevant to staff in the form of still images.

economic tensions, these tensions also feed back into Rolling Meadows and, to some extent, become assimilated into Rolling Meadows' structure.

In its de-facto institutionalization of overtime, the nursing care center actually parlays its employees' abiding need for greater income into an advantageous operational situation; it capitalizes on its workers chronic need to boost their income to either mitigate a financial crisis or to acquire social and material goods that would otherwise be out of reach. In this way, the nursing care center's reliance on overtime transforms the structured economic and social needs of its own employees into a beneficial economic good for the organization. While simultaneously providing a necessary financial release valve to workers (by allowing them an opportunity to generate greater income), relying on overtime to remedy a chronic labor deficit allowed Rolling Meadows a critical means of managing and reducing overall labor costs. Through this meshing of organizational needs with individual, workers' needs, Rolling Meadows, and other work places like it, can be understood as important sites where the structured needs of the organization and the structured needs of the workers – needs that, in part, are actually produced by the organization --- coincide in ways that ultimately benefit the organization.

CHAPTER 5

THE ENCHANTMENT OF EDUCATION

In this chapter, I suggest that the immobility of nursing assistant jobs infuses postsecondary education with a mythic charge. Rolling Meadow's management encourages workers' efforts to obtain a postsecondary degree in a number of critical ways. Yet, given the structured realities of many workers' lives and the evidence that few ever realize this path, managements' support for workers' efforts to educationally improve themselves has an unreal, fantastical quality to it. These more spectral qualities are particularly evident in management's unquestioning acceptance of one staff member's claim of spectacular academic success. I explore how managements' assiduous support for postsecondary education may be understood as an attempt to salve some of the tensions that the immobility of these jobs otherwise engenders.

Professional School

Early into my fieldwork at Rolling Meadows, Jill informed me, in a tone conveying the pride a mother might feel, that Michelle, the full time administrative assistant for the nursing care center (and Jill's scheduling assistant), a 23 year old African American woman from Ypsilanti, was also a full time student in a professional graduate degree program at a nearby university. In addition to being the most prestigious program of its kind in the state, the professional school in which Michelle was enrolled was one of the top in the county. Michelle's admittance to it marked her as part of a highly select,

elite group. I was awed that Michelle was able to manage being a full-time student in a professional degree program while also working full-time at Rolling Meadows. Yet, it also gave us something in common; based not only in any affinity we might feel as a result of our shared identities as graduate students, but also in our shared experience (albeit one with important distinctions) of currently straddling two very different social worlds: an elite graduate school environment and a workplace in which only a minority of staff members had bachelor's degrees. I imagined that, like me, Michelle might find the contrasts between the embodied experiences of those two worlds fairly palpable. I hoped our shared status as graduate students might form the basis of a meaningful connection. Instead this shared status became fodder for unexpected friction between us; friction that caused me to have uncomfortable doubts about aspects of Michelle's graduate school experiences. As a result of these doubts, however, I began to understand that Michelle's story of dramatic academic accomplishments played a vital role in helping craft and sustain a larger narrative of upward mobility at Rolling Meadows.

The Scheduling Assistant and Schedules

Michelle's administrative position traversed both the scheduling department and Chantal's, the Director of Nursing, office. With Jill, she was responsible for compiling, keeping track of, and managing all the data related to staff members' absences, punctuality and disciplinary incidents. While Jill managed all the day to day functioning of the scheduling office, Michelle's job was to keep statistics on each nursing staff members' attendance, ensure it went into their personnel file and produce monthly reports based on the collective data. One of her central tasks in relation to this was to put together a monthly spreadsheet of the scheduling "irregularities" of nursing care staff:

absences, tardiness, early departures from shifts, and anything else erratic in their punching in and out records.⁸⁰ In addition to these tasks, she handled other database tasks for Chantal related to staffing and budgeting, ordered all office supplies for the nursing care facility, and produced flyers for staff events. In many ways, she was Chantal's administrative right hand person.

Michelle's role vis-à-vis the scheduling office, however, meant that she took over Jill's scheduling duties whenever Jill was absent or out of the office for any period. Although Jill herself was rarely ill, during the time that I was at Rolling Meadows, Jill's son had a serious medical problem that required her to miss work to accompany him on doctor's visits, take him for surgery, and oversee his post-operative care. On a number of these occasions, I heard nursing care staff remark how much they disliked it when Jill was absent because it meant they had to deal with Michelle.

Michelle was much more cavalier about shifts working short. She was also much less willing, in general, to put extra effort in to sorting out scheduling complications. When someone called in absent for a shift, Michelle made the perfunctory rounds of calls to find a fill-in, but no more than that. On one occasion, Michelle tutored me in the difference between her approach to scheduling versus Jill's. In Michelle's view, staff were all adults and, as adults, had a responsibility to be at work when scheduled to be. Michelle said that Jill was considered to be a "soft touch" while staff knew that Michelle was much less sympathetic and much stricter regarding their obligations to work their scheduled shifts.

⁸⁰ Staff members used time cards to punch in and out for their shifts and for any break they took if they left the Rolling Meadows campus. The latter action was mandated as a way of recording who was physically present on the campus at any particular point in time, ostensibly, in case of an emergency such as a fire alarm.

As Michelle informed me, “It’s a question of doing what you are paid to do.” According to Michelle, although, optimally, a shift should have a certain number of staff, in actuality, the shift could work with one less staff member than that. In fact, as she pointed out, Rolling Meadows actually employed a higher number of staff per shift than the state’s mandated minimum. So, in Michelle’s view, although it might not be ideal, it was possible to work short-staffed and, because it was possible, that’s what “grown-ups” who get paid to work do; “they do their job.” There was a peculiar irony in Michelle’s avowal of this attendance ideology, however, given her own scheduling and attendance habits.

Although the normal administrative staff schedule was to work 7 till 4 every day, Michelle rarely came in by 7 and, on several days a week, left the office no later than 3 p.m. in order to attend her graduate school classes. Yet, unlike everyone else’s pay, which was calculated according to the strict increments of their time cards, Michelle’s pay never reflected anything other than full-time attendance. In addition, Michelle built up a significant history of full afternoon or days off to attend special school-related events, such as exams, conferences, or intensive special classes held at various locations around the Midwest. Her absences to attend school-related activities or events were treated as unquestionably necessary and legitimate. None of her claims were subject to scrutiny: she never had to show her course schedule or bring in any paperwork regarding her absences due to her schooling demands.

Compared to her administrative counterparts, Michelle’s attendance was exceptionally erratic. On top of her graduate school obligations, she also had several major life events that caused her to miss a number of days of work. Two of these

involved extended family members, cousins, who were hospitalized with serious illnesses, one of whom died. I had witnessed a number of occasions in which Jill had had to inform, or remind, a staff member that only in the case of an immediate family member's death (a child, partner, sibling or grandparent) were days off to attend a funeral covered by Rolling Meadows' bereavement policy. In cases of the death of another family member, the official policy was that staff members were allowed the time off only if they had sufficient paid time off (PTO) to cover it.

The less strict application of attendance rules to Michelle was noticed by a number of her administrative colleagues who resented what they saw as her more preferential treatment. At one point, after several co-workers had complained directly and indirectly to Chantal, Chantal had a talk with Michelle. The talk, however, was motivated by the "excess" days Michelle was taking off -- days she had been absent due to the family crises or her own ill health – not by her school-related absences. And although Michelle was irked by the verbal reprimand, she suffered no long-term consequences as a result of it.

Michelle came from a large extended family that had been based in the area for several generations. Her father owned a small business in the Ypsilanti area and her mother managed a store in one of the local shopping centers. Her parents made sufficient income to be considered middle-class, but Michelle, the youngest and the only daughter, was the only one of her four siblings to have obtained an undergraduate degree. She had completed her undergraduate degree at Eastern Michigan University (EMU), finishing, (as she related to me at one point), with a 4.0 grade point average. Among many people in the community, the graduate school Michelle was attending was seen as a challenging

environment for someone coming from the much more working-class milieu of EMU to navigate. There was a common perception, especially among those in the local African American community, that it was not a place that welcomed African Americans, especially working-class African Americans. These contextual factors -- the prestige associated with professional program in which Michelle was enrolled combined with Michelle's background as an otherwise ordinary, young woman from Ypsilanti -- certainly fed into the standing accorded to Michelle.

Although Jill demonstrated the most active and engaged interest in Michelle's graduate school experiences -- avidly engrossed in Michelle's accounts of class room exchanges and delighted by Michelle's stories of professors singling her out for praise -- Michelle's status as a student earning an elite professional degree was considered an estimable accomplishment by many staff, especially the management staff. Mention of her student status among nursing and administrative higher-ups was typically accompanied by regard for her accomplishments, particularly for her ability to handle such a double load with such apparent ease.

Doubts and Dissonance

Not long after Jill had informed me of Michelle's graduate student status, in early Fall 2004, Michelle stopped in for one of her regular visits to Jill's office. While Michelle leaned against the waist-high filing cabinet that hugged the wall behind my chair and Jill's, Jill enthusiastically noted that Michelle was now fully immersed in her first semester of graduate school. She then went on to designate both Michelle and I as obviously and admirably accomplished people, by virtue of our shared status as graduate students. As Jill finished, I swiveled in my chair to face Michelle, and followed Jill's

sentiments with an admiring commentary on the cachet associated with the professional school in which she was enrolled,

It's such a great graduate school. It's so hard to get into. One of my best friends applied to get in for this year as well. I thought she'd be a shoe-in. She's really smart, had all this great stuff on her resume and had been working at the School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan as one of their admissions coordinators. But she didn't get in. She wound up going to the University of Wisconsin. She was really disappointed she didn't get in.

In response, Michelle proceeded to tell me that not only had she been accepted, but she had been awarded a scholarship that covered all her tuition. After again esteeming her evident academic prowess, I asked her if she was finding it difficult to manage an academic workload that was well-known for being extremely demanding on top of her full-time position at Rolling Meadows. Michelle replied it wasn't hard at all for her; she just did her work in the evenings, after classes. Her tone was so blasé it seemed dismissive; communicating a disinterest in talking further on the topic.

As noted, my friend who had applied and been rejected from the graduate program Michelle attended had gained acceptance to one at the University of Wisconsin instead. As my friend and I kept in close contact during the year, I learned many details about her day-to-day academic experiences. Over the course of what was both of their first semesters in these professional programs, the picture that developed of my friend's life in graduate school was substantially at odds with the one that developed of Michelle's. As my sense of the extent to which Michelle's experiences diverged from what my friend and her cohort at Wisconsin were experiencing, I began to question the veracity of Michelle's claims; eventually, to the extent that I wondered if she were actually enrolled in the degree program she said she was.

My awareness of the discrepancies between these otherwise parallel experiences began midway during the fall when my friend at Wisconsin began to sound increasingly anxious and stressed as her first semester exams approached. In the last days leading up to her first exam, she was so worried she was barely sleeping. One morning, sitting in the office with Jill, I was telling Jill about what a hard time my friend was having, including her complaints that she didn't have time to exercise or cook because she found it so difficult to keep up with all the reading and the other work. Between going to classes and studying, my friend was spending up to fourteen hours a day consumed in her graduate school activities. In the midst of this, Michelle walked in. Our conversation prompted Jill to ask Michelle when she would be taking her first exams. She said she would be having some soon. When I asked her if she was getting nervous about them, she, again, demonstrated an unwavering confidence and an utter lack of concern; she wasn't worried, she said, she'd do fine.

Even before the first semester ended, Michelle boasted of having all A's in her classes. She told of professors launching surprise quizzes that she invariably aced. She recounted tales of obnoxious classmates whom she bested in class discussions. Invariably, her talk about graduate school involved stories of triumph and singular recognition and praise from her graduate professors. My friend's account of her classroom experiences varied considerably from this. She certainly didn't find herself the object of consistently glowing, public praise from her professors.

And while maintaining her full-time job at Rolling Meadows, even with an infamous first semester's workload of reading and class assignments, Michelle's Monday morning check-ins with Jill invariably revealed that she seemed to find plenty of time on

weekends to go shopping at the mall, attend various family functions, and hang out with her boyfriend. From the accounts Michelle gave, her weekends were filled with purchases of the latest desirable sports shoes (which she would model for us), clothes, jewelry and compact discs.

My status as a doctoral student at the University of Michigan gave me an unusual insider's perspective on Michelle's graduate school engagement that others at Rolling Meadows did not have. It was my cultural capital as a graduate student that made me begin to doubt Michelle's claims. The almost supercilious way Michelle responded to questions regarding her work load or the stresses of graduate school expectations struck me as odd and made me suspicious, while her co-workers seemed to take this a sign of her remarkable competence and self-assuredness.

What finally crystallized my doubts, however, was my realization that it was extremely unlikely Michelle could be attending her graduate classes according to the schedule she had outlined to Rolling Meadows' management. From my friend attending graduate school in Wisconsin, I learned that, unlike its' counterparts in the region, Michelle's school was almost legendary for being unfriendly to part-time or evening students. In fact, I learned that the only way to attend her graduate program was as a full-time student. It was hard to imagine how Michelle had wound up being able to structure full-time, first semester professional school classes (which allowed for very limited elective options) around the daytime work schedule she worked: Monday through Friday, ostensibly 7 a.m. till 3:30 p.m. In the schedule Michelle had negotiated with Chantal, the Director of Nursing (and Michelle's overseer), Michelle had said that all her classes were scheduled for 4 p.m. or later except for one course that she was taking as an

intensive workshop held over several three-day weekends in cities in Ohio and Indiana. When I looked up the graduate school's course schedule (which set out the timeline of every course a first year student was required to take and the time schedule options she had for taking it) on the internet, it seemed impossible for Michelle to have found enough sections of the courses she was required to take after 3 p.m.⁸¹

My conclusions, however, as to whether or not Michelle was actually enrolled in graduate school are not, ultimately, important here. What is important is that my doubts about the credibility of her status "took me out of the game" as Merleau-Ponty might say (Merleau-Ponty in Crossley 2001). In other words, my uncertainties disrupted my immersion in Michelle's narratives of her graduate school experience and drew my attention to Michelle's *performance* of her role; in particular, her role as a person simultaneously managing to be a full-time worker and graduate student. In his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Erving Goffman argues that in any social interaction all of us feel an imperative to perform in certain ways in order to manage the impression we make on others. In Goffman's schema of the social world, every time we walk into a social space, we are both being seen by others and aware of being seen by others. In this way, in his now famous metaphor, we are all actors on a stage.

Critical to Michelle's performance was that she had succeeded in gaining admittance to and was beginning study at one of the most prestigious graduate schools in the United States; into a school and a professional track widely perceived among staff at Rolling Meadows as aligned to an elite world. This made her academic success particularly charged; a model of academic success that defied the odds. Yet, what struck me as remarkable about Michelle's performance of being someone so artful in her

⁸¹ This was according to the Fall 2004 graduate school course schedule, accessed 2/20/2007.

academic success was the way in which Michelle's performance did not just benefit her as an individual, either intra-psychically or vis-à-vis her social standing at Rolling Meadows, but benefited what might be called the larger symbolic imaginary of mobility at Rolling Meadows. The fact that Michelle's status as an elite graduate student was laden with extra-individual meaning can be seen, I suggest, in management's unqualified support of her academic endeavors. Any scheduling need related to her schooling was accommodated by management; she experienced unparalleled leniency in combining her work and school schedule. The degree of support Michelle received from management can only fully be understood, I contend, by considering the ways in which Michelle's academic success served to showcase an idealized conception of mobility through schooling. That management as well as other staff would find Michelle's embodiment of an ideal mobility both so appealing and so necessary can be best understood, perhaps, by comparing the possibility Michelle embodied to the not-so-ideal, real world of mobility that much of the staff, particularly the nursing assistants, faced in their lives.

Upward Mobility

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that economic fortunes in the United States are increasingly tied to whether or not an individual has completed any postsecondary education (Adair and Dahlberg 2003; Center for Women's Policy Studies 2002). Economists refer to this as the education wage premium: the increase in an individual's wage earning capacity associated with increases in educational attainment. As Anthony Carnevale, formerly an economist with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and a senior fellow at the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), has written,

Since the 1970s, the earnings of workers with at least some postsecondary education relative to high school graduates...has doubled from 35 percent to 70 percent, even though the overall supply of workers with least some college has grown by 60 percent over the same period (Carnevale 2002:3).

This widening wage gap is tied to the dramatic restructurings in the U.S. labor market that occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century, as the United States transitioned from an economy centered on manufacturing to one centered on technology, information, and services.

Economists and other social scientists have analyzed ways in which these transformations in the U.S. economy have significantly altered the opportunities available to workers with no more than a high school diploma. As a number of commentators have noted, a high school diploma doesn't open nearly as many occupational doors as it used to (Danziger 1999; Pearson 2007:726-727). Instead, for workers with less education and skills, the jobs open to them are largely in the service sector. These jobs tend to be lower paying, provide few work benefits, and offer few opportunities for advancement (Baker and Tippen 2002:347; Blank 1995:63; Corcoran et al 2000:258; Danziger 1999; Loprest 1999). As a result, the labor market is increasingly two-tiered, divided up into "good" and "bad" jobs. This dichotomization is creating ever more divergent trajectories for workers with higher and lesser education and skills. Workers with relatively low levels of education and skills find few jobs that pay a "living wage," offer potential for significant wage growth, and provide opportunities for occupational mobility (Dodson, Manuel, Bravo 2002:14; Wilson 1996).

Nursing Assistant Jobs and Occupational Mobility

Certified nursing assistant (CNA) jobs are prototypical of this trend. Not only are they jobs in which significant numbers of single mothers are employed, they are also, in essence, dead-end jobs. The only way to transition from a CNA to a higher-skilled, better paying, health care job is through acquisition of a further credential and/or degree; advanced tenure as a CNA does not lead to any career ladder progression. This makes occupational mobility dependent entirely on a worker's own initiative and self-direction; on her desire, willingness and ability to pursue extra-employment educational coursework.

Yet, intersecting with the mobility structure of the job is, what might be similarly labeled, the mobility structure of the individuals employed as nursing assistants. For the single mothers whose families are dependent on their singular earning and income prospects, pursuing these educational paths requires them to combine the simultaneous demands of work, child-care, home life, and school. Existing research indicating that few single mothers succeed in completing the degree programs required for occupational mobility suggests just how burdensome this combination is for many single mothers. Single mothers face multiple, structured impediments to pursuing these extra-work, academic trajectories. Not least of these is the fact that their economic situations invariably dictate that they continue to work a substantial number of hours while the time they allocate for schooling only increases the amount of help they need with child-care.

Putting Community College into Context

Although exact figures are notoriously difficult to ascertain, in part because of inconsistencies in measurements, there is considerable agreement among social scientists

that more than half of all students who begin coursework at community college do not wind up completing a degree (ACT 2006; Ansalone 2002; Bailey, Jenkins and Leinbach, 2005; Lumina Foundation 2004). This general figure describes the broadest community college population, including students entering directly from high school, attending full-time as well as part-time, and child-less as well as those with children. When national data sets are broken down by characteristics that somewhat more closely approximate typical characteristics of low-income single mothers, the picture is much more pessimistic (Ansalone 2002).

One study that tracked students who went directly from high school to community college looked at how these students fared over an eight-year period. The study determined that for first-generation college attendees who come from the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) quintile, only 14% completed an associates degree within eight years, 11% were still taking courses intermittently, and over 60% had dropped out (Bailey, Jenkins and Leinbach, 2005). Most scholars and commentators believe that completion rates for students who begin community college after a significant break from high school are even lower (Ansalone 2002). In addition, studies that have analyzed the reasons community college students leave a degree program prior to completion report two top reasons for dropping out -- work and family obligations (ibid). Although no large-scale studies exist for single mothers who must attend school while also working more than 20 hours a week, smaller-scale studies and anecdotal evidence give every reason to believe that their completion rates are among the lowest (Adair 2001; 2003; Shaw and Coleman 2000).

Vivyan Adair's research explicates some of the likely reasons why completion rates are so low among single mothers. Adair helped found the demonstration project, ACCESS, a program that provides intensively coordinated educational and social services to very low-income single mothers to help them access and complete a college education program. Adair chronicles the considerable difficulties that the single mothers enrolled in ACCESS experience in completing postsecondary degrees and moving into higher-skilled jobs (Adair 2001; 2003; c.f. Shaw and Coleman 2000). As Adair asserts, low-income mothers, particularly single mothers, who must stay in the workforce while going back to school, require an extraordinary level of support to complete postsecondary programs. Not only do these mothers need financial support to help pay for tuition and study materials (such as books), they need child-care, help with transportation and other forms of social support, as well as academic support services to navigate the educational system and get the most of their classroom experience (Adair 2001; 2003 and from annual report on web). As Tye's experience with community college illustrates, recounted in Chapter 2, even when it appears as if a single mother has these supports adequately lined up, circumstances can easily intervene, rapidly unraveling the most well-intentioned plans.

Postsecondary Education, the Possible and the Infeasible

In this chapter, I argue that the intersection of the mobility structure of nursing assistant jobs with the mobility structure of many of the single mothers employed in these jobs imbues postsecondary education with what cultural theorists and anthropologists might call a "mythic charge" (Lipsitz 1990). By this I mean that postsecondary education is not only a practical, pragmatic endeavor, but a symbolically freighted one. As an

increasingly necessary means for achieving occupational mobility (and, thus, higher wages) but one associated with such unlikely chances for ultimate success, postsecondary education becomes simultaneously bound up with the *possibility* and the *impossibility* of a better economic future. I contend that in its concomitant signification of what is possible and what is probable, postsecondary education evokes tensions that are felt and responded to not only by single mothers themselves, but by those who work alongside them; most unexpectedly, perhaps, by their supervisors and managers. These assertions have their basis in the extraordinary support extended to workers enrolled in nursing-related degree programs I witnessed at Rolling Meadows.

Management promoted workers' efforts to enroll in nursing-related degree programs in a number of critical ways. This encouragement was expressed concretely, for example, in scholarships to eligible staff to pay for course tuition and books, and dispositionally, in positive orientations towards workers who were enrolled in nursing-related programs. Perhaps the most important and pervasive form this support took, however, was in allowing workers to structure schedules around their classes. The extent to which management made accommodations to staff enrolled in nursing related coursework was striking. Schooling-related scheduling requests were prioritized to an exceptional degree, even more so than requests concerning child-care or other family needs.

At the same time, I also learned that there existed a scarcity of proximate, embodied examples of the successful journey from CNA to degreed health-care professional among staff. Although a significant percentage of CNAs at Rolling Meadows undertake such efforts, very few had been able to sustain the lengthy and

difficult commitment required to obtain a degree. Conversations I had with administrative staff revealed only two instances of staff members who had advanced up the occupational ladder from CNA to licensed practical nurse (LPN), a step that required a two-year associates' degree.⁸² It was these facts combined with the extraordinary way in which management treated two staff members who were seen as exemplary academic achievers that led me to think more deeply about the meaning of management's wholehearted support for postsecondary education, especially given the limited evidence that such efforts would be ultimately successful.

Epochal Enchantments

In an influential article in which they evaluate the “epochal” shifts that have been wrought by what they characterize as “the global triumph of capitalism at the millennium,” anthropologists Jean and John L. Comaroff suggest that the contemporary dominance of a neoliberal ideology, one that imbues the market and the marketplace with an almost divine-like capacity to both create value out of “nothing” and diffuse and democratize the potential for vast profit-making, has had profound consequences for the ways in which people all over the world conceptualize the relationship of means to economic ends (Comaroff 2000:313). This market driven ideology has encouraged what some have called a “casino capitalism” in which wealth is generated “by less tangible ways of generating value” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000:298; 295). As part of this, the Comaroffs document a range of economic practices and phenomena in which economic value and profits derive less and less from the material world of production and more and more from a set of actions unfastened from materiality and driven by a self-referential

⁸² LPN is a licensed practical nurse. A LPN degree allows one to work as a nurse, although subject to certain oversight by an RN (registered nurse). LPN's require a vocational degree in nursing which can be often be acquired from a community college.

momentum; i.e., speculation and exchange. This includes governments increasing authorization of and reliance on forms of gambling for revenue generation (such as casinos and lotteries), the boom of trans-industry acquisitions and mergers, and the opening up of the stock market to non-professional, individual traders. The Comaroffs contend that the greater legitimacy accorded to speculative means to ends fosters a “turn to enchantment” in which magical routes to economic prosperity become ever more appealing with especially potent effects for those “who feel themselves disempowered, emasculated, disadvantaged” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000:318). Faced with the profound contradictions between “a world, simultaneously, of possibility and impossibility” – between the promise of prosperity and their own lived experiences and likely prospects -- the multitudes who are “left out of the promise of prosperity” are subject to an ever greater social impulse to embrace “magical means for otherwise unattainable ends” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000:315;316).

I do not mean to suggest that embarking on a degree program at a community college to obtain a nursing degree (or related qualification) is exactly a “magical means;” that it is unmoored from, or transcends any rational logic. In fact, it is **the** most logical path for staff members already working in the health-care field. Yet, I would argue that its rate of return must be understood as so low that its basis in rationality is in conflict with a distinct irrationality. Given how unlikely it is that the nursing assistants, particularly the single mothers, working at Rolling Meadows will successfully complete an associates’ degree in nursing, I would suggest that there is at least an element of magical thinking in management’s exhortations to staff to make their way in the world by going back to school and getting a degree.

In this chapter, I explore a number of occasions in which managements' assiduous support for postsecondary education is evocatively revealed. Having already detailed the scheduling accommodations provided to Michelle, I look more broadly at the ways schooling-related scheduling requests were treated, especially in relation to other kinds of scheduling requests. I then turn to an account of another staff member associated with an unusually successful academic trajectory, Sharise, who was exempted from otherwise expected disciplinary sanctions. Sharise was one of only two staff members in recent memory (according to Jill and others with whom I spoke) to have completed the educational journey from CNA to LPN to RN while simultaneously maintaining employment at Rolling Meadows. Through in-depth analysis of these different scenarios, I suggest that the marked extent of management's support for staff members undertaking postsecondary education may be understood as a "form of enchantment," an embrace and encouragement of a path to mobility that, given most staff members' likely outcomes, is simultaneously laden with "hope and hopelessness," "possibility and impossibility" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). The promotion of this vision of mobility, a vision that is frequently more spectral than real, can be understood as a critical attempt to salve some of the contradictions propelled by these dead-end jobs. I begin this next section with an examination of the ways in which work schedules were normally arranged to illustrate the exceptional degree to which schooling-related scheduling requests were accommodated.

Schooling and Schedules

When a new nursing care staff member was hired at Rolling Meadows, she was hired onto a particular, set schedule. This schedule included not only a set number of

shifts, but an allocation of those shifts to morning, afternoon, overnight or, occasionally, some combination of these.⁸³ At the end of new staff orientations, Jill would pull out her master schedule and consult with the new hires about the number of shifts they wanted to work, the days they were available to work (which had to include weekends) and whether or not they wanted day, afternoon, or overnight shifts. This began the complex negotiations at which Jill was extremely practiced. Jill's intimate knowledge of the permanent schedule and fluent ability to craft individual schedules made the process a rapidly efficient one. Within minutes, Jill could tell someone how well their preferences matched up with the open slots on the schedule and, with some back and forth between them, could fine tune the iterations between the hire's expressed desires and the facility's scheduling needs to come up with a permanent schedule for the new hire on the spot.

Because they were hired in on a set, permanent schedule, altering that permanent schedule required the availability of appropriate openings on the schedule. If a staff member had been hired in as a morning shift person, she could only change to afternoon shifts if and when enough afternoon shifts opened up. The same applied to changing the days worked. And although permanently reducing the number of shifts worked was a simple matter of signing a form and having Jill erase one's name from those shifts, permanently increasing the number of shifts also depended on waiting for available slots to open up.

While there was considerable flexibility in how schedules were enacted on a weekly basis (e.g., it was an everyday practice to ask to swap one's regular shift for an open shift on the schedule, to swap shifts with a co-worker, or to pick up an extra shift),

⁸³ Staff could be hired to work as few as 4 shifts per two week period – which was called a “.4” – to as many as 10 shifts per two week period – which was called a “1.0”; most staff fell between a .6-.9.

permanent changes to one's schedule were much less common. Staff could wait several weeks or months for desired, regular slots to open up. In addition, there was a queue system. If someone else had already put in a request for a preferred, permanent shift, the staff member had to wait her turn.

There were two categories of requests to change one's schedule that were given special consideration. The first had to do with requests related to caring for young children. The second had to do with school schedules. Although these two categories were both prioritized, they were not equally prioritized. Jill would go to considerable effort to accommodate child-care needs, especially urgent ones (such as when a staff member's child-care provider was no longer available on needed days). Still, child-care requests were subject to a manager's approval (which was not a foregone conclusion) and required that the necessary slots open up on the schedule. Although scheduling requests prompted by a staff members' child care needs were treated with a great deal of respect and taken very seriously, they were also inflected with a larger ideology that prevailed at Rolling Meadows in which it was clear that family needs were always ultimately pliable. The following incidents illustrate the extent to which family needs were construed as flexible in relation to the more pressing demands of the schedule.

The vicissitudes of work and family priorities

As I accompanied Jill on her morning rounds throughout the nursing units on a Thursday, a week before Thanksgiving, Jill was fretting even more than usual about several open slots on the schedule for the holiday Thursday. She was commenting on how tough it was to get holes filled for holiday shifts when we came across Veronique on 2 South. Jill made a beeline for her, "Veronique, Veronique – how about a nice shift in

the afternoon on Thanksgiving!” Veronique gently laughed, demurring with a shake of her head, “No, Jill, I can’t work that afternoon. That’s when my mother is cooking dinner!” Jill cajoled, “Tell them to have the dinner **earlier!** I know your Mom would like to have you for Thanksgiving dinner, but so would we!” Veronique just smiled, again, shaking her head “no.”

Jill’s intimation that no domain of family life was so sacred that it was invulnerable to the insistent pressure of scheduling demands was commonplace; not only spurred on by the extra exigency of the holiday. In another illustration, one morning in the spring 2005, Jill and I wound our way up to 2 South to find a group of CNA’s, Shannon, Jada and Keri, clustered around the nursing station. Keri was sitting at the nurses’ desk while Shannon and Jada stood over her, the three of them looking at a gift catalogue that Keri was leafing through. Jill had an opening for the upcoming shift she desperately needed filled and she asked if any of them could stay for the afternoon shift. None of them wanted the shift. Ignoring their muffled refusals, Jill singled each of them out, in turn, for an additional plea, trying to sense an opening she could then zero in on. In response, Keri protested, “I can’t. I have to pick up my kids from daycare.” Undeterred, Jill pointed to Shannon and enthusiastically asserted, “Shannon could pick up your kids. She could drop them off at your mom’s and then you could stay for the shift! Shannon would do that. Wouldn’t you, Shannon?” she finished, turning expectantly to Shannon. At that point, Jada took charge of the exchange, brushing off Jill’s suggestion, with the comment, “Keri’s mom don’t want to watch them anymore than she has to!” Keri laughed at Jada’s observation, affirming, “That’s right, she sure don’t!” Jill, sensing the impasse, turned her sheets over to days later in the week,

automatically asking the three if they wanted any of the shifts she had open later in the week. But when the three, their attention already turned back to the catalogue, quickly declined, Jill and I moved on down the hall.

On a Friday in mid-November 2004, Margaret, one of the three nurses on duty on 2 North, called down to Jill's office. She said she had just gotten a call from her daughter's school informing her that her daughter was in the school nurse's office with a rash and a fever of 102 degrees and the school wanted to be able to send her daughter home. It was 11 a.m. in the morning and Margaret's shift wasn't due to end until 3:30 p.m. Jill asked Margaret if Margaret's husband could go pick up their daughter, but Margaret said he was out on a "call" (he was an electrician) and wouldn't be able to leave the job. Jill told Margaret that she would try to find someone to replace Margaret, but she wouldn't be able to release Margaret until she could find a replacement. It was clear from Jill's end of the conversation that this upset Margaret. Jill reassured her that she would try to see what she could do.

The scene up on 2 North was especially hectic that morning. The unit was Rolling Meadow's primary rehabilitative unit; rather than housing a stable population of long-term residents, it treated residents, most of who were transitioning out of hospital back to their homes, on a short-term basis. As a result, it was characterized by a fairly constant flow of arrivals and departures on and off the unit. Dealing with all these admissions and discharges created a considerable amount of paperwork; new treatment plans had to be delineated and administered, and administrative, medical and insurance paperwork had to be filled out and processed. As the nursing staff was responsible for completing this paperwork and overseeing the treatment regimens, this created a heavier

work load than on some of the other units. On this particular Friday, the unit was to receive an unusually high number of new “admits” (new patients arriving to the unit from a hospital or other care facility): four.

Over the next hour, Jill made a dozen or more calls to staff at home to see if anyone could come in to replace Margaret, but she couldn't find anyone who could. After striking out, Jill called up to 2 North to ask Margaret how long she could “hold out.” Margaret told Jill she thought she could leave her daughter at school until 1 p.m. Armed with this information, Jill then called up to Bonnie, the 2 North nurse manager, to apprise her of the situation. Jill told Bonnie of Margaret's situation with her daughter, that Margaret was willing to stay until 1 p.m., and that she hadn't been able to find another nurse to come in. If Margaret were to leave the shift early, she would leave the unit with only two nurses instead of three. Bonnie told Jill that she, herself, was too swamped to fill in for Margaret so it would have to be up to the other two nurses on the shift, Sandy and Dayo, to decide if they were willing to work short. After she hung up, Jill called back up to 2 North and asked to speak to Dayo, the senior nurse in charge of the shift. Jill again recounted the situation and explained that Bonnie said it was up to Dayo and Sandy to decide if they would be willing to work short-staffed. Dayo said she would go ask Sandy how she felt about it and then would call back down to Jill. Less than fifteen minutes later, Dayo called back and reported that Sandy said she was **not** willing to work short. This left Jill with the task of calling back up to the nurses' station to convey the bad news to Margaret, which she did. Margaret remained on her shift until her regularly scheduled departure time, 3:30 p.m.

The outcome of this particular incident reflected a combination of factors, some of which had to do with personality issues among the staff -- specifically, the fact that Margaret was not well liked by her co-workers; she was perceived as someone with an insufficiently stoic attitude towards dealing with stresses and her personal life. As Jill related to me, with Margaret, "everything was a crisis." Yet, even given the peculiarities of Margaret's relationship with her co-workers, it was also true that while everyone involved sympathized with the plight of having an un-well child stuck at school for the entirety of the school day, the situation was not considered particularly dire. Compared to the demands of the unit, the discomfort of an ill child did not qualify as an exigent family need that unquestionably overrode work obligations.

Schooling-related scheduling needs, however, were almost never subject to refusals, nor to the entreaties or attempted rearrangements outlined in the other incidents. Even the relatively moderate level of uncertainty associated with scheduling requests due to child-care needs was completely eliminated in the case of staff members' school-related requests. These requests were given a singular priority, a consideration that stood out in relation to every other kind of request.

In August and January, there was a flurry of increased activity in Jill's office as the staff taking nursing courses at the local Community College brought in their new semester's school schedules. Without so much as a second glance, Jill took their school schedules from their hands, filled in the official paperwork, and quickly reconfigured their work schedules. With these requests, Jill didn't ask any questions; she didn't review the school schedules and ask if it was possible for the staff member to sign up for courses on a different day; she didn't complain to the staff member about how difficult it would

be to fill the shifts their new schedules now left open – all things she routinely **did** if the request was related to a family or personal need. Instead, Jill just took their papers and put them in the tray with the rest of the paperwork she needed to get signed off by management.

Even school scheduling needs that garnered suspicion from Jill or supervisors were accommodated. I witnessed one such case on a Friday afternoon in October as I sat with Jill in her office while she manned the phones. Althea, the nurse manager from the 1st floor, was visiting Jill, getting updated on the latest floor goings on, when an incoming phone call interrupted their conversation. Jill picked up the phone to find Veronique, a CNA and an African immigrant, on the other end of the line. Althea, who was Veronique’s nurse manager, stayed while Jill took the call, listening in on Jill’s end of the conversation. Veronique told Jill that she would no longer be able to work her regularly scheduled Sunday day shift because the clinical section for her nursing class (the portion of the class spent on a nursing unit doing patient care under the supervision of a nursing instructor) had gotten scheduled for Sundays, at a time that traversed the day and afternoon shifts.

When Jill hung up the phone, she and Althea both shook their heads. Althea said, “Nobody schedules clinicals on a Sunday!” and Jill concurred. They couldn’t imagine a nursing instructor would have arranged to conduct clinicals on a Sunday. Althea said “it’s another thing every week with that girl.” Yet, still, Jill filled out the paperwork for the request and Althea initialed it, even as she shook her head in bemusement. As soon as Althea finished signing Veronique’s request to drop her Sunday shift, Jill gave Althea

another school-related scheduling request, this one from Sonia, another CNA who was African American and a single mother.

Sonia had filled in a request to take time off, asking to change her regularly scheduled hours for the coming Saturday so that she would start her shift an hour earlier (at 6 a.m. instead of 7) and leave an hour and a half earlier (at 2 rather than 3:30 p.m.). On the form, Sonia had written that she needed to leave at 2 p.m. to be on time for a nursing exam she needed to take at the test center. As Althea listened to Jill summarize what was on the form, Althea blew out her breath with an exasperated shake of her head. Both Jill and Althea were skeptical of Sonia's request. Althea exclaimed, "You can take your test anytime you want at a test center!" Jill nodded in ascent while adding, "But when you leave it to the last minute, you get pushed to the wall." In both Althea and Jill's view, Sonia's scheduling request wasn't the result of circumstances beyond her control. They both believed Sonia could have arranged to take the test in a way that wouldn't impinge on her work schedule. But, again, even as she grumbled, Althea signed off on Sonia's request.

The exemption of school-related scheduling requests from the same level of scrutiny or the same potential for rejection as other scheduling requests signals, I suggest, the exceptional regard with which work-related educational activities were held by management. I turn now to an incident involving a staff member named Sharise that further illustrates this regard. Sharise was an exemplary model of mobility via education.

Sharise – A Contentious Horatio Alger

Sharise, an African American single mother, was an LPN working the overnight shifts on 2 North and in the midst of finishing her academic and training requirements for

an associates' RN degree. Sharise's rise from CNA to LPN to RN was, far and away, the most successful example of occupational mobility among Rolling Meadows staff. The only other staff member who, according to anyone's memory, had made such a similar leap up the occupational ladder was Yusef, a single, male Kenyan immigrant who had arrived in the U.S. with a college degree from Kenya and a job history that included having worked as a legal clerk while still in Kenya.

Sharise was infamous, though, for her bad-tempered disposition among her co-workers. She frequently battled with co-workers and few staff enjoyed having to stand up to her when she asserted her view of the way things "should" be done. On more than one occasion, I witnessed staff members checking the weekly schedule before agreeing to pick up an extra shift and demurring once they discovered they would have to work under Sharise's supervision.

In June 2005, Sharise was a central figure in an incident that threatened serious ramifications for Rolling Meadows and, in particular, for the Director of Nursing, Chantal. On a Tuesday morning, Bonnie, the nurse manager for 2 North, came down to Jill's office to sign off on whatever paperwork Jill had waiting for her. As she perused the pile, she noted a request for time off from Sharise. She paused over it and, looking up, asked Jill when the next time was that Sharise would be in, saying in a surprisingly grave tone, "I have to talk to her." It was clear that Bonnie meant this to be a disciplinary talk; the kind of talk for which Chantal would also be present.

After Bonnie left, I turned to Jill and asked, "What's that about?" And Jill proceeded to tell me that a new CNA had been hired to work the overnight shift on 2 North. The CNA was still going through orientation which involved working closely

with and under the supervision of a nurse and a senior CNA for each shift on which she was scheduled. Apparently, the new CNA had arrived to her Sunday shift to find that her supervising CNA was not yet there and that the two nurses on the shift were in the midst of a fierce disagreement. One of the nurses had been Sharise. The new CNA had found their conduct extremely unprofessional and was so “disgusted” by “their antics” that she walked off the shift, in protest, and then proceeded to leave a detailed voicemail message of complaint on Chantal’s voicemail.

Later that afternoon, Bonnie returned to Jill’s office. She was going to fire the new, still orienting CNA for leaving in the middle of her shift, and she wanted to do it over speakerphone so that Jill could be a witness to the conversation. Getting the CNA on the phone, Bonnie said she wanted to hear more about what had happened during the shift in question and why she had walked off. The CNA explained that when she reported for the shift the charge nurse, who had been Sharise, had been fighting combatively and vociferously with the other nurse at the nurses’ station, an open area at the center of the unit. At some point during their fighting, Sharise apparently said, very loudly, that there was no way she was going to work with “that” resident – “No way!” – and then proceeded to detail how unpleasant the resident was and how much it “sucked” working with her.

From other sources, Bonnie had heard that the dispute between Sharise and the other nurse had been over who would have to supervise the care of a resident who was a paraplegic. The patient had both significant health problems and cognitive deficits. This meant she not only required a considerable level of care, but that providing that care was taxing. The patient also had a reputation for being demanding and sometimes insulting to

staff. Sharise had apparently refused to work with her, foisting her onto the other nurse's patient load. The CNA said the back and forth bickering between Sharise and the other nurse went on for 45 minutes. The CNA alleged that, at one point, Sharise had walked into the paraplegic patient's room and, in response to the patient's on-going bout of crying, yelled, "I am **not** going to put up with this!"

After recounting this series of events in impassioned and angry detail, the CNA informed Bonnie that she had quit. She then shared the unexpected news that she had also contacted the state and made a complaint to them about the treatment of the resident. As soon as Bonnie heard this, she brought the conversation to a sudden close, hung up, and quickly dialed Chantal's number. The news that this CNA had registered a complaint with the state over a resident's treatment was a serious threat for the nursing home's management team. Invoking the state over this matter dragged Rolling Meadows onto the terrain of potential elder abuse, an extremely serious allegation. If the state investigated and found evidence supporting the CNA's allegations, Rolling Meadows would not only be subject to hefty fines, but there would be other damaging consequences, especially for Chantal. Because Chantal had received the complaint from the CNA on her voicemail but had failed to transmit the complaint to the state, if the state found the incident to have reached the level of abuse, Chantal was at risk of losing her license and her position at Rolling Meadows.

Chantal and Bonne called Sharise at home and arranged to have her come in for a special meeting with them. Meanwhile, a somewhat frenetic plan of action ensued to investigate the allegations made by the CNA. Chantal went to track down the other nurse who had been involved and the other CNA who had been on duty to see what their

accounts of the incident would reveal. Althea, who seemed to have a nose for ferreting out details of staff dramas, stopped in to talk with Jill about the incident. Althea was somewhat shocked that Chantal hadn't taken the incident more seriously until she'd heard word that the protesting CNA had reported it to the state. She thought it certain Chantal would fire Sharise. It did seem the inevitable conclusion to draw. It was hard to imagine that such an incident would not result in the most serious sanction.

Although the news of the event was exceptionally dramatic, there were plenty of other minor dramas and scheduling fires for Jill to attend to and as Jill re-immersed herself in the quashing of those fires, my attention followed Jill to other things. The following Monday, however, I was looking over the weekly schedule and saw that Sharise's name was still on it for her regular shifts. Puzzled, I turned to Jill and asked, "What happened with Sharise? Didn't they fire her?" Jill responded, "No, they didn't."

Jill didn't know all the details of what had transpired in Sharise's meeting with Chantal, but, apparently the allegation that she had verbally abused the patient was now being framed more ambiguously. It may have been true that Sharise had been impatient and, perhaps, short with the resident, but she had not shouted at her in the manner reported by the CNA. Just as importantly, however, Sharise, a woman known for her tough, aggressive often defensive demeanor, had conveyed anguished contrition to Chantal for the incident; apparently bursting into tears in her office. She let Chantal know that she knew her behavior was not professional and hoped to have a chance to do better. Chantal had decided to give her the chance to do so.

When I asked Jill why she thought Chantal had agreed to give Sharise a second chance, given how difficult Sharise could be and how unpopular she was with other staff,

Jill said that the way Sharise reacted when confronted by Chantal had been important. According to Jill, Chantal's decision to fire someone or give them another chance was usually determined by whether the staff member was respectful and seemed sincerely contrite. Equally as vital in this case, however, was that Chantal had what Jill called "a soft spot" for single mothers in situations like Sharise's, single mothers who were struggling, but who were going to school, trying to "better themselves, improve their situations." Although this was, by far, the most dramatic instantiation of it, I had heard this phrase – or a version of it – repeatedly from Jill whenever I asked her why various exceptions had been made for staff members who happened to be single mothers.

The American Dream of Education

The American dream is based on the belief that the U.S. is fundamentally a meritocracy.⁸⁴ Yet, as Livia Martins Pinheiro Neves points out, the logic of meritocracy in the United States is informed by two somewhat divergent, but complimentary beliefs: 1) not everyone begins from the same "starting point" with the same advantages and 2) the individual has the power to surmount any limitations or obstacles that constrain her, if she is sufficiently determined (Neves 2000). Neves suggests (as have others) that this simultaneous recognition of the fact that Americans are "born unequal" and face varying degrees and kinds of constraints combined with the celebration of the individual's potential for agency creates a particular fascination in American society and culture with stories in which individuals surmount difficult circumstances to achieve various forms of

⁸⁴ This idea resonates throughout American society; it's difficult to open a newspaper or a magazine or turn on a television talk show without coming across some iteration of it. While doing the research for this dissertation, I began to realize how often I came across one articulation or another of it just while going about my everyday activities. Two such examples include a commentary by Clive Crook, senior editor of *The Atlantic* and a columnist for National Journal, on public radio's "Marketplace" (Thursday, August 31 2006; accessible on the web) and a PBS show entitled, "Novel Reflections on the American Dream" (broadcast April 2007).

success, including academic (Neves 2000). Such stories have a potent valence in American popular culture; they are widely celebrated in movies and fiction and serve as tropes for popular non-fiction.⁸⁵ As Neves writes,

It is not by chance that the quintessential North American hero is the 'self-made man' and that his basic tenet is 'self-reliance'. Here is an individual who made it 'on his own', without any help from friends or relatives. He negotiated all hurdles resorting to his personal merits. This character is systematically immortalized in North American imagery, and is depicted in many different roles – cowboys, detectives, Superman or even the 'regular guy' – and in many scenarios. (Neves 2000:339-340)

Educational attainment is importantly intertwined with these notions. Educational attainment is seen as not only indicative of individual merit, but as one of the primary mechanisms for translating individual merit into economic and social rewards (Carnevale 2002). Within the dominant paradigm of the American dream, the prominent role accorded to educational attainment as a “sifting mechanism” is deemed to be both apt and equitable as the U.S.’s universal education system promises to allow every individual access to the skills, knowledge, and experiences required for “success” (ibid). As a result, for those who start from a disadvantaged position due to their background or circumstance, education is understood to serve as the great equalizer; enabling individuals to acquire the necessary resources to “level the playing field.” In the latter half of the 20th century, the increased institutionalization and expansion of a publicly funded adult education system added further potency to these beliefs (U.S. Department of Education).⁸⁶ Thus, for those individuals who fail to actualize their potential through the secondary school system, the adult educational system, in the form of generalized

⁸⁵ Examples of this, particularly illustrating tales of academic success against the odds, include *A Hope in the Unseen: an American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* by Ronald Suskind.

⁸⁶ Accessed from website: <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0602/ijse/ijse0602.htm> on June 27, 2007

equivalency degrees (GEDs) and community colleges, provides a second chance. Belief in the openness, accessibility and efficacy of this system helps maintain support for the conviction that upward mobility is a democratic promise tied to individual effort and perseverance (Carnevale 2002).

In somewhat different ways, both Michelle and Sharise compellingly embodied the dramaturgical elements of the educational version of the American dream. Given their backgrounds and life circumstances, they had both achieved a level of statistically unlikely academic success. In addition, their academic achievements demonstrably (and dramatically) improved their occupational opportunities and socio-economic horizons. These two staff were not only exceptional in their academic success, but were also objects of exceptional treatment in the work place. Both avoided certain disciplinary sanctions that would have normally been meted out based on work performance.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the significance of postsecondary education at Rolling Meadows, highlighting various ways in which management promoted workers' efforts to enroll in nursing-related degree programs. I suggest that as humane and supportive as this support is, it also works to help deflect tensions surrounding the occupational immobility of nursing assistant jobs. Management's active investment in staff's postsecondary educational efforts encourages a focus on the *possible* rather than the *probable*; a focus that, while seemingly empowering, downplays recognition of the underlying structural issues that limit workers' prospects for occupational mobility while elevating their capacity for and responsibility to prevail over circumstances. Keeping attention focused on the always, almost possible, management's disposition towards staff

members' educational efforts helps to individualize workers' potential for mobility and mitigate more direct acknowledgement of the conditions that structure their mobility prospects.

In this context, management's anomalous treatment of Michelle and Sharise becomes particularly meaningful and understandable. It is my contention that Michelle and Sharise's notable academic successes played a critical role in buffering them from the kind of disciplinary scrutiny and punishments that would have otherwise been expected. Michelle and Sharise's academic success was symbolically potent for and crucial to both management and staff at Rolling Meadows. To sustain the conviction that, even given the structured realities of many staff's lives, the inherent immobility of these jobs could be overcome, management and staff at Rolling Meadows needed the examples of success that Michelle and Sharise embodied. Vital to the imaginary of mobility that pervades American society is a belief that every individual has the potential to overcome almost any obstacle. Michelle and Sharise's academic success ground that chimera in the context of tangible experiences and life-worlds to which other staff could relate. They embodied possibility and, in doing so, helped counter a more pragmatic assessment of the likelihood of upward mobility for the vast majority of nursing assistants.

CHAPTER 6
THE DREAMSCAPES OF MOBILITY?: ROMANCE, ENTREPRENEURIALISM
AND DEBT

In this chapter I examine the extra-work efforts of several single mothers at Rolling Meadows to secure a more comfortable, stable future by circumventing the constraints of their current circumstances. Attempts to transform their circumstances engage them in phenomena as varied as on-line dating, membership in a multi-level marketing sales organization, and the subprime mortgage lending market. In analyzing these efforts, I pay particular attention to the ways in which the women “rely on and reformulate conventional gendered, class, and ethnic identities” in pursuit of their “entrepreneurial dreams” (Mills 2005:4036). Furthermore, I suggest that the extent to which these efforts have a quixotic quality indicates how limited these mothers’ options are for otherwise overcoming the constraints they face.

New Technologies and Gendered Dreams of a Better Future

Linda worked the morning shift as a CNA on the 1st floor at Rolling Meadows. A trim, youthful, 49 year old, white woman, she was a single mother with two daughters: a 22 year old who lived with a boyfriend and a 13 year old who lived at home with her. When she stopped in at Jill’s office or when I saw her on the floor, Linda was invariably sociable and friendly, more than happy to chat if she had the time. Easy to laugh, she

liked to tell lengthy anecdotes which were generously interspersed with self-deprecating and humorous asides.

In February 2005, Linda was at work when she got the news that her elderly mother, who lived in a nursing home in Georgia, was dying. Trying to figure out her plans for getting down to Georgia and rearranging her work schedule so she could do so involved Linda and Jill in a rapid series of logistical conversations during which Linda's stressed and taut manner was met with calming sympathy by Jill. I was present during these conversations and, while trying to be as unobtrusive as possible, like Jill, expressed my sympathy to Linda. The next time I saw Linda after her mother had died, she was sitting alone in the 1st floor residents' dining room, eating a leftover tuna fish sandwich from a resident's lunch tray. I asked her how she was doing. She seemed to welcome the opportunity to talk, replying at length. As I joined her at the table, in the otherwise empty dining room, I learned of the ways in which her father's death the year prior and her complicated and estranged relationships with her siblings had made coping with her mother's death even more difficult and upsetting.

After that day, our casual exchanges became more frequent and more personal; on her way down to the break room, she made a point of popping in to Jill's office to say hello and chat. One day, early in April 2005, as she stood in the hallway outside Jill's office, Linda pointed to the notice about my research project pinned to Jill's door and, laughing, said, "When are you going to interview me?" intoning the question more like a social offering than a research one. I gladly accepted the invitation and we made a plan to meet at her house the following week, on one of her days off.

Linda lived in the area to the east of Ypsilanti between Ypsilanti and Willow Run that had built up in the 1940s and 50s around the auto plants. A historically white, working class area, its dense concentration of small, single-family homes seemed a slightly tattered oasis marooned by the declining industrial and commercial areas that surrounded it. Linda's neighborhood was bounded by several highways that had been built to service the enormous Willow Run auto plant; bringing materials and resources in and transporting the finished products to dealerships around the state. These urban highways were no longer main arteries, having been long ago surpassed by the interstate system, and the commercial markets they housed had seen much more prosperous days; evidenced, in part, by the un-modernized 1950s-60s' architectural style of many of the businesses that lined the highways. Those still in operation tended to be surrounded by empty lots; their concreted grounds covered by bits of refuse and breached by patches of bare earth and long grass.

On a block populated by small bungalows, several with shabby exteriors and disabled cars ornamenting their lawns, Linda's house, although among the smallest, had a well-maintained, well-tended exterior. The front was offset by a wooden porch that, in its unvarnished state, looked recently added. A rocking chair occupied a prominent place near the front door. The lawn was neatly mowed and flower beds framed the front of the house.

I arrived to find Linda in the midst of a full-scale window washing operation, the panes and screens off of her front windows. Holding a pane in her rubber gloved hands, she good-naturedly welcomed me in, directing me to a seat near the front door. After drying the pane and reinserting it in the window frame, she peeled off her gloves and

enthused, “Here, let me give you the full tour. It’s a bit of a mess right now, but -- oh, well!” The house was attentively decorated in a “homey,” classic American style with checked gingham curtains and faux-antique pine furniture. Contrary to her assertion, I thought the small interior was impeccably tidy, though each time we entered a new area, Linda would apologize for the state it was in.

From the front door, Linda’s house opened into a living room that extended to the right and an eating area and kitchen that extended to the left and back along the left side of the house. A tiny nook that housed a computer station was immediately across from the front door, marking the separation of the living room from the eating area. The living room was taken up with a small settee, a coffee table, an easy chair, and a couple of shelving units adorned with family photos of Linda, her parents, her siblings, and her children. There were a number of photos, in particular, of her youngest child, Kristi. The furnishings looked inexpensive but in good condition and well taken care of. The living room merged into a short hallway that led to three small bedrooms at the back of the house. Linda opened the first door on the right to show me her daughter, Kristi’s, room. It was extensively decorated with girlish colors and prints, cut out posters of boy bands on the walls, and Kristi’s school art projects. Linda’s room was decorated in darker, more somber tones, with most of the space taken up by a queen sized bed covered in a maroon and green machine-made quilt. The third bedroom was atypically cluttered serving simultaneously as a storage room, an exercise room (marked by the presence of an abdominal workout chair), and, with one corner dominated by a desk on which an old-fashioned Brother word processor/typewriter sat, an office. The tour ended back in the kitchen which, upon closer inspection, hadn’t been updated in quite awhile and looked to

be in a somewhat unfinished state. The kitchen cabinets were old-fashioned and unfitted and the appliances aged and worn looking.

During the course of a very conversational interview, Linda explained that her home was owned by her landlord and best friend, Ted, who lived across the street. Linda and Ted had been friends for almost 25 years and they had an unusually close relationship, although, as he wasn't Linda's "type," it had remained a platonic one. According to Linda, though, when Linda needed to move back into the area, she convinced Ted to purchase this house and become her landlord. Apparently, Ted had willingly agreed to this and although she was clear of her status as only a renter, she had invested considerable time, energy and her own money into improving the interior of the house and its' landscaping. An avid gardener, she had filled the yard with a number of bushes and perennials.

Linda's very upbeat and cheerful demeanor led me to be somewhat unprepared for a life history pocked by considerable transience, a number of unhappy, tumultuous relationships, and an experience of sexual violence. As Linda described, she had moved "a lot!" in her adult life. Born in one of the white working class suburbs west of Detroit, she had initially stayed fairly close to home, moving around within the western suburbs. After her children were born she had ventured somewhat further afield, living in a variety of locales in the northern part of the state before returning to southeastern Michigan for the past five years.

Linda had been married twice; neither time to the father of either of her children. Her first daughter, Brittany, was the result of a date rape. Still relatively romantically and sexually inexperienced in her mid 20's, she had had a couple of dates with a man she

knew through some casual friends. On the third date, he raped her, and she became pregnant as a result. Shortly after the rape, he disappeared, moving somewhere out of state. Confused and ashamed, she didn't even know his last name (it wasn't until years later that she was able to ascertain his last name and track him down to Florida), and overwhelmed by the situation, she didn't report the incident to the police. She couldn't face having an abortion, so she decided to carry the pregnancy to term.

While pregnant, she started dating a man who wanted to marry her. The security of a marriage seemed appealing initially, but she soon found him to be “mentally abusive” and the relationship was an unhappy one. After 3 years, she divorced him. Not long after her marriage ended, she became romantically involved with another man, Glen. After they had been together for several years, she became pregnant with Kristi. Then, in her 8th month of pregnancy, Glen left her for another woman.

By the time she was pregnant with Kristi, Linda had worked at a variety of low-level office jobs but had liked none of them. As she said, she wasn't much of a typist, “I'm not fast enough to be a good, fast typer,” and didn't enjoy being stuck at a desk all day. Feeling in a rut, she decided to move “up north” to an area around Traverse City, Michigan with her, by then, elementary and preschool aged daughters. After awhile there, she was able to purchase 10 acres of “beautiful, wooded land” near Interlochen. She set up residence on the property in a dilapidated 30 year old trailer that she fashioned into a habitable, comfortable-enough home for her two daughters. It was there that she first got her certification as a nursing assistant; an occupation for which she felt exceptionally well-suited. But after several years living there with her girls in her trailer, she started to feel lonely for a romantic relationship. As she put it,

I was alone for 11 years, raising Brittany by myself, raising Kristi myself. And I was just tired of being alone. Tired of it. I didn't want to grow old alone... You know. Nobody was coming around and I...I didn't go out ever, I didn't go anywhere...

Using a dating service, she met a man named Floyd and, not long after they met, they decided to marry. She sold her trailer and, with her two daughters, moved in with Floyd. Floyd owned a home in a nearby town and earned sufficient income that Linda didn't have to work, but could instead stay home, take care of her kids, and look after the house; a scenario that was ideal to Linda. But Floyd had four sons who were variously involved with drugs and alcohol, practices Linda did not engage in and for which she had little tolerance (she was, in fact, vociferously disdainful of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs). Linda found the sons presence an unpleasant intrusion into her domestic idyll and an unwelcome influence on her daughters, particularly the now teenage Brittany. So, she divorced Floyd and set out, again, as a single-mother with her two daughters. Not long after, around the time Brittany finished high school, Linda's elderly parents' health started to decline precipitously, particularly her mother's, and besides wanting to be closer to her parents as they became increasingly frail, Linda felt she had a unique skill set she could apply – both in her training as a nursing assistant and in her “gift” of being good at it. So, Linda took Kristi (with Brittany eventually following) back down to southeastern Michigan, initially moving in with her parents.

With the passing of her father, her mother's move to a nursing home in Georgia (arranged by one of Linda's sister's who lived in Georgia), and with Brittany living on her own in a nearby Detroit suburb, Linda moved with Kristi to this house in Ypsilanti owned by her friend, Ted. It was here that she had begun her sojourns onto “Match.com,” an internet-based dating service. In one of her searches for eligible men,

she came across a profile for a man named Bob. A line engineer for one of the Ford plants, he owned his own home up in a rural county north of Detroit, almost 60 miles from where Linda lived. She had, as she said “winked at him,” and, not long after, he emailed her.⁸⁷ Although he was at first wary of the distance, she convinced him “that’s just geography” and they arranged to meet for a first date. Linda was immediately smitten. By the time I interviewed Linda they had been dating for eight months.

Divorced for over 12 years, Bob had two grown-up sons, neither of whom lived at home. His house sat on a large parcel of land which he had purchased to share with his parents, building one house for himself and another for them, a moderate distance apart. From Linda’s accounts, he lived a very quiet, sedate and ordered life. She described his home as exceptionally clean, tidy and uncluttered, with nothing out of place; an external sense of order which he seemed to highly prize. In one of their most significant fights which, at the time, Linda had believed signaled the end of their relationship, he had lashed out at her for having left dirty dishes in her sink and a pile of dirty laundry in her hallway.

It was clear that, emotionally, Bob was very different than Linda. Where she was talkative and gregarious, he was quiet and very reserved. She laughed as she mimicked his style of initially hugging her, an awkward embrace that involved him tipping forward from the waist and engaging minimal contact with her torso. Yet, her clearly strongly felt frustrations with a more emotionally distant manner she found both unfamiliar and unsettling were counterbalanced with what seemed an equally deeply felt attraction to his reliability and stability. Running throughout her description of Bob, their relationship,

⁸⁷ Within the match.com dating system, “winking” at someone is a way of expressing interest in someone without writing them an email.

and his relationship with her daughter Kristi was the conviction she returned to again and again: Bob would provide the kind of secure and comfortable life for which she desperately longed. Through Linda's depictions, I developed a picture of Bob as a man who seemed emotionally remote and awkward, but who, in both disposition and material resources, represented an almost fairy tale-like escape from an otherwise troublesome future.

When I asked Linda if, after 8 months of being together, there had been any consideration that one of them might move to be closer to the other, she exclaimed,

Are you serious? Leave this? I wish I had pictures. Oh, my God! I've got to show you these pictures. I have pictures of Bob's house. This immaculate home that he built himself ten years ago. It's huge...It's huge. It's...four times the size of my house it seems like...It's beautiful. Just beautiful. He's got an upstairs, he's got a downstairs. He's got...[laughs] you know, this giant porch, you know. It's beautiful...Wait till I show you the pictures of his house. You're going to go, "Holy crap! What are you waiting for?"

Later in the interview, when I asked Linda if she knew how Bob felt about the relationship and where he saw things going, her hopes for what the relationship would mean for her and Kristi's future were inordinately clear,

Um, yeah. Yeah, I mean he definitely wants it to go all the way, you know. Yeah. He's just real cautious. And it's only been eight months, so...But the only thing is that I'm kind of on a time schedule, because of Kristi. I don't want her starting high school here, take her out and start her...you know, finish her in high school there. I'd like to not be around here after August.

Kim: Oh, really? She's in the eighth grade this year, right?

Linda: Um-hum. So I want her to start her whole high school years in one spot, if possible, you know.

This desire to maximize the stability of Kristi's schooling experience was not just an idle wish; rather, as it became abundantly evident, it was a central concern to Linda,

for reasons that appeared increasingly momentous as we continued to talk. Woven throughout our several-hours long conversation was a theme that Linda repeatedly returned to: a wish to pull Kristi back from a ledge to which she seemed to be edging precipitously close and a fear that the only means to do so involved a dramatic change of circumstances.

In Linda's view, it was not only the constraints she faced as a single parent working full-time outside the home, but Kristi's increased exposure to the surrounding area's youth -- youth Linda viewed as wayward and likely delinquent -- that were combining to make the transition into Kristi's high-school years seem particularly weighty and potentially treacherous. Part of the difficulty, she felt, was all the moving around the girls had experienced as they were growing up. Looking back, she didn't think that the girls had lived in any particular house or apartment for more than two to three years. As Linda put it, "every time I moved, I felt like I was trying to do better for them [my daughters], you know." Still, she worried about the repercussions of so much moving. She was particularly concerned about the effect it had had on Kristi, especially in relation to her ability to form positive, long-term friendships. Since they had moved back to southeastern Michigan, Kristi had developed a very close friendship with one local girl that Linda had liked and trusted. But that girl had moved away last year and, since then, Kristi had begun to drift into a crowd that seemed to encourage unwelcome behavior. As a result, Linda found herself dealing with a newly rebellious side to Kristi. As Linda recounted, until this year, Kristi had been a straight "A" student. But now, hanging out with this new group of friends, she had taken to misbehaving in school. One particularly bold incident had involved Linda catching Kristi at home during school

hours. After angrily chastising Kristi and driving her back to school, Linda learned after the fact that, rather than return to classes, Kristi had re-exited the building through another entrance and made her way to a commercial strip near the school where she met up with some of these friends.

Linda was certain that Kristi's exposure to these troubling influences would only increase exponentially once enrolled in the local public high school. The high school had a very large student body, almost half of whom were non-white. It was clear that Linda was particularly concerned about the lower-income African American kids with whom Kristi would attend school. Linda worried about Kristi's safety as a small, "skinny white kid" in a sea of older, rougher, "blacker" kids. But Bob represented a ticket out of that. In his rural county north of Detroit, the schools were much smaller and much whiter. As Linda put it, "I hope and pray to God that Bob will scoop us up, you know, the minute she [Kristi] gets out of school."

Although Linda didn't comment on it much herself, I was struck by what a difficult period the summer seemed likely to entail. As was true for many of the single mothers at Rolling Meadows who had children past traditional child-care ages, the summer posed an especially vexing set of challenges, particularly in relation to supervision issues. In Linda's case, it provided conditions that, from my perspective, seemed likely to only amplify the conflicts that had been brewing between Linda and Kristi. When I asked Linda what arrangement she would have for Kristi after the school year ended, her answer was that Kristi would stay "just here by herself." Linda seemed

unfazed by this scenario, most likely because, in the last few years, leaving Kristi by herself for hours at a time had become the ordinary state of things.⁸⁸

As had been true for the past several summers, Linda's policy was that Kristi was to remain at home by herself during the day. She wasn't allowed to go beyond their block nor was she allowed to have friends come over. Instead, during the hours that Linda worked, from 7 a.m. till 3:30 p.m., Kristi was to entertain herself with the computer, the television, books, or by playing in the yard. When I asked Linda if there was anyone who could help her with child-care, she said that, occasionally, she asked Ted for help, but that was usually on the weekends, when he was off work. Up till now, Linda had felt that that summer arrangement had worked out and that, even though Kristi didn't always like it, she had complied with it. But, now, with this new group of friends, that continued compliance was tinged with some uncertainty. This nagging doubt in Linda's mind translated into an even greater hope that her relationship with Bob would move ahead sooner rather than later.

The one blemish in Linda's visions of a bright future with Bob for her and Kristi, however, was that Bob hadn't warmed up to Kristi the way Linda had expected. In Linda's experience, her male friends were always "crazy" about Kristi; an affection Kristi usually returned, soaking up the attention and the opportunities for play. But, Bob was somewhat awkward and uncomfortable around Kristi, remaining fairly detached from her. Although Linda was sure he had the best intentions (as evidenced by Bob's initiative

⁸⁸ When Linda's mother had been alive and before she had been moved to a nursing home in Georgia, Linda had spent more than a year providing substantial care to her mother in her parents' home. Providing this care had meant that Linda would leave work at Rolling Meadows at 3:30 p.m., stop quickly by at her own home to check in with Kristi, and then drive to her parents' home in a western suburb of Detroit. She then spent the evening with them helping to feed and clean her mother and take care of her parents' home, returning to her own home in Ypsilanti as late as 10 p.m. Linda had asked her older daughter, Brittany, to stay with Kristi for those evenings during this period, but Brittany proved to be unreliable in this. As a result, most evenings, Kristi would spend the evening alone.

in taking the two of them to a recreation pool when they had visited him last summer), he had also expressed concern over entering into a parental role with a teenager, again, at an age when he was getting close to retirement. Linda was convinced that if he spent some one-on-one time with Kristi he'd warm up to her, yet, as she mused,

He would never come here and stay here when I'm not here...Even though this would be the perfect time to, you know, spend time with Kristi and...But he won't do that...Um, it's not his comfort zone, and, you know, he doesn't like this area anyway...You know, I tell him, I say, "You know what? I wish that you could just come here and hang out with her, you know, and take her out to lunch or take her to the store or, you know, I could give her 20 dollars of her money, you know, and you could, you know, let her do things."

But, as Linda observed,

He's not into teenagers at all...He doesn't know how to be around girls. He had two...he had two brothers, he had two sons. No girls. It's very hard for him. Um, and I, you know, I had a hard time accepting that at first...I felt like, you know, why doesn't he...why isn't he all crazy about her like the rest of them... I mean, I have a friend of mine that comes over here every once in a great while, um, you know, once every three months or something at best I see him. And he thinks Kristi is just the cat's meow, you know. He just...oh, my God! I tell him about Bob, you know, and what's going on. And he said, "He's crazy! How could...how can he not love her to death? You know, she's wonderful. She's great, you know." I don't know.

However, even the considerable worry this caused Linda did not outweigh the allure of the relationship in other dimensions nor diminish the significance of the qualities that deeply mattered to her:

...I don't know why I'm so attracted to him and why I think that it's so perfect. I don't know. He gives me a sense of, um, ah, what's the word? Not calming, but security...I just feel real sec—like I could be really secure with him.

When Linda expresses her explicit desire that Bob will whisk her and Kristi away to his beautiful house and financially stable life in the country, Linda is drawing on a particular set of logics and gendered expectations about relationships. Born in 1956,

Linda grew up on the cusp of profound shifts in dominant American cultural expectations regarding women's opportunities, likely futures, and routes to financial well-being and economic security (Stewart 2002; Stewart, Settles, & Winter 1998). While middle-class women of her generation might have identified themselves with an ideology of equality that espoused women's financial independence from men and stressed the importance of a career to self-esteem and personal fulfillment, for Linda, such independence meant reliance on her own very limited economic earning power and a job schedule that did not always optimally mesh with her daughter's. In Linda's case, marriage and homemaking were not mutually exclusive with personal fulfillment, quite the contrary. To be in the luxurious position of not having to work and, instead, focus her prodigious energies on crafting a domestic world in which the products of her labor would be pleasingly and constantly reflected back to her (in her baking, gardening, cleaning) was an ideal scenario to her. Marriage was a critical route to such a life, one that could provide her, as she said, with the security for which she longed.

Gendered Opportunities, Gendered Expectations

In her book, *Intimate Economies* (2004), Ara Wilson delineates the myriad ways in which Thai women who have migrated to Bangkok in search of work “rely on and reformulate conventional gendered, class, and ethnic identities” in pursuit of their economic dreams (Mills 2005:4036). In one of her book's chapters entitled, “The Economies of Intimacy in the Go-Go Bar,” Wilson closely examines the complicated dynamics of the relationships that can develop between the Thai women who work in go-go bars and their customers. In particular, she examines the blurring of “logics” that often occurs when the women forge longer-term relationships with customers,

relationships that transcend the spatial, social, and economic boundaries of their initial encounters in the bars.

In some of these cases, women become a customer's "girlfriend," a status associated with widely varying degrees of commitment, exclusivity, and longevity, but one that transforms the peculiar financial terms of their bar room roles – in which certain, set fees are pre-determined for particular practices and particular amounts of time – into a more amorphous, economic arrangement. In these relationships, the lines between the praxis of companionship, romance, and commerce become entangled. Sometimes, these relationships become long-term arrangements, the most significant of which are associated with the "western" boyfriend setting his Thai girlfriend up with an apartment and on-going income support, perhaps to the point that she no longer needs to work at the go-go bar. Almost always, these relationships are characterized, at minimum, by some degree of repeated interaction and gift giving, actions that blur the strict commercial logic of the singular interactions that otherwise occur at the bar.

In some important ways, it is the go-go workers' gender and ethnic identities that make these particular kinds of economic possibilities available to them and their fluency in capitalizing on aspects of these identities (in large part, by understanding ways in which these identities are valued and desirable to their western customers) can make them more or less successful in advantageously actualizing these possibilities. Wilson describes how the Thai women contribute to the establishment and perpetuation of these relationships through various practices, including gendered ways of interacting perceived as appealing and attractive to their western customers. As part of this, the women bring

into play their acquired knowledge and stereotypes, for example, of how their “asian-ness” supposedly makes them more desirable than their western counterparts.

Their expectations in relation to these relationships draw on pre-existing and gendered “orientations to romantic or patronage relationships” (94). According to Wilson, in Thai society, these orientations are deeply informed by “the idiom and practice of exchange” (92). As Wilson elaborates,

(r)elationships in Thai society are inflected with defined patterns of exchange obligations, typically hierarchically so, and often bear gender and sexual implications. There are those of elder-junior or patron-client, those of caretakers and children (with greater obligations for daughters), those between human beings and the spirit world, and those surrounding romance, courtship, and marriage (93).

The centrality of this logic to Thai society, in which social relationships are significantly constituted, maintained, and reproduced through practices of material exchange such as gift-giving, encourages the women to evaluate their western boyfriends in these terms; especially in relation to their generosity. While the desirability of a generous boyfriend is, in part, instrumental (i.e. the economic value of gifts have real material, financial, and social benefits for the women), a boyfriend’s displays of generosity are taken to indicate the esteem in which the woman as well as their relationship is being held. Generosity and reciprocal gift giving are both important markers as well as forms of intimacy in these relationships.

The Thai women’s relationships to their western boyfriends cannot be unmoored from the initial terms under which they were set, as explicitly commodified exchanges of intimacy. Linda’s romantic relationship with Bob was not comparable in this way. And, in any case, she did not see Bob as an explicit “money ticket” (although his parents,

apparently, feared that she did, a humiliating bit of information Linda learned through conversations with Bob). I bring in the situation of Thai women go-go bar workers not to suggest comparisons to the commodified nature of the Thai relationships or to reduce Linda's relationship with Bob to an economic one, but to highlight the point that, just as the Thai women drew on pre-existing and gendered "orientations to romantic or patronage relationships" in elaborating their relationships with former customers-now boyfriends, so did Linda. As they did for the Thai women, these orientations shaped Linda's expectations for her own and Bob's behavior in the relationship, as well as for what she expected (or, more accurately hoped) the relationship to provide. In both contexts (and, arguably, in many others), these romantic relationships offered a potential bridge to some other, desired and desirable state. For both the Thai women working in the go-go bars and for Linda, romantic relationships were a route towards greater economic security and less arduous life circumstances, even if only for a time.

In the glowing descriptions of Bob's house and in her wishes that he might "scoop" them up and, in particular, install Kristi in a safer, less urban (i.e., less black), more optimal school environment, romance was not merely an end to itself, but a bridge to a transformed life. In this way, Linda was attempting to secure a better life for her and her daughter through a route that had been the most conventional option for generations of American women preceding her, through marriage. And although her own life experiences, as well as those of friends, co-workers and peers -- combined with demographic trends in the American populace at large -- might have given her every reason to be skeptical of the ultimate dependability of that plan, Linda embraced it with an abiding optimism. This optimism seemed rooted, in part, in a nostalgic view of her

own parents' relationship, a relationship she described as characterized by an enduring love and plentiful displays of affection. But it may have also been an optimism born of otherwise limited options. If Bob would not be the means to a more optimal romantic, social and economic situation, Linda foresaw few alternate scenarios for achieving it.

Whereas Linda's vision for a better life depended on the resources a desired partner could provide, Tye's plans invariably involved capitalizing on her own latent potential; potential she was certain could be realized if only the right set of circumstances fell into place. At her most optimistic moments, Tye felt the world was full of opportunity. It was just that, too often, seizing those opportunities necessitated amounts of money, time, or other resources she didn't have. To Tye, these obstacles were unfair and undeserved and she had an always ready list of grievances against those she saw as, if not wholly responsible for, then unduly culpable of aggravating them. At the same time, she was determined not to be stymied. She energetically devised plan after plan to overcome the obstacles that stood between her and her visions of a better life. Inevitably, however, her perception of the likely success of any particular plan was subject to extremes of optimism and despair, swinging through these with often alarming rapidity. Yet, even as she cycled through these extremes, I was amazed by her consistent and incessant creativity; both in devising new plans and in forging connections to people who might help her actualize these plans. To me, Tye seemed to epitomize an entrepreneurial mindset; regaling me, in her moments of optimistic verve, with details of the latest plan or opportunity she was on the verge of enacting.

Possible Futures and Multi-Level Marketing

Not long after I moved into Tye's apartment in February 2005, Tye left a glossy folder by my bedroom door and encouraged me to look over the material contained within it. The packet contained information about a company called "Pre-Paid Legal Services." According to the material, Pre-Paid Legal Services (PPLS) is an organization that provides legal services to individuals for a monthly fee. It operates according to an insurance policy model; the customer pays a monthly membership fee to have a variety of legal services available to them when and if they should need them, regardless of whether or not they actually make use of them.⁸⁹ The services include phone consultations, document review, a phone call or letter to a third party made on a customer's behalf, and limited forms of representation in a court of law. The company's promotional literature emphasizes that it can help customers with the most ordinary, every-day forms of legal assistance: help with a speeding ticket, repair malfeasance, payment disputes over bills, product warranties, security deposits, contract reviews, purchase of a home, and wills.

Elements of the company's marketing materials sound like a clarion call for social justice. PPLS asserts that the affordability of their service upends the otherwise commonplace reality that, counter to our professed polity ideals, Americans "receive about as much justice as we can afford." By providing legal representation, for a moderate monthly fee, PPLS claims it helps fulfill one of the most hallowed promises of American democracy to provide "equal justice under law" to the vast swathes of the population who fall between the very rich and the very poor. Like "the wealthiest 10

⁸⁹ In 2005, the cheapest plan cost \$16 dollars a month plus a one-time \$10 enrollment fee. Detailed information about the services offered by PrePaid Legal Services can be found at their website, www.prepaidlegal.com

percent in America,” PPLS’s services allow the ordinary citizen to “have a lawyer on retainer.”⁹⁰

A week or so after Tye had left the PPLS folder with me she asked me if I had had a chance to look it over. Confused about why Tye had wanted me to review the materials I asked her if this was something she was thinking of buying. She said, “No, I **have** Pre-Paid. I’m one of their reps.” She went on to detail what a great service it was, how glad she was to have it, and how useful it had already been to her. Understanding that she was viewing me as a potential client, I told her that as a student at the university, I already had access to legal representation and advice through the university’s student legal services. Tye nodded and said she had guessed as much, but she reiterated that if there was anyone I knew who might be interested, I should let her know. She said she made a commission on each sale.

It wasn’t until I came home one weekend afternoon in March to find a professionally dressed, immaculately coiffed African American woman visiting Tye that I began to fully understand what Tye’s connection to PPLS and position as a “rep” meant to Tye. Tye introduced me to the woman, Keisha, and said that Keisha was one of her guardian angels, emphasizing that Keisha had really been there for her (a sentiment Tye often evoked in relation to people to whom she had turned in an emergency). Tye continued by declaring that Keisha was a real inspiration and a role model. Keisha smiled warmly as Tye spoke. Observing them interact, they were friendly and sociable, clearly comfortable around each other.

Settling into one of Tye’s leather sofas, Keisha asked Tye if she minded if she made some phone calls. Tye encouraged her to “go ahead.” Relaxing back into the

⁹⁰ These quotes are taken from their website, www.prepaidlegal.com; accessed August 16, 2007

leather cushions, Keisha kicked off her high-heeled shoes and took out various pieces of paper and a planner from a fashionable, leather briefcase, spreading them out next to her on the sofa. As I sat at the nearby dining room table, I listened to Keisha's professional, confident tone as she spoke to a couple of people, setting up and confirming meeting times for the following day. After she hung up, Keisha and Tye talked in shorthand I couldn't follow about some money Tye would receive related to a PPLS commission and the recent sales successes Keisha had been having. Keisha talked of being in the midst of a move out of state, to somewhere near Atlanta.

Keisha then turned her attention to me and asked me what I did. I told her I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, that I had met Tye through her work at Rolling Meadows, and that I was doing a study on how single mothers balanced their work and family lives. Keisha said she knew that struggle intimately, being a single mother herself. And then smoothly piggy-backing off that comment into a narrative that sounded remarkably spontaneous and unforced, Keisha said that she had been just like Tye, a single mother, struggling desperately to make ends meet. But, unlike Tye, she had been unemployed, on the verge of homelessness, her self-esteem in shreds. She'd found herself facing some really dark days; days she'd been so depressed she'd barely managed to get out of bed and deal with her kids. Then she'd met this guy, a casual acquaintance she knew through friends, and he'd introduced her to PPLS. He'd told her all about how the organization worked and brought her into it, helping her along at every step. Now, she was a sales manager for PPLS with a number of associates working underneath her; Tye was one of them, part of her team. Having built this multi-level group of sales associates up, Keisha reflected on the length of the distance she had traveled: now she

made a great income, had a newer model car, had turned her life around, and was about to move to the Atlanta area, a move that had been encouraged by some upper-level folks at PPLS, where her PPLS business prospects would be only better. Tye interjected, building on Keisha's inspirational tale by pointing out how generous Keisha had been with her. As Tye recounted, a couple of times when Tye's financial strains had reached a near breaking point, Keisha had given Tye leads on "converted" customers -- customers who had basically already agreed to purchase a PPLS yearly plan -- so that Tye could be credited with the commission. As Tye observed, although Keisha still made a commission on these, as well, she hadn't needed to include Tye in the deal.

It was clear that Keisha had genuine empathy for Tye's situation and that, as two African American single mothers, both familiar with the experience of being weighted down by financial strains, and both motivated by ambitions to do better for themselves, they felt bonded over these shared commonalities. At the same time, I found it hard to disentangle Keisha's interest in and friendliness to Tye from her own self-interest. Keisha had the remarkable talent of many successful salespeople to turn ordinary conversation topics into opportunities to make well-rehearsed connections to their sales products; in other words, it was hard to know what aspects of a conversation with Keisha were genuine and guileless and what aspects were calculated to serve as springboards to a sales pitch.

I met Keisha only one other time while living with Tye. The second time was a couple of months after our initial meeting when Keisha, making another pass through the area, stopped in to see Tye. As with our previous encounter, Keisha was the epitome of the successful professional, wearing a stylish dark suit; her hair and make-up impeccably

done. During this visit, while Keisha and Tye were engaged in warm, affable, “catching up” conversation, I happened to be on the phone to AT&T about a problem I was having with my cell phone. The customer service person I was speaking to at AT&T and I had differing viewpoints on whether or not the problem I was experiencing was something AT&T should address at no cost to me. During the conversation, I had found myself getting increasingly frustrated and my tone increasingly exasperated and terse.

After I got off the phone, Keisha expressed sympathy for what she said sounded like a draining and aggravating interaction. In saying this, she sounded utterly sincere and concerned. Still caught up in my chagrin at AT&T, I welcomed her expression of sympathy and seeming interest in the details of what had transpired. After a few moments of listening to my venting, during which Keisha murmured affirming, supportive comments, Keisha launched into her own story of a recently dispiriting experience with the customer service department of a credit card company with whom she had an account. I listened attentively, thinking we were having one of those conversations in which we were bonding over having been mistreated customers, overwhelmed by the puniness of our options for redress against a faceless, powerful corporation when I began to realize that her story was veering onto somewhat different terrain. Like the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into the butterfly, her story of corporate malfeasance morphed into a story of how her use of PPLS had transformed her from one individual voice of complaint -- a nobody -- to a customer with whom to be reckoned; a customer backed up by the potent forces of her very own consumer protection law firm. A story of potential consumer aggravation became an illustration of the power of PPLS to effectively translate a customer complaint into a victorious settlement.

Sales pitches aside, I thought Keisha seemed like a perfectly amiable, good-natured, good-spirited person. She was warm, down to earth, and charming. But as I did more research into PPLS, I became more skeptical of the promise that Keisha embodied – the promise that selling PPLS was a likely route toward economic mobility, or even in the very part-time mode in which Tye engaged it, a generator of significant, supplementary income.

PPLS is set up along a multi-level marketing structure. In multi-level marketing sales organizations, sales agents are rewarded not only for their own direct sales (by receiving commissions on each sale) but also for recruiting new sales agents into the organization (Cahn 2006). In other words, Keisha not only made money each time she succeeded in signing someone up for a PPLS membership, she also made money by bringing other people into the organization as sales representatives on her “team.” By successfully recruiting “active” sales associates underneath her, Keisha became eligible for a higher rate of commission per sale, or, a higher “commission level.”⁹¹ The emphasis on “active” here is important, however, because in order to count someone as a member of her team, Keisha’s recruits had to be recording sales; they had to demonstrate somewhat regular sales activity.

⁹¹ PPLS has a five-tiered commission structure. At the entry-level, or bottom, of the tier is the individual sales associate. In February 2008, for the sale of one individual plan, a sales associate would make \$25 on a \$26 monthly plan (contingent on the buyer’s year-long commitment to the monthly plan). Through a combination of recruiting associates to your team and individual sales numbers (in some configuration of 5 active sales associates on your team and 25 sales a month), a sales associate is able to move to the next level of commission, Commission Level 2, or “Senior Associate”. At this next, higher level, the PPLS sales agent would make \$75 for every \$26 a month plan sold and so on. This raised tier structure in commission ranges from the bottom-level associate to the top level, “Executive Director.”

It is important to note, here, that sales associates only made commission on the \$26 a month plan, not on the more inexpensive “standard family plan” which cost \$16 a month in membership. (http://wserver0.prepaidlegal.com/newCorp2/bus_opp/how_4.html accessed 2/28/08)

In this way, the generous gift of the converted sales leads that Keisha had bestowed on Tye – crediting Tye with sales that Keisha had actually generated – was not a completely altruistic act. Allowing Tye to get credit for the sales actually helped Keisha: it allowed Keisha to record Tye as a successful sales agent, or associate in her structure. As she built a sales team under her, she worked her way towards a higher level of commission. In effect, she made a commission off the gift of the commission to Tye.

I also learned from Tye, however, that Keisha’s ability to record Tye as an active member of her team had, initially, cost Tye money. Reflecting a facet of PPLS’s organization that is common to many multi-level marketing, or “network marketing” sales organizations, to become a sales associate for the company required an initial investment of cash (Cahn 2006). One had to pay to become eligible to sell PPLS memberships. Tye said she had initially paid \$49 to become a PPLS sales associate. She had also paid additional money for required sales training (she didn’t specify how much, but from things I read on various websites, she likely paid at least another \$50 for this training).

Beyond this initial investment, however, becoming a PPLS sales associate made one vulnerable to additional costs. Once one became a sales associate, one had a vested interest in doing well at it. PPLS sales literature made it easy to believe that one could only truly optimize one’s chances of becoming a successful sales agent by investing in extra services PPLS provided. One of the most important of these extra services was the “sales leads” that PPLS would sell directly to associates. These leads consisted of contact information for people who had supposedly already expressed interest in buying PPLS services. Presumably, these leads represented people who could more easily be

converted into successful sales. In addition, PPLS advertised refresher courses and supplementary courses on particular aspects of more effective direct selling, courses on marketing, website creation, improving one's presentational style, etc. etc. etc. Again, all for a fee.

A key feature shared across direct sales enterprises is a fetishization of these various sales enhancing services and products, especially, sales leads. This fetishization is so intense (and, apparently, so lucrative) that a whole, secondary industry has sprung up devoted to selling these services and products to the sellers. A quick search of the web (in February 2008), reveals any number of websites that promise to sell you "warm leads:" leads "guaranteed" to translate into a successful sales. From the websites I reviewed, it seemed easy to pay up to \$5-6 per lead. There are also plenty of websites that offer books, DVDs, and on-going consultation services, all for a fee.

With this in mind, Keisha's generosity also affirmed that Keisha was a source of the resource most necessary for success in this enterprise: bankable sales leads. It is a truism to note that one's success as a salesperson depends on one's success in cultivating or garnering prospective clients. But beneath this simple observation lays a complicated social reality. When working as an independent vendor of a product, how do you figure out who your market is? How do you actually find clients? The most immediate option is to turn to the people you already know – your existing social networks. However, this poses certain difficulties.

Even in as pro-market a culture as the United States, conventional ideas surrounding family and friendship construe these relationships as set apart from the relations of the market. Idealized notions of authenticity and intimacy expect these

spheres to be non-commercialized; commercial activity is thought to contaminate or pollute intimate relationships. This makes the interweaving of commercial activity and intimate relations very tricky terrain. Bringing commerce into these intimate spaces can be uncomfortable and risky (potentially risking the continuance of the relationship). But even beyond these social complexities, in the case of women like Tye, trying to transform one's social networks into business opportunities can also be a fairly futile endeavor.

A significant proportion of the people in Tye's social networks were women like her: low-income single mothers; or, if childless, employed in low-paying jobs, or unemployed. Although these women tended to be familiar with the kinds of legal needs that PPLS served, they were also women who could least afford to commit to a regular, year-long expenditure that wasn't absolutely necessary, but might be potentially useful. In addition, even for those among her peers who could commit the resources to such a service, they were most likely to buy the cheapest plan, the "Standard Family Plan" which cost \$16 a month. PPLS only paid its sales associates commission on the "Expanded Family Plan" which cost \$26 a month.

Even among Tye's acquaintances and family members who were a little better off than she was and somewhat more economically stable, however, Tye did not feel all that comfortable transforming these relationships into sales opportunities. Tye's unease in this was motivated by some of the normative concerns I described above and also reflected Tye's calculations of what was in her short-term versus long-term interest in relation to these relationships. These relationships often provided her with a mix of resources – sometimes material, sometimes practical, sometimes social. She feared that

transforming her role within these relationships to one of sales agent might risk alienating relationships professed to be based in mutual regard and affection.⁹²

This reluctance had resulted in Tye being a very casual and sporadic member of Keisha's sales team. For another person dealing with either their inability or reticence to transform their existing social networks into sales opportunities, this might make the appeal of the broad swath of secondary services promising to enhance one's effectiveness as a sales agent only more potent. In Tye's case, in a somewhat ironic consequence of her economic situation, Tye was too financially strapped – too broke – to sink additional funds into these “enhancement” services and products.

Social Identities, Social Relations and Opportunities for a Better Life

As discussed earlier in Chapter 3, in his book, *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994), James Ferguson analyzes how the larger economic and social problems of Lesotho are translated from their enormities – from their basis in transnational and intra-national inequalities and other structural problems – into technical problems amenable to the bureaucratic remedies of aid organizations. In establishing the sociological context for the region of Lesotho in which his analysis is grounded, James Ferguson supplies an insight that has considerable relevance to both Linda's pinning of her hopes for a better life on Bob and Tye's half-hearted involvement in selling Pre-Paid Legal Services. It also resonates in interesting ways with the observations recounted earlier from Ara Wilson's study of female go-go bar workers' relationships with former customers.

⁹² Her ambivalence to “pitch” PPLS to me, for example, can be seen in very soft approach she took: leaving the folder by my bedroom door without much of an explanation, waiting a week to ask me if I'd looked over the materials, and almost immediately suspending the sales spiel once I positioned myself as an unlikely client.

In describing “the nature of the society” (88) that then became subject to the development interventions he analyzes, Ferguson enumerates the various sources of household income to which villagers in the region had access, prior to the introduction of the economic development projects. In his discussion of these (pointedly limited) sources, he notes that one way in which area residents brought in vital sources of income was through the home brewing of beer that they then sold. This was a highly gendered economic strategy with the brewing and selling taken up by women and with men serving as the primary customers. As Ferguson describes, “(b)eer drinking is the main social event in the village for men, and it goes on in small or large groups every day” (127). The men able to participate in this beer drinking are the men who have succeeded in securing wage labor; typically by becoming migrant laborers, working in the mines or other industries in South Africa.

According to Ferguson, women’s economic success in selling beer to these men depends, however, as much on their “social skill(s)” as it does on their “technical one(s)” (ibid). To be good beer sellers, Ferguson observes, the women in these villages must skillfully transform existing social relationships -- their social networks -- into commercial ones. As Ferguson writes, in Lesotho,

one’s ability to make money by brewing is not a simple matter of the amount of beer one produces...To sell a lot of beer a woman must be a cheerful and congenial hostess, and have a strong social position in the village. Making money on beer requires the same kinds of skills and social assets as throwing a successful party. It is thus a form of economic activity which is deeply embedded in the social relations of the village. (127)

For these very low-income women villagers in Lesotho, much like the Thai women in Ara Wilson’s study, and much like Linda and Tye (in relation to PPLS), the ability to “rely on and reformulate” (Mills 2005:4036) existing social relationships presents not

only a vital opportunity to secure greater economic comfort, but, at least as importantly, a seemingly accessible one. In each of these cases, women must attempt to transform existing social relationships into potential commercial avenues, or transform potentially fleeting relationships into more committed ones. In doing so, however, women's social identities and social locations -- as these are gendered, raced, and classed -- become both the bases for these possibilities as well as the factors that, ultimately, also constrain them.

In Linda's case, we see how her gendered notions of how she might provide a better environment for her daughter (one, importantly, that offers greater financial stability and a more palatable educational milieu) depends on ensuring the commitment of a male partner. Such a strategy involves her giving up her current home, job, and social circle and would leave her desired gains vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a romantic relationship. In this way, Linda's gender and gender ideologies both make certain opportunities possible as well as leave her vulnerable to the risks of being dependent on a relationship.

In Tye's case, we see how the typical financial situation of the people in her existing networks, many of whom -- like her -- are single mothers of color, becomes a double-edged sword in relation to her PPLS sales' goals. On the one hand, their financial situations mean they likely have greater need of affordable legal services. On the other hand, their situations make them unlikely to buy the higher-priced packages that reward Tye with a commission. So, the people who might form her most convenient "target market" also limit her potential to profit from selling pre-paid legal services.

In the remaining sections, I turn to an examination of two other entrepreneurial avenues for securing a more desirable life and future; one, again, involving Tye and the

other involving Beverly, another African American CNA from Rolling Meadows who was also a single mother. In these two cases, the transformation of difficult and, even, unbearable circumstances into better ones involved affixing hopes to business people who promised, through their services, to make otherwise unattainable resources and opportunities attainable. In Tye's case, her enthusiasm for this particular strategy was bound up with a widely-shared American belief that ingenuity was a ticket to estimable financial success. In Beverly's case, her path was, in part, a reflection of the importance attached in American society to the dream of home ownership.

The Invention Center

At the end of April 2005, Tye asked me if I was free on a Monday afternoon to go with her to an appointment she had. She said she had made an appointment to meet with people at a company in Bingham Farms, a northern Detroit suburb, who provided help with product development. Tye was really excited about the meeting, almost elated. She said she had found the company by doing a search on the internet and that they were in business to help people like her. I wasn't really clear what Tye meant by any of this, but I was happy to go with her, especially to participate in something she was obviously so excited about. I offered to drive -- an offer that only added to her jubilant state as her car was in increasingly creaky and cranky condition.

We set off on a perfect spring day. The sun was bright and warm and the sky deep blue, offset by a scattering of wispy clouds. As we drove northeast along the network of highways that connect Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti to the Detroit metro area, the sun warming our skins through the car windows, it was hard not to be caught up in Tye's buoyant optimism.

I had never heard Tye speak of this plan before, but as we drove the 40 minutes from Ypsilanti to the office in Bingham Farms, Tye told me that she had been harboring ideas about two products she had thought up that she was sure had potential for great consumer success. Both had to do with feminine hygiene. The first was a set of disposable plastic pouches that she imagined for inclusion in a box of tampons. Tye had envisioned these pouches as a resolution to an embarrassing scenario that she had experienced at work and thought was commonly experienced by women -- having to transport your used tampon and tampon applicator from the relative privacy of a bathroom stall to a wastebasket in the public area of a multi-stalled bathroom. The pouch would provide women with a more discrete means of dealing with their sanitary waste products. The second product was a set of pre-moistened hygiene wipes that would be included with packages of sanitary napkins and/ or tampons. For Tye, the appeal of such a product reflected not only her own experience of dealing with menstruation and the importance she attached to maintaining high standards of feminine hygiene, but her experience of providing bed bathes to elderly women. From this work with elderly (albeit non-menstrual) women, Tye had developed a sense that feminine hygiene was a concern and priority for many women and a convenient option for maintaining hygiene, especially in circumstances where bathing wasn't possible, would be popular.

Tye had made an appointment to meet with an “adviser” at Invention Submission Corporation,⁹³ a business she said that specialized in helping individuals bring their product ideas, or inventions, to market. Tye said they gave advice about and assisted with all aspects of the process. You just had to come to them with the idea and they did all the rest – they would help you design a prototype, get a patent, do the marketing.

⁹³ The company has since changed its name to “InventHelp”

Everything. She said they had told her she just needed to bring herself, her idea and, ideally, a sketch of the product she wanted to design. She hadn't managed to produce a sketch, but she said the person she had talked to had told her it would be okay if she didn't bring one with her – they could help her with that part, too. Plus, she didn't think a sketch was necessary; the products were so self-explanatory.

We exited I-696, the highway that traverses the northern boundary of Detroit, onto Telegraph Road, a commercial thoroughfare of the northern Detroit suburbs. One of the main commercial arteries of the suburbs, Telegraph Road is distinguished by its long, seemingly unending, line of strip malls representing outlets providing for all aspects of daily living: restaurants, pet stores, grocery stores, dry cleaners, gas stations, opticians, chiropractors, insurance agents, home furnishing stores, hairdressers, car dealerships and on and on. At the stretch of Telegraph we were at however, just north of I-696, the dense commercial landscape gave way to slightly more open space on which were set larger, stand-alone commercial buildings and an assortment of multi-storied office parks. Tye peered out at the suburban-scape alongside the road, looking for building numbers and comparing them to the address she had written down. Not long after we had gotten onto northbound Telegraph Road, we realized that the building must be nearby. On the right hand side of the road, we saw a large signpost in the ground advertising 30600, the address we were looking for. Its road frontage had been converted into a fairly large expanse of parking lot. At the end of lot, set back away from the road, stood a large, multi-story office building of white colored concrete and mirrored glass. The mirrored windows formed a tier of seamless strips alternating with the white concrete, marking the different stories of the fairly new and well-groomed office building.

The office for the Invention Submission Corporation was on the third floor. Entering the building from the parking lot, we walked into an open lobby that flowed into a central space towards four sets of elevators. Taking the elevator up to the third floor, we arrived into an upscale, professional, if somewhat anonymous, looking corridor. Across from the elevators was a directory listing all the suites on the floor, the names suggesting a mix of accountants, title insurance companies, and various financial services. We found the suite number for Invention Submission Corporation and followed the numbers down the hallway. The suite doors were discretely labeled and indistinguishable from another; after taking a few moments to orient ourselves, we found the right one.

We opened the office door into a medium sized waiting room bordered by a number of internal offices. As we walked in, I noticed that some of the office doors were open and glancing in to the offices, I saw that they were attractively, if fairly neutrally, appointed. Everyone inside the individual offices seemed to be wearing professional business attire, many were African American.

The waiting room itself was attractively appointed with potted plants and newish looking upholstered furnishings in fashionably muted colors. There were several coffee tables set around the room on which were placed copies of a clear-cased binder that looked stocked with printed materials. The walls were decorated with a number of framed magazine excerpts that showcased different products created and designed by Invention Submission Corporation clients. The magazines were not ones I'd heard of; they seemed to be trade publications. One product was particularly prominently displayed. In a larger frame than the others was a reprint of a magazine layout that,

spread over two pages, featured the image of a man holding a brightly colored, packaging box containing the toy he had designed. The magazine spread touted the fact that the toy had been picked up by the well-known toy manufacturer, Wham-O, for production and sales. The piece included a biographical sketch of the inventor along with highlighted quotes outlining the almost serendipitous way the idea had come to him and how Invention Submission had helped him bring his idea to market.

Tye and I stood in the middle of the waiting room and a well-dressed African American man came out of his office and approached us. Tye said she was there to meet with Ms. Southerly. The man said that Ms. Southerly would be out in just a minute and we could just take a seat in the waiting room. A few minutes later, one of the office doors opened and an elegantly dressed, attractive African American woman came out into the waiting area. The man who had spoken to us walked over to her and motioned in our direction. She crossed the waiting room and introduced herself, “Hi, I’m Ms. Southerly. You must be Ms. Baylor. Why don’t you come on in?” Tye and I exchanged glances and I said I’d wait out in the waiting area for her.

As I sat in the waiting room, I picked up one of the clear plastic binders and realized it was full of promotional material explaining the services Invention Submission Corporation could provide including testimonials from various clients detailing ways in which Invention Corp services had been invaluable. A number of the materials promoted the Invention Corporation sponsored “INPEX,” “the largest invention trade show” in the United States (www.inpex.com 2/28/2008). According to the materials, one of the most important reasons for becoming one of their clients was that the company would feature your product at its trade show, a show where many “companies interested in licensing,

marketing, or manufacturing new products” would be able to find out about and review your invention (ibid).

After fifteen or twenty minutes, Tye came out to the waiting room and asked me to join her in the office. She wanted me to hear what Ms. Southerly had been telling her. Tye’s mood was noticeably darker and she was almost sullen, barely making eye contact with Ms. Southerly as we walked back into Ms. Southerly’s office and as Ms. Southerly spoke to her. Ms. Southerly’s office was elegantly appointed. The mirrored glass that covered the building gave her office a large window from which you could look out onto a stretch of lawn that bordered the side of the building. Treetops and green grass seemed to fill the view. I tuned in to Ms. Southerly who had continued talking in an expert-sounding, professional tone to Tye about what the contract for their services would involve. As she spoke, Tye made a face at me and said with a downcast, resentful tone, “It costs \$300 to sign up with them.” I looked over at Ms. Southerly who countered with a soothing tone, empathizing that yes, it was a lot of money, but once Tye paid that amount, the company could offer her financing options to pay for the costs of other services – in effect, she could pay as she went and only pay for the services she wanted.

Tye shook her head and kept her face turned down, refusing to meet Ms. Southerly’s gaze. She said to me, “C’mon, let’s go” and we headed out of the office. Tye’s mood had taken a dramatic downturn and she was quiet as we headed back to the car and drove back to Ypsilanti. On the few occasions she spoke, she repeated bitterly that there were always too many obstacles -- the bar was always too high. She knew her ideas were good and could make it to market, but she was shut out of the chance to capitalize on her good idea by not having the necessary entrance fee. As sorry as I was to

witness how depressed the encounter with Invention Corp had made her, I found myself relieved that the money required for the sign-up fee was too big of an obstacle for Tye to overcome. At the moment, all Tye could focus on was yet another experience of being excluded from resources that promised to make a vast world of possibilities available and being precluded from transforming her dreams and ambitions into reality.

From my more detached and less-invested vantage point, one in which I hadn't been immersed in such hopes and expectations, all I could tune into were my suspicions regarding Invention Corporation's business model and my unease at the extent to which it seemed to depend on fueling hopes like the ones Tye possessed. Such a business model seems keenly attuned to (and seemingly exploitative of) what George Lipsitz has argued is a widely-shared American preoccupation with the possibility of translating ingenuity into overwhelmingly lucrative economic gain and the possibility that every individual had some innate gift, or latent talent that need only the right set of circumstances to be realized and which, once realized, would be utterly transformative (1986; see also Epstein and Sacks 2007).⁹⁴ Lipsitz has observed that America has long been "a society nurtured on Horatio Alger stories about rising from rags to riches" (1986:375). The iconic status of this cultural narrative within the larger American imaginary is also evidenced by its

⁹⁴ As a postscript to this account, as I was writing this section I wanted to verify some of the details I had recorded in my field notes at the time. A Google search of the company's name led me to the Federal Trade Commission's website. Their website contains two important links to Invention Submission Corporation. The first is the notification of the outcome of a successful lawsuit brought against ISC by the FTC in 1993 for fraudulent business practices (<http://www.ftc.gov/opa/predawn/F93/invention4.htm>). The second is a PDF file detailing over 101 pages of customer complaints filed with the FTC against Invention Submission Corporation during the year 2001 (<http://www.ftc.gov/foia/inventionsubmissioncorp..pdf>). These consumer complaints are unverified, meaning that the FTC is not stating that the accusations made against the company are valid, merely documenting the content of the claims made. While these claims are not substantiated, it is notable how many have been made (during a one year time period for 2001). There was also some suggestion from web sources that the company's name change (from Invention Submission Corporation to InventHelp) was, in part, a response to both this history of complaints as well as a lawsuit undertaken by the FTC against it. Since Tye and I encountered Invention Corporation in spring 2005, the company has revised its promotional materials to make abundantly clear that the likelihood that any of their clients will successfully license or bring to market one of their inventions is exceedingly low.

concomitant cultural shadow: the historical and on-going viability of profit-making ventures promising to facilitate such meteoric mobility.

Roopali Mukherjee has argued that fantasies of spectacular mobility, or what she calls “class transcendence,” have taken on even more significance for “working-class African Americans” since the 1990s (2006). Mukherjee claims that by the 1990s, the civil rights era had been transformed into the “post-soul era” (ibid). Core to the civil rights movement was the notion of the collective: collective identities, struggles, actions, mobilizations, and solutions. However, by the 1990s, the notion of mass action and political protest as the key means to address racial and their concomitant social and economic inequalities had taken a battering. The demise of the civil rights movement as a potent political force, the unraveling of some of its most significant political and legal gains (most notably, affirmative action), and the recognition that, ultimately, it had failed to significantly alter the economic landscape for the majority of African Americans (in part, because the “good jobs” that the civil rights movement had succeeded in opening up to working-class blacks were the very jobs that were disappearing) resulted in a new politics of race that was complexly inflected by “the logics of neo-liberalism” (602). According to Mukherjee, in the logic of neo-liberalism, the individual and the markets represent the crux of society, seen as both the engine and the locus of social transformation. This elevation of the power of the individual and the market to determine outcomes and enact social change has profoundly altered the terrain on which racial struggles and ideas of racial justice are formulated. Not only does the ascendance of this neo-liberal logic encourage an ideology of “individualism” in which the explanations for as well as the solutions to social problems are found within the individual (or, within the

“group” in the way that racialized social problems come to be seen as an intra-group problem), but it encourages a belief that markets are the primary means through which those solutions are realized.

In Mukherjee’s view, dashed hopes for greater economic mobility combined with the pervasiveness of political and cultural frameworks that hyper-emphasize the role of the individual and markets as agents of change has led to an embrace “of the ghetto entrepreneur and black enterprise itself as a salvational sphere” for working-class African Americans (599). Mukherjee traces the proliferation of messages that celebrate the powerful potential of entrepreneurialism to “transcend” class in a variety of cultural forms produced by and targeted specifically to black Americans, including movies, hip hop music, rap videos, television programs, books, and magazines (600). In her survey, Mukherjee finds a growing move towards championing “black entrepreneurial zeal as a key mechanism for political transformation and personal fulfillment” (606). For the poor and working class blacks who find themselves shut out of more conventional modes of upward mobility, the appeal of such messages is not hard to understand.

Home Ownership and Subprime Mortgages

Beverly was a CNA who worked the morning shift on 2North with Tye, Ayasha and Jalika. Older than many of her fellow CNAs at 38, Beverly was an African American single mother of two teenage sons. Although I never heard anyone say anything negative or critical about Beverly, none of her co-workers seemed to know her all that well. Reserved and seemingly shy, she was a quiet presence on her unit, keeping mostly to herself. While she was always polite in response to my greetings, we rarely exchanged more than a few words. However, when I was compiling a list of all the

single mothers who worked as CNAs to try to formally interview as many as possible, Jill wanted to make sure I included Beverly on my list. Jill said that one of Beverly's sons struggled with depression and she had had a tough time of things with him recently, including, Jill thought, dealing with an episode in which he had had to be hospitalized.

On a day towards the end of April 2005, I went up to the staff lunch room and found Beverly sitting alone at a table, eating her lunch. I got my food and headed over to her, asking if she minded if I joined her. As we sat there, both eating our lunch, I remembered that I'd heard some other staff discussing plans to attend the annual staff appreciation dinner to be held in a couple of weeks. Besides being a festive occasion, this was the event where staff were awarded service pins for their number of years of employment. After three years of service, the pin was accompanied by a monetary gift.⁹⁵ I had heard one of Ayasha and Tye's friends, Carla, speak of her plan to attend specifically to receive her award. Carla hoped the check would be for as much as \$100, though she thought it might only be for \$50 (when I mentioned Carla's speculations to Jill, she told me the amount was more likely to be \$25).

I asked Beverly if she were planning to attend the dinner. She said she didn't think so. She had just moved into a new house and she was still in middle of getting the last of her stuff moved in, unpacking, and arranging everything. While Beverly and I had been talking, Tye had come into the lunchroom. Just as Beverly was telling me about the move to her new house, Tye came over to the table and sat down with us. As Beverly continued talking it became clear that she was moving into a new house she had bought and, in doing so, had become a first-time homebuyer. Knowing what a simultaneously

⁹⁵ After three years of service, these monetary gifts continued to be awarded at other, periodic intervals such as five and ten years.

rare and desired experience this was for the other single mothers I had come to know at Rolling Meadows, I enthusiastically congratulated her and asked her more about the house's specifics. She said it was a 3 bedroom house with an unfinished basement, over on the south side of Ypsilanti. Tye asked her how she had afforded it and Beverly replied that the mortgage was \$800 a month with no down payment. I expressed my surprise and complimented her on having gotten what sounded like a good deal on her mortgage. Tye wanted to know how she'd gotten that kind of deal. Beverly replied that she had used a mortgage broker by the name of Jack Meyers. Tye said, "I need to go talk to those people. I need to get me a house like that." Beverly nodded her head, concurring, and said that Tye should let her know if she wanted more contact information for the broker; she would get a \$500 referral bonus for every person she referred who wound up using his services. By this time, Carla had come into the lunchroom and had joined us, as well. The conversation shifted to Tye talking about Xavier's new experience of pre-school. He loved "school," as Tye said he liked to call it.

While Tye and Carla were talking about Xavier, I turned to Beverly and asked her how old her children were. She said her oldest was 18 and her youngest 15. I asked if the move had meant that her younger son had had to switch schools and she said, no, that the new house was "real close" to where she had been living. She said that all her "people" were from the area; in fact, her new house was just down the street from her aunt and her cousin and only a few blocks from where her mom "stayed." Tye finished lunch and got up so she'd have time to smoke a cigarette outside before returning to her unit. I stayed a little longer talking to Beverly, Carla, and Laquaya who had joined us, as well. I asked Carla and Laquaya if they were attending the staff appreciation dinner and

Laquaya said she was planning on it. Carla turned to Laquaya and said, “You are? What are you wearing?” When Beverly got up to go back to her shift, I left with her, leaving Carla and Laquaya talking about their weekend plans. As Beverly and I walked down the hallway together, back to the care units, I asked her if she would be willing to do an interview with me, saying that I’d love to hear more about her new house and how she was managing everything. She said that would be “alright.” After a couple of weeks of back and forth conversation figuring out dates that would work with her schedule, I made an arrangement to interview her at the end of May at her new house.

On the appointed day, I drove to Beverly’s new house. It was located in a residential neighborhood on the “southside” of Ypsilanti, an area bordered by Michigan Avenue to the north, I-94 to the south, and by the dual thoroughfares that led straight from I-94 into downtown Ypsilanti to the east. The southside of Ypsilanti was known as one of the more lower-income and higher-crime areas of a city that was already, in comparison to Ann Arbor and other towns in Washtenaw County, markedly lower-income and subject to higher crime rates. To the east of the dual thoroughfares sat the Ford Assembly plant, one of the largest employers in the vicinity. Few of the homes in these southside neighborhoods, though, housed active union workers. Instead, the blocks in these neighborhoods were primarily populated by retirees, lower-working class families, and very poor families who resided in one of the two low-income housing developments situated on the area’s edges, Parkview Apartments and Paradise Manor. Both Parkview and Paradise Manor had long been hotspots for local drug dealing and other criminal activity. Parkview Apartments had been notoriously mismanaged for over a decade until the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) sold it to a

private property management company in 2005⁹⁶ and Paradise Manor was a public housing development managed by the Ypsilanti Housing Commission, a local government agency with a troubled history.⁹⁷

Beverly's block showed some signs of blight (a couple of boarded up houses at the end of the street and a vacant lot nearby), but it seemed in better shape than many of the blocks surrounding it. Her particular section of the street was the nicest of the block, dotted with modest-sized but mostly well-maintained homes with older model cars in the driveways. On the day I drove up to Beverly's house, an older African American couple in a house across the street sat out on their porch talking to some passerby. Right next door to Beverly's house, only a few feet separating their structures, was a red brick building that I realized, as I drew nearer, was a church. I parked my car in front on Beverly's house and walked up the short path to her front door. Her house was small, probably no more than 900 square feet, but in good shape. The front of the house was dominated by a concrete porch bordered by a decorative stretch of white picket fencing and covered by an awning of white aluminum. The white awning and fence attractively offset the house's light grey aluminum siding. A medium sized picture window looked out onto the porch.

I rang the doorbell. Within moments, Beverly was at the door to greet me. She opened the door into a small carpeted living room that was attractively though sparsely furnished and still obviously in the process of being unpacked and arranged. I complimented Beverly on how nice the house looked and she offered to give me a tour of

⁹⁶ Khalil E. Hachem, "Ypsilanti low-rent housing is sold," *Ann Arbor News*, May 28 2005. <<http://lexisnexus.com>>

⁹⁷ Khalil E. Hachem, "Director shakes up troubled Ypsilanti Housing Commission," *Ann Arbor News*, November 11, 2003. <<http://lexisnexus.com>>

the rest of it, disclaiming, though, that the living room was the farthest along in being settled in. A short hallway to the left of the living room led to the bathroom and the bedrooms. From the hallway, we looked into Beverly's bedroom which had its door open and she pointed to the two closed doors of her sons' bedrooms. At the back of the house was a square kitchen area big enough to hold a table. From the kitchen a backdoor opened out onto a well manicured, fenced-in backyard. Although the interior was small it was in good condition. And in addition to the ground floor, the house had a full, unfinished basement.

After the tour, we settled in the living room, with Beverly on the couch and me in a chair facing her. We began talking about how the moving in process was going and I asked her where she had lived before she'd moved. She said she and her sons had "stayed" in Paradise Manor, the apartment complex on Michigan Avenue, on the northern edge of the southside area. She had only paid \$500 a month for a three bedroom townhouse, but she had been anxious to move from there. Some of her neighbors there were unruly and the place had felt unsafe. I asked her if she had experienced any problems living there. She said, "the problems I had was like people sitting on my porch...and they kind of like got on my nerves. And plus, I couldn't get no sleep at night, because they was out...just hanging out."

Kim: People you knew sitting on your porch, or just people who lived there?

Beverly: People like, that stay next door. They company was all over my porch.

Kim: And then would...would you talk to your neighbor about it, or...or were they just not people you wanted to have to talk to about it?

Beverly: No, mostly I had a...I...I just stayed away. Like go be over...be over to my family's house.

Kim: Just try to not interact with them?

Beverly: Yeah.

I thought I knew enough of the reputation of Paradise Manor to imagine what Beverly meant. A number of years ago, I had had a couple of part-time jobs that had taken me to Parkview Apartments, which had had a similar reputation for being poorly managed and poorly maintained. I had been surprised, at the time, by how rundown they had been and how uneasy I had felt driving and walking by the groups of men congregating around the parking lot. But only six months after my interview with Beverly, an incident that made the local news made me reconsider how well I had understood Beverly's remarks about the residential environment in which she had been living and her eagerness to get away from it.

In October 2005, at around 2 in the morning, a 29-year old African American Ypsilanti man named Ryan Taylor had driven into the Paradise Manor parking lot. Ryan was not a resident of the complex but had come by, apparently, to visit a casual acquaintance who lived there. The newspaper account insinuates that Ryan's more affluent apparel and car immediately marked him as a stranger to the complex. As one of the *Ann Arbor News* stories puts it, he was "driving a late-model Ford Mustang convertible with the top down. He was well dressed. Wearing a nice watch."⁹⁸ As he parked his car in a space outside one of the buildings, at least 10 to 20 people were congregating near the parking lot (the buildings form a u-shape around a central parking lot). The person who Ryan had been attempting to visit didn't answer her door and as Ryan turned to head back to his car, one of the men in the crowd approached him.

According to a witness account, Ryan kept on walking, ignoring the man, but the man

⁹⁸ Susan Oppat, "A shroud of silence covers son's death; Witnesses fear testifying, father of victim says," *Ann Arbor News*, June 18, 2006. <<http://lexisnexis.com>>

pursued Ryan and then, catching up to him, reached out and punched him. Within moments, four other men had joined in and began to viciously beat Ryan. While he was on the ground, being punched and kicked, two of the men rifled through his clothing and took his car keys and wallet. At some point during the beating, Ryan broke free of the men and ran out onto Michigan Avenue, with two of the men who had been beating him chasing after him. Apparently, people shouted to him to get out of the street, but he staggered⁹⁹ into a lane of traffic, was hit by a mini-van and was killed.

Besides the viciousness and senselessness of the attack, what was equally disturbing was that for months police couldn't get any witnesses to come forward, although there were accounts that as many as fifty people had witnessed some part of the events that transpired. After months of investigation, the police were only able to secure testimony from one eye-witness and her willingness to come forward was connected, in part, to the fact that she had since moved out of the complex. Two other residents who had initially given witness accounts withdrew their testimony after they themselves were physically attacked. A resident who was interviewed by the *Ann Arbor News* said that as a resident at Paradise Manor, "(s)he's had to push her way past people gathered there to get into her own home. One day, drug dealers called out to her to take her mother inside so they could do business in the parking lot."¹⁰⁰

Reading these accounts made me view Beverly's motivation for moving out of Paradise Manor and into a more desirable residential setting in a much different light.

⁹⁹ An autopsy revealed that he had been drinking that night and had a blood alcohol level above Michigan's legal limit for driving. His unresponsiveness to the shouts to get out of the road may have been exacerbated by his alcohol consumption. Art Aisner "Grieving parents add own money to reward: tips sought after hit-and-run death," *Ann Arbor News*, December 8, 2005. <<http://lexisnexis.com>>

¹⁰⁰ Susan Oppat, "A shroud of silence covers son's death; Witnesses fear testifying, father of victim says," *Ann Arbor News*, June 18, 2006. <<http://lexisnexis.com>>

Reviewing the transcript of our interview after coming across these news stories, I realized the increased import of some of the comments she had made, such as when she said that she had “stayed away...a lot” and had spent a great deal of time over at her family’s house. During our interview she had also told me that, while living there, when she worked on the weekends, or during the school vacations, her sons stayed with her sister, her aunt, her mother, or their friends. At the time of the interview, I had focused on the ways in which this signaled the especially close-knit nature of her extended family. While I also understood it revealed her discomfort at leaving her sons alone while she was at work, I hadn’t fully grasped the urgency behind it.

Her home had been far from the ideal of a shelter from the stresses of the outside world. At first glance, the knowledge that Beverly had managed to secure a lease in an affordable housing complex would have seemed to put her in an advantageous position, especially in economic terms, compared to many of the single mothers who worked at Rolling Meadows. For many of the women I interviewed, housing costs played an enormous role in their financial difficulties. A number of the other single-mothers I interviewed had put their names on waiting lists for such government subsidized slots, but the waiting lists were long and administratively difficult to remain on.¹⁰¹ Yet, having secured a resource that was highly sought after by many of the single mothers I got to know -- at least, in the abstract -- had not made life easier for Beverly. Instead, it had exposed her to a host of other, potent difficulties.

However, in addition to the keenness of her wish to move away from Paradise Manor, Beverly had also wanted to move into this house, in particular. The house and its

¹⁰¹ Both Tye and Ayasha told me of experiences of having been “bumped” from the Section 8 waitlists without their knowledge. Tye found out that her name had disappeared from the waitlist only when a new case manager had taken over her benefits case and had reviewed her current benefit status with her.

location were physically as well as socially meaningful to Beverly. For a start, the church that sat next door to the house was the church to which Beverly belonged. Equally significantly, her aunt lived just down the street, a mere six houses away. It was she who had first learned the house was going on the market, bringing Beverly over to take a look at it. The then owner was an elderly woman who needed to put the house up for sale because she was moving into an assisted living facility. She also happened to be a member of Beverly's church. When Beverly approached her pastor about the house, he had encouraged her to buy it, telling her that the price was good and if the house needed any fixing up or repairs the church could help her out with that, they had people who did plumbing and carpentry. Yet, while the connection she had to the property through her church and the fact that its location was so near to her aunt greatly enhanced its desirability, she had initially thought there was little she could do to take advantage of this. Her connections to the house could do little to make the property available to her. The element that had been indispensable to her moving into this house -- and out of Paradise Manor -- had been finding a mortgage broker who was keen to work with people like her; people with "bad credit."

While reading the newspaper one day at work, Beverly had come across an ad that seemed to have been designed with her in mind; it was an ad touting mortgage services for people with bad credit. Calling the number, she reached Jack Meyers. He seemed happy to talk to her. He assured her he could help, even with her bad credit. On top of having a bad credit score, Beverly didn't have any money saved up for a down payment. That was fine, too, he told her; they could work with that. In a deal that required her to put no money down, Jack Meyers arranged for her to buy the house by

taking out two combined loans, what in the banking industry has become known as a “piggyback” loan arrangement.

Piggyback Loans, Down Payments, and New Mortgage Markets

Until the 1960s’, the dominant practice in the mortgage lending business had been to require home buyers to make a down payment equal to, at minimum, 20% of the sale price of the house in order to secure a mortgage.¹⁰² Over the past thirty years, however, banking deregulation in the United States, combined with other changes to financial regulations and markets, dramatically reconfigured these conventions (Kuttner 2007; Williams 2004). The convention of requiring a 20% down payment had evolved out of collective assessments by mortgage lenders, financial analysts and government policy makers that this percentage represented an optimal balance between making homeownership accessible and minimizing the risk that borrowers would default on loans. But as housing prices rose disproportionately to incomes, having savings equivalent to 20% of the cost of a house became prohibitive to a growing percentage of the U.S. population. In response to this, a series of alternative practices developed. While these practices helped not only maintain but, arguably, increase the accessibility of home ownership, their approaches to controlling the risks associated with mortgage lending were quite variable.

The first of these alternative developments was Private Mortgage Insurance, or PMI. PMI became the standard means for mortgage lenders to provide loans to people who did not have 20% down payments without taking on substantially greater risk.

¹⁰² In the beginning of the 20th century, banks had required up to 50% of the price of a house for a down payment. The 20% down payment had become the industry standard as part of the post-WWII government effort to increase access to homeownership; (No Author Given), “Private Insurance On Loans Is Urged; NEW PLAN URGED FOR HOME LOANS” *The New York Times*. Final Ed., May 19, 1957, pg. R1, 2 pgs.

Borrowers with less than 20% down payment had to purchase this insurance to obtain a mortgage, protecting the lender in case of loan default. However, unlike mortgage payments, PMI payments were not tax deductible. In response to the tax disadvantages of PMI, another lending practice emerged in recent years that allowed people considered “riskier” borrowers (those who could pay less than 20% for their down payment) to obtain mortgages but optimize the tax benefits of those mortgages. These were called piggyback loans.

Piggyback loans avoid the need for PMI by arranging that a prospective homebuyer take out **two** loans; typically, a primary mortgage loan for 80% of the value of the home and a second, or piggyback, loan to cover the shortfall between the borrower’s contribution and the 20% down payment figure. The terms for the two loans are structured differently with the secondary loan usually pegged to a repayment period of 10 years and a significantly higher interest rate than the first loan. As these piggyback loans became more and more common, a new conventional wisdom developed mandating that the borrower still needed a minimum of a 10% down payment (called, in the industry, an “80-10-10”) to qualify for the arrangement.

Even as these piggyback arrangements skyrocketed in popularity, analysts warned, however, that they presented an excessive level of risk and cautioned lenders against allowing them to become so “mainstream.”¹⁰³ This alarm was only intensified in relation to a variant of the piggyback loan that permitted people to purchase homes with **no** money down (what is known as an “80-20” piggyback loan). Even before the implosion of the mortgage lending market in 2007 and 2008, many industry analysts

¹⁰³ Kenneth R. Harney, “Piggybacking Onto Trouble,” *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2006. <<http://www.lexisnexis.com>>; Steven Pearlstein, “‘No Money Down’ Falls Flat,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2007. <<http://www.lexisnexis.com>>.

categorized this as an unacceptably risky practice,¹⁰⁴ most especially for people with poor credit ratings.¹⁰⁵ With the general consensus being that anything below a FICO score of less than 660 is considered a poor credit rating, from the news reports, analysis and punditry I read it appeared that even in the gung-ho mortgage heyday of the early 2000s, most lenders considered it too great a risk of loan default to provide an “80-20” piggyback loan to someone with a FICO score of less than 660.¹⁰⁶

This was exactly, however, the loan set-up that Jack Meyers had arranged for Beverly. Requiring her to put no money down even given her poor credit rating, Jack Meyers put together a piggyback mortgage loan package for Beverly in which one loan was set an initial interest rate of 1% and the second at 7.8%. In early 2005, at the time when Beverly set the terms of these loans, the national average loan rate for a 30 year fixed rate mortgage was 5.85.¹⁰⁷ Beverly’s loan rates categorize her as being in the subprime lending market,¹⁰⁸ meaning that while her mortgage broker provided her with access to homeownership she might otherwise not have had,¹⁰⁹ the access came at

¹⁰⁴ Devona Wells, “Say bye-bye to zero-down mortgages,” *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, August 26 2007. ABI/INFORM Dateline database; “Suicide Loans: Piggyback Mortgages Default by up to 50%,” *PR Newswire*, July 19, 2006. ABI/INFORM Dateline database; “Independent Study Released by PMI Mortgage Insurance Co. Finds Piggyback Loans May Pose Risk to Mortgage System; Piggyback loans are concentrated in areas at highest risk of home price declines,” *Business Wire*, July 6, 2005. ABI/INFORM Dateline database.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Beverly did not tell me her exact credit report rating at the time she signed her mortgage loan, but it was clear it was below this score.

¹⁰⁷ Using historical data available from the internet, the national average rate on mortgages during the time period in which Beverly signed her mortgage agreement was as follows:

30 Year Fixed Rate Mortgage (FRM)	15 Year FRM	1 Year Adjustable Rate Mortgage
5.85	5.38	4.24

From website: http://www.mortgage-x.com/general/historical_rates.asp; accessed February 26, 2008

¹⁰⁸ Based on personal communication with the loan officer at the University of Michigan Credit Union, Greg Seymour (February 27, 2008).

¹⁰⁹ While Beverly certainly wasn’t a traditional candidate for a prime market rate mortgage loan, it’s unclear whether or not she might have found access to homeownership through less risky or more advantageous means. As one of the financial columnists for *The New York Times*, Gretchen Morgenson, observed during her interview on *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross (WHYY, October 17, 2007), just one of the disturbing aspects of the explosion of the subprime mortgage lending markets in the 2000s was that

considerable expense, causing her to pay the borrowed money back at a much higher interest rate than the average going rate.

Beverly expressed her concern to Mr. Barnett that the resulting \$800 a month payments would be tight for her, possibly too tight. But he had reassured her that she would be able to refinance the loan after six months to try to get a lower rate, lowering her monthly payments. I asked Greg Seymour, the loan manager at my local credit union, the University of Michigan Credit Union, about this and he confirmed that Jack Meyers's claims accurately reflected the potential gains such refinancing might offer someone in Beverly's situation. After Beverly demonstrated herself to be a reliable, monthly payee, she would be considered a less risky borrower and, quite possibly, could qualify for better rates, although this certainly wouldn't be guaranteed. Even if she qualified for lower rates, however, the refinancing would cost Beverly money in the short-term. Based on the information I gave Greg Seymour he estimated the processing costs for refinancing would be somewhere around \$1200.¹¹⁰ And adding to potential riskiness of the mortgage was that Beverly did not seem entirely clear on all the details of her mortgage arrangement, as is evidenced from the following exchange taken from our interview:

Kim: ...does your mortgage rate stay at the same? Or does it...will it vary over time, do you know?
Beverly: He told me I could like refinance like in 6 months.

unsustainable mortgages were targeted towards the very population (e.g., low-income, first-time homebuyers) that FHA mortgage loans were designed to serve. Not only were people who might have qualified for FHA insured mortgages steered away from them (because mortgage brokers enjoyed much higher fee payments on subprime mortgages), but, during this same period, participation rates in federal programs designed to assist and facilitate home ownership were noticeably low. These federally funded programs provide financial counseling and down payment matching funds to low-income individuals with poor credit scores, helping them to rebuild their credit scores and qualify for below-market rate mortgage loans. However, unlike the subprime mortgages, it can take individuals several years of working with these programs to secure a home mortgage and, additionally, mortgage brokers do not make fees off of them.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

Kim: Uh-huh.
 Beverly: And my mortgage p—part go down.
 Kim: What kind of interest rate do you have to pay?
 Beverly: I think it was 1.0, and the other one was 7.8, something like that.
 Yeah.
 Kim: How long does it stay at 1.0?
 Beverly: I think it's...I think he said 6 months.
 Kim: And then what happens when you refinance? What does...what does the rate stay at?
 Beverly: That's...that's what I got to find out.
 Kim: Oh, okay.
 Beverly: Because he said, it can go down, my payment.
 Kim: Okay, right.
 Beverly: Yeah.

Beverly's uncertainty about the 1.0% rate is particularly troubling. As she said during our interview, while she has a sense that the 1.0% rate will change in six months, she focuses on the potential option to refinance at that time, an option Mr. Barnett clearly emphasized. In our interview, for Beverly, this six-month point is most salient for the opportunity it provides, hopefully, to lower her payments. What Beverly either downplays or, worse, doesn't fully understand, is that that six-month point is when her 1% rate, what is known in the industry as a "teaser" rate, will balloon up to something much higher, potentially up to as high as 10% (Morgenson 2007). Given the struggle it was for her to make her initial mortgage payments of \$800 a month, it's difficult to imagine how she will manage anything greater.

Subprime Mortgages and the Financial Profitability of the Poor

During the period that began in 2000 and ended only just recently, in 2007, Jack Meyers, and many other mortgage brokers like him, welcomed borrowers like Beverly. Prior to 2000, it would have been unlikely to view someone with Beverly's credit history, income, and inability to pay a down payment as a desirable customer, but the 1999 repeal

of the Glass-Steagall Act combined with the frenetic explosion of the securities and hedge fund markets dramatically changed that evaluation (Kuttner 2007). As Robert Kuttner details in his book *The Squandering of America: How the Failure of Our Politics Undermines Our Prosperity* (2007), that constellation of forces set in motion a financial markets zeitgeist in which the risk associated with providing mortgages to people in Beverly's financial situation was transformed from a financial disincentive to a financial incentive. For a period of time, a whole host of actors in the financial world were able to make money off of providing credit under these circumstances.

The most immediately appealing element of these subprime mortgages for Jack Meyers (and other mortgage brokers like him) was the money to be made from the commissions, service charges, and fees associated with arranging them. High-risk borrowers were charged significantly higher fees for the loans they obtained. Then there were the fees (and, again, potential commissions) to be made off of any refinancing the customer might undertake. But perhaps the most financially enticing aspect of these mortgages, most especially for the financial entities with whom these mortgages were arranged, was the money to be made by selling the mortgage "up the chain."

Beginning in the 1970s, but becoming a central fixture of the mortgage lending industry by the 1980s, a secondary mortgage market developed in which lending agents would resell mortgages to other financial entities that would then, by bundling together thousands of these mortgages, turn them into securities (Van Order 2000). By 2000, however, a new twist in this practice had developed: bundled packages that contained high percentages of very risky, subprime mortgages. The securities based in these high-risk mortgages became enormously profitable for two important reasons. The first was

the involvement of hedge funds in these securities markets. For hedge funds, the riskiest loans from the subprime market were attractive for their potential to yield high returns. This demand helped lead the push for lending agents to make more of these loans. The second factor was that the transformation of subprime mortgages into securities became characterized by an arguably new degree of opacity. Robert Kuttner notes that, in many cases, the ways in which these packages were put together (benefiting, in part, from the roll back in regulations that would have otherwise required greater disclosure information to be attached to them) enabled “blue chip” banks to get bond ratings agencies to bless these securities with the “triple A” ratings, the highest, or safest ratings given to bonds (2007).

A number of analysts and commentators including Robert Kuttner and Gretchen Morgenson,¹¹¹ a financial columnist for *The New York Times*, have pointed to the major role the 1999 repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act played in setting the conditions for this subprime market exuberance. The Glass-Steagall Act, a regulatory act crafted in the wake of the Great Depression, had enforced clear distinctions and separations between commercial banks and brokerages. Under the structure this enforced, the same financial entity could not be a mortgage lender as well as a securities agent and trader. Once this separation was done away with, however, the fiscal disincentive of making high-risk, if not dubious, loans was considerably diminished (Kuttner 2007; Morgenson 2007). Under the pre-1999 system, a bank’s profitability was still significantly tied to the successful repayment of the loans it made to customers. In the post-1999 system, the almost dizzying expansion of a market in which even risky loans could be profitably (often

¹¹¹ Gretchen Morgenson “Inside the Countrywide Lending Spree,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 2007. Gretchen Morgenson, Interview. *Fresh Air*. WHYY. 13 Oct. 2007.

extremely profitably) sold onto to other financial entities reduced the incentive for as well as the accountability of the lending agent to ensure the mortgage loans it made were reasonably low-risk.

In her book, *Debt for Sale: a Social History of the Credit Trap* (2004), Brett Williams suggests that these subprime mortgages were only one manifestation of a larger sea change in the credit industry. As she observes, the deregulation of broad swathes of the financial industries that began in the 1970s and accelerated rapidly in the 1980s and 90s' helped to encourage a fairly radical shift in how financial industries viewed the low-income and the poor as a business market. Williams provides a detailed and careful historical overview of this shift, delineating the intersection of factors that resulted in the credit industries reconsideration of low-income Americans as a population with great, untapped potential for their profit making efforts. This was true not only in terms of the mortgage industries, but in the credit card and check-cashing industries, as well. Williams describes this realization among credit industry businesses as akin to a floodgate opening up. As Williams writes, in the 1990s and 2000s, mainstream financial institution after mainstream financial institution "entered the poverty debt market in earnest" (97).

In line with a number of other scholars, Williams argues that citizenship in the United States has become increasingly bound up with consumption and consumerism; so much so that being a good citizen has become increasingly predicated on being a good consumer (Chin 2001; Cohen 2003; Lipsitz 1986; Mukherjee2006). She notes that not only is full inclusion into the benefits of citizenship increasingly dependent on one's ability to consume, but the economic health of the United States has become framed as an

issue of consumption to the virtual exclusion of other economic practices (such as manufacturing or saving). Recessions become occasions for government officials and popular commentators to encharge U.S. citizens with a patriotic duty to help spend the economy out of a recession. As Williams forcefully asserts, while the poor are moralized against for spending beyond their means and for making seemingly financially irrational decisions, in fact, such behavior has become the mainstay of American society; encouraged by an overwhelming barrage of cultural messages and, not coincidentally, a critical source of profit for the financial and credit industries.

Post-script

In March 2008 I was able to conduct a follow-up interview with Beverly. When I left Rolling Meadows in September 2005, it was just a month before the six-month period passed on Beverly's mortgage. At the time, the subprime mortgage crisis was bubbling, still more than a year away from its full explosion into the national consciousness. Since then, the subprime mortgage market has become a news topic of major proportions and an issue of overwhelming popular, economic, and political concern. I was curious to find out how Beverly had been faring during a period when many people like her had been losing their homes. Getting back in touch with her, I learned that Beverly has managed to hold onto her home, in large part, because she now has a long-term relationship with a romantic partner (a fiancé) who financially contributes to her household. He moved in with her over two years ago and, since then, has been helping to pay the mortgage.

My sense that Beverly did not fully understand the terms of her mortgage, however, was only amplified in our second conversation. She told me that she had **not**

taken the option to refinance her mortgage at the six month period and the 1% rate had adjusted up to a 10% rate. Although this raised her monthly payments and might have otherwise endangered her ability to continue making them, it was around this time that she became involved with her fiancé and he began contributing to her mortgage payments.

I also learned that Beverly's mortgage arrangement had put her in the eye of the subprime mortgage storm even more than I had realized. Not until our second interview did I learn that Beverly's mortgage had initially been with NovaStar. NovaStar is viewed by some commentators (including Gretchen Morgenson¹¹²) as a "poster child" for the business ethos and practices that led to the subprime mortgage market meltdown. Its trajectory exemplified the spectacular rise and fall of a number of subprime lenders and the deliberately lax and even unethical practices that went along with that. Although NovaStar certainly had its defenders,¹¹³ it was also hit with more than its fair share of complaints and run-ins with overseers, regulators, and lawyers. Morgenson details a spate of legal troubles that dogged NovaStar since the early 2000s, including two major lawsuits (one of them a class-action suit) for fraudulent practices.¹¹⁴ Several major financial partners broke off business relations with it, including a Lehman Brothers unit, because of concerns over NovaStar's practices of inadequately documenting borrower's income and overstating property values.

¹¹² Gretchen Morgenson and Julie Creswell "Borrowing Trouble," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2007 and Gretchen Morgenson "Creative Loans, Creative Compensation," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2007.

¹¹³ See, for example, Craig Cunningham "NovaStar's Wild Ride," *The Motley Fool*, May 4, 2004 (<http://fool.com/investing/general/2005/05/04/novastars-wild-ride.aspx>).

¹¹⁴ It settled the class-action lawsuit out of court and received a guilty verdict in the other. Gretchen Morgenson "Subprime, Subpar: For Sale?," *The New York Times*, July 15, 2007.

Two other claims against NovaStar have particular salience in light of Beverly's experience. From a variety of sources, including those represented in the class-action suit, there were complaints about NovaStar's questionable practice of paying mortgage brokers large commissions for successfully steering clients into "riskier and more expensive" loans than their situations merited (Morgenson 2007c). In addition, several states, including Nevada and Massachusetts, filed cease-and-desist orders against NovaStar for operating in their states without licenses. Learning this bit of information about NovaStar helped me understand a bit of information that had been puzzling me in relation to Jack Meyers, the broker who had initially arranged Beverly's mortgage. When I had tried to track down Jack Meyers to get background information from him on his mortgage brokerage business, the number I had for him directed me to an office telephone number that was no longer in business. When I did an internet search to see if the business had relocated to new premises, one of the first results that came up was a link to a State of Michigan "consent order" against the mortgage brokerage office that Jack Meyers had worked for in 2005, when Beverly had initially made contact with him. It was a "cease-and-desist" order filed against the business for conducting residential mortgage activity in the state of Michigan without a license.

It's unclear how Beverly's mortgage situation will, ultimately, turn out. By the beginning of January 2008, NovaStar, effectively, had gone out of business and it had sold on the servicing of its outstanding mortgages to another company, Saxon Mortgage Services, Inc. (a financial entity bought by Morgan Stanley in 2006). In December 2007, Beverly received notice that her mortgage had been transferred to Saxon. Saxon informed her that it had converted her loan to a fixed-rate, 30-year loan. Beverly wasn't

sure exactly what her new interest rate is, but her current monthly payments are \$854 a month and she is pretty sure the interest rate is now below 10%. Although Saxon has been one of the major players in the subprime mortgage business, it hasn't had the reputation for unscrupulousness that NovaStar had. Still, the disparity between Saxon's ability to set the terms of their arrangement and Beverly's ability to fully understand the implications of those arrangements or negotiate more favorable terms leaves room for ongoing concern.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In Barbara Ehrenreich's very powerful book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001), she writes, "It is common, among the nonpoor, to think of poverty as a sustainable condition – austere, perhaps, but they get by somehow, don't they? They are 'always with us.' What is harder for the nonpoor to see is poverty as acute distress" (214). Yet, as she asserts, the experiences of the low-wage workers that she chronicles in her book

are not part of a sustainable lifestyle, even a lifestyle of chronic deprivation and relentless low-level punishment. They are, by almost any standard of subsistence, emergency situations. And that is how we should see the poverty of so many millions of low-wage Americans – as a state of emergency (ibid).

Ehrenreich's claim that the economic plight of these low-wage workers constitutes a "state of emergency" -- has an interesting resonance with the recent work of a European political theorist, Giorgio Agamben. Without delving into Agamben's argument – which is an argument about political power and governmentality -- I want to connect a key phrase from his book *State of Exception* (2005) to Ehrenreich's claim. Agamben is interested in understanding the conditions under which "the emergency becomes the rule" (22). I would suggest that this phrase – the conditions under which "the emergency becomes the rule" – nuances Ehrenreich's assertion in a way that speaks to something at the core of my dissertation.

On the one hand, Ehrenreich's categorization of the circumstances of low-wage workers' lives as a state of emergency is an attempt to emphasize that the unsustainability

of these circumstances poses a crisis in need of urgent response. However, unlike conventional understandings of a state of emergency as an altered state that is exceptional and set apart from the normal state of things -- and, additionally, in its exceptionality, impermanent -- I take Ehrenreich to be saying that this state of emergency, far from being the exception, has become the rule. In other words, for a significant percentage of those in the low-wage labor market, the insufficiency of their wages in relation to their costs of living results in an economically unsustainable way of life that is, at once, a crisis and the normal state of things.

In my dissertation, I explore the state of emergency engendered by conditions in the low-wage labor market within the context of the lives of a group of single mothers working as certified nursing assistants, or CNAs, at a nursing home in the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area of southeastern Michigan. To do this, I conducted ethnographic research involving just over fifteen months of participant observation at a nursing home I call “Rolling Meadows” and in the community with single mother staff during their non-work time. This community-based participant observation included seven months of sharing an apartment with one of the single mothers, a woman I call “Tye.” I also conducted formal, research interviews with single mothers, supervisor and administrative staff at the nursing home and analyzed work documents produced by various nursing home staff.

As I have shown in this dissertation, much like the workers Ehrenreich met in her sojourn through the low-wage labor market, the status quo for the single mothers working as nursing assistants at Rolling Meadows is a state of considerable financial and social stress and, often, distress. I have argued here that the financial and social stresses and distresses of the single mothers at Rolling Meadows reflect two important truths about

the low-wage labor market that tend to be under-acknowledged by policy-makers and politicians. The first is that low-wage jobs in the United States – particularly those in the service sector – have become structured in such a way that they provide few opportunities for significant wage growth or occupational mobility. The result of these structured conditions produces considerable economic immobility for the workers in those jobs. The second is that it is extremely difficult for single mothers to make ends meet on the wages earned from even a “good” low-wage job, let alone lead what many would consider a socially and economically normal American life.

Ehrenreich’s book focuses primarily on this second truth – on the social and material distortions that workers’ low wages impose on them – the inadequate housing, food, and the toll it takes on physical and mental health. And as the quote I referenced suggests, she implies that these conditions are not bearable (and certainly should be not considered so, by us non-poor), although she provides us with less insight into how the workers she works alongside experience and make sense of this. In addition, she does not provide us with a conceptual framework to understand how and why it is that people get stuck in these low-wage jobs (other than their exhausting schedules leave them with too little time and too little energy to search out better-paying alternatives). In this dissertation I argue, however, that better-paying alternatives do not readily exist, at least not without substantial investments into more education or vocational training than most of the CNAs at Rolling Meadows already have.

And this, I might suggest, is the dirty, little secret of the post-welfare reform landscape for low-income single mothers. As Roberta Iversen has noted, “the design, formulation, and implementation” of contemporary public policies targeted towards low-

income workers are built around the assumption that steady employment in and of itself, even in the low-wage labor market, pays off (2006:20). In this way, the economic unsustainability of low-wage jobs is overlooked, disregarded, marginalized; in part because, again, as Iversen puts it, the presumption has always been that “jobs are the expected way for families to get ahead in the United States” (2006:8). Therefore, economically unsustainable jobs must only be a temporary, way station on the way to a more “normal” life. This dissertation asks, however, what happens when we consider the immobility of these low-wage jobs to be not the exceptional state of things, but “the rule”?

This question is of particular concern in relation to less-skilled, single mothers. As single parents combining the role of primary caregiver with breadwinner, they serve as the chief source of income for their families. In this dissertation, I show how, for the single mothers at Rolling Meadows, the wage and occupational immobility of their jobs suffuses their home lives, posing particular social and economic challenges for them. Given the relatively high cost of housing and child-care and the narrow options for public transportation in the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area, single mothers at Rolling Meadows face particularly vexing challenges in securing affordable housing, affordable, quality child-care, and reliable transportation. I chart the strategies they undertake to deal with these challenges. In addition, I highlight ways in which the structured conditions of their home lives constrain their ability to undertake the extra-work efforts that are necessary to advance into better-paying occupations.

For some of the single mothers I met at Rolling Meadows, the seeming insurmountability of their ongoing economic and social difficulties heightens the appeal

of what might be considered “alternative” paths to mobility. These alternative paths include phenomena as varied as on-line dating, membership in a multi-level marketing sales organization, and participation in the subprime mortgage lending market. These alternative paths suggest that the economic conditions of their nursing assistant jobs and the impracticality of the extra-work options necessary for occupational mobility make the single mothers I met vulnerable to opportunities that seem to promise some measure of relief, but, ultimately, embroil them in situations that are at least potentially exploitative or risky.

In addition to illuminating how the economic and social tensions that result from the immobility of these jobs affect women’s home lives, however, I also show how these tensions feedback into the workplace. I found that the immobility of these nursing assistant jobs joins together the single mothers’ economic and social worlds with the economic and social world of Rolling Meadows in ways that are surprising and unexpected. For example, I show how many CNAs’ chronic need for greater income is a central feature not only of day-to-day interactions among nursing assistants, administrative staff, and management, but of the very structure of the workplace. I demonstrate how the chronic gap between nursing assistants’ income and expenses is not only recognized – both implicitly and explicitly – by the nursing home management, but is assimilated into bureaucratic and labor routines in ways that, ultimately, benefit the nursing home’s operating costs.

The immobility of these nursing assistant jobs also engenders what might be considered cultural tensions. In my dissertation, I devote considerable attention to how these cultural tensions play out at Rolling Meadows. At Rolling Meadows,

contradictions between the lived experiences of immobility and the still, powerful cultural notions about the democratic promise of mobility and the rewards of hard work come face to face. These CNA's lives contradict American democratic ideals that hard work should – if not lead to reward – at least keep you from sinking. The workplace is where these unsustainable conditions are both literally established as well as where the tensions these conditions generate play out in “close proximity” among people who are differentially positioned by their social and market locations (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001:xi).

Because American social life is still so largely segregated by class and race – including where people live, where they send their children to school, where they shop, and where they spend their leisure time, the workplace can thus be understood as one of the rare social spaces in which the economic and social struggles of marginalized American citizens are likely to be intimately visible to and encountered by Americans who are economically (and socially) better off. This makes workplaces a particularly critical site, therefore, for understanding both the nature, as well as the consequences, of these encounters. How do workplaces, as organizations, manage the economic struggles of their least advantaged employees? How are these struggles experienced by, engaged with, responded to, or ignored by supervisors, administrators, managers and those higher-up the bureaucratic chain?

Based on my fieldwork at Rolling Meadows, I would suggest that one answer to these questions is that workplaces may be an especially potent site for understanding how the larger structural inequalities that shape American society are depoliticized. At Rolling Meadows, we see how the impossibility of the economic conditions that CNA

jobs result in is deflected and displaced onto workplace-based remedies that do nothing to change underlying conditions, but offer temporary, partial fixes that often patch over crises enough to keep worker's going for the time being.

The larger economic inequalities that affected CNAs were translated into issues that could be addressed through scheduling, overtime, and benefits. Economic difficulties and the complex social problems these often led to were recast as issues of attendance and punctuality -- as behaviors that could be addressed as issues of work performance. Rather than encouraging workers' economic and social struggles to be framed as outcomes of collective circumstances, the organizational practices, policies, and mechanisms at Rolling Meadows had the effect of re-articulating these struggles as individual issues, reflecting individual circumstances. In the end, I would suggest that my dissertation importantly contributes to our understandings of what happens when the state's role as an enabler of opportunity and as a source of social and economic provisioning is devolved to the marketplace and when the individual and the markets come to be seen as both the engine and locus of social and economic transformation.

Policy Recommendations

As did Ehrenreich, I found that housing costs posed considerable financial strain for most of the single mothers at Rolling Meadows. Under the current Bush administration, public subsidies for housing have continued to be rolled back. As Iversen suggests, we need to think of economic mobility in a more holistic way than has traditionally been the case. The unsustainability of low-wage jobs is greatly amplified by the un-affordability of housing. Significant increases in the number of housing subsidy

vouchers available to low-income workers could go a long way towards easing their financial burdens.

Another policy change that would significantly improve these single mothers' standard of living would be to expand the reach and financial adequacy of child-care subsidies by changing the formula used to determine eligibility. The current eligibility formula in the State of Michigan uses the federal poverty rates as its baseline. In other words, to be eligible for child-care subsidies, a family's income can be no more than 144% of the federal poverty rate.¹¹⁵ This formula, however, is un-tethered from the actual cost of child-care, the variability of these costs within particular locales, and the proportion of a family's income these costs represent. Eligibility for child-care subsidies should instead be calculated according a model of income-affordability akin to the way in which the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines affordable housing. According to HUD, affordable housing should cost no more than 30% of a family's income. Similarly, eligibility for child-care subsidies should be based on the principle that child-care costs should take up no more than a specified percentage of a family's income. "Fair-market" child-care costs could be determined much the way fair-market housing values are determined by HUD. This sensitivity to the actual costs of child-care, to their geographic variability, and to the percentage of a family's income these costs represent, would greatly expand the child-care subsidy coverage and would benefit many of the single mothers working at Rolling Meadows.

Lastly, returning to a model of workforce development that stresses the importance of postsecondary education and vocational training opportunities is essential.

¹¹⁵ This was the formula in 2006, according to the Michigan League of Human Services. (<http://www.milhs.org/Media/EDocs/ChildCareAssistPoliciesOct07REV2.pdf>) accessed June 14, 2008.

This would require the re-introduction of public supports and supportive services to enable people to not only access such opportunities but complete them. While these would not be simple or inexpensive measures, without greater support for adult educational opportunities, it is hard to imagine how the circumstances of women like those at Rolling Meadows will change substantially for the better. A model for such a program could be the ACCESS Project headed by sociologist Vivyan Adair at Hamilton College (see <http://www.hamilton.edu/college/access/index.html>). By providing an array of holistic, supportive services this project assists very low-income parents in completing a four-year college education. The program provides assistance with accessing public benefits, child-care, on-going help with academic preparation, academic advising, career counseling, and a host of family support services in the form of intensive case-management. Although resource and service intensive, the program has demonstrated very encouraging results. For women who do not have a strong educational background and who must balance schooling with so many other demands, such supported educational opportunities are critically vital.

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