BUT WE KNOW: A FEMINIST, CHRISTIAN ETHNOGRAPHY AND ANALYSIS OF SINGLE, WORKING-CLASS MOTHERS AND CLASS, GENDER, AND RACE DYNAMICS IN THE U. S. POLITICAL ECONOMY

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IN THE U. S. POLITICAL ECONOMY

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A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of
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in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of
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in
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by
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This dissertation is a work of liberation theology, for it attends to transforming cultural and economic systems that deny basic human dignity. It uses ethnographic, critical, and intersectional methodologies to interrogate economic systems and to complicate cultural ideas of what it means to be working-class single mothers identifying as Black, Latina, and white. In this essay, the self-reported and statistical stories of working-class single mothers—read critically—challenge their portrayals in commonplace political, economic, and societal structures and rhetorics. The work, which moves inductively (from the ground up), identifies both oppressive life conditions and oppressive representations that often help perpetuate the other. Perhaps equally important, the essay harnesses ethnography such that working-class single mothers have a voice in what counts as dignity and as basic human worth. This essay is also a work Christian theological ethics. It takes respect for dignity and basic human worth, like Martin Luther King, Jr. argues, as a Christian demand—and so suggests that the stories of working-class single mothers teach us something about Christian duty, practice, and morality by teaching us about human dignity and worth.
In Chapter One, I explore how the concept of an economically vulnerable single mother has evolved in ways that amplify the cultural and economic barriers to thriving. I address how appeals to Christian theology in political rhetoric contribute to these developments. In Chapter Two, I articulate how the use of critical ethnography challenges these cultural stereotypes while hoping to offer a substantive picture, in the voices of single, working-class mothers, of what their lives are like and what they need in order to thrive. I argue that attention to embodied existence, as seen in an inductive methodology, reflects a deeply incarnational theology wherein the particular matters. In Chapters Three through Five I present a critical, inter-disciplinary, ethnographic study of single, working-class mothers’ self-representation, and so complicate many long-held assumptions about how best to love, support, respect, empower, and listen to people who have been functionally segregated from structural and cultural means to thriving. In particular, I attend to the stories of eight racially diverse women, each of whom are participants in the Dallas Area Habitat for Humanity program living in the same neighborhood in Dallas, TX. These collaborators share generously of their time and insights over the course of multiple conversations. In Chapter Six, I name some of the cumulative impact on single, working-class mothers of living in a society that objectively and subjectively degrades and denies their fundamental needs. Using their own voices, I offer marks of thriving that uphold human dignity, equality, and interdependence. Finally, I deploy Martin Luther King, Jr.’s theological images of beloved community and the world house as cultural and economic moral visions instrumental to a way forward. King’s attention to particular, embodied, intersectional realities of injustices and large-scale global and ideological dynamics, coupled with his ongoing authority in both Christian and secular discourse, suggest that his theo-ethical vision holds the possibility for traction in the U.S. political economy.
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For Mike, my rock

Kai and Cole, my perspective

and Sarah, Meredith, and Michelle, my camaraderie:

I could not and would not have wanted to have done it without y’all.
INTRODUCTION

Origins

I first encountered the power of single, working-class mothers’ stories to challenge my own assumptions in 2001. In 2001, my first year of seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, I began a one-and-a-half-year position as the live-in Resident Manager at an emergency night shelter for women with children. The frequent stories I heard did not shock me. Women staying at the shelter had been abused, made questionable choices, and become mothers in their teens. Some were mentally ill. Perhaps due to my upbringing in a wealthy white suburb of Houston, Texas, the reality that roughly sixty percent of the women who stayed at the short-term shelter worked fulltime did shock me. Very quickly I realized I could not reconcile the hard-working, resourceful women I came to know with conservative economic and cultural narratives about single mothers, particularly Black single mothers (who comprised all of the shelter population during my tenure). I did not comprehend the contours of the U.S. political economy and the complex dynamics of classism, racism, and sexism shaping the realities of women who worked one and two jobs and still were unable to meet their families’ basic needs.¹

¹ The following definition of classism, racism, and sexism functions as my starting point or guide. This project will explore these ideas more expansively as it unfolds. I understand classism, racism, and sexism as systems of advantage based on the positionalities and identities of people in these constructed categories. These systems of advantage are “supported by institutional structures, policies and practices that create and sustain advantages for the dominant…group[s] while systematically subordinating members of targeted…groups. [These systems of] relative advantage for [dominant groups] and subordination for people…[are] supported by the actions of individuals, cultural norms, and values, and the institutional
Seeking to understand and connect more deeply with these families, I sought a summer fellowship to spend full days with families staying at the shelter. Many families graciously allowed me to accompany them as we took Atlanta public transportation to day shelters, job interviews, social services visits, libraries, and housing hunts. During these sweltering days, I began to realize just how inefficient, frustrating, and vulnerable homelessness can be for those experiencing it. In the evenings, after kids were in bed, we would sit outside, talking about their days, relationships, struggles, hopes, and challenges. I became increasingly aware of power differences and of my many privileges, as I (mostly) listened to these stories with a growing sense of frustration, anger, and despair. These responses arose not because I experienced the women as victims but because their perseverance, integrity, and resourcefulness were revealed, marking them each in distinct ways and defying pervasive cultural messages to the contrary. These single, working-class mothers faced extreme cultural and economic pressures based on their occupation of a morally questioned, often outright maligned identity category that had been produced and re-produced by a variety of social, historical, economic, and theological forces.

My Christian theological commitments to justice, dignity, equality, and compassion compelled a response to this awakening. I intensely engaged my seminary coursework, seeking the vast wisdom of relevant theologians, scholars, and ethicists in my desire to understand these dynamics and realities better. My studies, informed by embodied stories that remain with me, helped construct a theo-ethical grounding and a way forward. Among other formative works, I read Welfare Policy: feminist critiques. This compilation of essays by noted feminist Christian structures and practices of society.” Maurianne Adams and Lee Anne Bell, eds., Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice, 3 edition (New York: Routledge, 2016). These widely accepted understandings lay groundwork to explore overlapping, reinforcing realities of cultural and economic hierarchies that this project seeks to expose and disrupt.
ethicists such as Beverly Harrison, Traci West, Emilie Towns, Pamela Brubaker, and Ada María Isasi-Díaz not only gave me a greater grasp of injustices experienced by poor women and their children, it also provided me with the methodological, theoretical, and theo-ethical path I wanted to follow in my own work. Beginning with concrete realities of those closest to oppressive realities, the essays in Welfare Policy expose dynamics of classism, sexism, and racism shaping punitive public policies aimed at poor women and their children. They collectively assert that an incarnational, liberative Christian theo-ethical response to the injustices experienced by poor single mothers must begin with particularities, with stories, with embodied, material realities in order to demand systemic changes based on values that reflect the Shalom of God.  

I began to realize the power and potential of a dialectical relationship among three spheres: direct experiences of persons with the greatest epistemic proximity to social justice issues; interdisciplinary academic studies; and activism engaging the systems in the broader political economy. These spheres offer critical insights and knowledge that can mutually inform each other to produce more just economic and cultural realities. This essay is born out of my commitment to this sort of dialectic. And it is born into a Christian theo-ethical imagination. It presents the results of a critical, ethnographic study of working-class single mothers. These results complicate widespread assumptions about the group, and so help to dismantle operative stereotypes that currently shape public policies, cultural hierarchies, and economic systems.  

Like the contributors to Welfare Policy, I work from within the Christian theo-ethical tradition and resources. This positionality entails identifying the Christian tradition’s legacy in contributing to and perpetuating oppressive cultural and economic systems, as well as its

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liberative strands that offer transformative potential. My hope is that this work taps into the 
streams of liberative Christian theo-ethical ideas and movements that have historically motivated 
Christian communities, along with others who share commitments to justice, dignity, love, and 
interdependence, to engage in liberative work.

As I have moved on physically from seminary and Atlanta, the concrete lives of women 
whose experiences of homelessness intersected with my own journey have stayed with me in 
vivid, compelling ways. As this dissertation project demonstrates, I continue to seek broader, 
deeper understandings of realities faced by economically vulnerable single mothers.  

I am moved by Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous formulation about the “fierce urgency of 
now.” In his April 4, 1967, speech at Riverside Church and in his book Where Do We Go From 
Here: Chaos or Community?, King demands response and action to current, dehumanizing 
conditions. The urgency shaping my earliest experiences with single, working-class mothers and 
the theo-ethical advocacy work of Welfare Policy revolved around the re-authorization of 
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in the early 2000s. The urgency shaping my 
current work with single, working-class mothers is quite different. The economic recession 
beginning in 2007 considerably increased numbers of economically vulnerable persons, with 
single mothers constituting a particularly large and vulnerable group. As economic insecurities 
mount, so do tendencies to target and scapegoat marginalized persons and communities. Given 
that the precedent is so deeply rooted, single mothers have become an easy, unsurprising target 

3 From the outset of this project, it seems appropriate to honor these formative experiences and to 
recognize that while my methodology works more inductively than deductively, from particular 
experiences of a group of single mothers in Dallas to theoretical analyses from other 
epistemological resources, I recognize I am already influenced by previous experiences and 
research.
for detrimental cultural attitudes and punitive public policies. Direct assistance programs have been slashed with impunity. With Texas leading the efforts, many states have enacted stringent anti-abortion laws, forcing closures of Planned Parenthood and denying millions of poor women access to birth control and safe abortions. These laws expose underlying sexism and promise to increase rates of economically vulnerable single mothers.

The intersectional movement The Movement for Black Lives (BLM) has condemned policy brutality and institutionalized racism in new ways, catalyzing anti-racist and racist public discourse and actions. In addition to demanding an end to the war on Black people as enacted in police brutality and incarceration, the BLM platform also insists on investment in the health and well-being of Black people, local control of policies and institutions, political power, reparations, and transformation of unjust economic structures created by global capitalism. In this platform, BLM centers the voices of the most marginalized Black people.\(^4\) All these dynamics gave rise to an unprecedented 2016 Presidential campaign in which the proudly racist, sexist, xenophobic, and violent rhetoric of now-President Donald Trump exposed the bigoted impulses of millions of Americans that persons of color have always known. In the first year of his presidency, hate crimes have spiked and congress has legislated to further concentrate power in the hands of the economic, political, and social elite.

In this moment, when the principles of democracy seem tenuous, listening to and foregrounding the voices of economically and culturally marginalized persons are themselves acts of defiance against the status quo and those who benefit from it. Telling the stories of

marginalized persons resists the dehumanization and erasure that obscures the broad impact of these economic and cultural forces. This act of attending to the realities of marginalized persons reflects liberation theology’s recognition that God is encountered in the particular, with special attention to people longing for release from oppression. Listening to each other’s stories, particularly among the working and middle classes who do not benefit from the status quo, increases capacity for solidarity and the sort of intersectional, de-centralized movement of resistance envisioned by organizations like BLM. Utilizing this increased understanding and connection to each other can catalyze responses to these perspectives and realities in ways that will bring more justice, dignity, mutuality, and compassion into a world in desperate need of each. Bearing witness to each other’s stories and responding in mutual efforts also recognizes God in the midst of the struggle, as partner and power for justice.

This essay is a work of liberation theology, for it attends to transforming cultural and economic systems that deny basic human dignity. It uses ethnographic, critical, and intersectional methodologies to interrogate economic systems and to complicate cultural ideas of what it means to be working-class single mothers identifying as Black, Latina, and white. In this essay, the self-reported and statistical stories of working-class single mothers—read critically—challenge their portrayals in commonplace political, economic, and societal structures and rhetorics. The work, which moves inductively (from the ground up), identifies both oppressive life conditions and oppressive representations that often help perpetuate the other. Perhaps equally important, the essay harnesses ethnography such that working-class single mothers have a voice in what counts as dignity and as basic human worth. This essay is also a work Christian theological ethics. It takes respect for dignity and basic human worth, like King argues, as a Christian demand—and so suggests that the stories of working-class single mothers teach us
something about Christian duty, practice, and morality by teaching us about human dignity and worth.

**Structure**

In Chapter One, I explore how the concept of an economically vulnerable single mother has evolved in ways that amplify the cultural and economic barriers to thriving. I address how appeals to Christian theology in political rhetoric contribute to these developments. In Chapter Two, I articulate how the use of critical ethnography challenges these cultural stereotypes while hoping to offer a substantive picture, in the voices of single, working-class mothers, of what their lives are like and what they need in order to thrive. I argue that attention to embodied existence, as seen in an inductive methodology, reflects a deeply incarnational theology wherein the particular matters. In Chapters Three through Five I present a critical, inter-disciplinary, ethnographic study of single, working-class mothers’ self-representation, and so complicate many long-held assumptions about how best to love, support, respect, empower, and listen to people who have been functionally segregated from structural and cultural means to thriving. In particular, I attend to the stories of eight racially diverse women, each of whom are participants in the Dallas Area Habitat for Humanity program living in the same neighborhood in Dallas, TX. These collaborators share generously of their time and insights over the course of multiple conversations. In Chapter Six, I name the cumulative impact on single, working-class mothers of living in a society that objectively and subjectively degrades and denies their fundamental needs. Using their own voices, I offer marks of thriving that uphold human dignity, equality, and interdependence. Finally, I deploy King’s theological images of beloved community and the world house as cultural and economic moral visions instrumental to a way forward. King’s attention to particular, embodied, intersectional realities of injustices and large-scale global and
ideological dynamics, coupled with his ongoing authority in both Christian and secular discourse, suggest that his theo-ethical vision holds the possibility for traction in the U.S. political economy.
CHAPTER ONE

History of Economically Vulnerable Single Mothers

Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that dominant cultures have created images of single, working-class mothers that effectively ignore and replace their actual voices and experiences. These images are incorporated into political, social, and economic rhetoric and policies, which exacerbate and compound the difficult conditions these mothers already face. This chapter aims to begin to counter these misleading images by considering socio-historical materials that contextualize and frame the cultural and economic situations in which single mothers find themselves. This groundwork demonstrates the need for sustained attention to the actual life experiences of single, working-class mothers and offers a textured picture that gives deeper meaning to their perspectives and reflections.

Women who are single mothers face unique, interlocking economic and cultural pressures in the U.S. political economy. I argue that centering particular, embodied perspectives and focusing sustained attention on a group of persons society has constructed and labeled as “single mothers,” “unmarried mothers,” “unwed mothers,” and/or “female heads of household,” demonstrate unjust, intersectional power dynamics of class, gender, race, and sexuality. By attending to this group, single mothers themselves bear witness to cultural and economic hierarchies of class, gender, race, and sexuality. Sustained attention to their realities prompts analysis of the broader, fundamentally problematic underlying assumptions, ideals, and goals of advanced capitalism in the U.S.\(^5\) The depth of injustices and indignities experienced by single,

\(^5\) In this initial framing I identify heteronormative dynamics as systemic forces impacting the experiences of single, working-class mothers. Because each participant in this particular project
working-class mothers, as one of the most vulnerable groups within these structures, calls for a response that transforms cultural and economic systems by highlighting the knowledge and moral agency of this diverse group of women. As a white, feminist, social and theological ethicist, I explore Christian theological norms and practices as sites of oppression and neglect of single mothers as well as sources of liberation and transformation. Specifically, appeals to norms of justice, dignity, interdependence, and human thriving espoused by liberative Christian

self-identified as heterosexual and because my inductive methodology explores issues raised by project collaborators, this dissertation does not deeply interrogate implications of heteronormativity for single, working-class mothers. This site of oppression is a critical justice issue, and the lack of even minimal analysis here is not meant to suggest any hierarchy related to experiences of marginalization and multiple dynamics impacting experiences of single mothers. It is important work and deserves sustained attention.

The distinction between cultural dynamics and economic arrangements stems from the work of Keri Day; drawing from her model, I demonstrate the interrelatedness of these realities within the American political economy. Keri Day, Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America (Orbis Books, 2012).

The complexities accompanying the label “Feminist Christian Ethics” abound. Scholarship of Black and Latina ethicists, theologians, and theorists deeply shapes my work, and this diverse field of scholars embraces various labels for their lives and work. Some choose the label “feminist” and others self-identify as Womanist, Mujerista, Black feminist, or Latina feminist. White feminists, particularly those with socioeconomic privilege, have too often remained blind to ways in which our scholarship, ministry, and activism ignore and perpetuate the intersectional oppressions experienced by women of color. This occurs in both concrete and symbolic ways, including language choices. Some women of color argue that linguistic distinctions of “feminists” and “feminists of color” allow white feminisms to remain the norm while “othering” feminists of color. Others experience particular identities, such as “Womanist” and “Mujerista,” as acts of empowerment and meaningful distinction from the work of others. By using the label “feminist,” I do not mean to suggest that my work represents any kind of feminist norm, nor do I intend to hide my reliance on the work of other scholars who embrace labels that recognize their embodied realities as different from that of a white, middle-class woman. This struggle with respectful, appropriate terminology is the first area of many throughout this project in which I will tread cautiously and with openness to correction and critique, particularly those whose epistemic proximity to intersectional oppressions is much closer than my own. When referencing particular thinkers and project collaborators, I will make every effort to use their own language. Otherwise, my language will shift, aiming to reflect the fluidity, ambiguity, limits, and significance of these distinctions in identity conceptions and categories. Finally, I explore my own identity and positionality in relation to this project in greater depth at the end of chapter two.
theological traditions as well as pluralistic democracies give rise to my proposal for collaborative movement toward economic democracy where power is broadly shared and market and non-market production are valued.\(^8\)

Fully proposing a concrete, detailed vision would betray the theo-ethical norms shaping my methodology, which demand centering persons with experiential knowledge in decision-making processes while also including participation of persons with other types of knowledge. I hope that by hearing a small group of stories, readers will seek out more stories of those whose voices must be included in transformation of unjust realities. Therefore, I hope this project cracks open the moral imagination of those of us who need to hear these stories and who are moved to act based on these values of justice, dignity, interdependence, and thriving. Most participants said they were eager to share their perspectives, glad someone wanted to hear them, and hopeful that their stories might help single mothers in some way. I, too, hope this project might modestly contribute to greater cultural and economic equality and justice for the women who collaborated in this project along with others whose lives have been marked in overlapping yet distinct ways by systemic dynamics raised and investigated.

**What is a Working-Class Single Mother?**

At the onset of this project, it seems appropriate to explore meanings of the essay’s key terms. Defining these terms is a complex task as each label for any identity category overlaps with other labels and has its own relationship to a variety of social, historical, political, theological, and economic attitudes and actions. Each label, then, is freighted with layers of

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\(^8\) I deploy the concept of “thriving” from Keri Day. This project accepts Day’s goal of thriving and aims to constructively develop the idea further based on the perspectives of project collaborators and other knowledge sources. Day, *Unfinished Business*, 2012.
helpful, neutral, and problematic connotations that impact the images constructed in the popular imagination. That said, beginning with foundational terms and initial, albeit fluid, understandings provides a starting point. A place to begin and a place to push against, a stable point, even if it is stable just long enough to function as a jumping off point. Exploring terms and labels offers the opportunity to compare how people identify themselves and how others identify them, which leads to important questions asking what these differences mean and what do they tell us? Offering an initial definition provides the chance to say a bit about what it is and is not. It is an important step in the process of knowledge production and affirmation of human dignity.

It makes sense to begin with the group of persons whose cultural and economic experiences locate them within a particular, albeit fluid and ambiguous, identity category. “Female head of household,” for example, most often reflects an economic category and is typically used in official economic data presentation and analysis. “Female head of household” does not assume the presence of any children; it does denote sole fiscal responsibility for the survival and well-being of a household. For most research purposes, “female head of household” does not include unmarried mothers who live with their parents; this categorization reflects tax status and tax structures. Some understand this term as an empowered one, recognizing agency and independence without connotatively triggering negative cultural baggage attached to the term “single mother.” Others suggest this term perpetuates norms of patriarchal, nuclear families by leaving the hearer or reader to assume that any household other than a “female-headed household” is headed by a male, who is assumed to be a traditional breadwinner and leader. In official economic reports, categories include female-headed households, male-headed households, and married-couple households, which indicate specific household formation and tax status rather than a particular social norm. That said, the connotative associations raise valid
concerns, and so this project will primarily limit the term “female head of household” to specific economic analysis.

The term “single mother” has been used most often in academic and popular discourse, including by those persons who inhabit this identity category. This label has been produced socially and historically in a variety of actions and attitudes. This construction is undeniably freighted with pervasive negative stereotypes and assumptions, particularly for African Americans. This identity construction, however, has also been utilized by activists who seek justice, equality, and understanding, including allies and those who proudly embrace this identification as their own self-understanding. Thus, while the terms “lone parent” and “unmarried mother” can be helpful in terms of avoiding harmful cultural and historical baggage, this dissertation will primarily use the term “single mother” in order to expose and explore the wide-ranging connotations accompanying it as critical sites of interrogation, interruption, connection, and empowerment.9 As participants in the ethnographic portion of this dissertation observe on multiple occasions, the term also allows for broader articulation of their experiences, given that the word “single” allows more porous boundaries than the more specific “unmarried.”

What is a “single mother?” As Adrienne Rich observes, a male can be identified as a “father” regardless of whether he has any contact or relationship with a child he has biologically co-created.10 Culturally and connotatively, however, the terms “mother” and specifically “single

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9 I do not want to undermine the linguistic possibilities inherent in using a less freighted label, such as “unmarried mother.” This linguistic shift is likely an empowering component in shifting public discourse and perceptions away from some of the negative associations attached to those occupying the category of “single mother.” I therefore think it likely helpful in other projects as well as my own future projects.

mother” assume a relationship between a person identifying as a woman and one or more children. But the term seems to go beyond this: does “single” automatically mean unmarried? Can someone be a single mother if she is in a romantic partnership of some kind? Can partners be living together and one still be considered a single mother? Does this label perpetuate heteronormativity? If one is unmarried but receiving child support or some financial support from her child/ren’s father/s, is she a “single mother?” If that father is an active physical presence in his child/ren’s lives, is she a “single mother?” Moreover, is one a “mother” if a child is not her own biologically or legally? Or if she has lost custody of her child/ren?

What, then, are the contours of the identity category of “single mother?” For most practical and discursive purposes, the definition indicates an unmarried woman, which includes women who have been divorced, with primary guardianship of one or more children. This definition determines outcomes of research as well as eligibility for direct government assistance and many charitable programs. This definition and the resultant research and assistance efforts primarily identifies single mothers in terms of their economic and material realities, rendering it easier to observe and classify a group of women as a particular “unit of analysis.” This classification serves a helpful function to many ends, including exposure of economic systems and arrangements in which particular women attempt to survive and thrive financially. The

11 I recognize gender as a culturally constructed, fluid category and sex identities as much more complex than a binary of male/female and man/woman. Since the constructed category of “woman” has concrete implications in society for those who inhabit and perform this gender and sex role, this project strategically uses labels of “woman” and “man” in service of interrogating how these socially and historically produced categories have impacted the realities of those who inhabit them. Further, the project aims to avoid essentializing any experience related to any identity category even as it explores how particular, systemic economic and cultural dynamics shape certain contours of particular, diverse realities.
definition, however, cannot capture the fullness of experiences of women who identify as single mothers, in terms of their realities, their needs, or their agency as individuals.

Responsibility

Collaborators in this project articulated a broader self-understanding of themselves as single mothers. In two separate focus groups, they quickly reached consensus that being a single mother is about “responsibility.” These women, whose lives encompass a spectrum of different relationship constellations currently and in their pasts, agreed, with a level of agreement not present in any other topic area, that being a single mother means one accepts “sole responsibility” for the well-being and care of her child/ren. This, they said, remains the case regardless of any support, financial, physical, emotional, or otherwise that she may receive in relationships with extended family, spouses, partners, significant others, governmental agencies, faith communities, or charitable organizations.12 Many collaborators identified themselves as single mothers while they were married.

This definition, arising from a group with the greatest awareness of daily realities of single mothers, signals several important factors in considering single mothers’ realities. The term “responsibility” moves beyond a passive description of marital and parental location to an active characterization of what this means to those who inhabit this category. Responsibility for a child or children denotes power, agency, leadership, and control as well as liability, culpability,

12 Exact data on the number of single mothers living with a partner are not available. However, an American Time Use Survey found that approximately 4% of households with children under the ages of 18 include unmarried partners. http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/29/chapter-4-single-mothers/#fn-17132-22. Accessed 4/12/2018. As indicated later, financial contributions of partners in such relationships with single mothers remain minimal.
and the capacity for fault, guilt, and blame. This recognition of duties associated with the role of a single mother opens space to recognize single mothers as subjects with active, dynamic roles rather than as passive, static objects. Taking sole responsibility for care of a child or children includes attention to economic demands of meeting concrete physical needs as well as attention to emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being. This work involves pressures, vulnerabilities, and agency that require enormous amounts of energy, creativity, and perseverance. Attempts to express and understand lived experiences of single mothers benefit from awareness of these multiple definitions, including richer analysis of what might be involved in ensuring a system in which single mothers and their families can thrive.

Including the conception of single motherhood as “responsibility” also allows for movement and overlap across certain identity boundaries. Here, married or partnered mothers might be recognized as single mothers when they have primary responsibility for their child/ren. Not only does this opening allow for broader exploration of gendered roles and diverse familial arrangements, but it also implicitly acknowledges that ambiguity and/or broader scopes in definitions create space for recognition of similarities and overlapping interests while maintaining the integrity of real differences and particularities. Although this project relies on

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13 Popular discourse often identifies this reality as that of a “default parent.” This is the person to whom all matters child-related “default” even if they delegate tasks to other caregivers.

14 Interestingly, when asked about the definition of “single mother,” both focus groups arrived at this consensus understanding around “responsibility” fairly quickly. The two collaborators who did not participate in focus groups volunteered a qualifier to the identity of “single mothers.” Christina Freedman began our conversation by saying she felt “different” and “unlike other participants” because she had so much support from her parents. Twila Barker, on the other hand, said she was a “real single mother” because she did not have “a boyfriend, like so many of them do.” One wonders whether they would have accepted, qualified, or resisted the categorization of this particular life experience as relating to responsibility in the focus group context.
some boundaries in definitions for purposes of research, analysis, and aid, I hope this broader definition proves meaningful and empowering for anyone who identifies as a single mother.

*Class, Race, and Gender*

Given these opening explorations, questions arise about why a study of single mothers should garner interest of theo-ethicists, economists, politicians and policymakers, and persons of faith. The quantity of single mothers in the United States, trends regarding their general economic situations, and cultural barriers to thriving indicate that such attention is not only warranted on theo-ethical grounds of concern for vulnerable populations but also because the well-being of single mothers and their families correlates directly to the economic, cultural, and political well-being of the U.S. political economy. Further, dynamics of class, race, and gender exposed in the narratives of particular members of this group connect to broader dynamics of class, race, and gender in the U.S.

What does it mean to be a working-class single mother? This project focuses on single mothers who are primarily positioned within the working class although many have experienced and continue to experience movement between working class and so-called underclass realities. Framing the focus in this way provides a pathway to explore class dynamics and the political economy impacting this particular group. Further, without minimizing qualitative and quantitative differences known by single mothers, the particular economic pressures and vulnerabilities to which single mothers can attest also expose dynamics and structures impacting others within poor and working classes in striking ways. This work aims to highlight particularities of pressure and agency for single, working-class mothers while also making connections with those who share class interests and even those in middle and upper-middle classes who ultimately share certain socioeconomic interests as well.
The working definition of “class” that this project deploys includes exploration of relative financial security (including income and assets) but does not define class based on income levels. Rather, it understands class as economist Michael Zweig proposes: a reflection of relative political, economic, and social power. Relative economic stability directly impacts access to participation in democratic processes that shape systems impacting life choices and power. Feminist economics provide critical insights into the gendered ways in which economic structures render women, particularly single mothers, less powerful in these processes.\(^{15}\)

Another critical factor in possibilities for thriving involves cultural contexts and societal attitudes surrounding and infusing the lives of single mothers and their families. Diverse scholarship and personal narratives have long exposed social and historical processes that have produced stigmas, stereotypes, and cultural assumptions that accompany and comprise the identity category of “single mother.” These carry different connotations depending on racial/ethnic identity, and this project would be deficient without an exploration of how racial differences impact quality of life and choices related to social, political, and economic power experienced by diverse single, working-class mothers. Thus, the project acknowledges historical constructions of race in the U.S., and explores how some single mothers experience this racialized aspect of their lives.

Intersections of class, race, and gender deepen exploration and analysis and theo-ethical reflections suggest concrete responses that might emerge from such a project as this. My hope is to deepen, broaden, and open discourse and possibilities for concrete changes that improve the likelihood of thriving for working-class single mothers, their families, and all those who inhabit the U.S. and the globalized political economy. Benjamin and Day deploy language of political economy to begin addressing these broad realities. Political economy “describes those political ideas, structures, and norms that shape, guide, and determine economic practices and outcomes.” Addressing political economy provides leverage to transform cultural and economic dynamics because “economic attitudes and practices in American life are always regulated by larger political values, projects, and goals.” My use of political economy is intended more to broadly indicate the intertwined relationship between political and economic structures. Because American democracy has fairly robust checks and balances and American capitalism does not, I would argue that economic structures currently have greater impact on political structures than vice versa.

In the following section, I highlight the historic silencing of single, working-class mothers and the replacement of their voices with stereotypes and harmful rhetoric. This false narrative continues to shape unjust realities, demonstrating the need for a project wherein the methodology inductively brings these voices and realities to the foreground. This section also provides contextualization for the stories that will follow, situating them in the broader story of single mothers’ experiences in the U.S. and allowing for deeper engagement with their voices. Thus, I offer an initial socio-historical framing of theoretical, philosophical, theological,


17 Day, 6–7.
political, economic, and cultural dynamics impacting today’s economically vulnerable single mothers and their experiences in the U.S. political economy. This section functions (1) to make an argument, with focused attention on the particularly illuminative case of welfare reform policies, for the existence of and need to address unjust structural forces impacting opportunities for thriving for single mothers; (2) to make clear the necessity, practically and ethically, of experiential knowledge of economically vulnerable women in decision-making processes aiming to ameliorate pressures and marginalization; and (3) to be transparent about research and theoretical commitments that I bring to a project that intended to be more inductive than deductive.

The final section in this chapter explains theoethical reasoning for beginning with inductive, ethnographic study.

Socio-Historical Context

Thomas Jefferson once encountered a poor, single mother in France. He listened intently to her as she recounted her experiences of abject poverty while trying to support her child after her husband had abandoned them. When she was able to procure paid work, she made such a paltry sum that it bought little by way of food or security. Jefferson was deeply moved and immediately sought to take measures to preclude such experiences in his beloved America. In a

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18 I have published large portions of this section: Julie A. Mavity Maddalena, “Floodwaters and the Ticking Clock,” CrossCurrents 63, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 148–73, https://doi.org/10.1111/cros.12021. Other pieces were presented in a paper titled, “What is it Really Like to Struggle?: A Feminist, Theo-ethical Response to the Systematic, Political Oppression of Single, Working-Class Mothers in the U.S.” a politics and religion session at the 2013 American Academy of Religion meeting in Baltimore, MD. Material from both of these sources has been revised and updated. Other sections reflect new research and analysis.
letter to James Madison, he stated “hope for a more equitable distribution of wealth in America.”

Pamela Couture points out that Jefferson’s ideal of freedom never understood freedom as an end in itself. Freedom existed “for the purpose of organizing a good society, in which people could care for their families and communities.” Jefferson located the source of the woman’s poverty in the corrupt nature of France’s economic structure, which encouraged the concentration of property in the hands of a few while people wanting to work were left begging. Observing the damaging effects of this economic polarization, Jefferson claimed for Americans the “right of all people to property to enable care for their families.”

Jefferson located responsibility for this equitable distribution of property in the government, even suggesting ways to incorporate it into legislation:

…the consequences of this enormous inequality producing so much misery to the bulk of [human]kind, legislators cannot invent too many devices for subdividing property…The descent of property of every kind therefore to all the children or to all the brothers and sisters, or other relations in equal degree, is a politic measure and practicable one. Another means of silently lessening the inequality of property is to exempt from taxation below a certain point, and tax the higher portions of property in geometrical progression as they rise. Whenever there are in any country uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far exceeded as to violate a natural right.

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20 Pamela Couture, Blessed Are the Poor?: Women’s Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology (Abingdon Press, 1991), 137.

21 Couture, 137.

22 Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson, 841–42.
Jefferson suggested three additional means to ensure the possibility of equal outcomes for children, each radical for the time, and arguably still radical: (1) the repeal of the laws of entail and primogeniture, through which mass amounts of wealth were consolidated into the hands of powerful families or the eldest son; (2) establishment of freedom of religion, which bars any religion from acquiring disproportional wealth and power through relations with the state; and (3) public education, which at the time was a radical new innovation. Each measure eventually gained some purchase in society though none proved ultimately successful at thwarting the rise of the gross inequalities Jefferson that sought to avoid, particularly for single mothers.\(^\text{23}\)

Despite Jefferson’s efforts, colonial single mothers were divided into the binary categories of “deserving” and “undeserving” for eligibility by the Early Settlement and Colonial Poor Laws.\(^\text{24}\) While poorer persons and families were generally not yet immediately stigmatized, single women with children were automatically held in suspicion unless their culturally acceptable circumstance, widowhood, was widely known in the community.\(^\text{25}\) Even widows, however, were often left to attempt survival in a socioeconomic structure weighted heavily against them. Single mothers have always been among the most vulnerable families in the United States due to extreme susceptibility to poverty.\(^\text{26}\) Couture names four factors that most contribute to this vulnerability: (1) women are relegated to a secondary status in the U.S. socioeconomic

\(^{23}\) Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?*, 139.


\(^{25}\) Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?*, 28.

\(^{26}\) As has already been noted, single mothers of color experience disproportionately greater and different economic and cultural vulnerabilities than white single mothers.
system; (2) they bear heavier economic and emotional responsibilities with less access to economic resources; (3) they are less able to compete for higher places in economic structures because responsibilities of care for dependents conflict with availability for economic competition; and (4) the macroeconomic processes of advanced capitalism have depleted communities where they most often live. Further, society views the jobs that women have historically obtained as income to supplement that of a male breadwinner.

Therefore, from these earliest times in U.S. history, lower wages, part-time status, and denial of benefits such as Social Security, pension, insurance, or unemployment insurance have characterized jobs held by women. Moreover, employers have viewed female employees as less committed and more dispensable than their male counterparts. Males have thus historically enjoyed the advantages of intergenerational transfers of resources, such as investments in their education, based on deeply held assumptions and valuation of patriarchal breadwinner roles.27 These unjust cultural and economic systems remain substantially unchanged to the present day.

In their efforts to help women, many early American feminists created an image of the single, working-class mother that was somewhat less than complementary. Indeed, they deliberately distanced themselves from the stereotypes they created for political purposes. Building on early concerns voiced by Abigail Adams, nineteenth-century activists, such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone sought economic independence from men, yielding freedom and equality in marriage plus freedom to leave a marriage, control over one’s own sexual experiences, and voice and power be to no longer considered property. This “new true woman” offered promises of equal rights, economic and psychological self-reliance, and

27 Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?*, 38–43.
gender similarity. Unfortunately, these white, upper- and middle-class women rarely took into account concerns of the poorest women, even proliferating vicious stereotypes and generating proposals that denied aid to poor pregnant women. Further, when activists began privileging the fight for Black, male suffrage over that of women’s suffrage (arguing it would speed progress for Black males and allow for women’s suffrage to be achieved later), many white feminists turned their anger against all African Americans. Later, when it became potentially politically expedient to exclude Black women from women’s suffrage initiatives, many white feminist suffragist groups chose this path. These classist, racist streams in white feminist movements have continued through the course of history, sometimes responding constructively to criticisms from feminists of color and sometimes continuing to yield in damaging ways to compromises or oversights afforded by their privileges of class and race/ethnicity.

These early middle-class feminists fell into the trap of shunning those closest to their cause who appeared to threaten it by embodying “weaknesses” that opposition efforts could leverage. The white feminists who fell into this trap betrayed the original intent of feminist causes by undermining the very purposes of women’s flourishing. Instead of realizing that struggles of poor women, particularly poor, single mothers, threw into relief the ultimate telos of a culture that expects women to stay home and tend to the children (setting up an economic system to reflect that expectation, a system that punishes those who fail to conform to these norms), many early feminists distanced themselves from poor women. The legacy of this disassociation is that white, middle-class feminists reified the ideal that wage earning signifies the key to economic independence. They missed learning from women with knowledge about various barriers still standing, that barred the way to true self-determination even from within the

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28 Couture, 141–44.
workforce. This oversight opened the door for twentieth-century welfare critics to feel justified, even “liberated feminists,” compelling poor mothers into paid work and expecting that work to eradicate their poverty without dismantling the bars preventing escape from poverty. One wonders what might have developed had Jefferson’s experience with a poor, working mother and his willingness to manipulate wealth distribution in the name of justice maintained a more public presence, or even early feminist discourse. Perhaps if more founders had had direct experiences with such stories, they would have mirrored Jefferson’s desire to create different systems.

Regardless, largely due to feminist efforts and economic need, greater numbers of middle-class women were entering professional fields and experiencing a measure of economic independence by the turn of the century. This expanded freedom was not without its costs, however. Privileged women experienced challenges of balancing motherhood, marriage, and careers (since domestic work had not shifted from the female purview). Professional women’s working-class counterparts, however, had significantly different needs. As nineteenth-century capitalism produced increasingly ill-paid and unsatisfactory working conditions for low-wage workers, women struggling to put food on the table needed labor protection more than individual economic opportunity. Women working for economic necessity, rather than for economic independence, experienced dramatic exploitation as they worked long hours for poor pay in unhealthy conditions. The distinctive desires of these groups of workers can be seen most clearly in the two organizations developed to advocate for women. The Women’s Party claimed the prerogative for women to work because it recognized that work satisfied a need for self-fulfillment; these women fought against societal norms pressuring them to stay home, keeping their lives, voices, and power private. The Women’s Bureau, on the other hand, argued that most labor experienced by its members was exploitative, depriving women of adequate economic and
emotional sustenance; these women fought against economic structures favoring shareholders over workers and male workers over female workers.29

Working-class women resisted these exploitative conditions by forming some of the earliest unions. Women factory workers organized in Lowell, Massachusetts, to protest working conditions in 1843 and freed Black women organized in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1866. Mary Harris “Mother” Jones led union strikes with women throughout the turn of the century, and immigrant women led the Bread and Roses strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which led to the first minimum wage law.30 The Women’s Bureau, together with the National Consumer’s League and the Women’s Educational and Industrial Union produced critical research on women workers while advocating on behalf of women workers and their families.31 In fact, Mary Anderson, who led the Women’s Bureau from 1920 to 1944 is credited with primary responsibility for the inclusion of women workers in the 1938 Federal Wage and Hour Law (now known as the Fair Labor Standards Act).32

Throughout the twentieth century, the number of women in the workplace continued to rise steadily (with small ebbs and flows stemming from World Wars I and II), and the number of

29 Couture, 150–52.


single mothers grew dramatically. Women found themselves supporting families for a variety of reasons including flight from abusive marriages or relationships, impregnation by rape, and abandonment. Whatever their circumstances, women who sought work from economic necessity continued to encounter limited access to life-sustaining incomes. Not only did single mothers enter the workforce without benefits of seniority and experience (that husbands likely accrued while their wives engaged in full-time family work with younger children), but they often lacked financial resources, marketable skills, self-esteem, and community and family support. Further, several of the largest labor unions fought to protect family wages and jobs for white men from white women, Black men and women, and immigrants. These unions helped institutionalize this sexism (privileging men) and classism (privileging heterosexual, married households not dependent on women’s wages) through “protective legislation.” A 1908 Supreme Court decision justified sexist laws by codifying the “proper” place of women in society:

…woman’s physical structure and the performance of maternal functions place her at a disadvantage in the struggle for subsistence…[Since] healthy mothers are essential to vigorous offspring, the physical well-being of woman becomes an object of public interest and care in order to preserve the strength and vigor of the race.33

Thus, regulation of women’s bodies, in the name of preserving their primary capacities for dependent care work, became a matter of public prerogative. The sentiments of this declaration appeared in laws restricting women from certain jobs and the time and place of paid work. An 1881 California law prohibited women from working in establishments selling alcohol, and later labor laws barred women from working as miners, messengers, elevator operators, letter carriers, and taxi drivers. These laws not only prevented many women from earning

enough to support their children, but they also played a pivotal role in crystallizing women’s secondary labor force position. As poverty rates skyrocketed and female-headed households fell deeper into poverty, welfare programs were legislated and enacted. Disparities and prejudices in these programs widened economic and cultural gaps between white single mothers and single mothers of color. Again, those who allegedly sought to help created and deployed stereotypes of single, working-class mothers for social and political gain at the expense of the most vulnerable. In the early decades of the twentieth century most states enacted “widow’s pensions” or “mothers’ pensions,” which the public accepted as means of support for families who had lost breadwinners. Known for primarily helping “gilt-edged widows,” these programs explicitly and implicitly favored “respectable” white women. African American women were often denied assistance based on biased criteria, such as the relative “suitability” of their homes and the “moral” standards encoded in the programs, often excluding non-widowed mothers. Stereotypes of hypersexed, promiscuous, lazy, immoral Black mothers shaped perceptions of local welfare workers, leading to denials of claims based on “suitability.” Black mothers were not alone in their underrepresentation in receiving assistance. While poor immigrants from Eastern Europe were often granted aid because they had the “potential to assimilate” to American values, Hispanic women were not viewed with such potential. In California, for instance, “Mexican-born widows were excluded from mothers’ pension aid because it was assumed their ‘feudal background’ would predispose them to abuse the program.”

34 Sidel, 53.

A famous example of this stereotyping—particularly around race—is in the creation and maintenance of AFDC. Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, also known as “welfare”) was established in 1935 and initially viewed by the predominantly white public as primarily helping poor, white widows who had perhaps lost their husbands in mining accidents. As the number of single mothers continued to increase, the image of welfare recipients shifted from a white widow to a Black woman with multiple children and an “unwillingness to work.” In 1940, 42 percent of AFDC recipients were widows. By 1963, only six percent were widows. By 1991, the number of widows on AFDC had declined to two percent.36

Further, after 1960, most recipients were not white, although public perception largely failed to recognize that white women and their children still comprised close to 40 percent of AFDC recipients. The white perception was that persons of color were receiving almost all welfare benefits. During this span of time, especially the 1970s and 1980s as real wages declined, many middle-class women began to work for the first time from economic necessity.37 State and local AFDC programs used their flexibility and discretion to disperse benefits

new dimensions in recent decades with the rise of nativism and the association of all Latinas with undocumented migrants from Mexico and Central and South America. The narrative declares immigrant women “fraudulent and lazy” by suggesting they have children in the U.S. as a means of staying here. The slur used is “anchor baby,” and the narrative continues that immigrant women have these children in order to qualify for direct government assistance. The same groups spreading these ideas suggest that Latinas have a multitude of children, thus “racializing Latina mothers as animals, suggesting that these women are either incapable or unwilling to regulate sexuality in order to work hard and follow the rules.” Melinda Vandenbeld Giles, *Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism*, first edition (Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2014), 202–4.


unequally to single mothers across racial lines. Extensive studies found that “states whose populations contained greater proportions of African Americans had more restrictive welfare eligibility requirements than did other states.”

Even with these distribution discrepancies, economic conditions, proportionately worse for persons of color, forced a greater number of single mothers of color to accept AFDC assistance.

The 1965 report by Daniel Patrick Moynihan provided leverage to blame Black women’s morality for their economic vulnerability. Moynihan’s report interpreted higher rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and single mothers among African Americans as signifying moral depravity creating disproportionate rates of poverty among Black single mothers. When combined with threatening stereotypes of Black matriarchs and President Ronald Reagan’s fabricated “welfare queen,” the results for single mothers were devastating. Single mothers of color, with particular focus on Black single mothers, had become emblematic of deficient cultural values untethered from an economic system that contributed to their economic vulnerabilities.

Within this broad narrative poor, single white mothers had become largely invisible. While white privilege offered them a myriad of benefits, including economic ones that were withheld from single mothers of color, they remained considerably more economically vulnerable than other populations.

The stage was now set for an assault on single mothers through the AFDC program. In particular, welfare detractors chose to leverage strategically the pervasive American, capitalist myth of self-sufficiency (with racism and sexism implicitly fueling this “righteous” cause) and

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38 Neubeck and Cazenave, *Welfare Racism*, 64.

39 Neubeck and Cazenave, 152–53.
its inherent moral goodness to enact changes. AFDC detractors deemed “self-sufficiency” the panacea for the problems of economic vulnerability of single mothers and located the roots of self-sufficiency in the same place as many early American feminists—in waged work. Thus, the whirlpool of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism applied to single mothers drew strength from the ideal of self-sufficiency and began to spin more powerfully.

_Self-Sufficiency_

Why did (and do) these stereotypes and injurious policies have such rhetorical purchase? They seem to make use of a widespread assumption about self-sufficiency, which is broadly harmful and particularly so for single mothers. Before looking at the systemic dimensions of the welfare reform process and its impacts on economically vulnerable single mothers, I look more closely at the origins of the cultural ideal of self-sufficiency because it is a persistent, fundamental value driving destructive policies and divisive attitudes, even among single, working-class mothers. People deemed “self-sufficient” by the dominant cultural narrative are assigned more worth, more dignity. This designation, by design most often applied to powerful white males, is tied up with the capitalist system because it almost always indicates economic security and wealth. However, the label belies the truth of interdependence, even for the most powerful persons in society, as ontological reality and as moral, theological good. Experiences of single mothers expose these lies and bear witness to the realities of interdependence and the dignity therein.

While the ideal certainly did not originate with early white feminists such as Adams, Anthony, Cady Stanton, and Stone, in embracing it they missed the critical distinction between the psychological value of self-reliance and the popular concept of economic self-sufficiency, a distinction women in this project articulate in important ways. Unfortunately, these early,
dominant feminists, most often white and economically privileged, identified the economic ideal of self-sufficiency as their primary escape route from constrictive social roles without full recognition of the unintended consequences of this narrow focus. This conflation of a problematic ideal and a critical psychological need has contributed to destructive attitudes and policies this project seeks to correct.

Couture looks at this ideal of self-sufficiency and its connection to single mothers in helpful ways. She traces its historical roots as a philosophical and historical subject to Plato and Aristotle and then forward into the American, capitalist ethos that worships “rugged individualism” and the “self-made man.” Couture also retrieves Martin Luther’s rejection of the pervasive privileging of so-called self-sufficient individuals as an early theological argument against individualism in favor of interdependence. Luther eventually concluded that self-sufficiency is a misguided norm, “which conceals the interconnections between individuals, families, social institutions, and government which are essential for human flourishing.”

Plato’s vision of an aristocratic society in a just city included equality between men and women and mapped out the route to self-sufficiency. In order to enjoy the self-sufficiency needed to pursue a life of contemplation (Plato’s idea of existence perfected), one must (1) receive enough education to achieve the freedom from emotions required for the full exercise of reason; (2) renounce all domestic attachments so that one’s exercise of judgment not be influenced by personal affections (one would not know one’s own children); (3) embrace total

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40 Socialist and working-class feminists better understood the limits of self-sufficiency and argued for broader protections and redistribution of economic power and recognition.

41 Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?*, 24–25.
responsibility for one’s own life and choices (Plato recognized the unavoidable influence of environment on human development and choice, and so constructed a scenario in which each human chooses his or her exact place of birth); and (4) allow compassion only to enhance judgment about one’s own life.  

In essence, Plato’s vision allowed privileged women full equality but only at the expense of poor persons (who would take on household work) and children (who would be raised by the community, with no knowledge of their biological families). As stark as this picture appears, Plato explicitly identifies what is implicit, but fully operative, in most contemporary arrangements: women can only be equal when supported by domestic labor (which will be done by persons with less privilege and power, most often women of color). Couture’s assessment of the privileged class’s pursuit of Plato’s ideal (regardless of whether it is recognized as such) cautions that “in our obsession with self-sufficiency, we may be well on the way to enacting a portion of Plato’s structural change, the abolition of the family and the destruction of attachment, without any of the benefits to the common good which Plato hoped to achieve in his just city.”  

Meanwhile, Aristotle’s views on human nature planted women firmly in the realm of inferiority linked to total economic dependence—ideas later adopted by Christians through the writings of Thomas Aquinas and others. Aristotle did not even entertain the idea of women’s equality or that of all persons in lower socioeconomic spheres (“slaves,” in his language). Women’s inferiority arose from their economic necessity generated by normalized economic restraints limiting their activities. Justice, for Aristotle, is realized because men are morally

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42 Couture, 74–79.

43 Couture, 80.
obligated to care for women. Women are obligated to care for the home and the husband, but these mutual obligations did not reflect any sort of equality of relation. This notion of reciprocal duties within family systems became the basis for family law until the 1970s (clearly containing seeds of Pauline thought as well). Couture notes that as history unfolds, while the “bonds of moral obligation on the part of the ‘superior,’ economically-privileged party loosen, the economic necessity of the ‘inferior’ party remains intact.”44 This relegates single mothers to positions of extreme vulnerability morally, culturally, and economically.

Dominant, early streams of Christian tradition favored the ideal of self-sufficiency through beliefs that celibacy defined true Christian discipleship. Celibate Christians could pursue their relationships with God without distracting family ties. Later monastics embraced this ideal of self-sufficiency as they sought total freedom from economic and relational attachments (the Platonic ideal, without gender equality). These societies viewed children as burdens, and many were given to monasteries through the practice of oblation. Observing this development, Martin Luther rejected such devaluation of the family and sought to reclaim motherhood as a radically graceful life. Luther recognized the unjust power dynamics in current arrangements and challenged them from theological grounding. According to Luther, “in God’s world, grace upsets the relationships of the powerful and the powerless.”45

Luther particularly noticed the vulnerabilities and the relative lack of power of poor women and their children. He saw men spending money needed by the household for expensive pilgrimages designed to secure their salvation and blamed the Church for encouraging pietistic

44 Couture, 82–83.
45 Couture, 84–97.
practices to fill its own coffers while impoverishing women and children. By pronouncing God’s blessing on sexuality, the family, and labor while advocating lives of compassion for one’s neighbor, Luther reversed the ideal of self-sufficiency in favor of ideals of mutuality and interdependence, even though he did not challenge paternalistic, patriarchal hierarchies within families. Embracing an ethic of care, which recognized the web of interpersonal and institutional relationships, Luther envisioned “an economically and relationally reformed society, one which ideally put the service of the family and neighbor at the center of its economic and relational practices…for the sake of God.”

Like Jefferson’s economic vision, Luther’s vision failed to take root in the practices and theologies of those who would eventually conquer and shape America. Evangelicalism during the Reformation retained the patriarchal hierarchy that Luther espoused and dropped his radical ethic of care, interdependence, and relationality among all people in favor of cultural and economic individualism. Couture notes that, once this ethic of care collapsed, women and children, and single mothers in particular, became exposed to the dangers that so grieved Luther.

Many activists, theologians, and ethicists have challenged the theo-ethical validity of the ideal of self-sufficiency (that functionally relies on the subjugation of marginalized persons, a point Plato made some 2,300 years ago). Joerg Rieger identifies theological understandings of individualism and explicitly connects this “mythical” ideal with the reinforcement of the free market economy, which oppresses workers, including single mothers. He identifies

46 Couture, 111.

47 Couture, 116–17.
individualism as the “founding myth” as well as one of the “most important points of connection” of dominant ideas in economics and theology. This myth functions to favor those with power and privilege, “who tend to see themselves as independent and autonomous,” effectively hiding the many ways the labor of others has profited them. This, he argues, allows myths of self-sufficiency to cover “up both questions of power and empire.” Religion relegated to the private sphere, particularly Christian traditions promoting Prosperity Gospel theology, sanction these economic understandings and relationships. Patriarchal and racist theological traditions, which similarly infuse American economic and political structures, render all women and people of color particularly vulnerable in these systems.

While these areas of resistance are critically important, they remain largely unheard as the dominant current in America holds all people morally and practically responsible for self-sufficiency, regardless of the strong undertows pulling them toward economic vulnerability. This ideal has been wielded in particularly destructive ways against culturally and economically marginalized single mothers, violating their basic human dignity and their material wellbeing, with so-called welfare reform providing a stark picture of its power and its consequences.

Welfare Reform: TANF and Final Rule

Among the more striking examples of how stereotyping, when incorporated into the social and political orders, perpetuates and compounds injustice is that of TANF. A close look at its history and current existence provides perspective and meaning to realities and perspectives single mothers share in this project, both in relation to how they experience the judgmental, dominant gaze and how they sometimes see each other in unfavorable lights.

In the early 1990s, in the months leading up to the welfare reforms promised by Presidential candidate Bill Clinton, the claim of the moral good of self-sufficiency was directed with increasing intensity toward economically vulnerable single mothers and their children. When Clinton was elected in 1992, he immediately set a course for reform that would channel more welfare recipients into the paid work force. As noted previously, supporters of this movement attributed the poverty that welfare recipients experienced to single parenthood, so-called welfare dependency, and, most fundamentally, unwillingness to work. Despite parallel statistics of birth and divorce rates with middle- and upper-middle class counterparts, detractors leveled cruel, inaccurate accusations and insinuations of laziness, sexual promiscuity, and parental irresponsibility at mothers, particularly single mothers of color, who accepted the direct aid AFDC offered. Continuing the legacy of Moynihan, Reagan, and others, members of Congress blamed women receiving welfare for various social ills. Vice President Dan Quayle suggested poor, unmarried women with children were at least partially responsible for the “lawless anarchy” of the Rodney King Riots. Quayle undoubtedly missed the ironic reversal of the equally hyperbolic, offensive conclusion of a 1931 “study,” which linked “truancy, incorrigibility, robbery, teen tantrums, and difficulty managing children” to a “mother’s absence from her job” of staying home to raise children.

The same contingent that publicly valued an economically privileged mother’s ability to choose to engage solely in unpaid family work to benefit her children simultaneously maintained that children of economically disadvantaged mothers would receive greater intellectual stimulation and social development if they engaged in paid work beyond their unpaid family

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50 Sidel, *Women and Children Last*, 55.
work. These advocates related stories of “proud children” proclaiming the “joy” of having a mother who doesn’t “just stay home all day” and the satisfaction of having an answer when “schoolmates ask about what their parent does for a living.”\textsuperscript{51} In contrast to “selfless” mothers raising their children without paid work or direct government assistance, poorer mothers who also believe fulltime family work is a better choice for their children have been repeatedly and systematically identified as “lazy and crazed, trying to meet their own selfish needs.”\textsuperscript{52}

Diane Dujon and Ann Withorn followed media coverage in the months leading up to the passing of welfare reform legislation. Their overview begins with a February 2, 1995, \textit{Newsweek} article citation that blames the “sexually irresponsible culture of poverty” on television, which is “the only sustained communication our society has with the underclass.”\textsuperscript{53} Television, the article continues, idealizes sexual irresponsibility as its most powerful message.\textsuperscript{54} Isolating poorer families, envisioned primarily as families of color, into “the underclass” generates troubling “us” and “them” language, which, as Sidel notes, is neither helpful nor accurate in evaluating existing social programs or in devising new ones.\textsuperscript{55} Rather, reinforcing stereotyped differences within communities inhibits empathy and recognition of injustices, which blocks widespread vision or movement for common, social, and moral goods of full thriving for all.


\textsuperscript{52} Sidel, \textit{Unsung Heroines}, 22. It should be noted that families who do not receive direct assistance in the form of AFDC, then, and TANF now, receive government subsidies for their children in the form of tax breaks and refunds—often in larger amounts than TANF direct aid.

\textsuperscript{53} Diane Dujon and Ann Withorn, eds., \textit{For Crying Out Loud: Women’s Poverty in the United States}, 1St Edition (South End Press, 1999), 30.

\textsuperscript{54} Dujon and Withorn, 30.

The same day of the *Newsweek* article, Diane Sawyer interviewed a group of teenage mothers (who comprised less than 10 percent of welfare recipients) on *Prime Time Live*. Assuming the role of the “angry taxpayer,” she asked, “why should taxpayers pay for your mistake?” When one of the mothers pointed out that welfare spending constitutes less than one percent of the budget (far less than defense spending), Sawyer immediately redirected the interview to the mothers’ irresponsibility. Dujon and Withorn wryly hope that Sawyer might direct the same fury and tenacity at CEOs and heads of state, implying that Sawyer and the American public she represents have channeled their mounting rage at failing economic structures toward the easiest targets, those who lack power to affect real change in working conditions, income inequalities, tax codes that disproportionately benefit the wealthy, violence, and other social injustices.56

Biases in media coverage continue. The Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) organization studying media coverage of welfare reform from December 1, 1994-February, 24 1995, in six major new outlets noted that 71 percent of the writers were male, few of whom were experts and most of whom were moralizing the issue as traditional wisdom and concerns about “values.” Most stories recounted words and actions of politicians rather than stories of poor women and their children. In this coverage, 24 percent of the sources were members of Congress (72 percent Republican, 28 percent Democratic), 24 percent were state and local officials, and nine percent were persons representing the Clinton administration. E. Clay Shaw, Jr., chair of the house sub-committee that drafted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act

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56 Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, 30–31. Also relevant to this media event is the moral assumption of “mistake” leveled at this group of mothers. Sawyer and the public she represents leave no room for the wide range of reasons single mothers are parenting alone.
(PRWOA), enjoyed the widest coverage. Shaw’s quoted sentiments included the notion that the current welfare program simply functioned to “pamper the poor.”57 As with Quayle, Shaw ignored the fact that income levels of recipients with AFDC assistance were still at half the federal poverty line.

Recipients of AFDC assistance comprised ten percent of media sources. Even then, the portrayal of recipients was highly selective and distorting and fueled stereotypes. Interviewees were most often between ages 17 and 19 even though that age bracket represented less than six percent of recipients. Further, overt racism appeared, for example, in the World Report story on January 16, 1995, which featured seven women in its cover story. Six were Black, and the lone white woman was “clinically depressed.” Recipients were most often asked insulting, invasive questions and were never invited to share their stories beyond leading questions that portrayed them in the least sympathetic light possible. A Boston Globe article on April 16, 1995, asked the question, “A family that works does not get a raise for having a child. Why then should a family that doesn’t work?”58 Many would respond that a $2,450 tax credit along with tax subsidies for childcare received for each child by families not receiving AFDC funds qualifies as a raise, and few would suggest that middle-class families base their childbearing decisions on these publicly-funded income subsidies. Finally, the FAIR report cites nine percent of sources for the media as research and advocacy groups. While these groups offered studies demonstrating no causal relationship between birth rates and benefit levels, statistics and evidence were largely overlooked in favor of “conventional wisdom and morality sound bites.”59

57 Dujon and Withorn, 31–32.

58 Dujon and Withorn, 33.

59 Dujon and Withorn, 33–35.
incongruence implicates the powerful role of confirmation bias in perpetuating cultural stereotypes that shape institutional structures and policies. When previously held beliefs contain prejudices related to racism, sexism, and classism, the results can be devastating.  

Day exposes the religious values underpinning stigmatization of poor, Black women. Values such as the Protestant work ethic and the heterosexual family structure with “traditional” gender roles collude with neo-liberal logic that perpetuates ideas of meritocracy (while masking realities of power and privilege within the racist, hetero-patriarchal capitalist system). Thus, poor, Black single mothers are judged as morally deficient in a way that skirts systemic causes of poverty.

Given the cumulative weight of historical bias, the pervasiveness of the cultural ethos and myth of self-sufficiency, and the power of media misrepresentation of single mothers, it is unsurprising that the 1996 Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF) had broad, popular, bipartisan support. TANF promised to help poor families achieve self-sufficiency by linking direct assistance to work requirements and creating a lifetime limit of five years for the time during which poor families can receive assistance.

Almost a decade after its inception, though before the economic crash of 2008, Sharon Hays explored the TANF program and the families it professes to serve. She illuminates the conflicting, imbedded values of the program: the work ethic and the traditional family, which, together, “condemn the ‘dependence’ of poor women and children on the state and celebrate

60 Cf. Pamela Couture on American Christians in particular. Couture, Blessed Are the Poor?, 18–20.

their dependence on miserly employers and men.”\textsuperscript{62} Most Americans, and most TANF workers, are unaware that the preamble to the PRWOA includes a congressional edict on family. Goals for the restoration of this fabled middle-class, heterosexual family with a mother caring for the children fulltime include a reduction of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and the promotion of marriage, which will allow for the “care of children at home.”\textsuperscript{63} While the program offers no marriage enrichment training or dating advice to its staff or recipients, the message remains: the U.S. congress would like economically vulnerable single mothers to find husbands who earn wages sufficient to allow them to stay at home. They will enforce these values to the extent they can by teaching women, through the stringent, inflexible, unrealistic, and punitive demands of TANF, that they really need a husband for their own well-being and that of their children.\textsuperscript{64}

Hays spent considerable time in TANF offices observing staff, recipients, interactions, and literature. She notes two dominant themes, the ticking clock that is the time limit for assistance and the priority of paid work above all else. Pamphlets exhort such aphorisms as “work is better than welfare,” “all jobs are good jobs,” and “work is the first priority, any earnings are good.” A large banner hanging in the TANF offices Hays visited asks the question,

\begin{flushright}
\text{“What is your priority?”}
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\textsuperscript{63} Hays, 34.
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\textsuperscript{64} Hays, 35–36. The U.S. has continued to pursue the assumption, that a heterosexual marriage will solve the economic challenges of single mothers. Since 2001, the Bush and Obama administrations have spent billions of dollars on “Healthy Marriage Incentives.” None of these initiatives has influenced the growing numbers of single mothers or the economic vulnerabilities of single mother families. See www.nytimes.com/2016/03/23/business/for-the-sake-of-the-children-not-marriage-but-help.html?mwrsm=Email&\_r=0. The measures have, however, contributed to cultural judgment of single mothers, making systemic changes that might benefit this and other populaces more difficult to achieve.
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“how much time do you have left?” The image of the ticking clock appears in most TANF literature as well.⁶⁵

TANF has penalties for non-compliance and allows few exemptions per state. States can exempt 20 percent of their TANF clients from paid work requirement. This includes exemptions for disability, mental illness, illness, behavior problems of children, and domestic abuse. Exemption slots disappear almost immediately given high rates of all of these realities among poorer members of society. States maintain considerable leeway to develop their programs, which has some advantages but also presents prohibitive challenges to families moving between states and anyone measuring the outcomes of the program. This leeway also allows states to redirect TANF funds to other programs aimed at addressing issues related to poverty but not directly providing assistance to primary financial providers in families. Each state requires a job search entailing 30 applications per month, submission of all paternal information so that the state can pursue child support, acceptance of the first job offer one receives, and retention of that job. A woman may choose to pursue job or vocational training part-time for one year in lieu of full-time work but still must work part-time. TANF offers temporary subsidies for childcare as well as temporary cash assistance once a mother has found paid work—helpful measures that presumably function to give her the time and leverage to transcend the bounds of poverty.⁶⁶

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⁶⁵ Hays, 34–38.

Strings are attached. Not only can states restrict assistance so that a woman who gets pregnant cannot receive benefits on behalf of that child, but she will also be penalized for any time she takes off when she gives birth. She therefore receives no assistance during her maternal leave from the paid workforce, and those unpaid months count towards her five-year maximum TANF assistance. If a woman fails to submit required paternity information (if she was raped, uncertain about her child’s parentage, or fearful of retribution and abuse), she will not receive assistance. If a woman leaves a job, because she cannot find childcare that fits her work schedule, the location of the job (or childcare) makes the situation unmanageable, working conditions are unacceptable (documented sexual harassment rates are high), or wages are insufficient to meet her family’s needs, her TANF funds are withheld or discontinued. If a woman is waiting for a childcare subsidy to become available (only one-third of TANF recipients nationwide receive childcare assistance, and there is a major shortage of facilities), she must be employed or she will be punished, and the clock keeps ticking.

In addition to moral deficiencies in the realms of human dignity, compassion, privacy, safety, and justice, the fiscal realities of TANF ought to elicit a response from conservatives. Given the high cost of childcare, the price tag for childcare subsidies for low-income women far exceeds the costs of paying the same women for the work of raising their own children. Similarly, the child support enforcement effort cost taxpayers $745 million in 1996. Unarguably, paternal support is important, and neglect is crippling. Most mothers receiving TANF assistance do receive some sort of support from their children’s fathers, many of whom are working for extremely low wages themselves, whether in the form of diapers, cash, or gifts, which function to maintain relations with the children and aid the mother. Incidentally, she only receives $50/month if the government does manage to extract child support, with the rest reimbursing
TANF. Frequently, these fragile relationships crumble entirely (often violently) when a mother submits requirements to TANF to identify her child’s father. Other mothers do not want to identify fathers because his payment of child support grants him knowledge of his child/ren’s location and legal rights to see his children. Mothers who fear the fathers of their children must make terrible choices about meeting needs for safety, security, and psychological well-being of themselves and their children over the small measure of financial security TANF might offer. The costs clearly outweigh the benefits from multiple angles.\textsuperscript{67}

Because states receive significant incentives for reducing their rolls, many have incorporated a powerful diversionary system. By disqualifying many and rendering others ineligible whether or not they need or qualify for assistance, states can access enormous bonuses.\textsuperscript{68} Potential applicants must attend a meeting (typically with no childcare provided) in which they are discouraged from applying for TANF funds. Hays observed many instances of partial, confusing, and misleading information that lead many attendees not to apply.\textsuperscript{69}

Yet supporters have proclaimed the “success” of TANF based on drastic reductions in the numbers of recipients. Indeed, the number of families receiving welfare benefits has declined by two-thirds from 1994 to 2008. Studies belie this success with reports from individual states that suggest the percentages of people exiting TANF with work hovers around 50 percent. This 50 percent, moreover, includes anyone who has earned $100 or more in the last three months. Further, the number of poor children receiving TANF benefits has plummeted from over 60

\textsuperscript{67} Hays, 35–81.

\textsuperscript{68} Sidel, \textit{Keeping Women and Children Last Revised}, 203.

\textsuperscript{69} Hays, \textit{Flat Broke with Children}, 84.
percent prior to the introduction of TANF to 23 percent in 2007. The Children’s Defense Fund reports that 70 percent of poor children are living in families in which someone is working full- or part-time. The same report indicates that over half the families with children poor enough to qualify for TANF do not receive assistance due to the various barriers to enrollment.

Since the recession of 2008, the numbers are much bleaker. In 2017, TANF benefits for a family of three are at or below 60 percent of the federal poverty line, with rising cuts at both state and federal levels. In most states, these benefits have fallen at least 20 percent, adjusted for inflation, since the program’s 1996 inception, and they do not meet basic rent or utility costs for modest, two-bedroom apartments in every state. Coupled with the fact that cash assistance for poor families with children fell by more than forty percent between 1970 and 1996, the amount of assistance has dramatically diminished. Further, paid work or raises directly offset TANF benefits so families never experience income increases as they move off TANF.

The troubling reality is that TANF goals are to reduce welfare assistance provided, not to reduce poverty of single mothers and their children. Rhetoric about self-sufficiency is just that. Based on pervasive cultural values, economic systems, and direct assistance programs, it is

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reasonable to conclude that the systems moving the U.S. political economy do not care for the dignity and wellbeing and thriving of single mothers and their families. Naming this reveals attitudes and perceptions shaping the entire cultural, political, and economic system and makes clear why the current project pertains to all economically vulnerable single mothers, whether they receive direct aid or not.

This clear indifference to “solving the problem of poverty” by propelling poor single mothers into the job market was also clear to those calculating the sheer impossibility of supporting one child, much less multiple children, on minimum or near-minimum wage incomes. While minimum wage has since been raised, during most of the life of TANF the minimum wage of $5.15/hour yields an annual income of $10,712, which is below the federal poverty line.\(^{74}\) This, of course, assumes steady, 40-hour work weeks with no sick or vacation time, which, for anyone who has children, is virtually impossible. These jobs rarely offer healthcare benefits (whose premiums would likely be prohibitive even if available) or unemployment insurance. Further, poverty wages leave no space for unexpected medical, transportation, family emergency, or hundreds of other snowballing costs.\(^{75}\) Dujon and Withorn offer the metaphor of “Jumanji,”

…where every role of the dice yields yet another unplanned disaster: a month with consecutive cases of the chicken pox without backup childcare, a returning mate who

\(^{74}\) In 2007, Congress raised minimum wage in a series of three raises over the course of three years. It is now $7.25/hour, which is substantively improved, particularly coupled with the new federal poverty levels, which come much closer to recognizing financial challenges facing poor families. That said, the basic challenges to low-income single mothers remain largely unchanged, particularly in light of the recession that started in 2008.

\(^{75}\) The gradual implementation of 2010’s Affordable Care Act should help to some degree but is certainly no panacea.
falls off the wagon and disrupts the family entirely, a sister’s car that breaks down so she can’t shuttle the kids to camp, rents raised, premiums raised…76

Poor women have been sentenced to be part of a low-wage workforce that is utterly unwilling to allow a single mother enough control and flexibility in the workplace to accommodate her multiple responsibilities for care work and paid work. Most low-wage jobs demand that paid work assume the position of one’s first priority, relegating familial responsibilities to secondary, private matters.

The more worthy goals of work—its promise of independence, citizenship, valued contributions to the collective good—have been debased or discarded. What remains is the individualistic ethic of self-sufficiency and an image of the “good society” as one full of unfettered individuals busily pursuing their daily bread in the marketplace, fending for themselves without a care or concern for others.77

Through all of this, actual families and material realities have remained largely absent from the views of middle-, upper-middle-, and upper-class Americans with some power to influence culture and economic systems. Regardless of whether the shortcomings or negative consequences of TANF were anticipated or intended, had recipients or potential recipients been included in the decision-making processes, they could have identified the detrimental ramifications of the new program based on their intimate knowledge of their own economic and cultural realities. As current realities stand and as TANF illustrates, single mothers exist in a double bind, unable to financially support their children fully despite full-time employment or to care for their children fully with adequate time, energy, and resources.

76 Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, 20.

77 Hays, *Flat Broke with Children*, 85.


Still Under Pressure: Current Realities

While inherent injustices in these realities ought to stimulate attention and change efforts, escalating growth in the number of single mothers and their growing economic insecurities should garner the attention of anyone interested in the well-being of the U.S. political economy. A Pew Research Center analysis of the 2011 American Community survey found that 8.6 million women are single mothers. This represents 25.3% of U.S. households. One in five white children, one in four Hispanic children, and one in two Black children live with single mothers. In 1960, female heads of household comprised 7.3% of the population. The number of single mothers has tripled in the past five decades. Current analysis divides the category of “single mother” into two groups: mothers with children from a previous marriage and mothers who have never married. The percentage of mothers who have never married has risen sharply in the past five decades, from one to eleven percent, while the percentage of divorced, separated, or widowed mothers has remained relatively static at twelve to thirteen percent. In both Texas and the Dallas Metro Area, 30 percent of all households are female-headed households.

The federal median annual family income for these households is $23,000, while the median personal income, which excludes “outside” contributions from other family members of

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78 As previously mentioned, this designation refers to unmarried women who are not living with a parent or parents with at least one child under the age of 18.


co-habitating partners, is $20,000. In Texas and the Dallas metro area, female-headed households constitute 53 percent of households in poverty, which is defined by an annual income of $18,769 or less. Given that women make less than white men, with white women making 77 cents, Black women making 64 cents, and Latinas making 53 cents for every dollar a white man makes, it is unsurprising that a female-headed household (and mothers are twice as likely to be single parents than fathers) is nearly twice as likely to live in poverty as a male-headed household.

Likewise households in which single mothers make more than federal poverty standards frequently struggle to attain economic security by any measure because official poverty measures fail to assess costs of living adequately. In reality, “62 to 70 percent of jobs in the Dallas metro area do not pay enough for a one-parent, one-child family to make ends meet and save a little for a college education and retirement.” By low estimates, with no savings and the narrowest room

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for medical expenses and other life contingencies, a single mother with two children living in the Dallas/Fort Worth area would need to make $47,208 annually, $3,684 monthly, or $23.60 per hour to meet basic living costs, including healthcare. Only one category in the “Five Most Common Job Sectors for Dallas Metro Women” averages monthly incomes that meet these minimum income needs. Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services pay women an average of $4,903 per month (for which men are paid an average of $8,089 per month), but Educational, Ambulatory Health Care, Food and Drinking, and Administrative Support Services all fall below these basic income requirements.

While these statistics reflect growing numbers of single mothers and their tenuous economic circumstances in the U.S., the 2012 Presidential campaign exposed ongoing cultural dynamics of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism as they take particular forms for economically vulnerable single mothers. As with original welfare reform, some of the concrete implications of these broadly held cultural biases are most clear in the popular support of specific public policies, created without participation of single mothers. In April 2012, Ann Romney, wife of Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney, defended her family work in response to Democratic lobbyist and pundit Hilary Rosen’s public charge that Ann Romney had “never worked a day in her life.” Ann Romney immediately responded that she “knew what it was like to struggle” in family work, even if not financially, and that her husband Mitt Romney would often come home and say, “Your job is more important than mine.” Along with a loud, bipartisan

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chorus, she continued, “We have to respect women in all the choices that they make.”

Two days later, Mitt Romney himself in a speech to the National Rifle Association called Ann Romney his “hero” and emphatically stated his belief that “all moms are working moms.” He was probably referring to middle- and upper-class mothers. Just three months before Mitt Romney made clear his feelings about the relative value of the family work of poorer, single mothers. MSNBC’s Chris Hayes released a clip of Romney relating his positions regarding families (that is, women) receiving direct aid from the TANF program. Romney claimed that, as Massachusetts’s governor, he advocated for increasing paid work requirements for families receiving TANF so that “these women” would “know the dignity of work.” He also said would gladly increase childcare subsidies so that new mothers could engage in paid work “on day one.”

In addition to Romney’s doublespeak (reminiscent of Quayle’s), his campaign’s ads accused the Obama Administration of “gutting welfare reform” by “ending the work requirement.” This accusation signaled the Romney campaign’s assumption that any changes to TANF would generate public outrage. Indeed, the Obama Administration’s quick response affirmed these assumptions. The President reassured the public that these charges were “nuts” given that the actual changes simply granted more authority to states to self-regulate TANF as long as they could prove “20% increases in the number of people getting to work.”

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89 Ibid.

candidates actively voiced support for the original tenets of TANF, which, as stated previously, do not address the practical realities of single mothers as well as the deeper valuation of their work of care and production in relation to their children and households.

President Donald Trump embraced these legacies and doubled down on the myth that people receiving cash assistance do not work. In fulfillment of a campaign promise, Trump signed an executive order on April 10, 2018, that aims to expand work requirements beyond TANF to include those receiving benefits through food assistance programs like SNAP, Medicaid, and low-income housing subsidies. Administrators of these programs note that this order is unlikely to have a major impact in terms of reducing numbers of people receiving benefits.\(^9^1\) Its impact, however, will appear in less direct but no less harmful ways—by strengthening cultural prejudice against poor mothers, particularly poor mothers of color, and emboldening people with power over them to continue creating and enforcing punitive, impoverishing, dehumanizing policies and structures.

The well-documented, problematic consequences of welfare reform have yet to be addressed with any policy or ideological shifts. Rather, fiscal insecurities of the current economic recession and concerns about government spending have renewed working-, middle-, and upper-middle class anger and targeting of single mothers receiving direct aid. For instance, following on Presidential exchanges about TANF and the deeper messages about differing values ascribed to the family work of privileged mothers versus that of economically insecure mothers, more open, explicit attacks have emerged. Ramped-up targeting of economically vulnerable

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single mothers is evident in popular memes on Facebook that celebrate Florida’s 2012 law mandating drug tests for TANF recipients. That state’s program was suspended after three months after the law had been ruled unconstitutional. In that time, however, the state spent millions of dollars, which benefited private drug testing industries, to find that 2.6% of TANF recipients tested positive, which is lower than the regional average and the general population average.92 Suspicion-based laws have similar findings and have been enacted in states such as Oklahoma, Michigan, and Utah. In view of the individual costs of tests, which cost about $150 each, re-testing to ensure accuracy, necessary databases, and additional employee costs, these findings cost millions and save very little, given the relatively small amounts of actual assistance TANF recipients receive. In fact, an Idaho Department of Health and Welfare study reported that implementation of any program would require additional funding from the state. This does not take into account the burden placed on TANF recipients in terms of time, dignity, and resources because they are often asked to pay the initial costs of testing. Further, these programs neither develop intervention plans for recipients testing positive for drugs nor acknowledge the impact on the children of persons who have had their direct assistance withheld.93

Despite these outcomes, these legislative policies are gaining traction. They have now been introduced in over 30 states, with slightly different language justifying the testing. Federal proposals have also been introduced.94 To the extent that the popularity and pervasiveness of the Facebook memes provide evidence, popular support draws on blatantly inaccurate but politically


93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.
effective language like, “Drug test women on welfare, just like all of us who actually work for a living.”

The sheer fiscal waste of such policies, driven primarily by those who run on platforms of fiscal conservatism, indicates the presence of dynamics beyond fiscal motives. This project argues that these logical inconsistencies stem from deeply rooted sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism in the U.S. Particularly as it relates to economically insecure single mothers, one of the most vulnerable populations in the country. Drug testing TANF recipients represents an economically irresponsible encroachment on the dignity and time of vulnerable women. It is punitive, infantilizing, and shaming, like many TANF “reforms.” One can argue that these cultural prejudices created political space for recent cuts to TANF and other governmental programs that provide direct aid to persons and families. These cuts increase the levels of economic vulnerability and stress for millions, including female-headed households, a disproportionate number of whom include single mothers of color.

This political move theoretically constrains government spending, but it actually turns popular attention away from the proportionately higher amounts of government aid for corporations and even upper-middle- and upper-class families. It is also not accidental that many of the most vocal supporters of these drug-testing policies are themselves working class. Critical analysis of class dynamics based on historical research and ethnographic work reveals the stigmatized, marginalized positions of poor and working-class single mothers in the wider political economy. These hierarchies can be analyzed within the constructed, historical roots of class relations and tensions. Analysis probes how such public policies participate in the micro-

95 While many conceptions of class distinguish between the poor or “underclass” and the working class, I have found boundaries more fluid, particularly among economically vulnerable
and macro-economic arrangements of advanced capitalism, while unmasking and interrogating the assumptions, values, and goals driving the system. Who benefits from current arrangements and policies like TANF and drug testing initiatives? Policies and initiatives include dehumanizing, ineffective components for those who receive benefits from the government while others, who receive many more benefits through other fiscal policies, remain unscrutinized and unstigmatized. Perhaps, then, there is operative logic that is hidden and distorted in order to uphold and intensify the power of current systems of domination. Logic or agendas standing on contestable moral grounding that minimally should undergo the same levels of interrogation aimed at women struggling to survive and thrive in a system set against them.

While single mothers are consistently represented as moral failures on multiple levels, in reality they make complex ethical decisions every day. They are balancing goods of mothering and other care work with goods of paid work in a market system that depends on them while simultaneously penalizing the very persons who take care work responsibilities seriously. All this happens under constant scrutiny and pressures. Single mothers whose many productive works have not been granted widespread recognition or dignity materially or through cultural attitudes know what it is like to struggle every day against multiple fronts of oppression and

single mothers. Given work requirements of TANF, the fact that over 61 percent of single mothers work more than 30 hours per week, and the realities of participants in this ethnographic project, it would be difficult to assign these households to one of the classes. Most often, single mothers move in and out of eligibility for various direct aid programs according to life circumstances even as they continuously engage in paid work that gives them incomes above federal poverty levels. Moreover, given that my conception of class relates more to levels of economic, social, and political power related to surpluses generated by work, in which I include market and non-market work, it makes sense that women with various, overlapping levels of power occupy similar class positions. That said, I still hope to make clear the qualitative and quantitative differences that other factors, such as racial-ethnic identity, make for single mothers within the working class.
demands, often for decades. Their voices and their stories still remain largely untold and unheard, however.

**Conclusion**

This brief survey offers a sampling of economic and cultural realities for economically vulnerable single mothers in the U.S. Poor mothers and their children remain unvalued and invisible, primarily viewed through lenses of entrenched, demonized stereotypes. Relying on these stereotypes, few policymakers or media representatives have directly engaged economically insecure, single mothers who qualify for or receive direct aid or who live close to those economic thresholds. Few people are asking questions about these realities. What does it do to the psyche to be labeled, ostracized, and stigmatized over and over? What happens when women do not recognize themselves in the distorted cultural representations and are forced to develop a sort of dual consciousness in order to survive? What does it mean when one’s family, simply because it lacks a male “head,” is seen as deficient, defective, disrupted, and broken? What are the long-term effects of shame, guilt, and anger? What does it say about a mother’s commitment and love for her child, about her courage and tenacity, about her perseverance to face these assaults and indignities repeatedly in her determination to do whatever it takes to survive? How does it shape someone to know her race and ethnicity often evoke particular, negative images in persons with no knowledge of her actual life situation? What is it like to be watching one’s family struggle, knowing one is doing everything one can, while someone else holds up a ticking clock that shows the passage of time without any change in the systems that would enable one to support one’s family? Or when others ask what one did to deserve this oppression, or why one is not helping oneself more? What wisdom and insights are missing when these perspectives are excluded from policy- and decision-making? What ethical and
theological boundaries are violated, intentionally or unintentionally, when diverse experiences of single mothers are missing from public, political, and popular discourse because they are not included or because they are too busy trying to survive to participate? What ethical and theological insights are missing from these same missing voices?

These examples of troubling theological and economic ideals, socio-historical context, welfare policy and reform, and pervasive, hostile stereotypes and attitudes make clear some of the practical consequences of ignoring perspectives of single mothers. These also make clear broad economic and cultural biases and barriers against single mothers. This chapter provides textured, vivid pictures of the air working-class single mothers breathe. It paints the landscape, sometimes clear and sometimes hidden, project collaborators inhabit. While they are not the only realities shaping the perspectives and experiences of single mothers, holding these particular aspects of their realities in mind as context and framing remains important to maximize understanding of the stories shared in this project.

The next chapter illuminates this project’s methodology. I explain how and why I begin by listening to voices and stories of single mothers who are experts whose input must be included at any decision-making table working to promote thriving, and how sustained, careful attention to stories then interacts with other sources of knowledge. I frame this method explicitly from particular Christian theo-ethical commitments and traditions.
CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

If dominant actors in politics, economics, academics, and culture have tended to ignore the experiences and words of single, working-class mothers, this essay presents an attempt at an exception. In the following chapter, I argue that my inductive approach is valuable in part because it centralizes the voices and experiences of single, working-class mothers as primary knowledge sources. Further, this methodology begins to chip away at stereotypes by way of narratives grounded in direct experiences, which can then be offered inductively to broader discourse and other knowledge sources. These methodological priorities reflect my understanding of liberation theology’s preferential option for the poor, feminist and womanist theology’s attention to human dignity, agency, and thriving, and incarnational theology that affirms the value of particular, embodied existence. In this chapter, I first outline the components of my inductive method, and then describe the particulars and parameters of my research project.

Components

Ethnography

Womanist scholars have long recognized the value of direct experience for knowledge production efforts. Historically denied broad access to dominant, “objective” ways of expressing knowledge and moral truths, marginalized women have produced knowledge through literature, narrative, and poetry. Literature by Black authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison draws from direct experience to express realities of Black women. Womanist
ethicists Katie G. Cannon and Emilie Townes have led efforts to recognize these literary productions as critical theoretical sources for ethical and theological reflection and as sources of resistance and liberation.  

Cannon, Townes, and other womanist scholars such as Evelyn Parker, Stacy Floyd-Thomas, Keri Day, and mujerista Ada María Isasi-Díaz have explored additional methods foregrounding experiential knowledge of marginalized communities for liberative ends. One such method, ethnography, seemed most fitting for my efforts to center experiential knowledge of single, working-class mothers.

Ethnography as a social scientific research methodology is rooted in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. While it has needed to evolve from problematic assumptions of objectivity and underlying colonialism, sexism, and racism, ethnography has from its inception attempted a more sustained, rigorous, relational, engaged, and reflexive practice than the earliest “veranda” anthropological endeavors. A social scientific definition of ethnography suggests it is “a study that focuses on detailed and accurate description…a richly detailed picture of life” on its participants’ own terms. Ethnography values knowledge produced by direct experience and particularities only known through sustained connection and interaction. Within the formal disciplines of anthropology and sociology, ethnographic studies are most often descriptive enterprises. My methodology aims to move beyond description into liberative ends.

Womanist ethicists and white Christian ethicists Christian Scharen and Anna Marie Vigen have explored the potential in using ethnography for liberative ends. They understand

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ethnography as a “dynamic process of meaning making that is inherently intertwined with power dynamics.” They add that ethnography “does not stand wholly outside that which it explores—it itself and its narrative is also part of the inquiry. Thus it and the ethnographer need to interrogate themselves as much as they seek to learn from the people with whom a study is undertaken.” As Christian ethicists employing ethnography, Scharen and Vigen expound on the dialectical relationship between ethics and theology. Their working definition of “ethnography as Christian theology and ethics” is as follows,

…a process of attentive study of, and learning from, people—their words, practices, traditions, experiences, memories, insights—in particular times and places in order to understand how they make meaning (cultural, religious, ethical) and what they can teach us about reality, truth, beauty, moral responsibility, relationships, the divine, etc. The aim is to understand what God, human relationships, and the world look like from their perspective—to take them seriously as a source of wisdom and to de-center our own assumptions and evaluations.

I also embrace the premise that ethnographic work, undertaken with theo-ethical methods and commitments of scholar-activists like Isasi-Díaz, Floyd-Thomas, and Day, can become “a


99 Vigen and Scharen, 16.

100 Vigen and Scharen, 16. I did not assume participants self-identified as Christians or practitioners of any faith tradition, and I stated before interviews that faith commitments were not a necessity for participation. That said, all the collaborators volunteered understandings of religious beliefs and talked about church attendance at Christian churches at different points in their lives. My subsequent questions invited reflection on religious beliefs and/or religious communities that may have had significance in their lives. I assume that the experiences of single mothers in Hickory Creek shed light on critical realities and injustices, and that their wisdom and moral agency in these experiences contributed to dialogue concerned with a just social order. I also assert that God calls persons and communities of faith to cooperate and collaborate with others to transform injustices regardless of the faith commitments of those struggling for liberation. This project generates particular Christian approaches to issues that emerge without attempting to evangelize or “Christianize” the social order or families participating in ethnographic work.
transformative praxis”¹⁰¹ in which marginalized women are treated as subjects rather than
objects, whose experiences reveal individual, nuanced knowledge beyond a “generalizable
other.”¹⁰² Day contends, “[t]he standpoint of the generalizable other privileges commonalities
and sameness in order to fashion a concept of formal equality and reciprocity in governing
interactions within deliberative spheres of institutional decision-making. Consequently, when
deploying this standpoint, individuality and difference are discounted within democratic
community.”¹⁰³ Ethnography leaves messiness intact. The problems, inconsistencies, and
conflicts that become apparent create space to explore potential challenges and assumptions that
might thwart liberative ends. This attention to human existence and resistance to objectification
also reflects my incarnational theology and premise. As the particularities of Jesus’ identity and
experience matter to the meaning and inherent value of his life, death, and resurrection, so do the
identities and experiences matter of every human being. Attending to them affirms this
theological claim.

While flattening differences is undesirable for all communities, marginalized groups
suffer disproportionately from this dominant, traditional method. Day recognizes the need for

¹⁰¹ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 91.

¹⁰² Keri Day, “Poor Urban Black Women and Prospects Toward Thriving: The Significance of
Critical Social Theory for Womanist Theo-Ethical Discourse” (Vanderbilt University, 2009),
6667. At the 2010 American Academy of Religion meeting, womanist ethicist Emilie Townes
made a comment about ethnography during a “Black Feminists and Scholars” session. She noted
that while the intention of shifting from object to subject to subject with authority is undeniably
liberative, she still wondered “how we avoid objectivity in that which we attempt to create
subjectivity?” Ethnography, then, remains “a finely edged methodology that can turn on us at
any moment. These methodologies are as dangerous as that which we try to undo.” These words
of caution have remained with me.

¹⁰³ Day, 36.
theoretical work with generalizations and universalizations but argues that it must be done in balance with narratives of experience and particularity, which have largely been missing from dominant discourses shaping ethics, theology, and political economy. “These women must be able to articulate their experiences of deprivation and possibilities of flourishing within institutionalized deliberative spaces where policies are formulated and implemented.” The differences that these perspectives expose, counter the negatives of limited generalizations, which is particularly important for marginalized persons, like single mothers.

“Difference” takes many forms—identity politics, otherness, diversity, pluralism, and struggles for social recognition—and each of these intertwined concepts complicates formal democratic principles such as equal respect and equal opportunity. Power relations that govern the value of such differences often hamper the achievement of meaningful social recognition within democratic, deliberative spaces.

Day recognizes ethnography as a way of accessing and communicating these critical voices. In particular, she values its ability to facilitate moral reciprocity and “empathetic listening.” I argue that the empathetic listening engaged in ethnography can facilitate solidarity because witnesses are drawn into the narratives in compelling ways that differ from primarily theoretical accounts of oppressive realities. Further, as they bear witness to these detailed, personal accounts, readers will also likely find points of connection they may differ in degree if not kind. Thus, these encounters with lived experiences named by those most marginalized by destructive cultural and economic systems can provoke activist responses from a wide variety of people motivated by both solidarity and self-interest.

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104 Day, 129. While Day’s work focuses on poor, urban, Black women, I argue that its insights and methodology also apply for single, working-class mothers, a disproportionate number of whom explicitly fit within her focus group.

105 Day, 133.
To guide these responses to the primary knowledge produced by ethnography, I utilize other knowledge sources. Day and others argue for coordinated use of ethnography with many methods and sources. White, feminist, Christian, social ethicist Beverly Harrison, who pioneered the use of social scientific methods in the discipline of Christian ethics, practices “a multidimensional approach to feminist social ethics that privileges critically appropriated experiences in dialogue with traditional sources of theological traditions and scripture, read through critical social theory.” Theologians and ethicists such as these suggest the contributions qualitative research, like ethnography, can make as a starting point to understanding and even reshaping quantitative data and other spheres of knowledge production generated about the lives of single, working-class mothers. Ethnography can paint a picture of subjective realities with direct knowledge that exposes larger, structural patterns impacting the lives of participants. This method honors and maintains particularities, or what womanists call radical subjectivity, as it also looks to overarching connections with experiences of others. Quantitative data, then, can gather important evidence of concrete patterns, systemic developments, and certain objective economic realities. Social and theological ethics offer normative framing intent on liberative methods and ends. I deploy a collaborative or multi-pronged approach that begins with direct experiential knowledge and then engages disciplines of theology, ethics, economics, and sociology to address systemic issues, barriers, resources, and contributions to the ability of single, working-class mothers to thrive.

106 Day, 140.


108 Vigen, Women, Ethics, and Inequality in U.S. Healthcare, 6, 86.
**Grounded Theory Method**

Given the beginning point of ethnography and the movement into analysis with other spheres of knowledge, I chose to employ Grounded Theory Method (GTM) ethnography for this project. GTM “begins with observations rather than hypotheses and seeks to discover patterns and develop theories from the ground up.”¹⁰⁹ It is an inductive method that follows themes that arise during research for subsequent analysis. In this case, themes arising from ethnographic interactions direct analysis to roots of injustices and inequalities related to classism, racism, and sexism and subsequent normative judgments. The aim of this method is for the subjects themselves, as moral agents, to co-determine the particular issues, theo-ethical norms, and systemic changes explored in the project. As indicated in the Preface and the Socio-Historical Context section, I did not enter into the ethnographic study without prior experiences, ideas, opinions, concerns, theo-ethical commitments, and considerable research on issues I thought might arise. That said, I have tried to be transparent about what I bring to this project and stay as open as possible to directions that collaborators pursued and issues they raised, quoting directly as much as possible so that their stories and perspectives are written in their own terms. I was open to surprise and to shifting perspectives. I explored my own resistance, incredulity, and frustration when I felt them, often with the help of colleagues and advisors. I deployed what Mindy Fullilove describes as “feel-forward research,” which refrains from asking too many question, instead “searching for the questions” as conversations unfold.¹¹⁰

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This approach holds particular value for white scholars when working with collaborators of color. Given that,

racial power dynamics and the active presence of a particular social and material history are inherently operative whenever a white scholar works with communities of color, an inductive method may, at least in part, correct broad generalizations and stereotypes made by white scholars…that reduce…complex realities and human identities to woefully inadequate observations.\textsuperscript{111}

Further, while I remain open to discovering common ground with collaborators, my initial stance recognizes differences in our economic and cultural life experiences. Far too often Black and Womanist ethicists have had to express their frustration with white feminists who “jump too quickly into identification with others through a superficial call to ‘sisterhood’ or solidarity.” As Roman Catholic Womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland insists, “Before issuing a call to ‘feminist unity,’ structural power differences must be directly confronted and undermined.”\textsuperscript{112}

\textit{Freire}

Brazilian philosopher of education Paulo Freire also influenced my methodology, particularly in focus groups. While the field of ethnographic studies does not endeavor to attend primarily to marginalized persons and communities, Freire’s commitment to liberation for oppressed persons shapes his understanding of the value of generative themes. Thus, using his methodology in this project supports its intent as a liberative project. Freire’s methodology involves asking members of oppressed communities to speak to their own experiences, needs, and challenges. As one speaks to more and more members of a particular community, one identifies common themes that emerge. Thus, Freire posited, the method identifies problems

\textsuperscript{111} Vigen, 88.

\textsuperscript{112} Vigen, 80.
from the experiences of people with the most direct knowledge of that reality. Then, with the same community, they created responses and solutions, using internal and external resources, affirming the wisdom and agency of people so often ignored in broader efforts to address problems they experience. Freire called these common threads “generative themes.”

As introduced in the methodology section, focus groups can unearth generative themes in unique ways. The value of focus groups lies in interactions and dialogue between group members, which can (1) produce different kinds of knowledge and perspectives than individual interviews, (2) de-center the researcher from the conversation, (3) create possibilities for initial community building, and (4) develop clearer language and images of generative themes upon which liberative action and analysis can occur.113

While Freire’s full liberative methodology exceeds the scope of this project, the project aims to begin the initial naming of generative themes required for liberation and transformation. He says,

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming…saying that [true] word is not the privilege of some few [people], but the right of every [person]. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone—nor can [s/he] say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words.114

Collaborator accounts and dialogue in focus groups begin the process of naming their realities. Freire says this naming process exposes particular dynamics in a context characterized by “a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with


114 Freire, 76.
their opposites.” Freire, 91.

116 Freire, 91.

117 Freire, 92.

118 A critical piece of work that this project promotes and facilitates is exploring ways in which persons and communities might collaborate in efforts toward justice and thriving in the many ways it is compromised in the U.S. context, including those related to categories of class, gender, and race. Collaboration might entail recognition of commonalities among differences as well as practices of allies and alliances among persons and communities whose relative power and privileges differ. This collaborative method extends to dialectically exploring the offerings of
limited, and unpredictable, but it also optimizes opportunities for constructive justice work marked by accountability, democratic participation, creativity, and diversity. I believe it reflects the incarnational value of particular, relational, embodied existence as well as humanity’s imperfect, broad, and fluid access to knowledge of God and creation. Finally, I think this collaborative, inclusive methodology offers a liberative path to whatever limited, fleeting access humanity has to realizing cultural and economic systems marked by love, respect, just ordering, and human thriving.\textsuperscript{119}

Perhaps more so than the authors of many other dissertations, I make modest yet broad normative claims with a few concrete suggestions for creating cultural and economic systems that allow single, working-class mothers, their families, and wider communities to thrive in their own ways. Thus, specific suggestions, even with engagement with multiple knowledge sources found here, remain contingent.

**Particulars and Parameters**

The ethnographic portion of this project engages a group of single, working-class mothers who are also Dallas Area Habitat for Humanity (DH) homeowners in the Hickory Creek neighborhood. This project draws on theoretical and practical knowledge, universal and particular experiences, and transcendent and immanent conceptions of God and humanity. Womanist, liberationist, Christian Ethicist Traci West argues for and practices this method as she demonstrates the power in putting theorists, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, into dialogue with particular contexts and perspectives, such as those of Harlem Jewish housewives and domestic workers in New York City. In this work, she demonstrates the power of disrupting these dichotomies and opening spaces for movement and ambiguity without compromising the particularities she addresses. Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

\textsuperscript{119} White, feminist ethicist Sharon Welch notes that these efforts will always be risky ventures of perpetual trial and error. This, Welch contends, should be humbling and freeing. Public lecture. Southern Methodist University. Spring 2014.
(HC) neighborhood of Southeast Dallas. Project collaborators, self-identify as Black, white, and Latina and report annual incomes ranging from $25,000—48,000. Racial-ethnic diversity along with commonalities related to income range, Habitat homeownership, and experiences as single, working-class mothers, provides a balance of variables and commonalities. These factors allow for original research and analysis around issues of class, gender, and race. I am influenced by Womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas, who notes that Womanist methodology, by definition, includes racial and class components in its research methods, generating complexity that transcends the one-dimensional nature of many other dominant methodologies. While one might note that these incomes render participants ineligible for TANF, which I used to demonstrate intersections of cultural and economic oppression experienced by vulnerable single mothers, each participant has been eligible for some sort of direct government assistance at some point in her life as a single mother. All but one have received direct aid of some kind, and most participants have received direct aid, for varying lengths of time, after moving into their DH homes. Thus, their incomes remain fluid, which is an important aspect of their narratives and insecurities. Further, given my conception of class as related to power rather than income and their own accounts of economic and cultural stigmatization, barriers, and dueling responsibilities of care work and paid work, I suggest that they inhabit a similar class position as women with incomes that render them eligible for TANF benefits. In fact, I argue that similarities between economic and cultural vulnerabilities of working-class single mothers who make what many consider working-class incomes and those making less can function to connect experiences of separated, smaller groups to larger, coherent systems of oppression impacting everyone to differing degrees.

120 Floyd-Thomas, Mining the Motherlode, 11.
Eight women, ages 29 to 51, participated in one open-ended individual interview and two focus groups. While this is a small group, I have been shaped by Womanist practical theologian Evelyn Parker and white Christian ethicist Aana Marie Vigen, whose ethnographic projects have yielded important, liberative insights with similarly sized groups. As Vigen says, while “future studies will be enriched by speaking with more people…[these] stories are no less significant or valid. The point is that every story, every person, matters.”\textsuperscript{121} If “justice means loving rightly—seeing and regarding one another rightly…nothing and no one is expendable; no person can be spared or discarded. In the language of the New Testament, each lost coin, each meandering sheep, each child must be brought home.”\textsuperscript{122} Vigen grounds this claim in the inherent worth of every human person as a “child of the divine and also imbued with the divine within her/his being” and in her/his relatedness to God, others, and creation.\textsuperscript{123} Vigen does not seek to impose a Christian theology or soteriology on the public. Rather, she thinks theoethical commitments about human dignity can enhance public discourse and decision-making and promote justice and equality in constructive, inclusive ways rather than in oppressive, exclusive ways.\textsuperscript{124} This theological focus is also deeply incarnational, arguing that every human experience, every detail of embodied existence is a reflection of God and deserves careful attention and response.

\textsuperscript{121} Vigen, \textit{Women, Ethics, and Inequality in U.S. Healthcare}, 6.

\textsuperscript{122} Vigen, 9.

\textsuperscript{123} Vigen, 66.

\textsuperscript{124} Vigen, 8–9.
Project Set-up

The Dallas Women’s Foundation (DWF), “the largest regional women’s fund in the world,” grants millions of dollars annually to advance and promote the well-being of women and girls in Dallas, Collin, and Denton counties.125 Because they focus specifically on female-headed households in their work, which includes giving direct aid to agencies working to improve lives of women and children, advocacy, investments, and research, the staff was willing to invest in this project. Not only did DWF provide me a grant for research expenses, including modest compensation for project collaborators, but they also connected me with one of their grantees, Dallas Area Habitat for Humanity (DH). Eighty percent of DH homeowners are female-headed households so this seemed a likely prospect for finding a core group of single, working-class mothers with whom to work on the initial stage of the project.

Multiple staff members of DH worked with me, beginning by identifying a neighborhood that met the needs of my research. Out of roughly twenty neighborhoods, only one DH neighborhood in the Dallas Area has white, Latina, and Black homeowners. Significantly, this was also a neighborhood in the highest income bracket of Dallas Area homeowners, each making between $25,000 and $35,000 annually. The HC neighborhood differs from other DH neighborhoods in other ways as well. Located in southeast Dallas, just outside Interstate 635 in a predominantly rural area, the neighborhood was almost a casualty of the 2008 recession. Dallas Habitat saved the subdivision from becoming an abandoned site by buying one-third of the houses from investors and honoring existing contracts with homebuilders. Thus, HC

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125 Dallas Women’s Foundation. http://www.dallaswomensfdn.org/learn-more
homeowners did not build their own houses. Rather, homeowners worked on homes in other neighborhoods, often but not always with other HC homeowners.

In collaboration with advisers, particularly Evelyn L. Parker, whose ethnographic work with Black and mixed-race adolescent girls deeply informs my own methodology, I aimed to interview between nine and twelve racially and ethnically diverse women. Per Parker’s suggestions, I intended to organize focus groups in same-race divisions in order to promote more openness and trust. After getting my dissertation proposal approved on April 29, 2013, I planned to conduct interviews between June and December. For various reasons related to institutional changes, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) did not approve my project until August 6 (see Appendix 1). Thus, my recruiting and interview period was cut short in the interests of progressing the dissertation. DH mailed fliers I had composed (see Appendix 2)

126 In Parker’s work, *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender*, interviews were arranged for race to match between interviewers and interviewees. Given the constraints of a dissertation, these interviews do not reflect such a match. As a white woman, my race matched that of the two white collaborators, but since I am a middle-class person, my social class did not. I have strived to be as self-reflexive as possible with my awareness of these differences in identity, power, and social positions, but I recognize that these differences impact interviews and interpretations in ways that will remain difficult to recognize. Evelyn L. Parker, ed., *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010).

127 My original plan included offering childcare during focus groups. DH had agreed to run background checks on caregivers, and my background in education includes “safer spaces” training and implementation in multiple contexts. This offer seemed an important acknowledgment of barriers to participation in various activities many working-class single mothers face. The IRB said this created too much of a liability and denied that portion of my proposal. While I understand this decision on many levels, I remained unsettled by this limitation, wanting to minimize impositions on collaborators. I ultimately decided to talk with each participant in the individual interviews to ascertain childcare needs and brainstorm no-cost, safe options for focus group times if she needed childcare. Collaborators were able to find childcare on their own or had children old enough to be home alone. They did not seem to find this a major difficulty. They chose meeting times and days through consensus.
asking for volunteers to participate in one individual interview and two focus groups, with compensation included. Two collaborators responded to this flier. I then walked through the neighborhood and taped fliers on doors of single mothers with an address list provided by DH. This generated six more participants. Needing to begin interviews, I hoped that two to three more women might volunteer based on word of mouth from women who had already talked with me. No one else volunteered, and so I proceeded, again with Parker’s advice, with a group of eight women. Project collaborators included four African American women, two European American women, and two Latina women. In order to have at least three persons participating in each focus group, one group consisted of African American collaborators and the other of Latina and European American collaborators. I would have preferred consistency of race within focus groups, which each met twice, but time constraints dictated this particular arrangement.

*Interviews and Focus Groups*

Individual interviews began in early August and concluded in mid-September, each ranging from 1.5 to 3.5 hours. All but one interview took place in collaborators’ homes. Focus groups met from October until January, each lasting from three to four hours. One focus group met in a different collaborator’s home each time, and the other chose to gather in a meeting room at a local Best Western Executive Inn. I provided home-cooked meals, beverages, desserts, and snacks at focus groups to show hospitality and respect for collaborators’ time while fostering a sense of communal dialogue and experience. Particularly for the group gathering in the meeting

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128 The fliers included logos for DH, SMU, and DWF and identified me as a researcher. When I spoke with volunteers, I explained that I was a doctoral student and clarified my relationship to these groups, emphasizing confidentiality. Before they signed consent forms at our first conversation, I also made sure they understood my relationship to SMU and DH, particularly in regard to confidentiality. They would only have known that I am white if they searched for me on the internet (which would have yielded a picture fairly easily).
room, I tried to make the room feel less sterile with tablecloths, ceramic serving dishes, and vases from a thrift store, tablecloths were blue because research indicates that blue contributes to feelings of comfort and openness. I brought these to the focus group meeting in participants’ homes along with small gifts for the two hosts. Focus group participants expressed appreciation and gratitude in particular for the meals.

Focus Group One (FG1) consisted of Jennifer Harris, Pinky Holloway, and Clodie Peterson. Twila Barker expressed interest and willingness to participate, she did not respond to the invitation to the first meeting. Although she indicated she would attend the second focus group and did not attend that session either. Pinky was sick for the second focus group meeting. This group met on Saturdays at a local hotel in a meeting room. Focus Group Two (FG2) consisted of Jessica Hernandez, Alma Moreno, and Stormy Wells. Christina Brandley indicated a willingness to participate in focus groups but did not respond to any communication about either focus group meeting. This group met on weekday evenings at collaborators’ homes. Both groups met twice for about four hours each time. FG1 was comprised of collaborators who identify as Black, and FG2 was comprised of women who identify as white and women who identify as Latina. Similar patterns occurred in individual conversations.¹²⁹

Focus Group Conversations

During focus group conversations, I tried to stay open to collaborator leads while asking questions that might further nuance or develop themes that arose repeatedly in individual

¹²⁹ Based on Dr. Evelyn Parker’s recommendations, I intended to have a focus group for each racial/ethnic identity to promote more open conversations. After several recruiting initiatives, two women who are Latina and two women who are white volunteered to participate in the project. I did not have time to continue recruiting. Sociological methodology strongly encourages focus groups with a minimum of three people. Therefore, I put these collaborators in the same focus group. The other focus group was composed of the four collaborators who are Black.
conversations. I also occasionally made comments or asked questions that introduced different interpretations of observations about other people or new information that differed from what a collaborator suggested. I have tried to include these comments for transparency related to collaborator conversations. I understood the recurrent themes identified here as potentially generative themes, sites that expose barriers to thriving, systemic issues, and opportunities for transformation, resistance, hope, and liberation. Thus, I invited collaborators to discuss include the following: (a) how collaborators understand the category, or “role” to use their language, of “single mother,” (b) self-descriptions and self-understandings, (c) perspectives on societal perceptions of unmarried mothers, (d) sources of stress and pressure and sources of strength and support, (e) conceptions of thriving, and (f) perspectives on whether or how particular structures, organizations, institutions, and communities care about capacities for thriving for themselves and their families. I intended to spend more time asking about ideas for change around various structures impacting their lives, but other topics garnered considerable discussion and development. While several concrete suggestions arose, the territory we explored and named together involved in-depth listening to particularities and similarities in collaborator experiences. This time laid necessary groundwork for moving toward addressing sources of injustice and mining sources of support and wisdom.

My specific approach in these sessions included a mix of open-ended questions and more focused exercises designed to facilitate naming of experiences and perspectives. Questions included: “How would you define the term “single mother?” “How do family, friends, and/or people in positions of power and influence, like those making public policies, see your experiences and those of single mothers?” “What might be changed to reduce some of the pressures you have already mentioned?” In the second focus group meetings, I asked
collaborators to list what they needed to be physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy. I followed this by asking what their families needed in terms of overall health and thriving. I asked, “If all the needs you named were met, how would your lives be different? What resources would you need for all these needs to be met for you and your families to thrive?” I also asked the groups what entities had their and their family’s best interests at heart and how they knew that. I asked specifically about schools, work, churches, direct assistance agencies, and DH.

Finally, I asked how gender and/or sexism have impacted how they have been treated and whether they saw or experienced sexism anywhere else, such as whether single fathers are treated differently than single mothers. I asked whether racial and ethnic differences impacted neighborhood dynamics and how they thought issues of race played into their experiences in times of vulnerability.

Pilesort

In the first round of focus groups, I asked collaborators to participate in three “pilesort” exercises as a way to get specific data and as a way to initiate conversation. I generated a list of words from their interviews and from a media search of articles related to unmarried mothers and printed them on small, individual, blue cards. I included blank cards and pens and invited participants to write in words of their choosing and to define any words however they wanted. For the first exercise, I asked collaborators to choose from six to eight cards that best described themselves and their experiences as single mothers. Participants each received their own pile of cards, and they each made their selections before proceeding. Words in this exercise included:

struggle, powerful, powerless, single, woman, mother, parent, single mother, single parent, welfare, values, ethics, prejudice, struggle, tough, independent, dependent, leader, strong, government, TANF, SNAP, food stamps, vulnerable, pressure, tired, drained, respected, disrespected, self-respect, shame, lonely, conflict, warm, open, honest, domestic violence, lazy, hard worker, low-income, poor, unplanned pregnancy, wife, partner, people person, resourceful, thrifty, loans, charity, homeowner, feminist, welfare queen, baby mama, job insecurity, job loss, needy, hunger, choice, security, optimistic, upbeat, realistic, and hopeful. The next two pilesorting exercises involved choosing words that represented five to six “sources of stress, pressure, or anxiety” and then five to six sources of “support, encouragement, or coping mechanisms.” I used the same set of words for both of these exercises while continuing to invite collaborators to create their own cards. I hoped to begin to identify the most salient aspects of experiences of pressure and support for single, working-class mothers. Words for these exercises included: school, kids’ activities, mortgage, rent, health, healthcare, car, family, work, job, job loss, job insecurity, employer, boss, parents, childcare, faith, church, God, self-care, vacation, friends, food, after-school, student loans, father of kids, community, neighbors, neighborhood, income, wages, benefits, public aid, insurance, Medicaid, education, prison, legal problems, and bills.131

_Hickory Creek_

Driving from Far East Dallas on Highway 175 toward the HC neighborhood just west of Seagoville, geographic differences become noticeable. Popular chains and shopping areas give

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131 In retrospect, I am not sure why I did not include “sexism,” “racism,” and “classism.” I wonder whether including these words might have changed any responses or the resultant conversations.
way to warehouses, freight companies, and occasional gas stations dotting the edges of the highway, with rural areas stretched out behind them. HC itself appears as a new subdivision, just south of the highway, surrounded by sprawling properties with horses and older houses. The nearest grocery store is a mile down the highway, although two fast food restaurants are an exit away. The area south of the subdivision is also sparsely populated, with small houses in need of repairs and a few small churches. I saw one Dallas Area Rapid Transportation (DART) bus stop just outside the entrance to the neighborhood.

In the evenings, children on bikes and scooters or playing basketball fill the streets. I noticed many cars with handicapped license plates. Fewer adults than kids are outside, but I still see many adults sitting on porches or fixing vehicles, often interacting with kids. Most of the lawns are neatly mowed, and many yards have extensive landscaping and yard décor. The edges of the neighborhood remain vacant, with about one-third of the neighborhood undeveloped. Vehicles vary in type and condition, but SUVs and older cars are prominent. During the day, since interviews occurred during school hours, the neighborhood is quiet and still except for the gentle tinkles of wind chimes on the breeze.

DH representatives report that HC has been its most popular neighborhood in addition to being its most racially/ethnically diverse neighborhood. Although its location necessitates private transportation and commutes for homeowners, DH representatives suggest the popularity of the neighborhood stems from exactly that. HC homeowners feel like they have moved out of inner city or troubled neighborhoods into suburbia. Unlike other DH neighborhoods, which are all located in predominantly Black and Latinx West and South Dallas, HC has not been stigmatized as a poor neighborhood, and so this new subdivision represents homeowners’ ideas about “moving up.”
While Dallas is one of the most segregated cities in the South, Southeast Dallas is one of the more racially and ethnically diverse areas of Dallas. White leadership pushed the Black and Latinx population into South and West Dallas from the early 1900s through the civil rights era. Dallas was slow to integrate its school, moving at the pace the white population preferred, with a primary focus on the maintenance of “law and order.” DH recruited homeowners from Far East Dallas and Mesquite, also areas with more racial and ethnic diversity than North, South, and West Dallas.

I had not realized the geographical recruiting area when I started interviews and was startled to realize many collaborators grew up and still work within a couple miles of my own home. Several collaborators had been to the same Women Infants and Children (WIC) office where I received our family’s assistance when my husband lost his job during my second pregnancy. During interviews my husband had been pursuing his first advanced degree, an associate’s degree from Eastfield College, which several collaborators also attend or have attended. In this dissertation, I have reflected on overlaps as well as differences in power and privileges between project collaborators and me. Any of these families could be our neighbors, and our income levels are similar, particularly when factoring in some of the assistance their families receive and the fact that our income puts us just above assistance levels (with the two years of my husband’s job insecurity and our subsequent need for WIC as an exception). In some important ways we share vulnerabilities the ruling class doesn’t experience; on the broad spectrum of relative social and economic power, we are closer to each other than I am to ruling class elites. However, I benefit from privileges stemming from race, education, higher previous income levels (which allowed us to own two relatively new, relatively reliable, fuel-efficient

132 The Dallas Myth, 172-179.
vehicles), heterosexual marriage, flexible work schedules (mine in particular), social connections with persons who transfer their kids’ toys and clothing to our family, resources from extended family, including modest inheritance money, and prospects for economic stability after my spouse and I graduate. These differences create a considerably different subjective and objective quality of life that can significantly impact issues of health and basic security and well-being, including different life expectancies and threats for myself and my children.

Attempting to understand my own positionality in this project and how that identity might impact this project in various, mostly indiscernible ways, seemed an important task to begin and continue as the project unfolded. Differences in social location between participants and me inescapably contributed to power dynamics that impacted what was shared, and how, during interviews and focus groups. Recruitment fliers identified my gender and my association with Southern Methodist University (SMU). My race was visible when I arrived for the first interview, and I introduced myself to each collaborator as a graduate student in religious studies as we sat down to go over the consent form before beginning the interview. At some point in each interview, I mentioned my children and my husband and the fact that we lived near where many of them lived before moving to HC. Thus, “mother,” “married,” “heterosexual,” and “middle class” became a part of collaborator perceptions of my identity. While people often read my age as younger than I am (guessing that I am five years younger than I am), it was likely clear that I am within five years of age to most collaborators and younger than a couple of them.

Drawing definitive conclusions about how my identity and how consequent power dynamics might have shaped collaborator conversations is untenable, yet it seems helpful to name possibilities. For example, the value I place on education and my connection to SMU likely shaped conversation about schools, education opportunities, and experiences. It also likely
influenced who participated in the project from the outset. One collaborator mentioned looking for education opportunities in our initial phone call and another stated her desire to write a book about her experiences. Collaborators may have envisioned possibilities of goods, services, or connections I might provide. Education is intertwined with class status, and collaborators have demonstrated knowledge of the value of increased class status by way of participation in the Habitat program.

Other power dynamics also impact these relationships. Ethnographic methodology endeavors to empower participants by creating space and opportunity for telling their story in their own words with minimal direction from the ethnographer. That said, the ethnographer retains the power to record, transcribe, select, and arrange these stories. Participants benefitted from telling their story and from possible connections to higher class status through my real or perceived resources. I benefited from increased authority, status, and respect from writing about their stories. I paid participants from the money paid to me to conduct the interviews. Participants may or may not have situated me in relation to people within education who have greater power and status than I do, or in relation to those in the ruling class who have even more power. I do not know whether knowing my position as a graduate student conveyed the reality that faculty are paid much more than I do, that I do not get healthcare for myself or my family through the school, that how I represent and analyze their stories can impact job opportunities and basic security for me, or that I will graduate with large amounts of debt. I do not know whether they perceived a greater gap in power or quality of life between their class status and my own or between the status of both of us and that of the ruling class. These are important questions, and their answers may well influence the efficacy of organized efforts to dismantle systems that oppress us both, even if unevenly.
Similar questions and dynamics could be explored in relation to other aspects of our identities that shape relative power and privilege. How did my whiteness influence what collaborators of color shared about race and what white collaborators shared? Would white collaborators have shared their perceptions related to race as freely were I a woman of color, and would collaborators of color have shared more or different reflections? I made clear in initial conversations that the project in no way required any particular religious affiliation. Yet my situation in religious studies may well have shaped conversations in particular ways. And so on.

These realities of power and privilege also impact how I hear stories and perspectives from persons experiencing pressures and marginalizations I can only apprehend imaginatively. How did my previous experience with single mothers experiencing homelessness impact what I heard and focused on? What assumptions did I bring to these stories given my familiarity with some of the neighborhoods where they grew up? How did my own vulnerabilities as a middle-class woman impact how I identified with their vulnerabilities related to gender and class? How did these dynamics enhance and how might they have limited how I presented and analyzed this project? This awareness spurred ongoing qualitative and quantitative engagement with single mothers and personal attempts to maintain self-reflexive humility. To the best of my ability, I have worked to recognize my own epistemic limitations and influences and the need for continual growth, understanding, and accountability from the single mothers with whom I worked and from ethicists and scholars of color.

The next chapter introduces project collaborators and outlines of life experiences and perspectives they shared during individual interviews. I highlight themes to which I will return in more detail as case studies in later chapters.
CHAPTER THREE
Marathons with Hurdles: Collaborator Narratives

This chapter offers individual collaborator stories and reflections. I will highlight themes and conclusions based on these conversations in Chapter Four, which will include dialogue from focus group meetings. I first introduce each collaborator so that her story is told on its own and with its particularities. While any movement from recorded dialogue to transcription to summary involves interpretation, I have worked to present the clearest picture possible as shared by each collaborator.

Jessica Hernandez: Judge Not

Jessica and I talked on a Wednesday evening at her home. Her yard looked neat and simple, with a bistro set on the small porch. Inside, multiple candles lent a flowery scent to our conversation. Jessica’s furnishings and I are comfortable and minimal, and the few decorations on the walls included coordinated, framed pictures of her children. She says her kids sometimes comment that “we’re the poorest people in the neighborhood” because of the relative simplicity of her yard and home.

Jessica is 29 years old, white, and casually dressed. She smiles easily and does not volunteer reflections on her emotions but will talk about them when asked directly. Although she said she was nervous, I experienced her as calm, warm, and open throughout our time together. She says she avoids conflict, but she has spoken up to advocate for her children in several

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133 I invited project collaborators to provide pseudonyms. All but Christina Freedman and Twila Barker did so. Jennifer Harris preferred to use her name, although she also provided a pseudonym for potential instances where using her name might reveal identifying information about the neighborhood or other participants. For this dissertation, using her name does not seem to create problems.
contexts. She quietly but persistently spoke up in focus groups to interject alternative, non-judgmental perspectives when other participants made critical comments about Black, single, working-class mothers. She has two daughters and a son, ages 10, seven, and six.

Jessica seeks stability, which she understands as consistent locations of housing and schools, and she avoids risks when possible. She is concerned, observant, and attentive to her kids’ needs and desires, and she often feels conflicted over whether a choice is in their best interests. Jessica also often feels caught between the demands of being a good worker and being a good parent; she chooses to be present for her children even when it means negative consequences at work. She values and notices dependability in others and repeatedly says her mother is the only person whom she has ever been able to depend on fully.

Born in Wichita Falls, Jessica’s family moved to Dallas shortly thereafter. After many move, she moved to Mesquite at age 11 and remained there until moving to HC. She is the fourth of six children. She is her father’s only biological child, and he and her mother divorced a few years after she was born. Her father died when she was a young teenager, and she maintains a relationship with her last stepfather. Despite abuse, her mother stay married to this stepfather until her children all graduated from high school so that they would not have to move again. Jessica’s mother had her first child at the age of 15, and Jessica’s older sisters had their first children at ages 15 and 17. Jessica says she grew up helping take care of her younger brothers as well as her nephews.

Jessica got pregnant with her first child as a 17 year-old senior in high school. A year later, she married her daughter’s father, a Mexican citizen living in Mesquite with his family. In the course of their marriage, they had a son and a daughter. Jessica describes their father as having “addiction issues” and “mental illness issues” and as being “pretty abusive and
controlling.” After graduation she started school at Eastfield Community College for a teaching degree but stopped going because of “issues” with her daughter’s father. Jessica left her ex-husband several times and returned only because her children said they missed their father, and she could not decide whether it was better for them to be out of that context or for them to be with their father. Her mother encouraged her to leave, and she finally left about five years ago. She realized she “was already doing everything on [her] own” and so she might as well “do it on her own” and receive help from her mother, with whom she lived, and direct aid from government programs. Even while married, she said, her husband spent money on himself and left her and the kids to fend for themselves.

Since the divorce, her ex-husband has not paid child support. She reported him, and when his wages were set to be garnished, he quit his job. She lets him spend time with the kids because she thinks it is in their best interest to know their father, although she says he often plans visits and fails to arrive. His parents have not contributed financially or otherwise to their grandchildren’s lives.

For the past nine years, Jessica has worked as a teller at a branch of one of the top 25 largest commercial banks in the U.S. She currently makes $14/hour, which brings her $2200 twice a month. She said she has gotten a raise of about a dollar in the nine years she has worked at this bank. She takes home $1500/month, with the rest going to cover health insurance for her and the children as well as her FLEX spending account. Her children get sick often, and she has frequent migraines. Her son requires ADHD medications. Jessica thinks it might be possible to find a less expensive healthcare option, but she is deeply fearful she will compromise her family’s coverage and stays with what the bank offers.
Jessica’s work has been a major source of frustration for her. Other than one manager, she is the most senior worker at her branch and is often asked to perform tasks beyond her job description because of this experience. She has also received the highest performance review and highest raise in her office. Yet she has been passed over for promotions despite feeling like she had been promised the next opening. Jessica has considered other employment opportunities, some of which would have paid more. She has not accepted any positions because they would require a move for her children, transportation costs would be too high, or the job required an immediate start, which would mean failing to give the bank two week’s notice. Jessica is currently taking courses at Eastfield Community College.

Childcare has been frustrating for Jessica. She only has two options that take Child Care Assistance (CCA, formerly Child Care Management Services, CCMS) and also pick up her children from their school. She feels like care providers do not really pay attention to dynamics among children in their care and often show favoritism toward certain children, often the children of providers or friends of the owner. Her kids report care providers telling her son he was “bad” and her daughter she was a “brat.” Jessica does not think her children are faultless, but she has stayed around to watch enough that she has seen providers ignore provocations by other children directed at her children. A co-worker who used to work at the facility has told Jessica she quit after witnessing inappropriate physical restraint of toddlers (grabbing arms and shoving) and leaving kids out in the sun without water as a consequence of behavior. The co-worker described what she witnessed as “abuse” and said her attempts at raising concerns with the director only resulted in her being bullied. Jessica said the director responds to her concerns by saying the kids are “making it up.” Jessica feels as if neither her children nor she is heard or taken seriously. She knows she could not survive financially without the CCA help as it saves
her about $850 per month. She feels she has to accept this reality for her children despite concerns with the quality of care they receive.

Jessica also currently receives SNAP. She worries people judge her when she uses her card to buy her kids cookies, birthday cakes, or even treats for school parties. She says that even though she feels like lots of people “abuse the system,” she tries not to judge anyone because no one can know her circumstances. She feels judgment from co-workers and friends around her status as a single mother, and she worries she does not spend enough time with her kids. She feels guilty that she cannot afford extra curricular activities they request. She notes how extra expenses like school field trips mean calculating how much she can pay on each bill to avoid getting utilities or her phone cut off. Jessica’s two youngest children are in the Talented and Gifted (TAG) program at their school.

Jessica attends Lake Pointe Church, an evangelical Christian church in Mesquite. She attends less regularly than she once did but still attends when she can. She has volunteered in their food pantry as well as the nursery. She said she has enjoyed the small groups and thinks they would likely help her in a crisis, but she would not feel comfortable asking. They helped her sister and her children once when they needed to attend an out-of-state funeral.

While Jessica said she has it “pretty good” and “has more now that I ever had before,” she also used language of living “paycheck to paycheck” to describe her reality. She credits her mother with helping her fill gaps when they need groceries or are too far behind on bills. She describes her mother as one who always sacrificed for her children, including taking extra evening jobs to help Jessica and her family and also helping her with childcare earlier in their lives. Jessica feels grateful and guilty for her mother’s help and pays her back money she has borrowed. She recognizes this same model of sacrificial mothering in herself, even saying she is
“exactly like” her mother in terms of sacrificing for her children. She says they have never gone without school supplies or clothes and have always had birthday parties, even if she had to sacrifice to provide these things. Despite this, she says, “there’s always going to be judgment…there’s always gonna be that guilt…”

Jessica feels “stuck” with the stress, saying that what “holds [her] back” is “a combination of everything,” whether transportation—she notes her car is always breaking down—or gas, or being too far away from her kids, or not being able to pick them up. She feels as if she cannot take risks with jobs because “I can’t not work.” She says this reality is “very stressful. A lot of times it’s very upsetting.” When I asked her what she did to take time for herself, she laughed. She said now that she has a boyfriend, she occasionally takes hot baths, which “feels like a vacation,” or watches television. She also said she will sometimes go grocery shopping with her mother.

Pinky Holloway: Sheer Determination, Crabs, Marathons

Pinky was the first person to respond to the flyers DH sent. She was patient, persistent, and encouraging as I sorted out a few final snags with the IRB. She has remained in contact with me and is the most interested in reading the final dissertation. Pinky is eager to begin writing a book about her life. Pinky is 32 years old, Black, and has a nine-year-old son.

We planned to meet on a weekday morning. When I arrived, Pinky and her boyfriend were hunched over the open hood of one of the cars, on the phone with someone trying to find out if a certain part was available. I was quickly to learn this was a recurring theme in her life, more than one job has hung on whether her car runs. She has had to quit jobs when her car broke down, once when she was five months pregnant with her son. At other times, a broken car has meant three and a half total hours on public transportation that involved taking her son to
daycare, going to school, picking her son up and taking him home where her mother took over childcare, and then taking another bus to her night job in downtown Dallas. These days started at 5:00 am and ended at midnight. Later, a broken car meant the difference between a twenty-minute drive to work each way and an hour on public transportation followed by a mile and a half walk to work each way. These days started at 4:30 am, with timely arrival at work contingent on “how tired I was and how fast I was able to walk that morning.”

Pinky wore casual clothes, and we sat on comfortable couches surrounded by nice furnishings. I noticed wall decor that still had tags on them and an empty picture frame on an end table. Christmas decorations in plastic storage boxes lined the back wall of the living room. A television played in another room. Our conversation started with Pinky answering questions in a matter-of-fact way, and she quickly began offering more detail and interpretation of what she was sharing.

Pinky’s story reflects hardships, struggles, persistence, determination, complicated relationships, and ambition that are both personal and directed toward helping others. Her insights and self-awareness generated rich conversation, and she used powerful, vivid metaphors. Pinky is honest, direct, and open even as she admits to being guarded and not particularly social given her trust issues. She has given interviews about her experiences with DH on at least two previous occasions because she says DH knows, “I will tell it like it is.” Pinky laughed freely, had bursts of good humor, and became tearful when remembering preparation for her son’s birth when telling me about her father’s death this past fall. She expressed anger at persons who try to understand vulnerabilities and realities of poor and working-class persons without listening to persons who daily live these realities for decades and lifetimes. She also talked about her anger at persons who ignore or exploit vulnerable persons.
Pinky was born in Pennsylvania and moved to Dallas as a two-year-old. She talks about the cultural context of her childhood and its impact on her life.

Growing up in the eighties was a part of the crack cocaine epidemic. So my mother had got addicted to crack. She ended up, I guess, letting it take control of her life to the point where her responsibilities were no longer a priority. So she lost her apartment and I ended up with nowhere to stay for a time. Then I went to live with my dad. I was seven. I lived with him until I was twelve. And then I’ve pretty much been on my own since then.

Pinky thinks her mother was a high school teacher before her addiction issues. Her father, who did not have a college degree, retired from Dallas Independent School District (DISD) where he worked for the landscaping department.

Pinky is clear how these early experiences continue to impact her own way of being in relationships. Not only does she continue to have trust issues in all relationships because of “being abandoned when I was little,” but she also very clearly and repeatedly declares her intention never to become “a product of my environment.” She takes negative experiences and uses them to drive her to success. She also has been determined to be a present, supportive, loving mother and provider for her son. Her greatest fear is losing her house, and she marks every year after her son’s seventh birthday as being one more year during which she has kept him from becoming homeless like she was at age 12.

Pinky moved between boyfriends’ and friends’ houses from age 12 until she graduated from high school. She said she had a lot of absences because of this transience and yet was determined to graduate largely, she said, because a teacher once told her she couldn’t. Throughout her time in Dallas, she has lived everywhere but North Dallas. She graduated from James Madison High School, an historically significant, predominantly Black high school in the South Dallas/Fair Park area. While Pinky attributes more of society’s inequalities to class
dynamics than race dynamics, it is interesting that despite living in Far East Dallas between graduation and the move to HC, her son has always attended daycare and public schools in the predominantly African American city of Lancaster south of Dallas. She said she would give him the option which high school he attends when that time arrives.

While Pinky knew she wanted to become a registered nurse (RN), she did not receive any guidance about the process of going to college from her high school. Deterred by the confusing financial aid process at El Centro Community College, Pinky chose to pursue medical assisting at PCI Health Training Center. PCI is a private, for-profit institute, and Pinky’s certificate program took nine months. She is still paying off the $9,000 tuition. While she still wanted to become a nurse, Pinky thought medical assisting would provide an initial foray into a career from which she could move into nursing.

For three years, while she was working as a medical assistant, Pinky said she was trying to conceive “because I felt alone and unloved.” Not having success, she enrolled in nursing school at El Centro with the help of a boyfriend “who wanted me to better myself.” She decided to wait until she was finished school to pursue marriage and a child. She made payments all fall, with the plan of starting in the spring. In January, Pinky spent a night with former boyfriend and got pregnant. She became depressed and considered whether to terminate the pregnancy. The school advised her that a student had to complete the nursing program once starting and that any interruptions, including having a child, would mean starting completely over.

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134 For-profit colleges are coming under increasing fire for theirs costs, loan default rates, recruiting tactics, and predatory appeals to lower-income students, non-traditional students, and those with obligations requiring quick graduation. That said, Pinky’s story as well as those of other collaborators exposes problems of inefficient, underfunded, understaffed community college systems as well.
As Pinky neared the time to make a decision about her pregnancy, she woke up from a powerful dream one night. She turned on the television to a Christian program and thought she would listen to the message and pray for help with discernment. She also called her stepmother, who she identified as the most supportive person in her life despite not being close to her father. Her stepmother reminded her that she had wanted a baby for a long time and said, “That baby may have a purpose and you wanna take it away…nothing is gonna be perfect. So if you’re waiting to hit the lottery and win millions of dollars to be financially stable and have this big ole’ house you’re dreaming about, that’s not gonna happen.”

Pinky decided to continue the pregnancy and her MA work. Her car broke down when she was five months pregnant, and she could not afford to get it fixed. She quit her job and applied for government assistance. She received housing assistance and food stamps at that time. She supplemented her income by fixing hair in her neighborhood. She remembers, with emotion, that she would earn $25 and take half of that to a dollar store to buy bottles and onesies to prepare for the baby.

She stayed depressed throughout the pregnancy and became more depressed once the baby was born. She called an emergency room nurse when the baby was two weeks old, and the nurse agreed that she likely had postpartum depression. Pinky said she did not seek treatment because she did not want to be diagnosed as “crazy” nor have to take medications. After six weeks, her stepmother found a friend to fix her car without charge and so she took the baby to see his father’s family. While the baby’s father had denied paternity previously, his mother, Pinky’s son’s paternal grandmother, said one look at the baby was all the paternity confirmation needed. At her son’s grandmother’s insistence, Pinky lived with the family for six months. She believes her son’s grandmother could tell she was battling severe depression and anxiety and
wanted to care for both of them. Her car broke down again shortly after she began living with her son’s father’s family.

Pinky’s time with the family was a mixed experience. They introduced her to their church, Pleasant Grove Missionary Baptist Church in South Dallas, where she became part of the choir and praise dancing team, attended Bible studies, and volunteered for carwashes and garage sales. She continued attending after she moved into her own apartment. Living in close quarters with a loving family, however, reminded Pinky of what she had missed in her own childhood. She said she often withdrew to her bedroom at mealtimes because she “didn’t know how to interact with family,” which made her “sad and depressed.”

Pinky spent the next two years battling depression while caring for her son. This was the first period since she was fourteen she was not employed in some form of paid work. She received TANF, SNAP, and an energy check of $469 per month, or $5,628 per year. Even with housing assistance, Pinky is not entirely sure how she survived financially during that time. (Factoring in housing assistance, Pinky’s annual income would have been roughly $16,428.)

Tired of not working beyond parenting or having much income, Pinky decided to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (I) after seeing an advertisement for a four-week program. She discovered the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) would pay for the program and living expenses if she were diagnosed with a disability. Pinky went in for testing and DARS eventually diagnosed her with bipolar disorder. She took the medications long enough to get through the program although she stopped taking them fairly soon thereafter because even though they helped with mood swings and sleep, they caused weight gain.
During this time, still without a working vehicle, Pinky would take a bus to Lancaster to drop her son off at daycare, take a bus downtown for school, take another bus back to pick up her son and her biological mother, who watched him during the evenings, then take another bus back downtown to work at the American Airlines Event Center from 6:00 pm until midnight. When I asked how she survived this exhausting schedule, she said, “Motivation. Didn’t want to become a product of my environment. I had to have better. I refuse to become the mother that I had. There is a lot of negatives that I’ve turned into positives. Negative experiences that drives me to do better and strive for more.”

Pinky liked the center caring for her son. She had CCMS, and she describes the staff at the center as being very engaged with parents, knowing full names and relational connections in the community. She also appreciated their attention to the children, teaching them basics, manners, and social skills as well as potty training. Pinky said they filled an important gap by teaching these things while she was working and going to school.

Pinky’s first job as a CNA paid $10 per hour, which meant her housing assistance decreased proportionally and she no longer received TANF or SNAP. Thus, Pinky saw about a $4000 increase in her annual income (giving her an annual income of $20,800 if she didn’t have to take any unpaid leave). Her job at an assisted living facility in Richardson, just north of Dallas, required a commute. She got up at 3:30 am to catch a bus and then a train. Once at the station, she walked another mile and a half to her job. Eventually, a co-worker saw her walking and offered her rides in the morning since they lived near each other in Far East Dallas. In the afternoon, the co-worker dropped her off downtown so she could pick up her son.

Pinky loved this job. She enjoyed both caring for patients and camaraderie with co-workers. She eventually purchased a car and worked there three years. During that time she
recalls the financial pressures as the hardest part. Childcare demanded the most money since she was no longer eligible for CCMS. She struggled to provide food, bills, rent, diapers, soap, tissue, and other household items. She could not afford car insurance or a home phone, which she felt compromised their safety. She remembers trying to decide how much to pay on what and calculating when something would get shut off. Only when she received a termination notice would she resort to asking her stepmother or her son’s paternal grandmother for help. She said her church was an emotional support during this time.

Pinky also said she thinks class impacts power relationships and opportunities more than race. She thinks doctors treat people according to “green and white dollars” rather than skin color. She said she sees this reality more clearly because “I come up on the poverty end of the economy.” As an example, she talked about the high costs of medical supplies when one can easily acquire the same products at a fraction of the cost at a discount store.

Still wanting to become a nurse. Pinky chose the Dallas Nursing Institute for her vocational nursing degree. A boyfriend paid the tuition (based on their current website, it was likely about $25,000), and she finished in two years while working. Her car broke down the week she started school so this time was again marked by long days on multiple lines of public transportation between school, work, childcare, and home. When she graduated and began work as a nurse, she made $19 per hour. Noting that this income change immediately raised her rent, she decided “If I had to pay that much money in rent, I may as well become a homeowner. So…I looked into Habitat.”

Pinky was thrilled to become a DH homeowner. She felt like being able to leave public assistance fulfilled a promise she had made to herself to escape a cycle of assistance. Pinky said
she had seen many other girls “like me growing up” who are the third generation receiving housing assistance. “I just didn’t want to be a part of that.”

Since moving into her home, Pinky has worked several nursing jobs. While she was completing the DH process, her biological mother was dying at a nursing facility nearby. Pinky would work all night, then visit “the same mother who had abandoned me,” and then work her DH sweat equity hours. She called this as “a time to bond…being that we really just didn’t have a lot of time throughout my adolescence.” When her mother died, Pinky became depressed and required outpatient treatment. She had not been at her job long enough to qualify for Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) protection, and her employer replaced her position while she was in treatment. Pinky could not find employment for several months. She left a job at a nursing facility in Mesquite when she discovered the facility engaged in practices that could “lose all of us our licenses.” She found a job she loves in Far East Dallas, not far from where she lived before moving to HC. She now makes $21 per hour.

These months of unemployment forced Pinky into tenuous financial situations. She is currently trying to pay off a title loan, a bank loan, and a private loan. Similar to previous seasons, she often spends sleepless nights wondering how much to pay on what bill to avoid termination of various services. She could not buy her son a new school uniform this year and was planning to use her next paycheck to buy him shoes and underwear. She feels frustrated because she feels “like I should be further than where I am in life.”

Pinky does not want an “easy” life, and she knows she has the characteristics to overcome these challenges. She understands God as playing an active role in the particularities of her life.
I just thank God for ambition and strong will and determination. I don’t think I would change anything because of the path that was lined and predestined for me has gotten me to where I am right now. I thank God for Habitat… Yeah it’s still a struggle. But even though it’s a struggle and I hate the struggle, I thank God for the struggle. Anything worth having in life is worth working for. It’ll make you appreciate it better versus somebody just handing it to you on a silver platter.

She wants her son to learn these lessons as well. While she cannot provide him with everything he might want, she says she would tell him “no” regardless of her financial resources. She wants him to know “he isn’t better than anyone else,” and that life will include disappointments that can’t define or limit him. She wants him to know “how to survive” and “see the glass as half full.”

Pinky has used these short periods of unemployment to connect more deeply with her son. She said his grades always finish high but sometimes drop in the middle of the semester. She uses her time at home to work with him on his schoolwork to get him back to where he was. These periods provide some balance between the responsibilities of parenting and financial provision. To a degree. “If my child needs me and I’m not working, I can be there for him…that’s good because nobody loves your child like you…but then I’m not providing money for my child, and that doesn’t work. It just doesn’t balance out.”

As we were wrapping up our conversation, Pinky asked me whether I had read Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed*. Pinky had read the book for a school paper and had written a response to it. I said I had and asked her what she thought of it. “It pissed me off. She has no clue. She’s not us. She has no idea what it means to live that life. She didn’t show real struggle. That was false struggle. A book should be about somebody who’s actually lived that life.”

Pinky said she related much more to the film *The Blind Side*. In the film, based on a true story, Michael Oher is a Black teenager living on his own as his mother struggles with addiction
issues. A wealthy, white family adopts him and supports his academic and athletic development in a private, Christian school. After a lot of hard work and extra support from a tutor and the family, he is awarded a football scholarship and is later drafted into the NFL.

Pinky said in ten years she would like to have a master’s degree in nursing, live in a larger home, use her Habitat home for public assistance housing, and run a group home and a halfway house. She is confident that despite her ongoing economic struggles and struggles with depression and bipolar disorder (which she “refuses to get treated”), her God-given determination will get her through this “marathon,” even if she has to take the occasional break.

She asked me about teaching at the university, and I told her I taught a Women’s and Gender Studies course in which I included stories like hers and the systems contributing to the challenges she has experienced. She listened and then asked, “Will they do anything about it? Or will they just say, ‘Oh, I read about this, now I know’?” I told her I would pose this question to my students, and others. Pinky’s response strikes me as an important, penetrating question, and one that should be posed as frequently as possible.

Twila Barker: Hope Floats, But We Know

While Twila did not attend focus groups, her insights were particularly revelatory and relevant. Because they are inseparable from her autobiographical narrative, much of our conversation appears in later chapters of this project.

When I arrived at Twila’s home for our conversation on a Friday morning, she hugged me at the door after our handshake. Twila is warm, friendly, professional, mature, reserved, and optimistic. She laughed easily although she was surprised when she cried as she recounted the prejudice she experienced at work. In fact, later in the interview she said, “I didn’t know I was
going to cry about that job thing. I would like to have choked that back.” Twila’s yard was neat, with an inviting teak bistro set on the porch. The inside of her house was warm, simple, and coordinated. Twila wore slacks and a short-sleeve jacket. She is 40 years old and Black and has two daughters and a son, ages 22, 16, and 13.

Born in Dallas, Twila said she lived in the North Park area that is, “not the Highland Park North Park.” Twila’s North Park is farther north than the elite Highland Park area. This area is racially and socioeconomically diverse, a demographic reflected in her public education experiences. Twila grew up with her mother, a manager at then-Southwestern Bell, her father, a mechanic, and her two younger brothers. Both of her parents finished high school.

Twila had her first daughter at age 18, after finishing high school. Twila does not say much about her daughter’s father except that they did not stay together and that she was “on her own.” She lived with her parents for the first six months after her daughter was born and then moved into an apartment. Twila remembers this as a difficult time, particularly because of childcare costs. She was working at a telemarketing company and then the J.C. Penney credit department and going to Dallas County Community College where she majored in psychology. Twila’s mother retired while Twila’s daughter was quite young and assumed childcare responsibilities for Twila’s daughter. Twila says her story is “different” because of this arrangement because she knows other single mothers struggle with daycare costs for much longer.

After two years, Twila quit college. She said it was just “too hard” with her daughter and working. Twila explored several jobs, including several that required licensing, trying to decide what she wanted to do long-term. She spent four years as a 911 operator and had her second daughter and her son. She decided to go to medical assisting school because she liked the
administrative aspect of the work. She moved to Mesquite, an area she loves, and worked in the medical assisting field for thirteen years. Twila likes administration because she enjoys finding answers for patients. She observed that other people do not often take initiatives to find answers. Twila spent five years working for an affiliate of a major Dallas hospital system and has been doing part-time secretarial work at a trucking company for the past year. She is currently enrolled full-time at Dallas Baptist University and majoring in healthcare management.

Twila’s oldest daughter currently attends Texas Southern University, an Historically Black College (HBC) in Houston. Her other daughter attends Irma Lerma Rangel Young Women’s Leadership School. Located in Fair Park, Rangel is highly decorated and is also the first all-girls public magnet school in Texas. Twila’s daughter sings in the choir, and Twila really likes this school for its female leadership and its racial/ethnic diversity. Her son attends W.E. Greiner Exploratory Arts Academy, where he specializes in cello. Greiner, also a magnet school, is located in Oak Lawn and is predominantly Hispanic, catering specifically to economically disadvantaged students.

When I asked whether her jobs have been supportive of paid work/family work balances, Twila said, “Work has never been very supportive.” She said her kids have not been sick much, but even getting their regular checkups has been a hassle. Her last job in the medical field was particularly challenging. When management changed rules regarding requests for time off, more staff requested the same dates. Twila said management forced the “more dependable” staff to work, which included her. The same manager also changed her hours without notice. The new start time meant Twila’s children would have to ride the bus to school and get to their bus stops twenty minutes early. When Twila voiced her concern at an office staff meeting, her boss said the decision had already been made.
While Twila may not have wanted her children riding the bus for many reasons—she said she was cautious and did not let them go outside alone in the neighborhood until they had lived there eight months—I suspect the time together in the morning was important to her as a parent. Her mother picks the kids up so this would have been time for conversation before a full day begins. Twila said she would prefer to live and work in diverse spheres, like the neighborhood in which she grew up as well as the Mesquite area where she lived before the HC move. She wishes HC were more diverse. Despite feeling like persons of racial privilege can never fully understand realities of persons of color, Twila said she thinks racism will end because the increasing number of mixed marriages will eventually produce a “swirl” as to render race a non-issue. For the time being, however, when it comes to experiences the subtleties make racism difficult to name, she concludes, “[People] have to experience it themselves [but] when you know, you know.”

Twila has attended Greater South Central Baptist Church in Oak Cliff for over fifteen years. While church membership at this small church is primarily persons who are Black, Twila said there is socioeconomic and geographic diversity in the faith community. She is very active in her church, participating in a Monday night women’s bible study, Wednesday night services, Saturday choir practice, and Sunday worship services. She loves studying the bible and learning, which also informed her decision to go to Dallas Baptist. She said her faith is a primary support to her although she would never ask the church for any practical or financial assistance because she would not want everyone to know.

Twila is grateful for her DH home and the opportunities it has created, but she also talked about challenges. She wanted a two-story home for her teenaged children. She knew the neighborhood had two-story homes available, and she did not feel as if her DH worker, a Latina, advocated for her in this regard. She said another homeowner, with a different DH worker, told
her that her worker held a two-story house for her while she raised the money for her down payment. Twila noted that this was a violation of DH policies. Twila grew so frustrated she considered declining the home. Ultimately, she accepted the house, saying, “You’re upset, but don’t be stupid upset, be smart upset.”

Twila said she previously rented two-story homes, but her DH home is the smallest they have lived in for quite some time. She is “hoping and praying for some windfall one day to pay it off and eventually rent it out. I was thinking rent it out to low-income families.” She said she appreciates the fact that she is no longer subject to the whims of landlords who had previously asked her to move arbitrarily when they wanted to let relatives move into the home she was renting. She does not notice a difference with friends because most of her friends already own homes. She said she has never felt different from them since she has rented homes, and she said she might notice a difference in how people see her if her friends did not already own homes.

She said her children enjoy socializing in the neighborhood, but she does not know many people.

Right now, Twila is living “check to check.” She lost her job in January when she clocked in three minutes late despite a work history of being on time or early. She had received “Five-Star Spirit” awards at this job and consistent bonuses because of her outstanding attendance. With raise season approaching, Twila thinks the firing was related to management wanting to bar her from entering a higher pay bracket. Twila is now working part time as an administrative assistant at a small trucking company. She took out a student loan for the first time this year so she could attend school full time. She said her mortgage is higher than most in the neighborhood at $740 per month, and that the higher cost makes it difficult to save anything, even before she lost her job. She said her DH worker said her finances indicated she could pay the rate (she made $35,000 per year), but she points out that this did not include any sort of
“rainy day” provision. This, she said, is the major issue with single parenting. One income makes it impossible to save for the “rainy day that’s inevitably coming.” She also got a new car just before losing her job. Twila said she received child support for two years when her children were younger and that “helped a lot.” So far she has been able to stay afloat by spreading out bill payments and “catching up” when her income tax refund arrives.

Twila is currently receiving SNAP, and she talked about how uncomfortable she felt at the grocery store using her card. This is the first time she has received direct aid since her children were much younger, and even then she “felt bad about it. I felt terrible.” Now, she said, she still feels badly because “I wanted to be financially at a point where I wouldn’t even qualify for it.” I asked her whether feeling badly was a personal judgment, a cultural judgment, or a mixture of both. She responded that it was “me judging myself and then what I see as far as culture.” Twila explained that what she sees culturally is direct aid recipients making inappropriate grocery choices. She said that persons fill their “basket…with everything that keeps you from cooking…this is my view of it, 9 out of 10 persons is often unemployed.”

For Twila, her discomfort is both undesirable and something that differentiates her from those women she observes at the store. “I should probably not care. But I do. (laughs) It bothers me. I see people absolutely not care. And I see girls at the store with their boyfriends and she’s using her card and he’s just throwing stuff in the basket. I’m like, ‘Who’s gonna work here? No one’s gonna work?’ It annoys me. It just does. So I think I may be stereotyping myself. (laughs) I don’t do that. When I go, I go to the store and I try to make what I consider to make good food choices.”
I met Stormy at her house on a Saturday afternoon. Stormy is friendly, straightforward, hospitable, pragmatic, thrifty, and self-confident. She said she was a “creature of habit” who prefers a simple, comfortable life. She described herself as both a “people person” as well as a “loner” with just a few close friends. She smiled often. Stormy talked about how proud she is of her house and how much she has enjoyed making it into her space. Stormy’s garden and patio are filled with plants, patriotic flags, and decor with Texas stars. She has a sign indicating the presence of an alarm system. Inside, Stormy’s house smells of vanilla from her candles, and she has filled the walls and furniture surfaces with family photos, pictures, plants, and other decorations.

Stormy is 44 years old and white. She was initially confused by my question about how she identified racially/ethnically, and when I offered examples, she said, “Oh yes, I’m Caucasian, white, either one, and I never had an issue with that and knowing who I am and what I am.” She then mentioned being a minority at her school growing up and “never having issues getting along with minorities.” Stormy has three daughters, ages 25, 19, and 13. Stormy was born in Dallas as one of six children to a mother who worked as a I and a father who was a mechanic. Her parents divorced when she was young, and her mother remarried a man who worked in a pawn shop. Stormy moved around quite a bit growing up. She lived in Lancaster until fourth grade with her mother and grandparents. She then lived in Oak Cliff, North Garland, and Mesquite. She spent her senior year in Rockwall with her mother and elderly grandparents, graduating from Rockwall High School.

Stormy said no one mentored her or encouraged her to consider the future throughout school. She met her husband when she lived in Mesquite, and she got pregnant when she was
eighteen. She said she married him because “You know, back then in the eighties, you got pregnant and got married.” She said she “wasn’t in love with him” but “At 18, what do you know?” Stormy describes her ex-husband as chauvinistic, jealous, and controlling. They were married for eighteen years, and until the very end, he would not let her work. She also said he was abusive and on drugs. Shortly before she left, he bought her a car. He continued to pay for it and insurance after they divorced. Despite his financial support during and after their marriage, Stormy felt like she was “on her own” from early in their marriage.  

She has been her daughters’ protector, provider, and rock throughout their lives. While she said that had her husband been a “kind person,” she would likely still be married, but she accepts her life. “Things happen for a reason, and that’s fine, and you know, this is where I am.”

While married, the family lived with her husband’s parents the majority of the time. Stormy thinks they were “great.” They owned a porcelain doll shop, and Stormy taught ceramics classes there for eight years as her only work beyond caring for her children. She called this “a blessing,” and added, “Now you just can’t, I mean, two people have to work to make it.”

Stormy said when things with her husband continued to worsen, she decided she did not want to spend the next twenty years with him. She explained her decision to leave in terms of divine intervention and her own agency:

Timing is everything. I’m a firm believer in that. When the time is right, God will just…open doors for you. He’ll open and close them. I just knew that…I was just like, “Do I want to live with this man for another 20 years? I mean seriously?...Okay either shut up or put up.” And it’s just one of those things: if you’re not [happy], then do something about it…And I was just, “God no! I can’t. I can’t.” I just couldn’t deal with it. So then it’s like, okay, then you’ve got to do something about it…When I did I just started saving my money, like I said, God just opened the door. I got a job…I just had to

Stormy did not mention child support, and I failed to ask, but I think it safe to assume her former husband paid child support given that he also paid her car note and insurance as per the “divorce decree.”
get out. I just had to…I couldn’t deal with him anymore and, like I said, I started saving my money and everything just fell into place. I knew I wasn’t scared being alone. That wasn’t the problem. Financially it kind of scared me a little bit.

Stormy said she knew that some people stayed married for the kids, but “in my situation, it wasn’t good for the kids either.” So she and her two youngest daughters, who were six and twelve, moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Mesquite. She shared a room with her youngest daughter for the next six years until they moved into the HC neighborhood. Stormy continued working at Walmart, the job she had gotten before moving out. Stormy always paid her rent and bills on time. She received SNAP, Medicaid, and support from her ex-husband. Although she had received online certificates in health administration and medical assisting while still married, she realized she ultimately preferred her cashier job. She enjoys interacting with people and has “my regulars”; she also feels like Walmart takes good care of its employees. If her daughter gets sick at school or if something, she first calls her ex-husband, who is self-employed, and then her older daughters. If no one is able to get her daughter, Stormy leaves work because “that’s my responsibility, and that’s what I do.” She has never had anyone raise concerns about any child-related absence.

Stormy’s beginning wage at Walmart was $7.40 per hour, and she now makes $12 per hour after nearly a decade working at the same store. She said when she first started working, Walmart offered biannual merit raises, making it easier to increase one’s wages. Now, she said, the store only offers raises once a year. I asked Stormy how she survived financially during the years after her divorce, and she said she really did not know. She said:

it was paycheck to paycheck…I get paid bi-weekly. So I would have one paycheck, I would take half my rent out. Right off the top. And then I just had my light and I don’t know maybe one or two more…My rent was first and then my utilities…Trying to put gas in my car. But you know, I did it and God always made a way. He never failed…honestly I never did ask anybody for any help. I mean it just stretched. I don’t know how to explain it. Just God made a way. He made it stretch for me. You know
sometimes I’d go, “God I only have $10,” but…I was like 7 minutes from work. So it lasted me. Just honestly I don’t know.

Stormy said she “managed my money to a T” because “I knew I had to. There wasn’t any messing around.” “You just do it. You just work every day and I don’t think about tomorrow…because you can’t. I just live today and I worry about today.” She looked forward to getting her income tax because she could “treat” her children to items they needed, like a microwave for the apartment or clothes. Stormy said that now she makes most of her purchases at garage sales and thrift stores.

While she was married, Stormy attended Gateway Apostolic Church (GAC), a predominantly white, Pentecostal church in Mesquite. She said she grew up in the Church of God and felt like GAC was “more strict” than her preference, but she thought it was good for her girls. She has not attended church since working because she works on Sundays, but she is clear that her faith in God remains her primary source of support, strength, and confidence.

About two years ago Stormy received a DH flier in her mailbox. Despite her poor credit, she was approved and moving into a house in two months. She chose her particular house because she loved the name of the street, and she quickly moved through her sweat equity hours. She said her mortgage is very low because it is based on her income, and she absolutely loves living in her own home.

It’s just a blessing from God. God just totally opened that door and made it happen and it’s just awesome. You know, the feeling of knowing that this is your home and…I just can’t explain it. It’s awesome. It’s just amazing…I mean I’ve always been a strong person, but it just makes you, I don’t know, somehow it just strengthens you more. It just makes you feel better as a person. That, you know, you’ve worked hard and, you know, I deserve this…And I continue to work hard. You know, go to work every day. That’s incentive too to go to work so I can buy things for my house.
Stormy loves having a yard and a porch, and she has worked to make her home “cozy, inviting, and comfortable.” In fact, her daughter told her that when neighborhood children, whom she said are mostly Black children, come into their home, they often comment that the family must be “rich” because the house is filled with knickknacks and pictures. Stormy finds these comments both “funny and sad” both because everything in her home was a gift, a yard sale, or a Goodwill purchase and because she wonders what it means about their own home environments. Stormy said she knows “how to put things together and just take care of my stuff…I’m very proud and happy,” and she wonders whether the other children’s homes “aren’t really homey or inviting or comfortable.” She said she thinks maybe “they just don’t have their own things, their own space,” and “I don’t really know where they came from before.” Further, she said that while she does not know what the insides of neighborhood houses look like, looking at yards makes her think, “My gosh, you have been given a brand new house…you have been blessed with a brand new house and you don’t take care of your yard. You know, I don’t get that. And, too, maybe they don’t know how, you know.”

For her part, Stormy plans to stay in her house until she dies and passes it on to her children. She said right now she just wants to enjoy life, keep it simple, and be there for her daughter. Stormy said she could go into management, but she feels like her daughter needs her right now. Managers, she said, work long hours and deal with hassles she would rather avoid. “I want to enjoy life and come home and there be light outside and, you know, work in my yard. That’s it. I don’t want any hassle. I don’t want any headache. I don’t want anybody else’s

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136 Many collaborators think every house in the neighborhood is a DH house.
problems. I want to come in, punch the time clock, do my job, and leave and that’s it. It’s just that simple.”

Stormy said she feels financially stable. Just last year she learned she made too much to continue with SNAP benefits. She gets her insurance through work, and her daughter has Medicaid. They do not have any ongoing medical issues, nor have they been sick much. She said if an unexpected expense arose she would either draw from her 401K or ask her boyfriend.

Stormy’s outlook is that “people are people…You’re not better than me, and I’m not better than you.” She said this is how she looks at relationships and interactions with persons of other racial and ethnic identities. “I never had a problem getting along with minorities…You treat others with respect, nine times out of ten, that’s how they’re going to treat you…I acknowledge everybody and I think for the most part that’s what everybody is looking for.” Although she said her co-workers were “like family” at one point in the conversation, she also said “nobody is my buddy… I go there, do my job, and I leave…I’m out of there and that’s that.”

When I asked Stormy whether she had ever experienced criticism or judgment, she said, “You know, I’m sure. I just don’t care to be around people like…I don’t care to listen to it or want to be around it. I’m sure, you know, I don’t know who or where from, but sure I guess.” I followed that question with whether society views single mothers in particular ways. Stormy said:

There’s just so many that are and that are on assistance. Yes, I see it every day. I don’t know, I mean the thing of it is, I think, okay if you’re a single mom then so be it. It’s just is what it is, but the difference is okay don’t keep having…you know, if you’re struggling and you’re single, it’s hard for you to make ends meet, don’t keep having children. I mean that’s pretty…it’s not rocket science. And just keep working. I mean, you know, do for yourself. Do for your kids. And just try. Just try hard. That’s all you can do. I think as long as people work and they’re not lazy and they keep their kids clean and their house clean and make sure they get to school and are fed, you know, I don’t see what the
criticism is about that. As long as you’re trying to be normal, I don’t know what normal
is, but you know, and I know there’s a lot of things going on in the home and you can’t
get your kids to school and…don’t know, I just think…I mean there’s nothing wrong
with that as long as you’re trying.

As for what she thinks others might not understand about the realities of single mothers,
Stormy said, “It’s a struggle. It is. It’s definitely a struggle. But what’s easy in life anyway?
Nothing is easy. You’re not handed anything. You have to work hard for everything. There’s no
handouts. Nobody is going to give you anything. Nothing is free. That’s why I think anybody
that has anything has worked hard for it.”

Stormy hopes her daughters will know this. She wants them to “be responsible and
productive.” She does not want to give them so much they will expect easy lives where they
cannot “make it on their own and survive.” She said she would like to provide each of them with
a house, a “good, used, reliable car,” and an education so that none of them have to “rely on
anybody.”

Stormy’s daughter attends school in Mesquite. Stormy’s older two daughters attend
Eastfield Community College in Mesquite. Her oldest daughter wants to join the FBI, and her
younger daughter is still exploring her options as she completes her basic requirements. Both
work at large restaurants.

On my way out the door, Stormy thought of something to add about the needs of single
mothers. She suggested the need for “dating tips. Every single woman wants a husband, but they
need to know what to look for. I would love a husband, but I’m also afraid.”

**Clodie Peterson: Figuring out a Way**

Clodie and I met on a Wednesday evening. Pulling up, I noticed a new SUV in the
driveway, a landscaped yard with new trees, a teak bistro set on the porch with knickknacks, and
an alarm system sign. Inside, she had candles lit and a large, nice dining room table with family pictures on a buffet behind it. She offered me something to drink immediately.

Born in California, Clodie is 51 years old and has a son and a daughter, ages 32 and 14. She is Black and dressed in professional, work clothes. Clodie is an entrepreneur and a businesswoman by training and by experience. She is self-assured, warm, driven, resourceful, and organized. She called herself a “people person,” and her compassionate leadership skills are apparent in her work and her family history. She has a background in athletics, dance, and theater, and she has frequently worked multiple jobs at once, calling herself “hyper” and “motivated.” Clodie claims her value in workplaces, although she is currently having substantial challenges at work, unlike any previous work experiences.

Clodie spent most of her life in West Texas. Her mother did full-time family work, occasionally helping her father, and had a tenth grade education. Her mother married Clodie’s father when she was 14 and he was 28. He had been married previously. Her father had a fifth grade education and became a Baptist minister when Clodie was young. Clodie was the fourth youngest daughter in a family of nine children. One sister died at the age of two, when Clodie was nine, in a housefire in Galveston. This loss prompted the family move to Smyer. Clodie lost another brother to a childhood disease before she was born. When Clodie was in high school, white members of the crew over which he was foreperson murdered her older brother. She said he had been friends with his crew, sharing meals with them in his home. A “drifter” came in, resented working “under a Black man,” and convinced the crew to kill him. They hit him in the back of the head and threw him into a lake where he drowned. Clodie said an original crew member finally told the truth. The “drifter” received some jail time but “not enough.”
Clodie spent much of her childhood and college years as one of the only Black persons in her contexts. She said while Black persons primarily attended her father’s churches, her family took in a diverse mixture of foster children and other children whom local law enforcement sent to them after they had run away. She also said she and her friends visited each other’s churches, which were ethnically and racially diverse. She was often the only Black athlete on her basketball and track teams, including during her first semester playing basketball at Tarleton State University on a partial athletic scholarship. She said her family always lived “in a pretty good side of town. It’s not like I lived on the east or the south side, cause I didn’t. I never lived in the east or south side. ‘Cause, you know, we wasn’t prejudice or anything, but it just so happened when my parents purchased homes and stuff like that, we never really lived what we call south side of town or east side which is predominantly Black.” She said she her small town of Spur had “tight-knit” relationships between the different racial/ethnic groups, but she did not see any interracial couples. She thinks this is a difference now, and interracial relationships are now more acceptable in society.

Clodie always wanted to attend college. She said she and her closest brother were the only family members “motivated” and “driven” to attend school. She’s not sure why they had this drive, given that her parents never discussed or encouraged college. She said, “I just knew…it was just something that I wanted to do. Because I used to love to write and I used to keep a journal. So maybe reading and writing I guess if that was my thing then. Maybe that was it.” She also remembered encouragement from teachers in her small school:

My teacher that did the drama, you know, stage and all that…now he was the one that really, really was gung ho…Because he just said, “You need to go! You can do it.” He just really wanted me to go. Take my scholarships and go here. Then I had a lady that was in high school, but she was my teacher…she motivated me a lot. And I all I could see was dreams. (laughs) “Maybe I should go.”
The same teachers, all white, encouraged Clodie’s siblings to attend college, but only she and her brother took that route. One of her older sisters got pregnant her first year of high school. Clodie said her parents “stood by her” and tried to get her to stay in school. The sister stayed a year and quit her sophomore year. Clodie said she watched her sister and did not want to take that path. She said her parents supported her even though the ideas did not come from them.

Clodie attended Tartleton for one semester and said she enjoyed her time there. She transferred to Odessa Junior College, where she completed an associate degree in business administration. At Odessa Clodie had basketball and speech-theater scholarships. She quit the basketball team when she got pregnant at age eighteen at the end of her first year. Despite her intentions not to get pregnant, Clodie said her parents had never discussed sex or birth control with her. When she got pregnant, her parents told her they would help take care of her child while she kept attending college as long as she did not get pregnant again.

Clodie thoroughly enjoyed college life. She said she was “blessed” with two roommates, one white and one Hispanic, who came from wealthy families and gave her clothes and makeup. She said on weekends they would go to clubs that held dancing contests. Clodie won often and made good money. She also “made headlines in Arizona” for her theater work. She said at one point, “I even dated a white guy for awhile.” Her teachers helped her find “the best” jobs to help her make money to send home to help support her son. She thinks they helped her because they saw how hard she worked. “Teachers were great with me and maybe they just realized that I was trying so hard because they gave me the opportunity…They got me some of the best jobs…So it worked out pretty good.” Clodie worked part time during the school year and full time during summers. She bought herself a car, which she used to visit her son on weekends. Her parents also brought her son to visit her whenever possible.
Despite her jobs, life was still difficult at times. Her parents started having financial difficulties due to a younger sister with health problems so Clodie sent more money home. When I asked her how she dealt with these challenges, she said, “You kind of deal with it. (laughs) I don’t know what to say. You just kind of deal with it and figure out a way.” Clodie did not stay in a relationship with her son’s father, and she said he was not supportive financially or otherwise. Later, when she filed a claim, he paid child support, but not during this period.

After graduation Clodie stayed in Odessa. She wanted to continue with her education at a university, but she decided she needed to take full responsibility for her son. She said she “didn’t want him to get too old not to know me” and that it was time for her to “grow up,” and so they moved into an apartment. This period was the hardest time for Clodie. She said her son was always fed, but she would “barely eat” sometimes. Clodie said this period did not last that long, and she was doing well again relatively soon. She started drug abuse counseling and made good money. She continued sending money to her parents, and a friend of her brother’s, who had a small child, took care of her son for relatively little money. Clodie said she has never received any direct assistance although she mentioned in a focus group that she did not know she had any options for assistance during this period of her life.

Clodie later worked for an insurance company as a secretary. She said the owners, two white men, were great regarding family work and paid work balance. They were particularly support and “lenient” when she was supporting her parents and sister through her sister’s health problems. Her sister’s kidneys were failing, and she was being treated in Galveston. Clodie would drive her family to Galveston for her sister’s treatment and then bring them back to Spur before heading home. She grew frustrated with her other siblings and said, “You woulda thought I was the oldest because I was really, really being supportive.” Clodie tested as a match and
donated a kidney to her sister. The surgery went well, but her sister died of hemorrhaging before she left the hospital.

Clodie then finished a degree in business education from American Commercial College. She took out a loan for that program and paid it back. Clodie moved to Lubbock shortly after that, where she worked at the Lubbock State School and helped care for her older brother who had leukemia. Before moving, she said she “planned everything” by securing a job and care for her son.

Clodie had good benefits at this job and bought a house. She began attending Texas Tech University for a degree in family studies and substance abuse counseling. During this time, Clodie worked at the state school from 5:00 am until 9:00 am or noon. On days she had class, she went to class from 9:00 until 2:00 pm, and then she returned to work until 5:00 pm. Some days she then went back to school until 6:30 pm and then worked until 10:00 pm. When I asked her how she managed this demanding schedule, she said, “I just did it. Maybe because I was young, I don’t know. But you know I didn’t feel guilty because it seemed like the way I fixed, you know, I was a little bit worried about my son, but actually it seems like…and he never told me any different, but it seemed like we spent time together. And then maybe he didn’t miss me because there was relatives around. Other kids and stuff.”

Clodie’s father got lung cancer, and her childhood home burned down during this time. Clodie and her younger sister moved her parents to Lubbock. Clodie took out a $10,000 financial aid student loan to help her parents. She does not regret this loan completely because “it was for a good cause,” but it remains a financial burden today. She made payments when she could and, at one point, it went into default and a collections agency took over it. Clodie said she has not received her income tax in several years because it gets garnished for the loan. She said she has
paid thousands more than the actual loan by now but does not see any way out. At one point the loan reached $20,000, and Clodie said it is now $14,000. Clodie helped her parents as much as she could, going over to their house at night to help them pay their bills. She made sure her son had what she needed but did not have any money left over for “extras.” She was frustrated that her siblings, “who did better than me, way better than me” did not make similar sacrifices to help their parents. She “felt like it was all pretty much falling on me. It was really falling on me.” Helping her parents was her primary source of financial stress at that point, and she was receiving child support after filing a claim.

After her brother died from leukemia, Clodie decided to move to Austin to explore new opportunities. She got a job with CCMS and worked there several years despite thinking the pay was too low. What she remembered most from that job expresses Clodie’s approach to life perfectly.

[I] tried to motivate the people over me because they wasn’t very motivated…I still remember a couple of years down the road after I left there and they called me…the lady that was over us was a Black lady and then the lady under her that was over me was Black…She had told me, “You know what? I used to love to hear you talk to me. You motivated me,” because she used to be so soft and crying and upset a lot. And I was like, “Girl, please.” It was to a point where she felt she needed to leave and do something different. And she was hesitant about leaving. “Little girl, please,” I said, “You better go ahead,” and I talked to her and I said, “Look, if I had the opportunity to be the President I would do it.” I would probably take the job. If I knew more politics and I know the President get a lot of help, you know…Girl, you don’t have a limit if you’re motivated and want to be there.” So she actually praised me on that because that’s just the way my mind set. When I go on a job I get to know that job. I work hard. And I have never had a problem where anybody gave me any hard time. No matter what. Because I actually work hard…When I work that hard, I expect for them to work with me. I just never had a problem with jobs and when it came down to my parents, my family when there was a situation like that, I never had a problem. Never.

Clodie worked at CCMS and the Texas Veterans Land Board, from whom she bought six acres of land. She added a doublewide trailer for herself and a singlewide for her mother after her father died, a home health care company, and a marketing company. While she worked these
jobs, which provided benefits, she also started her own businesses, including one of the first payday advance businesses in Austin, a cleaning and home improvement business, a collections agency, and a documents business that handled income taxes, uncontested divorces, name changes, and consolidation programs. She said she always went to court with her clients in case they needed her, and that each of these businesses was successful.

During these years Clodie married a man she met while cashiering part time at a grocery store. They had a daughter in 1999. They divorced several years later. Clodie’s mother took care of her daughter until her health declined. Clodie helped her mother get treatment in Dallas, where she had family, and her mother died shortly after Clodie set her up in an apartment near what would later become the HC neighborhood. While her mother’s health was failing, Clodie worked for a marketing company where she quickly became the third-top seller. She said they gave her a team, sent her around the country, and gave her medals. This work allowed Clodie flexibility to care for her family because her work schedule revolved around “hitting her numbers.” Clodie said she “hit her numbers” early in the day and could then leave to take her mother where she needed.

After her mother’s died, Clodie felt depressed and wanted to be closer to family. With savings from her businesses, Clodie moved to Mesquite. She worked primarily in the home health care field, where she feels most passionate even though she also feels like she is consistently undervalued. The field does not provide benefits, and Clodie describes those who run companies as “greedy.” She does not think being devalued and exploited is related to her race or gender, but rather to the “greed” of the industry. Clodie talked about basically running companies and having more skills and knowledge than owners, nurses, and others.
Clodie received a postcard advertising the DH program. She was shocked when DH approved her in seven days. “I was like, ‘Oh God, thank you thank you thank you!’ I was feeling so good. I was feeling so happy that they approved me! I was praying all the time. I still do it in the morning and at nights, but especially in the mornings before I get up. I was just so thankful. I was thanking God for it. Rent and stuff is so expensive!” Clodie enjoyed her sweat equity work and loved “the helping part” of “working really hard on other people’s homes.”

Soon after she moved in, Clodie took a new job, where she still works. She was able to set her annual salary at $48,000 by coming into a home health company as a seasoned office manager for a woman just getting her business started. Clodie bought a new car since her other car had 300,000 miles on it. The new job and her finances, however, have not developed the way Clodie expected. She makes too much money for Medicaid but not enough to pay for health insurance for herself or her daughter. Her son manages a convenience store and lives with her sister in Austin. Further, the owner changed how taxes were taken out of Clodie’s paycheck just after she bought her car, and she now has difficulties making payments. She plans to “get back on track” as soon as possible, but she had to take out a payday loan in the meantime. She knows “those things are just the worst things you can really deal with,” but she did not feel like she had a choice. She said when she ran her company, she refused to exploit people who clearly were not going to be able to catch up.

Clodie linked her current financial struggles to being a single parent.

It’s hard being a single parent. It’s easy to get off track. Really when I look at it I try to say, ‘Okay, what is it that I have that I’m paying on to take get me off track a little?’ And there’s nothing that should really keep me off track. But when you live from payday to payday—pretty much is what we do—anytime something take you off your normal routine and the way you have…it’s set up from payday to payday how you’re making ends meet, then that kinda throws your whole financial situation off track. And right now
that’s what it has done for me recently…I’m trying to figure out how to get it back, but I haven’t gotten it, yet.

Clodie said that generally she thinks there are higher numbers of Black single mothers, including grandparents raising grandchildren. Clodie’s ex-husband stopped paying child support about a year ago. Clodie said he was on disability, and she has filed to get her daughter’s money. She is still waiting for that to come.

Clodie said she has “chilled a little” and doesn’t have the energy she once did to work so many extra jobs. She also has health problems, which she thinks are the result of her stressful work situation. Clodie suffers from migraines, high blood pressure, and sleeplessness, and she is having a difficult time getting the healthcare she needs without health insurance. She said it scares her not to have health insurance and that she’s been fortunate that she and her daughter have previously enjoyed good health. That said, she knows she’s “getting older” and that “nobody in [my] family is going to be able to help [me].”

Clodie’s daughter attended Seagoville Middle School and was about to begin her first year at Mesquite’s Poteet High School at the time of our conversation. Seagoville, Clodie said, “is kinda different.” She said she could not find ways to get involved as a parent, and she was concerned by the security measures at the school. She said her daughter had things stolen from her backpack and that she struggled because she is shy and did not fight when other girls harassed her. Clodie said the school changed her daughter’s schedule multiple times and that the choir was disorganized and undisciplined. She said Mesquite schools would not allow this sort of behavior during school hours and that “the lady next door, she’s a white lady. She went to school out here, and she said, ‘They used to beat me up so bad up here. So her daughter stays in the Mesquite system.’” Clodie’s neighbor is Stormy Wells, who talked about her early school
experiences; I do not know whether Clodie knows Stormy participated in this project since they were in different focus groups.

She said her boss does not know anything about the administration of a home health care business or basic technology like cell phones and email. Clodie’s boss relies on her to keep the business up to professional codes and has denied her promised vacation time, for over a year, because she thinks Clodie must be present when inspectors arrive. Since these are unscheduled visits, Clodie must be present every day. Clodie had requested her annual vacation time during our August individual interview. By the time we had our last focus group meeting in January, she had been denied her vacation time for the entire previous year because her boss refused to let her leave before an unscheduled annual inspection.

For the first time, Clodie is experiencing a work environment where she feels like she does not have flexibility or respect for her hard work. Not only does her employer question any sick days she takes, but she is also actively supporting other employees who make more money than she does. She knows she is underpaid for her knowledge, skill set, experience, responsibilities, and work. She would take another job if she could find one that paid comparably, but she would also feel badly about leaving the patients, most of whom she brought into the company. For the time being, she is trying to learn “not to stress with [her boss]. Just blow it off.”

**Jennifer Harris: Tough Leader**

Jennifer and I met at her home on a Wednesday morning. She is deeply spiritual, with strong beliefs in the power of angelic and demonic forces and God’s providence. She is soft-spoken, open, emotional, hard-working, and loyal. She understands herself primarily as a provider for her family and as a savior for her ex-husband. Her friends tell her she is the
“toughest person they know,” and she said she speaks up for herself and can get along with anyone because “no one is a stranger.” During a focus group she talked about her leadership in the local neighborhood group and their efforts to force local developers who still own primary interests in the subdivision to provide more services in return for neighborhood homeowner fees. Jennifer encouraged others in the focus group to participate.

Jennifer is 43 years old and Black. She has a son age 28, a daughter age 21, and a son age 17. On an end table sits an 8x10 matted, framed picture of her daughter in a military uniform. Jennifer’s conversation often revolves around the cyclical relationship with her abusive, drug-addicted ex-husband. He is not the father of her children. Married for ten years, she divorced him several years ago, but he is still an inconsistent physical presence in her life and a constant psychological presence. Her stories of his physical attacks evoke strong sadness in her. Descriptions of life when her children were young, however, contain a few inconsistencies and contradictions.

Born in a small, racially diverse town in northwest Louisiana, Jennifer is the second oldest of six children. She was raised by her mother and stepfather. Her mother had her first child at age 17 and did full-time family work. Her stepfather completed high school and joined the military. He worked at the VA hospital as a custodian. Jennifer said her mother drank a lot of alcohol and that her stepfather was abusive; she said her mother’s drinking caused a lot of her stepfather’s behavior. She said she felt close to her stepfather because he cared about and protected her when the rest of her family ostracized her for “being different.” Jennifer said she always felt different from her family, from eating habits to socializing. She has painful memories from early childhood of her mother favoring her younger sister. When she was five, her mother backed over one of her toys with the car when she would not share with her younger sister. She
also remembers being eight or ten and sitting in a separate room, hungry, rocking, and crying, because she did not want to eat the food her family was eating. She also remembers getting more support from friends than her family when she had her second and third children.

Jennifer had her son at 16. She had to drop out of high school immediately.

I felt that it was my responsibility to take care of my son and do what I needed to do to provide for him. My mother did provide a little assistance, but because I knew what was right and what wrong and because I was disobedient, I felt it was my responsibility to step up to the plate and take ownership of what I had done. With the help of my mother I was able to get a little part-time job to take care of my son. As well as his father’s parents, they also stepped in to help provide and care for my oldest.

Jennifer said she decided to go back to school when she was 22 because she wanted her high school diploma and because her great-grandfather, with whom she was living and caring for, encouraged her to do so. She was pregnant with her second child at this time, and her great-grandfather’s house caught on fire. Jennifer had to quit school again. Having two children and “no place to stay, I had to provide shelter. Not just support, but shelter…Just me being responsible again. It’s what I needed to do…I had to be the person that they look out for.” She moved in briefly with a sister and then an aunt. Tensions prompted her to move out. Early in our conversation, Jennifer said she moved to an even smaller town in Louisiana where she worked cashiering at a grocery store. Here she became pregnant with her third child. She said she and his father were planning to get married, but her family somehow intervened and convinced him not to marry her. She is not sure what they said and did.

Later in the conversation Jennifer remembered living with her great-grandfather in her hometown while she was pregnant with her third child. She said his daughter, her great-aunt, owned the house and forced him to “put her out” even though it hurt him to do so. She said
shortly after she left, he fell on a radiator and burned himself so badly he went into a nursing home and never recovered.

Jennifer said the hardest struggles were when she had her first and second child.

I couldn’t provide for my children’s like I wanted to…Sometimes we would have nothing but bologna sandwiches, chips, and pop. I would let my kids eat, and I would go hungry. And I was pregnant with my third child. There were a lot of nights I went hungry to make sure my two oldest didn’t go to bed hungry. There were nights when we all had to get into bed together because where I lived it would get so cold inside of that house that we all had to sleep together just to keep warm. We would turn on the stove, but it didn’t heat good cause the house was so old.

At some point in this last pregnancy, Jennifer lived with her mother. She said, with much emotion, her mother made her sleep on the floor in the wintertime.

At some point after the cashiering job and the birth of her third child, Jennifer moved to Shreveport, LA, where she got a “good-paying job at RaceTrac.” There she met her future husband. They moved to North Dallas with her two youngest children, and her son moved to Atlanta with his father. In Dallas they both worked at a major manufacturing company. Before long, however, her husband “started hanging out with the wrong people,” including his siblings. He was arrested for distributing drugs, and it became difficult for him to find jobs. Jennifer said this development was particularly painful “because I thought he was gonna be the person that was gonna come in and take me away from everything that I had faced coming up.” Instead, “I became the sole provider for the family…I provided everything. Life then started becoming stressful.”

Jennifer moved the family from an apartment into a home in Garland because she wanted a “private setting” for her kids. The family moved several times, finally moving to Far East Dallas to be near her daughter’s high school. Jennifer’s daughter attended Skyline High School,
the first magnet school in the U.S. Skyline is large, nationally acclaimed, and predominantly Hispanic and African American. Jennifer chose to live in a neighborhood close to the school, which was also close to her son’s school. Jennifer “felt safe” living within walking distance of her children’s schools. She said this concern for safety stemmed from growing up in a small town and trying to adjust to a big city.

Jennifer’s husband’s behavior became more troublesome, and he became physically abusive. Jennifer said he pushed her through a window and punched her in the eye, both “out of the blue.” At one point, when he was in jail again, she moved and did not tell him where she was living although she did visit him. She said she let him move back in when he got out because he did not have anywhere to go and “I felt I always protect. I felt like I had to care and be more concerned for him than I was to myself.” They had a period of happiness, during which they spent a lot of time with her grandchildren. Jennifer’s oldest son had two small children and was serving an eight-year prison sentence. Jennifer loves her grandchildren’s mother and would take care of her grandchildren when she worked. Jennifer has also consistently taken the grandchildren to visit their father while he serves out his term. He is up for parole this year, and she is hopeful he will be released.

This peaceful period did not last, and Jennifer moved to Lancaster in South Dallas to try to remove her husband from the situations and persons enabling his behavior. Her daughter had graduated and was attending Grambling State University, an HBCU in Grambling, LA. Her daughter visited often and sent money to help her out. At this point in the conversation, Jennifer talked about her daughter’s father. She said, “Her dad was wonderful. There was nothing that [she] wanted that she didn’t get. She asked for it, she got it. Her father was pretty well off…He paid voluntarily child support. That was one person that I never had to put child support on. He
was a wonderful provider. So I never had to worry about that. When she moved to Louisiana, his responsibility of helping her continued.” Jennifer did not know her daughter’s father was married until she was pregnant. She said his wife was also pregnant, and they have always kept her daughter’s existence a secret. She said her daughter did not understand this growing up but accepts it now. She said she made sure to talk to her daughter about everything because she values openness with her children.

Jennifer said that although her two older children often did not have things they wanted and felt detached from peers because of these material differences, they “understand what my life was like…and they know I always did my best and always loved them.” She said they talk about those times “gracefully. They don’t blame me, they don’t blame their fathers, they don’t blame anyone…they’re glad to know we don’t live like that anymore.” She also said they frequently tell her youngest son to appreciate what he has because it is much more than they had growing up and he “just doesn’t know how that made [them] feel.”

In Lancaster, Jennifer’s husband became more abusive, at one point choking her until she thought she was going to die. She said he was not the same as the hard-working man she married. She said when he became abusive, she would “address him as Lucifer” because she knew it was not him acting that way. Jennifer said she “kept him around” as long as she did because he was so good with her grandchildren and because “I felt if I didn’t look out for him, something was gonna happen.” After years of transience, abuse, homelessness, and rehabilitation attempts, Jennifer finally told him he could not continue this pattern because it hurt the grandchildren too much. She did not let him in the house the next time he came over, and she filed for divorce even though it was painful.
Shortly after filing for divorce, a realtor for the house she lived in recommended DH. DH approved her, and they moved from Lancaster to HC. She said she feared he would show up while they were building, but he did not show up for two years. Reflecting back, she said she realized “I can’t help him. He gotta help himself.” She marvels at having survived to this point, saying that “he could’ve killed me. Cause he used to tell me all the time, ‘If I can’t have you, can’t nobody else have you.’ I just continued to ask God to just bless me. Bless my house, when I get off work at night, bless my surroundings. I just hope he don’t never get in that state of mind where he meant what he said. So far we’re happy. My son don’t want him back.”

Jennifer said she feels like her life is always a “rollercoaster.” Her daughter is in the Navy, about to deploy to Afghanistan, and her oldest son is coming up for parole. Her youngest son has been angry because “there’s so much that’s happened that he’s been there to witness…I guess he was angry about what was happening to his family.” Angry, Jennifer’s son said God must not exist and did not want to go to church. A week prior to our conversation, Jennifer’s youngest son texted her and asked her to call immediately. He told her he had “just saved a woman’s life.” He and a friend were driving the deserted 175 highway and he saw a woman in the backseat of a car who mouthed to him, “Help me.” They called the police and followed the car until they came to a police barrier. The man had abducted the woman at gunpoint in downtown Dallas, and the woman said she had already “prepared herself to die.” Jennifer told her son, “That wasn’t nothing but God…What we have always tried to explain to [him] was God is not about hurt. He’s nothing but a good…Sunday came and I said it was time to go to church. He got right on up. Not a problem. Thank you, Lord. I said, ‘Just be prepared for more. God is not through with you, yet. He has to show you who He is. I can’t tell you.’ We just went on to church and haven’t had a problem.” About a week after our conversation, this story made
national news. At our first focus group, Jennifer said her son had been on *Oprah*, and Oprah gave him and his friend new pickup trucks.

Again reflecting on her life, Jennifer said:

I just know that all that I have been through, coming up as a child, 10 years of marriage, the loss of my son for eight years, almost losing my daughter, almost losing my son to the Devil, I know at the end is all gone come together for a reason. One of my friends said, ‘Girl, you’re one of the toughest peoples I’ve ever seen. You done been through so much, yet you still can laugh and smile.’ So we’re here. I’m loving my home. I finally have something that I can call my own. I know in about six more months I’ll be here by myself cause he’s graduating high school…I’m just waiting on what else God has in turn for me. Jennifer’s son will graduate from Seagoville High School, and he plans to join the Air Force.

They will send him to Baylor University, after which he wants to become a doctor.

Jennifer attends St. Luke Community United Methodist Church, a large, local, predominantly African American church. She said the church is very socioeconomically diverse. When I asked about this, she said she drives “a ’99 [and] when you drive up to church, you see BMWs and Mercedes’.” That said, Jennifer said:

I don’t feel any different because I’m just like everybody else, I have just as much as everybody else has. I can dress just as decent as you, it might not be from Neiman Marcus, but I can dress just as nice. I am who I am. I can be who I am and get along with someone. My daughter is the same way. You could probably never tell if you didn’t see what we drove or where we live. We’re not treated any different…It’s amazing when we go shopping at the stores…I talk to everybody…they don’t know who they’re talking to. I’m way from the other side of town…most of the time, they talk right back…When I go to those places that are diverse, I fit right in.

Jennifer currently works for a logistics company where she runs reports and manages daily productivity. She said that at $11 an hour, she is “way underpaid.” She is “currently looking for employment where I can explore my expertise and be appreciated for it.” While she does get benefits at this job, it remains the lowest-paying job she has had in a long time. She said the stress of her current job is causing her headaches, migraines, and high blood pressure. Since
moving to Dallas, she said she has never had financial problems because she “budgets” and “saves.” She briefly received SNAP about a year ago but lost it when she got a 25-cent raise. Part of her stress with the current job is that her schedule does not allow her to take on a second job, as she did previously “when it’s not comfortable for us.” Ideally, Jennifer would like to become a hospice nurse. She currently volunteers for a hospice program where she visits people. “They love me as much as I love them…Sometimes when I go into the homes, it takes away the stress.”

Jennifer also said she has never had trouble balancing family work and paid work. “I’ve never had a problem. I think it is all because when I come in, I come in doing what is asked of me and I do it to the best of my ability. So if there’s something that comes up, they know how important it is. Most of them are mothers and fathers and they know that sometimes things have to come up that you have to go take care immediately. They know I am a single parent. I always try to explain that anytime I take off, it’s gonna be important. I just don’t take off to take off.”

When I asked her what people do not understand about what it is like for single mothers, she said,

It’s the children that hurt the most. We try to stay strong for them. It happens more in our culture because people are just not willing to share. Culturally, people have just become so selfish with what they have…It’s just amazing to me. I’ll give anything I have to help out the next person, especially if it’s a child.” I asked why people are not willing to share, and she said, “I think there’s a stigma. It all depends. I’m not gonna say that I think that they judge single parents cause this has been happening for years culturally. I think that the stigma of being a single parent is in the product of raising the childrens. Kids being disrespectful. It’s almost like you try to put us all in the same category. It’s different. We’re different… I have a single parent that lives next to me. She drinks every day. The kids knows it. I hear her cussing the kids all the time. As far as me, I don’t do any of that. I hurt for the kids.

When I asked Jennifer about her strengths, she said it was her toughness.

I take it, I deal with it, I just don’t hold on to it. I have too much joy. Whatever happens to me, I take it, I move on, and I try to make the rest of it happiness… My strength is my
struggles. Deal with it, get over it, keep moving. There’s always something better. You gotta go out there and get it. It’s amazing. I learned to cry in order to release the emotions of hurt. From my struggles, my pains. So I can look back and realize, I beat it. Everything that comes against me, to me, is nothing but the Devil. Anytime I know that I defeated him, I’m fine. He’s been attacking me for years.

Jennifer ended by saying she hoped to get to know other families better in the neighborhood because she would like to be an extra mother for their kids now that hers will be gone. She talked about it being a “relief” to share her story so that someone knows even if she “hides it” during the day. “I’m smiling, but you know what I’ve been through now.”

Christina Brandly: Laugh Off the Stress, Clear the Hurdle, Keep Going

When I arrived at Christina’s house on a late Saturday morning, I met her father who was just leaving with her older daughter. Christina’s home felt cluttered, clean, and comfortable, with ample evidence of the two small children living there. Christina is easy-going and down to earth. She described herself as a “bubbly people person” who has learned to be “tough and assertive” by necessity as a single mother. She is also both independent and quick to identify ways she has been “fortunate” in support she has received from her parents. Her four-year-old daughter stayed at the house with us, and Christina responded to her frequent, precocious interjections with good humor and patience, laced with mild exasperation.

Christina is 32 years old and describes herself as white and Hispanic. She has two daughters, ages eleven and four, whose fathers are both Black. Christina was born in Dallas and grew up in the Pleasant Grove neighborhood of southeast Dallas. Her two brothers are 10 and 11 years older than she, and her mother and father are nearing their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Christina’s parents were high school sweethearts in the small East Texas town of New Summerfield, which is roughly 75% Latino/a and 23% Black, with marginal numbers of white members and other persons of mixed race/ethnicity. Pleasant Grove has similar demographics.
Christina’s mother has always engaged in full-time family work, and her father is a broadcasting engineer. Both finished high school. Christina’s life has been deeply shaped by her diagnosis with leukemia at age three. She underwent chemotherapy treatment until she was considered cured at age six. She was told she would not be able to have children, and she still undergoes annual blood tests. She got sick frequently throughout elementary school due to her compromised immune system, and her parents decided to homeschool her from middle school through high school because they feared the stress of middle and high school would trigger further medical problems. Currently, she is having liver and gallbladder issues, which her doctor says are side effects from cancer medications. She said she also has a higher chance of getting other types of cancer.

Christina started working as a cashier at Target in high school and said she thinks the immediate purchasing power of having spending money deterred her from attending college. While she said she wanted to be a nurse growing up, she never really considered college after high school. She also said her faith community, Jehovah’s Witnesses, did not encourage higher education for anyone. She felt like the message she got at church and from her parents was, “If it’s God’s will, a path with open, but religion is the priority.” Christina does not attend a church now.

After five years working at Target, she got a job as a file clerk at a law firm. She got pregnant with her daughter around this time. Her daughter’s father, she said, was “gone as soon as he found out I was pregnant.” She ran into him when the baby was four weeks old, and he told her where he lived. A friend took her by his house, and she said his mother was on drugs and “the living situation wasn’t anywhere I wanted my daughter to be. So that was the last time we’ve seen him.” For the first two years, they lived with her parents. Christina said repeatedly
throughout the conversation that she is “fortunate because a lot of people don’t have that family support.” She moved into an apartment because she wanted to be independent and because she wanted to “relieve some pressure off of my dad” because he was providing for the entire household.

Living on her own, Christina did not have a car so she rode the bus. She started at the law firm making $7.50 an hour and eventually close to $9 per hour. She said the income was enough to cover rent and “that was about it.” She applied for direct assistance and was told she made 10 cents an hour too much for help. Upset by this, she said her parents told her they would help her out. During this period, Christina lived on an extremely tight budget, never eating out so she could meet basic needs.

Christina said most of her friends, whom she knew from church since she had been homeschooled, were married by then and did not understand why she did not “just find somebody and settle down.” Christina’s response to that was, “I was just worried about supporting my daughter.” She said she still gets those questions from friends and others and identifies this as a common misperception about single mothers.

Christina feels like race plays a role in these perceptions. “A lot of people seem to judge minorities…they see it as more common to be a single mom that’s a minority.” She remembered when she moved into her apartment in the diverse Pleasant Grove area, the white, female apartment manager giving her a tour said, “Oh, we have a lot of single, Hispanic moms here. And I was like, ‘okay…’” She also has experienced racism having interracial children. She said members of her extended family were unhappy “that I brought a different race into the family—even though they’re white and Hispanic, they didn’t like that I brought Black into the family.” She also said “a lot of Black people don’t like when they see mixed kids.” She had problems
with one of her oldest daughter’s teachers that she felt were racially motivated. The father of her youngest daughter is listed on school forms as the emergency contact person. Christina’s daughter’s teacher would text him when she needed to communicate something. Christina told her she needed to be contacted first, and the teacher, a Black female, continued to contact her younger daughter’s father first. After asking twice with no change, Christina called the school principal. Only after she emailed the principal did the teacher finally begin contacting her directly about her daughter.

After living on her own for three years, while her parents cared for her daughter while she worked, Christina moved back in with them. Her work environment had deteriorated, she had a verbally abusive manager, and she wanted to look for another job. She said she wanted to get direct assistance while living with her parents so they were not supporting her completely, but she could not because agencies required detailed information about her parents’ finances and living situation. After working temp jobs, Christina found work with a company she loves. She appreciates their flexibility and the family-friendly atmosphere. The company recently moved to North Dallas, and the toll costs reduced her pay substantially. She is struggling with the commute and the financial stress but is reluctant to leave such a good work environment. Christina tries to “laugh off” the stress, which she does naturally with her bubbly personality and intentionally as a way of dealing with life. This, she says, is her strength and her survival mechanism.

Christina said the DH process and house has been “awesome.” When she got pregnant with her youngest daughter, she had moved in with her daughter’s father in Garland. She said this relationship did not work out because he was cheating on her and because he was not interested in family or family time together. She appreciated the small cushion of having two
incomes and was able to take her daughters on road trips to Galveston and Arkansas for the first time since she was a young girl. But when she got a flier in the mail about DH, she saw an opportunity to be on her own and support her kids without “having to depend on somebody I’m not happy with.” Despite him telling her she “couldn’t make it,” Christina is proud to have proved him wrong. She likes the quiet of the neighborhood as well as the rural feel. After negative experiences with direct assistance—she did receive WIC for a few months until she got a raise when her youngest daughter was born—Christina said the DH experience has been positive because it offered help she needed without making her feel like she was getting a “handout.”

Christina’s parents continue to help her with childcare and other unexpected expenses. She said they will continue to help her all they can, but they all realize this is not an indefinite arrangement. Her father is almost 70, is blind in one eye, and has a cataract in the other. Christina fears what will happen when her parents need support and care because she cannot put money into savings with her current financial situation. She said she would really like to go to college, perhaps for business or human resources.

Christina’s oldest daughter attends Seagoville Middle School, which Christina likes much better than the local DISD elementary school she attended. In her first six weeks there, budget cuts dropped the number of teachers in her daughter’s grade from four to two. Further, her daughter had problems with the same teacher, her math teacher, who would not contact Christina directly until she had contacted the principal twice. This teacher, Christina said, made her daughter nervous because she was very “aggressive” and said she was too “fidgety” despite differing reports from other teachers. At a parent-teacher conference, the teacher told Christina that “something’s not clicking” and that her daughter “was ‘half-assed’ in her work” in front of a
classroom full of other parents and their children. Christina said several other mothers reported negative experiences with this teacher, and another said her daughter had been an “A” math student at her previous school only to fail in this teacher’s class. Christina eventually wrote a letter reporting the teacher to the school at the district, but not until later in the summer because the teacher was helping to get her daughter tested and diagnosed with a learning disability. Despite really “not liking the woman,” Christina was grateful for her proactive help in filling out the necessary paperwork for testing.

**Alma Moreno: You Live and You Learn**

Alma and I met on a Wednesday evening at a busy McDonald’s. She brought her three-year-old with her. Alma wore colorful scrubs, and we kept her daughter busy with colored pens, paper, and eventually Diego on my computer. Alma was immediately warm, friendly, talkative, and relaxed. She laughs easily and talks openly even as she admits that she does not trust many people and generally keeps her emotions “bottled up.” She is still actively grieving the loss of her mother who was her “best friend” and primary support. Her death four years ago from cancer has impacted Alma’s life tremendously, from her current assumption of responsibility and care for her father to getting herself and her children into counseling to deal with anger and grief.

Initially describing herself as Hispanic, Alma clarified that she is Chicana because she was born in the U.S. She said her mother was also Chicana, from Corpus Christi, and her father is Mexican, having come to the U.S. at age 17. Alma as born in Garland, and grew up in Far East Dallas in a household with both her parents, two older sisters, and an older brother. Her mother, who got pregnant young, finished eighth grade and eventually received her GED. She engaged in full-time family work while her children were young and also worked as a server, in telemarketing communications, and then as an officer manager for a doctor. Alma’s father
completed seventh grade and worked two jobs in his life, one as a chef for a country club and the other as a supervisor for the City of Dallas Water Department. He never completed a GED and was able to work his way up through the Wastewater Department without certifications, eventually retiring from that job.

Alma is 33 years old and has a son and three younger daughters ages 17, 15, 10, and 3. She also has a six-month-old grandson. She got pregnant at age 15, and she married the father of her three oldest children. She had her son at age sixteen. After getting married, Alma attended Woodrow Wilson High School, an historic, predominantly-minority high school that is now recognized as one of the best public high schools in North Texas. After her son was born, she quit school and got her GED. Alma says she remembers wanting to be a nurse, and she wishes she “would have listened to my mother and not gotten married.” Alma stayed home with her son and started paid work after her daughter was born two years later because her husband, who is also Hispanic with parents from Mexico, had gotten injured and could not work full-time.

After working in the fast food industry, Alma got a job doing clerical work at a doctor’s office. Around this time, she initiated divorce proceedings. While Alma did not want her kids to grow up “in a broken family,” she feared that staying with her husband as he became more abusive would normalize his behavior. She did not want her kids thinking abuse was typical or acceptable. For three years, her husband refused to sign papers, threatening and stalking her. Throughout this period, Alma said she “had to be strong for my kids,” and so she never let them see her fear. She said she would let herself break down in the shower, but otherwise hid her stress and fears even from her mother.

While she and her ex-husband now have an amicable working relationship, the period of separation and divorce was a struggle. She moved in briefly with her parents and then moved to
Richardson to work as a leasing agent and then bookkeeper for an apartment complex. Making $14.50 an hour with occasional bonuses for leasing an apartment, Alma received no help from her children’s father. She listed the financial stressors as rent, utilities, car and insurance payments, school expenses for the kids, doctor visits for the kids, and food. Even “budgeting to a T,” Alma often went without eating so her kids could eat, slept on the floor, and kept candles ready because their electricity would occasionally get shut off.

Alma got laid off from her job when the property changed ownership. A friend helped her find a job working for an attorney just as her divorce was finalized. At $9 per hour, she did not qualify for direct aid despite applying in Richardson. Alma worked at this job for a year and grew deeply frustrated with the office manager, a single, white woman. She said the office manager treated staff of different racial/ethnic identities unequally and made balancing paid work and family work difficult.

Despite this treatment and Alma’s frustration, she stayed with the work until she was fired after being hit by a car. Alma does not regret being released because she did not want to work for someone who could not understand parental responsibilities.

Your kids are always priority. Men come and go…I just always thought that way cause that’s what [my mom] showed me. Your kids are always number one. Matter fact, that same year that I worked [for the attorney], that’s when my mom was diagnosed with cancer. So that time when I needed to help out, she [the office manager] goes, “Well you know what? Obviously your family not gonna pay your bills.” I said, “You’re right. They’re not going to pay my bills, but you know what? If my mom needs me, in a heartbeat I’m going to be there. That’s my mother. I can’t pay back for what she’s done for me. And if you feel that way, well, we all eventually need somebody.

Alma got a job working for Concentra Urgent Care clinics where she made $12.50 an hour and was able to supplement that income by working overtime. Alma worked forty-hour weeks and would often then go to another clinic that stayed open until 9:00 pm. She also worked
an additional twenty hours over the weekend when her father could care for her kids. After stalking her to make sure she was “really working,” Alma’s ex-husband eventually leveled out and became a helpful presence in her life. He often kept the kids on weekends so she could work. After her mother died of cancer, Alma and her family devastated. Alma credits her mother with supporting her, affirming her, teaching her the value of family, and making her promise to care for her father. “She would give me that shoulder to lean on. She said I was a good mother. And like she said, ‘You don’t have best friends. Your best friend is always going to be your mother.’ And she’s right. You don’t have, you know, there’s people, yeah you have, but those are not friends. Those are, cause they betray you because that’s just how, and it’s true…” Alma remembered helping out a struggling friend at one point and feeling like her friends turned their backs on her when she needed help.

She also promised her mother she would care for her father, which included making sure he had regular haircuts and fresh clothes, as a reflection on her. She has kept her promise to her mother, helping him pay bills and keep appointments, and caring for him through his depression and cardiac issues. After he had a stroke, she eventually moved in with him. She thinks her siblings have not helped with their father much because the death of their mother scattered the family. She said mothers are the “puzzle pieces” that keep families together.

Prior to moving in with her father, Alma lived in Richardson. She loves its school district because she said they paid attention to her children and helped them through the divorce and then the death of their grandmother. When they moved back to Far East Dallas, her kids attended Woodrow Wilson, where she did not like what she saw. She said her oldest children’s grades dropped dramatically and her daughter got involved with the “wrong crowd.” Despite its excellent reputation, Alma said the teachers at Woodrow Wilson failed to “motivate” or “expect
much” from students “who are gonna be dropouts” and the students generally just “didn’t care.” Worried that her daughter would get pregnant and her kids would not take their education seriously and continue on to college, Alma put the older kids back into Richardson ISD for high school where they have thrived. While her daughter attended elementary school locally, she plans for all of her children to attend middle and high school in Richardson.

When I asked her what she does to care for herself, she said she does not do anything for herself.

To this day everything is for my kids. Make sure that they’re taken care of, this and that; you just get on a go… I’ve always been, “Okay make sure my dad’s taken care of, make sure my kids are taken care of.” You know, I don’t take that breather to say, “Oh, I’m going to treat myself to this.” I was just thinking about this, “You know what? What about me? Cause nobody is taking care of me!” (laughs) But you kinda have that reality check that sometimes it’s just, as a mom your mind and your mentality is for your kids and you’re always on the go doing for them or doing for others that you never take the time to, but, you know, if I don’t care for myself, I’m not going to be here to provide for my kids.

Provision for her kids is one of the main benefits of homeownership. Alma said a friend told her about DH’s HC development, and she applied. She felt like the process was in God’s hands even as she remained skeptical given her previous inability to get assistance. Once she received approval, Alma worried most about moving away from her father. She felt she was “abandoning him.” But she loves the quiet of the neighborhood and the way “everybody looks out for each other…we all know who belongs and who doesn’t.” Her kids love having a home to call their own, and she is glad to have something concrete to leave to them. She said she has never owned a home, and it feels great to be able to have something to show for all her hard work. She said some friends have asked about how to get a DH home and even implied that she is getting something for free. Her response is that she still has bills and payments like everyone else, and she does not have time for the jealousy of “friends who are not really friends.”
Alma did not change the older children’s schools when they moved to HC because she researched Seagoville schools and did not think they would be a good fit. Her father helps with transportation to Richardson. Alma does not like the elementary school her daughter attends, particularly since the school district was rezoned. She now has to drive ten minutes out of her way to a school that is farther away than the first elementary school. While Jessica was able to get an exemption to leave her daughter in the same school, Alma felt like she had no choice in the matter. She is angry and suggested that the school district should pay for the difference in gas to the new school.

A year ago Alma started working for a dermatologist, earning $15.50 an hour. She said she still struggles because the job has fewer benefits and the taxes taken out have increased. Her three-year-old daughter from an unplanned pregnancy the year after her mother’s death has medical issues, and she also helps support her son’s six-month-old baby. The baby lives with his mother and her parents, but Alma pays half of his expenses and helps her son keep him on weekends. She still cares for her father, and she said she is surviving financially as long as nothing unexpected arises. She feels financially vulnerable because she does not have any savings right now. She said, “Something’s always happening. I can’t get back on my feet. I hate that because I don’t like to live like that.”

While Alma is not active in a faith community, her Catholicism is important to her. Specifically, she talks about her faith and coming to terms with God after her mother’s death. She was angry at God and felt like God had not responded to her prayers for her mother. She said she needed help understanding that her mother is no longer suffering and that God is still there. “I have a different aspect now, I guess. You learn. It’s a phase. You gotta live and learn. And you
realize that actually he’s there. We don’t let him in. You don’t get nowhere just being angry. You gotta let him in so he can be there for us, too. I do truly believe that.”

When asked about personal strengths that have allowed her to survive and thrive, Alma said she has always been a “strong, independent person” like her mother who doesn’t “let things show.” She did say she knows that people need “a shoulder to lean on” to “let everything out” because otherwise “it’s like a bomb waiting to go off.” She said that she honestly does not know how she “does it,” but she begins each day asking God to give her another day and ends each day thanking God for that day. She wants to be around for her children because she does not think anyone else would care for them and treat them as she does. In fact, she said she has difficulty opening herself up to romantic relationships because of this concern. “You kinda put that guard up because you become very like, ‘No, it’s just me and my kids and nobody is gonna look at my kids the same way. They’re just gonna look at them as a bother.’” Her guarded attitude and her awareness of her financial vulnerabilities meant she did not plan or desire another pregnancy. Since she was unwilling to consider an abortion, however, she said she looked at the pregnancy as something that happened “for a reason.” Given that it occurred the year after her mother died, she said, “maybe because one life goes, another one’s a new beginning.” Her youngest daughter’s father pays for daycare and clothes and spends time with his daughter. Alma said he is a good father, but they are just not compatible romantically.

Alma said she would like to go back to school but cannot imagine it at the moment because of the cost and the stress of juggling work, kids, and school. She knows herself well enough to know that this constellation would likely cause a “nervous breakdown.” That said, she said she definitely wants to be in a more stable, secure, established place in ten years. What shape that life may take, however, Alma does not yet know.
CHAPTER FOUR

Generative Themes and Cultural Realities

Chapter three presented a synopsis of each collaborator’s account of her experiences as unmarried or single mothers. Chapters four and five identify recurring themes from individual interviews as they developed further in focus groups. These themes provide broad, descriptive accounts of collaborators’ cultural and economic experiences within the U.S. political economy. As what Freire has called “generative themes,” they are sites that expose barriers to thriving, systemic issues, and opportunities for transformation, resistance, hope, and liberation. Generative themes that arose from individual and focus group sessions include the following: (1) experiences of sole and complete responsibility for ensuring well-being of one’s family; (2) challenges related to balancing responsibilities of paid work and family work; (3) inability to consistently maintain financial security; (4) barriers to receiving quality educational opportunities for self and children; (5) health issues and problems created by the healthcare system; (6) cumulative impacts of meeting these and other demands over extended periods of time. Conversations and content from focus groups are woven into sections exploring these themes.  

I separate the first five generative themes into two categories: themes related to cultural dynamics and social hierarchies and themes related to economic and class dynamics. This

137 Isolation of generative themes can create artificial separations that do not reflect fluidity, overlap, and complexity. While intersections will be explored later, categories in this chapter provide a clearer picture of commonalities, differences, and nuances of collaborator perspectives without compromising each collaborator’s particular voice and experiences. Further, as described in chapter three, generative themes recognize collaborator-identified sites of limitations and opportunities for liberation, thriving, and systemic change.
chapter explores the first two generative themes as they relate to cultural hegemonies experienced by collaborators. In it, the damage wrought by false narrative and stereotypes is clear even as it is difficult to pinpoint in particular instances. It is also clear how these cultural forces penetrate all areas of reality, often in unexpected ways. We also see how they even pit members of similar groups against each other. The next chapter examines the three generative themes related to systemic and economic hegemonies collaborators have experienced. Here it becomes clear that the primary systems impacting single, working-class mothers do not work in their best interests. They were not, in fact, designed to work in their best interests. A few good actors may ameliorate harm in certain instances, but having to rely on the benevolence of those with more power is uncertain and unjust. It often forces marginalized persons to accept conditions that fundamentally undermine their basic human dignity.

I undertake the final generative theme as a site that exposes the collusion of cultural and economic inequalities single, working-class mothers of diverse racial and ethnic identities have experienced. This collusion suggests that focused efforts to address any one generative theme are insufficient. Rather, broader cultural and economic transformation is required. I work with Day, who draws from critical social theorist Walter Benjamin and feminist economist Nancy Fraser, for this framework and analysis.

Day deploys Benjamin and Fraser to argue that cultural inequities and economic inequities “collude to structure adversely the economic opportunities of poor black women.”\(^{138}\) Cultural capital, Day argues, consists of the respect, confidence, and parity necessary for human personalities to thrive and flourish within broader systems. Benjamin explains that hegemonic

cultural norms provide grounds for cultural dominance that “interact with and shape modes of production” and distribution. Benjamin understands “culture and economy as separate yet interrelated spheres that determine the opportunities of oppressed communities within society.” Advanced capitalist institutions and values perpetuate economic instability and intensify class struggles. Thus, cultural hierarchies and economic systems must both experience transformation, and people must experience “social recognition” and “redistribution” to create conditions for thriving for marginalized populations. While I separate generative themes into cultural and economic categories, the interrelated nature of these realities is clear.

Collaborators’ descriptions of generative themes in these two chapters also expose the need for an intersectional approach within each theme. Whether conversations and questions focused on specific challenges or broader dynamics of class, race, and gender, collaborator accounts consistently demonstrated the irreducibility of their experiences to any one dynamic of subordination or vulnerability. In conversations about class and gender, collaborators referenced race as a reality shaping their perceptions of others and their own experiences related to class and gender. In conversations about race, collaborators reflected on differing gender dynamics.

As Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, critical race theory scholar, argues, reality exists at the intersections of identities. Attempts to isolate any of those identities—i.e., asking women of color to talk specifically about gender or asking white women to talk specifically about class,

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139 Day, 5.

140 Day, 5.

141 Day, 128.
pushes marginalized persons “to a location that resists telling.” As this project argues, “telling” is a critical site of empowerment and agency individually and communally.

Cultural stereotypes of single, working-class mothers demonstrate the necessity for and value of intersectional attention. As demonstrated in Chapter One, these stereotypes consequently impact structures of the political economy, from governmental to private structures and policies, ethical values, and social interactions. These stereotypes differ by racial identities of single, working-class mothers. Stereotypes related to unmarried parents also differ by class and gender. Key to disruption of these structures, then, is exposing the narratives that undergird them and replacing them with humanizing narratives more reflective of realities. Thus, counter-narratives, to be authentic and effective, must include differences in identity related to class, race, and gender among other differences. While critics of intersectional analysis argue this attention subverts the unity and focus necessary for transformative coalitions, Crenshaw posits that this omission “conflates or ignores intragroup differences,” with the result that “ignoring differences within groups contributes to tension among groups.” Day builds on Crenshaw’s work, citing the sexism and heterosexism that critically undermined the Civil Rights Movement and the Poor People’s Campaign as examples demonstrating the ongoing need for intersectional approaches. Day maintains that dismantling oppressive dynamics within class-based movements contributes to stronger efforts toward economic justice.

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143 Crenshaw et al., 357.

144 Crenshaw et al., 357.

In addition to subverting coalition efforts, Crenshaw argues that inattention to intersectionality or attempts to isolate one dimension of oppression “will often replicate and reinforce subordination” and oppressive power dynamics in any proposed systemic changes and transformations.\footnote{146 Crenshaw et al., \textit{Critical Race Theory}, 360.} When a coalition attends to a single axis of systemic oppression, solutions will default to benefit those persons occupying identity positions with the most power within the group. Liberative economic movements without intersectional analysis will benefit white males most, regardless of intent.

Therefore, as Chapter Four identifies generative themes related to cultural dynamics, it also listens to these themes at the intersections of race, class, and gender in collaborators’ accounts. The knowledge produced at these intersections offers constructive insights for efforts to promote thriving and a foundation for transformation of the U.S. political economy.

**On My Own: Feeling Responsible and Alone as a Single Mother**

One of the most prominent generative themes from collaborators in this project is the sense of being solely responsible and alone in experiences of parenting and providing for the objective and subjective needs of their families. The gendered nature of these responsibilities emerged often, as did their intersections with race. Women bear disproportionate amounts of responsibility for their children across racial and ethnic lines, even as different racial and ethnic histories create distinctions in how this disproportionate responsibility appears in women’s lives. Most often, even within a heterosexual marriage, a mother is the “default parent,” the one who takes responsibility for meeting her child’s needs even if the other parent “helps.” This basic patriarchal reality recalls Aristotle and Christianity through Paul, Aquinas, Luther, and those of
modern-day Evangelical traditions. As we will see in the next chapter, it is intertwined with and reinforced by capitalist economic structures. Collaborator perspectives expose these truths and their costs in unique, compelling ways.

After initial introductions and conversations, I asked both groups how they would define the term “single mother.” In FG1, Jennifer described being a single mother as “one person contributing all the factors a family needs,” and her focus group members readily agreed to this description. Collaborators in FG2 arrived at a similar characterization. Jessica said that being a single mother is “being the sole provider, having all the responsibility.” Jessica and Alma talked about “doing it all” as providing sole financial support, managing schedules, transporting and coordinating transportation, making decisions about schools, cooking, cleaning, finding ways to meet material needs, tending to sick children, and navigating healthcare decisions. All agreed that their lives as single mothers could be characterized as being “constantly on the go with no time to breathe.” Not only did the two focus groups quickly and independently reach similar consensus definitions, but these definitions also align with participants’ comments during individual interviews. That said, their distinct experiences within this definition of single motherhood affirm the multi-directional cultural and institutional challenges impacting women.

I have chosen “single mother” instead of “unmarried mother” for this question because this is how collaborators most often self-identified. Throughout the dissertation, I will alternate between “single mother” and “unmarried mother.” The U.S. census uses the term “unmarried” to mark an economic category in its official data. It also recognizes fluidity and ambiguity among terms. The U.S. Census Bureau recognizes “Unmarried and Single Americans Week,” and explains the use of both words as “an acknowledgment that many unmarried Americans do not identify with the word ‘single’ because they are parents, have partners, or are widowed…Unmarried people include those who were never married or widowed or divorced.” Accessed July 2, 2015. http://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2014/cb14-ff21.html.
who are responsible for a child in the United States. Insights and conversations in focus groups also point to intersections with dynamics of race and ethnicity.

Conversations about causes of this exclusive responsibility included sustained attention to relationships with their children’s fathers and other potential male partners. Each collaborator’s first pregnancy was unplanned. Each ultimately chose to continue with her pregnancy and to parent her child actively. While the males certainly made choices related to parenting, their choices involved different dynamics and consequences. Females immediately bear disproportionate responsibility for choices related to parenting because she is carrying the child and because cultural norms assign more meaning to motherhood than fatherhood.

In this project, the two white collaborators and one of the Latina collaborators, who were all in FG2, married the fathers of their children in response to their unplanned pregnancies. The four Black collaborators, who were all in FG1, and Christina, the Latina collaborator who gave an individual interview without joining a focus group, did not. These choices mirror broad trends among single mothers of different racial and ethnic identities. Collaborators explored gender dynamics related to parenting and marriage, ultimately highlighting how they identified gendered cultural norms contributing to their experiences of sole responsibility for their children.

Given the predominant cultural notion, inscribed in various public policies, that heterosexual marriage balances burdens of parenting responsibilities for mothers, collaborators’ experiences with marriage are significant. Just as significant is the reality that collaborators’ values align with broader trends indicating that, despite cultural stereotypes to the contrary, most working-class single mothers, across racial and ethnic identities, embrace traditional ideals

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148 This chapter explores cultural causes of disproportionate responsibility. The next chapter addresses structural, economic barriers to balanced partnerships.
related to heterosexual marriage and gender roles.  

In fact, “Latinas, African Americans, and low-income [white] women actually express the most traditional views on marriage.” Rather than “social deviance,” most single-working class mothers would prefer to express conformity with social norms related to heterosexual marriage. Therefore, collaborators who hold these ideals have still learned that heterosexual marriage, without dismantling patriarchal gender roles, is no panacea for single mothers.

To begin, dominant cultural norms of heterosexual marriage, particularly acute among white and Latina cultures, encourage pregnant teenagers to marry, giving little attention to the health or sustainability of the relationship. Stormy, for instance, met her husband and got pregnant when she was 18. She said she married him because “you know, back then in the eighties, you got pregnant and got married.” She said she “wasn’t in love with him,” but, “at 18, what do you know?” She also said no one mentored her or encouraged her to consider the future throughout school. Jessica, too, followed her mother’s example of marrying the father of her child when she got pregnant as a teen. Once they were married, cultural gender norms, often rooted in religious understandings, frequently created unequal power dynamics in marital relationships, including the extreme dynamics of abuse. Three of the four collaborators who married the fathers of their children experienced multiple forms of abuse in addition to other physical, psychological, and emotional hardships related to gender dynamics and roles.

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150 silva, Latina/Chicana Mothering, 142. Italics added.
Jessica, reflecting on her experiences of sole responsibility within marriage, observed that “single mothering” can be present regardless of whether a parent is married or whether anyone else is living in the home. She said she felt like a “single mother” when she was married. Stormy affirmed Jennifer’s experience, saying, “You probably did it all anyway.” Jessica agreed, noting that her husband, “a macho man from Mexico,” spent large proportions of family income on himself and abused her physically, verbally, and emotionally, while expecting her to do all the family and housework, including taking care of him. She was also working full-time for pay and attending school full-time during this time.

Stormy said she was also “on her own” from early in her marriage, functioning as the sole “protector, provider, and rock” to her daughters even though her ex-husband provided financial support during and after their marriage. Stormy describes her ex-husband as chauvinistic, jealous, and controlling. They were married for eighteen years, and, until the very end, he would not let her engage in paid work. She also said he was abusive and on drugs, leaving her alone to provide emotional and physical support for their daughter, with limited access to her own resources. The drug abuse started after they discovered their landlord had molested their two-year-old daughter.

My husband went berserk…He got on drugs real bad. He would go steal scrap metal from all these job sites and go sell that to get his next fix…I was at home. I didn’t have nothing. And matter fact it’s ironic what I had told you, 20 years ago we lived right down the street on Beltline in that trailer park. Back then, 20 years ago, I didn’t have a phone in the house. I didn’t have a cellphone. All he had was a pager. I didn’t work. I didn’t have a car…We didn’t have nothing in the house. But somebody, God knew, somebody had to be strong for that little girl. Somebody had to be strong for her. I could’ve easily used the same excuse and said, “Hey, you know what? This happened to her. I’m gonna go off the deep end, too. And I can go do drugs and I could go do this or whatever because this happened to her and I’m sad and I’m hurt and I’m this and I’m that.” Which he did. It’s all how mentally strong you are. People cope with things different. And I had to be there for her. Like I said, I could’ve gone off, too. But I had to be there for her. She needed somebody.
Alma said her mother tried to dissuade her from marrying the father of her child at age 15 when she got pregnant. She now says she “should have listened” to her mother. She dropped out of high school to work and care for her child and initiated divorce proceedings a few years later. Illuminating the tension between traditional values around marriage and difficult realities, Alma said, “I didn’t want that for my kids…but sometimes the other partner just makes it so impossible. You try, you try.” She continued, “I didn’t grow up in a broken family, and I didn’t want that for my kids…I kinda dealt with it and I held on, but things just got so bad that I thought I was making it better for them, but really I was making it worse. Because they were seeing everything; all the fighting physically, and he began to get more aggressive. I was just like, ‘Oh no, I don’t want this for my kids.’ Cause I don’t want them to think it was normal.”

Alma said it took three years to finalize the divorce because her husband avoided being served and refused to sign papers. In that period, she talks about being “very, very scared” because he would show up at all hours wherever she and the kids were and would “just try to bust my windows while I’m pulling out…[H]e got…postal.”

Collaborators who married the fathers of their children agreed that being an unmarried mother and more formally accepting full responsibility was ultimately preferable for their own well-being and that of their children to being a “married single mother.” Stormy and Jessica both talked about the judgment and lack of empathy they received for having children with abusive husbands. Stormy said people said, “’If he was such a jerk, why’d you stay with him for so long? Why did you keep having kids if it was so bad?’ I mean, when you’re married, that’s what you do. You’re married, you have kids.” Jessica said she hears similar things, “They’re like, ‘You must not have hated him so much cause you had all the kids with him,’ and honestly, I want to say, ‘Well, he was kind of abusive.’”
Jessica said she wished for broad, cultural recognition that in some cases, like hers, being a single mother and “trying to make it on my own” was much better for everyone than staying married. For this reason, Jessica would like to see more help available for unmarried mothers, without pressures to marry, because they might not “want to get married again.” In the face of these cultural and institutional pressures to marry, Jessica said, “I feel like you shouldn’t be with somebody just to be with somebody.”

Alma also said she also feels societal criticism as a single mother who chose to leave an abusive marriage. “They think we chose that to be in whatever situation in our marriage, and, like, it’s our fault. We chose to be in that circumstance that we’re in because our decision.” Stormy said, “You couldn’t make him happy.” Jessica said, “You never hear as much…like, a woman has four kids and she’s divorced and they’ll be like, ‘Well, you know what causes that…’ But you don’t hear men that have multiple kids.” Alma said, “Yeah, you know, ‘She’s just a ho. She’s going from one man to another. She’s got two baby daddies.” Jessica said, “Yeah, you don’t know what the circumstances were.” And Alma said, “Yeah! They judge!” I said it seemed that the sexuality and choices of single mothers get judged at every level and that there did not seem to be room for saying that she made the best choice by being single. Stormy and Alma both said, “Exactly.” They said all of their kids had the same father even though people assumed otherwise. Jessica said, “I’m not judging women who have multiple because my mom. I have five brothers and sisters, and we don’t have the same dads. And I don’t think that my mom was a bad person or anything like that. But my kids are from the same dad, and you still hear people make comments.”

Sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas have conducted expansive, in-depth research with low-income single mothers. Their findings suggest that two-thirds of all low-
income single mothers have left relationships with their children’s fathers because of intimate partner violence and drug and alcohol use problems. Most often, single mothers report leaving in order to protect their children. Edin and Kefalas also note that, statistically, white and Latina single mothers experience more physical abuse in relationships than African American single mothers.\textsuperscript{151} A conclusion, then, borne out by broad research and collaborator experiences, is that barriers to successful heterosexual marriage, specifically “gender mistrust, domestic violence, high expectations about marriage, and fear of divorce,” create the realities of sole parenting responsibility experienced by single mothers.\textsuperscript{152}

The dynamic of “gender mistrust,” identified by Edin and Kefalas, surfaced multiple times during interviews as well. During the group discussion about the definition of being a single mother, Stormy talked about seeing men, whether fathers, boyfriends, or even co-habitating boyfriends, as perpetual “outsiders.” Alma added her experience of finding it difficult to trust men, who are “always unreliable,” and Stormy and Jessica immediately identified with this lack of trust of men in the various responsibilities of parenting. All three collaborators in FG2 agreed that “honesty” is critical for single mothers in relationships with men because they have all been burned by “lies and games.” They also agreed that getting married young and having that trust broken at a young age has made it more difficult to trust men later on. FG1 expressed similar distrust. Jennifer’s first reaction to the question about who has her and her family’s best interests at heart was “definitely not any man.” Collaborators in this group expressed differing reasons for this distrust, from being with abusive and violent spouses, to being abandoned by their own parents and families at young ages. Pinky said she has “barbed


\textsuperscript{152} silva, \textit{Latina/Chicana Mothering}, 143.
wire fences” in any relationship because of the early abandonment she experienced with both her parents.

Jessica said she is beginning to trust her current boyfriend, who has been the first partner who has “helped at all” with her kids, including their father. However, she is finding it difficult to accept this help because she is “so used to doing it all on my own.” She also fears relying on his support, whether regarding responsibilities or income, and making any move to marry. She worries he might leave or become unable to work; she would then lose his income and the direct assistance she receives. Given long waiting lists for direct assistance, Jessica lives in fear of losing all support and “going over the edge.”

Despite these struggles with gender mistrust, most collaborators do ultimately want a partner and spouse. They want a marital relationship that is healthy for themselves and their child/ren. Jennifer identified this hope painfully disappearing when her husband became abusive. “I thought he was gonna be the person that was gonna come in and take me away from everything that I had faced coming up.” Stormy said, “Every single woman wants a husband, but they need to know what to look for. I would love a husband, but I’m also afraid.” Pinky was engaged during our interviews, and I noticed at some point that her text messages were signed “Mrs. X.” When I asked her whether she had gotten married, she said, “No, I’m just trying out the name, trying to get used to the idea and get past my trust issues. He’s incredibly patient and understanding, but this is so hard for me. I feel sorry for him having to put up with me.” Several other collaborators mentioned idealistic visions of “perfect families” that they have relinquished and/or sidelined while they struggle to care for their child/ren.

As collaborators discussed views on gender roles beyond their own abusive marriages, they revealed their understandings of mothering and responsibilities for family and tensions
created by these cultural ideals. While observing hardships caused by disproportionate expectations, particularly as they occur for unmarried mothers, collaborators in FG2 also accepted aspects of disproportionate levels of responsibility for mothers as “natural.” In terms of women’s and mothers’ roles, Jessica describes her own mother as one who always sacrificed for her children, including taking extra evening jobs to help her and her family and helping her with childcare earlier in their lives. She recognizes this same model of sacrificial mothering in herself, even saying she is “exactly like” her mother in terms of sacrificing for her children. Stormy said she thinks that as humans, specifically as mothers “it’s natural” to sacrifice and always put your children first. Alma agreed that she “prefers putting her kids first.” Everyone in FG2 said that she feels guilty doing anything for herself, and that feeling constant guilt is also “natural” for mothers.

Alma also said she learned about gender and parenting roles from her mother. She said her mother taught her to put her family first. As her mother was dying of cancer, she also promised her mother she would care for her father.

She told me and my sister that’s in Oklahoma to promise her on her deathbed, literally, to never leave my dad alone. Take care of him, make sure, cause my mom was the type of woman, he better have a clean haircut, shaved—she always said that the way a husband or your spouse looks or the father of your kids, is the way it represents the woman. If you have your husband dressed sloppy, that just shows what kind of wife you are. She always wanted to make sure he was ironed, his clothes were in the cleaners, he got a haircut—everything. And to this day I still do it. I take care of all his bills, keep all his stuff in order, make his appointments…I feel I don’t want to let my mom down. Of course, my other sister, she don’t even come down no more. It hurts me because I’m the one that’s there.

Alma’s father suffered a stroke the week her mother died, and he has since struggled with depression and heart issues. Alma eventually moved in with him when she was pregnant with her youngest daughter to help care for him. She thinks her siblings have not helped with their father much because the death of their mother scattered the family.
During this same conversation, collaborators expounded on intersections of race and
gender stereotypes and norms in their relationships. They also identified boundaries and areas of
resistance to these realities. Alma said the doctor she works for wants her to teach him Spanish
“’cause he says he wants to get a Latina.” Alma continued: “I say, ’No,’ and he goes, ‘Yeah!’ I
said, ‘Why would you choose a Latina?’ He goes, ‘For one: they’re hard workers and they’ll
cook and clean, they don’t ever back-talk. It’ll be perfect!’” Stormy commented, “Subservient,”
and Alma said, “That’s mainly how Hispanics are just kind of raised…when they come from
Mexico, you being a housewife, you have to tend to your husband. You need to make sure his
dinner is ready, his clothes are washed, ironed, everything. I go, ‘So, you just want to be treated
like a king?’ and he goes, ‘Yeah!’ Oh no. Nuh uh.” Jessica said, “That’s how my ex-husband
was.” Alma said, “It just comes natural, but I go, ‘Just the same way you wanna be treated, you
gotta take care of her.’ He goes, ‘Oh, she’ll be up here on a pedestal.’ Okay, just trying to make
sure.” Jessica said, “My ex-husband is from Jalisco,” and Alma interjected, “Ah, they have a	
temper,” and Jessica said, “Oh yeah.” I asked for clarification of what this exchange meant, and
Alma said, “People from certain parts of Mexico, they’re still…their pride. Uh, machismo, that’s
what we call it. They say, ‘No, you had to do what I say, where I go, you go, when I say so.’
They call the cards. You have no say.” Jessica said, “He does have that kind of macho attitude.”

Alma said she dated someone from Mexico after she divorced, but she left because she
was too independent for him. Jessica said, “[My ex-husband] would go, ‘Oh, you white girl,’ and
I’m like, ‘Well, that’s what you married. So if you wanted different, you should’ve…’” Alma
said Hispanic guys “are more controlling,” but she also said, “My dad was never like that.”
Jessica, who is white, also said her mother was outspoken and independent “although she did do
all the cooking and cleaning.” The difference, she said, is that her mother put the kids first and
then the husband. This was in contrast with her ex-husband, she said, where “the way his family was, it was men first, then kids.” She said, “He was constantly like, ‘You better serve me.’ I had a full-time job and went to school full-time. But it was to the extent that if I put a soda in front of him, I had to pour it. And I had to pour it a certain way...I think part of it was the macho attitude and part of it was the mental illness.”

Maternal studies scholar Dorsía Smith Silva expounds on tensions Alma describes in relation to her sense of responsibility to her family as well as her resistance to male domination. Silva notes that a part of “Latina/Chicana mothering is about forming a strong connection to family, which transpires into significant mother-child relationships.” That said, she draws on Chicana theorist and writer Gloria Anzaldúa to note that, “[b]eneath the image of Mami as the giver of life, fierce warrior, and preserver of cultural heritage, Latina/Chicana mothers struggle with cultural contradictions...Which is it to be—strong, submissive, rebellious, or conforming?” Michelle Téllez also identifies this tension and concludes that the cultural expectation of Chicana mothers to sacrifice themselves fails to leave space for them to care for themselves, ultimately creating more care work for their daughters, the next generation of Chicana mothers. Laura Ruth Johnson identifies this tension for Latina women in challenges they experience related to education. She echoes Alma in naming machismo culture as a barrier

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153 silva, 4.
154 silva, 4.
155 silva, 64.
to education and root cause for Latinas dropping out of high school at higher rates than any other racial/ethnic group in the U.S.\textsuperscript{156}

More broadly, Johnson sees Latinas like Alma, who embrace some traditional ideas of family and women while challenging other aspects, as stretching “the borders of gender \textit{within Latino culture} rather than [waging] a struggle against their culture around gender issues.”\textsuperscript{157} Given these challenges Johnson observes that “for many Latina mothers, the only ‘choice’ is to go it alone.”\textsuperscript{158} Going it alone, however, means releasing the father from responsibility, not rejecting familial help altogether. Scholars Elizabeth Trejos-Castillo and Helyne Frederick note that Latina teenager mothers have more positive outcomes than their white and Black counterparts because of cultural emphases on extended family. Trejos-Castillo and Frederick include “increased aspirations for the future” and improved relationships with parents among the positive outcomes that Latina teenage mothers experience.\textsuperscript{159}

Alma’s interaction with her boss and his desire to find a Latina wife also warrants reflection. Sociologist Gilda O. Ochoa explores stereotypes shaping cultural ideas about Latinas. Within their limited visibility in popular discourse, Mexican American mothers are represented in a binary, as “traditional, self-sacrificing women who passively accept others’ dictates” or as “sexually loose.”\textsuperscript{160} Alma’s boss seems to desire a woman who fills this traditional role while,

\textsuperscript{156} silva, 96–97.

\textsuperscript{157} silva, 96–97.

\textsuperscript{158} silva, 98.

\textsuperscript{159} silva, 130–31.

\textsuperscript{160} silva, 106.
presumably, enjoying her sexuality in a “contained” way, exclusively for himself. Alma’s response to him suggests her acceptance of cultural ideas of gender complementarity, with some parameters around how her boss’s hoped-for wife is treated.

These parameters or limits became clear during another conversation in FG2. Near the end of FG2’s second meeting, I remembered that Alma’s daughter attends the high school that recently received international attention for hosting a controversial motivational speaker. The school provided minimal notice to students about the speaker and no notification or permission from parents regarding the content of the assembly. The speaker, Justin Lookadoo, is known for his book *Dateable* and his conservative, white, evangelical Christian, gender-specific dating advice to teens. The messages on his website and in his books include the following: “A Dateable girl isn’t Miss Independent.” “Dateable girls know how to shut up.” “Dateable guys know they aren’t as sensitive as girls and that’s okay. They know they are stronger, more dangerous, and more adventurous, and that’s okay.” While Lookadoo said he would not bring up specific quotes from his “Dateable” materials nor his explicit religious commitments during his talk, early in the talk at Richardson High School he said, “ladies, I’m going to say this in the nicest way possible—you are the most horrible, awful, vindictive, creatures this planet has ever seen.” He said girls should not do anything to “stand out” as it would give other girls the chance to “tear them down.” He also used numerous gender stereotypes as he urged female students to curb their sexual urges so they did not become the subjects of rumors among male students. He also told boys “It’s not OK to be a nerd or someone who plays video games…Those guys are pathetic losers and silly dorks.” He also said that feminism has made boys “pansies.”

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When I asked Alma if her daughter attended this assembly, the conversation that followed was rich. It further revealed ideas about gender roles and differences, limits to ideas about roles and differences, their own relationships and parenting of daughters, the role of Christianity in gender roles and relationships, and the impacts of such message on males. Their reflections allow deeper engagement with cultural norms contributing to their experiences of sole responsibility and motherhood.

In response to my question about the assembly, Alma said, “Oh yes. My daughter was like, ‘Mom, it was horrible.’” After explaining the context a bit to the other participants, I asked Alma more about what her daughter said. She said, “What he told the girls, that the girls are monsters, that they’re evil, like, bad-taught girls. It was horrible. This was at my kid’s school…for real, it was awful.” Jessica and Stormy expressed shock over this event, and Jessica said, “I do think men and women in a way think and act differently, but this is the last thing you want to tell a teenage boy! Teenage boys are already cocky!” I said some girls had left in protest, and Alma said, “Oh yeah, they did. They walked out because it was offensive.” Jessica said:

Girl, I’m far from being an extreme kind of feminist, but even my child knows…she knows better. She’s outspoken. She would be like, “Excuse me!” [laughter] I had Jon [Jessica’s boyfriend] at my house and his cousin one time came to visit…We joke with each to other…’cause he’s not really like that…we play around…when he’s over there he likes it freezing cold so he’ll wanna have the thing and I’ll put it up and his cousin…decides to walk in the room and say, “Well the way I was raised, the man of the house always controlled the thermostat.” My daughter goes, “No. The OWNER of the house controls the thermostat.” [laughter] And I was like, “Thank you!”

After conversing about how this speaking event could have happened on taxpayer money, Jessica said again how awful it was that boys heard the message, too. “Basically, what you’re
teaching boys is…” “Be a bully,” Stormy added. Jessica said, “It’s okay to abuse women because they deserve it cause they’re evil…we have half a brain and only speak when spoken to.” Jessica also said:

I’m Christian and my classes that I’ve taken at church and stuff, couples classes…they teach pink and blue, men are right, women are not wrong, they’re just different. Love language and all that kinda stuff. But nowhere in the Bible in my church says that women are just supposed to be…when they say in the Bible submit to you husband, that doesn’t that you’re a doormat for them to run on. People interpret it wrong. Where in Christianity do you see anything that women should shut up?

Stormy said, “Right. They take that and run with it. The women are the backbone of the family anyway.”

These observations are distinctive and were omitted from the majority of the “expert” discourse at the time. But they cohere with research linking patriarchy with violence against women. The fact that collaborators in FG2, all survivors of domestic violence (who still hold fairly traditional ideas about gender roles and marriage) immediately highlighted these implications exemplifies why voices like theirs in discourse and decision-making are so critical.¹⁶²

¹⁶² Several recent studies have explored connections between religion and domestic abuse in the U.S. While collaborators in this project did not express these views, it remains important to note that research indicates that religious women in situations of domestic violence are more likely to stay in abusive marriages, less likely to seek help, more likely to believe their husbands will change, and more likely to be disappointed in a faith leader’s response when they do seek help. They often believe God calls them to forgive their abuses, to believe they can change, to submit to their husbands, and to stay committed to marital vows by staying in the marriage. Many abusive husbands use this same religious language to justify their violence, to convince their wives to stay and forgive them, and to manipulate spiritual leaders to encourage their wives to stay. See Nancy Nason-Clark et al., Religion and Intimate Partner Violence: Understanding the Challenges and Proposing Solutions, 1 edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).
Neither Jessica or Stormy directly discuss whiteness in relation to their experiences of single mothering and disproportionate, gendered responsibilities. Jessica’s response to her ex-husband’s accusations of being a non-submissive “white girl” and her experiences at her primarily white, evangelical Christian church suggest that she does not make a direct connection between her whiteness or her religion and the oppressive weight of the sole responsibility that she knows as a single mother. Her connections between Lookadoo’s ideas, which are grounded in evangelical Christianity, and exploitation and abuse of women, however, offer an opening to note that idealizations of motherhood as sacrifice and unequal, patriarchal gender roles have their roots in European-American culture and religion as much as in Latin cultures. In fact, Irene Blea points to European colonization as a factor in machismo’s development.

In her work exploring Chicanas or Mexican American women, Blea argues that patriarchy in the geographical areas that would become Mexico and Texas became prominent during European colonization, and indigenous women lost a great deal of power and respect in their culture during Spanish conquest and colonialism. Male Spanish invaders did not bring many women with them, and they raped, exploited, and abused native women. They also imported Catholicism, including its veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus, which emphasized her as a model virgin, immaculately conceived and idealized as a mother. Eventually, the Spanish colonialists began to marry indigenous women, imposing patriarchal norms and religious expectations of submission.163

This impact continued as non-Spanish Europeans settled the area that would become Texas. After the 1848 Treaty of Hidalgo made Mexican citizens into United States citizens, Mexican-Americans experienced harsh, often violent discrimination even as they were expected to assimilate to emerging American culture. These assimilations include introducing gendered divisions of labor, paid and unpaid, within the economic system (with Chicana women subservient to white women) and losses of property rights and legal representations for women.\textsuperscript{164} Blea observes that while white feminists name Latino males as being more sexist, an historical case can be made even into contemporary times that “the more urbanized and Americanized the Chicanos become, the lower the status of their women falls.”\textsuperscript{165} Certainly, it might be argued that as Latino males have endured oppression at the hands of dominant white cultural and systemic dynamics, what Alma and others identify as \textit{machismo} culture has developed as one way to assert power. In this way, even with connections to European-American patriarchal oppression of white women, Chicana women experience a harsher form of patriarchal and racist oppression, felt in distinct ways by single mothers.

At a different point, I asked FG2 whether single fathers are treated differently than single mothers. Stormy said, “I think they can’t do the job or the role as a woman, or they can’t do it as good.” Jessica said:

I do feel like a lot of times more responsibility does fall on the woman, but I also see that for the men that actually do want to try, the court system tends to favor the mother. And it’s not always a good thing…but for the most part, the responsibility does fall more on the woman...Even as times are changing and roles are starting to reverse and there’s more, like, stay-at-home dads, there’s always still that mentality that it’s the woman’s job to take care of the kids. Men get to focus a lot of times on self and their school and their career and stuff. Women...we do it, but we’re doing that...we’re multitasking more.

\textsuperscript{164} Blea, 52.

\textsuperscript{165} Blea, 29.
(laughs) We’re trying to get our education and go to work while we’re picking up kids and dropping off kids and taking the kids with us. You wouldn’t so much see a single dad that’s bringing his kids to school with him.

Stormy agreed with Jessica. Jessica added that single fathers are interesting because sometimes they are perceived as “good” and “strong,” but at other times “he’s perceived as weak or less of a man, especially if he’s a stay-at-home dad type.” Stormy also agreed with this. I said I could definitely see this, but that I also wondered about when single fathers are praised. Alma said, “They’re acknowledged a lot more, and what about women that do that 24/7 every day?” Jessica said, “’Cause it’s expected.”

Black mothers in the United States have a different history contributing to their experiences of sole responsibility in parenting. In this study, collaborators who are Black did not marry when they became pregnant. Whereas in FG2 the pilesort exercise asking about major sources of stress elicited “father of child/ren” as one of the universal responses, in FG1 a universal response was “unplanned pregnancy.” Jennifer and Clodie both used language of “devastating” and “life-altering” to describe their unplanned pregnancies. Clodie talked about only being able to continue with her college athletic scholarship because her parents cared for her child. Jennifer talked about losing opportunities for college athletic scholarships and not getting help or support from her family. Pinky agreed that her unplanned pregnancy had been devastating. When Pinky talked about considering terminating the pregnancy, Clodie said she had similar thoughts. Despite her intentions to avoid pregnancy, Clodie said her parents had never discussed sex or birth control with her. Collaborators in FG1 did not explain why they did not marry the fathers of their children. While they each talked about many areas of uncertainty
and frustration, they did not include uncertainty over whether to marry the fathers of their children.\textsuperscript{166}

While due caution for making definitive connections between the choices of four women and broad racial/ethnic trends, it bears noting that the choice not to marry the father of the child is common among Black women. Black, feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has written extensively on developments of Black women, motherhood, and families in the United States. Her work explores dynamics that may impact the experiences of collaborators in this project. Hill Collins identifies the dominant ideology of “traditional American families” as fundamentally opposed to the well-being of Black women and their families. As portrayed in discourse, media, and policies around welfare reform, this traditional, state-sanctioned, American family “should consist of heterosexual, racially homogeneous couples who produce their own biological children. Such families should have a specific authority structure, namely, a father-head earning an adequate wage, a stay-at-home wife and mother, and children.”\textsuperscript{167} Hill Collins exposes the fundamental disconnect between this norm and the Black American experience beginning with slavery. Under slavery, Black women’s lives and families never fit into this idealized public/private binary, which reinforced (and, in many ways, created) a dominant

\textsuperscript{166} While I largely let interviews unfold through the direction of the collaborator, I also asked questions. If the collaborator did not volunteer the information, however, I did not ask questions about whether they considered marriage. Only Pinky offered any reason—the father of her son denied paternity. My recollection from those interviews is that I was engaged in listening to each story and did not think to ask about marriage. I do not know whether I refrained from asking because of my own awareness of my whiteness and possible cultural judgment that might be assumed in a question. Responses may have been illuminating, or they may have threatened whatever trust was possible between us. It seems important to mark this as a dynamic impacting narratives when a privileged outsider interviews marginalized persons.

\textsuperscript{167} Collins, \textit{Black Feminist Thought}, 53.
American sexual division of labor that persists today. No practice or idea of a “stay-at-home mother” developed for Black women. Further, the tenuous nature of slave life and the commodified nature of Black women’s childbearing that benefited owners “encouraged Black women to elevate motherhood over marriage.”  

Relationships between mothers and children were primary in slave communities, and children were always the sole responsibility of their mothers, since Black fathers could be sold at any time and white fathers did not acknowledge their existence.

After emancipation, Black women continued working in order to help their families survive economically since Black men were denied the family wage paid to most white men. Thus, “motherhood as a privatized female ‘occupation’ never predominated Black civil society.”  

Further, Black women who did withdraw from the domestic labor most often available to them to focus on their own families were criticized by the dominant white culture “because they were seen to be aspiring to a model of womanhood that was inappropriate to them.”  

Hill Collins notes that Black women did not withdraw from paid work to “mimic middle-class White women’s domesticity,” but to escape the sexual harassment and demeaning work they experienced in domestic service of white people.

Economic developments under capitalism have rendered economic security elusive among the Black working class. Owners have outsourced manufacturing jobs often held by

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168 Collins, 53–58.

169 Collins, 58–60.

170 Collins, 61.

171 Collins, 61.
Black men and service jobs often held by women pay poorly, and have no benefits. Heterosexual marriages without living wages are highly stressed and often unappealing as stabilizing factors for a pregnant woman. Thus, despite having even somewhat embraced the “dominant ‘family values’ ideology,” Black working-class women are choosing single motherhood. Hill Collins points out that rates of adolescent pregnancy are decreasing among young Black women. The rising number of young, unmarried Black mothers, then, signals perceptions that this is the best route for sustainable households. Thus, for cultural, historical, and economic reasons, Black women often accept sole responsibility at the time of pregnancy rather than during or after a marriage.

Day uses feminist critical theorist Seyla Benhabib to argue that resistance to the cultural misrecognition that assigns sole responsibility to single mothers involves seeing the misrecognized persons as “concrete others.” She identifies a “reversibility of perspectives” that involves listening deeply to embodied and embedded people who are morally compelling and engaging in ways that subvert the “generalizable other” currently holding the dominant imagination. In this case, listening to single mothers describe themselves rather than listening to stereotyped caricatures.

Experiences of being solely responsible for their own individual well-being and that of their children have shaped each collaborator’s sense of identity, character, and positioning in her world. For the first pilesort activity, I asked collaborators to choose words on six to eight cards, from a selection of 30, that best described themselves and their experiences as single mothers.

172 Collins, 69–70.

Each participants received her own pile of cards from which she made her selections or wrote her own words. In both focus groups, every collaborator chose the words “strong” and “independent” to describe herself. Clodie talked about relating these two concepts together and getting her strength from her mother and her independence from her father, who raised his girls to work from early ages so they “wouldn’t need a man.” Alma talked about independence by saying, “We all know you can’t depend on a guy, especially if you have kids.” Later, Stormy also linked “strong” and “independent,” saying that acting on these traits is intrinsic to being a single mother. She also said she thinks this is generally characteristic of women. “The majority [of women] are that way. I think women are just more stronger than men, and God made us that way.” Alma agreed, adding, “We can deal with more than what guys can.”

This unanimous self-identification as “independent” leads back to the distinction between the need for psychological independence and independence as cultural and economic ideal and myth. Collaborators feel a strong sense of autonomy, of awareness of themselves as distinct people in charge of their own choices and lives. They do not need men to feel complete, capable, or fulfilled. In a patriarchal system designed to make women feel psychologically and economically dependent on men, the sense of independence so many single mothers experience offers resistance. As this essay indicates, economically vulnerable single mothers are particularly targeted for being “out of line” with this independence, which makes their strong senses of self that much more noteworthy. Psychological independence or autonomy differs from economic independence or self-sufficiency. Collaborators continue to acknowledge their needs for support, relationships, security, safety, and material goods. As we will see in Chapter Six, they lay this out clearly in their favorable experiences with the DH process, wherein they felt their
independence acknowledged even as they felt supported and connected to community. They are well positioned to reveal important distinctions between autonomy and interdependence.

Pinky said that continuing with the pregnancy and all its consequences for her life have contributed to making her the strong woman she is now. Comparing her constant struggles to mothers in supportive, heterosexual marriages, Pinky said, “I’m not better than anybody, but in a sense I feel like if they’re not the single mother and their husband has been there for their kids, they try to degrade. I feel like it’s empty…because in reality I’m stronger than you. That bothers that person. It’s hard being a single mother. It’s a blessing and a curse.” She continued by saying that if anything disrupts the stability experienced by women in supportive relationships, “They are lost, and single mothers are not lost…we are able to cope and deal. We are able to maintain and keep a level head versus women who have not been blessed/cursed to have the opportunity that we have. I wouldn’t change nothing.”

Jennifer chose “powerful,” following that up with “I am one strong, powerful, Black woman.” Jennifer also chose “leader,” and she and Clodie both chose “respected” and “self-respect.” Jennifer said she “refuses to accept anything else,” and Clodie said she “demands respect.” They both also talked about giving respect to everyone.

Jessica included “powerless” and talked about all the spheres where she feels like opportunities and choices are limited. Jennifer, Alma, and Stormy chose “tough.” Stormy said she almost chose “vulnerable,” but chose “tough” instead because she did not want to be vulnerable. For Stormy, being vulnerable means needing a “thick skin,” which she relates to toughness. Alma and Jessica strongly agreed with Stormy’s description, and Jessica said that despite this experience and her choice of “powerless,” she does not want to see herself as a
victim or as someone who is vulnerable. Alma, too, agreed that she feels vulnerable but prefers identifying herself in other ways.

Finally, Clodie and Stormy both chose “resourceful.” Clodie explained that to her being resourceful means sharing resources and knowledge with those around her, particularly the Black and Hispanic communities, she feels know less about various opportunities than persons who are white. Stormy did not elaborate on being resourceful, but in her individual interview, she talked about decorating her house with thrift store purchases and surviving financially on low wages by “budgeting to a T.”

In sum, collaborators in this project named and explored the generative theme of single mothering as one defined by sole responsibility for the well-being of one’s child/ren. Collaborators differed on how marital status and financial contributions from the fathers of their children or other partners impact this description of “single” mothering, which mirrors broader cultural norms that place primary and sometimes sole responsibility for parenting on the mother. Yet each collaborator’s experiences of having sole responsibility for care of dependents has shaped how she describes herself. Regardless of whether this has solely occurred while unmarried or began occurring while still married, this group of women describes themselves as “strong,” “independent,” “hard-working,” “tough,” “powerful,” and “resourceful” in large part because of their responsibilities as “single” mothers.

Many collaborators also said they can feel “powerless” and “vulnerable” in their constant struggles to ensure survival and thriving for themselves and their families. None describes herself as a victim or wants to feel like a victim regardless of what has happened, is happening,
or will happen. Every collaborator quickly chose and first shared the words that expressed her agency and strengths before naming words that reflected her struggles and challenges. Given cultural stereotypes driving attitudes and shaping public policies impacting single mothers, their own perceptions of themselves provide critical contributions to broader narratives necessary to the work of disrupting cultural misrecognition of single mothers.

The damaging impacts of cultural norms of motherhood should be clear from this section. Mothers are expected, to varying degrees, to assume primary if not sole responsibility for the care and well-being of their children. The toll this takes on mothers is visible in vivid ways in the experiences of single, working-class mothers. Differences between how these cultural norms developed and how they are leveled at single mothers of various racial and ethnic identities are also clear from these narratives. The next generative theme uncovers the double bind collaborators encounter when they do take their parenting responsibilities seriously. This theme names particular sites related to paid work and family work balance where collaborators struggle to survive and thrive despite their strength, hard work, and independence.

\footnote{Identification of single mothers as “victims,” whether as self-identification or by people who are not single mothers, invites further reflections. The word “victim” by definition indicates harm done to a person. Certainly collaborators were willing to name harms they have experienced. That said, the cluster of implications and associations evoked by the word “victim,” which transcends its literal definition, are relevant as well. “Victim” often conjures images of powerlessness, passivity, and lack of agency. These associations are likely what collaborators resist, perhaps as a psychological and emotional survival tool. Who, then, is most likely linking single, working-class mothers with disempowered images of victimhood? And why does this matter? These questions exceed the bounds of this essay, but I would tentatively suggest that perhaps privileged, well-intentioned persons who want to “help” people like single mothers without truly examining cultural and social hierarchies or sharing power and privilege might be most moved by the “victim” narrative. If so, their responses would perhaps focus more on immediate needs without attending to root, systemic causes of the harm done to “victims.” How, then, might efforts at liberation name harms done without conjuring associations with “victimhood” that cause different harms?}
(Im)balances: Paid Work, Family Work

During the pilesort exercises in both focus groups, collaborators also chose words that indicated sources of stress or pressure. Jennifer, Clodie, and Jessica all chose words relating to their paid work experiences. These included “work,” “boss,” or “employer.” Jennifer and Jessica talked about not being paid their worth despite long-term employment and positive feedback from managers. Only Jessica chose “work” as a primary source of support even though she also included “work” under her list of stressors. She said she included it in this list because her job provides financial security along with the stress and frustration it generates related to balancing her paid work with her family work. No one else chose any word related to paid work as a primary source of support or encouragement.

Jessica said managers at her job make her commitment to being a responsible parent and a responsible, respected employee challenging. When she misses work for her own illnesses or those of her children, she knows her managers suspect she might be lying. After nine years at this job, Jessica views these suspicions as a direct challenge to her integrity and her dependability, which is her highest personal value and character trait:

Even though I may have had absences, I try. I have come to work throwing up before. I have come to work with a migraine. I have come to work with a lot of situations. So even if I’ve been out, they should know me by now, like, my character. If I’m out, I didn’t have a choice… I walked in on my manager the other day when I was about to leave because my daughter was really sick and had to go to the doctor… and she was talking to my other manager and said, “I think she had something to do today.”

Jessica wants her character, trustworthiness, and loyalty recognized at her workplace. She said she “knows there are people who take advantage,” but she resents the assumptions about her and feels she has proved herself. She said, “You just literally made me feel like dirt for taking my daughter to the doctor and staying home sick with her.” Day attributes experiences like
Jessica’s to a lack of “cultural capital” needed to be treated with respect. The cumulative toll of these experiences erodes the confidence and dignity “required to self-actualize and thrive.”

Alma responded that the suspicion displayed by Jessica’s bosses seemed like a power display: “I think they have the title and you don’t, that’s why you’re here and they’re over there.” Jessica said if anyone reports this treatment to Human Resources (HR), someone in HR immediately calls the manager and reports the conversation. She has seen a manager bring up previous records to undermine a worker reporting this treatment. Jessica said, in summary, “they kinda put you in that position, and that’s what’s hardest. I obviously need this job to support my children, but I can’t choose that over my children. It’s so hard they make you feel like you have to make a choice.” Jessica’s observations illumine the relative absence of choice and the particular vulnerabilities created when cultural distrust of single mothers, a dearth of structural supports for their parental responsibilities, power imbalances in the paid work force, and economic vulnerabilities collude.

Pinky also expressed frustration regarding the imbalance of responsibilities of parenting and financial provision within a different arrangement of paid work and family work. “If my child needs me and I’m [temporarily out of work], I can be there for him…that’s good because nobody loves your child like you…but then I’m not providing money for my child, and that doesn’t work. It just doesn’t balance out.” Pinky’s experience suggests the near-impossible attainment of being a “good parent” while also being a “good provider” within the current political economy.

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Twila talked about changing work policies that made it more difficult to balance paid work and family work. She said she would have been a bit more amenable to changes in policy had they been evenly applied. When I asked her whether any of these changes reflected any cultural bias or judgment against single mothers, she said yes and specified dynamics of being a Black single mother:

I think sometimes people are more sensitive when it’s a single mother, but I think if you’re Black, they’re less sensitive to a Black single mother. And I might cry, so sorry… I’ve just experienced [voice breaks] that being Black, not necessarily a single mother, but with work, I think if you’re Black, and I don’t know if it’s a male or female thing, but I’ve always had issues because of that. Especially if management is non-Black or non-Hispanic. The last manager [a white single mother]…she treated people differently based on race. I’ll give an example of a young lady that was white that was married, she helped take care of her stepdaughter. She’d call and say, “[My stepdaughter’s] sick and I’m taking off.” And she’d be like, “Okay go ahead! Do whatever it is you need to do.” And [my stepdaughter] had a mother and she had a father both unemployed. This girl needed to be at work, but she’d tell her to go ahead. But if I were to happen and call and say I have a flat tire? “Well, when are you gonna get here? When we hired you, you said you had dependable transportation.” The only thing I could pinpoint was race because I would see what the other people that were non-Black were experiencing, but then someone Black, “Oh no, you need be here. Are you sick? If you’re sick, you need to go to the doctor.” If you were Black. If you were white, “Okay well you just get better. Work on yourself. Do you need us to call something in for you?” That seems to be kind of a double standard. As single mother…hmm…I know there was a difference in us being able to take our kids up there. We couldn’t bring our kids and let them sit in the break area without them saying, “Okay is someone coming to pick them up? How long are they gonna be here?” You know if the kids were on spring break and they had their children dropped off. They’re gonna go to the mall after work or something. So there’d be issues like that. But you couldn’t necessarily say, “They’re being prejudiced, they don’t want kids here,” but then you see the other kids that would come through and they would let them stay all day and would play, offer them food. But those of us that brought our Black children, it was totally different. To the point we just wouldn’t do it. Let’s not even let our kids go through that although they don’t even know, but we know. But we know…There’s things that are subtle and then not so subtle that are just put out there every day. Where one race could call in and say “My dog is sick” and a Black person couldn’t call in saying “My kid is sick.” It’s like, “You should have arrangements for this because you know your kid might get sick, so is there not any other relative?” to “Oh, your dog is sick? Aww! I know you love little Fido. Go take care of Fido. Take him to the vet. And don’t forget to call me back and tell me how Fido is doing.” Okay, well you tell the Black person that they need to find someone for their flesh and blood, but—don’t get me wrong: I have a dog and I love her to death— but I’m saying you’re saying that
this child isn’t important as this person’s dog. I can’t pinpoint it. Maybe it’s not race. Maybe it’s something else. But I know for sure in my heart what it is.

Twila described other work experiences when she felt vulnerable in particular ways as a Black single mother:

An interview process is totally different and the qualification for a certain position…you have to then be overqualified. I’ve even gotten a job before where I had to interview with not only the manager but the entire front office staff. They were all white so I had to see if they liked me enough to allow there to be one Black female, is how I felt, in the front office of this doctor’s office. I was like this is a strange set-up. The esthetician, she was Black, but she had been there since she was a teenager…she came and asked me questions like if you have any kids and those aren’t questions that you’re supposed to ask in an interview. And I knew that, but I was afraid to not answer the questions because she’s Black and I’m Black, maybe if I don’t answer she’s gonna tell them I’m hostile and I won’t get the job.

Twila said she has experienced these dynamics broadly though less often when managers are persons of color. These dehumanizing, demoralizing experiences rooted in prejudice and systemic violence erode the dignity of Black single mothers.

Alma also talked about how dynamics of race have impacted her balance of paid work and parenting responsibilities. A friend helped her find a job working for an attorney just as her divorce was finalized. She needed the job even though its hourly pay of $9 left her skipping meals and choosing which bills to pay. Alma worked at this job a year and grew deeply frustrated with the office manager. She said the office manager, a single, white woman, not only treated staff of different racial/ethnic identities unequally, but she also made balancing paid work and family work very difficult. I quote our conversation:

AM: She had favoritism…it all seemed like kind of racist. She always found things to gripe about and I never understood. I’m like, “I don’t get the need to be that way.” I mean, you know, why mistreat? It just, it was the way she would act towards one, you know—difference. Like that other individual would get there late and, “Oh, that’s okay.” Just the way, the punishments weren’t always the same. You get away and if you’re five minutes late, oh you’re in trouble. You get a verbal, another one happens, you get written
up and, you know, the consequences. But just certain people. It was never the equal way for individuals.

I: It sounds like that was kind of compounded with both you being Hispanic and you being a single mom and the demands from being a single mom.

AM: Mmm. Yeah… I had an incident. My daughter had got sick. I was, like, “Look, I need to take her to the doctor.” She’s, like, “You know what? You need to figure that out, your kids are not my problem.” You know. Just things like that. And it’s just, like, wow, I said, “a job is not my priority. My priority is my kids and if you don’t understand that, then I’m sorry.” I don’t need to be working for somebody like that.

Despite this conviction and frustration, Alma felt stuck in the job because she needed to support her kids. Alma said the attorney, a white, male, behaved fairly, but staff could not access him without going through the manager. The manager refused to let them speak with him. Alma stayed with the work until she was fired. Alma was hit by a car while walking, and she was unable to walk, work, or drive. Her parents were caring for her children, and the attorney had taken the case. The office manager did not believe she was truly incapacitated and came to her home while Alma was on unpaid sick leave. “She wanted to see for herself if I was really injured. So she came to my house and she actually saw that I was pretty banged up and I guess that’s when she realized, ‘Well, if you’re not able to make it, we’ll need to find somebody else that’s responsible and is going to work every day.’” Alma responded by telling the manager that she did not want to be working for someone “who didn’t appreciate or treat their employees equally.” Alma won her case a week after the manager fired her.

A study of employer perceptions and worker experiences in metropolitan Atlanta sheds further light on the dynamics experienced by collaborators in this project. According to this study, employers have particularly negative associations with single mothers, specifically Black single mothers. Concerns raised by employers related to single mothers as workers included

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176 Stereotypes of Black women as single mothers leads employers to assume that most Black women are single mothers, even when they are not. Employers tend to assume white women are
tardiness, distraction, and absenteeism. Even when male and female workers had similar rates of absenteeism, employers most often viewed women’s absenteeism more negatively, and Black women more than white women, because they associated it with single motherhood, which, as previously noted, has racial dimensions. Even when employers commented on the strong work ethic and responsibility of single mothers, they often undercut this potentially positive attribute by attributing it to “desperation” associated with economic vulnerability. Other workers, males and white females, were credited with a strong work ethic without negative connotations. Irene Browne and Ive Kennelly note that the combination of lower regard and awareness of vulnerability might lay a foundation for employers to exploit Black, single mothers.177

Collaborators of color in this project certainly experienced these dynamics and felt regularly exploited. At one point, Jessica said that the emphasis on “numbers” has resulted in layoffs that then lead to the company “trying to make us do more work with less people.” This comment led Alma to talk about what Jessica said previously regarding doing work without getting paid accordingly. Alma said, “I used to have to do what was the manager at the clinic’s work, but I’m not getting that paycheck. I knew how to do all that stuff, and they would take advantage of that.” When I said it sounded like they were being exploited, Jessica said, “Yes, I

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177 Browne, 309–17.
think it’s cause they know I’m in a position to where…I need that and I don’t have as many options. So I feel like they kinda use that to their advantage.”

Clodie also said she was hired by the owner of the startup healthcare company because of her experience. She runs the office and knows the inner workings of all aspects of the business. Her boss, who is the owner, acknowledges this reality by the fact that she refuses to allow Clodie to take her vacation time until after inspectors have visited because only Clodie knows how to ensure a successful inspection. While her boss takes off for doctor’s appointments, Clodie does not receive the same flexibility. At one point Clodie, who is on salary, stayed home sick. Her boss docked her pay for that day, saying she did not believe Clodie was “sick enough” to miss work. Clodie gets calls on her days off and feels like she must respond to work 24/7. She also comes home from work, takes a shower, spends time with her daughter, and then continues working from home. She knows she makes about half of what the Director of Nursing (DON) makes even though she has taught the DON the administrative details of the DON’s job. She knows that she should be making much more money than she does given her knowledge, skill set, experience, responsibilities, and work.

Collaborators offered additional examples of systemic features that impact single mothers in particular ways. In Jessica’s individual interview, she explained the company sick leave policy. The company, one of the top 25 largest commercial banks in the U.S., allows a certain amount of annual sick leave days but only three “occurrences” of sick leave. An occurrence is a continuous block of absence. Managers often call Jessica when she is out sick or caring for a sick child and ask her to return to work immediately, citing how much they need her. When Jessica or someone else then gets sick from the same illness, Jessica must leave work again, sometimes having only come in for half a day at a manager’s request. This means she has now used two
“occurrences” for the same illness. Managers have written Jessica up for excessive occurrences even though she has stayed within her allowed days of sick leave. In the past nine years of work, Jessica has received outstanding performance evaluations. Managers consistently ask her to perform tasks beyond her job description because she is the second-most senior employee at her bank. Yet the same managers have cited her labors of care to deny promotions, telling her she is “undependable because her children get sick.”

Stormy said Walmart has restricted its absence policies in recent years, making it difficult to miss work when an employee or family member is ill. She thinks this change stemmed from “people abusing” the previous time-off policy. While Stormy said she has never experienced a problem related to balancing paid work and family work, she also said she and her kids have had no major health problems. She calls her ex-husband and older daughters if her youngest daughter gets sick while she is working. She has needed to leave or miss work a few times for her daughter, and she said her managers have always been supportive because they know she works hard. She said she does not get paid for these absences, which makes her finances tighter, and so she tries her best to avoid missing any work.

The distinction between whether collaborators are individually appreciated and valued for hard work and what they had described about generic corporate policies, like sick leave, reflects the dual impact of cultural and economic barriers experienced by single, working-class mothers. Clearly both are troubling, difficult to navigate, and difficult to predict and avoid, which brings it own implications.

Several collaborators have had positive experiences with paid work and family work balances, although the trade-offs they make are important to name. Before Walmart stopped offering merit-based raises, Stormy received regular raises and felt valued for her particular
contributions. Alma said her current employer respects her as a single mother and gives her flexibility. While Alma needs higher pay to meet her expenses and save for unexpected events, she is willing to stay in her current job for the respect she gets and for the ability to be present for her children. For instance, after a pregnant co-worker needed extra time off, Alma’s current boss gave her a raise. “I guess he realized that I was doing everything and I was always by myself, so he acknowledged that…It made me feel good.” Thus, Alma said some jobs are “sympathetic,” but some previous jobs, saw her only as “a robot.” Alma attributed some of these differences to “corporate and private” work environments. She said previous experiences in larger corporate environments did not evince concern for her or her family. “It was all about numbers. Numbers, numbers, numbers.” She said her current job is much more flexible and individualized because it is a private practice.\(^{178}\) Stormy agreed, classifying Walmart as a corporate work environment with penalties for absences regardless of reason.

Sacrificing some spheres of well-being, often economic viability, in order to maintain others, like respect from employers or the ability to parent, was a common theme with collaborators. Christina, for example, worked several temp jobs before landing at her current job where she is a receptionist and billing agent for a manufacturer. She said this job paid well from the start—at $13 per hour—because the job was located in Fair Park, “across the street from a crack house” and they had already lost eight receptionists that year.\(^{179}\) Christina is now making a

\(^{178}\) Alma likely means private practices afford greater possibilities for better treatment because her experience of being fired after getting hit by a car by the manager who treated different racial/ethnic employees unequally occurred within a private practice.

\(^{179}\) Fair Park is an historic area of South Dallas, which continues to house the Texas State Fair and other cultural and art venues. It contains mostly lower-income households, roughly 75% of which are Black, 23% Latino/a, and the rest mostly white. This has been an area of revitalization efforts, and DH has built in the local neighborhoods.
little over $15 per hour. Christina has loved working for this company. She said they were originally a family-owned business and that her supervisor, a white woman, “has been a single mom for years so she’s very understanding.” Christina has flexible hours and can take her work home with her if needed. Six months ago the company moved to the affluent, predominantly white, North Dallas suburb of Allen. Christina now has to leave her house while her children are sleeping, which she hates, and drive to work via the North Dallas Tollway. This extended commute costs her an extra $60 per week in gas and roughly $100 per month in toll charges. On the one hand, she is actively seeking another job because the commute costs mean she barely breaks even financially and cannot save any money. On the other hand, she said, “I’m not trying too hard because I know you won’t always find a supervisor like I have now or a company that is…kinda run with that family feel…I know I’m not going to find that in corporate America.”

Christina’s supervisor knows she is looking for closer work and has hired a backup staff in case Christina leaves. Christina advised her boss about finding the right person: “I told my supervisor, ‘You gotta have somebody that cares enough about their family to want to do their work right.’”

As another example of racism at work, Jennifer said one of her worst paid work experiences involved a white, female office manager who supervised her when they were both part of a company startup. She said they came from similar class backgrounds but that the manager now owned nice cars and lived in a gated community. Jennifer said the manager still felt threatened by her because of her skills and because of her professional dress. She said the manager criticized her work even when Jennifer had worked from the manager’s notes and made it difficult for her to learn new skills. Jennifer said the manager then made Jennifer’s frustrations “out to be a racial thing.” She said the manager greeted and socialized with the white workers in the office, deliberately excluding her. The manager did include one Black woman, and Jennifer
said this woman “thought she was white. She wanted to be Michael Jackson…She would say she didn’t like Black men.” Jennifer said this woman would eat lunch only with white co-workers and would talk with her not at work but only outside work.

I asked Jennifer what it meant to “act white,” particularly as distinguished from “becoming one of the guys,” which she and Clodie both said they do in response to dominant male work culture. Jennifer said there is a difference from being “one of the guys” and “acting white.” She and Clodie agreed that “being one of the guys” does not involve substantially changing their identities or putting down other women. They said “acting white” involves “putting down the race” and is dangerous because, as Clodie said, “white people retaliate against my group.”

As an example of this retaliation, Clodie talked about a Black female co-worker who felt as if she had to act in particular ways because the “white ladies really liked her.” This included changing her voice, body language, and socialization patterns at work. Clodie said they were friends outside of work, but the woman did not think she could be friends with Clodie at work. She chose not to eat with Clodie because she thought it would make the white co-workers unhappy. “She would laugh and carry on in a different way” at work. Clodie observed that these choices “sometimes can make it bad on women, especially Black women” when other Black women choose to ally themselves with white women for acceptance at work. Clodie compared this behavior to “selling yourself to the Devil.” She said the woman told her she “had to be that way.” Clodie and Jennifer rejected that belief. Clodie said the cost of this behavior is high because “when you start to change and lose who you are, eventually in our lives things change because of financial and this and that. When she hit that point, they didn’t understand. Instead of helping her, they got angry at her.” In this instance Clodie’s co-worker had previous legal
problems that meant she had to pay a fine and serve jail time after work. Clodie said the Black
community would have understood and showed compassion and help. The white community
interpreted it as a negative change and “retaliated against her.” Clodie said white co-workers
could never understand where she came from and were unhappy when she “wasn’t her jolly old
self.” That, said Clodie, was the cost of trying to be someone she was not. “She was lost.”

Clodie and Jennifer feel as if they do not have to change for anyone. They agreed that
they can fit in anywhere without compromising who they are or changing how they act. They
both “treat everybody the same.” That said, Clodie said she has seen Black women with college
educations and lower management positions behaving as if they were inferior to their white,
male supervisors. She said she kept reminding them who they were and what they had because
she wanted to “bring them up.” She felt like they were also lost. “I was always telling them, ‘I
don’t know what y’all doing. You’re supervisors. You went to school. What’s the
problem?...You’re lost. You’re management, and you’re lost just because of this place.’”

Clodie also stayed with a previous job despite oppressive dynamics because it allowed
her flexibility for family care. During a period when her daughter was young and her mother was
terminally ill, a company allowed her a flexible work schedule because she was a top seller for
them. However, despite giving her awards and sending her all over the country for her selling
records, the company promoted young white males into management positions. Clodie does not
remember any females in top management positions. She also said, “They were getting these
younger girls that worked at Hooters and they were hiring them on and giving them breast
implants.” Clodie said she has experienced and seen the most sexism, gender discrimination, and
racism in the corporate world. I asked, “Basically, you were willing to put up with sexism and
racism because they had the other pieces to enable you to survive and take care of your family?”
Clodie answered, “Yes.” Jennifer, who talked about similar experiences, then added, “You have to come to just accept it.”

It would seem that collaborators are often accepting unjust working conditions as a penalty for having parenting responsibilities, parenting responsibilities that impact other parents’ work performance in similar ways without the same ramifications. A survey conducted within the same Atlanta research project asked parents of children under the age of eighteen about impact of childcare on their work in the past twelve months. Respondents were asked whether “concerns about childcare ever caused you to be late for work, be absent from work, or change hours.” Employer surveys reveal the assumption that this number is disproportionately higher for Black female workers. An assumption which often leads employers to avoid hiring Black, female workers or to judge their work in particular ways. The survey indicates that the percentage of affirmative answers is statistically equivalent for Black women and white men (43% and 41% respectively). White women answered affirmatively 54% of the time. Black men answered affirmatively 31% of the time. This evidence suggests employers’ assumptions are grounded in cultural stereotypes, not reality, and collaborators in this dissertation bear witness to psychological and economic ramifications therein.

As with the previous generative theme, collaborators provided vibrant descriptions of their commitment to, pride in, and satisfaction with their work that counter cultural judgments

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180 Study participants are not necessarily single parents.
182 Browne, 318.
183 Chapter One explores stereotypes and their impacts on public policies and cultural biases as well.
about them. All three collaborators in FG2 talked about receiving recognition and appreciation from customers and clients. Stormy said she has customers who come only through her line, hug her, and tell her she’s “the best.” Jessica said some customers will wait in the lobby just to work with her. She’s heard them tell others, “That’s my teller. I’m waiting for her.’ That makes me feel good.” These same customers will also bring her Christmas gifts. Alma said patients call and ask specifically when she will be at work that day. Jessica said, “yeah. At my job, people might say, ‘Oh, a bank. You’re just a number. They don’t care. They just want to sell you things.’ But to me good customer service, you’re making each person feel like you have their best interest at heart. That’s the reason I’m not going to try to sell somebody something they don’t need just to try to get a number.” Clodie said that despite deep dissatisfaction with her current job, including major health problems from work-related stress, she has reluctance about leaving because of her loyalty to the clients. She brought many of them to the company, and she knows they trust her.

On another side of this balance, or imbalance, collaborators raised issues related to challenges assuring quality care for their families while they work. Stormy raised the issue of childcare, and both Jessica and Alma agreed that childcare is a critical need for single mothers. Jessica, who shared specific concerns in her individual interview in Chapter Three, said those receiving direct, governmental assistance need more and higher quality choices for childcare. Alma, who is currently on a waitlist for childcare assistance, also said she wanted more assistance availability. Clodie said the quality of childcare was an issue with her son. She had to leave him with someone she could afford, but said “Their life situation didn’t make me feel comfortable so I found myself leaving school sometimes early, wondering if my child was eating

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184 While only certain childcare providers accept children who receive assistance through CCA, families receiving tax-credit from the Dependent Care Credit for childcare costs have no restrictions on which childcare facility they use.
there. And I would get him and take him to McDonald’s to eat.” Clodie said that just “a little extra money to get him out of that environment” would have helped her family thrive.

While quality, affordable childcare could be addressed on a number of fronts, employers are certainly one entity that could help or advocate for employee needs in this area. Similarly, Jessica said her children’s school policy of only allowing parents to eat lunch with their kids only on certain days has precluded her from eating with her kids. Her work schedule, over which she has no control, does not align with the limited and specific days the school allows parents to eat with their kids. At one point, she called the school to verify an open lunch day that day, and when she arrived, school officials said she was not there on the correct day. They would not let her eat with her children. Again, this problem could be addressed with flexibility on the school’s part or the employer’s part.

Reflecting on these conversations about paid work experiences, I asked both focus groups whether any of their job situations or people for whom they have worked have had their best interests or those of their families at heart. Jennifer said she never had a job where anyone “with authority” over her showed concern for her. “The interest is in them because they are in a higher position.” Jessica said something very similar: “I think they have the company’s best interest at heart. Theirs is more about production, making money, cutting costs.” Clodie said she has never worked in a job “that really has cared about the welfare of people that work for them.”

Collaborators expounded on gendered and racial aspects of this lack of concern. In FG2 Jessica and Stormy talked about experiences of sexism at work. Like Clodie, Jessica said she sees it the most in job promotions. Stormy said she sees males grouping together as buddies and females speaking negatively about each other. Jessica agreed, saying, “I think a big part of it in the workplace is that men stick together and women are always constantly fighting each other to
get that spot, because it’s harder for us to get that upper spot.” Alma also said, “It’s harder for females.” When I asked them who benefits from women fighting with each other, they simultaneously and unanimously said, “Men.” I asked whether this was similar to their conversations about socioeconomic class and race. When I asked who benefits when persons of different racial identities and similar socioeconomic positions do not get along, Jessica said, “People that are up.” After an extended discussion about women working against and competing with one another, Jessica said, “I mean, if we could stick together…”

When I asked Clodie what it would be like to have a job at which people in power had her and her family’s health and best interests in mind, she said, “It would feel awesome. I think I would feel better about getting up and going to work.” Jennifer agreed and said she has tried to organize her co-workers so they “learn to empower one another…I told the girls we need to start learning to come together and help one another. We’re all here to work and to make money and to take care of our families.” She said most of the women wanted to work together. When I observed that it seemed as if she were creating a workplace that was more collaborative than competitive, she agreed.

Clodie said that collaboration and cooperation would be best and noted the prevailing dynamic of selfishness. She said her employer could easily provide group healthcare coverage if she shopped for a group plan, but that she is only concerned with covering herself, even though it would be less expensive to cover everyone. She knows that some companies help with or provide daycare, which reflects an awareness of their employees’ needs and contributes to their health and thriving. Jennifer said, “Yeah, that company is looking out for you. That makes you more productive.” Clodie said, “Man, they were so happy.”
These accounts and insights demonstrate in particularly illuminative ways the vulnerability and devaluation of workers. Through their tears, their anger, their resignation, and their defiance collaborators attest to the relative vulnerability and degradation experienced by workers that is often determined by their gender, race, sexuality, and ability. Their stories also bring to life the frustrated impotence they experience in the paid work force when they are forced to accept unjust working conditions, or to make unrealistic sacrifices to stay with a rare, benevolent employer. They tolerate these conditions because they take their parenting responsibilities so seriously. These power imbalances shaping workers’ vulnerabilities are created by capitalist structures and justified by cultural stereotypes. They reflect a system that devalues workers even as it exploits their work.

Collaborators’ narratives also reveal the reality that care work is even more devalued in these cultural and economic systems. Even as cultural messages put primary parenting responsibility on women, employers in the paid workforce judge and punish them for taking this responsibility seriously. Again, through gut-wrenching stories like Jessica’s managers doubting her integrity within earshot and Alma’s employer criticizing her for caring for a sick child, this project shows how these consistent degradations wear on workers, particularly white single mothers and even more so on single mothers of color. Referencing feminist Kathi Weeks, Henkle-Rieger and Rieger recognize that while capitalism does not value productive labor, it values reproductive labor, like care work, even less. A transformed system would value productive and reproductive work and workers as contributors to flourishing of life.  

185 Rieger and Henkel-Rieger, *Unified We Are a Force*, 22.
The constructive ideas from Clodie and Jennifer, in addition to the content of the rest of this chapter, offer a path to this transformation. Their recognition of dynamics that divide workers and their calls for organization and cooperation provide fertile ground and energy for resistance to the broad account of cultural and economic domination they experience. Combining their unique insights gleaned from immediate proximity to oppressive realities with other organizers and organization efforts promises to be a powerful force.

In the next chapter, collaborators identify generative themes related to their experiences within various systems shaped by ideologies of advanced capitalism that hinder the abilities of single mothers to thrive in the current political economy. These stark portrayals of structures that consistently work against the best interests of themselves and their families create a broader, interrelated picture, of a system that concentrates power in the hands of a tiny percentage of elites while denying the reality and goods of interdependence, collaboration, and human dignity.
CHAPTER FIVE

Generative Themes and Economic Structures

The previous chapter explored ways in which cultural norms or hierarchical social status related to gender, race, and “single mother” as a constructed identity, negatively impact collaborators’ abilities to thrive. As evidenced in collaborator accounts, oppressive cultural norms function to limit objective goods like paid work opportunities and equal parenting partnerships and subjective goods like social recognition and respect in places of work. These norms also function as a basis on which exploitative economic arrangements are morally justified and perpetuated.

The other three generative themes raised by collaborators explore ways in which economic structures inhibit capacities for thriving, specifically through accounts of inadequate access to income, healthcare, and education. Their stories bear witness in great detail to systems not designed to work in their best interests. While a few good actors may minimize detrimental impacts of these systems, participant descriptions of the costs of reliance on these few good actors for basic rights like income, healthcare, and education make evident the frightening, precarious, and unjust realities of conditions under advanced capitalism. These realities compromise the freedom of collaborators to make self-determining choices about their lives and their families.

Collaborators also articulate ways in which these three spheres expose class structures and explore the interrelatedness of class and social hierarchies of racism and sexism. I argue that the problems of scarcity experienced by collaborators reveal the nature of capitalism and the
values of neo-liberalism, while the intersectional nature of experiences also confirms the irreducible, complex relationship between cultural hierarchies related to class, race, and gender.

**Constant Precarity: Income vs. Expenses**

While class structures transcend the category of income, the immediate economic stability secured or denied by the balance between income and expenses remains an important marker in assessing both fundamental capacities to thrive and relative positioning in the political economy. This balance weighed heavily on the collaborators in this project and must be identified and explored as the first generative theme in this chapter.

Each collaborator described her current balance of income and expenses as highly precarious.\(^{186}\) Despite describing spending practices as “budgeting to a ‘T’,” all collaborators described their current realities as “paycheck to paycheck,” “payday to payday,” and “check to check.”

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\(^{186}\) Collaborators provided more specifics in their individual interviews about struggles to meet expenses, both prior to DH homeownership and currently. Generally speaking, collaborators spoke about benefits of homeownership and the DH program more in terms related to long-term stability and appreciation for the neighborhood and self-esteem boost than in terms related to relief of current financial duress. Pinky alone said that while she would still choose homeownership, her current financial situation is worse because of homeownership. Each said that while she would still choose homeownership for its benefits, she lives in constant fear of losing her home. Collaborators often expressed frustration at their inability to put money into savings. I did not ask whether this concern reflected budgeting awareness gleaned from financial management courses participants complete during the DH process.

This does not necessarily reflect a generalizable statement about DH homeowners or even DH homeowners who are unmarried mothers. Because recruiting fliers indicated that participation would include compensation, one cannot assume broad levels of financial precarity among DH homeowners from this project. The respondents to a 2014 DH survey of homeowners indicate that of the 58% of homeowners who would describe their financial situation prior to DH homeownership as “paycheck to paycheck,” 31% continue to describe their financial situation as “paycheck to paycheck.” These findings did not include HC residents nor did they isolate unmarried mothers. See 2013 Dallas Area Habitat for Humanity Homeowner Survey Report, 15. Given broader statistics on the economic precarity of unmarried mothers, however, collaborator experiences are likely fairly representative.
check.” Alma and Jessica chose the phrase “low-income” as a primary identifier of their experiences as single mothers. Collaborators gave overlapping and distinct reasons for these realities. In the pilesort exercise related to sources of pressure and stress, every collaborator in both focus groups chose “bills.” Pinky, Alma, and Stormy each chose “mortgage.” Jennifer, Alma, Jessica, and Stormy chose “income.” Clodie and Jessica specifically talked about struggling to decide which bills and expenses take priority in any given month and their frustrations at living “paycheck to paycheck” without savings. Jennifer talked about choosing between bills and medications she needs. Jennifer and Jessica each talked about not being paid their worth despite long-term employment and positive feedback from managers.

Particular sources of financial imbalances named included the following: medical issues; bills; transportation challenges; various job changes; low incomes; underemployment; changes in tax deductions; debts from student loans, title companies, banks, and private sources; insufficient or non-existent direct aid; lack of paternal or extended family support; costs of extracurricular activities, school-related expenses, and basic needs for their child/ren; and costs of helping support family members such as parents, grandchildren, and siblings.

Jennifer said she has previously worked second jobs for additional income, but her current schedule prevents that. Clodie worked three and four jobs at a time for three decades and said she no longer has the energy or health for that schedule. In addition, she works unpaid overtime hours for her current salaried position. Collaborators recount sleepless nights wondering how much to pay on what bill to avoid termination of various services. Several said some of their frustration with their current financial distress stems from feeling as if, in Pinky’s words, “I should be further than where I am in life.” Twila said, “I wanted to be financially at a point where I wouldn’t even qualify for [direct aid].”
Stormy also said a “system change” is needed. She said, “Wages need to go up,” and Alma agreed, saying, “Oh yeah, because men are unreliable.” Jessica said that raising the minimum wage would not help because then “they have to raise everything and the costs go up.” Stormy said that minimum wage “keeps people dependent on the government and assistance” because no one can “make it” on minimum wage. In FG1, Jennifer and Clodie talked about the need for higher wages and laughed at the idea that the current minimum wage is remotely sufficient to meet expenses.

When I asked collaborators to list what would promote their health and well-being, Jennifer said “better pay” would help her in multiple ways. She said that “better education” would “probably” allow her to make more money, but she also thinks she should be making more in her current job. Clodie summarized her desires for paid work as a job in which she can directly help people, have control over her schedule, and have enough income for financial stability. Control and respect, expressed in multiple ways in a work environment, are important to Clodie. She said she has previously felt as if she had the ability to leave a job if she was not respected, but she does not have that choice now because of the current job market and economy.

As FG2 discussed the need for more income, Stormy talked about using tax refunds to “treat her family to a few things.” When I asked her what sort of things she bought, she said, “Oh, like a microwave for the apartment because we didn’t have one.” Jessica does not really even want more income to spend on herself. She said, “I feel guilty buying socks [for myself], but I want to be able to go to the store to buy my kids new outfits.” Alma also said she finds it difficult to spend money on herself, even when given gifts or gift cards by someone who wants her to spend it on herself. In her individual interview, Christina recalled just how tight her budget has been at times. She said, “My daughter would want to go out to eat. We couldn’t. I had a
friend take her out to eat and she goes, ‘I’m so sorry, I didn’t know you don’t allow her to eat McDonald’s.’ I said, ‘I allow her to eat McDonald’s.’ ‘She said she hadn’t been there in, like, a year.’ I said, ‘Well that’s ‘cause we can’t afford it. (laughs) It’s not ‘cause I don’t allow it.’ So it was little things like that she didn’t have.”

Stormy finally said, “You almost have to have two incomes.” This observation is similar to what Twila said in her interview. The financial imbalance is “probably a major one with all single mothers, unless they’re pretty financially set…they [kids] wanna take part in certain things and you just don’t have the money.” Jessica said, “I don’t want to use it as an excuse, but I think it almost is harder for single women than men.” She talked about women making less than men in the same job and said she sees it in her field. I added that women of color make even less than white women, and that it takes a full degree more of education for women to make equal wages to men. Jessica talked about how much income her ex-husband made, despite having less education, and his refusal to pay any child support, despite court orders and a back child support bill between $30,000 and $40,000.

Twila also identified the limitation of one income as the major issue with single parenting. One income makes it impossible to save for the “rainy day that’s inevitably coming.”

Alma said, “Something’s always happening. I can’t get back on my feet. I hate that because I don’t like to live like that.”

Clodie said:

Everybody is struggling. So it’s kinda hard to really put a finger on it. It’s nothing to blame, no one to blame. But it’s just that divorces and everything leaves single parent families, single mothers more so. To me, I may be wrong, but for the most part the costs of living, society, the way it’s designed, it’s more for a two-income family. Everything is so expensive, but pay is still down here. It takes two to make ends meet, but you can take a two-income family and still barely be making the income meet. If you think of a two-income family that’s living from paycheck to paycheck, ‘cause they do, too, just think about the single parents. Just like I’m saying, I done got off course and am trying to rearrange to make things work. A lot of the single parents, women, they have to figure
out this and this. Sometimes it’s, like, “Do I pay this bill and be late on this one, but it has to be paid.” So it’s just an ongoing struggle.

Clodie thinks a major issue that would help her, other “single persons,” and “welfare people” is raising pay. She continued by saying that “a lot of single parents that we’re saying that’s on the system” recognize that if they make just a little bit more, they will lose assistance and still not be able to pay bills with the amount of federal taxes taken out of their paychecks. Indeed several collaborators talked about losing assistance after raises as little as ten and twenty-five cents per hour. Clodie thinks this system means the “middle-income people” lose out. She said raising wages “helps society. It’ll help the stores…’cause these people have money to buy things. Of course it’s gonna put money into businesses.”

In relation to the experience of struggling to match income with expenses, Pinky referenced Barbara Ehrenreich’s book *Nickel and Dimed*, which recounts her short-term struggles while experimentally living on low incomes. Pinky found Ehrenreich’s work frustrating. She would much prefer persons interested in learning about these struggles

…be blunt and straightforward, asking us our perspectives and our situations…She only got a taste of what was going on. She didn’t live it day in and day out…I felt like she had a lot of advantages to her situation being that she was privileged…she had a cushion which allowed her to slip through cracks…people like us who work minimum wage jobs don’t have cushions. Life is not neutral!

Stormy’s specific hopes for her children’s futures paint a particular picture worth repeating here. She does not want to give them so much they will expect easy lives where they cannot “make it on their own and survive.” She said she would like to provide each of them with a house, a “good, used, reliable car,” and an education so that none of them has to “rely on anybody.” Further, Stormy would like to provide this for her children without having to “climb any professional ladders.” She likes her cashiering job. She finds customer relationships meaningful and job responsibilities manageable, leaving her fulfilled and with enough energy to
enjoy time at home, care for her daughter, and take an annual vacation. She said she could likely work in management if she wanted but that she “doesn’t want the hassle.” She also feels like the position would keep her from maintaining a healthy balance of paid work and family work. She said she might consider management after her daughter graduates from high school and leaves home.

Clodie, of course, accurately names wage realities in the U.S. economy. Economist Richard Wolff notes that real wages in the U.S. stopped rising after the 1970s, even as productivity steadily increased. Minimum wage, introduced as a “family wage,” was envisioned as a way for males to provide for their families as sole wage earners. However, it was never tied to inflation and has steadily declined in value, justified by the (false) idea that minimum wage earners are primarily young people who are not their families’ primary income source. Wolff identifies the roots of wage stagnation and decline despite increased productivity and profits in the workings of U.S. capitalism, which gives disproportionate power and control over productions and surplus to the capitalists or ruling class. Collaborators clearly know this exploitation well.

Chapter One included basic statistics of wage disparities by gender and race, which are also noted in collaborator discussions. Leslie McCall explores these economic and social inequalities in Dallas, arguing that dynamics of inequalities differ by region: “[C]onfigurations

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188 As explored in Chapter One, this arrangement has always left single mothers economically vulnerable.

of inequality, in which race, gender, and class intersect in a variety of ways [depend] on underlying economic conditions in local economies.”190 McCall notes that efforts in the 1930s to address economic inequality were limited to universal policies that implicitly and explicitly excluded white women and all people of color and did address issues of discrimination against these groups. In the 1960s, policies addressing social inequalities of race and gender failed to address class inequalities and their economic roots. Dallas, already situated in “the most deregulated economy in the advanced industrial world,” is “one of the most deregulated, deinstitutionalized, and flexible labor and competitive product markets” in the U.S.191 It is “a city with low unemployment, sustained service growth, and concentrated postindustrial employment” with “a legacy of low wages for highly educated/skilled women, a low and declining wage floor for less skilled men, integration of men into female dominated occupations, and a high ceiling for highly educated men.”192

This deregulation has allowed Dallas to fare better than other areas in the recent recession, but the work is available—low-wage work that impacts women and people of color in particular ways. First, McCall says, “a less regulated economy is more likely to permit discriminatory behavior among employers, especially in metropolitan areas that have attracted so many highly skilled white migrants from other parts of the country. These factors combine to create greater racial dualism in postindustrial, immigrant cities like Dallas.”193 McCall continues


191 McCall, 31.

192 McCall, 82.

193 McCall, 82–84.
that efforts for recognition and redistribution should aim to reduce inequality in service-dominated economies, with feminists orienting “their politics toward a more inclusive concern for the dynamics of racial inequality and for the condition of male as well as female low-wage workers.”\(^{194}\) That said, McCall also notes that Dallas is a high-technology, advanced producer in services and electronics. Given the gendered nature of the technology field, well-educated, professional women have not made the same advances in economic equality in Dallas as they have in other regions with different economics configurations. Thus, education levels of women in Dallas have less economic impact than elsewhere. Unfortunately, McCall predicts that the Dallas economy is most representative of future economic trends.\(^{195}\)

Given these economic vulnerabilities and their inherent inevitability within the structures of neoliberal capitalism, many argue for a stronger social safety net.\(^{196}\) Katie Cannon cites social theorist Oliver C. Cox’s observation that “in capitalist culture welfare institutions emerge in abundance.” Cox does not view these welfare institutions as ameliorating the impacts of capitalist structures, describing them as “pretentious manifestations of humanitarianism or, at best, concessions to domestic discontent aimed to adjust conditions to make capitalist political economy appear to provide a respected way of life.”\(^{197}\) Collaborators confirm the failure of direct

\(^{194}\) McCall, 88.

\(^{195}\) McCall, 53.

\(^{196}\) Even Adam Smith assumed a strong social safety net, ensuring basic material needs of community members, outside the competitive mechanisms of capitalism.

assistance programs to offer substantive economic or social support, once again exposing the 
interrelated nature of advanced capitalism and oppressive social hierarchies.

Each collaborator has received direct aid to assist with expenses or needs at some point in 
her time as an unmarried mother. Many currently receive direct assistance of some kind, whether 
food stamps (SNAP), CCA, and/or Medicaid. Stormy talked about living “barely paycheck to 
paycheck” and needing assistance to survive while feeling judged for “being on assistance” and 
trapped there because of financial vulnerability. Members of FG1 said existing forms of 
assistance for single mothers are difficult to discover. After Jennifer expressed this frustration, 
Clodie said, “Well, they don’t advertise that. They advertise payday loans…They don’t really 
advertise how you can get help, but they have a lot of those commercials on how to get in debt.” 
Clodie talked about never really knowing about what resources might be available to help. She 
said she did not know about or think about food stamps even when her son was young and she 
went without eating so she could feed him. She also talked about caring for her elderly parents 
and ill siblings and the high costs in terms of money and time. As noted earlier, Clodie said 
childcare costs have also been highly stressful. With just “a little extra money,” she could have 
chosen childcare she felt helped her son thrive more than the care her financial situation forced 
her to choose.

In addition to frustration with the subjective quality of their experiences with direct aid 
agencies, collaborators in FG2 said these agencies most often fail/ed to provide or help in a 
meaningful way. Jessica said, with government childcare assistance, that funding is limited: 
“They told me specifically, they’ll look for any reason, any reason they can, they will drop you 
because they have limited resources now and a huge waitlist…If you don’t swipe your card 
every time you drop your kids…they can drop you.” Alma is on this waitlist for childcare
assistance. When I asked what people who decide whether to increase or cut funding for childcare are thinking about single mothers, Stormy replied, “They think, ‘That’s not my problem.’ I honestly think they don’t care because, number one, it ain’t them.” Jessica agreed, saying, “Yes, I think the higher up it is, the less they actually see what’s going on.” Alma said of her critical co-workers, “They don’t know struggle, they don’t ever experience it.” This constant sense of insecurity, even with the assistance she gets, impacts Jessica’s choices. This includes whether she reports or addresses concerns about her children’s childcare quality to whether she will marry her boyfriend and risk losing what direct aid she has if that relationship does not work out or if his added income does not contribute enough to meet her expenses without direct aid.

Stormy said that people, such as policy makers who cut funding from direct assistance programs, “think we’re not as hard-working because we’re getting temporary assistance and still struggling.” Jessica said she has heard other students comment negatively about people receiving food stamps as well as criticisms of their food purchases. She said she does not think anyone “should judge” because “you don’t know. They’re not always lazy, they might be a hard worker.” In terms of people with power, Jessica said, “Yes, I think the higher up it is, the less they actually see what’s going on.” Alma said of her critical co-workers, “They don’t know struggle, they don’t ever experience it.”

Alma said her negative impression of these agencies results from not getting help when she needed it most. “I was by myself. I literally have nothing in the apartment with kids, and I couldn’t even get food stamps. Are you freaking kidding me? I never ask for help, and now I have nothing in my fridge. I don’t care, just enough for my kids, you know? I remember that experience. It was horrible. That girl was so rude.” Jessica said one way in which assistance could be more equitable would be evaluating income after deductions like insurance and bills.
She would like agencies to consider what she actually takes home each month instead of what her official earnings show given the high costs of her insurance and her family’s medical bills.

Pinky noted, “Like I said, the system is designed for failure.” She added that when she did not have a job, she could not pay her bills. She said, “When I was off and I was collecting unemployment, they didn’t let us get food stamps.” At another time of need, she remembered calling numerous “churches and organizations,” which told her they were not allowed to help her because she was receiving housing assistance. As a result, her lights were shut off because housing assistance precluded her receiving other forms of charitable assistance.

As explored in Chapter One, the political will to create meaningful direct assistance programs is blocked by the system’s need to “breed universal contempt for those people exploited by the system.”198 Because capitalism relies on the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy to explain differing levels of income and power, individuals “are assumed to have willingly chosen the course leading to their station in life.”199 When a disproportionate number of individuals belong to the same social grouping, stereotypes function to justify the broad trend.200 Thus, programs for direct assistance targeted specifically for the poor “tend to stigmatize recipients, casting them as deviants and scroungers and invidiously distinguishing them from ‘wage earners’ and ‘taxpayers’ who ‘pay their own way.’ Welfare programs of this type ‘target’ the poor—not only for material aid but also for public hostility. The end result is

198 Cannon, 156.


200 Cox, 148.
In the case of single mothers, Fraser identifies the relationship between cultural misrecognition and economic reforms as one in which “a pervasive cultural devaluation of female caregiving inflects support for single-mother families as ‘getting something for nothing.’”

Not surprisingly, this “divide and conquer” mechanism is powerful. Even as collaborators articulated their frustrating experiences with direct assistance programs, they shared their negative perceptions of other single mothers receiving direct assistance. In FG2, Stormy talked about single mothers “abusing the system.” “I see it every day…women, they don’t work or they live with baby daddy, and he may work but they don’t claim his income so she can get it. They keep having more kids so they can stay home and get the money, the TANF, the food stamps…they have their nails done, they have better cellphones than me…and they have expensive designer purses, which I have one that my daughter bought me like four years ago for my birthday.”

Alma added, “You’re like me” because she, too, has a designer purse, which her mother bought her before she died. Stormy continued, “They just abuse it…making me aggravated. Maybe they do work, and maybe I am being judgmental…but it’s, like, I see you in the store week after week, and it’s the same thing. I mean, if I can do it, you can do it.” Jessica was the only member of FG2 who said that others, too, might have received their purses or phones as gifts.

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202 Fraser and Honneth, 65.
Jessica said that while “some [people] abuse, no one knows every story.” She does not like feeling shame because she knows she, too, is being judged based on surface assumptions regarding choices and appearances. Stormy responded that Jessica “shouldn’t feel shame because you’re not abusing.”

When Stormy commented on the hair and nails of customers “who are abusing,” Jessica, who is white and thin, with straight, brown hair, said she has not had time or money for a haircut in three years. Stormy’s use of “baby daddy,” which is often identified as a racially and ethnically coded phrase and her reference to hair and nails suggest she is envisioning Black women in her comments about markers that indicate abuse of direct assistance. These comments reflect a lack of consciousness for what Hill Collins identifies as the prevailing white standards of beauty in relation to skin color, facial features, and hair texture. These beauty standards have long functioned to “other” and devalue Black women, whether they are being judged for not fitting into these norms or for spending limited finances in attempts to fit into these norms.203 Black women know that if they do not find ways to straighten their hair or if they wear their hair natural or in braids, they incur material and social repercussions, whether missing out on jobs or more subtle forms of cultural disrespect.204 Further, collaborators in FG2 might not realize that Black women have similar “work arounds” as they do in relation to expensive purses, so they are likely not paying as much for their hair and nails as Stormy and Jessica assume. Struggling with their own challenges, Jessica and Stormy do not see how their skin color and hair privilege them in this social and economic hierarchy.

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203 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 97.

204 Collins, 100.
Twila and Pinky, who are Black, expressed anger at women who “abuse the system” for other reasons than their hair and nails. Twila cited observations of grocery choices and the presence of an adult male, and Pinky cited direct knowledge of neighbors and friends. Pinky said that some women’s understandings of gender and gender roles lead to particular ways of seeking direct assistance and financial support from the fathers of their children. She specifically pointed out TANF as a problem because some women “are not trying to work” and “just want more money from their baby daddies, husband, or whoever it was.” She said some times the father is supporting his child/ren, but that “it’s not to the mother’s expectation of what she feels the man should do. So because she wanna be greedy and get extra and go get TANF, when she give them his name, they’re gonna slap him with child support. It’s all a big old loop to keep you trapped.”

Pinky also said, “People don’t realize that government assistance is supposed to be temporary. People get on that mess and get comfortable.” Pinky said that when she started accepting direct aid, she promised herself she would only need it for ten years and is very proud that she stopped receiving aid after ten years. Jennifer and Clodie said they knew people who had been on TANF “their whole lives.” When I asked whether they knew about the five-year limitation on TANF benefits and the work requirements, neither did. They said they were glad to know that. They also did not know that the actual value of TANF benefits has decreased in the past decade. I also pointed out the relatively small amount of money the government spends on direct assistance programs. Jennifer said, “That’s true,” and the discussion shifted to ways to help more women.

I do not doubt that every collaborator knows someone who makes use of direct assistance in ways that differ from her own approach. Statistics, however, suggest that the vast majority of persons receiving direct assistance are much more similar to themselves. A study by the U.S.
Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that families receiving direct assistance spend considerably less than families not receiving direct assistance in every area of expenditures, including housing, healthcare, entertainment, and food.\textsuperscript{205} Further, along with TANF work requirements, studies show that 87\% of families with children receiving SNAP benefits have been employed within a year of receiving this assistance, with 62\% being employed in that month. Overall, best estimates of “abuse,” or ineligible receipt of assistance, range between two and three percent.\textsuperscript{206}

The effectiveness of stereotypes to function within oppressed groups to perpetuate oppressive structures is disheartening. They reveal the effectiveness of the system at turning people whose interests actually align against each other. However, collaborators often found ways through these conversations into more empowering approaches. Right after the conversation about welfare abuse, members of FG1 said they do not really want to judge young, single mothers too much. In what was perhaps the most dynamic conversation in all my interviews, Pinky talked about leaders not knowing and caring about people’s experiences. She said young people will be positioned to make changes in the future so it matters that they learn about realities such as theirs and care enough to make changes. Jennifer agreed that young people need motivation not just to “continue society the way it has always been.” She and Pinky agreed that it is not young people’s fault that they do not know, and Jennifer said “We can enlighten them. If you can plant one seed…” She also said foundations like DWF “need to sit down and…listen to our stories.” She continued, “We can go to the state and say this is what we


need to do for these women.” Pinky added, “We have to get together in numbers.” Clodie then said, “Now you talking!” She said they do need to talk to young people, but “we have to pave the way…it takes us to go and voice what we have experienced to get them there…we ought to get knowledgeable about who they are and what to do to get them where they need to be.” Jennifer then said, “We’re letting our society down by not standing up” because single mothers will continue to experience the same struggles in the future unless or until people like them and others “do what we can do.”

At this point, I had to suggest stopping this developing conversation because our scheduled time was up, and I wanted to respect everyone’s time and afternoon plans. I asked if they could bring their energy and ideas to the next focus group, and Jennifer said, laughing, “Do you realize how long we’ve been fighting this fight?” Pinky repeated that they needed numbers to enact change truly on a governmental level, and she acknowledged the difficulties in getting comfortable people in power to change their actions. She concluded, “If we never try, we never know.” Jennifer then said, “We can start right here, in Dallas. And from Dallas, it can go to Austin.”

Collaborators’ experiences of inadequate wages, their encounters with racial and gender discrimination in paid work, and their acknowledgment of social stereotypes confirm what McCall, Wolff, Day, Fraser, and others identify about the interrelatedness of economic inequality and social inequality. McCall, in her analysis of dynamics in Dallas, argues for the need for antidiscrimination policies as well as broad policies that address systemic economic inequalities. She warns that “economic policies must…be understood as organizers of multiple, and at times competing, dimensions of social inequality” so that any economic restructuring does not
“reinstate gender and racial hierarchies.” These accounts also reinforce the need and potential for leadership by those with direct experience in these efforts.

The next generative theme deepens the picture of class structures and social hierarchies impacting collaborators’ capacities for thriving—education.

Education

Collaborators spoke at length about their experiences with education. Personal experiences of collaborators as unmarried mothers with education systems and institutions, whether regarding their own education or that of their child/ren, were prominent in individual and focus group conversations. Six collaborators became pregnant while in high school. Each felt as if she had to drop out, often after trying to balance attending school and caring for her newborn. Seven collaborators have earned GEDs or high school diplomas, and most have gotten vocational certifications of some kind. With varying degrees of urgency, almost all collaborators would like to receive additional education.

While Clodie said she was able to finish her associate degree because her parents took care of her son, she also said she wanted to complete a bachelor degree after her associate degree and did not feel she should. She started working full-time so she could take responsibility for her son. During this time she went without eating and had to put her son in childcare situations that made her uncomfortable. Jennifer gave up opportunities for college athletic scholarships when she chose taking primary responsibility for her child over continuing with her education. In the pilesort exercise she chose “education” as a primary source of stress, explaining that she wants to go to school for her high school diploma and then for nursing, but

__207__ McCall, *Complex Inequality*, 190.
she cannot manage balancing school and paid work. Jennifer said more education would “make things much better for me mentally, emotionally, spiritually, really in all aspects of my life.”

Not surprisingly, then, Jennifer answered my later question about what needed to change by saying “education.” She said she would be “the happiest woman in the world” if she could just go to school full-time without having simultaneously to work full-time. This, she said, would allow her to “become what God has chosen me to be.” Pinky agreed, and Clodie said there has to be a way to change the system so that options extend beyond “going on welfare just to go back to school.” Pinky commented that in the current system “you gotta take a step back just to take a step forward.” The group brought up food stamps, welfare, and Section 8 housing assistance as ways to make ends meet while “bettering themselves” through education. They also agreed that these options demonstrated the reality that single mothers must “take a step back to take a step forward.”

Pinky is experiencing stress because she is taking online classes and is struggling with some of the material. She thinks taking classes at a campus would be better, but online courses work best for her paid work and family work schedules. Pinky suggested a three- to four-year “schoolcation” that would provide income for single parents going to school. Everyone agreed she would expect stipulations regarding grades and attendance to accompany such opportunities. Jennifer said she would subsequently “put back into society what society is giving me in order for me to achieve what I want to do.” Clodie added that the government spends so much “of our tax dollars on different things” that this should be manageable. Jennifer then said, “Our tax dollars are going to women that are just sitting at home and not doing anything.” Clodie said, “Right!” Jennifer said, “As a taxpayer, I just want to receive some of my money back.” Clodie said she does not want to go to school but supports changing the system so that others can.
When Clodie was attending college after her son’s birth, individual teachers supported her by helping her get good jobs to support him. She feels they helped her secure jobs because “they could see how hard I was working.” Clodie worked part-time in the school year and full-time in the summer. She detailed her current struggles to pay back a student loan from many years ago when she tried to finish her bachelor’s degree. The IRS is still garnishing her earnings although she has now paid well over three times the amount of the original loan. Twila tried attending community college after high school when her children were young and stopped because the balance was too difficult to manage. She has since attained certificates to work in the healthcare field. Twila is currently taking out student loans to pay for college and is enrolled full-time and taking online classes while working.

Pinky tried attending Dallas community colleges twice and received misinformation regarding financial aid and enrollment options. As she graduated from high school, she said no one at her high school gave her any advice on how to pursue advanced education. The financial aid process at a Dallas community college was prohibitive for Pinky for two reasons. First, she would not be reimbursed until after paying initial costs, which she could not afford, and second, the school asked for information about her parents’ finances to determine her eligibility. As Pinky noted, the financial aid department “said because I was under a certain age that I had to use the parents’ information and I’m, like, ‘What the fuck world do they live in? My life is not perfect [laughs] like other people’s who come through here. There is no income. There is no parents.’”

Hence, Pinky has chosen for-profit colleges for her education. She is currently paying off a $9,000 loan from her first certification after high school.

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208 The financial aid department clearly did not advise Pinky that students can apply for exemptions from having their parents’ financials considered. That process, however, is lengthy
Pinky’s experience is not uncommon. While for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) have existed since the 1800s, labor demands and social realities have resulted in significant rises in the numbers of such institutions and their visibility. Increasing scrutiny by government and advocacy groups is raising concerns about practices of these FPCUs. These institutions cater to students who need to finish degrees or certificate programs quickly because of caregiving responsibilities and financial needs. Students attending these schools are more likely “to be older, women, students of color, and come from lower-income and less educated families” and are persons “most disadvantaged by educational and social opportunity gaps.”

A recent study found that 30% of single mothers attend FPCUs, comprising 25% of the total FPCU student population despite being only 11% of the total undergraduate population. Black, low-income women are mostly likely to be single mothers and are the group most likely to attend FPCUs.

Because these institutions rely entirely on tuition as income, they are oriented towards students as consumers. They are often drawn into the school by aggressive recruiters who work on commission and make promises regarding job placement that have been contested by outside research groups. Costs and default rates are disproportionately high at these institutions. Ninety-six percent of students take out student loans at FPCUs, compared to 13% at community colleges, 48% at four-year public schools, and 57% at four-year private non-profit colleges.


Single mothers have disproportionately higher loan amounts and default rates on these loans.\textsuperscript{211} While Pinky owes $9000 (boyfriends helped her pay for some of her certificates and degrees), 57\% of students at FPCUs owe $30,000 or more, compared to 25\% of those from private non-profit and 12\% from public institutions.\textsuperscript{212} FPCUs meet important needs, however, including low student-to-teacher ratios, a wide range of classtime options and fast tracks to vocational degrees. Most students at FPCUs expect future income capacities to offset the cost of their education.

Community colleges also have benefits and drawbacks for single mothers who are students. Jessica, who currently attends a Dallas community college, chose “school” as a primary source of support or encouragement. Even though she has had to attend intermittently because of work and family demands, she talked about how much she enjoyed going to school because it makes her feel “motivated” and “positive” about her future. She also experiences frustrations with her community college. She said when she applied for childcare assistance at the college, she received approval several months into the semester, near its end. She also said despite calling repeatedly for many weeks about childcare needs and tuition bills she could not afford, she got inconsistent messages. Upon hearing this, Stormy said, “It’s just paperwork to them, and that’s all it is.” When I asked what it would look like if the school system had the family’s best interests at heart, Stormy said, “If you have classes with your child, they wouldn’t penalize you for it.” Jessica said, “Or just being personable, even over the phone. When I finally get someone helpful, I’m, like, ‘Thank you so much!’ and they’re, like, ‘Oh, it’s okay,’ and I’m, like, ‘You

\textsuperscript{211} https://iwpr.org/publications/single-mothers-overrepresented-profit-colleges/.

don’t know what I’ve been through.’ I have to hold for about an hour and a half every time I call…and then weeks go by and nothing happens so I call again, wait another hour and a half and explain it all to another person. And by then I’m about to cry on the phone.”

Jessica and Pinky’s experiences with community colleges are important to explore because community colleges offer postsecondary access to many students balancing responsibilities of work and family. Single mothers are much more likely to attend a community college than a four-year college, a university, or an FPCU, and recent data indicate a rise in these numbers. Of the single mother population attending postsecondary schools, 44% attend a community college. Among community college students, 30% are student-parents. Given difficulties collaborators describe, it is unsurprising that 43% of single mothers attending community colleges report that they are likely to drop out of school because of dependent care demands. In fact, only 28% of single mothers entering college complete a degree or certificate within six years.

A recent study of student-parents in community colleges examined systemic factors shaping single mothers’ experiences there. Specifically, researchers explored the impact of neoliberal policy making in community colleges, suggesting that increasing marketization of

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community colleges adversely impacts marginalized students. Authors Rebecca D. Cox and Margaret W. Sallee write, “Not only does neoliberal ideology discount the effect of structural inequality on nontraditional students’ postsecondary pathways, but it also renders family relationships and caregiving responsibilities irrelevant to its emphasis on individual responsibility and market exchanges.” Specifically, neoliberal principles of “increased market competition, new forms of state intervention, and promotion of individual rights over collective responsibility” have, among other impacts, altered the nature of funding for these institutions. Schools have responded to decreased levels of government contributions by increasing tuition costs and cutting operating costs in the name of greater economic efficiency. Thus, as Jessica experienced, schools have less staff overall and less full-time staff to respond to student needs in consistent or timely ways. The study found that smaller administrative numbers also diminish capacity to share information effectively about services that are available to support single mothers. For instance, many single mothers remain unaware of childcare programs offered by their schools. While collaborators in this project did not mention their professors, reports from faculty and students in community colleges indicate that higher numbers of underpaid adjunct professors also detract from a school’s capacity to provide meaningful, sustained faculty support for students.

As Cox and Sallee indicate, the additional demands on students to navigate a system without adequate support disproportionately impacts students like single mothers. Jessica’s experience intersects directly with my own experiences and highlights how intersecting

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216 Cox and Sallee, “Neoliberalism Across Borders.”
dynamics of differences and privileges related to class and gender impact one’s chances of educational success. My spouse, Michael, attended the same community college Jessica attends. He also encountered inaccessible, untrained, and overburdened financial aid staff. He, too, did not receive financial aid until near semester’s end for most semesters and sometimes not until after the semester ended due to administrative errors. Like Jessica, he expressed frustration, anger, and helplessness at many points during his time as a part-time student as he also worked full-time in a maintenance position and did his share to care for two young children. He also lost sleep and developed health problems related to these anxieties.

Differences between his experiences and Jessica’s experiences, however, are also significant. While Michael is a first-generation college student who also had children at a young age, he is now married to someone who shares responsibilities for family care and financial income (even if partially in the form of student loans). Further, because I have extensive experience in various education systems and a flexible paid work environment, I was able to connect him with a network of external people and information that ultimately helped him successfully navigate the frustrating and time-consuming community college system. Additionally, two teachers advocated strongly for him when administrative choices threatened to halt his progress. These teachers told him they were glad to help him because he was “such a good student, who showed up to class every time and turned in assignments on time.” He was able to do this because of his hard work and determination, which he shares with Jessica, and also because I was able to cover unexpected childcare responsibilities, a support Jessica does not have. Both experiences indicate needs for systemic changes in community colleges catering most often to people with limited time, money, and energy. Yet critical differences stemming from
class-related privileges have meant greater mental, emotional, and even financial costs to Jessica and less likelihood of completion of her degree.

As evidenced by statistics and collaborators’ accounts, these barriers often prevent single mothers from attempting postsecondary education. Alma would like to go to school but does not think she can add anything to her current responsibilities. In ten years she hopes to be in a “more secure place” where school might be an option. Christina expressed similar thoughts but experienced an additional barrier. She started working as a cashier at Target in high school and said she thinks the immediate purchasing power of having spending money deterred her from attending college. While she said she wanted to be a nurse growing up, she never really considered college after high school. She said her Jehovah’s Witnesses faith community discouraged higher education. She felt that the message she got at church and from her parents was, “If it’s God’s will, a path with open, but religion is the priority.”

Experiences with public education in the elementary, middle, and high school contexts via collaborators’ children were also a consistent theme in individual interviews and focus groups. Collaborators’ accounts include positive, negative, and mixed experiences with both individual educators and with public educational institutions. When they have been able to choose schools in a different district than their neighborhood school, collaborators report being much more satisfied with the quality of education their children are receiving. Seven collaborators have chosen, at some point, to send their child/ren to charter schools or schools not zoned for HC. The three whose children are attending or have attended neighborhood schools have predominantly negative impressions of these schools. Several collaborators leave their child/ren in local schools for elementary school and then send them to different schools for middle and high school. Families use addresses of friends or extended family members to send
their children to other school districts, or they enroll their children in charter schools. While DH literature on the HC neighborhood indicates a relatively strong local school system, DH staff said they know most families send their children to non-local schools.217

Sources of pressure and support from their children’s educational experiences vary regarding expenses, administration, educators, school changes, transportation, policies, and demographics. Pinky, for instance, said she could not buy her son new shoes or a new school uniform this year. She said that she had his old uniform dry cleaned so that it looked newer and that she planned to buy him new underwear when she gets her next paycheck. Jessica said she struggles when unexpected school-related expenses arise. When the school asks her to contribute to a school carnival, for instance, she has to use her SNAP benefits to purchase the items even though she knows she is being judged for having a cake in her grocery cart.

Jessica highlighted responsibilities for her children’s education as an area where she feels most stressed as a single mother. In her words, help even with “the littlest things…lightens the load so much…just getting someone to help the kids get the homework done.” Alma also included helping kids with homework at the top of the list of stressors in her daily grind of meeting responsibilities.

When I asked why there was such a difference between schools, Stormy and Jessica immediately brought up socioeconomic differences. Stormy suggested that it was funding, and Jessica suggested test scores, adding that test scores secure more funding and “areas that have more money produce better test scores.” Stormy also talked about active and well-funded Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) in more affluent areas that make positive differences in schools.

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217 I did not tell DH staff which or how many collaborators send children to non-local schools. Rather, I asked if this was a common practice among DH homeowners.
She added that more affluent families have more time to participate in school functions because “the women stay home and can devote their time to that.” Jessica said she was involved with her daughter’s class in Mesquite prior to moving to HC but that Seagoville did not allow parental attendance at class parties. Stormy said, “They don’t give a crap for the kid.” Jessica said, “They don’t really encourage you to come eat with them there…They don’t encourage you to be involved.” Stormy said her children are older, and they attended the schools in Mesquite that Jessica attended. Stormy said it seems like “it was just different…You had more personal relationships with the teachers. Even the people in the lunch room...You got more involved in the parties.” Jessica said when she attended those schools they had community service opportunities and that “it was just more fun.” Stormy said there was more sense of community.

When I asked again why local schools do not seem to have students’ best interests at heart, Jessica talked more about testing. “Honestly, I was going to school to be a teacher. And I can’t do it. It’s sad because they need more teachers that care, but these days you can’t even plan your own curriculum anymore…It’s all about test scores and memorizing.” Stormy said, “They test them to death.” Jessica also talked about teacher changes occurring multiple times throughout the school year, often because of budget cuts, resulting in larger classes. Jessica and Alma, whose children attend Seagoville elementary schools, were both impacted by a recent rezoning. The school district informed both families that their children would change schools the next year to a school slightly farther away. Jessica appealed to her current school’s principal, out of desperation and in tears, and the principal allowed her children to stay at their current school.
Alma did not appeal the change and is very angry about it, including the extra time and expense involved in traveling farther for school.218

Members of FG2 talked about children’s needs for play and downtime both at school and at home, where they feel encumbered by projects and homework. Jessica said she went one day to have lunch with her first and second graders, and a man “was screaming” at children walking through the line when Jessica did not think they were being loud. She said he told the kids they had to eat lunch on the stage and “the little kids were just on the stage crying the whole time, and they hadn’t even done anything!” She said they even left them there through PE. Stormy said, “that’s almost humiliation,” and Alma agreed. Jessica said, “That’s why I feel like they don’t have their best interest.” Jessica said she does not like the prohibition on talking at lunchtime and lack of recess in the schools. “No wonder they’re hyperactive!”219 Regarding public education, Jessica said, “They just need to put more effort into the public schools.”

The six collaborators whose children have attended a Seagoville (in the Dallas Independent School District, DISD) agree that the environments of these schools differ dramatically from environments at other schools, such as Mesquite, Lancaster, or Richardson ISD, where they have prior or current experience with their children in school. As they discussed these differences, intertwined relationships between socioeconomic and racial/ethnic dynamics

218 As with many instances, it is impossible to determine whether race was a factor in these different outcomes. But it is worth at least naming that Jessica, who is white, felt empowered enough to appeal whereas Alma, who is Chicana, did not.

219 Collaborators raised issues of parental visitation, peer conversation, and recess in schools several times. An informal poll I conducted with educators, parents, and friends with experience in a wide array of schools across the Dallas/Fort Worth area suggests that schools in lower income areas are more likely to restrict or prohibit peer conversations at lunch, parental visitation during lunch, and recess. Collaborators noted differences among Seagoville, Mesquite, Richardson, and Lancaster schools with similar patterns.
emerged. While collaborators initially observed the differences in funding between public schools, they also frequently referenced race. Collaborators talked about fights and aggressive behaviors of students at the HC schools. Jennifer compared students to those in Lancaster, and Clodie compared students to those in Mesquite, saying that students in the Seagoville schools are “rowdier” than other schools they have experienced. Both say such behavior is not allowed in other schools. Jennifer said the reason for the differences lies in socioeconomic, not racial, differences. However, both women then said the Seagoville school is primarily a mix of Black and Hispanic students whereas it was once predominantly white. Clodie said her daughter experienced bullying and talked about “a lot of Hispanic girls fighting” before she transferred to Mesquite schools. Jennifer said her son “hung around with a lot of Hispanics because he’s out here, and I don’t like the person that he’s started to become. He wasn’t that way when he was hanging out with the kids in Lancaster [which is predominantly Black]. They more calmer, they have values. The parents, they come from homes. They’re laid back.”

Alma said her daughter, who attends the local elementary school, also experiences challenges with her peers. “My daughter rides the bus to school and them kids…oh them girls.” She said the girls use language and are concerned with matters she considers too old for her daughter. Stormy said that “girls are bad” and “especially in this neighborhood.” Alma’s kids went to DISD schools and her older children now attend Richardson ISD schools. She said the difference between the schools is that Richardson’s “teachers…care about their job. They’re not just there to get a paycheck…they’re really motivating [the kids] for the future. They sit down, it’s more of a mentor for them.” When I asked why she thought there was such a difference between DISD and Richardson, Stormy said she thinks teachers are overwhelmed. Alma agreed. Stormy also said, “The kids are more abusive.” Alma agreed with that as well. “The kids are
very, they have a mouth on them. They belittle the teachers.” Stormy said, “In Dallas, you got West Dallas, you got East Dallas, South Dallas.” Alma said, “But there are students trying to learn. But the troublemakers…I think the teachers go, ‘I don’t get paid enough to deal with this.’” Alma and Stormy did talk about their daughters’ experiences with bullying in their respective non-Seagoville schools, which they attribute to a broader culture of troubling female behaviors.

In her individual interview, Alma said the Richardson ISD counseling program provided critical support for her family when her mother died. She said her son, in particular, began having behavior problems stemming from his anger, and the school counselors worked with him extensively. She does not feel like Seagoville schools would have supported her family in an equally helpful way.

Stormy was explicit in connecting race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status when she talked about changes in Mesquite. Like Clodie’s daughter, Stormy’s daughter attends school in Mesquite. Stormy said she did not want her daughter attending the local school because it is a DISD school. She said she did not have a good experience as a racial minority in her own DISD schools and did not want her daughter “bullied by mean girls.” She said she thought they were “meaner” in DISD than in Mesquite even though she said Mesquite has also “gotten bad” from when she attended. “When I went to Mesquite High…it was all white. And now…it’s like everybody is moving out of Oak Cliff, Pleasant Grove and into Mesquite because Mesquite now has so many Section 8 homes…They’re moving into Mesquite…Mesquite—the people that have been here my age or older—they’re selling and…they’re just going east…It’s gotten bad…because of crime and, you know, the ethnic groups. It’s not like it used to be.” Stormy’s next-door neighbor in HC, Clodie, said Stormy advised her to send her daughter to Mesquite
schools for these reasons. Clodie said Stormy told her, “Those girls in DISD beat me up so bad.” Stormy also mentioned to me that she had told her neighbor to stay away from DISD.

Clodie also talked about the weaker structure and less substantial programming in the Seagoville schools, giving the example of the disorganized choir program in Seagoville Middle School. She said her daughter’s emotional and physical health was compromised during her time in the Seagoville school from this lack of structure and from peer behaviors. Clodie said that she understands the need for some sort of regulation in the school system, but also thinks a parent should have the right to decide where to send her child to school.

Collaborator observations align with Dallas’s history. Planned segregation, including intentional drawing of school district lines, and white flight have impacted the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of schools. According to historian Harvey Graff, private, parochial, and charter schools plus suburban school districts have drawn students away from Dallas public schools. Graff argues that “Dallas schools are more segregated now than they were in the 1960s.”

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220 Harvey J. Graff, *The Dallas Myth: The Making and Unmaking of an American City*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2008), 178. Comparing Seagoville, Mesquite, Lancaster, and Richardson Middle Schools reveals interesting data. Seagoville data include the following: an overall rating of 35; a 16:1 student teacher ratio; racial/ethnic distribution of 57.6% Hispanic, 21.6% White, 19.3% Black, and less than 1% Mixed Race, Asian, and American Indian; 82.1% eligibility for free lunch (which represents incomes at or below 130% of poverty level) and 5.4% eligibility for reduced lunch (which represents incomes between 130% and 185% of poverty levels); test scores in the bottom 20% of Texas middle schools; 75.8% of teachers with a bachelor’s degree, 21.2% of teachers with a master’s or doctoral degree, 12 years of mean teaching experience, and a mean base salary of $49,778; and expenditures of $12,989 per student (DISD number).220 Wilkinson Middle School in Mesquite includes the following data: an overall rating of 44; a 15:1 student teacher ratio; racial/ethnic distribution of 54.9% Hispanic, 12.2% White, 28.4% Black, and 1.8% Mixed Race and less than 1% Asian and American Indian; 76.2% eligibility for free lunch (which represents incomes at or below 130% of poverty level) and 10.4% eligibility for reduced lunch (which represents incomes between 130% and 185% of poverty levels); test scores in the bottom 50% of Texas middle schools;
schools subpar compared to other urban schools and suburban Dallas-area schools, like Richardson ISD. Graff notes that regardless of what city leaders say, neither funding levels nor programs indicate real commitment to providing an equal education to students in DISD, who are often economically disadvantaged and highly likely to drop out of high school.\textsuperscript{221}

Collaborator observations and experiences confirm complicated connections between class, race, and impacts of neoliberal values in the U.S. education system. Education plays a critical role in maintaining the class structures created by capitalist markets and neoliberal values. While U.S. averages indicate it spends more per child on education than Western European countries, it has the highest level of inequality in that spending. The U.S. spends far less on the public education of economically vulnerable children, who are disproportionately

\begin{table}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Lancaster Middle School & Overall Rating & 17:1 Student-Teacher Ratio & Racial/Ethnic Distribution & Eligibility for Free Lunch & Test Scores in Top 50% of Texas Middle Schools & Mean Teacher\'s Salary & Expenditures per Student \\
\hline
\text{MISD} & 42 & 0.17 & 76.7% Black, 19.5% Hispanic, 2.3% White, Less than 1% Asian, less than 1% American Indian & 73% &  & $43,974 & $9,069 \\
\hline
Apollo Junior High & Overall Rating & 14:1 Student-Teacher Ratio & Racial/Ethnic Distribution & Eligibility for Free Lunch & Test Scores in Top 30% of Texas Middle Schools & Mean Teacher\'s Salary & Expenditures per Student \\
\hline
\text{RISD} & 87 & 0.14 & 31.1% White, 29.8% Hispanic, 19.3% Asian, 12.2% Black, Less than 1% American Indian & 46.3% &  & $44,396 & $9,275 \\
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\textsuperscript{220} Lancaster Middle School includes the following data: an overall rating of 42; a 17:1 student-teacher ratio; racial/ethnic distribution of 76.7% Black, 19.5% Hispanic, 2.3% White, and less than 1% Mixed Race, Asian, and American Indian; 73% eligibility for free lunch (which represents incomes at or below 130% of poverty level) and 8% eligibility for reduced lunch (which represents incomes between 130% and 185% of poverty levels); test scores in the top 50% of Texas middle schools; 41.8% of teacher with a bachelor\’s degree, 14.5% of teachers with a master\’s or doctoral degree, 7 years of mean teaching experience, and a mean base salary of $43,974; and expenditures of $9,069 per student (LISD).\textsuperscript{220} Apollo Junior High in Richardson data includes the following: an overall rating of 87; a 14:1 student-teacher ratio; racial/ethnic distribution of 31.1% White, 29.8% Hispanic, 19.3%, 12.2% Asian, 23.3% Black, and 3.6% Mixed Race, and less than 1% American Indian; 46.3% eligibility for free lunch (which represents incomes at or below 130% of poverty level) and 8.2% eligibility for reduced lunch (which represents incomes between 130% and 185% of poverty levels); test scores in the top 30% of Texas middle schools; 78.6% of teacher with a bachelor\’s degree, 21.4% of teachers with a master\’s or doctoral degree, 9 years of mean teaching experience, and a mean base salary of $44,396; and expenditures of $9,275 per student (RISD).

\begin{itemize}
\item http://public-schools.startclass.com/l/85550/Seagoville-Middle-School (accessed July 7, 2015);
\item http://public-schools.startclass.com/l/89100/Wilkinson-Middle (accessed July 7, 2015);
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{221} Graff, 253.
children of color and white children in households with single mothers, than other industrialized countries. \textsuperscript{222} Cox argues that education is used as a tool to keep the working class from advancement or knowledge that might stoke discontent. \textsuperscript{223} Fraser calls education a “nonmarketized institution” that overlaps with markets to reinforce social and economic hierarchies. What collaborators and Fraser identify is a powerful collusion of unequal funding distribution based on local tax bases and a myriad of market structures favoring wealthier neighborhoods justified by neoliberal values of meritocracy and individualism further justified by the racism and classism that dehumanizes the populations receiving inadequate education. She identifies the classism and racism perpetuating this system as “malrecognition” and argues that realities of malrecognition must be ameliorated before systemic distribution injustices will be addressed so that all persons have equal access to the opportunities afforded by education. \textsuperscript{224}

Feminist economist Nancy Folbre points out that while \textit{Brown v. Board of Education} reduced some barriers to racial and class segregation, people who “do not pay for other people’s kids” have constructed effective economic barriers to equal education. \textsuperscript{225} Of course, prior to \textit{Brown}, most lines for school districts were drawn to contain the wealth within neighborhoods so that wealthier people were paying only for their kids: “They drew district lines that excluded groups they considered undesirable, and they established good schools.” \textsuperscript{226} These neighborhoods

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{222} Nancy Folbre, \textit{Valuing Children: Rethinking the Economics of the Family} (Harvard University Press, 2010), 172–73.
\item \textsuperscript{223} Cox, \textit{Caste, Class, and Race}, 340–41.
\item \textsuperscript{224} Fraser and Honneth, \textit{Redistribution or Recognition?}, 58–63.
\item \textsuperscript{226} Folbre, 145–46.
\end{itemize}
remained exclusive through practices of redlining and deed restrictions prohibiting ownership of homes by racial and ethnic minorities. Property values rose in the “desirable” neighborhoods, allowing taxes to decline. Conversely, in poorer neighborhoods, lower property values necessitated higher tax rates to meet basic revenue needs, which, in turn, discouraged establishment of local businesses and new home purchases. While Texas has adopted a plan that redistributes or “recaptures” tax monies from affluent districts to struggling districts, significant inequality remains along with resistance to the program.

Building on her comment that “most of us [Black females] are single mothers,” Jennifer talked about connections between numbers of single parents, geographic location, and cultural stigma. She said:

We know that living in the southern sector isn’t always the best…I don’t know many people that lives further north that is as many single parents as it is in the south. To me that’s a problem. You probably won’t find as many single parents in Plano or Carrollton than you would in South Dallas or Oak Cliff. And when someone like me move in, being a single parent, that stigma is already there. It’s culturally divided. I saw it was culturally when we first moved here a long time ago.

Collaborators have had varied experiences with individual teachers and administrators. Jennifer talked about how teachers in multiple schools have disciplined her children in helpful ways and have provided anything they needed that they knew she could not afford.

“Someone…would always step up and take the initiative…I don’t know many people that lives further north that is as many single parents as it is in the south. To me that’s a problem. You probably won’t find as many single parents in Plano or Carrollton than you would in South Dallas or Oak Cliff. And when someone like me move in, being a single parent, that stigma is already there. It’s culturally divided. I saw it was culturally when we first moved here a long time ago.

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“Someone…would always step up and take the initiative…My children were like their children. They raised them for the time that they could raise them when I was out working.” Jennifer said one teacher saw her daughter “getting involved with the wrong group of kids” and pulled her

227 Folbre, 145–46.

aside to talk to her. This teacher “checked up on her and later helped her get into the military reserve. He keeps up with her now.” He also told Jennifer’s daughter that she had a “great mom who was really trying.” This attention and concern has continued since the family transitioned to HC. “Even with my son being in Seagoville right now, he got some mommas and some daddies that’s there that will call me and let me know they’re gonna take care of it.”

Clodie also talked about certain teachers, including some at Seagoville where her daughter struggled. One teacher would call the house to make sure she had done her math homework. Jennifer has felt like the school administration, specifically the principal, has shown her respect and attention. Clodie, however, experienced suspicion and disrespect from the principal when she accompanied her daughter to the same school. Jessica, whose kids are in elementary school, said she has not had that many issues with teachers in the DISD schools her kids attend. She thinks there are some exceptional teachers and some who do not show the level of care they should. She said the principal, however, is a different story. She does not feel like the principal knows “how to deal with children,” and Jessica said the principal has raised concerns about her daughter’s behavior during limited encounters, while her daughter’s teachers compliment her daughter’s behavior.

Jessica also expressed frustration regarding availability of pre-kindergarten spots for her children. She voiced her experiences in the context of a broader conversation about experiences related to racial and ethnic identities. “I do see there’s a lot of struggle for Hispanic-Americans, but also I do feel like they have a lot of advantages, too, because as far as getting my kids in pre-K’s, I have been able to…some will only let English as a second language kids in. Some will let you based on your income, but first priority for pre-K is always English as a second language. So what a lot of people will do now when they come here, they teach their kids only Spanish when
they’re little at home, then they send them to pre-K to learn English…so they actually have the upper hand when they start school.” Alma said, “It’s a lot easier for them. That’s what happened with my three-year-old. That’s all she spoke because the lady that took care of her since she was a newborn: Spanish, Spanish, Spanish.”

Collaborators’ struggles with the education system make particularly clear that, although individuals within these systems can make access to education more or less challenging for the most vulnerable in real ways, the system itself presents the greatest challenge to thriving and equal access to quality education and the goods it provides. Their perspectives also painfully elucidate complex intersections of race, class, and education systems. They do not need to have read sociologist Ann Owens’s report on the relationship between income and education and the growing relationship between income inequality and educational segregation to know that zip code most often determines educational quality and achievement. They also clearly know that

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229 I am unclear whether Alma’s comment “it’s a lot easier for them” referred to it being easier for children to learn Spanish first and then English in school or whether she was affirming Jessica’s observation that it was easier for non-English speaking children to secure a spot in a public pre-kindergarten. Regardless, despite Jessica’s assumption regarding geographical origins of families whose children learn Spanish first, Alma and her maternal family were born in the U.S.

230 While collaborators do not talk in depth about struggles within their classrooms, important work explores the ways class functions within aptly-named classrooms. In Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo’s book, New Working-Class Studies, Renny Christopher recognizes significant class-based barriers for first generation college students, which would apply to almost every collaborator. Further, she identifies class-based distinctions between racial and gender groups. For instance, working-class students of color respond better to collaborative, interactive pedagogical practices than more traditional competitive, lecture-based class experiences. Christopher points to the relative dearth of studies exploring, identifying the need for more attention to subverting oppressive dynamics within classrooms. John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, New Working-Class Studies (Cornell University Press, 2005), 216–18.

income segregation also most often means racial segregation. Hence, most of the collaborators make use of their resources to put their children in schools in different zip codes to give them what advantages they can. This individualistic solution makes sense even as it makes plain the need for broader, systemic change.

For similar, related reasons, other studies have declared that “zip code is a better predictor of...health than...genetic code.”232 Not surprisingly, health and healthcare was another generative theme identified by collaborators as a site of oppression and struggle. Their experiences demonstrate the crippling toll that stress and lack of adequate healthcare services take on physical health and the urgent need for a different healthcare system.

**Physical Tolls: Health/Healthcare**

Healthcare is one of the most consistent areas contributing to financial and emotional distress. Clodie cannot afford to buy healthcare on her own, even through the ACA marketplace. She has significant issues needing medical attention but has been unable to address them. As Jessica laid out in her first interview, while she earns $2,200 twice a month, she only takes home $1,500/month. The rest of her income goes into health insurance for her and the children and her FLEX spending account. Because she and her son have health issues, she fears that shifting to another policy will leave her uncovered and vulnerable financially and physically.

When I asked how healthcare costs might change to support the well-being of people like her, Jennifer said it would include lower deductibles, based on income rather than a flat rate for everyone. Jessica said one way in which assistance could be more equitable would be evaluating

income after deductions like insurance and bills. She would like agencies to consider what she actually takes home each month instead of what her official earnings show given the high costs of her insurance and her family’s medical bills.

While Jennifer and Clodie expressed anger over the health care mandate, they also both strongly agreed that everyone should have healthcare. Jennifer said it should be provided by the government because “it all comes together” when some persons experience barriers in education due to untreated health issues and stress. She said this relationship applies to adults and children, who will all perform better in life with better health and healthcare. Clodie and Jennifer also agreed that what “gets in the way” of universal or affordable healthcare are “the people who don’t have to pay for it.” By that, they mean government officials who already receive lifetime benefits. Clodie said, “The people that sat at the table and made this up, they’re the ones that probably are already covered. They don’t have to worry about whether or not they’re covered whatever their position is, or they have the money to afford it.”

Clodie mentioned countries that provide universal healthcare and asked me how they do it. I said most industrialized countries understand healthcare as a right and also understand that it costs less to provide coverage than what the U.S. system costs. Clodie said she did not know why the U.S. could not do this as well and wondered whether it had to do with the country’s debt. I asked Jennifer whether the government should provide universal healthcare. She said that the government should indeed provide healthcare for everyone and universal higher education as well. “You should be able to do like other countries. It [healthcare] should be for everybody across the board…I think we should have public education, but it should be all the way across the board. It shouldn’t just be from kindergarten to twelfth grade.” Basically, she said, “If you
want us to have healthcare, you should give us healthcare because there are people that can’t actually afford it. I mean, we [the U.S.] have the money to be able to do that.” Clodie agreed.

Collaborators repeatedly brought up issues related to health and healthcare as they discussed, both individually and in focus groups, their lives as unmarried mothers. They reported medical issues directly related to constant stress and anxiety and pressures related to caring for children and extended family members’ health needs. During the pilesort exercise relating to sources of stress and/or pressure, Jennifer and Clodie chose “healthcare,” and Jessica chose “health.” Clodie chose “benefits” as her job in the healthcare field does not include benefits, and she cannot afford coverage with her current income.

Clodie is struggling with stress-related health issues due to her current work environment. She is having migraines, high blood pressure, and sleeplessness and is struggling to get the healthcare she needs without health insurance. She talked extensively about the year it has taken to get a CT scan for severe recurring headaches and the fact that she is still waiting, two months later, for results. She said she knows she has been fortunate that she has not had significant health issues previously and that her daughter has not had health issues. She worries, however, about aging and developing even more issues than she is currently experiencing. She says, “Nobody in [my] family is going to be able to help [me].” Despite these challenges, Clodie continues working in the healthcare industry because she likes helping people and enjoys relationships she develops with patients. Many collaborators work or have worked in the healthcare field and share similar degrees of satisfaction helping people.

In her individual interview, Pinky talked about her recurring depression and her diagnosed bipolar disorder. She chooses not to take medication for her bipolar because of the side effects. She also has insomnia. Pinky said she chose the healthcare field as a “way of paying
it forward even though no one paid it forward for me.” At one point, Pinky lost a job because she entered outpatient treatment for depression after her mother died, and she had not been at her job long enough to qualify for Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) protection. Pinky also left a job in the field because the facility was treating patients unethically even though leaving created significant financial difficulties for her.

While Jennifer gets benefits at her current job, it remains the lowest-paying job she has had in a long time. She said the stress of her current job is causing her headaches, migraines, and high blood pressure. She also experiences insomnia related to general stress about economic security and her abusive ex-husband. Jennifer’s dream of becoming a hospice nurse includes her appreciation for the diversity she encounters in different homes. “The color of my skin never matters. Sometimes when I go into the homes, it takes away the stress that I’m dealing with because I see how fortunate I am to be where I am.”

Christina continues to be impacted by her childhood leukemia. Not only do her current liver and gallbladder issues stem from these treatments, but she also worries about recurrence and how she would manage. She tries not to worry about her health, but tending to it does take time, resources, and energy. She said she wanted to be a nurse growing up, but did not pursue college because her parents and community did not encourage it and because she did not want to forgo the money she was currently making in her retail job.

Alma cancelled our first interview appointment because she had to take her three-year-old to the emergency room. Her daughter has asthma and breathing issues that require consistent medical attention and emergency treatment. While she has no major current issues beyond sleeplessness, Alma said she wishes she had a little bit of time to herself or fewer constant pressures, because she fears “having a breakdown” that would compromise her ability to care for
her children. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Alma lost a job when she had to take off work to recover after being hit by a car. She also works in healthcare.

Jessica chose health and healthcare as the top of her list of stressors. She has migraines that resist medications and necessitate regular visits to emergency care and doctor’s appointments. She said she feels tired all the time and loses sleep because she worries about so many things. She talked about the high cost of health insurance multiple times and also said her kids get sick “a lot.” She also talked about her son needing ADHD medications. This led to an extended conversation about ADHD diagnoses and teachers suggesting ADHD medications for children. In FG2, each collaborator said these medications are most often unnecessary. Alma said, “teachers are not patient these days.” Stormy said she did not medicate either of her daughters despite educator recommendations. Jessica said that, despite recommendations that all of her children take ADHD medications, only her son has been diagnosed with ADHD and takes medications on school days. Jessica said she can tell a significant difference in her son’s performance and behavior at school based on test scores and admission in the Talented and Gifted Program (TAG). She said she also knows her daughters, one of whom is also in TAG, do not need ADHD medications. The collaborators in FG2 expressed frustration and anger at the pressures they have experienced to diagnose and medicate their children and wondered how many parents were unnecessarily medicating their children because of these pressures.233

233 In each instance, teachers, not medical professionals, made recommendations to collaborators about ADHD. While teachers do occupy significant positions to observe children closely, it might be interesting to research how often teachers are making these recommendations, and to whom, and whether this has changed in the past decade, and what impact it might be having on ADHD diagnoses and medications.
Jessica also said she would like assistance with logistics of tending to her children’s healthcare needs. She mentioned that challenges do not stop with being able to afford healthcare, but “just being able to in general take your kid to the doctor or even sometimes transportation is an issue.” Jessica said trying to make decisions and deal with these challenges has a significant impact on her own health and energy. Jessica expressed concern over not having the “time or money” to “exercise, plan healthy meals, and rest.”

While Twila did not identify any personal or familial health issues, she has worked in the medical assisting field for thirteen years. Twila chose healthcare administration because she enjoys finding answers for patients. She observed that other people do not often take initiative to find answers and feels she is helping people more by solving their administrative problems than by “taking their blood pressure.”

At the time of focus group conversations in fall and the winter of 2013, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) was just going into effect. Many collaborators talked about fears, frustrations, and uncertainties relating to the ACA’s impact on their healthcare and finances. When expressing her concerns about the cost of mandatory insurance, Clodie said she thinks, “they need to sit down and look at all that.” Pinky then said that everything is “a big, old mess.” Collaborators in FG1 expressed frustration, confusion, and anger over the healthcare mandate. Clodie said she feels “lost” in the new system and has spent hours on the phone and internet trying to figure out her options. She said she cannot afford any of the new policies. Jennifer, who gets insurance through her work, said the ACA is causing companies to charge higher premiums and deductibles. Clodie said having no healthcare and trying to figure out what to do with the new ACA requirements impact her physical, mental, emotional health in multiple ways. Both women emphatically agreed that the various organizations and people involved in the
healthcare system do not have their best interests and their overall health needs in mind. Clodie said, “They don’t even look at the position they’re putting people in.” They also agreed that these groups, including the government, should care about people’s health or thriving. Jennifer said the government should care because of the interrelatedness of health and different spheres of life. For instance, she said, when some persons experience barriers in education due to untreated health issues and stress, multiple areas are impacted. She said this relationship applies to adults and children, who will all perform better in life with better health and healthcare. Clodie said that her employer could easily provide group healthcare coverage if she shopped for a group plan, but that she is only concerned with covering herself, even though it would be less expensive to cover everyone.

Collaborators also talked about responsibilities and stress related to medical issues of parents and siblings. Pinky cared for her father in her home until he died in the spring of 2014. She was also regularly visiting her mother in hospice care while working full-time and completing DH sweat equity hours to secure her new home. Clodie has cared for many family members, sacrificing jobs, time, energy, and money, and even donating a kidney to a sister. While her parents have died, she is still paying off a loan she took out to help care for them. Alma takes care of her father’s medical needs to fulfill her promise to her mother, for whom she cared while she was dying of cancer four years ago. Finally, Christina talked about her father’s age and health. Her mother currently cares for her father when health challenges arise, but she fears the future when they will need her care and support. She knows she currently needs their care and support and does not currently have the resources for a reversal of these roles.

The challenges collaborators identify related to health and healthcare are not uncommon. While the U.S. “spends more money per capita on healthcare than any other country in the
world,” expenditures are so unequal that the U.S. ranks near the bottom of developed countries in terms of health.\textsuperscript{234} In 2015, 29 million people in the U.S., or 9.1\% of the population, did not have health insurance. White people, at 6.7\%, are least likely to be uninsured, with Black people at 11.1\% and Hispanic people at 16.2\% uninsured. Texas, at 17.1\%, has the highest rate in the country of uninsured persons.\textsuperscript{235}

The 2015 Commonwealth Fund Scorecard on Health System Performance offers a much fuller and troubling picture of overall health beyond who has basic health insurance. U.S. healthcare costs are the highest in the world yet falls below other nations when comparing “people’s ability to access care when they need it, the quality of care they receive, and their likelihood of living a long and healthy life.”\textsuperscript{236} “Across 37 core indicators of performance, the U.S. achieves an overall score of 65 out of possible 100 when comparing national averages with the U.S. and international benchmarks.”\textsuperscript{237} Within the U.S., Texas sits at the bottom or in the bottom quarter in almost every category. Including the District of Colombia in its measures, Texas ranked fifty-first in access and affordability, fiftieth in prevention and treatment, thirty-third in avoidable hospital use and costs of care, twenty-second in healthy lives, and thirty-first

\textsuperscript{234} Folbre, \textit{Valuing Children}, 173–74.


\textsuperscript{237} Vigen, \textit{Women, Ethics, and Inequality in U.S. Healthcare}, 29.
in equity. Overall, Texas ranked fortieth in its healthcare performance. These data mean that large numbers of economically vulnerable people are not taking needed medications, not going to the doctor when they need to, and missing out on preventative care and early disease detection.

Rising costs of insurance, as attested by Jessica, are also crippling families who are experiencing compromised credit and being forced to declare bankruptcy. According to 2015 Kaiser Family Foundation Employer Health Benefits Survey, employee contributions to health insurance have increased 83% between 2005-2015. Costs of premiums have increased 54%, with the average family spending $17,545 annually. During 2015, insurance costs rose 4% while wages increased by 1.9%. It is unsurprising, then, that medical costs are most often the cause of bankruptcies.

Studies also indicate discrepancies between quality of healthcare received by people of color. Stereotypes, cultural misunderstandings, and provider bias negatively impact experiences of patients of color. For example, they are less likely to receive the same level of pain medications as their white counterparts and more likely to be “more highly dosed with medications if providers are unsettled by their verbal or physical behaviors than white patients are.” Studies also found that doctors are shaped by prejudices against all people of lower

238 Ibid. While these conversations took place before full implementation of the ACA, it bears noting that Texas opted not to expand Medicaid, which diminished the accessibility of healthcare for millions of people, a disproportionate number of whom are white single mothers and single mothers of color.


240 Vigen, Women, Ethics, and Inequality in U.S. Healthcare, 40.
socioeconomic status, believing them to be less intelligent, compliant, and competent. These dynamics also impact communication and trust between healthcare providers and patients, adversely impacting equality in healthcare access.²⁴¹

Recent research suggests that long-term stress created by experiences of racism and prejudice leads to health problems like high blood pressure and diabetes.²⁴² It is unsurprising, then, that Black and Latinx people have higher rates of health issues like high blood pressure, cancer, depression, asthma, and anxiety, lower rates of doctor visitations, lower life expectancies, higher rates of infant mortalities, and higher rates of being uninsured.²⁴³ As Vigen points out in her ethnographic work with Black and Latina women with breast cancer, racism and prejudice intersect with class oppression. Inequalities in access to and quality of healthcare in the U.S. disproportionately impact women of color—this within a system that is already failing people across the board.²⁴⁴

These three generative themes illustrate where the work system, the educational system, and the healthcare system profoundly violate ideals of human dignity, access to basic needs and rights, and any valuation of interdependence and cooperation. Rather than supporting the

²⁴¹ Vigen, 44.


²⁴⁴ Vigen, Women, Ethics, and Inequality in U.S. Healthcare, 29.
common good, these systems foster divisions and competition over artificially scarce resources, with the most vulnerable members of society losing in the biggest ways. How, then, can we respond to this broad picture of intersectional cultural and economic oppression? The next chapter will explore the final generative theme, the cumulative nature of the problems with the U.S. political economy as witnessed by project collaborators, and the theo-ethical visions needed to transform these systems.
CHAPTER SIX

Thriving in the Beloved Community and the World House

In this chapter I argue that Christians have a basic duty to support cultural and economic structures that meet basic needs of all humans on interpersonal and, more importantly, institutional levels. Foremost among these basic needs is giving others the gift of understanding and recognition. The argument unfolds in four steps. First, I draw out notions of basic needs and the importance of understanding and care from others based on conversations with collaborators, exploring what it looks like to struggle to thrive and what it might look like to thrive. Next, I show that the ethnographic methods I have pursued here are helpful for advancing institutional recognition of single, working-class mothers. Third, I connect this power for institutional understanding to the protection and advancement of human dignity. Finally, I appeal to King to suggest that Christians have a basic duty to promote human dignity by supporting institutions that meet basic needs and by carefully attending to particularly marginalized people like single, working-class mothers.

Perpetual Marathons, with Hurdles

The generative themes explored up to this point that recur most often and with the most intensity and urgency in individual interviews and focus group discussions. Collaborators discussed other barriers to thriving: transportation challenges, domestic abuse, incarceration of family members, nonexistent or insufficient child support, substance abuse of family members, and beyond. While collaborators said some of these issues create more acute pressure, anxiety, and/or crisis than others in particular seasons, they were clear about the cumulative weight of so many demands and responsibilities. As they quickly noted in the initial conversation, being a
“single mother,” by definition, means grappling with a multitude of demands simultaneously. This final section, then, shares collaborators’ descriptions of what it is like to deal daily, for decades, with the particular issues outlined above as well as the many other regular responsibilities. The cumulative picture offered in this final generative theme includes a sense of competing, unmet basic needs, a lack of time for self-care, and an inadequate sense of feeling cared for and understood.

When Jessica and Alma talked about “doing it all,” they included providing sole financial support, managing schedules, coordinating transportation, making decisions about schools, cooking, cleaning, finding ways to meet material needs, tending to sick kids, and navigating healthcare. All the women in FG2 agreed that their lives as single mothers could be characterized as being “constantly on the go with no time to breathe.” Jessica gave this example:

I have to do this and this and this and this on my lunch break. While I’m working I have to be typing this thing. I have to fill out these forms. I have to fax it on my lunch break. I have to run to three different stores. I have to be back in time to leave early to get to the daycare to drop them off to get to school. And I have to finish this assignment in between. And then I think I have this coming up, and I have to go shopping. And this is how my brain is going all the day long.

She continued, “Having all that burden on yourself has just emotionally and physically worn me down over the years.”

Alma agreed and talked about the lists of what she has to do always running through her head, like preparing dinner, getting homework done, and getting kids ready for bed. Then when they are in bed, she feels guilty for resting because she feels like she should be doing something else. She said she worries about “having a nervous breakdown because my body—I’m just pushing and pushing.” When connecting her experiences to the others in the group, Alma said, “We’re constantly in panic.”
Twila said the primary difficulty of being a single mother is that “everything is on you.” She said it is “hard…you’re getting up, you’re getting them ready, worrying about them, that just becomes a constant in your life. If there is a spouse there, you’re kind of a little bit more relaxed.” Twila worries about whether her kids will be picked up from school on time and whether she will be able to support them in activities.

From their discussions, it sounded like the relentless pressure of demands from all sides included the energy required to discern good decisions for themselves and their families. I said, “You’re multitasking not only just getting everything done, but you’re multitasking multiple goods, right? How do I weigh whether to stay with this person who gives me financial stability but doesn’t make me happy and maybe isn’t setting a good example of marriage for my kids…? And while you’re balancing these things, society is judging you no matter what?” Jessica responded:

sometimes it’s a hard thing, a conflicting moral thing. I don’t want my kids to have to have their parents divorced. I want them to have that family structure. I want them to have that stability. That perfect family situation. And though you know in the back of your mind this is not an ideal family situation what they’re seeing. So you kinda have to make that judgment. It’s almost like a conflict of morals, because you’re like, “Do I get divorced?” Which I don’t really agree with. I think you should, if you possibly can, work it out. But then, “Or do I stay in this situation?” which is obviously not a good situation for my kids. I’m not gonna say men don’t have that decision, but I feel like a lot of that is a lot on the women. And you have to weigh the consequences of what you do. How is this going to affect your kid?

Despite these excruciating, draining internal conflicts (in which collaborators feel their sole responsibility acutely), Alma and Stormy specifically talked about “staying strong” for their kids. They recounted “having breakdowns in the shower so the kids don’t see the stress.” Stormy said the last two months of dealing with her house flooding have been so utterly depressing that “I probably a couple times even cried in front of my daughter, even though I had to be strong for her.” Alma talked about how hard it has been since her mother died because she lost her only
reliable source of support and help. She said her exclusive focus is on caring for her kids and her father. Collaborators experience constant tension related to multiple, competing, unmet needs. They feel like if they attend to one need, another important need will be neglected.

The second aspect of this cumulative impact of being a single mother relates to a lack of time for adequate self-care. When I asked collaborators what they did to take time to take care of themselves, most of them laughed outright at the idea of having that kind of time. Jessica said now that she has a boyfriend who “helps sometimes” and occasionally gets to take a hot bath. Alma said she is beginning to realize she needs to do something because she has recently had a “reality check that sometimes it’s just, as a mom your mind and your mentality is for your kids and you’re always on the go doing for them or doing for others that you never take the time to…but, you know, if I don’t care for myself, I’m not going to be here to provide for my kids.”

Clodie said she takes a few hours to herself every couple of weeks, and Stormy said she saves her money all year so that she can take a vacation to a beach once a year. Collaborators did agree that “talking things out” helped them feel less alone, and most specifically cited our conversations as being encouraging.

This final piece of this cumulative picture is the frustrating, dehumanizing sense that virtually no one, particularly institutions, understands or cares about the wellbeing of collaborators and their families. Collaborators agreed that most persons in various positions of power do not fully see the realities of single mothers or just do not care. Christina talked about friends who assume she could “just find a husband” if she really wanted:

They think, you know, “You need to find somebody and get married and it’ll fix it.” And it’s not that easy! (laughs) And it’s not. Being single for me wasn’t a choice growing up. “I’m gonna have kids and be single forever”…being a single mom I think most of the time is not planned. It’s not your goal. (laughs)...You know, my goal was to grow up and get married and have the white picket fence and a bunch of kids, and it didn’t turn out
that way. But it’s not always a choice, which I think a lot of people see it that way. At least for me it’s not. It’s kinda just the way life turned out and you just gotta run with it…I’m just worried about supporting my daughters right now.

Alma made a similar statement:

The thing is for single moms they think, “Oh she’s single; she’s on the government.” That’s not true because I’ve managed to do it. I don’t have government assistance…It’s been a struggle. But I guess the people’s point of view is, “She’s got what she has because she on the government.” No. I bust my butt to get what I have. I work hard. I don’t have everything that was handed to me on a gold platter, you know, that my dad was a doctor or I came from this little rich–no, cause you learn to be responsible and you have to work hard for what you get. Everybody’s situation is different and I’ve been kinda lucky with the opportunities that I’ve had recently as in job-wise. The doctor I work for now, you know, he’s good…Very understanding. I can’t complain. I’m lucky. But it’s been a challenge; it has. I just hope we’re not, as a single mom we’re not generalized like, “Why’d you keep on having kids?” You know, you don’t plan to be a single mom. Stuff happens or whatever…Everybody wants that perfect “Leave it to Beaver” family [laughs] you know. Unfortunately it’s not perfect.

In FG1, Pinky said, “There are areas of shades of gray that people fail to see. I don’t know if they see it or wanna look past it and they just don’t care.” Jennifer responded, “There’s no way they can see it and just pass it because it’s here.” To which Pinky said, “Well, then they see it, and they don’t care.” Jennifer then said, “Because they’re the ones that aren’t having to live it. Ask your son. Ask your daughter. Ask my son. We know.”

More so than any of the many indignities and challenges laid out in other generative themes, what collaborators describe as the pinnacle of marginalization is the cumulative impact of competing, unmet needs, lack of capacity for self-care, and profound institutional indifference about their wellbeing. These images of relentless, grueling, overwhelming daily demands on multiple fronts are experienced by a group of women who work hard, who take pride in their work, who work fulltime, who unceasingly attend to their caregiving responsibilities, and who have benefitted from many direct assistance programs including DH, one of the most prestigious non-governmental programs. If people fit all of these descriptions and still struggle to this extent,
something is wrong with the cultural and economic systems shaping their opportunities. To create better systems, we must begin by imagining what it might look like and what essential marks it might include. We turn to this exercise now.

What Does Thriving Look Like and Entail?

Thriving, then, means a sense of relief at having basic needs met and the capacity to release the feeling that attention to one need means another need will go unmet. It also means there is time for self-care and a deep sense that other people, especially institutions, understand or attempt to understand this cumulative picture. Given the overwhelming challenges identified, collaborators’ ideas about what “thriving” looks like or might look like for racially and ethnically diverse single, unmarried, working-class mothers are critical. I used this language of thriving primarily based on the work of ethicist Keri Day and the guidance of ethicist Traci West.\(^\text{245}\) I invited collaborators to write down and discuss what they need to be physical, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy. I then asked what their families needed for the same. After these discussions, I asked what groups, communities, institutions, or organizations had “their best interests and that of their families” in mind. I referred them back to what they had individually and collectively identified as the subjective and objective components related to health, shifting between language of health and language of thriving, as they thought about different entities with which they interact. What follows is a thick description of those conversations with a concluding, extended focus and analysis on their perspectives of the DH

\(^{245}\) Day, *Unfinished Business*, 2012. West advised me in a phone conversation about how to ask collaborators about what they need for their best interests and that of their families. She also prompted questions about which agencies and institutions have their best interests at heart. This line of questioning led to the insights about the limits and contributions of DH to visions of thriving.
process and organization and how it models important aspects of thriving even if it also has limitations in its reach.

In FG1, Jennifer started by saying that more education would make “things much better for me mentally, emotionally, spiritually, really in all aspects of my life.” She also said “family” and said she would like more time with her children and to have better relationships with her extended family. She said generally that it is good to be “connected” with people who “know who I am” and who “understand and accept” me. In particular, Jennifer said a “better understanding partner” would promote her spiritual, mental, and emotional health because she wouldn’t feel so “lonely” and could share all she does with other friends. In FG2, Jessica named “friends” in her list of component of thriving and health. Jessica and Stormy also included “love” in their lists. Jessica said, “Everybody needs to feel loved, whether by a parent, partner, or kids,” and to have “partnership” to “lighten the load.” Jessica, like Jennifer, said “kids,” because “having them around really helps my emotional health—they’re so funny.” Stormy included “laughter” on her list.

Jessica identified “help” because “having all that burden on yourself has just emotionally and physically worn me down over the years.” Having help and someone to talk to would contribute to her overall health. “Just talking things through calms me down. Even like this”—although she also said that there is never time for “things like this.” Each collaborator in FG2 talked about feeling constantly guilty for wanting or doing anything for herself. I asked if they thought this guilt was healthy, and they said that it was now. They also said it was “natural for mothers.”

Jennifer added “better pay” as something that would promote her health in multiple ways. She came back to education here, adding that “better education” would “probably” allow her to
make more money, although she also thinks she should be making more in her current job. Jessica also said she needed “less work or a job I would enjoy, which would feel like less work” as well as “more money.” Alma and Stormy agreed with this, with Alma saying it would be nice to go to a good restaurant occasionally or even “movies, museums, or parks.” She said she would love to go into Target and “buy what I want.”

Jessica and Clodie both talked about health insurance. Clodie spoke immediately about health insurance as the thing that would most contribute to her overall health. Clodie said a different job would greatly contribute to better overall health or thriving. She would like a job where she can directly help people, have control over her schedule, and have enough income for financial stability. Control and respect, expressed in multiple ways in a work environment, are important to Clodie.

Clodie also credits her prayer life for her spiritual and emotional health, noting that this is a highly individual practice for her. She participates in her church but finds most of the life-giving aspects of her spirituality to be her individual spiritual practices. Jessica listed “God, prayer, and church” as contributing to her health and thriving. Alma also included “God” because “I talk to him. I’m just like, okay, I know you have some plan. I’m down to my break. I’m on my weak moment.” Stormy named “spirituality” and “God” as components of her health.

During the pilesort exercise in which collaborators chose words that reflected their sources of support, encouragement, and coping during the first round of focus group meetings, every collaborator chose “God,” and all but one chose “faith.” Pinky and Jennifer also chose “church.” Pinky said she chose “Go”d because “without God, nothing is possible.” She added

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246 See Chapter Four for the details of this topic.
that church and faith help her when she is struggling with self-doubt because she continues to believe in God and eventually realizes she is capable of making it through her current struggles. Jennifer also talked about her faith as knowing that “all things are possible if you believe,” and she credited God with “bringing her through all her struggles.” She said she knows “everything is going to be okay,” and she talked about church attendance as functioning to “keep her mind at ease.” Alma talked about her faith in God being her support because she knows God “doesn’t give us anything we can’t handle.” Jessica also said God is “the reason I’ve made it.” Stormy talked about God “strengthening her” and that “God is always first.” She said, “You have to put him first…because that’s where all your blessings come from,” and also because “if you don’t put him first, he’s going to have his little ways of showing you. He’s going to put you on your knees. Cause he is our father and we are his children, and he will chastise his children.”

Clodie and Jennifer said that sleep and rest are important aspects of their health, and both said their sleep is often compromised due to stresses of jobs (Clodie and Jennifer) and relationships (Jennifer). Jessica, Alma, and Stormy also said that sleep and rest top their lists of what they need for health and thriving. Members of FG2 asked for ideas to get them started with their lists. Among ideas, I ask whether to include “sex.” Alma said that was definitely “a stress reliever.”247 Stormy agreed, and Jessica said it could be depending on how tired she was. Jessica added that she feels tired all the time and would love more sleep and more rest and vacation time, which she currently “doesn’t get much of.”

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247 I did not ask about sex in FG1, possibly from some combination of motives including FG2 did not ask for suggestions, there was less space in the conversation, I did not think about it, and/or I was more comfortable suggesting it to FG1 due to multiple factors.
Clodie said that while she goes through periods of not sleeping or resting because of anxiety and worry, she tries to get “some down time about every other week.” Alma said she needs “alone time” for her health in order “to think and plan out what’s next.” Clodie and Stormy both explained the need for rest as spending quiet time alone at home with nothing to do. Clodie and Jennifer both said that rest involves letting go of worries and stress and thinking. Jennifer said she has not rested in eight years because of constant “thinking and worrying.” Jennifer also said that her “free time” does not feel restful because it does not feel balanced or connected to meaningful relationships. I pointed out her use of the word “balance” and noted that a lot of what they said about health and thriving sounded like balance. They agreed this was an appropriate word. Jennifer said volunteering with hospice gives her balance and peace because she is connecting with and helping other people. She said she would also like more balance of connecting with someone else in the form of a husband.

Stormy included “peace” and “emotional stability” on her list of what she needs for health and thriving. She said she learned the value of peace and emotional stability after her divorce and refuses to live without them now. “I never knew what peace was while I was married. Now, you’re can’t put a price on it, having peace in your life and your home.” All three collaborators in FG1 agreed that, for them, being married was, as Jessica said, “like walking on eggshells, never knowing what might happen.” Along with peace and emotional stability, Stormy included “independence.” “Just being on my own, I’ll never trade that for nothing.” She links her independence with home ownership, saying, “Just knowing that you can be on your own and then take care of everything…just knowing it’s your house and no one can tell you whatever to do in your house.” Jessica also included “independence.”
Alma said she stopped watching the news because “all the negativity” was “so
depressing…I’m tired of seeing that. We live in a world of negativity. I don’t want that.” Stormy
and Jessica agreed and say they also avoid listening to the news. I asked if by this they were
saying they need “hope and positive thinking and optimism” for their basic health and thriving.
All three in FG1 said, “Yes,” and Jessica said, “I think that’s the only thing that just keeps you
going.”

Every collaborator articulated a general outlook on life and thriving that does not
preclude struggle. They recognized the strength, resilience, and endurance they have developed
from their own struggles. Many also expressed hope for finding meaning in their struggles. For
example, Twila said that while money is her biggest worry, she knows “everything can’t be great
always. Not that it has been or I would be in some big mansion on the hill with a great job and
finished college a zillion years ago. But I just think everybody has to go through some type of
struggle. I guess it’s to make me stronger?” Stormy said, “Things happen for a reason, and that’s
fine, and you know, this is where I am…It’s a struggle. It is. It’s definitely a struggle. But what’s
easy in life anyway? Nothing is easy. You’re not handed anything. You have to work hard for
everything. There’s no handouts. Nobody is going to give you anything. Nothing is free. That’s
why I think anybody that has anything has worked hard for it.”

Clodie said her outlook is that “you kind of deal with it. (laughs) I don’t know what to
say. You just kind of deal with it and figure out a way.” Jennifer said, “I just know that all that I
have been through…I know at the end is all gone come together for a reason…I’m just waiting
on what else God has in turn for me.” She said her strength is her toughness.

I take it, I deal with it, I just don’t hold on to it. I have too much joy. Whatever happens
to me, I take it, I move on, and I try to make the rest of it happiness…My strength is my
struggles. Deal with it, get over it, keep moving. There’s always something better. You
gotta go out there and get it. It’s amazing. I learned to cry in order to release the emotions of hurt. From my struggles, my pains. So I can look back and realize, I beat it. Everything that comes against me, to me, is nothing but the Devil. Anytime I know that I defeated him, I’m fine.

Finally, Christina said, “My mom always told me, ‘Expect the worst.’ So when it’s not as bad as you think, then you’re looking up. And, I don’t know, I’ve always had a bubbly personality where I just kinda, I take things serious, but I don’t let it stick to me. I just kinda let it go and keep going…And that’s kind of the way I deal with life is, you know, you have a hurdle for a reason and just get over it and keep going.”

Jessica included “physical safety” on her list of basic needs for thriving, which is also a gendered concern. Clodie had a sign for an alarm system in her yard, but alarm systems or issues of physical safety did not arise during FG1. As noted in Chapter Five, Twila chose greater financial anxiety over constant anxiety related to physical safety when she turned down a DH home in a neighborhood with higher crime rates and lower mortgages. Jessica also added “healthy meals” and “exercise” during the conversation. She said she could include these, which are important to thriving, with more “time” and “money.”

I then asked what their families needed in terms of overall health and thriving, and Jennifer said kids need to see a balanced parent. Clodie agreed with that. Jessica said in addition to the “basics of food, clothes, shelter, school, social interaction, and playtime,” she thinks children need unstructured time for fun and recharging. She also talked about the need for relationships with friends their ages as well as with adult, “parental figures like mentors.” She said they need “love, hugs, kisses, praise, consequences, discipline (good and bad), teaching about how to adapt to school, society, physical stimulation, and stability.” These images offer a profound picture of thriving wherein these women envision a contented reality where their basic needs are met without compromising another basic need.
These marks of thriving identified align with basic understandings of human needs, such as food, shelter, safety, rest, affection, education, exercise, economic security, and healthcare, as well as subjective needs of affirmation, relationship, respect, spiritual meaning, independence, emotional well-being, positive stress, peace, and stimulation. Situated within the context of their stories and in their own words, it is easier to see which aspects of these needs are made so much more difficult to attain, given current cultural and systemic realities. As they lay out how they know that institutions and systems do or do not have their best interests at heart, these deficiencies become even more visible and are then easier to address.

Do Institutions, Systems, and Communities Support Thriving?

Collaborators offered sharp critiques of institutions that are not remotely interested in their wellbeing. Reflecting on the basic needs previously identified, I asked the groups what entities had their and their families’ best interests at heart and how they knew that. Their responses reflected the recurring needs for cultural and institutional recognition for full thriving. When asked about who has her best interests at heart, Jennifer immediately responded that she “definitely doesn’t trust any man.” Distrust of men was a recurring theme in both focus groups. Collaborators also readily agreed that the public school system did not have their family’s best interests at heart, although several collaborators noted individual teachers within those systems who care and even some systems, like Richardson ISD, that “care” more than other schools and school districts. Collaborators gave similar responses for “work” and “direct aid programs.” Again, while they named individual exceptions, they did not feel overall as if persons or entities with power over them were set up in their best interests or were primarily staffed by people who were concerned with their best interests or thriving. According to collaborators’ accounts, helpful people are the exception rather than the rule within disempowering systems.
Despite working hard and earning respect at each job she has worked, Jennifer said she never had a job where anyone “with authority” over her showed “actual concern” for her well-being or thriving. Clodie also said that while she has never “had any problems at work” because she “always made sure I did my job, and I did it well,” she has never worked in a job “that really has cared about the welfare of people that work for them.” Jessica made a similar statement. “They have the company’s best interest at heart. Theirs is more about production, making money, cutting costs.” Christina is currently seeking another job because its new location has increased the cost of her commute so that she barely breaks even financially and cannot save any money. However, as quoted before, she said, “I’m not trying too hard because I know you won’t always find a supervisor like I have now or a company that is…kinda run with that family feel…I know I’m not going to find that in corporate America.”

When looking at these experiences, members of both focus groups agreed that, ideally, workplaces need some ability to assess work performance and issues that arise on an individual basis or need at least some room for judgment and leniency. They also said they wanted to be treated with respect. In FG, I specifically asked whether I was correct in hearing that in addition to sufficient wages, their full health or thriving also included a work environment that included dignity and respect for them as individual workers. They agreed. Collaborators in FG2 talked about similar dynamics and frustrations related to work and other systems, like direct assistance programs. In FG2, I reflected that I was hearing the need for concrete changes as well as for being treated with compassion, warmth, and trust, and as a person with dignity. All three agreed. Jessica said, “If things were just on a more personal level. I understand that’s your job, and you’re just looking at it maybe it’s just a job. But if people just care a little more. Even the
people who are supposed to be helping you, if feels like…” Stormy said, “They’re just there to work.”

These observations raise interesting questions about what differences it would make if people in positions of relative power within systems were kinder and more compassionate even if the systems themselves do not change, or whether something about the systems shapes or misshapes people’s responses to each other. I would posit that these questions illumine the entangled, reinforcing relationships between cultural and economic hierarchies. When economic systems dehumanize certain people, those with more power and privilege see them as less fully human, and when cultural ideals dehumanize certain people, they create or support economic systems that dehumanize those same people. Because single, working-class mothers experience the extreme ends of both economic and cultural devaluation, they are positioned to name both as they truly are. People with more power and privilege in one or both areas are more likely to settle for the status quo, overlooking an abusive employer because they are well paid or overlooking inadequate pay when they are well respected. While these tendencies are evident in collaborators’ accounts on rare occasions, their experiences with these hierarchies still provide one of the more clear renderings of these oppressive systems.

Finally, I asked members of FG1 whether churches have their best interests at heart, “keeping in mind the holistic view of thriving you have painted.” Clodie said:

No…I feel like churches can do more…when they see Ms. King and her children get evicted or barely keeping a roof over their heads, the church says, ‘Well, keep your head up. I’ll pray for you.’ Why do I need you to pray for me? I can pray for myself. You need

248 I did not ask FG2 this question. Conversation developed in other areas that seemed important to collaborators, and we ran out of time before we could address this topic. While none of the collaborators attend church regularly at present, they have each attended churches previously, and their answers would have been undoubtedly been interesting and insightful.
to help me. Or help them…I don’t know, Black churches they just don’t do that. Black churches could help with housing.

Clodie also thinks churches should be more involved in communities, helping others as well as those in the church. She said there was a time when she got help with rent from a white church because her own Black church wouldn’t help. Jennifer said she agreed and experienced the same thing and also noted that some churches show a lack of attention to her presence and her needs. No one reached out to ask about her welfare when work meant she started missing church or when her husband stopped coming with her. “No one has taken the initiative.” Clodie said her pastor would call, but “he’s the only one.” She said he did help her with an electric bill once, “but for the most part, churches don’t normally help you,” and that even if they do occasionally help individuals, “it goes beyond two people.”

Thus, collaborators painted a stark picture of missing institutional support for thriving. They illustrated the impact and cost of this neglect and violation of their basic need for affirmation and recognition. The one exception they made was for the DH process. Their description of DH’s strengths and its weaknesses in this regard provide an instructive final piece to the overall ethnographic portion of this project.

*Dallas Habitat Homeownership Process and Thriving*

This section considers how DH provides a complex but helpful example of an institution that imperfectly meets many of the needs identified by collaborators. It listens to their needs and tries to understand how to best support their families, by providing housing, it helps relieve some of the competing needs that make life an impossible balance, and it communicates its care.

Collaborators said the DH process seems to have their best interests and those of their families at heart more than any other institution they encounter. Collaborators noted the objective
and subjective differences the homeownership process with DH has made in their lives. Several collaborators said they had some reservations about the process and about DH, which are also important to note. Thus, collaborators’ descriptions of the process provide substantive visions of a system that supports economic and cultural thriving in meaningful ways through affirming homeowners’ dignity as unique humans with important contributions to make: connection to community and support, opportunity to give back to the community by way of service hours, provision of significant physical goods that offer a stable home for supporting their families now and in the future, relevant education, leadership opportunities, and affirmation of independence while also revealing the limits of such organizations within current economic and cultural systems. The organization, through its workers, is still prone to behaviors and attitudes influenced by unconscious bias of cultural hierarchies, particularly those related to race. While homeownership is an important piece of wealth generation and elevation of class status, it does not provide broad economic security needed to thrive. Finally, because DH helps individual families, several collaborators reported tensions and even broken relationships with friends and family who wished they, too, could benefit from the DH program.

Christina said she saw DH as an opportunity to be on her own and to support her kids without “having to depend on somebody I’m not happy with.” Christina said DH is the first organization to help her in a way she needed without making her feel as if she were getting a “handout.” She said, “They make you feel like you improved your life, not that you’re rock-bottom getting assistance.” Noting the broader opportunities DH has provided, she commented that even credit cards ask whether the applicant is renting or is a homeowner. She also said she thinks people see her differently as a homeowner because “they see you as more stable when
you’re owning a home…I guess it’s, ‘Okay, they can actually settle down and stick to something and not be bouncing around.’”

Alma said provision for her kids is one of the main benefits of homeownership. Her children love having a home to call their own, and she is glad to have something concrete to leave to them. She said she has never owned a home, and it feels good to say, “‘I’m working hard to pay off…for something that’s gonna be left to my kids.’ If something were to happen to me, at least they have a roof over their head, and they won’t be in the streets or something, struggling.” She said it was great to be able to have something to show for all her hard work. Alma feels guilty about “abandoning” her father by moving to a different area, but she does love the community in the HC neighborhood.

Stormy was also very positive:

[T]he feeling of knowing that this is your home and…I just can’t explain it. It’s awesome. It’s just amazing. It makes you just…I mean I’ve always been a strong person, but it…somehow it just strengthens you more. It just makes you feel better as a person. That, you know, you’ve worked hard and, you know, I deserve this. And I worked hard for it. And I continue to work hard. You know, go to work every day. That’s incentive too to go to work so I can buy things for my house.

Twila is grateful for her DH home and the opportunities it created. As reported in chapter three, she also talked about challenges. When she wanted a two-story house for her two teenagers, she did not feel like her DH worker, a Latina, advocated for her. She said another homeowner, with a different DH worker, said that her worker held a two-story house for her while she raised the money for her down payment. Twila noted that this was a violation of DH policies. She said her general experience with her worker indicated she “had an attitude” and “wasn’t into helping.” Twila grew so frustrated she considered declining the home. She appealed to her worker’s manager, and while he was “friendly and understanding,” he did not intervene.
Twila was not angry with him because she said it made sense that he would “uphold what the person under him said.”

Ultimately, she accepted, saying, “You’re upset, but don’t be stupid upset, be smart upset.” Twila said she previously rented two-story homes so her DH home is the smallest they have lived in for quite some time. She is “hoping and praying for some windfall one day to pay it off and eventually rent it out. I was thinking rent it out to low-income families.” She said she appreciates the fact that she is no longer subject to the whims of former landlords who had arbitrarily asked her to move when they wanted to let relatives move into the home she was renting.

Pinky describes the DH homeownership process as “a dream.” She had promised herself when she first enrolled in public housing assistance that she would only accept assistance for ten years. The year she moved into her Habitat home marked the end of ten years on housing assistance. She credits this development to “the grace of God” and to her determination to “not become a product of my environment.” Pinky said, “I was sick of going through annuals every year where they have to come out and inspect you. And I know they’re doing their job. But I’m just saying…and then the more money you make, the more rent you have to pay. It’s like you’re never getting a boost on life from anywhere.” Pinky said she sees the benefits to homeownership including a “stable environment,” an unchanging mortgage, and the promise of owning a house outright. She also said she has even more pressure to keep a car running since the neighborhood has minimal access to DART. Pinky said she lives in fear of losing her home and feels like some of her struggles are more acute than they were prior to DH homeownership. Pinky said in ten years she would like to have a master’s degree in nursing, live in a larger home, using her Habitat home for public assistance housing, and run a group home and a halfway house. The
Dallas Habitat experience has been a positive one for Jessica. She feels like she worked “really hard” to earn the house, and she is particularly proud to be “the first homeowner in [her] family.” She repeated this sentiment several times.

When I asked members of FG1 whether Habitat for Humanity and the home buying process had their best interests at heart, Clodie said, “You know what? I do. I was very shocked.” Jennifer said, “To a certain extent.” Jennifer said the foreclosure process is unfair because they foreclose in two months as a means “to get the homes back.” She said the two-month foreclosure is “why they end up giving so many homes to people that end up going to foreclosure. I don’t know what the percentage is, but I know a lot of people that have lost Habitat homes.” Even though Clodie said she knew someone whose payments had been reduced after a job loss, Jennifer was adamant about her information. She said DH reports to credit services very early, which hurts people who are already vulnerable. Both women agreed that DH would optimally work with families until they could make their payments.249

Jennifer listed the following ways DH showed care for her and her family’s health and thriving: through the low down payment; through “allowing us to use our physical abilities…to put back into the community through community service”; through the lack of age discrimination (she talked about appreciating elderly Habitat neighbors); and through the sense of community generated by working and living together. Clodie agreed with Jennifer and added that she

249 My conversation with DH representatives about general policies and procedures included information aligning more closely with Clodie’s experience. They said they have a department that works with people who are struggling. They follow state law that requires foreclosure after 90 days, and they give families the option of surrendering their houses for $500 so the surrender does not go on their credit. DH also said they set up payment plans, sometimes for as low as $50. According to their records, 94% of DH homeowners are still in their homes, and the remaining 6% are either on payment plans, have surrendered their homes, or have experienced foreclosure.
appreciated DH’s willingness to overlook negative credit incidents. She also praised the “sense of family” of the organization.

That said, Clodie and Jennifer said they felt like the home selection process was not fully transparent or fair. They also both said the “home visits” felt intrusive and unnecessary. Jennifer and some of her neighbors wrote a letter to the DH CEO and received some concessions regarding timing of home visits.

In FG2, collaborators said they felt like DH cared for them and their families’ well-being and thriving without reservations. They identified marks that conveyed cultural respect and recognition along with support of their economic needs. Alma said, “The experience there is different compared to if we were to go through a realtor, because to them we’re money signs. [DH] gave you that caring feeling.” Jessica said, “They tried to empower you to learn things on your own” with classes on budgeting and managing credit. Jessica differentiated DH from a “charity” for these offerings and other reasons. “They really got you involved. Not only are we working on each other’s houses, we’re doing the classes together. And then they do the whole dedication ceremony…it makes you feel like a community. Before I could be in a house and never really feel like a community.”

FG2 collaborators agreed they felt a “sense of accomplishment because they make you feel like you worked for it. You put in the hours.” Jessica said, “I did it and I got this house on my own.” I said it seemed like they were describing a process that provided them some of the hope and security they talked about needing previously. I also said it sounded as if they were describing a balance of feeling independent and being part of a community at the same time. All agreed that this was their experience, with Jessica saying, “Yeah! They do, at the same time give you the independence that I can do something on my own, and they do make you feel part of a
group. This is the first I ever felt a sense of community, honestly.” She also said she feels like she has a lot in common with her neighbors in terms of work ethics, values, and commitment to the community. Alma talked about swapping meals with a neighbor to share cooking responsibilities.

Observations regarding the positive economic and cultural benefits of homeownership raise important points related to the need for asset-building among the working class. Day argues that poor Black women would benefit more from asset-building, like homeownership and savings, than increased income. Indeed, comparing relative wealth reveals greater inequalities than comparing incomes. These inequalities are exacerbated by intersecting identities. For example, the mean household income in 2013 for the top 1% of the U.S. population is $1,679,000 while the bottom 40% is $20,300. The mean household net worth for the top 1% is $18,623,400 while the bottom 40% is -$10,800. Broken down by race, the median income is $54,000 for white households, $30,000 for Black households, and $32,000 for Hispanic households. The median net worth is $116,800 for white households, $1,700 for Black households, and $2,000 for Hispanic households. These realities reflect the long history of “asset denial and wealth discrimination” written into public policies of the U.S. Day argues that reversal of poverty requires removal of blocks to asset-building for poor people. Feedback from collaborators suggests that the DH program has provided an asset helpful to them and to


future generations, in addition to the multiple subjective goods related to cultural respect and recognition they identify.

DH also intentionally aims to strengthen the entire communities where it builds its houses, not only families participating in the DH program. It supports neighborhood association and crime watch programs and provides resources related to voting, medical services, early education and afterschool services, job training, and legal services. DH shares information for contacting the city for beautification and safety issues and has begun facilitating community gatherings using the Asset-Based Community Development model to build community and harness resources within neighborhoods. Particularly since 2010, DH has begun focusing on neighborhood revitalization projects. The organization empowers DH homeowners to participate and take leadership roles in community efforts so that “the work is sustainable over time.” These initiatives aim to support safer, more stable neighborhoods where families can thrive.

Members of FG1 mentioned involvement in their neighborhood association as well as ongoing negotiations with the city and developers to address empty, overgrown lots. They also had an overall positive view of their neighborhood’s sense of community. Jennifer said, “We all get along. We see the kids grow up. We see the babies come. We visit. They come out, they speak, they holler. If their kids are out on the road, I stop get out of my car, and say, ‘Get out of this street.’ I never had a parent saying don’t say nothing to my kids.” Clodie also said she had said something to kids who were behaving in ways she knew her neighbors did not like. She knew a neighbor did not want kids climbing over her fence, and so she told them to stop doing it.

Jennifer said she knew which kids these were; they are Black teenagers. Clodie said she was nice when she talked with them, and that she feels like this is part of being a community, holding neighborhood kids accountable. I asked if they thought this was a cultural marker of the African American community, and they both agreed that it was. Jennifer said, “that’s how we grew up. Everybody cares and everybody watches out. That’s right.”

FG2 also talked about neighborhood dynamics, although they brought them up before I had a chance to ask. It seems likely that the two group discussions are referencing some of the same neighborhood children—with different experiences and perceptions. In a conversation about local schools and aggressive behaviors, Stormy said the kids are “especially mean in this neighborhood.” Jessica said, “We had to take down our basketball hoop because some little girls from over here come over to our street, and they were pushing our kids and cussing at them.” She said, “that girl is 14 and my kids are like six and seven.” Alma said, “But then I stop and think, you gotta realize their environment that they’re in.” All three participants agreed that this particular child “was not being monitored whatsoever.” Alma said, “Their mom’s like in her own little world.” Jessica said there were other teenage girls on their street who were “good kids” even though she has also “never seen an adult.”

When Jessica returned to the subject of the girl who she said was treating her kids badly, Stormy expressed concern that it might be her daughter. Jessica said it wasn’t and said this girl was “a little Black girl.” Stormy said she thinks her daughter has talked about this particular girl. Jessica said she told her kids to come get her if the girl showed up and said anything inappropriate, but she said the girl always leaves before she can get outside. “But she called my daughter a white bitch in my backyard, because my daughter was telling her, ‘My mother doesn’t
want anybody in the backyard. Please come out of here.’ And she was like, ‘Well, we’re about to fight, then.’ And then she called her that.”

Returning to the basketball hoop, Jessica said, “I put up the hoop for all the kids, you know, to play. But my kids couldn’t even play because the big kids would push them around…It’s a mess.” Stormy said, “Well, they’re just confrontational, wanting to fight.” Jessica agreed and said she had asked them before to watch their language around younger children. She said they have stopped coming to her house, and she said, “But you can tell the difference. The kids that you never see the parents, that’s the ones that are…”

Twila is not highly involved in the HC neighborhood, although she said her children really enjoy the community. As she noted in her individual interview, Twila prefers contexts with racial and ethnic diversity. She wishes more white people lived in HC, and she is suspicious of monolithic neighborhoods. “You’re not gonna be at a place where you’re gonna have all your race. Or you shouldn’t be…When that happens there’s something going on. Denying applicants of other races or something going on.” When people with diverse racial identities live in communities together, their relationships are less likely to be influenced by power differences than those same relationships would be in paid work environments. Twila sees potential for greater equality in diverse neighborhoods.

As noted in Chapter Two, HC is the only DH neighborhood with significant racial/ethnic diversity. Collaborators’ perspectives indicate the possibilities, the challenges, and the complications these differences present for authentic community and solidarity in HC, even among members who share gender and class identities.
I also asked how family and friends responded to their participation in the DH program. Alma said that some friends have asked about how to get a DH home and even implied that she is getting something for free. Her response is that she still has bills and payments like everyone else, and she does not have time for the jealousy of “friends who are not really friends.” When I asked Pinky if people treated her any differently now that she is a homeowner, she responded, “Oh yeah. Supposedly I’m too much. I think I’m all that.” She said people she grew up with see her as thinking she is “better” than them. In response to feeling judged by others, she said, “No. I’m struggling worser than you! You still get to have your housing. You have a brand new car that you’re paying a car note on. I can’t even afford to pay a car note.” Pinky’s explanation for this response is powerful:

Society is judgmental. And envious. When you say society, I just think about a big bucket of crabs. As long as everybody is at the bottom of the barrel, it’s fine. It’s like the little crabs be sitting down there amongst themselves with their little antennas. I guess that’s how they socialize. When I envision that, I envision people just sitting there, downtalking one another. How bad the other one is doing when in actuality your situation really isn’t better than mine. Then I also reflect back to the crabs because when one of the crabs is tired of being in that bucket and they’re trying to climb and get out of that bucket, another one takes their snappers and pulls them down trying to keep them there with them. That’s what I mean by envious. Someone else is trying to make it out and it’s like you don’t want them to make it in life. You damned if you and damned if you don’t. If I’m down here with you, you have something to say, if I’m trying to do better, you still have something to say. That’s what I mean by envious.

Prior to interviews, I had not considered the potential for participation in the program straining existing relationships and community. This experience makes me wonder how residents in neighborhoods where DH builds perceive their DH neighbors. Do they see revitalization efforts and positive impacts on the neighborhood, with benefits to themselves, or do they have similar conceptions as Alma and Pinky’s friends? Answers to these questions exceed the scope of this project, but the questions themselves, along with the broader challenges presented by collaborators, suggest that DH is a limited model for supporting communal thriving. DH
homeowners, by their own accounts, experience a measure of cultural recognition and economic stability they do not experience in other institutions. They have critical needs met, people who listen to them, and occasionally space for self-care. And yet, even as one of the better, most affirming and helpful institutions of its kind, the program is still not nearly enough to support thriving and full participation in society. Much more substantial systemic change is required for single, working-class mothers to experience full thriving.

Thus, a broader, more detailed vision is still needed even as the ethnographic knowledge generated in this project offers a critically important foundation. Before delving into this broader theo-ethical vision as I conclude this project, I relate the difference ethnography has made in my approach to feminist social ethics.

**Conclusion: Ethnography, Beloved Community, and the World House**

This ethnographic methodology is helpful because it advances compassionate understanding of marginalized people. I endeavored to undertake an ethnographic methodology for my dissertation because I believed that foregrounding the direct experiences of marginalized women was not only ethically aligned with my theological commitments but also an effective way to participate in and help motivate broad efforts for systemic change. The ethnographic experience and the knowledge it generated exceeded what I had envisioned. It deepened my understandings, motivated me in new ways, challenged my assumptions and preconceived ideas, and convinced me even more of the need for this work in feminist social ethics. In this process, I realized more fully the difference ethnography can make and additional reasons for its efficacy.

While I identified some of these capacities related to ethnographic study before the project, I can now offer particularities and examples that deepen and bolster these claims. I am not claiming that this particular project realized each of the goods I identify as possible through this
ethnographic methodology; that would require deeper engagement with collaborators and widespread readership of the project. Rather, I can see more clearly how it optimally functions to achieve these goods. I explore these insights in the following pages.

First, the thick descriptions offered by collaborators create solidarity while resisting re-centering, simplification, romanticization, or minimization of these realities, all possibilities when theorists offer accounts on behalf of marginalized persons or even when single mothers interpret each other’s realities from a distance. Ethnography can create solidarity by countering judgmental ideas grounded in cultural stereotypes with complex, relatable realities that trouble simplified stereotypes and generalizations. In focus groups, collaborators often responded to each other in much more empathetic ways than they did when talking about working-class single mothers whom they had encountered more superficially. For instance, Stormy expressed frustration with single mothers who “abused the system.” As evidence of this abuse, she cited women with expensive purses who also received TANF benefits. In the same sentence she noted that her own expensive purse had been a gift. Alma agreed with Stormy’s assessment while also noting that she, too, had an expensive purse given to her. If Stormy and Alma encountered each other without substantive interaction, would they have given each other the same benefit of the doubt? If they had meaningful contact, whether in person or through an ethnographic account, with one of the women they perceived as “abusing the system,” would their perception shift?

Regardless, these are the sorts of divisions that keep people whose interests overlap from working together to challenge oppressive systems. These divisions are not accidental. When systems are designed to pit people against each other through systemic competition and cultural prejudice, vulnerable persons miss that abuse of the systems does not create inequalities. Rather, the systems create inequalities. While knowing every single story is untenable, the more people
with overlapping interests hear each other’s stories, the more likely they are to withhold judgment in other interactions.

Second, ethnographic accounts are also particular enough to create space for readers with more privilege to identify places of connection while curbing tendencies to over-relate and recenter the conversation away from the most vulnerable persons in ways that minimize their suffering. That is, ethnographic accounts of lived realities can stimulate responses that maintain constructive balance between activism motivated by self-interest and activism motivated by solidarity.

Third, ethnographic knowledge can generate stronger senses of solidarity than primarily theoretical arguments. I understand solidarity as empathetically understanding oppressive realities one does not directly experience and responding based on moral commitments. Centering the subjectivity of extremely marginalized persons as a primary knowledge source provides compelling descriptions of realities that lead to a visceral picture of the moral goods being violated by oppressive systems. Once someone feels an authentic connection to someone suffering from a violation of this fundamental need, they are more likely to work for change. While it will always be important to guard against saviorism that ignores the agency of those suffering the most, it remains a stronger response in many people to act on behalf of someone they know and love than to act on behalf of themselves. Particularly for those who are socialized to care for others, like women. This certainly reflects my own story of invested relationships with single mothers at a homeless shelter that catalyzed, and continue to catalyze, my activist and research efforts. Ethnography can facilitate these sorts of investments, even if it functions to motivate people to get involved to the point where they will meet people whose stories prompt a deeper, more passionate commitment to change.
An example of a moral commitment that fuels responses from solidarity is the theoretical value of human dignity. Collaborators’ stories in this project show why dignity matters. Their accounts paint pictures of what dignity looks and feels like when it is present and what it looks and feels like when it is not, whether in interpersonal relationships, places of work, charity programs, activist movements, political campaigns, or institutionalized policies. Examples of this are: Twila having her Black children not welcome at work; white women’s dogs seemed to matter more than Black children; Jessica overhearing employers doubting her honesty or having to beg, in tears, for her children to stay in a school closer to their home; Clodie providing the expertise at her workplace, without healthcare or adequate wages, while those she supports receive more respect and greater material benefits; and DH creating a system where homeowners retain their dignity because they are not treated as helpless but are viewed as capable, important contributors. Each of these stories demonstrates the importance of basic dignity in all spheres of life.

My methodology affirms human dignity. This affirmation has deep theological roots in many Christian theological traditions. The recognition of the need for cultural and economic systems which affirm basic human dignity is a fundamental aim of liberation theology. Identified by James Cone as “a liberation theologian before the phrase was coined,” King has a particularly strong theological commitment to the ethic of dignity and human worth in cultural and economic hierarchies. This demand to create realities, transforming structures when needed, that affirm human dignity drives King’s image of beloved community. In its attention to sacred worth and its broader call for diverse, culturally-transformed communities and relationships, the image of

beloved community speaks powerfully to the deficiencies and potential in current cultural hierarchies experienced by collaborators.

This image remains powerful today. In December 2017, I attended the National Association of Independent Schools annual People of Color Conference. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw offered the opening address, and Ta-Nehisi Coates closed the conference. During the opening ceremonies, which included musical performances, multiple speakers, and Crenshaw’s speech, I noted three references to “beloved community.” At this ostensibly secular conference, with close to 6,000 attendees and no sessions on spirituality or religion, I counted another three references to “beloved community” in workshops I attended. These were passing references, made with the assumption that participants knew what the term means, and indicated the relevance and accessibility of King’s vision and the values undergirding it as well as its ongoing authority.

This anecdotal evidence suggests the broad, persistent power of King’s image of the beloved community to provide moral and strategic grounding for a disruption of cultural hierarchies experienced by single, working-class mothers and other peoples experiencing oppressive cultural dynamics. King understood that theo-ethical convictions of beloved community, which demand cultural respect and recognition, produce interventions in the broader social context. These transformations change hearts and structures. King viewed Rosa Parks’ defiant act as an assertion of her dignity and self-respect, as a claim on her theological right to inhabit beloved community.255

255 Dorrien, 394.
While the main thrust of King's writing, speaking, and preaching, including most of his work on beloved community, engages struggles for racial equality, his later works bring struggles for economic equality into sharper focus. He does not engage in struggles for gender equality, yet his ideas about the role of religious communities in transforming societal structures are applicable to efforts at gender equity. Further, feminist and womanist critiques, like those of Crenshaw and Christian ethicist Sharon Welch, are helpful in further developing his ideas to attend to intersectionality, relationality, and oppressive dynamics within resistance efforts.256

King's theological convictions drove his passionate engagement of the civil rights movement as well as his relations with faith communities. King's most profound belief was that "deeply rooted in our religious heritage" lies the conviction that humans are heirs to legacies of dignity and worth. This fundamental, universal worth stems from the fact that all human beings equally reflect and possess the image of God. "Every [person] must be respected because God loves [them]…human worth lies in its relatedness to God."257 Segregation, then, became the

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256 I did not intend to use King’s theo-ethical positions at the outset of this project. In fact, I was inclined to resist engaging him given his lack of attention to gender equality and his personal misogyny. There are numerous feminist and womanist ethicists and theologians who speak to the themes raised in this project, and I have read and been shaped by many of them. And yet I wanted to be as authentic to the inductive process as possible. So I paid attention when the generative themes that emerged from collaborators so clearly represented the distinct and overlapping hierarchies of culture and economics. And I noticed how well they connected with King’s overlapping images of beloved community and the world house. And I engaged new scholarship exploring the interdependent, economic dimensions of the world house image even as I also noticed the cultural persistence of the image of beloved community. And when I did not find any scholarship holding these two images explicitly together, I determined that grounding my theo-ethical response to the lived realities of marginalized single mothers in King’s cultural image of beloved community and economic image of the world house offered enough familiarity to get traction and enough innovation to present an original, theologically-compelling framing in this project.

257 Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 97.
absolute greatest violation of humanity because it was designed to degrade and annihilate personality by humiliating and excluding the personhood of African Americans as a group. It is also one of the world's most terrible evils because it denies humans freedom and human dignity, the qualities that make one human. In beloved community, every person’s divine worth is equally recognized and affirmed.

For collaborators in this project, and other working-class single mothers, segregation, and the resulting violation of humanity and freedom, comes in many forms: bosses who assume they are irresponsible and separate them from positions of greater power and earning capacity, managers who make employees of color prove their injuries after being hit by a car, separation from basic or quality healthcare, social isolation that stems from overwork in the realms of paid work and unpaid family work, separation from quality educational experiences, and inequitable and insufficient wages. All of these can be linked to neoliberal values and structures, and all of which separate these women from meaningful participation in movements for change or for basic democratic processes. This separation is exacerbated in clear ways for single mothers of color, and King would renounce it.

King placed enormous responsibility for help or hindrance in the fight to transform systems in the hands of faith communities or churches. While he willingly accepted that many groups must collude to amass the power needed to counter that of oppressive structures and cultural forces of racism, he nonetheless believed that the church is "the voice of moral and

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259 King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 97.
spiritual authority on earth."\textsuperscript{260} The liberal white church, he continued, has a special obligation to acknowledge the "shameful" reality that it has been an accomplice to "structuring racism into the architecture of American society."\textsuperscript{261} "America's segregated churches," King concluded, have come dangerously close to losing the capacity to distinguish between good and evil. He acknowledged rare but important exceptions among Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish communities who have lived out the ethical implications of the Judeo-Christian heritage with regard to race. He judged that much more frequently the church as a whole "has been all too negligent on the question of civil rights. It has too often blessed a status quo that needed to be blasted, and reassured a social order that needed to be reformed."\textsuperscript{262} By and large, the white church (he seems to include Jewish communities in this condemnation) has failed in the call to servanthood and must now recognize that "the judgment of God is upon the church for its failure to be true to its mission."\textsuperscript{263} A religion "true to its mission" knows that "segregation is morally wrong and sinful" because it is predicated on "pride, hatred, and falsehood," clear categories of moral failure. King further grieved that "two segregated souls never meet in God." Again with the church, however, has an opportunity and a duty to "recapture its prophetic zeal,"

to lift up its voice like a trumpet and declare unto the people the immorality of segregation. It must affirm that every human life is a reflection of divinity, and that every act of injustice mars and defaces the image of God in [humanity]. The undergirding philosophy of segregation is diametrically opposed to the undergirding philosophy of our

\textsuperscript{260} Martin Luther King, Jr., \textit{Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?} (Beacon Press, 2010), 97.

\textsuperscript{261} King, Jr., 97.

\textsuperscript{262} King, Jr., 97.

\textsuperscript{263} King, Jr., 96.
Judeo-Christian heritage, and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them lie down together.\textsuperscript{264}

King did not stop there, warning against the insufficiency of declarations: "the church must take the lead in social reform. It must move out into the arena of life and do battle for the sanctity of religious commitments. And it must lead [people] along the path of true integration, something the law cannot do."\textsuperscript{265} King here presents a compelling vision of authentic integration, transformation of the heart, which cannot be legislated. "Genuine integration will come when [people] are obedient to the unenforceable."\textsuperscript{266} This is also the unique, redemptive role and hope of the church—to transform the inner attitudes and expressions of compassion, which are laws written on the heart. "Laws assure justice, but a higher law produces love."\textsuperscript{267}

This is the cultural work needed to dismantle oppressive stereotypes and associations leveled at single mothers. Beloved community rejects stereotypes and prejudices that produce direct harm, as well as indirect harm in the ways they shape and justify economic and political structures and policies that inhibit thriving.

King's vision of integration testifies to his yearning for a faithful, healed community. He demands systemic equality and justice, but his theology reaches for a different kind of transformation as well. Desegregation might bring people together in some ways, but King recognized that "physical desegregation does not eradicate fears, prejudice, pride, and

\textsuperscript{264} King, Jr., 100.

\textsuperscript{265} King, Jr., 101.

\textsuperscript{266} King, Jr., 101.

\textsuperscript{267} King, Jr., 101.
irrationality, which compose the true makeup of segregation."\textsuperscript{268} The human community must believe that all humans are related and recognize that love is the "most potent weapon for personal and social transformation" because "something must touch the hearts and souls of [people] so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right."\textsuperscript{269} This fullness of God’s presence is what King and other Boston personalists called "the beloved community." For King, genuine "intergroup and interpersonal living" offers salvation that cannot be realized as long as the Black community suffers in isolation. For this reason, King was ashamed to acknowledge the reality of American churches that sing "In Christ There Is No East or West" during "the most segregated hour in America."\textsuperscript{270} Extending this argument to working-class single mothers involves persons and groups with more power recognizing their suffering and isolation and listening to their stories. True cultural transformation of hearts will demand participation and presence of the most marginalized members of society in all efforts to create beloved community.

King leveled equally strong words directly at the Black church, exhorting it to be fully engaged with building a united (if not uniform) front against injustices and racism. "There are still too many negro churches that are so absorbed in a future good 'over yonder' that they condition their members to adjust to present evils 'over here.'"\textsuperscript{271} King hoped to recover group

\textsuperscript{268} King, Jr., 101.

\textsuperscript{269} King, Jr., 101.

\textsuperscript{270} Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Address Before the National Press Club" in \textit{A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.} (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), 101.

\textsuperscript{271} King, Jr., \textit{Where Do We Go from Here}, 36.
solidarity in the African American community, reminding the Black middle class that "we have been oppressed as a group and we must overcome that oppression as a group."\textsuperscript{272} The current instantiation of this requirement addresses the tendencies for collaborators to distance themselves from other single mothers, often deploying the same stereotypes they themselves resist. That said, the vision and plan to make their voices heard articulated by members of FG1 offers a strong example of the sort of mutual empowerment needed to resist cultural and structural injustices.

King’s beloved community also crosses boundaries of difference. While he fully appreciated the challenges inherent in including white persons in the civil rights movement, including the potential for further diminishment of selfhood in the presence of white "saviors," he nonetheless insisted they be welcomed. "The answer [to racism and living together] was only to be found in persistent trying, perpetual experimentation, persevering togetherness. Like life, racial understanding is not something that we find but something that we must create…by the fact of contact."\textsuperscript{273} King did not romanticize this process or assume it would not be a messy, difficult, process of trial and error. Dismissing the idea of a pre-existent mold for healthy relations, King proclaimed "existence is the raw material out of which all life must be created." Further, he was keen to keep the deep morality at the center of the movement. To this end "Consciences must be enlisted in our movement…not merely racial groups."\textsuperscript{274}

\textsuperscript{272} King, Jr., 125.

\textsuperscript{273} King, Jr., 28.

\textsuperscript{274} King, Jr., 28.
While DH does not use language of beloved community, I think the leaders of the organization would acknowledge overlapping values between its visions of thriving communities and King’s image of beloved community. These messy, complicated relationships in neighborhoods open spaces for transformation of all parties, if invited. DH succeeds in its neighborhoods, to the extent it can without explicitly confronting and dismantling intersecting cultural hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. To embrace beloved community more fully, DH and its participants need to have more direct conversations about the ongoing cultural hierarchies still dividing its neighborhoods. Further, collaborators’ stories and perspectives must spread beyond their local neighborhood for broad cultural affirmation of human dignity and equality to bend toward a more global beloved community.

In *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Welch talks explicitly about faith communities, or "the beloved community," drawing directly from and building on King as well as the womanist authors whom she engages.\(^{275}\) The beloved community offers an appropriate symbol "for the process of celebrating life, enduring limits, and resisting injustice.\(^{276}\) Welch believes this symbol meets the needs for a faith community's identity and persistence in the struggle for liberation. "From within the matrix of the beloved community, there is a solid basis for social critique and self-criticism: the life-giving love constitutive of solidarity with the oppressed and love of oneself."\(^{277}\) Welch says it is this matrix of love that drives the struggle for justice. "When

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\(^{275}\) Although I find Welch to be helpful and am using her work here, I am aware of the criticism by womanists of her appropriation and use of womanist resources. Certainly these criticisms are important.


\(^{277}\) Welch, 160–61.
we begin from a self created by love for nature and for other people, choosing not to resist injustice would be the ultimate loss of self…[This love]…provides the resiliency of commitment, vision, and hope when efforts for change either are defeated repeatedly or are shown to be insufficient.”

Welch’s conception of love and the communal struggle for liberation complements and builds on King in helpful ways. Welch offers markers for creating a process of building beloved community. As Day and others have pointed out, the failure of the Poor People’s Campaign to recognize and empower women of color and sexual minorities undermined its capacity for success by reifying cultural hierarchies within its own structures. With her theology of immanence, risk, and contiguous community, Welch bridges the embodied, particular, intersectional stories of marginalized women with King’s universal image of beloved community in ways that resist cultural hierarchies within the broader beloved community.

Welch envisions community in which ”the connections that sustain community do not have to be solely connections of similarity. Rather, cohesive communities can be shaped by contiguity as much as by similarity.” This allows for transparent disruption of differences within beloved community that have been imbued with cultural hierarchies. She draws from the work of Joseph Maxwell for this relationship between similarity and contiguity in community. "Similarity-based solidarity derives from the ways in which people recognize or construct resemblances between one another, ways in which they are alike. Contiguity-based solidarity, on

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278 Welch, 165.

the other hand, derives from the ways in which people interact, meet one another's needs, and thereby come to know and care about one another." Welch emphasizes the enriched capacity for authentic relationships the contiguity-based dimension of communal solidarity adds. Just as often as the moments of recognition provide meaningful connections, so do the connections that "come from the shock of difference…having someone act in a way that offers a different perspective, an unpredictable and telling social critique or alternative strategy for acting justly." This recognition yields deeper joy and love within the relationships by way of "knowing that the other person or group exceeds our comprehension, prediction, and control." Not only does Welch believe this construal offers a rich path to communal identity, it also provides the conditions for "foundational ethical critique." In particular, acknowledging the lens of differences allows for a more thorough hearing of marginalized voices and recognition of power imbalances, admitting new authorities into discourse and decision-making. In this way, contiguity-based solidarity demonstrates that "the check to violence and coercion can be difference, taking seriously, learning from the narratives, histories, and experiences of different groups within our own communities, and the different experiences of other communities." Welch suggests that comfort with difference and contiguity also allows for a much more constructive, healthy resolution of conflicts. Communities "ostensibly ones of support and

280 Welch, 86.
281 Welch, 86.
282 Welch, 86.
283 Welch, 86.
284 Welch, 84–85.
cooperation" too often dissolve or shatter when conflict emerges, fearful and threatened by the inevitable difference of otherness. Worse, communities create scapegoats or repress conflicts in ways that jeopardize their identities and their missions and harm people.\textsuperscript{285}

Welch's community carries the following marks: "respect for every human being, commitment to justice, self-criticism, an awareness of our own weakness and flaws, openness to conflict, critique and change, delight in the surprise and unexpected gifts of life.\textsuperscript{286} With faith communities, she predicates these marks on a grounding in "a narrative of being in relationship to God" or in "being in the image of God." The particularity of each faith narrative shapes the motives for a community's engagement with the broader context, but Welch thinks the marks of contiguous-shape communities cross these porous boundaries of particular identities.\textsuperscript{287} While implicit in King’s beloved community, Welch’s articulation joins womanist and \textit{mujerista} ethicists who insist on foregrounding particular, marginalized voices in struggles for liberation and justice. This acknowledgment of and attention to difference and power dynamics within and across community seems an important point to amplify, particularly when considering the ongoing points of conflict among collaborators and lack of broader cultural respect and recognition.

As the previous section, and King’s witness, exemplify, activism motived by solidarity through commitment to Christian ideals, such as dignity, can create powerful movements. Commitment on the part of persons primarily motivated by solidarity can also wane, however,

\textsuperscript{285} Welch, 89.
\textsuperscript{286} Welch, 92.
\textsuperscript{287} Welch, 92.
when risks become too great or moderate change suggests some improvement. Here one can see the importance of acknowledging self-interest in the ethnographic, liberative method.

Returning to my reflections on ethnography in this project, my fourth reflection about what ethnography offers is that the level of depth and detail in ethnographic accounts can expose particular strands that create connections between collaborators and readers, making mutual interests more clear. In this case, generative themes this group of women laid out make it clear that addressing troubling cultural and systemic realities exposed will benefit a much broader and possibly the majority of people. Close attention to the areas of oppression of single, working-class mothers reveals structures impacting everyone whose identities and relative power are shaped by class, race, and gender. Persons who are most vulnerable within oppressive systems are the “canaries in the coal mine;” their levels of exposure to toxic elements impact them most immediately, most visibly, and most destructively. These elements are also toxic to others, even if they are not as visible. Ethnographic knowledge produced in this study, particularly as it is coupled with other knowledge sources, offers a compelling picture of how cultural and economic systems exploit the most vulnerable even as they also limit and oppress others.

Self-interest can also be tapped when suggesting how these direct experiences speak to the destructive, capitalist promotion of self-sufficiency, individualism, and competition. Single mothers who bear the weight of full responsibility for their children’s lives while absorbing the harmful impact of narrow ideas about work tell others why the lie of individualism and self-sufficiency must be challenged and why the reality of interdependence must be acknowledged and supported. Further, their sense of responsibility related to their children and their paid work, even as it is broadly denied, exposes the false narrative that personal responsibility is linked to wealth. As these false narratives become exposed, so does the myth that wealth and whiteness
are places of independence. King makes these points in his account of beloved community, but his image of the world house argues for interdependence in even broader ways, including condemnation of unjust economic systems in favor of liberative ones.

King articulated his vision of the world house in his 1967 work, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* The image of the world house is less well-known than beloved community though it has gained traction in recent years, particularly since the economic recession of 2009. It offers broad as well as concrete, particular hallmarks of an economically just beloved community. I argue for its utility for this project exactly because it is a less familiar, but no less important element of the King canon, which remains authoritative in broad secular and Christian discourse. The fact that the image of the world house can be paired with the image of beloved community, which is familiar and accessible, suggests that the two together offer a new combination that retains enough familiarity to compel people with its theo-ethical demands along with providing new challenges to our moral visions.

King wrote *Where Do We Go From Here?* while taking a break from his work in Chicago, where he engaged in justice work calling out economic structures, nationalism, and militarism. Specifically, the Chicago Freedom Movement aimed to address segregated housing, educational deficiencies, economic injustice, income inequality, employment discrimination, and health disparities.\(^{288}\) These aims align with the generative themes articulated as ongoing issues by collaborators in this project. Again, single, working-class mothers experience segregation, including economic segregation, and, in particular, life-draining ways day in and day out. Clearly

King’s moral vision remains relevant. While this vision retains the core elements and values of his vision of beloved community, King attends to global economic realities and economic interdependence in new ways. He begins by noting that cultural equality or civil rights is limited when economic inequality runs rampant. “Equality with whites will not solve the problems of either whites or Negroes if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty.”

King addressed globalization ahead of his time, arguing that technological advancements, the end of colonialism, and the concentration of economic power into the hands of multinational elites demanded that “we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood [sic].” King declared racism and economic exploitation “perennial allies” and cited their collusion as “the key to understanding most of the international complications of this generation.” With the Voting Rights Act as a step toward beloved community, King argued that creation of the world house must include dealing with “the economic aspects of racist exploitation.” In fact, racism, militarism, and nationalism provide a “treacherous foundation” for the world house. One must add sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and all forms of cultural oppressions that intersect with oppressive economic systems.

In his call to develop the world house, King insists that wealthier nations make use of their resources to assist in the development of poorer nations. He reminds wealthier countries

289 King, Jr., Where Do We Go from Here, 167.
290 King, Jr., 170.
291 King, Jr., 173.
292 King, Jr., 174.
293 King, Jr., 176.
that their economic development often occurred because of an abundance of (unearned) natural resources as well as through the exploitation of other nations. He hopes this awareness will engender humility and compassion, and he insists that actions taken to address global economic inequality “must not be used by wealthy nations as a surreptitious means to control the poor nations.” King warns that this would “lead to a new form of paternalism and a neo-colonialism which no self-respecting nation could accept.” Clearly King would find the international debt currently crippling two-thirds world nations morally abhorrent.

King’s moral arguments for the will to create the world house include elements of beloved community, like the conviction of the inherent worth of all humans as made in the image of God. He believes that those who accept this reality as fact can never accept hunger, lack of access to healthcare or education, or any degrading conditions in anyone, regardless of nationality, race, or any other factor. Humans, he argues, are interdependent by the nature of their shared humanity and also by the economic ties that have linked our global. To illustrate the multiple layers of interdependence and self-interest within the beloved community and the world house, King states:

All [people] are interdependent. Every nation is an heir of a vast treasury of ideas and labor to which both the living and the dead of all nations have contributed. Whether we realize it or not, each of us lives eternally ‘in the red.’ We are everlasting debtors to known and unknown men and women. When we arise in the morning, we go into the bathroom where we reach for a sponge which is provided for us by a Pacific islander. We reach for soap that is created for us by a European. Then at the table we drink coffee which is provided for us by a South American, or tea by a Chinese or cocoa by a West African. Before we leave for our jobs we are already beholden to more than half of the world.

294 King, Jr., 178.

295 King, Jr., 178.
In a real sense, all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother’s [sic] keeper because we are our brother’s brother [sic.] Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.\(^{296}\)

To effect change and build the world house, King calls for a revolution of values that directly challenges the root values of capitalism that will later be identified as neoliberal. Citing the story of the Good Samaritan, King says that a revolution inspired by true compassion involves transforming the structures that created the dangers of Jericho Road rather than simply bandaging the wounds it inflicts. Capitalism, he argues, has created an income gap so vast that the “haves” are so far removed from the “have nots” that most have lost the capacity to be moved by their suffering. King envisions a world house he describes as “a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism.”\(^{297}\) He condemns technological advances that disproportionately benefit owners at the expense of workers, budget choices that preference military expenditures over social welfare and education, and inadequate wages that fall far short of a minimum, “livable” income. King also identifies nationalism as a major block to the world house, arguing that loyalties must “be ecumenical rather than sectional.”\(^{298}\) Given the interdependent nature of global economic realities, King says, “every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to [hu]mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.”\(^{299}\)

\(^{296}\) King, Jr., 181.

\(^{297}\) King, Jr., 187–88.

\(^{298}\) King, Jr., 190.

\(^{299}\) King, Jr., 190.
Ethicist Hak Joon Lee’s *The Great World House: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Global Ethics*, examines King’s vision in the contemporary context of neoliberal global capitalism. He describes the inimical relationship between neoliberal capitalism and King’s world house, focusing on the concentration of power in the hands of the economic elite, the exploitation of poor countries by the World Bank and the IMF, the singular priority given to competition and self-interest, the deterioration of social welfare programs, unchecked consumerism, and environmental destruction. Each of these outcomes reflects the neglect or abandonment of concern for human dignity, mutual care, and the common good that King valued. Economic activities and structures must actively reflect and promote these values.300

Lee develops King’s economic ideas by focusing on corrective processes. He cites King’s work at local and global levels to argue that grassroots democracy must balance local power by invigorating activism while some form of global mediation and intervention creates a closed system of distribution with moral cohesion. While King did not fully articulate a vision that balances this tension, Lee argues that his vision of beloved community within the world house does provide clear ethical frames that bear on current realities. Lee describes them:

> Over all, resistance to neoliberal capitalism demands multiple coordinated approaches, including global regulations, the empowerment of global civil society and various grassroots movements, and the transformation of values. As King engaged in both institutional-legislative reform and grassroots transformation, in creating a closed system of distribution (the community), we need to invigorate both the governance from above and below, a two-tier approach that re-embeds corporations in the communal matrix.301


301 Lee, 162.
Lee observes that King’s vision of the local work brings focus back on the interpersonal relationships that make violations of human dignity more difficult. The cultural marks of beloved community become more viable when genuine connection exists. That is, if economic power is largely returned to local communities, where it is shared more equally among community members, conditions for thriving, such as those identified by project collaborators, will develop.302

King also held that faith communities could leverage their power in bringing economic justice to local communities. Reminiscent of the Acts community, he called on the Black community to share its financial resources with its working-class members and employed clergy in social justice operations of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Operation Breadbasket. Using clergy presence to reflect the moral position and popular support of the Black community, Operation Breadbasket sent clergy into local businesses where they asked questions about employment and salaries of African Americans. If the business did not adequately staff and compensate African Americans and subsequently failed to respond positively to the SCLC’s requests for greater representation and just wages, the clergy spoke from their pulpits and in the community to mount a boycott of that business.303

Painting a picture of a faithful church, King casts back to the early Christians, when they rejoiced that "they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed." In that time, the church was a thermostat instead of a thermometer, unbalancing power wherever its followers went and boldly challenging the status quo in their conviction that they were "a colony of

302 Lee, 163–66.

303 King, Jr., Where Do We Go from Here, 143–45.
heaven." Their passion "brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest" because while they "were small in number [they were] big in commitment."304

This redistribution of political and economic power to create checks and balances at the global level will require intentional organization to amass enough power for change. King, of course, recognized the need to attain power in the cause of justice. This focus on power and the assertion that "freedom is participation in power" shaped King's commitment to economic justice.305 He argued that power had been unfairly demonized and naively dismissed. While he conceded that "power without love is reckless and abusive," he also insisted that "love without power is sentimental and anemic."306 King never underestimated the power of unyielding, corrupt structures, and he did not entertain any organic notions of progress that would dismantle those structures. According to King, righteous communities need power to implement the demands of love and justice.

Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love…There is nothing essentially wrong with power. The problem is that in America power is unequally distributed. … It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our times.307

To challenge current power structures, Lee postulates that “[l]ocal and international activists need to engage in cross-border unionizing and cross-sectional organizing among

304 Ibid., 300. This is an unfamiliar claim, but cursory research indicates that early Christians opposed these practices and that the rise in prominence of Christianity coincided with their being phased out. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/resources/article/annotated_letter_from_birmingham/.

305 King, Jr., Where Do We Go from Here, 54.

306 King, Jr., 128.

307 King, Jr., 37.
laborers, farmers, environmentalists, consumers, and indigenous people.” He describes this movement as “glocal” because it recognizes that local movements must heed global realities while also recognizing that global movements must heed local realities. Specific communities will create movements reflective of their own culture, values, and needs. Further, in these efforts to counter and dismantle the power of global elites, Lee draws from King’s warnings to resist dynamics that will divide movements from within. “To prevent this,” Lee argues, “the leaders need to examine how issues of racism, militarism, sexism, and ecological injustice are interlinked with economic injustice, and reflect whether their own institutions are complicit with one or more of these social evils.” This recognition reflects the need for sustained attention to intersectionality and cultural hierarchies within change movements and within the broader society being transformed. Lee summarizes King’s vision of the world house as:

a future community grounded in a kinship of humanity and creation. A sense of solidarity and mutual care grows and includes human-nature relationships. It is a closed system of distribution where goods, services, and wealth are fairly shared, and basic human dignity and the sanctity of all life forms are respected….The great world house is approximated only through the creative combination of the revolution of our values, global grassroots mobilization, and intelligent governance over a global economic system…[In short] the best response to the problem of neoliberal capitalism can be summed up as localizing economy and globalizing politics and morality, which enhances global governance. 

King’s multi-pronged approach appeals to the same broad coalition of knowledge, experience, and action this dissertation has drawn from in order to listen to the voices of diverse, single, working-class mothers and draw conclusions about the current barriers to thriving in their lives. One hopes that he would announce that people, like the collaborators in this project, can

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309 Lee, 170.
begin to build partnerships and power within their local communities while calling on those with more power to work to transform oppressive economic systems from their ends. As is consistent with his theology, King’s process, fueled by the “fierce urgency of now,” is marked by his theological commitments to mutuality, equality, justice, dignity, and interdependence. He also knows, intimately, the pitfalls of achieving cultural recognition without economic recognition and vice versa. For these reasons, I argue that the visions of beloved community and the world house offer a compelling, persuasive, hopeful framework for a path toward thriving for single, working-class mothers within the U.S. political economy.

Thus, embracing interdependence deploys self-interest to fuel change efforts. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” King identifies the connection between interdependence and self-interest: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

While maximizing the potential of revealing mutual interests, ethnographic methodology also guards against the dangers of self-interested responses. Activism motivated primarily by self-interest too easily reifies cultural hierarchies within movements, whether created by race, class, gender, sexuality, and/or ability. Stories collaborators shared of sexist marginalization and silencing in work environments provide concrete examples that remain in the minds of all participants in resistance efforts, guarding against repetition of dominance patterns so deeply

311 This recognition does not mean King did not have blind spots. As mentioned previously, King’s inability to see cultural hierarchies related to gender and sexuality within the Poor People’s Campaign crippled the movement, perhaps fatally.

312 Martin Luther King, A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. James M. Washington (HarperOne, 1990), 290.
ingrained in collective unconsciousness. Activism motivated primarily by self-interest also allows activists with more privilege, whether a cisgender, heterosexual, working-class, white male, a heterosexual, Black woman who does not receive TANF benefits, or a typically-abled, queer, white woman, to lose interest or enthusiasm when minor to moderate change ameliorates their circumstances without fully transforming oppressive systems. Keeping vivid, direct experiences of the most marginalized persons, seen in projects like this one, in mind, helps thwart any tendency to lose interest in the movement even when one’s own situation has improved.

Finally, by leaving conflicts, inconsistencies, differences, and “rough” realities in view, the project leaves space for messiness and for acknowledgement of challenges and blocks to efforts at healing and justice, and for a richness unique to this method. It resists romanticized ideas about beloved community and the world house, which can undermine change efforts when disillusioned participants abandon the movement at the first sign of conflict or challenge. Messiness in this project appeared in the midst of leading an important conversation about problems in the healthcare systems and the need to assume leadership in change efforts, when Jennifer argued that the Illuminati were slowly concentrating power toward communism even as she demanded government-provided, universal healthcare. When Stormy made comments that could be construed as racist. When neighborhood tensions yielded very different understandings among collaborators. When collaborator accounts of their personal timelines did not always quite match up. And when collaborators judge each other critically, comparing their worth based on their relative “independence,” which enacts the violence and lies of capitalism that so pin them down. And so on.
This methodology reveals these real dynamics that thwart beloved community and the world house and that are steeped in structural violence that keep people at each other’s throats or at a distance, reinforcing the oppressive status quo. King’s vision has remained relevant and powerful because he did not romanticize these realities. And by not romanticizing these differences, by allowing them to become visible, they become a site for true, incarnational liberation that transforms all the structures, cultural and economic, that inhibit thriving for any of God’s beloved humans.
My dissertation poses questions about the lives of Black, Latina, and white single, working-class mothers. Not only did I want to develop an intersectional picture with depth and breadth, I wanted to see what difference it makes to work inductively, beginning with voices of particularly marginalized people within a broader, interdisciplinary, Christian ethic aimed at liberation. Based on content from individual and group ethnographic interviews with eight Dallas Habitat for Humanity Homeowners, I identified six generative themes that most consistently limited thriving. Based on theological imperatives for systems that uphold human dignity and reflect the interdependent nature of existence, I conclude that Christians must work for systems marked by collaborative movement toward economic democracy where power is broadly shared and market and non-market participation are culturally and economically valued.

My research holds together spheres explored separately in most ethical scholarship. Ethnographic studies in Christian ethics are typically descriptive, focusing on particular realities, while theoretical studies attend to universal ideas or broad trends. Few projects bring these methods together, treating knowledge produced by interviews as one source among many. I argue that this method maximizes knowledge needed to effectively intervene in oppressive systems. For instance, particular stories reveal interpersonal dynamics that hinder communal resistance while theoretical analysis provides statistical evidence that anecdotal evidence cannot capture. Theoretical work has explored relationships between culture and economics but none has done so inductively, through the lives of particularly marginalized persons. This ethic yielded novel insights into cultural narratives that dehumanize single, working-class mothers and connections with economic structures that impede basic security.
I discussed ethnography as a means to create solidarity while resisting re-centering, simplification, romanticization, or minimization of these realities, all possibilities when theorists offer accounts on behalf of marginalized persons or even when single mothers interpret each other’s realities from a distance. Ethnography can create solidarity by countering judgmental ideas grounded in cultural stereotypes with complex, relatable realities that trouble simplified stereotypes and generalizations. Ethnographic accounts are also particular enough to create space for readers with more privilege to perhaps identify places of connection while curbing tendencies to over-relate and re-center the conversation away from the most vulnerable persons in ways that minimize their suffering. Meaning, ethnographic accounts of lived realities can stimulate responses that maintain constructive balance between activism motivated by self-interest and activism motivated by solidarity.

While the narratives illuminated many points, I focused on what the stories tell us about human dignity and interdependence. Human dignity as theological demand offers a strong foundation for theoethical discourse and is so clearly and painfully violated across generative themes identified in this project. Interdependence as ontological reality and affirmation of theological good functions to expose the cultural and economic lies that sustains systems that oppress single mothers who, as “canaries in the coalmine,” experience power imbalances earlier and more profoundly that the broader population, the 99%, who is also oppressed by these systems.

I entered into this project having read widely in the areas of feminist and womanist ethics about single mothers and with a modest amount of direct experience with single mothers. That previous work prepared me well because I cannot say that the stories surprised. What surprised me was that despite having a fairly good sense of what challenges and strengths I would hear
about, I was still profoundly moved by hearing them in their fullness. As Parker’s work prepared me to see, these are powerful, convicting stories and they bring life to realities in ways theories and even second-hand accounts cannot. I bring them with me wherever I go and they shape how I move through the world. I tell people about Twila’s children treated worse than her white co-worker’s dog. I talk about Jessica’s migraines and her wise observations about the education system. Pinky’s vivid metaphors and her incredible determination, and Alma’s unwavering commitment to her family. Many times I talk about how this group of abuse survivors immediately connected the dots between Christian patriarchy and domestic violence, when scholars and journalists focused on other aspects of Justin Lookadoo’s toxic message to a group of Richardson high schoolers. These stories changed me and they change the other realms of knowledge they touch. These aren’t just stories, they are an ethic of justice.

These findings led to a new theological arguments. By working inductively, I am working with a sort of theological anthropology that starts with incarnation. I am saying, for this project, that based on historicity related to particularly marginalized lives function as a starting point to finding God and discerning how to work toward God’s Shalom in lived experience. My incarnational theology then interacts with feminist liberation theologies to interrogate current systems and demand ones that reflect moral goods of dignity and ontological, creational realities of interdependence. I brought to the project my work with many feminist, womanist, and liberation theologians, and found, somewhat to my surprise, that King’s images of beloved community and the world house connected strongly to the findings of the project.

That said, while King’s image of beloved community continues to resonate, it remains limited in its understanding of gender and how gender dynamics relate to beloved community. King did not develop a robust understanding of women and their experiences despite
opportunities presented to him by contemporary Black female activists like Fannie Lou Hamer. Hamer’s vision of beloved community and the world house as seen in the community she developed in her native Mississippi warrants attention for its relevancy to the picture of belovedness offered by collaborators.

Hamer, a Black activist whose speeches rocked audiences such as those attending the 1964 Democratic National Convention, focused on racism, voting, economic empowerment, welfare, housing, and education. In 1969, she founded Freedom Farm Cooperative in Sunflower County where she grew up as the daughter of a sharecropper. As it developed, female heads of households and farmers became the primary focus of Freedom Farm.

The farm’s values of self-determination, equality, interdependence, and affirmation of human dignity are reflected in its practices and instructive as visions of beloved community and the world house in the lives of poor, single mothers. Freedom Farm operated as a cooperative, never denying membership because of inability to pay. Hamer envisioned the farm as a mechanism of empowerment, promoting economic sustainability. She aimed to create “an organization which allows people to work and reap the benefits of their labor.”

Freedom Farm’s practices included supplying families with pigs who would reproduce, growing vegetables and cotton on community land, building affordable houses, providing scholarships for

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313 While this area of inequality exceeds the scope of this project, it is important to note that King also failed to promote equality on the basis of sexuality, particularly as seen in his treatment of Bayard Rustin.


315 Lee, 153.
school, developing businesses, and offering direct assistance to persons in crisis. The 680-acre farm also included a Head Start, a garment factory, a sewing cooperative, a tool bank, occupational training, and health care services. Freedom Farm functioned as a system resisting the dominant cultural and economic structures that so oppressed Hamer and her communities. Black community members held primary leadership and membership at the farm even as it served a small number of poor white farmers. Members and leaders advocated together to access benefits and disrupt systems in the broader U.S. political economy.

While the farm ultimately did not survive Hamer’s failing health and severe weather that damaged crops, its capacity to inspire alternative, cooperative communities remains. Given its focus on female heads of household, it seems particularly fitting in connection with realities described by collaborators. The possibilities for creating beloved community that promote thriving for single, working-class mothers are myriad and this Postscript will explore just a few as a way to deepen the conversation between collaborators, theologians and activists like King and Hamer, and myself.

Positioning the HC neighborhood as a beloved community where power is shared and harnessed to disrupt systems, I envision Jessica and Alma joining forces to challenge school rezoning or to circumvent its impacts, instead of feeling disempowered and desperate separately. Given concerns with local schools, all the collaborators could approach administration together or invite DH to partner with them to begin addressing funding and behavior concerns. They

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316 Lee, 148–52.

could also lobby to start a local Head Start or childcare program where living wages, shared power, and cultural respect for everyone create quality care and relationships. Clodie and Jennifer talked about advocating for policy change, and they could join efforts challenging the connection between public school funding and tax bases on a state and federal level. Pinky knows the value of direct accounts, and she wants to write a book. Her book would expose the structural obstacles to equal access to education for single mothers.

Clodie and Jennifer already have ideas about organizing women in the workplace. Given the prevalence and the variety of work in the healthcare field among collaborators and single mothers more broadly, one wonders what kind of possibilities for local businesses they might imagine if given the opportunity. They could create or promote a workplace where dependent caregiving responsibilities are viewed as positive reflections on parents who take their productive and reproductive work seriously. The eight collaborators in this project have clearly outlined needs for flexibility and recognition in paid work environments, and they have demonstrated their abilities to perform even when these basic needs are unmet. It does not take much imagination to envision their capacity to thrive in a work environment where they are supported and empowered.

While collaborators laughed at the idea of rest, Sabbath plays an undeniable role in beloved community. Perhaps collaborators could start a rotation for watching each other’s children. This cooperative childcare would function to offer regular breaks while building relationships between children and adults. These relationships will be a struggle, a reality that neither the Freedom Farm nor collaborator accounts ignore. They will be and are fraught with the persistent cultural ideologies that reinforce classist, racist, and sexist dynamics. Yet these relationships create deeper connections than physical proximity and so begin to resist these
ideologies. Shared childcare attests to the reality of interdependence and the possibilities of cooperation over and against toxic ideologies self-sufficiency and competition. These opportunities for meaningful contact can lead to mutual relationships that deepen over life’s losses and celebrations. I saw glimpses of these possibilities as collaborators came into each other’s houses and shared some of their stories and left knowing each other better and wanting to spend more time together.

Hamer functioned as the primary fundraiser for Freedom Farm, leveraging her passion, charisma, and life experiences to draw support from across the country. Similar ingredients plus a more sustainable leadership model would provide an opportunity for thriving for collaborators in this project. The humblest amount of support and opportunity created authentic conversation and mutual respect among neighbors with shared interests. It could be so much more. My hope would be that grassroots models like these begin to choke the life from the structures that currently inhibit opportunities to thrive as beloved children of God.
APPENDIX 1: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

From: IRB Committee
To: Julie A. Mavity Maddalena
Date: 08/06/2013
Re: IRB Application #2013-034-MADJ Expedited Review

Dear Julie A. Mavity Maddalena,

The IRB Committee has completed review of your application and has granted you IRB approval under Expedited Research Categories (6) and (7) on 08/06/13. Your application is valid for 12 months from the date of approval. This period applies to the data collection phase during which there might be some risk to the human subjects involved in the research project. If the data collection phase of the project will take more than twelve months, a follow-up review and approval is necessary. It is important to do the follow-up review in a timely fashion so that no interruption occurs in your project schedule.

Should you have any further questions, please reference all inquiries to the IRB Chair and provide your IRB Application Number in any correspondence (listed above).

Thank You,

APPROVED

IRB Committee

Office of Research Administration
Southern Methodist University PO Box 750302 Dallas TX 75275-0240
Office: 214-768-2033 Fax: 214-768-1079

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APPENDIX 2: RECRUITMENT FLYER

YOUR VOICE MATTERS!

Please consider participating in a research project exploring the life experiences of single, working mothers who are also Dallas Habitat Homeowners in the Hickory Creek Neighborhood.

Requirements for participation:
- Willingness to share life experiences
- 1 individual interview
- 3 focus groups (with 2 or 3 other Dallas Habitat Hickory Creek Homeowners)

Compensation for your time and participation:
- The project provides up to $100 ($25 per session), and
- A meal for each focus group.

Interviews and focus groups are confidential.

For more information and if you are interested in participating, please contact Julie Mavity Maddalena by text at 972-974-5142 or email at jmavmad@yahoo.com. Please respond quickly. Participants will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis.
APPENDIX 3: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

This form is meant to ensure that all participants in this study fully understand the project and to assist in decisions regarding participation in this study. I am a doctoral student in Religious Ethics at Southern Methodist University under the direction of Professor Rebekah Miles. The title of my project is, “A Feminist, Christian Ethnography of Single, Working-Class Mothers and Class, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity Dynamics in Dallas, TX.” Please feel free to ask any questions you may have.

This study is research for my dissertation, which might later be published as a book or article. This study will explore the life experiences of single, working-class mothers who are also Dallas Area Habitat for Humanity Homeowners in the Hickory Creek neighborhood of Dallas, Texas. This study will shape my dissertation as your stories and input determine what issues are important to address when communicating the realities of single, working-class mothers.

Participation in this study will involve completing one interview about your life and family experiences as single, working-class mothers, lasting approximately one to two hours, and participation in 3 focus groups with 2-3 other women in each group. These will take roughly two to three hours. They will focus on issues of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and public policies in relation to single mothers. I will ask questions about how you think these realities have impacted your own experiences, and you and your group will determine what you think is important to discuss. I will also ask to make an audio and video recording of these sessions for transcription and analysis purposes only. You will receive $25 cash compensation at the end of each session, up to four sessions (1 individual interview, 3 focus groups), totaling $100. Additionally, I will provide dinner at the focus groups. Refusing participation in any of these components will carry no penalty, although you will only receive compensation at the completion of each session. Just as your privacy will be respected, I will ask that you respect the privacy of others participating in focus groups with you.

The desired benefit of the study is to add new perspectives to what is known about the experiences of single, working-class mothers, educating others on what this means to real people like yourself.

Every effort will be made to protect the participant from risk. Information obtained during the course of the study will remain confidential, to the extent allowed by the law. In order to give the participant anonymity, no names will be recorded in the interviews and any contact information the researcher may have will be kept separately from the data. Video recordings will be kept in a locked file cabinet, and transcriptions will be kept in a password protected computer file. In addition, a pseudonym will be used in any reports compiled from the data. Despite all precautions, the participant should be aware that there is always the risk of being identified. Further, talking about the pressures you have faced and particular experiences related to those might also be emotionally distressing. I am a trained counselor, and a psychiatrist will also be available if you’d like to talk further about anything that arises from these sessions. I can also put you in with contact Dr. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner psychiatrist, SMU Professor of Pastoral Care if you would like additional counselling. I can also provide other resources for any other issues that might arise.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Data collected from your participation may be used in publications or in presentations at academic conferences, but your identity will remain confidential. If you so choose, you are free to decline to participate in this study or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to participate in the study, you have the option to withdraw at any time by contacting me. After withdrawal from the study, all information collected pertaining to you will be destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in the study, please sign the statement below. Keep the second copy for your records.
Voluntary Consent Form

I need your permission in order to include you in my study. If you would like to participate, please sign below verifying that you understand the possible risks and that you agree to participate in the study.

“I have read and understand all of the information on this form. I consent to participation in this study, and understand my right to withdraw from the study at any time. I have also received a copy of this form.”

Name (Please print)

Signature

Date

Thank you. I greatly appreciate that you have agreed to be a participant in my study. I may also record on audio and videotape some of the interviews. I need your permission to record them.

Do you grant permission to record the interview?

________ Yes  __________ No.

Please sign below. Your signature is needed to show that you give/do not give permission to record interviews on audio and video tape.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ______________

If you change your mind about your decision regarding the recording of interviews on audiotape, please let me know. You may reconsider your decision at any time during the interview.

“I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose of this study, the risks and benefits associated with the study, have answered any questions that have arisen, and witnessed the individual’s signature.”

Researcher Signature  Date:
APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW PLAN FOR IRB APPROVAL

“A Feminist, Christian Ethnography of Single, Working-Class Mothers and Class, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity Dynamics in Dallas, TX”

IRB, Informed Consent

Structure

Follow-up Possibilities: Questions, Clarification questions; transcript review; chapter review

Semi-structured individual Interview Questions:

Start with age and number/age of children

Tell me about yourself, including your family of origin; who did you live with growing up and what did they do?

(what are the geographic, socioeconomic, educational, work contexts of family of origin)

When did you become a parent?

Tell me about how you make a living for your family, what have been some of your successes? Challenges—past and present?

Tell me about your paid work experiences. What are you proud of in terms of your work? What challenges have you dealt with? Any specifically related to being a woman? Your race/ethnicity?

What do you find most challenging in terms of feeding your family? Providing healthcare or childcare for your family? How have you solved these problems and challenges that you have come up against? What resources, like government assistance, family, community, have been helpful? Not helpful? Did you feel affirmed and supported in these experiences? Why or why not?

Have you felt forced to make choices you didn’t feel good about or that you think others might judge negatively, but that you felt like were necessary for the good of you and/or your family?

How have these struggles and triumphs changed and shaped who you are?

Who do you rely on if you have childcare emergencies? Who in this community?

Follow up: what are their racial/ethnic identity, age?

Who are leaders in your life and community? How would you describe that person/those persons? Age? Race? Class?

What’s your relationship to the school system? Ever come together to ask for things from the school system?

Do you worship somewhere? Where? Why?

How did you begin the process of becoming a Habitat homeowner? Describe that process. What was life-giving and affirming? Were there any difficult parts?
How has life changed since you became homeowner? Do you think others see you differently? How?

How might life be different had you not become a Habitat homeowner?

How do you take care of yourself? What do you do for fun? In your free time? When do you have free time? Do you think you have more or less free time than other people you know or in society? Why is that?

What gives you joy? What gives you strength when you’re feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, angry?

What are your gifts and strengths? Where do you feel like you use them in your life? Where would you like to use them more? What is your dream work?

What do you think is morally good and morally bad in the world? How does that impact you? How do you participate in what is good and avoid what isn’t? How do you talk to your kids about right and wrong? What are the biggest ethical/moral issues they face? You face? Your community faces? Society faces?

Virtue ethics: faith, hope, and love: how do you live those things out? Where do you see them around you? In your life experiences? Who embodied them? In ways that inspired or supported you?

Who do you consider your community? Has that changed since you moved into your new home? How so?

Availability for focus groups? Hosting?

Focus Group One:

This will focus on issues of gender and race/ethnicity for single, working-class mothers.

Groups will be composed of those with similar racial/ethnic identities.

Questions will stem from individual interviews, but might include questions like: How do you describe or define your identity? How do you prefer to be identified? When did you first become aware of race/ethnic identities? Do you see people who look like you in the media? (I may bring some examples of newspaper or media treatments of single mothers and working-class single mothers and to see what sort of discussions the images prompt. Or ask how they respond to statistics about how race/ethnicity impacts economic security/stability.) Do you think there are different perceptions of persons with your race/ethnicity as single mothers than for other single mothers? What are they? Why are they out there? How does that impact you and your family in terms of your financial stability? In terms of how you experience your community? Do you think you face different pressures than others? What are they?

Do you think there are particular cultural particularities or generalities that go with your race/ethnicity? What are they? How do these help or hurt your efforts to thrive with your family?

Do you think others not in your race/ethnicity think there are generalities associated with your race/ethnicity? What are they? How do these help or hurt your efforts to thrive with your family?
Do you think there is a relationship between culture and the public policies that impact you or have impacted you and your taking care of your family?

**Focus Group Two:**

*This will focus on issues of gender and class for single, working-class mothers.*

*Groups will be composed of those with similar class backgrounds (depending on what is identified in individual interviews, this could be different educational experiences in family of origin and current or previous paid work experiences)*

*I understand class as relating to an individual or group’s ability to exercise power and influence, which often correlates to income levels. Thus, while there will be similarities in the group based on income levels (as qualification of Habitat homeownership), there will also be differences.*

Do you think people with different education experiences (other single mothers and people more broadly) as yourself get treated or viewed differently in society? How? Why? (As an activity, I might ask how they respond to statistics about women needing more education for the same pay as well as pay discrepancies in the work force. How would they change that?)

Do you notice that your child’s teachers talk to you differently than other parents? How?

Do you feel like you are heard and respected when you speak up in various settings? Give some examples.

Do you think persons and/or women in different socioeconomic groups have advantages or privileges you don’t? What are they? Why do you think this is the case?

Are there advantages or things you do better than persons in different socioeconomic groups? Do you face pressures that others do not? What are they? Why is this?

Do you spend time most of your social time with people who have similar jobs, education, or income levels yourself? When you’re around persons where these are different, do you notice? What do you notice?

Have you noticed a difference in how you are treated or how you engage the world now that you are a homeowner?

Do you vote? Participate in local elections? Federal elections? Have you ever held a public office? Local leadership position (government, school, work, community?) Would you/could you ever envision yourself holding a leadership position of some sort? What would it be? If so, what stops you? What would you like to hear or see from leaders (government, school, work, community) that would be meaningful for you and your family—both now and prior to homeownership?

Why do you think so few women hold public offices?

How much power and independence do you feel like you have in your paid work setting? In other areas in your community? When have you felt/do you feel most powerful in your life?
Focus Group Three:

This focus group will focus on issues of intersectional identities and experiences with public policies, including direct and indirect aid, and single, working-class mothers.

Questions will largely be determined after individual interviews, in which the researcher will learn what sorts of direct and indirect aid participants have received at various points in their lives.

If you feel comfortable sharing, what sort of governmental programs or aids have you or other single mothers you know used in your lifetime? Were they helpful? How? How were you treated by government workers? Do you think all persons receiving this support are treated the same? Do you think your age, race/ethnicity, or marital status impacts/ed this?

What other sources of support have you sought out or used for help—money, childcare, healthcare, housing? (Church, community, friends, family?) How were you treated? What was most helpful? Least helpful? What would have been helpful?

What do people not realize about the realities of single mothers? What sorts of cultural and financial pressures do you face that others may not?

What sorts of public policies would be most helpful for families like yours? Before you became a homeowner? Now?

Do you get money back on your taxes? Enough to be helpful in any way? How do you spend that money usually? Has that changed over the years?

Mobility: what do you hope for your children? What opportunities do you want them to have? Did you feel like you had these opportunities? Why or why not?

Is there anything else you would like the broader public to know about you and your family/ies?
APPENDIX 5: PILE SORT ACTIVITIES WORD CHOICES

Words that describe you:
Struggle, powerful, powerless, single, woman, mother, parent, single mother, single parent, welfare, values, ethics, prejudice, struggle, tough, independent, dependent, leader, strong, government, TANF, SNAP, food stamps, vulnerable, pressure, tired, drained, respected, disrespected, self-respect, shame, lonely, conflict, warm, open, honest, domestic violence, lazy, hard worker, low-income, poor, unplanned pregnancy, wife, partner, people person, resourceful, thrifty, loans, charity, homeowner, feminist, welfare queen, baby mama, job insecurity, job loss, needy, hunger, choice, security, optimistic, upbeat, realistic, hopeful

Words that describe sources of support and stress:
School, kids’ activities, mortgage, rent, health, healthcare, car, family, work, job, job loss, job insecurity, employer, boss, parents, childcare, faith, church, God, self-care, vacation, friends, food, after-school, student loans, father of kids, community, neighbors, neighborhood, income, wages, benefits, public aid, insurance, Medicaid, education, prison, legal problems, bills, independent, dependent
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