Anything but Uniform: Wesleyan Janitors and Students in Unlikely Solidarity

by

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**Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the student activists of the future. I hope you learn more from our mistakes than you do from our triumphs.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROLOGUE: NOT YOUR ADMISSIONS PAMPHLET ACTIVIST</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION: EL PONCHADOR</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: HOME, FOR WHOM?</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: ORGANZING FOR OR ORGANIZING WITH?; SHIFTING STUDENT AND WORKER ROLES FROM 1999-2013</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPILOGUE</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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In loving memory of Crystalyn Trevillion.
Prologue: Not Your Admissions Pamphlet Activist

In the Spring of 2015, I left my home in California to spend a week in the northeast with the intent of visiting all the colleges I had been accepted to. The goal was to make the ever so important decision of where I would spend the next four years. All these places that had previously only existed in pamphlets were now open for my exploration. Some, I discovered, were nothing like they were described and I wanted to leave the second I stepped onto the campus. I had received the “Intensely Wesleyan” pamphlet in the mail and found myself enthralled. I was eighteen years old and I had not only found my voice, but I had learned how to use it. There was (is) a lot of passion, passion that arose from anger, anger that can only arise from growing up with an intimate knowledge of injustice. Naturally, when I visited Wesleyan and saw students protesting against the occupation of Palestine, divestment from fossil fuels, and gathered with low income Wesleyan students to talk about their struggles in an institution meant for the wealthy, I was slightly frightened, but mostly excited that I found a place where my voice could manifest into something else.

The first chance I got, I joined every activist club imaginable. In a very naive, but also admirable way, I thought that I could fix all of the world’s problems if just signed up for the right number of mailing lists. Looking back on it, I was falling into all of the traps Wesleyan had put out for me, the ones I had seen in the pamphlet. The world has problems, Wesleyan told me, now use our tools to fix them. This, of course, relied on the assumption that Wesleyan was a perfect, issue-less institution, which I quickly realized couldn’t be further from the truth. What everybody seemed to be focusing on in different activist circles was the administration. It made sense to me, so I spent my first year and a half or so at Wesleyan either fighting the world or
fighting the school. I had expectations, of course. Expectations that something that I would do would bring about change. That all the meetings and protests and sleepless nights and confrontations would lead to something tangible and they never did. The first semester of my sophomore year I had a bit of a mental health crisis (or a full blown one but who’s counting?) and kind of lost all hope. I was doing so much, yet nothing was happening and it felt like nothing that I would ever do would lead to anything meaningful. If I couldn't change the world, if none of the activism I was doing ever led to results that I could see, what would I do with my life? What was my purpose if not revolution? I had made the mistake of thinking too big.

I did not come to Wesleyan with my eyes on joining the United Student Labor Coalition and being a part of student worker solidarity movements, in fact, USLAC was inactive my freshman fall semester. I pretty immediately noticed the woman who would come to my freshman dorm every morning to clean the hallways and bathrooms. I would say “Hi” to her but that was it. I was scared to speak to her in Spanish because I thought she might be offended if I did. I have family members working in the service industry and I was deeply uncomfortable with the fact that now a janitor was cleaning up after me, in a space where I lived. My sophomore year I moved into Music House and finally mustered up the courage to change my “hello” to “hola”. That’s how I met Magdalena1. Contrary to my belief that she would be offended, she seemed excited, if not a little surprised. I was one of two native Spanish speaking people in the twenty-two person house. We never talked about any labor related issues, just quick chats as I made breakfast in the morning before class.

1 Name changed
One day she stopped me in the hallway and she told me that her temporary worker contract was coming to an end. She did not know if she would be offered another position. She wanted to see if there was anything I, or any of the other residents, could do to help. Apparently, another worker had told her to ask me, because I spoke Spanish. I let the other residents know, found out the phone number of the Service Management Group² (SMG) manager at Wesleyan, and urged residents to call him and let him know how important Magdalene was to our house. Eventually, word got around to USLAC, but it was too late, Magdalena had been replaced. That Monday, I introduced myself to Lucy, the new custodial worker assigned to our house. I was worried about Magdalena and I had no way of contacting her, but I also did not want to put Lucy’s job in danger. Luckily, I ended up running into Magdalena in Bennet Hall³, where she had been offered another temporary position. As of the Fall of 2017, she is permanently employed by SMG and still works at Wesleyan. My relationship with Lucy developed in a similar manner as with Magdalena: just casual chats and we would occasionally share baked goods in the kitchen.

The next semester, I found myself at a USLAC meeting again, this time doing a class project about the role of students of color within Wesleyan leftist activism. I walked into a room of familiar faces, despite the fact that I was not a member of USLAC. I informed everyone about my project and told them that I had just come to observe, to which a group member responded: “Can you be a participant observer?” After my aforementioned crisis, I had taken a lot off of my plate, so I was determined to absolutely not involve myself in any sort of activities that USLAC was planning. Everyone went around the room sharing updates about the different happenings in the

² The company from which Wesleyan subcontracts its custodial staff.
³ An all freshman residence hall.
organization. We got around to Andrew, the point person for the custodial staff working group. He updated the group on a meeting that had taken place between the janitors and the working group, which had not gone well. Things seem to have gotten out of hand because many workers spoke over each other and the students had trouble understanding them in Spanish. Andrew was going to try for another meeting the following week. Just the short description of the meeting had evoked embarrassment— I could just imagine the disastrous results of having a group of college students with little Spanish experience attempting to communicate with janitors with varying accents and regionalisms. Before I could stop myself, I asked, “Can I go?” Andrew enthusiastically welcomed me and we set up a time to meet.

Later that week, I met up with Andrew in front of the University Organizing Center (UOC) with a bag full of Peruvian candies my mom had just sent me and we walked to the break room together. The Sun Services break room is located in the High Rise Apartment buildings and is about the size of a small walk in closet. We are let in by a worker whom I had never seen before and introductions were made. I let Andrew talk knowing that he had more information than I did, but soon got uncomfortable when I noticed the language barriers between him and the janitors. I intervened and acted as a half translator. As more workers came in, Andrew introduced them to me, always making sure to tell them my nationality. I did not expect the fact that I was a fluent Spanish speaker to of significant importance. The Hispanic population at Wesleyan isn’t huge, but I know that there is a good percentage of us out there. I noticed that when some janitors found out about my language abilities, their tone or demeanor would change slightly. Every time a new

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4 I say Hispanic as opposed to Latino to signify a Spanish speaker.
worker came in, another would immediately introduce me saying “This is Emma, she speaks Spanish.” The reactions I got were a mix of relief, excitement, and shock. Several people asked me where I was from and I told them that I was from Lima. At one point, a worker named Mariano5 walked in and I was introduced to him by Ricardo6 (another worker) as his paisana7. Mariano was from Lima too, but our differences became evident when he asked me what district I was from. “San Isidro,” I responded. He said, “Oh, that’s where the rich people live.” I asked him which district he was from and he replied with one I’d never heard of, as I had spent most of my time in Lima in middle- and upper-class districts. I appreciated this recognition because too often, immigrants are homogenized once they cross the border. His bringing of attention to our difference was not perceived by me to be hostile, instead I felt it necessary.

Astrid was one of the last people to walk in to the break room. She was the union steward and the main point of contact between Andrew and the rest of the workers. She expressed to me that she was grateful to finally have someone around who spoke Spanish and vocalized to me the problems the workers were having. Namely, it was that workers were given too much space to cover over the course of their shift, many workers reported being under incredible stress, having body aches due to the rapid pace of their jobs, and having to rush between the different buildings they were supposed to clean. While this was horrifying, it was not surprising to me. Migrant workers are often mistreated by the institutions that they work for and Wesleyan was obviously no exception.

5 Name changed.
6 Name changed
7 Countrywoman, meaning we come from the same country.
As I left the room, I felt a homey feeling. It was a similar warmth to when my extended family comes over to celebrate the advent or childhood birthday parties at the local park. It was very similar to something that I was so familiar with at home but was so strange to me at Wesleyan. It was indescribable. Almost immediately, janitors’ rights became a priority to me, despite my promise that I would take better care of myself. Turns out, this type of organizing became a crucial part of my self care. This felt different. It was solidarity like I had never experienced before.

Suddenly, it was not about an issue or an administration, it was about a person. It was about Magdalena and Lucy and Astrid along with the fifty janitorial workers on campus, many of whom I’ve had the privilege to meet over these two years. I kept coming back for that feeling. Every week, regardless of the amount of homework I have or how sleep deprived I was, I went. I would not miss it for the world. Of course, we “get things done”, but there is also a level of care and understanding that existed regardless of organizing projects.

What I am doing at Wesleyan now is so different than what I imagined when I first stepped on campus. In my youthful confusion, I was thinking too big. I was thinking that I had to change the world in order to do anything meaningful. I saw activism as completing a goal, rather than a continuous process of community building and changing perceptions. It is because of these relationships and new understandings that I chose to write this thesis.
Introduction: El Ponchador

The janitor’s break room is located in between the high rise and low rise student apartments\(^8\). It is the kind of room you would never just happen upon. In order to find it, you really have to look. It is perhaps the size of a large storage closet with most of the space taken up by a rectangular table, surrounded by several chairs. There are no windows, no sink, and the nearest public bathroom is a five-minute walk. There is a bulletin board with announcements, some small lockers, and an iris scanner where workers can clock in and out. The room is supposed to function as a space for the fifty custodians at Wesleyan, but I would be surprised if even fifteen people were able to fit comfortably in this room. It is clearly not meant to be a space where people gather. In its essence, it is unfriendly. It is consumed by Wesleyan’s campus, located far from the main buildings, and hidden away in a place that is really only frequented by juniors. There is a certain irony to the fact that the people who are responsible for cleaning the entirety of this campus are afforded this almost laughably small break room.

On most days, it does serve its exclusive function: a space where workers will come in at the beginning of their shift to clock in and at the end to clock out. Sometimes, it becomes more than that. Most workers call it *el ponchador*, signaling its primary usage: a place to *ponchar*\(^9\) when you first leave and on your way out. On a given day, the table will be filled with cakes, cookies, and drinks for someone’s going away party. Another day, you might find people airing out their frustrations about the latest union meeting. Sometimes, you can catch a group of students

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\(^8\) Campus apartments that house two or four students, usually in their junior year.

\(^9\) Spanglish form of “punch” as in, punch in and out of work.
discussing a plan of action to meet worker demands. I have been lucky enough to sit in that room when its function shifts. We leave the door open and I can see curious students turn their heads as they walk by, occasionally surprised by the break room’s existence. There is something odd about the fact that workers are willing to linger, sometimes for nearly an hour past their shift, just to sit down and talk to us. Many of the janitors have kids, other jobs, and are just generally tired, but always manage to dedicate some time to student organizers.

A lot has and can be said about the creation of revolutionary spaces within the university. Are the experiences, the conversations, and realizations being had in the break room changing the structure of the university? I don’t know. But it is a space where people can see each other differently. It is where solidarity movements between janitors and students has grown, where it is cultivated, vetted, fought over, and discussed before it is released to the rest of the world. It is where the important work getting to know each other is done. It has a life of its own: most days it serves its function, sometimes it becomes more than that. This break room is where I met most of my interlocutors for the first time. It is the place where issues are first brought to the attention of students. Devoid of frills, there is no place to hide, there is nothing left, but to see and be seen. Unlike every other space on campus, the break room is clearly dominated by the workers. During most of our visits, the students would sit quietly in a corner until Astrid walked in to tell us updates for the week. It is one of the places of campus when I find myself asking the most questions and listening the most intently.

I’ve seen so many people walk in and out of that room. Some may come in, clock out and then head home. Others linger quietly and leave in the same manner.
Some walk in singing happily about the arrival of the weekend. It is in this room, with this people, creating these possibilities where my ethnography begins. This project, along with the organizing and solidarity work I have been doing for the past two and a half years, is about janitors. But it is also about so much more.

While janitors will remain at the heart of this thesis, their experiences make important revelations about the university, students, and labor. Though the only place they can consider “theirs” in the university is this tiny room, they are responsible for cleaning an entire campus. Each building, depending on its function, carries with it a history and affect, through their labor, janitors interact with these buildings and the people who inhabit them, whether directly or indirectly. The university is structured in such a way that relationships between janitors and the people who inhabit the spaces they clean cannot easily be created. Class differences, language barriers, and scheduling limit interactions between students and janitors. However, these relationships have and continue to be formed, particularly during times of employment related turbulence. Sometimes these relationships are sometimes problematic, other times they are transformative, and they are informed by the histories of the places in which they exist. They are riddled with tension but also make room for possibility.

Literature Review

For this project, I gathered sources from three main bodies of literature: critical university studies, Marxist feminist works on labor, and social movement research particularly from anthropologists. In order to theorize the university as both a home, a workplace, and a learning environment, I turned to critical university
studies, which helped me look beyond the picturesque scenes found in university pamphlets. Though critical university studies lacked in information when it came to blue collar workers, it provided useful insight into working conditions in the university. In thinking about labor, I chose to focus on domestic labor to answer one of the central questions of my thesis: what happens when “women’s work” is taken outside of the traditional home? Using these frameworks, I could think about what differences and similarities exist between the traditional forms of domestic work and ultra-formalized and bureaucratic janitorial work. Lastly, I used social movement research to gain a perspective from which to understand both the organizing I had participated in and Wesleyan student organizing that has happened in the past.

**Neoliberalism and the University as “Home”**

In order to truly conceptualize the work that university janitors do and janitor/student solidarity movements at the university, we must contextualize the university historically and politically. First, my research seeks to deepen understandings of the residential liberal college, its history, and its mission. Foundationally, the residential college was created to provide an “academic bath” (Thwing, 1920, p. 393) for wealthy white young men, thus creating a dutiful and educated citizen. Though in recent history the university has expanded to include women, people of color, and other previously excluded groups, the goal of the residential liberal college remains the same. There is an insistence on “around the clock” learning (Chopp, Frost, and Weiss, 2013, p. 178) that ultimately create deep institutional “devotions” (Roth, 2014, p. 122) leading students to give back to the university after graduation. More recently, the university has been described as a
home (Roth 2017, Roth 2018, Brodhead 2004, p. 3). My ethnography seeks to complicate these notions, as they obscure the working people who firstly, make the space home like for students, and secondly, are not experiencing the university as anything resembling a home. In the same vain that I write against the university as home, I am also writing against an imagined university community, which similarly romanticizes the university and only serves hides power relationships that exist within it.

Critical university scholars, such as Marc Bousquet (2008), the EDUFactory Collective (2009), Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira (2014), Joshua Barkan (2013), and Henry Giroux (2014), have written extensively about the neoliberalization and corporatization of the university. This shift in the university is a direct result of the flexibilization of the global economy. Though neoliberalism has certainly changed the university, these changes are simply different iterations of centuries old principles. Bousquet, Giroux, Maira, Chatterjee, and others tend focus their work on professors and students. Bousquet writes extensively about contingent faculty and the lack of tenure track positions that keep professors in unstable financial positions. Maira, Chatterjee, and Giroux write about growing links between the university, the state, and the military, along with expanding censorship and surveillance.

While all of these works have made important revelations about the university, they tend to stray from mentioning blue collar workers, who are largely doing physical labor. Though there has been a lot written about student activism with janitors in the university (White and Hauck 2000, Albright 2008), they focus more on the historical and political aspects of student worker solidarity movements rather than the affective and personal side. Peter Magolda’s book The Lives of Campus
Custodians (2016) does delve into custodians in a more personal manner, however, did not cover activism on campus. This book tends to highlight exceptional moments in janitors’ lives, and though I believe every janitor featured in this janitor is exceptional, my ethnography focuses not only on the subversive, shocking moments of janitors’ work experience, but also moments they consider to be a part of their every day.

“Women’s Work” in a Masculine Space

Janitorial work defies categorization. There have been many ways in which what we think of as “women’s work” has been theorized. Domestic labor, care work, emotional labor, and intimate labor have all been used to describe activities such as child rearing, cleaning, cooking, and other tasks required in the upkeep of the feminine space of the home. A central question of my project is: what does reproductive labor look like in the hypermasculine space of the university? In addition, how do the workers experience reproductive labor in this particular space?

As the neoliberalization of the university is part of a historical continuation of exclusivity, the positionality of janitors on campus is also part of a specific history. In affluent American households, this reproductive labor has often been delegated to a person outside of the family. In early American history, it was not uncommon to have the bulk of these duties carried out by enslaved black women. Once slavery was legalized, domestic workers, typically underpaid women of color, were responsible for these duties. In the present day, through globalization and the increased amount of women in the workforce, domestic work in America is largely carried out by migrant women (Glenn 1992, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2014). My
project will add to this historical continuation, highlighting the university’s ongoing
dependence on the exploitation of black and brown bodies, as well as the continued
marginalization of reproductive labor.

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo’s *Doméstica* and Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez’s *Migration, Domestic Work, and Affect* were deeply influential to my
work. In *Doméstica*, Hondagneu-Sotelo writes about domestic workers in Los
Angeles, who are largely hired informally and working with specific families
conducting cleaning and childcare tasks. Hondagneu-Sotelo makes valuable historical
connections between the dynamics of working man and housewife and the female
head of household and domestic worker (2001). Though the increase of women of the
workforce has changed the people who occupy these roles, the power dynamics
largely remain the same. Both Gutiérrez-Rodríguez and Hondagneu-Sotelo speak of
the obscuring of labor relationships by the people who hire domestic workers
informally. Because of the intimacy that exist between domestic workers and their
employers, employers feel uncomfortable describing their employees as such, and call
them instead “part of the family” or “extra help”. Though not exactly the same, this is
also common in notions of community that exist at Wesleyan.

Scholars who have studied domestic work have largely written of its
informality as potential site for exploitation and a factor in the creation of intimate
relationships between employers and employees (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010,
Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001.) Janitorial work in the university is incredibly formalized, as
it is regulated by bureaucracies of the university, the subcontracting corporation, and
the union. Despite this regulation, both exploitation and emotion persist, though they
take on different forms. While janitors have fewer face to face interactions with
students than a domestic worker might have with her employer, janitors still interact with spaces that contain affect Gutierrez-Rodriguez argues that domestic work is affective labor, writing “when a domestic worker enters a household, she immediately becomes part of a network of energetic and affective relations. Her presence bears social suffering, as well as individual yearnings, hopes, and joy” (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010, p. 28). In a similar way, university janitors have affective experiences in the spaces they clean and can form relationships with the people who inhabit a certain space without necessarily having face to face interactions. Additionally, as I will describe in a later chapter, it is sometimes the lack of interaction that leads to affect.

Social Movement Research

This project demanded that I both researched histories of custodial worker activism at Wesleyan and reflected on my own experiences with organizing. In order to successfully do this, I was guided by several social movement scholars, many of them anthropologists who both conducted research on activist movements and were part of these movements themselves. I read Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish’s book *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* prior to starting my fieldwork and it served as guidebook of sorts. Haiven and Khasnabish write: “This book, then, sees research not as a foreign presence within social movements, but as an important part of the way social movements reproduce themselves” (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, p. 2). I see my research as a crucial part of creating a lasting institutional memories and archiving student social movements. This is an act of not just organizing, but dwelling in the organizing one does. My
intimate involvement with organizing was not a hindrance to my research, rather it enhanced it.

An important part of my research was not only uncovering recent histories of student-janitor solidarity movements, but being able to look at them critically. As a researcher, I have the privilege of being able to remove myself temporally from these movements. I know too well that in the heat of tense organizing movements, one does not necessarily have the time or space to be meticulous, leading to mistakes. There are moments in my work where I will be critical of the student activists who came before me. I do this not to negate their work, but as a way of continuing their progress. Feminist and historian Linda Gordon writes “We need to celebrate our activist parents—but even before that, we need to recognize ourselves as their children. As for kids today, parental love and respect does not mean being uncritical. Celebratory, official biographies may have their place but the greater tribute is to take our parents seriously enough to engage with them, to treat their ideas and strategies as living parts of our inheritance” (Gordon 2002, pp. 103-104). I can only hope that future student activists will be critical of the work that current students are doing, as having this critical eye only improves movements. My project is also part of a greater tradition of documenting student solidarity movements with workers (Cravey 2004, Curnow and Wilson 2013, Student/Farmworker Alliance 2010). Though college students are often very disconnected with the struggles of the working class, their privilege as students and their positionality within a university can be weaponized to create better environments for workers on campus and around the world.

Lastly, though I am writing against the concept of a university community, I am writing for the creation of activist communities. In fact, what is often most radical
about movement is not necessarily what is accomplished, rather the creation of new relationships based in counter-hegemonic understandings. Much of the work of social movements, whether successful or not, is the creation of new ways of relating that exist outside of the systems that one organizes against. Haiven and Khasnabish consider this to be part of the radical imagination, writing “We approach the radical imagination not as a thing that individuals possess in greater or lesser quantities but as a collective process, something that groups do and do together” (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, p. 4). This imagination makes room for mistakes and disagreements but assumes an essential common understanding. Though our institutions and methods are far from perfect, as social movement researchers and activists, we can return to common understandings and imaginations in moments of tension, disagreements, and even failure.

Methods

My three main research methods for this thesis were interviews, participant observation, and archival work. I conducted formal interviews with eight janitors over the months of September and August 2018. The location of these interviews varied from campus dining halls, to homes, Peruvian restaurants, and large performance halls. I found my interviewees by reaching out to janitors I already had relationships with and posting my phone number in the break room asking workers to reach out. I explained my project to each worker thoroughly and though the questions were similar from janitor to janitor, I would occasionally change a question or two if I wanted to know about a janitor’s specific knowledge. When I interviewed janitors I always asked basic informational questions like when they started working as janitors
at Wesleyan and if they were immigrants, when they moved to the United States. I wanted to know what jobs they had, if any, prior to becoming janitors. This question would often lead to me asking what the transition was between their former job and their current one. I would usually start by asking more general questions about their lives, and then move on to talking about their experiences with work, such as which areas they had cleaned, how they felt about the companies, the school, or the union, and if they interacted with students, staff, and faculty. If a janitor was involved in activism, we would discuss how and why.

I also interviewed two union officials: Gabriel Acosta, who is the union representative for Service Employees International Union Local (SEIU) 32BJ in Hartford, and Franklin Soults, who is the Associate Communications Director for SEIU Local 32BJ for Connecticut and the Hudson Valley. My interview with Gabriel mainly served the purpose of understanding the union better, as at that point I was confused as to what purposes they served. I also asked him some questions about his journey to becoming a union representative and his family, particularly his brother Francisco, who is one of the janitors I interviewed for this project. I met Franklin when the union collaborated with Wesleyan students to stop Francisco’s deportation. I asked him about his role in the union, his role in organizing for Francisco, and the status of SEIU and labor unions in the current political climate.

In order to gather information about prior student/janitor solidarity movements, I interviewed two students. One of the first people I talked to about this project was Manuel Rosaldo who graduated Wesleyan in 2003. I spoke to Manuel about why and how he came to organize with janitors, what his relationship to janitors was like, and his own thesis, which had been about a janitor at Wesleyan.
Though he had been involved in the Justice for Janitors movement, he had not been one of the main organizers. Manuel provided me with plenty of information about the English as a Second Language program for janitors, which he founded. I had a brief but informative conversation with Olivia deBree, who graduated in 2001. Though I would not consider this an interview, she provided me with more information on the Justice for Janitors movement at Wesleyan and the janitors’ process of unionization.

In addition to interviewing two former students, I conducted archival research in the Argus, both looking through their physical copies in the library and their available online sources. The Argus, while not always representative of the student body’s interest, is still the main university newspaper and is supposed to cover campus’s most important happenings. It is completely possible that there were workers rights related events that were not covered by the Argus, and thus did not make it into this project. For information regarding the Justice for Janitors protests that took place in the 1999-2000 academic year, I searched through the physical records of the Argus found in Olin Library. I combed through ever Argus from that year searching for any article that mentioned janitors, USLAC, or unions. It is completely possible that I could have missed some articles, but I believe my findings are more or less comprehensive. I was able to find most of the articles covering events that took place after Justice for Janitors online on the Argus’s website. There is a possibility that either a) some articles were not posted online or b) there were online but I was unable to find them.

Lastly, the bulk of my ethnographic research falls into the category of activist anthropology, some of which occurred prior to my thesis research and some of which occurred after. Because my involvement with custodians started before my thesis and
continues even as I am writing this, there are not clear lines between the beginning and end of my research. My participant observation from the past is based largely on my memory with some additional reinforcements from news stories from the Argus and other publications. During participant observation, I was first and foremost at event as an organizer and secondly as a researcher. Participant observation took place during rallies, protests, and meetings with both custodians and students. For this project I observed and participated in weekly meetings with janitors, several potlucks and social events, and mundane interactions with and between janitors. In terms of organizing, this thesis contains fieldwork from the “Keep Francisco Home” movement which took place in December of 2019 and the “Justice for Maria and Janitors at Wesleyan” movement that occurred between October and December 2018. The “Five More Workers” movement was an offshoot of the Maria campaign and is ongoing, though I touch on it in my epilogue.

My interviews with Francisco, Gabriel, Lucy, Astrid, Sandra, Diana, Roberta, and Gloria and a lot of my participant observation, took place in Spanish. A large majority of the janitors speak Spanish as their first language and I knew that the bulk of my fieldwork would be in Spanish going into this project. My first language is Spanish and I am very comfortable conducting interviews with other Spanish speakers. I translated most Spanish interactions to English. I am not a professional translator, nor do I have any training in translation. I chose to translate in a way that stayed the most true to what a person was trying to get across, which sometimes lead to awkward sentence structures or wording in English, but make sense in Spanish. Occasionally, I felt as if a full English translation did not do it justice and included the original Spanish quote, but translated it in a footnote.
Chapter Summary

Chapter one is mostly based in interviews conducted with custodians. I begin this chapter by conceptualizing the university as a space with the concept of reproductive labor. These two ideas complicate each other, as the university tends to be an incredibly formal and masculine space, while reproductive labor is considered informal and emotional. Several histories are an important part of this narrative: the colonial history of the university, the recent neoliberalization of the university, and historically gendered and racialized roles that decide who does reproductive labor and when. Once I establish a theoretical background, I will present my findings from the interviews I conducted with campus custodians who were employed by the university at the time that I conducted research. I will highlight commonalities and differences between janitors and how these trends are affected by general historical trends as well as personal histories. While this chapter will make revelations about cleaning labor, it also opens up many questions about workers’ relationships to the student body. In many ways, solidarity between workers and students seems unlikely.

Chapter two historically tracks this unlikely partnership, beginning with the Justice for Janitors movement that occurred between 1999 and 2000 and concluding in 2013. This chapter, mostly based in archival research and supplemented by interviews, provides a critical analysis of student worker relationships through activism. I begin by comparing the Justice for Janitors movement at Wesleyan with the Justice for Janitors movement across America. In many ways, these two movements, despite fighting for similar causes, were incredibly different. These differences make interesting revelations about how an organizer’s positionality
affects their ability to get results, as well as the backlash they receive. The central question of this chapter is: how do two groups with seemingly separate interests find ways to collaborate within an institution as fraught at Wesleyan? What problems does this institution and these positionalities create? On the other hand, what possibilities are created through this collaboration? The history of student-janitor solidarity activism at Wesleyan is somewhat a history of unexpected results, which I will highlight throughout the chapter, as I follow instances with English as a Second Language classes, abusive managers, new subcontractors, and excessive workloads. Temporally, chapter two ends shortly before my arrival at Wesleyan.

Chapter three is largely autoethnographic and centers my own experiences with activism. It brings in concepts from the two earlier chapters: I am conceptualizing my own positionality within a Wesleyan activist legacy and unpacking my affective relationships to the work I do and the people I do it with. Part handbook, part journal, this chapter is both an exercise in dwelling in my own experiences as it is an incomplete guide for future campus activists. In this chapter, I follow in the footsteps of social movement scholars in viewing organizing as more than protests and visible actions, and document the months of trust and community building efforts that have to take place in order for mobilizing to happen. The notion of community has been a thread throughout my thesis and in this chapter, I will be revealing the sense of community I have felt as a student activist and how that differs from the notions of community established in the mainstream depictions of the university,
Chapter 1: Home, for Whom?

Gloria describes Wesleyan students as her “pollitos”\(^\text{10}\). I can’t help but smile at her characterization, as I’m sure most students, myself included, stepped foot on this campus completely believing that we were independent adults. She sits across from me at a Peruvian restaurant in Hartford, CT, where she has treated me to an incredible dinner of traditional pollo a la brasa\(^\text{11}\). She’s there with her friend Norma. Both of them are from the northern part of Perú, whereas I am a Limeña through and through, and it shows. What was most surprising about Gloria’s description of students was not that she still saw us as children, but that this characterization came only a few minutes after Gloria described her unreasonable workload. She used to work Sunday through Thursday. On Sundays, she would take out the trash from twelve dorm buildings. The remainder of the day, she would spend cleaning three dorm buildings, one dining hall, and the student grocery store. Now, she cleans a large dorm building (Clarke Hall) and one third of Olin Library. She holds no resentment for students, despite their messes. She told me, “When I talked to my compañeras\(^\text{12}\), they would tell me that their mothers did not teach them, that they are cochinos\(^\text{13}\), that they’re this, that they’re that. I would tell them “Thanks to the fact that they’re dirty, we have a job”. Yes. It is just the truth. If they were clean, we wouldn’t be here.”

Though many workers would not thank students for their messes, in my time as organizer, very few custodians have made complaints about students. In fact,

\(^{10}\) Little chicken, in Spanish.  
\(^{11}\) Peruvian rotisserie chicken.  
\(^{12}\) Coworkers (feminine)  
\(^{13}\) Dirty
despite many of their heavy workloads, there is a certain level of care and responsibility certain workers feel towards students. In the face of differences in language, schedules that hardly overlap, and the fact that students and workers belong to different institutions, workers develop relationships with students and with the spaces they clean. Wesleyan university is a specific kind of place, but it also contains a multitude of places with varying functions and all of these places are immersed in the university’s complex history and ideology. It is within and in between these multitudes that we can begin to understand custodial labor at Wesleyan.

**Intensely Wesleyan: the university as a Domestic Space**

Wesleyan latest pamphlet is bright red in color and its layout is frankly confusing, but it contains one key phrase not found anywhere in the older version. “Welcome home” it says. For me, coming to college was an attempt to get as far away from home as possible. When my friends and I talk about leaving campus for break, we frequently refer to it as “going home”. But the relationship to home that exists on a residential college campus is complex. Many students spend more time on campus that they do at home, yet it lacks the feeling and comfort home does for many. Perhaps it is that it functions as multiplicity of spaces, from academic to social to domestic to professional, or maybe it is the ever changing nature of the University as students graduate and new ones enroll, classes change, and living arrangements get switched around. Regardless, it cannot be said that the university is an exclusively academic space.

“Round the Clock Learning” at the Liberal Arts College
Domestic rhetoric is not exclusive to Wesleyan. In his opening remarks to the Yale class of 1994 (also titled “Welcome Home”) the Dean of Yale College Richard H. Brodhead states: “It [home] is in essence a defensive structure, something contrived to shield us from things we would otherwise be all too obviously exposed to—vulnerability, loneliness, alienness, and the rest. So a home is in the deep sense of the word a security system: a world of belongingness thrown up against a larger world of exposure and strangeness” He goes on to say “In the deepest sincerity I say to you, Please make yourself at home here; and with equal but countervailing earnestness, Please: as you do so, don’t be too addicted to the self-limiting pleasures of security” (Brodhead 2004). The message here is clear: do not get too comfortable at college. Brodhead defines a home, acknowledges that the university should not fit that categorization, but continues to urge students to think of Yale as a home, if not an overly comfortable one. While these remarks seem contradictory, they aptly describe the trouble with the residential college: it does not neatly fit into either category: home or workplace.

The residential college has a long and complex history. Originally modeled after residential colleges at Oxford University, most colleges, including Wesleyan, were created exclusively to educate wealthy white males (Lang 2000). The purpose of the residential college was to educate the whole person. George S. Blimling, in his book Student Learning in College Residence Halls, writes: “Under this model, college was the place where young men (in the early years only men went to college) not only learned Latin, Greek, mathematics, philosophy, and religion but also developed character and learned values, manners, and deportment (conduct) of a gentleman” (Blimling 2014, p. 55). The residential experience was a core part of this
development, as it allowed the University to exercise more control over the student. Charles Thwing, former President of Case Western University, stated that the university created more opportunities for academic learning: “The community is academic and of it he is an individual part. . . . His talk, his fun, his tricks, his friendships, are all academic; he takes the academic bath. The worth of such absorption is great. At the altars of good fellowship and of opportunity, as well as at the shrine of scholarship, it is worthwhile to burn incense” (Thwing 1915, p. 23).

An important aspect of educating the whole student was instilling ideas of good citizenship and morality. Alexander Meiklejohn called the liberal university “a relatively safe place for a boy when he first leaves home; on the whole it may improve a student’s manners; it gives an acquaintance with lofty ideals of character, preaches the doctrine of social service, exalts the virtues and duties of citizenship” (Meiklejohn 1915, p 32). Residential colleges did decline in popularity in the mid-19th century, but later became popular again due to an increase in the number of women attending college, as unmarried women had more trouble acquiring independent housing and there was a need for greater social control of women’s morality (Blimling 2015). Though the modern university is less publicly dependent on the idea of citizenship, one can see these same “doctrines” in civic engagement and social entrepreneurship programs.

Though more than a century since the establishment of liberal arts colleges in America, many of the values of the residential experience remain the same. Just like many of the university presidents that came before him, Michael Roth, Wesleyan University’s current president, writes “The residential collegiate experience has attracted enormous devotion from students and alumni… This devotion would
become increasingly important to colleges and universities whose growth would depend on donations from alumni” (Roth 2014, p 74). This link between a residential college experience and a “devotion” to the University is reflected by George Blimling (Blimling 2015). The university is dependent to this devotion for fundraising efforts and publicity from well-known alumni, tying together an affective claim with the institution’s financial mission.

Another function that the residential liberal university continues to serve is its function as a transition between childhood and adulthood. Rebecca Chopp, Susan Frost, and Daniel H. Weiss, in their book Remaking College: Innovation and the Liberal Arts, describe college as a “rainbow bridge” that connects the two worlds of adolescence and adulthood. Incoming students are “not wholly formed, but not wholly unformed” and it is the job of the university to help them complete that formation. Much like Thwing’s “academic bath”, Chopp, Frost, and Weiss list “around the clock learning” (Chopp, Frost, and Weiss 2013, p. 93) as a key facet of the modern liberal arts college. This fosters a feeling similar to that of “home”, a place where one is shaped to have a particular outlook influenced by those around them.

Making and Unmakings of Home

Cultural geography scholars have yet to come up with a solid definition of home, but all agree that it is both physical and imaginary (Brickell 2012), both a goal and a reality (Moore 2000). Both Brickell and Moore connect the romantic idea of the home to middle class western values meaning that imagining the home as warm and comfortable is largely inaccessible, and to many, particularly in a gendered context,
the home can be a restrictive space. The ideal home is made up of memories, it is a place to return to, it is private and intimate, and provides an escape from the rest of the world (Brickell 2012, Janning and Volk 2016, Kenyon 1999, Moore 2000).

Sociologists Michelle Janning and Maya Volk have conducted studies of students’ perceptions of home at residential colleges in the United Kingdom. Their studies found that in students’ imaginaries, there were three distinct home-like spaces: the pre-college home, the college residence, and the post-college imagined home. Students’ perception mirrored Chopp, Frost, and Weiss’s “rainbow bridge” analogy, in which a university residence was considered a transitional space due to its lack of permanence and family structure. Some students marked their parent’s home as more home-like because of their past memories attached to the location, but also the potential to return. In addition, students who chose to live off campus considered these spaces more home-like than both their pre-college homes and their college dwellings (Janning and Volk 2016). It must be noted, however, that living off campus is not an option at Wesleyan University. One key difference between Kenyon’s and Volk and Janning’s works were “future home” conceptions. In the UK in the late nineties, students associated their future living spaces with home, comfort, stability, and the like, whereas students in the US in 2016 considered their post college homes to be less permanent and more like another stepping stone on the road to adulthood, due to the increasing precarity in the job market.

If home is seen as a fixture with a certain amount of permanence and an escape that keeps one secure from the outside world, can the modern residential liberal arts college be called a home? If so, for whom? If we consider home to be a place of escape or haven, then the liberal arts college cannot fit into this definition, as
the whole purpose of the residential liberal arts college is a constant academic
experience, where any place can become a place of learning. Temporally, college has
a clear beginning and end; the main goal of Wesleyan is to get most students in and
out within four years. Ideas of comfort and intimacy can vary among college students,
given their class status, race, gender, sexuality, and whether or not they are first
generation college students (Bliming 2015, Chopp, Frost, and White 2013). The idea
of “home” persists as an important marketing tool for Wesleyan and similar schools.
For this reason, I begin with an analysis and critique of the university as I turn to
seeing the university from a non-student perspective.

Both Wesleyan’s pamphlet and Broadhead’s speech are addressing
exclusively students, who will presumably call their campuses home during their time
as students. However, much like the idea of “home” itself, the university as home an
imaginary. The reality, both for students and employees of the university, is much
more fraught.

**Corporatizing the Classroom**

In recent years, the academic field of critical university studies has emerged,
which addresses the increasing corporatization and neoliberalization of the university.
Many scholars in critical university studies refer to the new university as corporate or
factory-like (Barkan 2013, Giroux 2014, The Edufactory Collective 2009). However,
before I begin to discuss the ways in which the university has become increasingly
corporate, it must be noted that the American university has always been a
problematic institution founded upon and invested in colonialism, slavery,
imperialism, and violent nationalism (Wildner 2013, Ferguson 2012) and that the
problems the university faces today are not new, rather they are new manifestations of principles that the university has always held. As Blimling pointed out, residential colleges were created to educate white males and make them into model citizens (2015). Wesleyan is no exception.

The university has followed global economic trends of flexibilization, meaning a shift towards instability and precarity in order to prepare for a world where what is most profitable changes quickly (Belous 1989, Bousquet 2009). In addition to this, universities have become increasingly intertwined with the military and corporate world (Chatterjee and Maira 2014), taking large grants from these institutions, partially due to the lack of public funding. In exchange for this funding, universities respond to the needs of the military and companies by providing courses and more funding to departments that benefit these institutions.

This trend has impacted most universities, including our own. In 2017, Michael Roth announced that Wesleyan University would be investing more than three million dollars in affirmative action for conservative thinking to encourage a more diverse learning environment. This included hiring a retired military officer to teach a course and providing money to bring conservative speakers to campus (Roth 2017). This came as a surprise to many students, as Wesleyan was still facing backlash over its decision to switch from need blind to need aware admissions policy and the impending closure of the Green Street Center, a music and arts after school program for local children run by Wesleyan students (Beals 2017). This decision made clear where Wesleyan’s priorities, and money, lie.

*Navigating diversity*
Though the university has never been a beacon for accessibility, in recent years and despite many advances in educational reform that have greatly increased the presence of marginalized groups in the university, a college education has become increasingly inaccessible. The cost of education has risen at both public and private universities leading students to have to take out outrageous amounts of loans in order to obtain a degree with no promise of the ability to pay it back (Bousquet 2009, Giroux 2014). The effects of rising cost is evident at Wesleyan, where the wealth inequality among students is greater than wealth inequality in America. A 2017 study conducted by the New York Times found that 70% of Wesleyan students come from families whose income is in the top 20 percent (Gregor Aisch 2017). If home is described as a space of comfort and security, Wesleyan cannot claim itself to be a home, especially in the face of mounting student debt and unstable job markets.

Wesleyan’s latest “Welcome Home” pamphlet pamphlet it quite different from the one I had received when I was a prospective student, entitled “Intensely Wesleyan”. Upon opening the pamphlet, you immediately encounter a sentence structure that will reoccur twelve times in the thirty one page pamphlet. “What’s so Wes are students who get involved in in stem cell research, software development, writing fiction, or all three”. From blank to blank. Laundry lists of radically opposing interests with the purpose of proving how Wesleyan students thrive in multiple fields. The ideal Wesleyan student is not simply excelling in their area of study, they excel in various disciplines, extracurriculars, and jobs, especially unrelated ones.“From choreography to volcanology”, “from academia and medicine to film and television”, “from playing chamber music to hypothesizing about wave dynamics”. This ideal
Wesleyan student is made for the flexible economy. She has a wide variety of skills and is always ready to meet the ever changing demands of the market.

Wesleyan will also attempt to market its activist reputation, with a page in the pamphlet reading “as the business world turns toward rewarding social entrepreneurs - those who earn a profit to the benefit of those less well off rather than at their expense - Wesleyan’s resources have grown to support the entrepreneurs in our midst”. Every interest the ideal Wesleyan student has is at its core about profit and recognition. After all, if a Wesleyan alum achieves success in their field, Wesleyan will reap the benefits, both monetarily and in reputation. This kind of “social entrepreneurship” is of a piece with the kind of moral education traditionally with residential liberal arts college. As I will get into in a later chapter, this representation of activism as a profit venture completely devoids this kind of work from emotion.

Though Wesleyan is attempting to brand itself as a home, it’s earlier descriptions of residential life seem more methodical than home-like. This section, titled “Residential” with the subtitle “Model Housing”, is rife with common evocations of independence and growth. Living at Wesleyan is an “experience”. Wesleyan’s depictions of residential life do not contain any sense of the coziness and comfort of home, rather it seems like a four year long training session. The idea of “around the clock learning” is persistent in this section. Residential facilities are not meant to act as a “haven” from the rest of the university and are instead part of the college experience. The factory analogy can be applied here, as students (or future alumni) are constantly in the process of being produced.

While residential environments are not fully differentiated from the rest of the University, there is a dichotomy of places presented in this pamphlet: Wesleyan and
the rest of the world. Middletown is rarely mentioned in either pamphlet, and when it is acknowledged, it is referred to as a “neighbor”. Throughout the pamphlet, images are evoked of Wesleyan creating a certain type of student and then releasing her into the world, as if Wesleyan exists separately and students are not affected by the worlds in which they live in. That certain type of student is entrepreneurial, independent, flexible: the “academic bath” of campus life provides enough of the security of “home” to help students transition into moral adults and global citizens who will always recall their college years fondly and with great nostalgia (ideally translating into alumni donations) Welcome home, to Wesleyan- these representations mark Wesleyan as a home like space, in the sense that it is supposed to exist as a sort of shelter from the rest of the world.

*Campus as a workplace*

Of course, it will come as no surprise that pamphlet representations of the university are not reality. But particularly for employees of the university, the campus experience is completely different, and their experiences are actively obscured by such representations, which too often become taken-for-granted by students, even those critical of campus life and administrative agendas.

Critical university studies scholars have focused on the problems facing faculty in the new university: a prevalence of contingent faculty, the increase of labor for faculty, and a decrease in pay. Whereas in the past, 75% of all university faculty where on tenure track, now that same number of faculty are part time or visiting (Bousquet 2008). The increase of contingent faculty is due in part to the flexibilization of university (as) economy. Keeping faculty in a precarious
employment states allows university administrations to fire and hire new faculty quite easily as market demands (and student interests) change. This is also a cost saving method for the university, as universities often do not pay for insurance, pension, or other benefits to part time and visiting faculty. For these contingent workers, the university is far from a home, as there is no continuity or comfort in their employment. This particularly affects faculty from marginalized groups, especially with the existence of diversity politics in the university. Faculty of color often serve as mentors to students of color and take on the additional unpaid roles of serving on administrative committees (Musser 2015). In addition, faculty are increasingly surveilled and censored, unable to teach topics that go against corporate and military interests of the university’s funders (Chatterjee and Maira 2014).

There is less scholarly work on how the changing backdrop of flexibilization in the new, neoliberal university has impacted janitors, who are not in faculty or administrative roles. Yet the move towards flexibilization deeply affects janitors, whom, as manual laborers with no “formal training”, are already undervalued in the masculine and academic space that is the university. In 1989, Wesleyan began to subcontract cleaning services to a corporation called Initial. Subcontracting is a practice that involves an institution (in this case Wesleyan) hiring a company to manage a service. Wesleyan benefits greatly from subcontracting, as it saves the university money as subcontracted workers are not paid as much as or offered the same benefits as those directly employed by the university. (Belous 1989, Zlolniski 2006).

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14 From the Wesleyan Archives
Subcontracting also allows for the university to distance itself from the workers, so that it can easily shift the blame when violations of workers’ rights take place. Because custodians are not technically Wesleyan employees, when they have problems they do not report them to the university, they report them to the subcontracting corporation. Over the years, the company that hires Wesleyan janitors has changed several times. During my time at Wesleyan, janitors have been managed by Sun Services, which recently changed its name to Service Management Group (SMG). As of 2000, janitors at Wesleyan are represented by the Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ. Both of these institutions mainly deal with janitors who clean office buildings, and as I have made evident, the space of the university is complex and serves a variety of functions. This thesis seeks to contextualize janitorial work within the university at the current moment, as an increasingly corporate and precarious institution.

To do so, I will introduce the stories of four janitors who I interviewed: Francisco, Astrid, Sandra, and Diana. Prior to the start of the project I had a generally friendly relationship with all four of these janitors, though we have grown in closeness as the school year has progressed. All four janitors are immigrants from Colombia. In the following sections, I will affect theory in order to reveal they ways in which janitors interact with the spaces they clean. These stories are riddled with contradictions, insightful truths, and revelations about what we can learn when examine the mundane.

"{\textit{Esto no es lo mio}}^{15}$: Janitors’ Stories

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$^{15}$  This is not what’s mine
Francisco, Behind the Uniform

Francisco was a teacher when he lived in Colombia, but you could probably tell that after spending a short amount of time with him. Though I considered us to have a close relationship, this is the first time we had really sat down and had a conversation in relatively calm circumstances. I had gotten to know him through the worst possible situation: he had been given a deportation order and I was heavily involved in organizing against his deportation. I will elaborate on this successful organizing campaign in chapter three. The last time I had seen Francisco was in December of 2017, before I left for my semester abroad, and his immigration status was still up in the air. As of the day I sat with him to interview him for the first time, in August of 2018, he had been given a stay of deportation until January 2018\(^\text{16}\). Francisco responded incredibly enthusiastically when I asked him to be a part of my thesis project. He felt indebted to me, he told me over the phone when I called him. Now that I know him better, I sense that his excitement from my project came from his passion for teaching and learning.

Francisco greeted me at around 9 AM in the lobby of the Exley Science Center, where he works. Each week, he cleans the Science Library, the Exley lobby, and the fifth floor offices. The first thing I did is I asked him to show me the letter was that informed him that he had won the Peter Morgenstern Clarren ’03 prize\(^\text{17}\). A

\(^{16}\) As of April 10th, 2019, Francisco has been given a stay of deportation until July 2019. Immigrations and Customs enforcement have consistently given him six month stays since his original deportation proceedings.

\(^{17}\) “The Peter Morgenstern-Clarren ’03 Social Justice Award was created in memory of Peter Morgenstern-Clarren who pursued social justice while a student at Wesleyan. His activism included securing benefits for Wesleyan custodial staff, participating in the United Student and Labor Action Committee, and contributing his leadership to the campus chapter of Amnesty International. We are grateful to Dr. Hadley Morgenstern-Clarren and The Honorable Pat Morgenstern-Clarren for their
handful of students had nominated him, myself included, thinking that the cash prize would be especially beneficial to him, as he had legal fees to cover. The letter was hung up in on a bulletin board towards the back of the Science Library and had been placed there by the librarians. The aspect of being nominated for this award Francisco was most grateful for was not the cash prize, rather it was the recognition he was getting from his workplace. He explained to me that this would be beneficial in building his asylum petition because it demonstrated his capacities as a worker and established him as valuable within the university community.

After showing me the letter, he led me to a table near the back corner of the Science Library. He had told me that he wanted me to come in on Fridays because during the summer the administrative staff only worked half days and his workload tended to be lighter. It was clear that, despite receiving a prize for his labor, Francisco knew that he could be reprimanded at any moment by other library employees. I was surprised when Francisco pulled out a list of questions for me and a notepad, even though I shouldn’t have been. Through his whole deportation process, he was always thoroughly prepared. “Before you interview me,” he said “I want to interview you”. The tables had turned and, frankly, I was uncomfortable. I expected him to ask me a few questions about my project, sure, but to be interviewed felt strange. I was getting a taste of my own anthropological medicine. The deeply rooted hierarchies between janitor and student and anthropologist and participant became apparent, and I noticed I was playing into the student centrality of Wesleyan’s admissions rhetoric. Despite

_generosity in sponsoring this award that honors their son’s activism for the public good. A committee will select the sophomore or junior who best embodies the pursuit of social justice. The winner will receive a cash award of $1,500.” (Wesleyan University Office of Equity and Inclusion)_;
considering myself to be a reflexive anthropologist, I took Francisco’s passivity for

granted.

He first asked me what the parameters of my thesis were, basically what I was
trying to prove. I gave him a quick summary of what I had researched so far: the
university, neoliberalism, and labor. Francisco was fascinated by my project,
especially after I told him about my theoretical questions. He told me that when he
used to teach, a popular saying in Colombia was “Educate boys so you do not have to
punish men”. Francisco started talking to me about his background as a science
teacher in Colombia, which he now used as a tool in getting to know students.
Francisco would pick out the Spanish speaking students and would impress them with
a scientific fact, like how he knew the periodic table by memory. Students would then
recognize him as someone they could turn to for help on their assignments. Once he
got to know the Spanish speaking students, he could communicate with non-Spanish
speaking students through them.

As we were walking through the science center, Francisco pointed to the logo
on his shirt. “I want people to know that there is a person behind this uniform. You
know, just because we clean garbage, doesn’t mean we are garbage.” I personally
could not conceptualize thinking that a janitor was dirty because of their proximity to
trash or to deny someone their humanity because of their uniform, but Francisco
obviously knew his job better than I did, and knew that especially at a place like
Wesleyan assumptions would be made about him. Perhaps that is why he chooses to
go out of his way to teach students, to establish himself as more than a custodian and
to align himself with something other than garbage. Francisco has a unique
perspective, as he now does cleaning in a building that is very close to his former
profession. I asked Francisco what the transition was like from being a teacher to being a custodian, seeing as teaching was one of his clear passions. “I don’t think about it”, he told me, “As soon as I clock into work, I can’t think about that, or I wouldn’t be able to do my job.” Though the Science Center may not be a domestic space or a particularly emotional one, Francisco’s work carries an affective burden due to his personal history. In some ways, this history is advantageous at times, but his feelings of loss, respect, and pride, must also be managed.

Francisco also talked to me about the respect he gets from staff and faculty around the science center. “Why do you think that is, Emma?” I replied, “Probably because they’ve seen you in the newspapers”. “Yes,” he said, “That, and the fact that they know I have an education, with the little English I know I tell them, “I was a teacher in my country.” Some of these people, before, they never even greeted me. Now, they see me and they say ‘Hi, Francisco, how are you?’” Immediately, I thought about how these newly formed interactions are shaped by the hierarchies within the university. From what Francisco was describing, staff members respected him more when they viewed him as more than ‘just’ a janitor. In a way, he was like them, except he was born into a dangerous political situation that altered his path forever. They could relate to him and in some ways see him as an equal, thus erasing some of the class related discomfort that comes with having a janitor clean up after you. In other ways, I thought, this might be a source of tension or guilt among staff members, who realize that their privilege of being born in a politically stable country led them to where they are today. Francisco’s story somewhat fell into popular movie tropes of the surprisingly wise janitor who shatters expectations. I wonder, does a janitor need to have professional academic training in order to receive this recognition or respect?
Regardless, Francisco was proud of these relationships and beamed whilst telling me countless stories of teaching moments he had with staff and students.

Francisco then took me to the fifth floor of the science center. Fridays, as it happened, were usually light in terms of workload and it was especially easy because it was the summer and fewer students were around. As I walked with him, I noticed most of the trash cans were completely empty and very little needed to be cleaned. He began to introduce me to different staff members he knew. Apparently, Francisco had become a Spanish teacher to many staff and professors at the Science Library. He strategized these relationships, he knew that many staff members had a desire to learn Spanish, but his services would come at a price: a Spanish lesson for an English lesson. Francisco eagerly presented me to those who he considered his most trusted companions. Some people, he said, were too strict and he would not introduce me. Once again, Francisco’s approach to his job was very methodical. He found ways to make himself known and continue his teaching career in little ways, while gaining something for himself, in this case, English lessons.

I appreciated the amount of control Francisco took during this first meeting for fieldwork. He gave me clear suggestions regarding things I should note and people who I should include in my project. He always called himself my collaborator. I believe the act of turning the tables at the beginning of the interview set the course for the rest of our interactions. However, this become a bit of problem the next time I came by to talk to him. When I met Francisco for our second interview, Francisco continued to turn the conversation away from himself whenever I asked him any questions. He introduced me to at least a dozen people, all staff at faculty based in Exley, but has talked to me very little about himself.
Once he was done introducing me to people on the fifth floor, we went back downstairs to the main floor of Exley. We went on an elevator that had two people on it, presumably faculty or staff. Immediately, their tone shifted. It almost felt as if they did not want to enter, but it was too late. The elevator doors had opened and they had no choice but to come in. There was a strangeness in the contrast between Francisco and I speaking Spanish and the two women speaking English. Francisco and I immediately stopped talking, but after a brief pause, the two women continued their conversation. This interaction sharply contrasted with the ones we had with staff members Francisco was friendly with. Whereas others welcomed us into their office, this exchange made me feel like we had interrupted a private space, despite the fact that we were in a public elevator. Though Francisco was essential to the upkeep of this building, this interaction made his body feel out of place. Despite his credentials as a scientist, his new status as a janitor, made apparent by his uniform and cleaning supplies, made him an outsider to the space. When they exited the elevator, Francisco told me “Some people are like that. They’re too formal and they do not even say ‘hi’”. Though Francisco, both through his own effort and his circumstances, is often recognized by staff and faculty in Exley, moments of discomfort and lack of recognition persisted.

El Acostumbramiento de Astrid

Astrid wears bright red lipstick every day. One day, when she showed up to the break room with bare lips, everyone noticed. She’s one of the first workers I met and has taken me under her wing ever since I started organizing, as one of two union stewards for the janitors at Wesleyan. Astrid hugs and kisses every student, which I
can tell is shocking to those who aren’t used to that level touchy-feely-ness. If ever multiple students come into the break room to meet with workers, she looks at me as she speaks, peppering her sentences with “escucha, Emmita”, to remind me to pay attention, as if my mind could drift from her words. I would be lying if I said this did not make me feel special, in a teacher’s pet sort of way.

Astrid was the second person I interviewed for my thesis on a hot day in mid-August. Classes had yet to begin, so the lack of students and faculty made Astrid’s workload significantly lighter. She was able to sit down with me at the back of Crowell Concert Hall, a huge auditorium that holds many of campus’ largest and most important events. Today, it was just us two, all the way in the back, sitting on a bench against the wall. Astrid has been working at Wesleyan since 2000, which as far as I know, makes her one of the custodians that has been working on campus the longest. I had been doing some archival research and had found through old Argus articles that 2000 was a turbulent year in terms of workers’ rights. Towards the end of 2000, USLAC had been working with the janitors on unionization. Much like today, the University had a hands off policy, which allowed Initial, the corporation that hired workers at the time, to have the upper hand in union negotiations (Campbell 1999). By the time Astrid was hired however, the janitors had unionized and were afforded benefits they did not have in the past such as health care, sick leave, and vacation days (Yampolsky 2000). Throughout Astrid’s time at Wesleyan, janitors had been managed by several different subcontracting corporations, from Initial to American Building Management (ABM) in 2002 to Sun Services in 2012. In 2017, Sun Services was bought by Service Management Group, which is the corporation that currently manages workers.
I asked Astrid if she had noticed any significant changes in the treatment of workers when corporations changed. She only noticed a change when Sun Services took over. “They changed everything, our areas” said Astrid. Previously, cleaning areas were divided in such a way that workers were generally able to complete their tasks in the allotted shift time. For example, under ABM Bennet Hall and the Fauver Apartments, two large residential buildings, were each cleaned by one person. With Sun Services, one person was assigned to clean both. Here, the effects of flexibilization and cost cutting on human beings can be seen. Though janitors are not the only campus workers who have faced increase in workloads, as blue collar collar workers who are all black or latino, their increases in labor to go unseen. Astrid, she would often say that she felt rushed during work. “At first the work is hard, but we get used to it. We do the best we can and we get used to it”. Despite having often heard Astrid describe how demanding her tasks were, she always assured me that it was something that she could handle. “Getting used to it” is a phrase that came up often in my conversations with janitors.

One of Astrid’s biggest concerns was that she did a good job cleaning. “The university never makes complaints” she said with pride. It was interesting to me that so much of her narrative focused on the students and the university. It sounded like she wanted to be doing a good job for the sake of the university. Something that Astrid said frequently was that she, above all, wanted “maintain the University clean for you [the students]”. She seemed very concerned, not because of the pay she was receiving or what the corporation would think, but that students have a clean place to study. When she told me this, I was confused. I expected her to be angrier about the entire situation. Unlike Francisco, Astrid’s interactions with students were limited,
but she still felt a somewhat motherly responsibility to keep our areas clean or perhaps this is just what she emphasized to me in our interview. Still, Astrid’s comments, like Francisco’s, show the emotions entangled with janitorial work: pride in one’s work, stress and rush, and the care that Astrid takes of students and their comfort through her labor.

Finally, I asked Astrid what she did before she started working at Wesleyan. Astrid had been an administrator at a grocery store. I asked her what the transition was like from administrator in Colombia to a janitor in America. She said, “It was very difficult. I used to cry every night. But eventually I had to get used to it”. It appears to me that moving to America involves a sort of grief. Having moved to America at a young age, I had less affective connections to Perú to lose. Astrid moved to America as an adult, by which point she had already gotten accustomed to her routine, her country, her neighbors, and her job. Dealing with this magnitude of loss was not part of her job description, but it was essential to her job functioning. Coming from a job where her positionality was different and the physical labor demanded of her was less grueling, adjusting to now being a janitor was emotionally draining. In addition to this change in career, Astrid was also in a new country with little family and a new culture, all of which she was navigating at the same time.

The phrase “getting used to it” came up several times during my interviews with janitors and it is clear, in Astrid’s case, that this process of getting used it is both a physical one and an emotional one. Although janitorial work may not seem emotional, there are certain factors that add to the intimacy of the work, factors that cannot be listed in a job description and are based in history and personal narratives. Immigration and cultural differences are not seemingly related to janitorial work,
however, when the majority of the custodial workforce is Latino, these narratives cannot be separated from the work.

Sandra: Born Again

Sandra is one of three people who clean the CFA, along with Astrid and another worker. She, Astrid, and her sister Diana, who I also interviewed, are very close and spend a lot of time together. Though I have known Sandra for several years now, I know very little about her life outside of work. She is short, has black hair, and talks very quickly with a thick Colombian accent, which I sometimes have trouble understanding. When I interviewed her for this project, we also met in the back of Crowell Concert Hall during a particularly hot August day. I begun this interview like I had began all the others: asking basic questions about the beginning of her job. She began working at Wesleyan in May 1999 before the workers unionized, but, she told me, she was new to the job and had only moved to America a few months before, she was not very involved in the organizing process.

Sandra had a lot to say about the changes in the company throughout the years. Although she did not comment about Initial at all, she told me ABM was her favorite company. “It was the personnel”, she said, “the man who managed the company was named Peter, he was American, but he was noble and an excellent person”. Though many workers agreed that ABM was a better company than SMG, her perspective was unique, as she attributed this company’s superiority to the relationships she had with management. Sandra went as far as to say that ABM’s decision to end their contract with Wesleyan was one of nobility. She told me, “ABM said ‘we better leave, because we cannot do that, exploit people in that way.’ So
ABM left and that’s when Sun Services came in”. Sandra recognized that exploitation was part of Wesleyan’s cost saving efforts, despite Wesleyan’s insistence that it selected contractors based on fairness, and sees ABM’s decision not to lower prices as an active stance against worker exploitation. Immediately upon beginning their contract, Sun Services attempted to fire ten janitors. When students and workers protested, they agreed to keep all the workers on the condition that they could cut their hours down to 35 hours a week. This was also stopped by worker-student solidarity efforts, which I will turn to in the chapters that follow, but Sandra has noticed that the company continued to make efforts overwork janitors\(^{18}\). “There is a lot of people who don’t know the union well, so they [the company] give them more work, so we who are more experienced tell them ‘Do not let them do that’, but a lot of time people because they are new, feel scared, [they say] ‘If I do not do it, they could fire me.’” Thus, while not an official policy, the company continues to try to cut costs in such a way that the student body does not see it. Yet, workers notice the difference. Sandra attributes this increase of work on the expansion of Wesleyan’s campus. Expansion is a key part of the neoliberal university, and particularly prevalent at the residential college. If students are seen as a consumer, universities compete by providing them newer, shinier residence halls, gyms, classrooms, and more. As these expansions continue, new janitors are not hired to keep up the workload, rather the most vulnerable amongst the janitors (new hires and temps) are expected to pick up this extra work.

\(^{18}\) Sun Services/SMG did not end up firing ten workers, but still managed to reduce the custodial staff by not replacing retired workers or workers fired with just cause and relocating workers to different campuses. This happened over the course of two years.
Sandra had a very similar migration experience as Astrid. Other than her sister Diana, Sandra had little family in the area, making her move more difficult. “At the beginning, I cried every day. *Ay no,* it was very difficult. Because you are not used to doing cleaning, you do not what it is to pick up a vacuum. So, working at night is even worse.” Before coming to America, Sandra worked at a factory where she made sewing machines, so her experience had less to do with a shift in class, rather it was about the kind of physical labor she was doing and along with that, a change in culture. “At the beginning, one says, *ay no,* I won’t be able to handle, I am leaving, because one also misses their family and their habitat, their friendships, their comorts, and getting here, one is born again. Born again because you need to start from zero. Start from zero as a person because of the culture, because of the language, because everything.” Thus adjusting to being a janitor was secondary to the culture shock of finding herself in a new country. For Sandra, the adjustment will never be complete, as she plans on moving back to Colombia once she retires. “With my 200 pesos, which is the current pension, what is one going to do here? Here there’s no one, there’s no family. The only thing I have is my sister, nothing else.” Sandra’s word emphasize that community is inseparable from her home in Colombia. While descriptions of Wesleyan are riddled with words like community and home, it is clear that Sandra does not sense that in her workplace, or in America in general.

Much like Astrid, Sandra’s interactions with students, faculty, and staff are limited. She has no complaints about any of the students and says that there are very few students who do not say “hi” to her when they see her. A change that she has noticed among students is that there seems to be more restrictions for them, which she appreciates. Sandra expressed, “One used to see them [the students] drunk over there,
doing things they should not do. No we do not see them as much, drinking and doing their crazy stuff. I see them being more calm”. Sandra’s relief with the shift in student activity is two-fold: one, it allows workers to clean without interruption and two, it keeps workers from seeing students in vulnerable and potentially embarrassing positions. To the students, the campus is an appropriate place to drink and go out partying, but Sandra considers campus her workplace, thus seeing this kind of behavior goes past her comfort zone.

Towards the end of my chat with her, Sandra looked at me and with complete confidence she said “I feel happy her at the university. From here, I tell Astrid, from here I am not leaving until I retire. I live contently here. For me, I like my job”. It was clear she did not want me, or anyone else, to pity her, or to think that she was miserable or unhappy simply because she was a janitor. During her nearly twenty years working at Wesleyan, Sandra had never changed areas, unlike many of her coworkers. Temporary workers are often moved around and other workers choose to move depending on the workload or the schedule. Sandra attributes this continuity to her happiness with her job. She knows her area well, she knows how she goes about completing her tasks, and although she encounters the occasional problem, cleaning the same area brings her comfort. She continues working at Wesleyan and looks forward to her retirement and return to Colombia.

Diana en el camino

While interviewing Diana for my thesis, I had an embarrassing realization: Diana had been the janitor who cleaned Bennet during my freshman year, before I met Magdalena. As she was telling me the areas she has cleaned throughout the years,
I noticed that the time she had cleaned Bennet was around the time I began college. Then I remembered, seeing her face and name on a picture on the hallway. As a freshman, I was unaware of how to deal with the fact that I was a low-income Latina immigrant with a Latina immigrant janitor cleaning my living space. I would say “Hi, how are you?” in English and quickly scurry away, in an attempt to avoid further interaction. Now, three years later, I did not disclose this to Diana during our interview and she did not seem to remember even interacted before my first visit to the janitors’ break room. But now, I considered her one of the janitors I am closest to.

Diana is very affectionate and is always cracking wise jokes. When I sat down to talk to Diana at a table in the common room of 200 Church Street, a program house that she cleans. Program houses are popular housing options at Wesleyan, as they give students an opportunity to live in a house as opposed to a dorm room, and have themes that are supposed to build community between residents. The theme of 200 Church was social justice and it houses freshmen and sophomores. She would ask me questions, but quickly answer them herself, just to keep me attentive. If they had not told me, I would not have assumed Sandra and Diana were sisters, as they are very different, both in physical appearance and personality. Though Diana came to America before Sandra, she only began to work at Wesleyan nine years ago. With the help of Astrid and Sandra, she was able to leave a low paying job at an elderly care center and begin working as a janitor at Wesleyan.

Unlike Astrid and Sandra, Diana has been working at Wesleyan for a relatively short time and has not been through too many changes in management. Though in 2016, Sun Services became SMG, the difference was only in name. Given this, Diana has a less critical view of Wesleyan and its various subcontracting
companies. When I asked her if she had noticed any change in her workload during her time as a janitor, she told me that it had gotten lighter— a rare sentiment amongst the workers. Like most of the janitors I interviewed, Diana affirmed that janitorial work was difficult, but not unmanageable, especially once one gets to know their area. She had absolutely no complaints about the company and attributed her lack of issues to the fact that she followed company rules. Diana told me, “We are all grown here, each one of us knows that we must be responsible for something, knows that there are norms to complete and rules to follow, but people do not want to follow them and unfortunately, while you are in a company, you have to follow them, whether you like it or not.” It is through this strict following of company rules that Diana finds peace in her job. To her, staying out of trouble is simple, though many workers would disagree.

Although she did not notice a significant change in management, she has noticed a change in the attitudes of the student body. When she started working, she said, students held racist beliefs against Hispanic people. She told me “They would not greet you, you would greet them and they left the word in your mouth, if they saw you leaving with a bag of trash, they would not hold the door, they would throw [slam] the door”. Now, working in 200 Church she feels much more respected by students. “I can’t say anything because if they [student residents] see that I am cleaning the bathroom, they do not even enter, so as to not step on the floor. They try to maintain the kitchen clean, osea, you see that they try to maintain what you do and that pleases you, because they are valuing what you are doing”. Students value of

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19 I use Hispanic as opposed to Latino, because these is the word Diana used during our interview.
20 In Spanish: dejar la palabra en la boca. Meaning, not getting a response.
labor is not necessarily expressed through their words, rather it is through their actions that their respect is shown.

However, this shift in student attitude is not universal. When I asked Diana about her experience cleaning Bennet and Fauver, her tone changed dramatically. “Bennet is where the muchachos are the least friendly.” When she told me this I felt guilty, knowing that I had been a part of this problem as a freshman. I asked her if she noticed a difference between the students who lived in Bennet and the ones who lived in Fauver, assuming that there would be improvement given their ages. She responded “Yes, those from Fauver are tremendous, they are terrible. They really are terrible”. Once again, it is both their attitudes and their actions that make them unpleasant to interact with. Diana explained: “The amount of trash you see in the closet on Monday, you do not know what to do. You are tempted to sit down and cry when you see so much trash. Another thing is that many times, they will drink liquor and then they do not throw the bottle in the trash, instead they throw it against the wall.” Once again, the disrespect and devaluation of cleaning labor is not evident through their direct interactions with janitors, but through their actions, which express a lack of care or active disrespect. Diana, navigating this kind of disrespect adds emotional labor to her already overwhelming workload. This disdain sometimes brings her to the verge of tears.

Diana also cleans the Public Affairs Center, an academic building that houses many departments, faculty offices, and classrooms. When I asked her if she had any interactions with professors or staff, she only knew the names of two people, despite having worked in the building for over two years. She said, “Still the thing exists of “I am more than you, I am better than you because you are the cleaner”, but that does
not affect you, at this altitude of the path. At first, yes, at first that does affect you because it makes you feel bad, but now that this altitude of the path, no.” Diana’s story highlights a common narrative of having to get used to being ignored, disrespected, or overworked persists. Becoming accustomed to being viewed as unequal is not part of the official job description, but still something necessary in order to find a certain amount of comfort in her job.

The university as home, the university as work

These are just four stories out of more than fifty janitors that work at Wesleyan. This simply scratches the surface of the various experiences of custodians at Wesleyan. Even within these four testimonials there are differences, not just in what areas each janitor is cleaning, but how they experience this type of work. Each testimonial complicates traditional narratives of home, work, and emotion. The student experience of the university as home is predicated on the labor, both physical and emotional, of janitors. Though for janitors, the university is a workplace, it still contains all sorts of affects. In Sandra’s case, these emotions are brought about by Wesleyan’s - and America’s - distance from her home. For Francisco, the emotion work has more to do with his workplace’s proximity to home as a science teacher now working in the Science Library.

Though student experiences in college comes with its challenges, particularly for low income students and students of color, the student experience of the campus is far removed from that of custodians. Even as a long time organizer, I found myself making (incorrect) assumptions about workers’ feelings or projecting my own anger

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21 In Spanish: a esta altura del camino. Meaning, this far along.
onto workers. Student/janitor solidarity, then, must be developed in such a way that creates common understandings, without homogenizing experiences. In the following chapter, I will discuss student/janitor solidarity movements at Wesleyan and the ways these movements succeeded and failed in the creating community.
CHAPTER 2: Organizing for or Organizing with?: Shifting student and worker roles from 1999-2013

On Tuesday April 7th, 2000, a few dozen students stormed into the Office of Admissions at Wesleyan. Many prospective students were visiting at the time, so the office was incredibly busy, thus perfect for disruption. The students were beating what they described as “African” drums and were prepared for a sit in that could last days. The occupation was a part of the Justice for Janitors campaign that had begun that previous fall. Students, janitors, and SEIU Local 32BJ were fighting for the janitor’s right to unionize, demanding increased wages, healthcare, and pension. After several rallies and meetings with Doug Bennett, then president of Wesleyan, proved unsuccessful, the students decided to up the ante. The admissions building in early April was the perfect time and place.

Manuel Rosaldo, a student who was present at the event told me when I interviewed him, “I remember I had students staying with me who I was talking to and we did this big plan where we came in different cars and we all stormed into the admissions building beating drums and stuff. And there were the students I talked to the day before and we saw each other and just started laughing and it was really scary when we decided to do that. I remember talking to my parents about it and there was some risk “What if we get suspended?” at Wesleyan we anticipated that there wasn’t gonna be real hostile reaction.” In an Argus article, student Jesse Lava described the 33 and a half hour long sit in as “more like summer camp than an angry protest” and said the participating students were “living in a state of near luxury” (Lava 2000, p. 11). In that same issue, student Ari Yampolsky and USLAC thanked the employees of Public Safety and Admissions for “tolerating our presence and noise” (Yampolsky 2000, p. 12).
I open with this story in order to highlight some of the distinctive aspects of Wesleyan’s Justice for Janitors campaign. As I will explore in the sections to follow, Justice for Janitors movements elsewhere, both in large cities and at other campuses, were much more turbulent, at times violent, and longer lasting. I will examine the Justice for Janitors movements in all locations from a critical perspective. Though all campaigns were successful overall, they utilized different tactics. I chose to begin with the Justice for Janitors movement at Wesleyan because many of the other janitor related actions that will follow are results of this campaign, whether directly or indirectly.

**Justice for Janitors Movements**

Across the country, other Justice for Janitors actions looked nothing like the cheery gathering taking place at Wesleyan. The movement began in the late eighties, but really took hold in the early nineties in Los Angeles (Gomez 2018). There were several factors that led to the rise of this movement: the deregulation of the commercial cleaning industry, the office building boom that occurred in cities across America, a growth in migration from Mexico and Central America, and the rise of subcontracting (Aguiar and Ryan 2009, Gomez 2018). This meant that many of the city’s janitors were employed by a corporation different than the one that owned the buildings they cleaned. Primarily, this is a money saving effort, as subcontractors pay minimum wage and do not provide benefits, but also creates a moral distance between the corporation and their blue-collar workers (Belous 1989). Subcontracting is also an anti-unionization tactic (Shamir 2017), as it obscures previously clear-cut employee/employer relations, and complicates any subsequent union negotiations. If a
subcontractor raises their employees’ wages, thus increasing the cost of their contract, corporations can simply look for another contractor.

*Organizing from the Bottom Up*

In Los Angeles, the unionization drive was dominated by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). SEIU knew that if they were to successfully unionize subcontracted janitors, they would need to use aggressive direct action and intense community outreach (Aguiar and Ryan 2009, Glass 2016, Gomez 2018). To aid them in their fight, SEIU recruited members of the United Farm Workers Alliance (Luff 2007). Together, organizers identified leaders amongst janitorial workers and visited janitors in their homes to recruit them for the fight in the unions. One of the most well-known direct actions took place in Century City, a small, affluent neighborhood in Los Angeles that was home to many TV and movie studios. On June 15th, 1990, hundreds of janitors and their allies marched across Century City. The event quickly escalated when police began to attack protestors, leading to dozens of injuries, two miscarriages, and sixty arrests (Lerner and Shaffer 2015). Regardless of the violence, protestors decided to come back the next day (SEIU Local 399 1990). The media attention garnered public support for janitors and eventually lead to the successful unionization of the Century City janitors (Glass 2016).

Early victories in the movement are credited for creating a sense of hope and reinvigorating the labor movement (Luff 2007). The movement was faced with the challenge of organizing workers in a completely different way. In addition to subcontracting, there was the changing demographic of janitorial workers from largely African American males to Latin American immigrants, a good portion of
whom were women. In addition to labor organizing, SEIU also provided its members with legal aid for immigration and bilingual know your rights trainings (Glass 2016, Lerner and Shaffer 2015). Once organizers formed ties with the communities they represented, they began to hold actions with janitors hired by various corporations, so that all subcontractors would be pressured to raise standards at once. Victories in San Jose, Los Angeles, Detroit, and cities across America gave hope to workers and organizers alike (Highlights from the 2003 National Student Labor Week of Action).

*Justice for Janitors takes the Campus*

The Justice for Janitors movement took hold on college campuses in the late nineties. At the University of Southern California, organizing began after the university began to subcontract their janitors from Service Master in March 1996, causing a wage decrease and a loss of benefits including health insurance, pension, and free USC tuition. SEIU Local 399 aided janitors in their campaign for unionization. Initially, rallies were organized and attended by union employees and janitors. Student involvement in the matter did not begin until July of that same year when graduate students in the department of geography sent a letter to the president of the university demanding that the administration be more selective in choosing their subcontractors. A larger group of students circulated a petition in support of the janitors in September 1996 (Palmer 2013).

In October of 1996, a rally of janitors and students took place, but was shut down by riot police. After this event, students and janitors formed the Justice for Janitors organizing committee. Another rally in November lead to janitors receiving a raise from $4 or $5 an hour to $6.50 an hour, but management still refused to provide
benefits or recognize the union. They organized another Rally in December, during which police arrested ten people. Protests continued into 1997, also involving police intervention and arrests. That year, Local 399 held secret elections in which 132 of 190 janitors voted for unionization. Their petition was ultimately rejected by USC and they had to go through the National Labor Review Board. It was not until the summer of 2000 that janitors were offered a new contract that provided health benefits and tuition remission, though only for janitors who had begun working prior to subcontracting. The Justice for Janitors fight at USC lasted almost five years and involved arrests, intimidation, and coercion (Palmer 2013). I linger on this particular story because it is reflective of movements across the country. However, Wesleyan’s timeline is a little different.

**Justice for Janitors at Wesleyan**

According to then-student Olivia DeBree, attempts to unionize began sometime around the summer of 1999 and were pretty much wrapped up by April 2000. That’s less than a year, with no recorded moments of violence or near violence, no arrests, and no hunger strikes. The movement began at Wesleyan in a way much different than the ways it occurred in different cities and campuses. To begin with, the movement was not begun by the union or the janitors. Olivia tells me that it arose as a suggestion made by some graduating USLAC students. SEIU Local 32BJ did not provide much help to student organizers, as they were focusing on larger campaigns, often organizing hundreds of workers at once. Justice for Janitors organizing efforts in major cities were aided by full time trained organizers. At Wesleyan, the people leading the charge were largely untrained students with several other commitments.
DeBree described approaching buildings at night, when janitors worked, and awkwardly asking that janitors sign unionization cards. This uncomfortable beginning already suggests a difference having to do with who is organizing for whom.

**Student Involvement in Organizing**

Because the movement at Wesleyan was not led by janitors themselves, we might wonder, why did students get involved in this movement to begin with? Olivia did not expand on her reasons for joining, but Manuel remembered his reasoning very clearly.

“I took a gap year and I was just kind of eager to continue speaking in Spanish and engaging with Latin Americans when I got there, so I got to know the janitors in my hall. I lived in WestCo and one of the janitors was from Puerto Rico and she had been almost like a motherly figure to me when I moved into school because I’m from California, so I was away from my family, but then pretty soon into my first semester she had to quit because she got sick and didn’t have medical insurance and she couldn’t afford a car so she was taking the bus to Wesleyan which was from Hartford or something and it was super inconvenient and I told that to a friend of mine who said ‘Oh if you’re really concerned about these issues you should join USLAC we’re organizing around janitors’ rights’”

Manuel’s involvement began with a personal connection with a janitor, but it is worth noting that after he mentions her early on in our interview, she is never mentioned again. This is not to blame Manuel, her absence is partially my fault, and I did not ask about what became of her. It seems like for both of us, she had been lost in the grand scheme of the movement.

Other students mentioned their support of the janitors as being tied to this idea of “the Wesleyan community”. Before the takeover of the admissions building, Ajua Campos, the Latino student collective, wrote an open letter to President Bennet.

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22 A music and arts themed dorm for freshmen and sophomores.
Reading this open letter almost 20 years after it was written as a Latina student, it feels empty. There are no demands, just vague calls for “pride”, “unity”, and “community”. There are no mentions of their work conditions, their wages, or even the union. The letter ends: “we ask for your renewed support in the maintenance, to every Latino, student and employee. Do not fail us.” (Ajua Campos 2000, p. 10).

Something about this does not sit right with me. Though there may be similarities in the experiences of Latino students and Latino janitors, the homogenizing of the groups reads as insensitive. What is obscured by grouping students and subcontracted employees, is the difference in power that exists between them. This letter uses an unproblematic and unreflexive “us” as if both groups faced the same stakes, where it is clear that janitors would continue to face economic and health problems, whilst students would not face a direct impact at all. In many ways, this similar to the way domestic workers are often referred to as “part of the family” by their employers in order to ease the employer’s discomfort with knowing they hire someone to carry out family related tasks—who is often underpaid and not provided benefits. Though this letter seeks to be inclusive of workers, it’s inclusivity is homogenizing and obscures workers as workers.

In this relationship, students, Latino or not, are the customer, of a service provided. They ask President Bennet “How are we to feel unified when the ideologies of this institution perpetuate racial hierarchy in our community?”. Community is mentioned multiple times, not only in this article, but in many of the articles published in the Argus. What is this community? I think back to the notions of community used during by residential colleges. These perceptions cannot be separated from an American idea of virtuous citizenships. With the growing
The corporatization of the university, college administrations will try to foster a sense of community as a way to get alumni donations. Universities have no economic incentive to include janitors in their community. In fact, Manuel Rosaldo told me that President Bennet had explicitly told students that janitors were not a part of the Wesleyan community. In the letter, there is no acknowledgement that Wesleyan, since its inception, has been an institution that perpetuates racial hierarchies. It presents Wesleyan as a benevolent institution with the ability to feel. That being said, this letter was meant to be a rhetorical appeal for the president, so one cannot really assume the genuine feelings of the writers. It has been a common and successful tactic in student worker solidarity movements to call on the supposed morality of an institution and weaponize what Michael Roth would call “devotion” in order to get results.

Regardless of the problematic implications of student rhetoric, it was still a form of support. However, at the time, the Argus as a whole was somewhat unsupportive of the campaign23. In one particularly critical article published in February of 2000, two months before the sit in at admissions, the Argus stated that USLAC members were not allowing students to make rational decisions, misrepresenting facts by appealing to emotions, and even stating that the Justice for Janitors campaign could have potentially disastrous consequences for the university (USLAC 2000, p. 12). These arguments fall neatly in line with arguments made by President Bennet during negotiations. When presented with the idea of providing increased wages and benefits to workers, Bennet would mention “Wesleyan’s

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23 It must be acknowledged that while the Argus may not represent the opinion of the majority of students at Wesleyan, it is Wesleyan’s official newspaper, thus being the main form of representation and coverage of most campus events.
commitment to “to increase faculty salaries by percent over the next three years, add 20 faculty and decrease student loans by 30 percent starting next year” (Bennet 2000, p. 3). This was meant to pit student and faculty interests against interests of the janitors. This presents the situation as a binary in which funds can either be allotted to decreasing student loans and hiring new faculty or better working situation for janitors. The answer should be clear: students and faculty are more important members of the institution and their interests should be prioritized—and the needs and demands of janitors come at the cost of those other, more valuable members of “the Wesleyan community.”

*Janitor Involvement (or the lack thereof)*

On a national level, Justice for Janitors was praised for their “bottom up” organizing strategy, meaning that janitors, their needs and voices, were prioritized in the organizing process. As I mentioned earlier, SEIU did not play a large role in organizing janitors at Wesleyan, thus leaving untrained students with a bulk of negotiation responsibilities. Only one of the workers I interviewed, Sandra, was present during the union negotiation process. She corroborates that she was not intimately involved in union organizing, but attributes this to the fact that she had just begun working as a janitor at the time. “In that moment, because I had little knowledge [and] I had just gotten here [the United States], I did not know what the union was about, but we all made strength and we all fought for the union to come in… In the moment that the union entered, it was always a fight because it was a difficult battle, thanks to all the former students it could succeed, because the students took over buildings, stopped classes, and did not let professors come in.” Even
Sandra’s own narrative centers students and their work, but this comes from someone who had only been working at the university for months before the campaign started.

The absence of workers at the start of the campaign does not necessarily signal student negligence. Based on the articles I read and the conversations I had with former students, it is the workers’ precarity as both subcontracted workers and without any formal institutions to protect them from losing their jobs that prevented them from organizing. Manuel Rosaldo regrets that students agreed to meet with President Bennet without janitors present, but once the initial meeting had been made, students could not easily walk back on it. Olivia DeBree recalls that leaders amongst the janitors did not emerge until much later in the movement, and even then, they played a peripheral role. The contract that Wesleyan had with Initial prevented any direct communication between janitors and members of the administration, and the union’s absence created a situation in which the main negotiators were students and administrators. Prior to the sit in at the admissions office, the university alleged that it had no place in union negotiations, as those were agreements that were to be made between Initial and the union. Thinking critically about this situation, we can see several actors in a situation, each with varying degrees of participation in the matter. The janitors, while supportive, are in a situation too precarious to participate; the union, that refuses to organize a collective of workers that small; the University, who refuses to take an active role in negotiations; the corporation, which obviously does not want workers to be able to unionize; and finally students, who are committed and have good intentions, but cannot fully grasp the concerns of janitors.

*An Unlikely Victory*
Given these complex relationships, one might imagine that this campaign was destined to fail, but it did not. In fact, it was a success greater than what anyone expected. The sit in, as I mentioned, lasted 33 and a half hours. Manuel Rosaldo recalls, “the president was visiting with funders or something somewhere on the west coast and he flew back right away as soon as we did the occupation and wanted to negotiate with us right away and wound up giving more than what we had asked for.” These victories included a raise to $9.40 an hour, health insurance, pension benefits, access to Wesleyan daycare for children, and ESL classes. This victory was not simply one for janitors, it led to the installment of the Code of Conduct, which provided all subcontracted workers with the benefits listed above, and also required a Code of Conduct board, consisting of two students, a faculty member, and a human resources employee, who would review complaints from subcontracted workers and attempt to handle them internally (Yampolsky 2000, p. 12).

There’s something to be said about the seeming simplicity of it all: no arrests, no firings, no hunger strikes, no years of campaigning. Perhaps it was the fact that the movement was student led that prompted its relatively quick success. Though stories from USC differ from ours, this victory aligns with other student worker solidarity movements in which students weaponize their privilege within the university, as customers, in order to demand better of institutions they belong to. Other college student worker-solidarity campaigns, such as United Students Against Sweatshops (Cravery 2004), United Students for Fair Trade (Curnow and Wilson 2014), and the Student/Farmworker Alliance (Student/Farmworker Alliance 2010) have taught us that students weaponizing their privilege can significantly improve the lives of
workers, both on campus and around the world. However, without significant leadership from workers, it is unlikely that all worker concerns will be fully heard.

However, one unexpected victory that I would like to highlight is one of new student-worker relationships. From awkward encounters in hallways, Manuel said, “by that time there was such a community between janitors and students. I think the students were able to do an activist campaign, the students and janitors together that could address real specific workplace issues and problems with certain managers”

However, this is was not exclusively a student sentiment, this was also shared by Roberta, a former janitor who began working at Wesleyan towards the end of union negotiations. Though she no longer worked at Wesleyan, she still lived in Connecticut. Manuel and several others had told me that she had been an important leader when she was a janitor, so I made the drive to her house. We sat in her backyard by the fire on a cloudy day in early September.

Roberta did not use the same community-oriented language Manuel did. She told me “When we had a plan to do something, then we would contact the students, like Manuel, or there were other good students who would help us from USLAC, we would communicate with them either over the phone or when we went to clean, we would clean some of their houses and we would tell them what we were going to do, they would send emails to the rest of them, and then they would all find out if we were going to do a protest”. Perhaps more interesting than the new “community” between workers and students was the change in directionality. Rather than having students ask workers to unionize, once this new “community” was in place, the workers would plan protests and then inform students to show up in support. Now that workers had a system of support, their involvement in organizing increased, thus
changing dynamics that had previously existed throughout the course of unionization. In this way, one of the key successes of the Justice for Janitors movement was a lasting sense of solidarity, as unlikely at it appeared at the start. The creation of the ESL Program, to which I turn next, is an example of this kind of unexpected solidarity, emerging from the least likely of student-worker collaborations.

**ESL Program**

After the success of the Justice for Janitors campaign, Manuel and a friend decided to spend the summer traveling around South America. By this point, Manuel had formed close relationships with some of the janitors and visited many of their families during his travels. During one particular visit to Chile, he stayed with the children of a janitor, who had a very specific request for him: “the kids were really nice to us and taking us out all the time and they were like “we’re being good to you and we hope you’ll do something good for our mom when you get back to Connecticut””. This suggestion was to teach her English, which prompted Manuel to start the ESL program at Wesleyan.

Although the program was spearheaded by Manuel, three other students, Daniel Thomas, Kate Standish, and Sarah Figlewski (Thomas 2003). According to Manuel, they originally imagined that the program would be a language exchange rather than a tutorial, meaning that Wesleyan students would teach janitors English and janitors would teach students Spanish. Unlike Francisco’s story from Chapter one, student quickly discovered that janitors were not interested in language exchange and preferred to be tutored. This illuminated a disconnect between janitors’ and
student interests. Though students wanted the relationship to be one of exchange, they also seemed unaware that the desire came with the expectation that janitors will do the work of teaching students Spanish in addition to their already substantial workload.

Adjustments continued to be made throughout the establishment of the ESL tutoring program. To begin with, the tutors (Wesleyan students) and janitors struggled to find a convenient time for the tutorials to take place. At first, they settled on Saturday classes, but driving to campus an additional day of the week, outside of their regular work hours, proved to be burdensome to janitors. Though this time was initially successful, according to Manuel, attendance declined as time passed. They shifted their meeting times to coincide with the janitors’ lunch breaks, but eventually, this, too, became problematic, as janitors did not want to spend their limited break time in classes. Students then appealed to the administration, noting that the recently instilled Code of Conduct stated that all subcontracted workers should have access to ESL classes. ABM and Wesleyan came to an agreement that workers could have three hours of paid time off every week to take ESL classes with students.

Just like with the Justice for Janitors movement, there are questions to be raised about the beliefs and behaviors of the students who tutored janitors. To begin with, let me present some of the reasons that students chose to become involved in the program. Manuel, as I established, began the program at the request of a janitor’s children. Daniel involved himself in the program because he “had just returned from a summer in Kenya where I had taught English in a secondary school, an experience that had sparked an interest in teaching English as a second language (ESL). Furthermore, while I had a relatively proficient Spanish, I wanted to further my
Spanish abilities” (Thomas 2003, p. 2) Though this student does not specify which program they attended or the purpose of said program, teaching English in the global south, while offered with good intentions, it can be understood as a colonial practice that promotes the “white savior trope” and reinforces the superiority of English as the default global language (Tollefson 2000, Pennycook 2002). Once again, Thomas brings up the misguided belief that this a language exchange. As I have presented in Chapter one, janitors were, and are, taking on several kinds of labor: cleaning labor, emotional labor, care work, and perhaps even additional jobs. The expectation that the program will be one of exchange rests on the assumption that students and janitors are doing the same amount of labor or have the same kind of available time.

A 2004 Argus article on the WesESL program reveals several different student perspectives. Program coordinator Annie Fox tells reporter Shila Miller, “Tutors will have really thorough ESL training that will be good enough to put on a resume” (Miller 2004). In a program that is supposed to be about “community building” (Wes ESL 2013), it is strange to use resume building as one of the main selling points, once again showing that students see the ESL program as transaction. In this case, they teach English in exchange for a more impressive resume. Fox goes on to say “It was a nice reality check to get outside the Wesleyan bubble” (Miller 2004). This sentiment is incredibly contradictory to the notions of community and inclusion used by the Justice for Janitors movement that had occurred only a few years earlier. What is the Wesleyan bubble? Are janitors not part of the bubble as workers who interact with the university: its buildings, students, staff, and faculty?

Is is evident that activists and tutors, while their roles are entangled, interact with janitors from different perspectives. In activism, when solidarity is being
created, students will try to erase difference by feigning a community, but in this situation that resembles the privileged helping the supposed less fortunate, students distance themselves from workers. There does not seem to be a middle ground between inclusion into an imagined Wesleyan community, one that obscures power relationships in the institution, and exclusion from the Wesleyan bubble, which ignores the multitude of ways that janitors interact with the institution. This shift in positionality aligns with a shift in the kind of work that it is being done.

*Collaboration in the Classroom*

Still and despite its problems, the Wes ESL program was popular amongst janitors and provided them a useful skill that would likely make their day to day lives easier in terms of communication. This was not the only gain of the ESL program, however. The program, with all of its problematic assumptions, put workers in regular contact with students, making them aware of which students they could trust with labor related issues. These relationships proved instrumental in November of 2004, when several workers asked ESL tutor Sasha Freudenberg to help them translate a petition accusing ABM manager Zbigniein Gryko of a range of abuses including verbal harassment, racism, and intimidation (Levin 2004). This instance demonstrates a sharp change in directionality than the previous organizing that took place during the Justice for Janitors movement. In the past, the movement was very much student driven in the sense that very issue of unionization was presented by students to janitors. This made for a much more collaborative campaign, with janitors taking the lead on the kind of action they wanted to take.

Several factors may have contributed to this shift from “organizing for” to “organizing with.” Seeing as the janitors first reached out to ESL tutors, the
relationships formed through the ESL program are one reason for this. In addition, by this point, janitors belonged to a union, which likely allowed janitors to feel more secure in reporting complaints, as there was an institution in place to protect them. The first article published in the Argus about this issue was on November 9th, 2004; the article announcing Gryko’s removal was published on December 10th, 2004, though these issues had been raised by janitors earlier in the semester. Though the campaign was relatively quick, it was not without issues. Prior to the publishing of the first article, janitors had brought their complaints to ABM, but said that the investigation of Gryko was unjust. Janitors were not provided proper translators and they were made to testify to supervisors who had a history of siding with Gryko, leading them to write a petition for a fairer investigation.

The first Argus article published on the issue included several anonymous quotes from janitors. One janitor said, “Before we weren’t united, but now we are and we don’t want games, we’re ready to fight” (Levin 2004). This speaks to the newly formed bonds and security that janitors felt after the success of the Justice for Janitors movement. However, this feeling of unity was not universal, as one janitor is quoted in the same article as saying, “People signed some letters, but some never even worked for him. I think maybe some people forced them to sign” (Levin 2004). All in all, seven janitors formally accused Gryko of abuse during the new investigation, including: “racial degradation, safety endangerment and physical intimidation” (Levin 2004). On December 10, 2004, the Argus published an article informing the campus that Gryko had been relocated. One janitor remarked: “I started to cry. It’s a lesson for us not to be afraid to fight for our civil rights. All of us living in this country can have our rights one way or another” (Levin 2004). Less than a month
after the case was initially reported, the problem was resolved, though there is a lot that can be said about Gryko’s “retraining” and “relocation”. In comparison to the Justice for Janitors movement, which lasted almost an entire school year, this case wrapped up fairly quickly, demonstrating the lasting effects of the organizing that had taken place four years prior.

Despite this new drive from the janitors, there was an opinion piece published in the Argus exclusively congratulating students for their efforts. The article reads: “Organizations like USLAC and ESL are crucial in maintaining a link between our community and the world beyond High Street. Thanks to a happy coincidence, these dissimilar groups were able to channel their energy and produce results. Congratulations to USLAC and ESL for recognizing an important issue. Hopefully, this trend of extra-campus activism will continue.” (“Applaudable Actions” 2004). It is quite shocking to see the dramatic shift in calling for janitors to be included in the community, to this sudden affirmation that though a Wesleyan community certainly exists, janitors are not a part of it. Despite the fact that janitors are very much on within High St and on campus, this article geographically distances them. All the credit is given to USLAC and WesESL when in fact it was the janitors who first brought up this issue.

Much like the version of activism the Wesleyan pamphlet presents – one that exists fully outside of the institution—the ESL program locates itself outside of Wesleyan. In a way, its distance from the university creates a more impressive resume for those who tutor. In activism and organizing, actions are very rarely all good or all bad. Despite the questionable intentions of the tutors of the program, it was valuable in the sense that it provided workers with a useful skill and created
relationships that ultimately made Wesleyan a better workplace for janitors. Like the Justice for Janitors movement, some of the most impactful results were unexpected. In the next and last section, I will explore the steady increase in workload, which was severely affected by the introduction of a new subcontracting company, Sun Services.

**New Contractors, New Problems**

From 2005 to 2011, things seemed to have calmed down with regard to janitors’ rights. Though there were some conflicts with regards to vacation days and weather concerns, coverage on this by the Argus was sparse. This is not to say that janitors were not having labor problems at the time or even that students were not involved in organizing, it may well have been the case that these events were widespread enough to garner attention from the Argus. Tensions began to rise February 2012, when ABM’s contract with Wesleyan was coming to an end. At around the same time, many of the janitors who were directly employed by the university retired, causing increased workloads for subcontracted janitors (Newport 2012). One article, published in the Argus and authored by USLAC, introduced a janitor named Lucia who had suffered spine displacement twice as a result of her workload. The point of this anecdote is revealed at the end when USLAC calls on the administration to “reanalyze unrealistic workloads, stop unsustainable and shortsighted layoffs, and to maintain the workers’ right to unionize” (USLAC 2012).

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24 “Spondylolisthesis is the medical term used to describe the forward slippage (anterior translation or displacement) of one spine bone (vertebrae) on another” (Spoonamore “Spondylolysis & Spondylolisthesis”)

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Contract negotiations began in late February with different potential subcontractors being presented to a panel of administrators, Physical Plant staff, and two students. Despite the problems that janitors were having with ABM, then union steward Herminia Duran affirmed to the Argus that most workers wanted ABM to extend their contract, as they had knowledge on the company and how to work with them (Newport 2012). Ultimately, the panel ended up selecting Sun Services. One of the students who was on the panel, Alma Sanchez-Eppler, told the Argus: “I can vouch that the process for choosing the contractor was fair. I can vouch that we didn’t look at money. I can vouch that we picked the company that seems to be most concerned with having a good workspace for their employees, but I can’t vouch for the industry” (Newport 2012). Many of the janitors I spoke to mark the change in contractors to be the moment when the quality of work began to drop, despite the fact that the problems began shortly before Sun Services was contracted.

Although Sanchez-Eppler affirms that the process was fair and Wesleyan chose “the company most concerned with having a good workplace” (Newport 2012c), a few of the janitors I spoke to had a very clear idea of why Sun Services was ultimate chosen: money. Sandra told me: “Even though we didn’t have many benefits, but still when they [ABM] saw that there would be more work for all of us, the ABM said ‘of course, because when a new company they offer less money and that interests the university, to spend less’, but they want to exploit us.” Sandra put the blame on the university, noting that their main objective is to save money. Roberta blames two very specific people. She told me, “Joyce Topshe25 became very good friends with her [Sanchez-Eppler], and she was the representative from USLAC. She sold the

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25 Associate Vice President of Facilities at Wesleyan University
rights of the workers, because we all told her that we did not want Sun Services to come to Wesleyan, so she let Sun Services come here and she graduated and left all of the workers screwed over.” Topshe was one of the major figures involved in the decision to contract Sun Services. No other worker mentioned Sanchez-Eppler and I reached out to get her perspective, but she never responded.

It is highly unlikely that Sanchez-Eppler had a lot of decision-making power or that she knew the impact that the selection of Sun Services would have in the long run. Sun Services probably portrayed themselves as ethical and caring to the panel, knowing full well that they were there to increase profit for the university. What the full truth is, no one knows, but the anger that Roberta feels is real. I can feel it in her voice, which became louder and more aggressive as she told this story. You can tell that this is an issue that continues to affect her, despite the fact that she no longer works at Wesleyan. The point of telling this story is not to place the blame on any one individual, rather to illuminate the very real consequences brought about by the change in contract. Sanchez-Eppler, as any other organizer (student or not), was learning as she was doing and she ended up supporting a decision that ultimately hurt workers. Janitors’ disdain and anger towards her is fully valid. This is also a moment where newer generations of student activists can learn from mistakes of the people who came before them. In this case the lesson to be learned is that workers know what is best for them, regardless of what the university or corporation may insist.

The summer after Sun Services began contracting at Wesleyan, janitors had a series of protests. They presented a letter to President Roth. Though I have been unable to find the full letter, this is what I have pieced together from the Argus:

“Us, Sun Services janitors do not appreciate being treated like animals, and we will no longer tolerate the immense disrespect from our administration.
We have been harassed and degraded by our supervisors for as long as we can remember. We will not allow them to manipulate us anymore. We will not sign this new work plan, which is to be effective in July. It seems that regular human ability has been forgotten here. This new plan changes our work schedules and responsibilities without any consideration of how we feel, what we think or what we are humanly capable of” (Morgan and Katz 2012).

This is in response not only to the increase in workload, but the rearranging of areas that Sun Services was ultimately successful in installing. The language in this letter is interesting, as the writers refer to both the administration and the supervisors, as being “theirs.” They insist that the administration responsible for them, taking a fierce and moral stance against the logic of subcontracting.

Diana recalls these protests with pride, smiling as she tells me the story. “We made signs, we walked all the way down the High [Street], we went to the president’s house, we did a strike there, we were in South College, we did a strike, we walked all over the place, we went to Long Lane. Ay, I don’t know why they didn’t fire us all, listen.” Sandra and Diana both see this organizing as a success. Sandra told me, “Now with Sun Services, there was a big battle because they wanted to take out almost fifteen or twenty people. So then we also had the help of many students and a lot of protests until again, through the help of the students, we could succeed”. While Sun Services did not succeed in firing workers, workloads increased as workers retired or were relocated, without anyone to replace them. Between 2012 and 2014, the custodial staff at Wesleyan was reduced from sixty to fifty (Wallock 2014), through this kind of slow attrition.

Janitors, of course, noticed the absence of these workers through the dramatic increase in their workloads. Roberta told me, “At first, with ABM I did like 7 houses and I would clean them one day and not the other. Then, when Sun Services came, made me clean, in addition to the seven houses, they gave me two [classroom]
buildings and the Malcom X. Roberta still thinks about Wesleyan janitors and the amount of work they are expected to do. “That woman who was given Foss 7,8,9, and 10 and with ABM, I did 8 and 10, and it was a trabajero. Outside of my break, I sat down for ten minutes on the stairs to rest because all of the sweating I did from sweeping the stairs and vacuuming. Now, imagine doing 7,8,9, and 10? How can you do all that work? That woman, I don’t know how she finishes that job.”

As workers urged for decreased workloads, making direct appeals to the administration and posing solutions such as keeping the staff and areas the same, the administration quickly shifted the blame elsewhere. Joyce Topshe told the Argus, “We have to respect each other. I’m embarrassed that [students] stuff paper towels in the toilet, and then poop on it, and then expect a custodian to stick their hand in and take that out. It’s disgraceful….We actually have members of our community that think it’s O.K. to paint a wall or punch a hole in the wall or break a window or kick a door” (Li 2014). Though it must be acknowledged that students play a role in the size of the janitors’ workload, as Diana mentioned, it is also incredibly unfair to think that cleaner students would make up for the loss of ten staff members. This shift the blame and responsibility from the managers and employers to the students, making the issue at hand seem like one of individual decisions by student rather than structural one. The janitors I have spoken to have had their fair share of complaints about students, still, none of them have pointed to students as the main culprits in their labor troubles.

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26 A program house connected to the Center for African American Studies, celebrating the life and legacy of Malcom X.
27 Nicolson 7, Hewitt 8, Hewitt 9, and Hewitt 10. Four large residential halls that house freshmen, sophomores, and juniors.
28 Big job
The losses in staff also led to other losses. For instance, the ESL program has been inactive since I have been at Wesleyan. Roberta noticed that when ABM was around, as union steward, she could more easily plan social events with workers:

“When I would tell them [the workers], we would all get together, but I would speak with the highest boss, not the one at Wesleyan, the one above him. I would tell him ‘on this day, I want you to authorize because we are going to have a get together for May Day,’ let's suppose. And the boss would tell me ‘oh, it’s fine, I will call Fernando (the Wesleyan manager) to let him know that you will have a get together at this hour.’” When Sun Services started their contract with Wesleyan, this was lost. Perhaps it was stricter management, but likely the increased workloads meant that janitors had even less time to be able to have picnics or take ESL classes. Around this same time, the student organization USLAC became inactive, and was not restarted until the Spring of 2016, just as I was beginning my first year at Wesleyan.

While Wesleyan has clear investments in creating an idea of home and community, for its students most especially, its labor practices prove otherwise, as they create difficult conditions in which a community can be created. It is very clear through these abusive labor practices Wesleyan’s community is predicated on the labor of others. Community creation is certainly not easy and attempts to create community with janitors in the past have ignored crucial power relations, or at times created even more hierarchies. In between excessive workloads, university histories and relationships, and the very nature of the campus, student worker solidarity or community must constantly be reevaluated and sometimes needs to be completely rebuilt. Still, as the story of the ESL class reveals, sometimes student-worker solidarity can spark to life, creating possibilities for organizing that resists attempts to
pit students and workers against each other (or faculty/staff against workers), and recentering responsibility where it lays.
CHAPTER 3: Activist Presents, Activist Futures

On the morning of January 19th, 2018, fourteen years to the day since I moved to America with my family, I was awakened by a call from Franklin Souls, who worked in the communications department of SEIU 32BJ. He informed me that despite the best efforts of students and the union, Francisco Acosta was set to be deported later that month. He would be taking sanctuary at a local church. I felt my chest tighten and wanted to cry, but I knew that there was no time. I immediately started calling my contacts at Unidad Latina en Acción (ULA), a grassroots immigrant rights group based in New Haven. In the past, I had been involved in some direct action campaigns for other people at risk of deportation, all planned by ULA. Their campaigns usually involved people purposefully getting arrested in protest of a deportation. These campaigns tended to be successful and I wanted to plan something similar for Francisco. I also immediately contacted Belén Rodríguez, a fellow Wesleyan student, who had played a major role in organizing against Francisco’s deportation.

As I frantically sent texts and racked my brain for more plans of action, I received another call from Franklin. Senator Richard Blumenthal had just sent a press release announcing that Francisco would be given a six month stay of deportation. The news felt surreal, especially after the shock of the news that came before. I hung up the phone and started frantically sending texts again—this time in celebration. I sent Francisco, Belén, and all the organizers at ULA a text. Immediately, I started sending emails to different student groups who had been involved letting them all know the good news. Once again, I felt like crying, but could not manufacture the tears. Even in my joy and relief, I thought about how six months was not a long time,
and wondered if we’d have to go through this again in July. It was a victory
nevertheless, a tangible one, unlike any I had ever experienced before. At the date,
Francisco has been granted six months stay of removal at every ICE appointment he
has attended since July 2018.

By far, Francisco’s case is the most visible campaign I have worked on at
Wesleyan. It involved several rallies, multiple articles in the Hartford Courant, an
interview for WNPR, and even involvement from President Michael Roth. It also
resulted in a tangible success with an easy to follow arc: there was a problem, people
organized to fix it, and then the problem was (more or less) resolved. It was also
short. I received news of Francisco’s deportation in late November, the bulk of the
organizing took place in early December, and Francisco’s stay of deportation was
announced in mid-January. In almost every way, the organizing I’ve done with
janitors on campus has gone nothing like this. Indeed, I would say most of my
organizing time on campus has been spent going to meetings either with janitors or
students—not on clearly defined actions or visible, public campaigns.

In his book, Direct Action: An Ethnography, David Graeber writes:
“[meetings] are more important even than the actions themselves, since actions
involve confrontations with hostile forces, and meetings are pure zones of social
experiment, spaces in which activists can treat one another as they feel people ought
to treat each other, and to begin to create something of the social world they wish to
bring out” (Graeber 2009, p. 287.) As I tried to show in my last two chapters,
activism does not begin with a protest or direct action. It begins with a conversation
in a hallway, a text message, or a call to action—the time spent in the break room or
eating Peruvian food. The protest, the most visible part of organizing, does not
happen without time—in some cases months or years—of planning. Linda Gordon outlines a dichotomy between the masculine act of activism, which tends to center confrontation, publicity, and militancy and organizing, which aligns with more traditionally feminine skills such as nurturing, listening, and patience. She also highlights a key distinction between organizing and mobilizing. “In organizing, as opposed to mobilizing, personal transformation becomes a part of political empowerment” (Gordon 2002, p 105). Organizing demands “radical patience” (Carlsson 2010) as it can often take months or years to achieve victories.

This chapter is based in my own experience as an organizer on behalf of custodians, which follows my introduction to activism fighting for student centric issues, to organizing with people who I can never speak for. Primarily, I will focus on two cases, the efforts against the deportation of Francisco Acosta and the case of Maria’s unjust firing, while still lingering in the “in between moments”, where organizing was less visible. Both the public activist experiences and the behind the scenes organizer experiences reveal different, yet important aspects, of student-janitor solidarity and, perhaps, even community.

**From Activist to Organizer**

When Wesleyan changed its contractor from American Building Management to Sun Services, it marked a significant change for custodians in terms of their workload and lead to the end of USLAC as an organization. When Maia Reumann-Moore arrived at Wesleyan in the Fall of 2014, she signed up for USLAC, but as far as she knew, they only held one meeting. Her second year, she developed an interest in trying to revitalize the organization and talked to upperclassmen whom had
formerly been members of the organization. Maia told me that when she attempted to question fellow students as to why USLAC had fallen apart, they seemed hesitant to tell her too many details. From what she gathered, it was a combination of burnout on the side of the students after their attempts to help workers reduce their workloads amounted to nothing, and mistrust on the side of the workers, who felt betrayed that students had been supportive of Sun Services when most workers agreed that ABM would have been the better decision. Prior to disbanding, the group’s primary focus had been with janitors, so Maia decided to start there and met with custodial workers in the break room. She sensed that there was a mistrust of students, and much like the students she spoke to, the workers would not tell her much.

In the Spring of 2016, through the work of Maia and other students, USLAC reemerged as a student organization. For the first year or so of its existence, members of USLAC attempted to get to know subcontracted workers, their unions, and their demands. The following year, through my involvement with the Wesleyan Democratic Socialists, I was introduced to many members of USLAC and their projects. Though the two organizations are distinct, they frequently organized together and had a large overlap in their membership. I was intrigued by the organization, but I was entirely too busy with other student groups. Maia contacted me several times, attempting to get me to join the janitor rights working group, but I skirted around saying no for a long time. Though I cared for custodians’ rights, I knew that I was fully incapable of taking on anything else. On top of my own personal problems, this was also around the time that Trump had been elected president, merging my mental health issues with fear and political hopelessness. After that semester, Maia left Wesleyan for a year and a half.
Shortly into second semester, I had a change of heart due to my relationship with Magdalena. In many ways, this decision reignited my passion for activism. As mentioned in the introduction, the type of activism I was doing previously led to a pretty serious mental health crisis. I had never organized before, what I was doing before was mobilizing. In the type of work I had begun to do, there was no particular goal in mind, rather it a was process of learning, both for myself, and the janitors. Though workers were excited to have me around, as I could communicate in Spanish, there was still a need to build trust between us. As first steps toward building relationships, I went to Friday lunch meetings almost every single week and began to get to know each worker and the areas they cleaned.

My previous experiences as an activist had been very student centric, meaning that I did not find myself thinking critically about the kind of interventions I was making. I did not have to think about my positionality because I was largely being an advocate for myself. In the past I had involved myself in actions with First Class and Ajua Campos, demanding better treatment for low-income and Latino students, respectively. Now that I was organizing alongside a group of people, who’s experiences and needs were both diverse, and completely different from my own, I had to be trained in the radical practice of listening. In other words, as a student seeking to organize alongside custodians, I had to leave my ego at the door and decentralize myself.

One of the most memorable examples of this learning curve occurred when Sun Services was bought by Service Management Group (SMG). Though the name had changed, most other aspects of the company remained the same, including the people in management roles. One of the few changes was to the company’s method of
how janitors should clock in and out of work. With Sun Services, workers would clock in and out of work using a code that they would punch into a pin pad. SMG had changed it so that janitors had to scan their irises in the break room in order to clock in and out, thus ensuring that workers could not clock in for each other. Immediately, I was appalled. “What is that thing?” I asked the workers completely shocked. I was there with other student organizers as well and I remember that they shared my disbelief. “Oh, that’s the new *ponchador*”, a worker responded casually. I told the members of USLAC during our regular meeting time and they were outraged, but we ultimately decided that we should not take any further action until speaking to workers about it.

Later that week, I called my dad and told him about this new horrible machine. My dad replied nonchalantly: “Oh yeah, when I worked at the hotel I clocked in with my fingerprint and social security number.” That was a learning moment, though I had worked several jobs in the food service industry, I had not become accustomed to the same violent surveillance working class people encounter everyday. Even as the child of someone who had been subjected to this level of surveillance, I was largely unaware of how insidious it was until this moment. This was my first lesson in organizing *with* rather than organizing *for* custodians, a core facet of the Student Farmworker Alliance (2008). The United Students for Fair Trade (USFT) has a similar practice called “work-in-solidarity” (Curnow and Wilson 2013). Both are based in the idea that though student support is helpful in these movements, workers and their concerns must remain central and students must do the sometimes difficult work of taking the backseat and recognizing that we do not have the same stakes in the struggle. Hypothetically, we could have rallied students around getting
the iris scanner removed and succeeded, but it would ultimately not be worth our time and energy, as this was not a major concern for janitors.

The general sentiment amongst janitors was that there were bigger things to worry about than the method they used to clock in and out. The most prevalent concern, I realized as I conversed with workers, was their growing and sometimes unbearable workloads. They had too much space to clean over their shifts and would have to rush to complete it, sometimes skipping lunch breaks to do so. My USLAC colleague Andrew and I wanted to help alleviate custodians’ workloads, but as inexperienced organizers, we did not know how. We took what we believed to be the most logical route at the time, which was to contact the SMG about worker concerns. For months, we attempted to call, write emails, letters, and even drove up to their headquarters. We learned a lesson that most seasoned organizers know too well: corporations do not tend to respond to being asked to do things in a civil manner. For several months, Andrew and I were sent around in circles, being told by the corporation that we should talk to the union and by the union that we should talk to Wesleyan and by Wesleyan that they had no responsibility in the matter because they were merely paying SMG. The subcontracting system was working perfectly.

This was not wasted time, however. During this period that some might interpret as unproductive, I got to know several workers on a more personal level, some of whom I interviewed for this project. I learned where people were immigrating from, if they had kids or grandkids, and where I could find them on a typical workday. The dynamics of my walks around campus changed, as now I would often recognize janitors who cleaned different areas and was frequently greeted with a friendly “Hola, Emmita”. Whenever I had the time, I would bake something to bring
to the break room on Fridays, which was my attempt at thanking the janitors for the time they spent talking to me about their concerns.

Though at first, our conversations were mostly about labor concerns, they gradually became more personal. Usually someone would ask the students how their classes were going or if we were staying warm. Sometimes we would talk about what our weekend plans were or exchange recipes. Though the conversations were simple and mundane, they helped establish relationships outside of an organizing context. A common occurrence amongst activists, particularly on college campuses (Gorski 2019), is what is described as burnout. Burnout occurs “when the accumulation of stressors associated with activism become so overwhelming they compromise activists’ persistence in their activism” (Gorski 2018, p. 667). Several studies have found that a major cause of burnout is the lack of solidarity and community building within activist groups (Grorski 2018, Chen and Gorski 2015, Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, and Rising 2018). As I highlighted in my introduction, the focus on accomplishing goals rather than relationship building was one of the major reasons of my burning out and temporary hiatus from organizing. Building relationships is crucial to long term organizing projects because it is a lot easier to abandon a cause than it is to abandon a friend.

During the Fall of 2018, SMG wanted to organize a Thanksgiving potluck lunch with the janitors. I remember arriving at the break room as several janitors were remarking on the audacity of the company. On top of the work they already did, they were not only being made to socialize, but were expected to provide everything: food, drinks, and utensils. Many workers expressed anger that the company and the school had so much money, but they would not even provide a small amount of money for a
get together. As a student group, USLAC has access to funds through the Student Budg
cetary Committee, so I proposed that USLAC could call this a “student worker
gathering” and get funding from the school to be able to buy food and supplies. The
workers all seemed to agree, and I immediately started sending out forms. A few days
later, I received a call from an unknown number. It was, Emilia, one of the SMG
managers at Wesleyan. She told me that I should not interfere with the event, because
the corporation wanted this to be an “cultural sharing” activity. She accused me of
telling people not to bring anything. I let her know that janitors were welcome to
bring whatever they wanted, but students would be present and would bring food as
well. The next day, I reported to the break room to talk to the workers about my
conversation with Emilia, one worker responded “And what are they going to
bring?”, rhetorically, knowing that the company would not be bringing anything.

Planning this event was surprisingly tumultuous due to the company’s
policing of communal activities, but it was this event that led me to Francisco. I had
seen him many times at the library but continued to feel uncomfortable about
approaching custodians in Spanish and was petrified of offending or disturbing
someone who was working. In this specific setting, however, it was not only
appropriate, but encouraged for me to start conversations with people. At the potluck,
Belén, Francisco, and I conversed about classes, immigration, and Thanksgiving
plans. Little did we know, the next time the three of us met, the circumstances would
be almost unimaginable.

Keep Francisco Home: La Lucha Obrera no Tiene Fronteras
When Belén informed me about Francisco’s impending deportation, I was absolutely devastated, but did not dwell on the tragedy of the situation for long, as I knew there was a lot of work to be done. The next day, I went to look for Francisco at the Science Library. I was nervous to see him, as deportation is a very sensitive topic and I had only met him once before. To my surprise, he seemed calm as ever. In fact, very few times during this process did I ever see him sad or stressed out. He told me a little bit more about his particular situation. He had been a math and science teacher in Colombia until the FARC, a terrorist organization, started taking power in the town where he taught. They specifically targeted teachers because their main recruits were young students. Francisco received a death threat from a member of the FARC and that’s when he decided to leave for the United States. For the past sixteen years, he had done yearly check ins with ICE, but this year they had ordered his deportation.

America under Trump is terrifying, especially for immigrants. In Connecticut, I had been in touch with ULA and taken part in fundraising and direct action for Connecticut residents like Luis Barrios, Marco Reyes, and Franklin and Gioconda Ramos, all of whom had received stays of deportation due to community organizing and direct action. It seemed like deportation cases were becoming more frequent, more public, and targeting people that the American public did not view as disposable (as opposed to the deportations that occurred under Obama, targeting criminals). ULA and other Connecticut organizations had stopped deportations through direct action before and I knew something could be done about Francisco’s case. As opposed to the organizing I had been doing regarding labor practices, a deportation crisis was a very visible issue at the time and one very easy to take a stance on:
stopping the deportation of an innocent man was something many people could get behind.

Belén and I soon got in touch with Franklin Soult, who would do the bulk of the organizing for Francisco’s case on the union’s end. Francisco had something that many people facing deportation do not, ties to a prestigious university and thus, to some very important people. As I have established, belonging to an institution with a history as complex as Wesleyan’s is fraught, Belén and I agreed that we needed “the Wesleyan community” to be present at Francisco’s rally. We wanted to let ICE know that people with prestige were supporting Francisco and willing to fight for him to stay in this country. A key aspect of deportation is a person's disposability within a national society, thus it is easier to deport people who we may consider dangerous or criminal. By connecting him to a “Distinctively American” (Koblik and Gruabard 2000) institution like Wesleyan, we made him seem less disposable in the eyes of ICE. We began to send emails to groups that we were a part of: USLAC, Ajua Campos, Wesleyan Democratic Socialists, the Women of Color Collective, and our classes. One professor, Kehaulani Kauanui, expressed particular interest in the case, and made sure staff and faculty were aware of Francisco’s case. We asked people to pass information along to anyone who might be interested. Soon, we had a spreadsheet with close to fifty names and just enough drivers to get everyone from Wesleyan to Hartford. The rally was taking place in the midst of finals week, so we were not expecting a large turnout, but we managed to get a sizable number of people to the Hartford Immigration Office in support of Francisco.

The rally was not exclusively for Francisco; it was also in support of immigrants who had Temporary Protected Status and a couple of other individuals
with deportation orders. There was a long list of speakers, including state senators, grassroots activists, and lastly, Francisco. Before Francisco went up to speak, Belén and I were asked to give a statement on behalf of Wesleyan students. We gave a short speech that emphasized that Wesleyan students, staff, and faculty would continue to show their support for Francisco through the whole process. I did not know if this would be true at the time. I knew Belén and I would do whatever we could, but we were both heading home out of state soon and I was going to be abroad the next semester. By that point, I had gotten to know Francisco well. Belén and I had organized practically everything for this on the student’s end. We had found drivers, made sure everyone had a way to get to the rally, and bought poster making materials. If it was necessary, would someone else do this in our absence? What would happen to Francisco’s case during the winter break, when most students left the state? With this doubt in mind, we still felt it was important to stress continuing support. After we read our statement, Francisco went up read his. Belén served as his translator. I listened again to a story I had heard several times before and I was as angry as the first time I had heard it.

After the rally, many students came up to Francisco, as he was very popular amongst students who studied in the Science Library. Belén and I left the rally shortly after it ended, knowing there would still be much more to do. As I said, most of the people who came to the rally were students, but we knew faculty would be interested in getting involved. There is no convenient time for a deportation to happen, but it was the end of the semester, resulting in a busy time for everyone, including professors. I thought if we were weaponizing our privilege, the involvement of professors would only strengthen Francisco’s case. The easiest way, I thought, would
be a statement of support signed by faculty. I brought the idea to Belén, Francisco, and Franklin, who expressed immediate support. In the interest of time, Belén and I wrote a short and vague statement of support. We did not want to cause any controversy or make people sign up for a task they were not ready to take on. We sent the email to as many departments as we could and as well as several student group listservs, asking students to ask their departments and professors to sign on.

The very next morning, I checked the survey we had sent out and noticed that we had gotten almost sixty responses. I was blown away by the amount of support we were getting. Every time I reloaded the page, there would be a few more responses. Library and ITS workers were also signing on to the petition, so we amended it to represent faculty and staff. We also received emails from several staff and faculty members asking if there was more to do to help. At this point, I was overwhelmed by the responses, and they just kept coming in, spanning almost every academic department, as well as libraries, admissions, counseling and psychological services, and more. I would check the list at least once an hour and was shocked when I saw that Michael Roth and Antonio Farias had signed on. Belén and I had previously asked one of our friends on the undocumented student’s committee to ask the administration for help and were told that the administration would not involve itself in the case due to conflicts with the union and their contract with SMG.

Roth’s involvement is an example of “weaponizing privilege” as a student activist connected to a problematic institution. Shortly after he signed, Roth put up a post on his blog and did an interview with the Chronicle of Higher Education. It was infuriating. His blog post was somehow carefully worded and hastily put together at

29 Former Dean of Equity and Inclusion at Wesleyan.
once. The first sentence had a typo, but what angered me the most was the last line “I am contacting key congressional members to enlist their support, and we will do our best to reverse what seems to be an unjust, mean-spirited effort to deport a valued member of our community.” Seems to be. Even in his support, he doubts the validity of Francisco’s claims, setting up a safety net in case anything incriminating is revealed about Francisco. *Mean spirited*. Deportation is not ‘mean’, it’s violent, its traumatic, it’s tragic. But most of all, *valued member of our community* (Vimal and Read 2017).

Nearly every janitor that I have spoken to has told me they are overworked. Janitors that have worked at Wesleyan for years told me that the school hadn’t so much as given them a thank you card for the holidays. Though he can accept members of the community being given unreasonable workloads, he draws the line at deportation. He would benefit more from supporting Francisco’s deportation, but has little to gain from establishing fair labor practices. Roth linked to our petition, but made no mention of the union and student organizing that had occurred previously. The comments commended him for his brave actions. His interview with the Chronicle of Higher Education was equally disgusting. He used *seems to be* again. There is so much to unpack in those three words (Roth 2017c). Once again, there was no mention of Belén, Franklin, or anyone, but himself. Later in the interview, Roth spoke about his affirmative action for conservatives. It was almost laughable that in an interview about stopping someone’s deportation, his adamant support for conservatives (some of the biggest defenders of deportation) continued.

As I organized in support of Francisco, I played into a lot of tactics I do not support—and I was aware of it. I did not say anything about Roth was gaining social
capital off of the suffering of immigrants and the labor of two female students of color. I realized Roth could have connections that could help Francisco and the media attention Roth would get could potentially get around to ICE. Whenever I was interviewed, I would talk about Francisco’s lack of a criminal record, even though I do not personally believe that so called criminals are deserving of deportations. I constantly meditated on the fact that this was not about me, it was about Francisco, and I would do what was best for his case, even if it went against what I believed. I was walking a fine line, something that you often have to do as a student activist in solidarity with workers. With deportation protests, you need to get as many bodies and people on your side as possible, and by getting too critical about respectability politics would alienate potential supporters. At the end of the day, it was a choice between deciding to change narratives about who deserves to be in America or making this individual case successful. As a green card holder and a student, I have less at stake. While I may have wanted to publicly call out Roth or talk about how criminality shouldn’t be a determining factor in deportations, it would have weakened Francisco’s case.

I did an interview with Connecticut Public Radio, which was the only one I did for publications outside of Wesleyan. Francisco, Franklin, Professor Kehaulani Kauanui, and I sat down with Frankie Graziano, a former sports journalist who now covers politics. The interview began focusing on Franklin and Francisco, with Franklin acting as his translator. Graziano asked questions that I’m sure Francisco had been asked a thousand times: “Why did you come to the US?” “How long have you been here?” “Where do you work?” The conversation turned to talking about Francisco’s family: his wife and his two sons. He had originally planned to immigrate
to the US, ask for asylum, be approved, and then bring his family to live with him. Because his asylum petition was never approved, he was unable to bring his family over legally. He had not seen them since he left. During this portion of the interview, Francisco got very emotional and began to cry. I got up to put my hand on his shoulder. It was hard to see him like this; I had never seen him get emotional over anything during the whole process. With that, Graziano turned to me. I assumed that the majority of people who would hear this would be outside of Wesleyan. I knew this interview would not have a huge impact on the outcome, but I wanted to present my best self possible. I don’t remember the questions well, but there were some personal questions, some about Francisco’s case and immigration politics in general, and a few about student involvement in the case.

At the end of the interview, I said goodbye to Francisco. I was going home that weekend and I would not be returning for the spring semester. I told Francisco about my plans to study abroad, I wished him good luck, and I told him I’d see him in the fall even though his fate in this country was yet to be determined. That night I went home and cried not due to exhaustion or fear, it was anger. I was angry that Francisco had leave his family behind, angry that borders existed, angry that Frankie Graziano had made Francisco upset.

I left campus that winter more nervous and unsure than anything. I deeply trusted Belén. I knew that she felt similar to me, Francisco was more than just a case and she knew him far better than I did. As long as Belén was around, organizing efforts would continue. But I still worried that student support would not remain as belligerent if the campaign ended up lasting for months. A few days after my departure, there was another rally to support Francisco during his ankle bracelet
fitting. Neither Belén or I could be there and, at that point, most students would have left campus. The crowd this time was smaller, but many representatives, organizers, and Wesleyan staff and students showed up. Everything went as planned, Francisco was not detained, he was fitted with an ankle bracelet and sent home.

Francisco’s case was extraordinary, yet increasingly common under the new presidential administration, and this made it distinctive from other kinds of campus organizing I had done. Because immigration and deportation was frequently covered in the media, it was on everyone’s mind. We did not have to educate people about the horrors of deportation because they say it on TV or in the news. Abusive labor practices were not something students were truly aware of and demanded a lot of energy just to make people knowledgeable about the current situation. Francisco’s case kept teaching me lessons about the challenges of student activism. Before this case, I had never organized around something so urgent and life altering. This case showed me how far labor activism can reach, beyond and within borders. While admissions pamphlets may paint student activism as a case of Wesleyan versus the world, Francisco’s case was an example of how campus is deeply entrenched in American and international political trends, conflicts, and movements.

Maria’s Story

When I returned to campus for my last year in August of 2018, I had a couple of organizing related goals in mind. The first and most important one was to finally get more custodial workers, which is what most janitors had told me they had wanted since the beginnings of my involvement in USLAC. The second was to gather ethnographic materials for my thesis. I hoped that these two goals would work in tandem with each other. By spending time having conversations with janitors, I would
be able to gather more information about the work conditions in the university. Activist ethnography, like the kind I am engaging in, is helpful in both capturing and reproducing movements, while retaining a critical and reflexive minds as one organizes.

In addition to conducting ethnographic research, I continued to go to the break room every Friday and converse with janitors about general problems. It was through my summer research that I stepped into a new role: custodians would now come to me with more specific, small scale concerns. For example, Lucy told me that there were not enough trash cans in the program house she cleaned and another janitor told me that students had left dorm furniture in the hallways, which made his job much harder. Janitors are not allowed to complain directly to students, meaning that I had the responsibility of reaching out to students. Most of these were easy fixes, usually resolved through an email or Facebook message. I was happy to be able to do this work, knowing that simple actions would help make janitors’ jobs marginally easier.

In early October, things took an unexpected turn, I checked my phone and saw that I had several missed calls from an unknown number. When I called back, an unfamiliar voice answered in Spanish. She identified herself as Maria and told me that she had recently been unjustly fired. She had gotten my information through another janitor, whom she did not name. The company alleged that she had been sleeping on the job, but she insisted that she had simply been taking a short break to eat during her shift at the Freeman Athletic Center. Throughout the years, I had heard from many custodians that the Athletic Center was one of the most difficult buildings to clean in the school because of its size and frequent use for athletic events. Maria disclosed to me that she lived with diabetes and blood pressure issues. For this reason,
she had to take breaks to rest and eat. I was outraged and continued to listen to her story. She had gone to Astrid, but she refused to help Maria, saying that because she couldn’t do anything because Maria had already been fired by SMG. She continued by saying that Astrid was not a moral person and a bad union steward. This stopped me in my tracks. I respected and trusted Astrid deeply. I was surprised and somewhat offended, but I chose not to let this color my judgement of the situation. For the time being, I would have to hold two truths: that Astrid was a trusted friend and that Maria’s story was correct.

This phone call took place on a Friday, and I was planning on meeting with workers in the break room later that day, as per usual. I met with two students, Xiomara and Ivanna, and updated them on the situation as we walked down Church Street. Both of them expressed deep concern and willingness to organize but were suspicious of Maria’s characterization of Astrid. After discussing some worker concerns, we asked Astrid about Maria. She told us that management had received several pictures of Maria sleeping on the job, in addition to other complaints from Wesleyan employees at the Athletic Center. Although I still saw Maria’s firing as being completely unjust, I understood how Astrid would think that there was nothing to be done, especially if the company told her they had definitive proof. It was clear that Astrid did not have a lot of information about the case, and suggested we go talk to Kevin to get more information. Daniela, Ivanna, and I decided to walk to Kevin’s office that very afternoon. We navigated the dark WestCo tunnels to get to his secluded office. From the beginning, it was evident that Kevin would not be providing us with any useful information. According to him, he did not want to violate any HR policies and asked that I leave my phone number for him to call me.
back. He never did. Ever since this Friday, Maria and her unjust firing, have been central the organizing I’ve been doing during my last year at Wesleyan.

Maria’s case has been the first time that I experienced a campaign that janitors had disagreements on. Having read ethnographies of several social movements (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, Gould 2009, Graeber 2009), it is almost shocking that it took me nearly two years to encounter. Before I begin to describe the ways in which janitors disagreed, I need to affirm one thing: everyone believed that Maria deserved to be rehired by SMG. The disagreements centered around three main topics: 1) whether or not Maria’s firing was unjust, 2) whether Maria was lying to students about her financial situation, and lastly, 3) whether Maria’s case should be tied to the larger worker struggle. These disagreements were spurred by a student petition that urged Wesleyan to rehire Maria and hire five more workers, while also naming specific complaints from workers such as exploitation and age discrimination.

Something many students regret, looking back at this campaign, is that we did not get enough worker input before releasing the petition. Though the situation was urgent and required the petition to be circulated as soon as possible, USLAC (myself included) should have tried harder to include workers in the writing process. That being said, we did get the approval from both union stewards prior to circulating the petition. As I go on to describe these disagreements, I will keep names out the best as I can, as to avoid any further tensions amongst janitors.

There were many janitors who wholeheartedly agreed with management’s story about Maria sleeping on the job, while others sided with Maria. Others expressed discomfort at the fundraising campaign that students had started to help Maria and her family after she had been evicted. Some workers felt like the word
“exploited” should not have been used to describe janitors’ conditions. At the time, this did not make sense to me. Everything that custodians had told me up to that point fit under the category of exploitation, however, this demonstrated that I still had a lot to learn about organizing. To myself, and the other students who wrote the petition, workers were being exploited and we wrote that line, not thinking about how it would feel to be described as exploited, especially if your job is something that you take pride in. Even looking back on it, I am failing to come up with a way in which everyone would be satisfied. Had I excluded the sentence on exploitation, there likely would have been people who were upset because they did feel exploited.

Though I trusted and valued those who were critical of the Maria campaign, I also could not bring myself to abandon her. I am unsure how other students who worked on the campaign dealt with these contradictions, but for me, I chose to believe that every worker was right. Though there was a clear divide between those supportive of Maria and her case and those who were more critical, and palpable tensions between the two groups, I knew that every janitor was choosing their side based on the information they had and from what I had gathered, no one was purposefully acting maliciously. However, this decision was complicated by my personal relationships to janitors. I feared that Astrid or Diana would begin to distrust or dislike me based on the decisions I made. Though I should have known better than this, I took criticisms against the petitions personally and felt that these new tensions were the result of my failures. To my relief, this was not the case.

Unexpected Results
When I presented Maria’s petition to janitors, on a Friday afternoon, you could feel the tension in the room. Janitors who were not supportive of the decisions made themselves heard. Some were very blunt about their distaste for Maria or their negative experiences with her as a coworker. Some people yelled, some people left, and some people let everyone know their disdain through silence and a facial expression. I was mortified, though I decided to continue helping Maria. I was surprised when I ran into a particularly critical worker one day and she greeted me with a kiss on the cheek and a warm smile. At this point, though we were not incredibly close, she had a trust in me that could not be broken by a single disagreement. Looking back on it, I do not think a single worker who disagreed with Maria’s case took it upon me personally. Though I certainly made mistakes, the trust I had established with certain workers over two years of organizing prevented these mistakes from ruining any relationships. Had this happened when I was a sophomore, perhaps these results would not have been the same. Perhaps workers would have never trusted me again. This is why you cannot begin to act until you have established common links between organizers, otherwise, the base will not make it through any conflicts. This is where community begins.

**Organizing 101**

I am by no means an organizing expert. Despite the range of issues I have organized around and them I have spent organizing, I only feel marginally more prepared to take on a large organizing project than I did when I first walked into that break room. Each project carries with it opinions, stakes, and questions. What action plan needs to be taken? Will this campaign require me to make myself a very public
figure or will I need to work behind the scenes, having one on one conversations with janitors about their work problems? Even with the same campaign, I find myself juggling multiple roles.

Geographically, my organizing has taken place on campus, but its entangled with America and the many nations SMG custodians come from. Temporally, it is everywhere at once. I look back to the past and think of my “activist parents” of the Justice for Janitors movement both at Wesleyan and at large, examining what their struggles were and comparing them to the struggles janitors face now. I think about the present. How every word I say, every text I send, every poster I make carries significance. How does what I am doing presently reflect on myself? on others? Most importantly, organizing is located in the future, sometimes near, but sometimes so far its almost unimaginable. Perhaps, in the near future I see Maria getting her job back, Wesleyan hiring five more workers, and Francisco getting his stay of deportation extended. Looking beyond that, maybe even more than a lifetime, I imagine a world where community is no longer a marketing tool and only something humans share and enact in everyday practice.
Epilogue

Today was Astrid’s last day at Wesleyan University. I had found out from Francisco earlier this week that she had received a new job at UConn, with the same company and union, but in a more convenient location. I was happy for her, of course, but my first reaction was sadness, in the most selfish possible way. Getting to know Astrid has been one of the greatest privileges of my time at Wesleyan. I admired her passion for workers’ rights, her kindness, and her sense of humor. I thought it was both comforting and terrifying when she yelled at me for not wearing warm enough clothes on a particularly cold day. I immediately went home and changed. She would give me rides home from the break room if it was too cold and would always make sure I was eating enough. When I told my friend Sophie that Astrid was leaving she said “that is such a big loss for the union.” Oh right, the union, I thought. Astrid’s indispensable role as a steward had gotten lost in my own personal sadness.

It did not make sense that I should get this upset over Astrid leaving. After all, I too would be leaving Wesleyan in a few short months, but it was hard to imagine my remaining Friday afternoons without walking into the break room and getting a “Hola, Emmita, cómo estás?” from Astrid. The day I write this epilogue to my thesis, Sandra and Isabela put together a small going away party in the Nicolson lounge. I brought papa a la huancaina, flowers, and a thank you card signed by USLAC members. Almost everyone who showed up contributed something: cakes, cookies, juice, chicken, fresh fruit. Astrid was tearing up, you could tell that leaving Wesleyan was not an easy decision for her. She had developed close friendships with Sandra, Diana, and Isabel, gotten to see countless students graduate, and helped dozens of
workers as steward. She was feeling nostalgic and gathered the students around to tell us about how she sees students change from seeing them on move in day with their parents, to later in the semester when their parents are gone and they “become crazy”. She told jokes through tears and you could tell that everyone in that room deeply appreciated her. When she started crying, Isabel or Diana would give her a hug and tell her a joke to try to make her smile.

The party was both a social event and an organizing opportunity. Diana showed me pictures of her granddaughter, who she is going to be meeting for the first time when she travels back to Colombia in March. Isabel told me about the basketball players who live in the dorm she cleans and how she’s been picking up extra shifts. I talked to Francisco about my spring break trip to Puerto Rico. Astrid gave a moving goodbye speech, recalling her time at Wesleyan, her friendships, the students she’s gotten to know (she appreciates them all, even the crazy ones), and thanking the current students for being organized and supportive. Her voice cracked as she said “Although the work here is very difficult, I will miss Wesleyan.” She then shifted her speech to talk about the opening position for union steward, which Sandra and Francisco were both considering applying for. She affirmed that she trusted both of them and believed they would do a good job, while also encouraging others to run, and have a democratically elected position. She may have been leaving, but she still cared that her peers were left in good hands.

This was not the first good bye of the year. Last semester, Lucy had also left for UConn, the same campus that Astrid is moving too. There was a similar style of celebration. As she was cutting her cake, I turned to Lucy and said, “I’m going to miss you” and she replied, “That’s what it’s all about, right? Having people who will
miss you”. At these celebrations, we did not talk about organizing and no one made remarks about not liking their jobs. It seemed that every time my plate was empty, someone would approach me, remark on how skinny I was, and proceed to provide me more food. We return to the break room, a small, brown room with no windows. This room was not built with the intention of holding going away parties and potlucks and organizing meetings and yet here we all were.

As my own departure approaches, one singular line keeps repeating in my head “what are we going to do once you graduate?”, something that has been asked of me more and more frequently by janitors as graduation day approaches. It breaks my heart. It makes me not want to leave. I take no pride in this sentiment. I always tell those who ask that there are other students who will continue to do this work, but we all know that it is more than just about doing the work. I do not know what I going to happen once I leave, but what I hope is that the work I and others have done over the past four years will create a lasting impact, one that will improve the working conditions of Wesleyan custodians and can serve as a guide for student activists to come.

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This Friday felt different. I made eye contact with people and smiled. I walked around campus with a spring in my step. I was sleep deprived, yet full of energy. It was the third day (and last) of WesFest. For the occasion, USLAC had organized series of protests and direct actions demanding that the Wesleyan administration hire five more custodians. On Wednesday, students picketed outside of the admissions office for eight hours. At noon, we held a rally attended by over 200 people. At that rally, custodians who had previously told me they were afraid to show up to rallies
took the megaphone out of my hands and started leading chants. *Si se puede!*

Thursday demanded a change of tactics: shut it down. And so we did. Students screamed over Roth’s speeches, stormed parent to parent panels, and interrupted information sessions. Eleven of us are to receive punishment from the administration. In an impromptu dinner meeting, the UOC was packed with students, some USLAC usuals, but mainly people who I had never even met before, who had within the last two days, decided to dedicate themselves to this campaign, putting their jobs, their status as students, and in some cases their bodies on the line. The floor was littered with empty pizza boxes as we received an all campus email entitled “Disruptions Today”. We smiled and thought *we really fucked this up for them.* If anything, this invigorated us further. They were scared of us. We were not scared of them.

Then Friday: another day, another picket. To my surprise, after everything we had gone through on Thursday, a steady amount of students stayed outside of admissions from 9AM to 1PM, chanting and marching. As Physical Plant and SMG trucks passed the office of admissions, they beeped in support. When I ran into fellow organizers, we all remarked gleefully about how filled with hope and excitement we were. We had ruined WesFest. On day three of protests, no one was even close to being burned out. It seemed like I could not walk more than a block without running into someone who had either participated in the actions to remark on how well they had gone or someone who had not taken part, but had heard of the actions, to offer a congratulations. It was ironic because we had not won anything. We were still very much in it, but there was something special about the way that you absolutely could not have attended WesFest without knowing about this.
Like most Fridays, Maia and I headed to the SMG breakroom at noon and met with janitors who had not attended the rally. We told them about the protest, the picketing, the attendance of physical plant workers in solidarity, the fact that public safety had called the police. They laughed, but not because they were making fun of us. They thought it was hilarious how badly we messed with their event. We told them that Roth had been saying that he had “data” that said janitors were not overworked. “Okay, well, doesn’t he come do the work with us? He’s never had to do a job like this in his life”, a janitor replied. The workers who had not shown up to the rally mainly missed it for two reasons: their workload on Wednesday had been too heavy and they could not leave before noon or they were afraid of the consequences. However, when they saw videos and pictures of the rally, you could feel their minds change. We told them about another rally next Friday and all of them said they would come.

We walked back to the Admissions Office where picketing continued for another hour. A group of organizers got lunch together in the dining hall and picked up copies of that day’s Argus, which had our picture on the front cover. When I was getting some food at the dining hall I ran into Lloyd, who had interviewed for this project. He said nothing, pointed at me, and gestured “come here”. I approached him, slightly nervous. He shook my hand and said “thank you”. I was joined by May and Ivanna, two organizers, and the four of us chatted about the past three days events. More to come, we stressed. We sat at the dining hall tables making endless jokes about the past three day’s events. We would give each other fake SJB points and make fun of Michael Roth’s constant evocations of free speech. I later received a call from a worker who told me the workers wanted to put together a gathering and bring
food for me to thank me for helping them. Everyone was celebrating. Our demands had not been met, but something had changed.
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