3.

A Shifting Hierarchy

> *By and large, everybody's great, but you do run into class issues—which has gotten better, but for a long time there was quite a three-tiered perception of faculty practically being the Brahmin in the caste system and the staff being untouchable. Where faculty would have parties completely apart, administration would have parties completely apart, and in fact I have been invited to those if I wanted to come and clean up. Which I refused to do. [laughs] Because, you know. You're staff, but you're really not second-class citizens*
>
> *–non-exempt staff member*

Many people spoke to me of social inequality in the Pseudonym College community, often using words like class, caste, and hierarchy—a vocabulary of discrete and unequal categories, of stratification. Most often it was members of the staff—both exempt and non-exempt—and of the senior administration who introduced such analyses. These conversations tended to revolve around the relationship among support staff, administrative staff, and faculty members. In fact, most people acknowledged the existence of three other constituencies on campus as well—senior administration, contracted workers, and students—but they were far less likely, without prompting, to position these groups within the hierarchy. Likely the focus on these three groups of employees is related to the framing of the broader public discourse about transforming structures of class at the college.

In the narratives people shared with me, relationships among support staff, administrative staff, and faculty tended to resolve themselves into two binary oppositions; faculty versus the two groups of staff combined, and support staff versus the combination of faculty and administrative staff. In part the choice between these two binaries is a question of with whom the class allegiances of the administrative staff lie.

Faculty versus staff

> *Really what it amounts to is those people who might get tenure at Pseudonym College and those people who might not.*
>
> *-exempt staff member*

> *Faculty can make those demands because faculty can demand anything they want to. They're tenured. They're going to outlive all of us—I mean there's almost no administrator who ever stays as long as a faculty member. Nobody stays for 40 years, mostly. But the problem that they [faculty] have is that they don't have control over the purse string.*
>
> *–exempt staff member*

> *[O]ur role really is to be supportive of the institution and to be good advocates for the institution. So there's always this kind of lingering question, how critical can we be or should we be? .... How vocal can you be before you cross that line and are not seen as—you know, the administrative is the team that supports the stands of the institution. If you're a faculty member and you disagree with a college policy and you're tenured, you say whatever you want. Like, "That's really silly for the college to build that building there." You probably shouldn't say that as an administrator.*
>
> *-exempt staff member*

In the traditional academic social order, the faculty always comes first—well, except for perhaps the senior administration and the Board of Trustees, but people rarely seem to talk about these constituencies—and tenure is the supreme marker of their primacy, even though, of course, not all faculty members have tenure. In the increasingly corporatized work environments of the United States, the practice of tenure is coming to look more and more audaciously iconoclastic. Although no one explicitly suggested this to me, I am inclined to wonder whether the fear of ultimately losing the institution of tenure might be an important undercurrent in faculty's sense of being under attack. The idea is not so far-fetched—while small colleges may not yet be in quite this situation, Freeman notes that already the trend of increased reliance on graduate student and adjunct labor has reached the point where "some universities have attempted to eliminate tenure track positions altogether." (250)

Tenure draws upon two major currencies in the college/workplace community: safety and longevity. The safety comes in the form of near-absolute job security, and is closely linked to the freedom to speak one's mind. As I will discuss more in Chapter 6, job security is one key factor that many people identify in determining how much voice one has in the workplace. One of the speakers quoted above claims that "faculty can demand anything they want to," and many others made similar statements in equally strong terms.

The safety of tenure creates a special privileged class at the college, since, to some extent, everyone else has to worry that their jobs might be on the line in any action they take. As the administrator quoted in the third epigraph notes, administrators feel more constrained both by their lack of tenure and by their understanding of their expected role in the institution. Perhaps because administrative positions as a category have been emerging over some of the same period as the corporatization of the institution has been going on, their positions are designed around the single-minded, goal-oriented business ethos, which stands in sharp opposition to this characterization of the extreme, almost anarchic freedom of the professorial class.

The other thing that tenure does for you is keep you at the college for a long time, and many people told me that longevity buys you a great deal of respect in the Pseudonym community—and conversely, that community members who tend not to stay long or are not expected to stay long have less legitimacy to claim a right to influence decision-making. This value can function to disenfranchise both contract workers and students. Many people cited the high turnover rate of Unnamed Contractor custodial workers as one barrier to their coming to be seen as full members of the college

community. Some staff members, I was told, are suspicious of student activists because most will only be at the college for four years. An administrator told me that sometimes, when students organize opposition to college projects, decision-makers will simply choose to wait them out, carrying forward the plans as soon as those students have graduated.

Insofar as longevity is a source of power and legitimacy, then, faculty have got everyone beat—"they're going to outlive all of us," as the administrator notes above. (Or as one professor quipped to me, "In the faculty community, most of us are here forever. Tenure is more permanent than most marriages.") But there is an interesting ambiguity in the second epigraph above, when the speaker notes: "I mean there's almost no administrator who ever stays as long as a faculty member…. But the problem that they have is that they don't have control over the purse string." Here again is an ambivalence about the relationship between faculty and administrators, linked to a broader dynamic of change in how power is allocated in the college community. One part of corporatization is the emergence of a new class, administrators, whose job is to control some of what faculty used to control; another part of corporatization is the increasing centrality of the budget to all other decisions, and hence the increasing relative influence of the group, administrators, whose job it is to make budgetary decisions. Of course, this generalization is truer of some administrators than others, since the category includes people in a variety of jobs, some of which have more control over "purse strings" than others.[1]

[1] This is also where the fuzziness of the boundary between administrators and administration—that is, between administrative staff and senior administration—becomes most noticeable to me, because the biggest fiscal decisions are really in the hands of senior administrators and the Board of Managers. While

In relation to the system of faculty privilege, administrators sometimes define themselves in solidarity with support staff members. In fact, a formal process of combining the categories was underway while I was visiting Pseudonym. However, there are also moments in which administrators seem quite invested in identifying themselves in opposition to support staff, sometimes by placing themselves in the same category as faculty members. Support staff, in turn, sometimes talked about administrators as their allies, and other times talked about them as a constituency just as oppressive as—or even more oppressive than—the faculty.

Administrators (and faculty) versus support staff

> *It's kind of easy to assume that the class structure is primarily the fault of the faculty, but in fact I don't think that appears to be the case. It's more widespread than that. I've had support staff tell me, "Compared to administrators, faculty aren't bad." [laughs] The real problem, in terms of people perceiving class based on that employee classification, they see as being among administrators rather than among faculty. Which really fascinated me, and depressed me.*
>
> *-exempt staff member*

> *You need economists, to be able to have those kinds of conversations, because you need to be able to look at the numbers in really complicated ways. You know, opportunity cost. Lost opportunity cost. The value of x number of employees. The value of senior employees versus junior employees. I mean, for example, it doesn't cost you very much to replace a groundskeeper who has children at the children's center. It costs you a lot to replace a vice president. So how do you judge the value of the Children's Center, who should get into the Children's Center, all those kind of things.*
>
> *-exempt staff member*

I repeatedly heard people invoke the idea that some people are more central to the college's mission than others; often the argument was that faculty are the most directly engaged with the educational project, and therefore attracting good faculty is more important than attracting good candidates for other jobs at the college. Sometimes,

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they are officially administrators, it seems clear to me that senior administration is not really the same

however—as in the second quotation above—administrators drew on a similar kind of rhetoric to argue their own importance relative to other groups on campus. From the idea that money is the most real consideration, it follows that people's real relationship to the college community can usefully be quantified in fiscal terms—the monetary value of an employee, for instance, and the cost of suitably replacing them. This speaker suggests that such calculations ought to play some role in determining eligibility for benefits like the Children's Center. In the context of the interview, this administrator certainly made this suggestion with a fair amount of ambivalence and hedging—but they made it nonetheless.

The underlying ethos of both arguments is that the college should do more for those who are more valuable to it. These are elitist discourses—they promote and sustain the inequalities of class within the institution. I argued in Chapter 2 that, even as the elitism of faculty dominance is on the decline at Pseudonym, a new elitism rooted in corporatization is on the rise. The speaker in the first epigraph suggests that in some ways administrators—those identified with the increasingly important currencies of professionalism and market value—are emerging as a new, or an additional, elite class in the institution.

If this is possible, then whatever it is that has been undermining the old hierarchy must not be damaging the foundational ideology. To some extent it is still possible for groups to claim privilege on the grounds of being more important or valuable to the college. It is only faculty's access to such a claim that is being challenged—so that even as it becomes less politically feasible to say that faculty are more valuable than staff, it remains (or becomes increasingly) acceptable to say that some staff are more valuable

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constituency as those represented by the Committee on Administrative Issues.

than others. In response to this second trend, this developing hierarchy between the two broad classes of staff, the college decided to make what seems at first, at least in some ways, to be a structural solution.

From administrative and support staff to exempt and non-exempt

While I was visiting, Pseudonym College was in the midst of a social and organizational shift, an official reorganization of the system of classifying staff. Part of this change involved abandoning the terminological distinction between "administrative staff" and "support staff." As various people explained to me, both groups would now fall under the general category of "staff"—though they would still be divided into the legal categories of "exempt" and "non-exempt" status, depending on their eligibility for overtime. (These categories were mostly, but not entirely, coterminous with the old administrative and support staff categories—more on this later.) The change also involved some concrete equalizing of such things as benefits between the groups, but people I spoke with were not clear exactly how far the leveling might extend. They pointed out such things as continuing discrepancies in vacation days and meetings still closed for administrators only, and wondered whether or not these might become standardized across the new, broader category.

Aside from the actual change of labels, the biggest effect people talked about was the combination of the two staff governance organizations, the Support Staff Advisory Council (SSAC) and the Committee on Administrative Issues (CAI), into one new Staff Council (too new, or too concise, to have an acronym). Staff members from both sides of the divide were excited about this—the general sentiment was that it would benefit support staff to be allied with this more powerful group, but also that many of the issues

of the two groups were similar and becoming unified would be a stronger position for both. Similarly, staff members were mostly in favor of unifying the two classifications in general—support staff were universally so, but a couple of administrators admitted to some ambivalence about the prospect of giving up the social status and material advantages of their administrative status.

I heard a variety of narratives about who or what initiated this constellation of changes around staff categorization; it seems likely that each of these factors played some role in the process, but perhaps some more than others. Some people credited conversations that took place as part of the Mapping Process, a kind of strategic planning process that Joe Newpresident had laid out, in which members of all campus constituencies (except the contract workers) had the opportunity to involve themselves in a series of meetings about the college's future. Others, including many who had been involved in the two staff governance organizations, told me that—long before the Mapping Process began—the particular leaders of the SSAC and CAI had started meeting together to talk about their common ground and about the possibility of combining. Still others told how the Human Resources department had considered adding this new category, "professional staff," which would have been in between support staff and administrators—according to this narrative, the prospect of such a change made people realize that more hierarchy would be counterproductive when the college should really be moving towards more equality. Of course, these explanations may, and probably do, overlap to reflect a multilayered truth. Nonetheless, it is worth considering the variation in originary stories and emphases as part of the larger question of how change happens at the college. A few people suggested that the student-led Pseudonym College Fair Labor

Campaign played a role in making the change possible—but if they did, it was in a subtle and indirect way, a matter of climate and discourse and empowerment, for these issues of status and categories were never an explicit part of the PCFLC's program.

The symbolic and the concrete

—But still. I'm an administrator, I get 22 days of vacation a year. For support staff, you start out with 10. And you can build to 20 over a period of 15 years.
AB: Wow. So you started with 22?
—We start with 22, we end with 22. We actually get more days off in a year that, because we also get 8 or 9 days at the holiday break in December, and a couple days at Thanksgiving. But just in terms of discretionary vacation days, a support staff starts off with 10, and then gets one a year over a period of years, so that I think after the end of 15 years they're up to 20. And then that's just one example of—even if we've now moved to the point where we invite all staff—meaning, there's now the term "faculty" and "staff." All staff now are invited to things like academic luncheons where people might talk about their research or talk about something interesting. Interestingly enough, those are mostly always given by faculty only. But now at least everyone's invited.

-exempt staff member

And that's a place where the support staff-administration thing has been this really like—underneath it is a kind of class warfare thing. That is the great unspoken conflict in United States society, is about what class you're in. So administrators are invited to faculty lunches, faculty parties, you know, the faculty club parties, various kinds of faculty things. Because we're generally college-educated, we're people that they consider to be—well, not quite their peers, dear, because we don't have a Ph.D., but, you know—although some of us do, or terminal degrees, whatever.

-exempt staff member

People kept bringing up the opening-up of the faculty lunches, which was one aspect of the recent constellation of changes. Apparently, it used to be that administrators, but not support staff, were invited to these monthly events. No one who spoke with me emphasized the value of the actual content of the lectures—indeed, a few people noted that not many support staff really wanted to attend the events. What was important about the change was not the material benefit to support staff, but rather the

symbolic meaning of being invited or not, and what it said about the institution's relationship to its employees. It was an issue of respect.

People complained that the old policy of exclusion was disrespectful. For one thing, it assumed that support staff would not be interested in these faculty lectures. Such an assumption is grounded in notions of class, class in the sense of a whole set of characteristics—education, intellectualism, wealth, income, skills, and tastes—bundled together into one ruling category. The idea that people in lower-paying jobs are less intellectual has particular sting in a college setting—for while educational credentializing still carries a fair amount of weight throughout the workplaces of the United States, it probably looms largest in institutions of higher education. The valorizing of education as the central mission of the college exacerbates the tendency to value highly-educated people more and sneer at others.

Here again is evidence of how de-centering the faculty from their special position in the institution can be part of a move towards democratization. At the same time, what I want to make clear is that I think corporatization, with its single-minded focus on the educational mission, is mostly counterproductive in this process. Corporatization does two things simultaneously to the mission of the college. One is that it somewhat expands the definition of students' educational experience, in a way that is minimally democratizing because it includes the work of some staff members, not just faculty. But at the same time, by narrowing the mission to this focus on delivering the product of education—rather than on serving as a model for, an oasis from, and a provocative influence on society as a whole—it helps entrench this new class hierarchy among staff

and closes the door to some arguments for a broader democratization grounded in social responsibility.

It is easy to see why the symbolic world of invitations and terminology matters to people, because it signifies respect—on an interpersonal level, a faculty member's respect for a staff member, for instance, and also on an institutional level, the college's respect for all of its employees. Yet I want to distinguish these kinds of elements, which I am calling symbolic, from the more concrete aspects of hierarchy—such as tenure, number of vacation days, and of course rate of pay. The staff member quoted in the first epigraph to this section draws a distinction—and a connection—between these two types of hierarchy when they note that the policies of vacation days remain unequal, "even if" all staff are now invited to the same social functions. The concrete elements tend to be the ones that involve significant reallocations of money—and it is worth noting that, by labeling them concrete, I verge on taking part in the same discourse I have critiqued earlier in this thesis, the one that says that money is the most real thing. Conversely, the senior administrators, whom I have described as generally budget-focused, nonetheless tended to talk about hierarchy exclusively in the symbolic mode of labels and social events, rather than in the concrete mode of benefits and pay. A very cynical reading of this apparent contradiction might suggest that their commitment to undoing hierarchy is not sincere, that they deliberately engage the conversation in these terms to avoid having to spend college money on the project. A more generous and nuanced reading could be that it accurately reflects how they perceive the problem of hierarchy at the college. A hierarchy in which people are accorded different levels of respect reads as viscerally unjust, whereas perhaps for the senior administrators I spoke with there is nothing

inherently wrong with a hierarchy in which people are accorded different levels of compensation. This is where the framing of the issues becomes so critical, and the question arises of which of the college's ideologies is at stake—for symbolic problems call for symbolic transformations, whereas concrete problems call for concrete transformations.

Three perspectives on the change in categories

At first I was puzzled that the old binary of administrative and support staff was to be replaced with the new binary of exempt and nonexempt. If the problem was distinction itself, what good would new labels do? What difference in meaning resided in the new terminology? In response to my question, one senior administrator gave the following explanation:

> *AB: On the switching of the terms from support staff and administrators to exempt and non-exempt. Why is that an improved set of terms to use?*
> —Um, support staff seemed somehow to be menial, let me put it that way, as distinct to administrative staff. We also had—there was pressure to create a third, a new category, called professional, who were somewhere in between. By using exempt and non-exempt we're using pretty neutral terms that relate specifically to the status vis-à-vis pay and benefits rather than some category that's attempting to describe sort of what people do.

In this account, then, the change is highly symbolic. The speaker ascribes enormous power and meaning to the words themselves. They seem to imply that class distinction inheres in the actual words rather than in people's attitudes towards one another—or, perhaps, that a shift in vocabulary of the labels will be enough to transform the relationships among subjects to whom they are affixed. The last sentence of the quotation attempts completely to disengage actual inequalities of "pay and benefits" from social categorization—where "attempting to describe what people do," I think, is a way of saying class. The speaker implies that people's descriptive notions of class, rather than

structural inequalities in institutional policies, do the major work of promoting hierarchical injustice at the college.

In the middle of the quotation, the speaker invokes the never-realized possibility of creating a new category of professional staff. This third group[2] is described as vague and liminal—"somewhere in between"—and this liminality seems to have threatened, indeed undermined, the whole system, but for reasons that are never explained. Unlike some other people, who explained to me that the idea of creating a third category threw into sharp relief the distastefully hierarchical nature of the existing categories, this speaker simply implies that the addition of the third category was itself untenable. Further, even though, as a senior administrator, they wield significant power in decision-making in the institution, the speaker begins the sentence with the impersonal "there was pressure to," as though some unspecified external force mandated the change. Why would a new category be undesirable, and why would there be pressure to create one? Two other quotations begin to shed some light on the nervousness around the idea of adding new categories.

I have spoken of the two categorization systems as generating roughly congruent groups, but in fact they were not identical, and so the change was not purely a linguistic shift but a regrouping as well. (The legal categories of exempt and non-exempt had existed all along, but with the abolition of the old distinction these terms became for the

[2] Some people talked about the professional staff category as a potential "third" group of staff; at least once I also heard it referred to as a "fourth" group, where faculty were the other category of employees referred to. In a somewhat related phenomenon, more than once a staff member made a statement about all employees of the college, then interrupted themselves to amend their statement to exclude faculty or to label faculty a special case. I read these incidents as reflective of an ambivalence about the extent to which faculty and staff are in the same category or operate according to the same rules. On the one hand, staff articulations more often than not represented themselves as distinct from faculty members, but on the other hand, it occurred to them to mention faculty as potentially similar yet actually distinct, whereas other

first time the primary markers of staff categorization.) One person now categorized as an exempt staff member spoke to me about their experience of the new label's becoming more salient:

> There's about—in the thirties, about thirty-some exempt staff members that aren't considered administrators…. And so this thirty of us are kind of out there in weird limbo land. No one really knows exactly how to address us. [laughs] You know? And what's weird for me too is to be in the category that I considered, um, kind of an elitist—like there's this hierarchy, and so to be promoted into that category seemed like very foreign to who I was trying to be and make Pseudonym become. So it's kind of put me in a really weird position to say I'm exempt. I'm like [hides mouth with hand], "I'm exempt." You know? [laughs] When people ask, [both laugh], it's sticky to tell them. It feels weird. [laughs]

The speaker describes a strong sense of unease (four uses of the word "weird," along with "foreign" and "sticky") about occupying an in-between category, a liminal space ("a weird limbo land") in the hierarchy. Part of the problem is a sense that their status itself is ambiguous—that exempt staff are supposed to be administrators, and support staff are supposed to be non-exempt, and therefore to be an exempt support staff member is to transgress social boundaries and make social interaction difficult. The line "No one really knows exactly how to address us" points out that people rely on their readings of social categories to know how they are supposed to communicate with one another. The social uncertainty of how to treat people in an in-between category makes it very clear that administrators and support staff are routinely treated differently from one another, and that exempt and non-exempt staff are routinely treated differently from one another. Perhaps this is part of how the posing of an added category threatens the existing social order, because it calls attention to practices that have been normalized perhaps to the point of invisibility, at least from some vantage points. It is worth noting that the new

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categories of college employees—contract workers and senior administrators—did not even come up in

category's in-betweenishness, its position on the borderline between two categories, is central to this function, because a focus in on it inescapably becomes a focus in on the border itself. Hence, the addition of a new category which can be read as entirely outside the existing system—as, for example, I imagine might have been the perception of contract workers when the college first began to subcontract—would not operate in the same way. There is certainly anxiety around the idea of contract workers, as I will explore further later on in this chapter, but it focuses on their difference and indeed draws the other categories closer together into one comparatively less-differentiated group.

The other half of the problem this speaker articulates is that they feel a strong solidarity with one group, while the institution categorizes them with the other. This class allegiance seems to be rooted not only in a sense of social identity but also in an anti-hierarchical ideology and agenda. The speaker says that being identified as an exempt staff member is "very foreign to who I was trying to be and make Pseudonym become," implying that this re-categorization in fact undermines their own activist project in working to reshape the institution. It feels like disloyalty or hypocrisy to be identified with a group one sees as "elitist"—this is why this person expresses discomfort about telling other people about their exempt status. Again, I point this out not to suggest that decision-makers in the institution deliberately designed policies to undercut the employees' democratizing activism. What I do want to highlight is that, contrary to the opinion of the senior administrator quoted first, this speaker makes clear that exempt and non-exempt are not neutral or unmarked terms at all—and furthermore, that classed divisions among staff members are deeper and more complex than can be erased by a simple switch of vocabulary. At the moment of this interview, anyway, the categories of

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these conversations as potentially comparable groups.

support staff and administrative staff were still tangibly present for this person—both in personal identity and in institutional policy. Eliminating these categories from official use did not erase their significance in college life, but only drove it underground to some extent, exacerbating the experience of liminality and discomfort of position, at least for this person.

A narrative like that of the senior administrator might lead one to expect that people would want to be re-categorized up—that, for instance, support staff members like this person would be happy to be relabeled as exempt, a move that apparently increases their social status by removing a stigmatizing label and realigning them in the upper rather than the lower category of the binary. But in fact nobody ever remarked to me in any interview that they themselves wanted to be moved up from a lower-status to a higher-status category. Instead they tended to talk about their objection to the disrespectful nature of the whole system of categorization and the various kinds of unequal treatment mapped onto it. They seemed to look at the stratified system and their place within it and see, not a reflection of their own self-worth, but a reflection of the degree of justice in the college workplace.

I will cite one more quotation on the issue of how the old and new staff categorization systems interact. This one is notable, first of all, in that the speaker brought the issue up in the context of a discussion of corporatization rather than democratization. Here is the exchange we had:

> —There's a strong trend at the college, I think, towards exempt support staff. Which I think is primarily a cost-cutting measure, money-saving measure, and I'd say disrespectful for the people involved in [unintelligible].
> *AB: How does that save money?*
> —The more support staff positions they can make exempt rather than non-exempt, the less overtime they have to pay.

> *AB: Oh, gotcha.*
> —And the more work they can expect out of the staff member. There are a lot of federal laws and labor regulations that affect that as well. But I just—it seems like a growth in exempt support staff.

Recall that the basic definitional difference between exempt and non-exempt is whether or not the employee is eligible for overtime. According to this person's interpretation, the development of this new intermediate category—whereas more traditionally all support staff would have been non-exempt, and all exempt staff would have been administrators—is an exploitative move on the part of the college. It is "disrespectful for the people involved" (presumably the exempt support staff) in that, as employees who on some level ought to be entitled to overtime, they are being denied that compensation through the re-labeling.

Recall that this development was prior to the official switch in categorization. The rise of exempt support staff, which this person characterizes as a gradual shift, happened during the period when support staff and administrative staff were the prevalent social categories, while exempt and non-exempt existed as legal designations. What then was the interaction between this trend and the changeover to a single set of terms?

Nobody said this explicitly to me, so this is a speculation on my part, but my hunch is that the proposed new "professional" category was going to designate more or less to this same intermediate group of staff, the exempt support staff. In this case, the "pressure" to generate this category, as described by the senior administrator, perhaps originates in the tension of disjuncture between the two systems of categorization. The situation of exempt support staff liminality can only last for so long—no one knows how to deal with them, and so the system generates social pressure to assign them to a recognizable category with predictable rules. Why not do so, then? One hypothesis, in a

sort of marxist reading where management's desire to exploit workers' labor drives its social policies, is that officially recognizing the category would make the exploitation too overt. Or perhaps, taking a less cynical view, the decision-makers simply genuinely share the feelings about social hierarchy that many people described: that to add another category would be to further stratify the institution, which runs counter to the friendly, family spirit of the community. In fact, this belief is quite consonant with the perspective the senior administrator shared at the beginning of this section—that language produces the social order, rather than the other way around. This respect for the power of discourses is consistent with much prominent contemporary social theory; it is only my sympathy for a marxist analysis, where conversely the imperatives of the structures of labor are the motor force that produces the social superstructure, that leads me to view it as naïve.

Yet in some sense, the motivation of the decision-makers, here as elsewhere in this thesis, is a red herring. Whether the choice is made in the best egalitarian spirit or to further some other agenda, the elimination of the distinct categories of support staff and administrative staff does have the effect, in practice, of making the trend of greater numbers of exempt support staff less visible. They can be pointed out neither as an anomalous, illegible in-between category nor as a coherent, newly labeled category for which new rules might need to be negotiated. Rather, they are folded in undifferentiated among the exempt staff, where their significance as a group can more easily vanish—and where, indeed, even if one did read them as somehow different from the other exempt staff, it would be bad manners to point it out, since "support staff" is now read to be a

disrespectful category—since, in other words, linguistic differentiation is understood to generate hierarchy, and the project of the terminological shift is to erase the difference.

Contracting out

> AB: So what do you think should be the role of the contract workers in the college community and in decision-making on campus?
> *—Mm-hm, mm-hm. Well, that's a tough one, I think, because an entity like Unnamed Contractor, being a for-profit corporation, and an entity like ours, as a non-profit, 501(c)3 educational institution, we have such different goals, we have different values, and we have very different budgets [laughs]—and, you know, and fiscal priorities. So in some ways that makes it really tough, because we speak a different language, in some ways. And we cannot force Unnamed Contractor—we could, I guess, by just not using them at all, but—That's a tough one to answer. I can't see, just as a human being, I can't see certainly preventing or barring anyone from having a voice here, I don't think that's right. But as far as influencing the wage structure for a separate corporation, I just don't know how you can mesh that, but—Yeah. Well, I'll be interested to read your study and see what [laughing] other people think about that.*
>
> *-senior administrator*

When staff members spoke to me about hierarchy at the college, they tended to talk mostly about the relationships among administrators, support staff, and faculty—and less about how students, senior administrators, or contract workers might fit into that picture. Each group, I think, was excluded for a different reason. The senior administration seemed to be an almost invisible constituency, of whom everyone must have been aware but who they rarely talked about as a body—instead, people frequently mentioned individual members of the senior administration, most often Joe Newpresident and his predecessor Jane Oldpresident; I also repeatedly heard people talk about the Director of Human Resources, the head of the Business Office, and the Vice President for Business and Finance. Rather than a unified body of senior administration, most people seemed to think of a disparate group of individuals—and indeed, as I noted in Chapter 2, some people perceived them as having distinct interests such that the power relationships

among them would be pivotal, as in the issue of whether or not Human Resources would report to the Business Office. The students, for their part, I think were often excluded from reckonings of the hierarchy of power—at least in the accounts of staff—because they were perceived in an amalgam of different roles, including both youthful wards to be protected and consumers of the college's major service—among which, to my surprise, the role of privileged political actors was often not seen as primary. Why subcontracted workers were generally not considered within the same hierarchies, however, is more complicated to explain.[3]

As I have already suggested, nearly everyone I spoke with talked about subcontracting and the contract workers with a great deal of nervousness. Frankly, this could be a whole thesis, just the conversation about subcontracting, and instead I am making it only one section of one chapter—in part because my interviews with contract workers themselves turned out to be fewer and more limited than I had hoped. But I do want to cover what I see as the main points in how people talked about contracting and how those ideas bear upon broader conceptions of the meanings and functioning of the college community.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the quotation from the senior administrator above is the speaker's sense of uncertainty around the role of contract workers in the Pseudonym community. In general, even people who expressed a strong commitment to the rights of all staff members to democratic roles in governance were often uneasy about how to structure the involvement of contract workers in college decision-making.

[3] In the interests of intellectual honesty it is worth noting that sometimes the phenomenon of separating contract workers into another category was probably sometimes partially a reflection of my own bias in framing the question. Sometimes I asked people about the balance of power among "staff, faculty,

Despite this general attitude that "just as a human being" one would want contract workers to have a voice like anyone else in the community, almost no one saw this as feasible. When I asked some version of the question above, I do not think anyone at all took me up on the implicit suggestion to propose some kind of structural democracy like a separate governance body of contract workers or contract worker representation in the Staff Council. Instead, people fell into two groups—those who argued that the current role of the contract workers was as it should be, and then hastened to justify this; and those who confided to me that in truth they wished the college would stop outsourcing and hire all of its employees directly.

Why would people think that contracted workers could not be full members of the college community and its decisions in the same way that other college employees could? The most commonly invoked reason was simply that they were employed by a different company, with a right to be autonomous in its choices about its policies towards its employees. While the justification for contracting out was always explained as a matter of cost—that for a variety of reasons, Unnamed Contractor as an experienced and large-scale provider of food service and custodial service could do those tasks with more budgetary efficiency than Pseudonym College could—the implications of what it meant to contract out rather than employing within the institution clearly stretched beyond the budget into more ideological realms. To me the budgetary and social aspects of contracting out seem hypothetically distinct—that is, it seems possible to imagine a situation in which Unnamed Contractor provides its resources of equipment and training and large-scale buying in coordination with its other clients, and in return the company

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students, and administration," or some order thereof, in part because at first I was not sure whether people would classify contract workers as staff members.

makes profits by keeping some of the money that the college saves through efficiency, but the college retains control of the workplace and its policies. However, I am apparently alone and somewhat naïve in this imagining. For others, it seems, this is an unthinkable or perhaps simply unworkable proposal, because there is a fundamental autonomy to a for-profit company. The principle—which I think is not unique to people at Pseudonym, but in fact is basic to the understanding of capitalism in the United States—is that a company must be free to make its own decisions in pursuit of its own bottom line. To ask it to subordinate these interests to a different set of values and interests, like those of the college, would be to violate the integrity of the company and its very ability to operate. This is profoundly off-limits.

I think this ideology of corporate autonomy is closely linked to the rising ideology of corporate personhood. Another senior administrator said to me:

> It's taken a partnership, and I think the college and Unnamed Contractor have had a long, long relationship, and I think they felt—it wasn't the kind of thing that we're going to throw them out tomorrow. We felt we had to come to something that we all felt comfortable. And I think they've appreciated—I think they've learned more on this issue, but I think they've appreciated the partnership.

Most striking in this quotation is that it is the company—not its workers—with whom the college has a relationship, and to whom its has a sense of responsibility or loyalty. While the workers of Unnamed Contractor were generally acknowledged to be not quite seen as full members of the college community in the ways that other constituencies were, in the eyes of this administrator it is the company itself who instead is a seen as a full member of the community. Wordings like "partnership," "relationship," "felt comfortable," and "appreciated" suggest a very personal quality to the interactions between the institution and the corporation, so that to "throw them out" takes on the character of unacceptable

incivility—whereas the language of deciding not to renew a contract, for instance, might have sounded more like a perfectly civil and ordinary organizational activity.

I want to stress that I am not only claiming that the company takes on the identity of personal community member, but also that it does so at the expense of its workers being identified as full community members. These moments in the interview conversations were moments of taking sides—I asked about the role of the contract workers, and the speakers responded to deny my implied claims of workers' rights by talking about rights of the company. What then makes possible this displacement of personal community membership off of the contract workers?

As I have said, many people told me that longevity was an important determiner of legitimacy in the college community; this is part of what makes tenure such an empowering tool for faculty members. In this sense, contract workers are in the least advantageous position of any constituency on campus. The rate of turnover among employees of Unnamed Contractor, especially custodial workers, is very high. In the time scale of the college, even students, who tend to be around for four years or so, are considered short-term members of the community and are sometimes dismissed as decision-makers for that reason—how much more so with contract employees. I gathered no hard data on longevity, but the sense I got anecdotally and from people who claimed to have looked at the actual figures was that a few custodial workers may stay around the college for twenty years, but most stay a much shorter time, and many are gone within the year.

Certainly this reflects the subjective experience of many other college community members I spoke with; people tended to place a strong emphasis on personal

relationships as an element of community-building, and to complain that the high rate of turnover among custodial workers frequently broke off those relationships or prevented them from developing at all. Custodial workers, too—especially, but not exclusively, those on the night shift—tended to talk about their experiences of the workplace in terms of their co-workers and supervisors, and not so much about interactions with members of other constituencies or about feelings of community membership.

Insofar as direct personal interaction was set up as a tool of community-building, the dining services workers were more likely to feel integrated them into the college community, since they saw many students and some other college community members each day in the course of their work. Both of the dining services workers I spoke with described the special joy of working with students on a daily basis, and in this way they shared the sense that I heard from many other college employees, that of the college being a special place. They also spoke some about the tangible benefits that came with working at a college in particular. Unlike nearly everybody in the other constituencies, however, they did not talk about the college as having a special climate as a community. The trope of the college as a small village, which I heard over and over again from members of other groups, did not really arise in my interviews with contract workers. I had the sense that the domain of the college in which they felt membership was confined to the space of their workplaces and the community members who peopled them—whereas faculty members, students, senior administrators, and to a lesser extent staff members were likely to speak, with a more expansive sense of belonging, about the entire space of the campus and the entire populace of the college, even the places they did not go and the people they did not see. To draw once more on Anderson's trope, many

people described to me an imagined community of the college as one coherent whole, whereas contract workers were more likely to talk about the more narrowly defined community of their own concrete experience.

Since custodial workers' direct experience tended to bring them into contact with even fewer members of other college constituencies, they were structurally set up to feel more separate from the rest of the college. For instance, when I asked about the best and worst things about the college as a workplace, they spoke about social dynamics among their co-workers and supervisors, and about Unnamed Contractor's compensation and other policies. One person shrugged their shoulders and told me it was "como cualquier trabajo" ("like any job"). Again, they did not speak of the values or overall community or climate of Pseudonym College.

The politics of space circumscribe custodial workers' experiences of the campus. One exempt staff member told me of Unnamed Contractor workers, "Most of them don't actually have a, quote, home on campus, an office. Some do, but many don't." The idea of "a home on campus" is certainly evocative; it recalls the domestic analogy, the language of the college as family, as well as the college as village. Indeed, a group of custodial workers working on a night shift told me they felt the lack of any space belonging to them on campus—specifically, they said, the problem was that they had no break room in the buildings they cleaned. Having no assigned space, they simply chose a room to take their break in, but they had periodically had to abandon the room of their choice and seek out another. At least once, this move was precipitated by their arriving one day to find that their stuff had been removed from the room, left just outside the door, without explanation. In this and other stories I heard, the dynamics of shared space

and distinct time schedules conspired to create a situation where custodial workers and other college community members interacted with one another only in an extremely mediated way through the movement of objects in space.[4]

> One day I came across a sign in a building that read:
>
> The Brown Common Room is a space for faculty members to retreat, read, or meet with small groups of colleagues. Please do not use it without permission.

As with moving the items out the room, here again it is an inanimate object—a sign, literally—that conveys the meaning that certain spaces are proscribed for certain community members. It so happened that a student later mentioned to me having attended an early PCFLC meeting in the Brown Common Room. After all, the informal rules of space use may be more flexible than the formal ones. Students, who interact with faculty face-to-face, may get permission to use the faculty's special space, or learn that they can in fact get away with using it without permission. An experience of the delineations of space when mediated through personal interaction, it seems to me, will tend to be softer and more malleable than when mediated through the cold matter of objects.

I have outlined a number of ways in which I think the dining services and custodial workers are set up—both spatially and temporally, for instance—to experience little interaction with the rest of the college community. I would be remiss if I did not mention that differences of social identity in the forms of class, race, and language also play a role

[4] In a more prosaic example of the same phenomenon, I write this chapter today at a computer in Swarthmore's library. I was here at the same computer until closing time last night, and arrived shortly after the library opened this morning. I can tell that the custodial workers on the night shift have been here in the intervening time, because my pretzel wrapper has vanished from the wastebasket. While we occupy the same space on a daily basis, it is difficult to imagine how, through this extreme mediation, we might ever develop a personal relationship that could work to support a sentiment of shared community.

in the sense of separation between Unnamed Contractor workers and others. While other constituencies at Pseudonym College are majority-white and most speak English as a first language, the majority of custodial workers are Latino/a and speak Spanish as a first language, although many also speak some or a lot of English. Certainly also discomfort around the awareness of social inequality inhibits relationships from both sides. One custodial employee who had just started work that summer told me they liked the new job fine and thought they would stay in it for longer than they had planned, but they were afraid of how they would feel when the students returned in the fall:

> —The people here are really nice. The only thing that scares me is the—when the students come back.
> *AB: Yeah? [both laugh] How come?*
> —Well, I—I don't know, it just—you know, I look at it, and it's like, "Oh, I should be in school!" You know, instead of [laughs] cleaning the toilets! That's the only thing that sort of like held me back about telling them I'm definitely going to be here from now on. You know. It's hard.

But many of the factors that promote the separation between Unnamed Contractor workers and other college constituencies—factors like the spatial and temporal circumstances of their work and the demographic differences of class and other social identities—may be read as functions of the type of work itself, not the fact of its being subcontracted. How much social division is an effect of the contracting? What would it look like if Pseudonym College employed people directly in dining and custodial jobs? These questions are hard to answer with an *n* of just one school at a single moment in its history. They call for a broader comparative study across many schools.

Hypothesizing on the basis of an informal comparison to what I know of my own college, Swarthmore, I will say this much. Like Pseudonym, Swarthmore employs its lowest-paid workers in dining and custodial services, and these workers, especially the

custodial employees, are disproportionately women of color. As at Pseudonym, many of Swarthmore's custodial employees work at night, and therefore their interactions with college community members other than co-workers and supervisors are primarily mediated through the physical environment.

Unlike Pseudonym, however, Swarthmore directly employs these categories of workers—and as such, they are represented by the same governance body as other staff members. To be sure, low-wage staff members are often marginalized and intimidated in governance processes—and, I hear anecdotally, sometimes in workplace situations as well. But I do identify a difference between the two schools in at least the rhetoric about the relationship of low-wage workers to the college. At Swarthmore, low-wage workers themselves, as well as members of the senior administration, do speak about the college's having a responsibility to all its workers; they do talk about everyone, including dining and custodial workers, as being part of the same broad community.

I have described how, at Pseudonym, both contract workers themselves and other college actors speak of the world of the contract workers as distinct from the realm of the broader college community. Surely the spatially and temporally circumscribed circumstances of their work are part of *how* this distancing is possible. But these circumstances cannot themselves be the sole cause—after all, other jobs at Pseudonym confine the movements and interactions of employees in various ways, and yet somehow do not have the same constraining effect on their roles in the community. It is clear to me that, at least from the senior administration decision-makers' end, the discourses of corporate autonomy and of efficiency have much to do with the ways that Unnamed Contractors' workers' roles are framed. Subcontracting is in one sense a manifestation of

the corporatization trend—a forfeiting of one part of the conception of the college's social responsibility within its own community, or rather a narrowing of how it defines that internal community of responsibility, in the service of the bottom line. In the spatial sense, it is also perhaps the boldest stroke of corporatization yet, for it represents the physical incursion of an actual corporation into the sanctuary space of the college.

The project of building democracy is long, complex, and sometimes wearying. As I explore in Chapter 6, officially inclusive rhetoric and even a sense of collective community identity are far from enough to ensure equitable democratic processes of decision-making in the workplace. But without such grounding, how can we even begin?