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In-House, yet "Standing Somewhere off": Spatial Reflections on the Enduring Marginality of Cleaning Staff in High-Ranking London Universities

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Abstract

This article centres the perspectives and knowledges of in-house cleaning staff of three high-ranking London universities during the outbreak of a global pandemic. It interrogates the cleaners' continuous experience of marginality after they were insourced within the last three years in response to persistent "Justice for Cleaners" protests. High-ranking London universities form relevant and ambiguous sites of analysis since they are neoliberal spaces of consumption and production that publicly commit to promoting social justice. An understanding of space as the entanglement of the built and the social environment serves to identify institutional practices that place in-house cleaning staff at the material and social-organisational margins of these universities. Crucially, the reproduction of the universities' international prestige and capital depends on cleaning labour, who are predominantly migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. The central argument is that the cleaners' experienced marginality is not only a site of racialised oppression but also a location of systemic knowledge about the institutionally performed hypocrisies. Ultimately, the moral integrity of high-ranking London universities depends on the resistance of their most marginalised occupational group and those who stand in true solidarity with them. The study suggests that if the insourcing of cleaners is based on the universities' public commitment to promoting social justice, this endeavour remains incomplete. Consequently, institutions need to ensure that cleaners are not only economically in-house but also fully included—*in the house*—in the built and social-organisational university spaces.

Keywords
cleaners, universities, marginality, personhood, resistance, transformation

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Introduction

Non-domestic cleaners are situated at an "important nexus of the global economy" (Aguiar & Herod 2006: 3). While they are one of the lowest paid occupational groups, their labour is indispensable for the maintenance of globalised spaces of consumption and production. In the wake of the neoliberal privatisation of higher education, high-ranking London universities have become such capitalist spaces which receive considerable criticism as to how they treat their cleaning staff. Contradictorily, these universities also publicly commit to promoting social justice, inclusion and equitable treatment. The combination of these conflicting characteristics makes these universities relevant sites to analyse the struggles experienced by cleaning staff. Within the last three years, persistent "Justice for Cleaners" campaigns have successfully urged many London universities to in-source cleaning staff against the grain of the neoliberal principle to outsource public services. Through this process of moving in-house, cleaners achieved a minimum of financial stability and social security. Yet, "Justice for Cleaners" campaigns persist. This raises the question whether the struggles of university cleaners, who are predominantly of migrant origins from the global South, are solely economic in nature. Ethnographic interviews with cleaning staff of three London universities in May and June 2020 suggest that although they are formally in-house, they do not experience institutional recognition. In the words of one interviewed cleaner, they are "still standing somewhere *off*." The perspectives of the interviewees shift the attention to institutional practices and to entrenched power structures that marginalise cleaning staff on a social relational level.

Marginality, I suggest, reflects a *spatial experience*; an experienced peripheral position within a system. Cleaning, I suggest furthermore, represents a *spatial labour* that establishes a socioeconomic relationship with the environment a cleaner frees from pollution. I thus centre the entanglement of space, cleaning, and power to understand the enduring constitution of the cleaners' marginality in their employing universities. The guiding questions are firstly, how this experienced marginality manifests in space and secondly, what institutional practices produce and reproduce this marginality which goes beyond economic exploitation.

Doreen Massey's (2005, 2009) understanding of space as the composition of the built and social environment allows me to identify that universities systemically deny their cleaning staff space to occupy and participate. Whether implemented consciously or unconsciously, these institutional practices place migrant cleaners from the global South at the margins of wealthy London universities—a neoliberal mechanism that reproduces entrenched racialised power relations.

If the decision to bring cleaners in-house was based on the intention to establish social justice, this process remains incomplete. Inspired by Paulo Freire and bell hooks, I finally argue that the cleaners' marginality is also a distinct location of potential transformation. The universities' moral integrity regarding their own public commitments to promoting social justice depends on the resistance of their most marginalised staff and those who stand in true solidarity with them.

Related Literature

To prepare the discussion of the collected interview data, I firstly situate London university cleaners in the neoliberal world economy and present studies that inspire my own account. Secondly, I discuss how the relationship between university spaces and cleaning labour is imbued with a coloniality of power.

Situating in-house cleaning staff of high-ranking London universities

Non-domestic cleaning—as opposed to *domestic* cleaning, which is widely discussed in social reproduction theory—has received scarce scholarly attention. Moreover, existing work rarely centres the voices and knowledges of non-domestic cleaners (henceforth referred to as cleaners) and far less of university cleaners in particular. This epistemically maps onto their economic marginality and prompts my aim to centre the perspectives of cleaners in this study.

While non-domestic cleaning represents one of the fastest growing industries in the global North (Herod & Aguiar 2006: 103), cleaners in the UK compose one of the lowest paid occupational groups (Aguiar & Herod 2006: 2). This economic trend is a repercussion of the globalised neoliberal policies of austerity, privatisation and liberalisation that force workers from the global South into disposable labour in the global North (Harvey 2005). Neoliberal capitalism has further caused the development of competitive cleaning agencies due to which subcontracted cleaners lose their sick pay, holiday pay, and pension as well as opportunity to make more than a minimum wage (e.g., Aguiar & Herod 2006; Aguiar & Ryan 2009; Avendaño 2014; Gerrard & Barron 2020; Hlatshwayo 2020; Kirkpatrick 2014; Knotter 2017; Savage 2006; Soni-Sinha & Yates 2013; Wills 2008; Woodcock 2014). However, in response to persistent "Justice for Cleaners" campaigns, all three London universities in question have insourced their cleaning staff within the last three years. This achievement highlights the importance of grassroots unions like United Voices of the World (UVW) and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), whose Cleaners Branches have built the backbone of the cleaners' movements in London (Kirkpatrick 2014).

Work by Julie Hearn and Monica Bergos (2011) as well as by Veronica Rabelo and Ramaswami Mahalingam (2019) centre university cleaners' voices and show that their struggles transcend their economic exploitation. Hearn and Bergos (2011) provide an overview of the psychological struggles of subcontracted London university cleaners during the first decade of the 21st century, while they were campaigning for a London Living Wage. Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019) centre the voices of cleaning staff of a US university to capture their lived experiences of invisibility although, as the authors acknowledge themselves, their study lacks a linkage to questions of race and gender. My study thus pursues these previous efforts and centres the perspectives of university cleaners during the moment of the outbreak of Covid-19.

A spatial approach allows me to consider how cleaners view their experiences of marginality in relation to the public portrayal of the spaces they clean for a living.

University Spaces, Cleaning and Coloniality

Clean institutional spaces embody modernity and progress (Brody 2006; Cresswell 1996; Douglas 1991; Herod & Aguiar 2006; Tomic et al. 2006). Contrarily, dirtiness not only stigmatises spaces but also those who wipe it away—despite their crucial role for operating a system like a university (Rabelo & Mahalingam 2019; Simpson et al. 2012). Doreen Massey's (2005, 2009) social relational approach to space allows me to disentangle how the cultural and economic devaluation of cleaning labour and of those who perform it is ingrained in the constitution of the universities' symbolic power.

Firstly, Massey (2005: 9) conceives of space as the *built environment* that enables the simultaneous happening of differing experiences in close proximity to each other. While students and teachers gather in classrooms, cleaning staff clean the bathrooms, and the school director has an important meeting in their office. Individuals situated at different positions in the university power hierarchy can simultaneously pursue these activities in the same building while their paths might never cross.

Secondly, space constitutes a *composition of social networks* that connect micro-sites to macro-environments (Massey 2009). A university system constitutes a network of all individuals participating in the university and extends to the places and people that led to these individuals' participation in it. Therefore "universities reflect deeply entrenched social inequalities marked by class, race, disability and migration" (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2016: 169). The elite networks of the respective universities are intimately intertwined with the cleaners' migratory and work trajectories that led to their occupation in these spaces of prestige. The fact that in high-ranking London universities, "Black and migrant people are literally cleaning up after us so that we can read, think and write" (Acciari 2018: 130) embodies a coloniality of power relations. In her decolonial feminist manifesto, Françoise Vergès (2021) stresses that the exploitation of predominantly migrant cleaners of colour in France today needs to be understood in continuity with the enslave-

ment of cleaning labour during French colonialism. Situated at the core of the former British empire, this consideration is equally relevant to comprehend cleaners' struggles at high-ranking universities in London.

Finally, space—in both its social and material form—is "*always under construction*" (Massey 2005: 9; emphasis my own) and thus embodies the possibility of transformation. It is open to reimagination and negotiation: space is constantly shaped and designed by those who engage with it (Cresswell 1996)—and thus also by cleaning staff.

In summary, the labour of cleaning is indispensable for the maintenance of not only the built university space but also for the reification of the prestige it symbolises. Conversely, the devaluation of cleaning labour plays an essential role for the reproduction of enduring racialised, gendered and classed power structures.

A Systemic Approach Towards Marginality

The overall theme arising from the interviews is that despite their formal status as in-house staff, cleaners experience a marginality which is marked by struggles over institutional recognition and inclusion. The interviewees' socio-political reflections on their marginality inspire me to argue that their location is also one of systemic knowledge based upon which they *claim space*.

With reference to Massey's (2005, 2009) conceptualisation of space, I suggest that marginality is a spatial experience in both the built and social environment. Through Paulo Freire (2005, 2016) and bell hooks (1989, 1993), I argue that the cleaners' lived experiences of marginality are not only a location of oppression and dehumanisation but also a site of collective resistance and possibility.

"To be at the margin," bell hooks (1989) states, "is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (p. 20). Marginality thus defines a location *within* rather than outside a system. Those who are marginalised stand in direct relation to all other individuals in a specific system. Freire stresses that:

> [T]he oppressed are not 'marginals,' … They have always been 'inside'—inside the structure that made them 'beings for others.' The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression but to transform the structure so they can become 'beings for themselves'. (Freire 2005: 74)

This quotation relates to hooks' summary of Freire's work, namely that "the question of moving from object to subject [is] the very question Paulo had posed" (hooks 1993: 149). Freire envisions social change as a process through which *all* social groups in a system become subjects and thus fully recognise each other as humans. Conversely, he understands oppression as an "instrument of dehumanization" (Freire 2005: 54), a mechanism that not only takes away the personhood of marginalised social groups but also of those who do not suffer oppression. In other words, the dehumanisation of one group extends to all other subjects in the system where oppression takes place. This turns the marginality of a group into a distinct location since the humanness of *all* individuals in a system is at stake.

As a result, the margin is not only a site of deprivation and repression but also one of potential transformation. Crucially, the margin must not be romanticised either since "it is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance" (hooks 1989: 19). The knowledge about marginality by those who experience it and their critical analytical engagement with it can transform "that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures" into "that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance" (hooks 1989: 23). In the words of Cornel West (1993), Freire has given theory to "the painful yet empowering process of conscientization" (p. xiii). This process describes how those who experience marginality, oppression, and exploitation *claim space* through their conscious identification of the power dynamics that lead to their marginality. Marginality thus forms a "central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in [a] radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (hooks 1989: 20).

My central argument is that the interviewees' critical reflections on their own position within the university systems and their reimaginations of these systems as truly equitable spaces turn their marginality into a location of potential transformation.

Research Design

The originally envisioned ethnographic fieldwork was impeded by the closure of all London universities in late March of 2020 due to the outbreak of the global pandemic. A Master's student at that time, I had navigated high-ranking London universities until that moment and aimed to learn from cleaning staff about their perspectives on these spaces. For my research, ethnography seemed suitable because "[r]ather than *studying people*, [it] means *learning from people*" (Spradley 1979: 3; emphasis in original). Under normal circumstances, ethnographic fieldwork would have comprised participant observation, writing notes, recording audio-visual material and conducting ethnographic interviews. The pandemic restricted this project to ethnographic interviews, which nevertheless allowed me to maintain the inductive openness critical to ethnography. In consequence, this study needs to be imagined as an ethnographic snapshot and thus as part of a wider research project that could be pursued in the future.

Method: The Ethnographic Interview

Seven individual ethnographic interviews conducted between 10 and 25 June 2020 build the foundation to my analysis. As mentioned, such interviews represent one component of ethnography (Spradley 1979). Central to the ethnographic interview is its similarity with a 'friendly conversation' as well as its central components: its *explicit purpose, ethnographic explanations* and *ethnographic questions* (Spradley 1979: 59). To build a trustful environment, I clarified the interview's purpose through an information sheet and an online consent form handed to each interviewee beforehand. Each interview usually began with a friendly exchange that would shift towards an in-depth conversation about the interviewees' struggles. During the interviews, I continuously offered explanations about my specific interests. Importantly, I asked *ethnographic questions*, as defined by Spradley (1979: 223), which would represent mostly *descriptive questions* complemented by *structural questions*. Descriptive questions comprise several question subtypes that "encourage an informant to talk" (Spradley 1979: 85) and thus, to determine the interview's content. For instance, I asked them if they could describe their common workday and used *retour questions* (Spradley 1979) to dig deeper into something the interviewees had mentioned in passing: "Earlier you said… Can you tell me a little bit more about it?" Once I could convey seemingly unimportant and personal details mattered, the interviews became gradually more personal and richer in content. *Structural questions* complement descriptive questions as they point to particular domains of knowledge and experiences of the interviewees (Spradley 1979: 60). From the third interview, after I had identified the role space plays in the cleaners' struggles, I weaved structural questions into the conversations: "I've learned from other cleaners that… Can you relate to that?" If they agreed, I encouraged them to tell me more about that specific aspect.

Questions of Reflexivity and Positionality

"[T]here [is] no such thing as apolitical scholarship. We are all situated, and it is this that conditions the ways in which we see and understand the world" (Salem 2016: xi). I am situated as a white, young woman from an educated German middle-class background who, at the time of my research, was student to the London School of Economics and Political Science. This has undoubtedly shaped the interviews. For instance, several interviewees stated that most of their colleagues would never agree to speak to me out of fear to suffer some sort of penalisation from the university. This fear was intensified by their worry about major staff redundancies as a result of the pandemic. A fundamental power imbalance inherent to my study constitutes the fact that the cleaners' voluntary participation built the foundation to my Master's thesis and thus to my graduation at one of the world's

leading academic institutions in social sciences. My positionality is also informed by my active engagement in the "Justice for Cleaners" campaign at a challenging time when it moved entirely online. I remain in touch with all the interviewees.

Data collection

The following sub-sections introduce the interviewees and address challenges of access.

Interviewees, Universities and Ethical Considerations

The narrations of six persons who work as in-house cleaning staff at three globally high-ranking London universities[1] build the foundation to my discussion. The total number of interviews amounts to seven because I conducted a follow-up interview with one of the interviewees. Two universities are part of the Russell Group, whose wealth is exemplified by the fact that it consists of merely 15% of UK universities but receives 76% of all research grant and contract income in the UK (Russell Group 2017: 7). All three universities have distinguished reputations in social sciences and publicly commit to promoting social justice through hosting *equality and diversity trainings*, establishing *equality action plans* and declaring *equality, diversity and inclusion strategies and policies*, for instance. By virtue of protecting the interviewees' identities, the respective universities' names are anonymised and the interviewees' names are pseudonymised.[2] For the same ethical reasons, I will only consider the cleaners' regional backgrounds to keep their nationalities and ethnic backgrounds as well as their age confidential. I interviewed a group of three women and three men from sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America of whom three are native English speakers and three are native Spanish speakers.

1 According to Quacquarelli Symonds (QS).

2 The chosen pseudonyms are commonly used male (David, George and Jack) and female (Amy, Rachel and Sara) British names.

Access

The small number of interviewees is firstly due to the policies implemented to combat the global pandemic which complicated the recruitment of interviewees. Since the campus was closed, I recruited all interviewees online. Secondly, cleaners found themselves in a highly uncertain situation and worried about staff redundancies because of the pandemic. These uncertainties meant that many decided not to participate. I finally found interviewees through one cleaner whom I had met months prior at a "Justice for Cleaners" meeting. When I told them about my research idea that was sparked that very day, they gave me their contact. In the beginning of June 2020, I contacted them and they agreed to participate in an interview and additionally put me in contact with two other cleaners willing to participate in the project. The entire communication with the interviewees took place via the audio-visual applications WhatsApp and Zoom. I succeeded in recruiting three more interviewees by randomly contacting students who were tagged on photos of prior "Justice for Cleaners" campaigns of different London universities on social media. Two students responded and established contact with either cleaners or further students who put me in touch with cleaners. An unpredicted challenge was the language in which I would have to communicate with interviewees who do not speak English, which is predominantly Spanish. Because I speak Portuguese at a native-speaker level and learned Spanish in school, I managed to conduct interviews in Spanish, transcribe and translate them myself.

Data Analysis

The data analysis comprised several phases of thematic coding (Gibbs 2007; Marvasti 2004; Saldaña 2016; Robson & McCartan 2015). The manual transcription of the interviews and the translation of two of the interviews to English was the first step of interpreting the interviewees' narrations. The next step consisted in identifying semiotic chunks and subsuming them into broader thematic strands of analysis (Marvasti 2004; Saldaña 2016; Robson & McCartan 2015). Such heuristically cyclic and data-driven engagement (Gibbs 2007; Saldaña 2016) with the interviews finally led to the identification of a multidimensional picture of the interviewees' struggles. I identified financial, social, psycholog-

ical, political, spatial, and temporal dimensions that characterise their struggle of which the psychological dimension overlaps with findings by Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019) and Messing (1998). The overall theme covered by all identified dimensions is that despite their moving in-house, the interviewees feel misrecognised as staff of the university and, in many ways, treated as though they continued working under a contractor. Inspired by Massey's (2005, 2009) conceptualisation of space as the composition of the built environment and the social relational environment, I identify that this central theme manifests in the cleaners' struggle over space.

Spatial Struggles

Remarkably, the commonly used expression *in-house* builds upon the spatial imagination that those who are directly employed by a respective institution *belong to its house*, to its space, that is.

The experienced juxtaposition of being formally and financially *insiders* but feeling treated like *outsiders* plays the central role in all conversations. As mentioned, "Justice for Cleaners"—a collective of cleaners, students, academic staff, and the union UVW—led to the interviewees' economic status as in-house university staff. This achievement guarantees the cleaners sick pay, more than the minimum of holidays, a pension scheme, and a higher hourly salary that varies between around 11 and 14 pounds per hour.

> [I]n that difference of benefits, it has been a quite big and good change for us! But, with regard to the treatment, dignity and respect, I think the university continues treating us the same way as the contracting agencies used to treat us. (David)

Similarly, Jack, who is employed by another university, states: "We are in-house, we get a lot of benefits! But they still treat us like we are under a contractor!" As a result, the interviewees compare their experiences as *in*-house cleaning staff with the struggles they experienced as workers for *out*sourced agencies. Amy puts this experienced marginality in a nutshell: "It's been two years since we're in-house. … But I still feel we're not fully *in*-house. We're still standing somewhere *off*" (Amy).[3] The *treatment* by the respective university management seems to be fundamental to the cleaners' experience which Sara explains as she addresses her employer:

3 All citations of cleaners in italics indicate an emphasised intonation.

> Don't treat us like we are not a part of the university, because we are in your HR [human resources] system; we are in the whole system of the university, we are wearing your uniform, on the road, on the campus!

In the following two sub-sections, I will identify how both material and social space play a crucial role for the institutional practices that marginalise cleaners and lead to their struggle for recognition as in-house staff. Inspired by Massey's (2005, 2009) relational understanding of space and power, I will argue that cleaners struggle over access to (1) *material* space to *occupy* outside the space they are employed to clean and to (2) *social-organisational* space where they may acquire information and *participate*. This spatiality manifests how racialised migrant cleaners from the global South experience marginality in wealthy universities that publicly commit to promoting equality.

Struggling over the Allocation of Material Space

The interviewed cleaners seem to occupy "a tenuous location" (Puwar 2004: 8) in the institutions whose spaces they clean for a living. Their narrations indicate that they are only *in*-house—*insiders*—so long as they are *cleaning*. Conversely, as *humans*, they experience marginality.

Firstly, I base this argument on the fact that universities do not provide a changing room to them but request them to use uniforms. Due to the lack of a changing room, interviewees report that cleaning staff change their clothes in corridors, bathrooms, and classrooms. Jack explains that other non-academic staff like maintenance staff, for instance, have changing facilities at their disposal and asks, "Why can't we get the same things

other staff are getting?" George, who is employed by another university, remembers that because of the lack of a changing room, he would change his clothes in the cleaning cupboard shortly before beginning his shift at 6 a.m. He recalls that one day, his female manager was sitting with her laptop in the cleaning cupboard and since he did not want to be late for work, he decided to get changed in her presence rather than using the bathroom as a changing facility.

> Three days later, I realised that she had complained about me changing in front of her. You know, obviously, I did change in front of her but not in the way she made people think, that I made striptease in front of her. (George)

In this situation, the lack of a changing room for cleaners results in the inappropriate use of a storage facility to change clothes. Additionally, the cleaning cupboard seems to be used by managers as a makeshift workspace. Consequently, the lack of a changing room prevents both cleaners and managers from carrying out their work seamlessly and disturbs a social order instituted by gender (female / male) and professional hierarchy (manager / cleaner). Rachel gives a further example of a humiliating situation caused by the lack of a changing room for cleaners. She explains that in her university, cleaners use to change in the bathrooms accessible to all people on campus. However, "the toilet cabins are too narrow to change clothes. So, you have to do it outside of the cabins where there are the sinks and the mirrors" (Rachel). She remembers that her colleague:

> [C]hanged in the men's room, at eight in the morning, thinking that there was no [academic] staff, because they usually arrive at nine, right? But someone was working early and he entered the bathroom and the cleaner was in her bra and, well, with her trousers open… He apologised, because logically, he did not expect to find a female cleaner changing in the men's room. (Rachel)

Again, the lack of a changing facility disrupts a professional and social order that organises along work hierarchy and gender. Since there is no space allocated to an essential activity for the profession of cleaning—changing clothes—inappropriate spaces serve as compensations and lead to inconvenient encounters between managers, cleaners, and academics of different genders. Due to the cleaners' position in the professional hierarchy and the humiliating potentiality of being seen undressed, the lack of a changing room subjugates and marginalises them in their work environment.

Secondly, cleaners do not have a suitable break room at their disposal. Most cleaners work long days comprised of several two-to-three-hour shifts and one-to-two-hour breaks in between. Jack explains that between his shifts, "I don't have anywhere to go! Because we don't have a social room." For his one-hour lunch break, he usually stays in the area where he works and explains that "you're not relaxing when you're sitting in the place you're gonna clean in the next few hours or in a few minutes when you finish your break" (Jack). He elaborates that cleaning staff would formerly take their breaks in the restaurant area but that the management prohibited them from going there. "There are some [cleaners] who finish [their first shift] at eight o'clock and they don't start [their next shift] at nine o'clock. They start at eleven! Where do you stay for two hours?" (Jack). This poses a particular challenge during winter based on their low hourly income due to which cafés in one of London's most expensive areas do not represent an option. Amy and Sara report that there is a room allocated to cleaners, which contains a microwave, but is in the basement and has no ventilation system nor windows. Additionally, they have no direct access to this room with their chip keys; rather, they are required to ask for access permission from campus security guards. At another university, there is a common room for the entire university staff, which "is very small and we are 120 [cleaners]. … So, imagine a space for thirty, forty people. If all of us go there, we occupy the space of the rest of the academics, of the office workers, of the university administration" (David). George explains that because of the lack of a break room, cleaners used to frequent the cleaning cupboard for lunch: "Yeah, we used to take [breaks] in the same room but we were told not to because of the chemicals."

Prestigious universities, which publicly commit to promoting equitable treatment, do not provide space where their cleaning staff may *stay* between their many shifts—let alone *take restful breaks*. The institutionalised devaluation of cleaning and cleaners reproduces

a historically entrenched pattern of subjugation. Outside of the labour for which they are hired, cleaners are "somewhere *off*" (Amy). In other words, because their profession is cleaning, cleaners do not seem to have the right to *occupy* space. The lack of suitable space for cleaners to take breaks suggests that because they are cleaners, they do not have the right to *rest* during their breaks or to put on or take off their uniform in *privacy*. Crucially, the universities' public commitment to social justice, diversity, and equality does not appear to extend to their own cleaning staff. Even though *as cleaning staff* they are formally *in-house*, they are spatially made aware that *as persons*, they do not deserve equal treatment.

This spatial mechanism of marginalisation reflects the neoliberal commodification of cleaners and thus an institutional oppression of their personhood. While students, academic and other non-academic staff like maintenance staff, for instance, have relaxation and refreshment areas as well as changing and shower rooms at their disposal, cleaners are deprived of it. All cleaners state that they do not feel like they are treated with *dignity* or *respect*. Göran Therborn (2013) explains that inequality of treatment reflects *existential inequality*, that is, an "unequal allocation of personhood" (p. 49). His considerations serve to explain how the non-allocation of space to cleaners equals a non-allocation of personhood. The deprivation of space to take breaks and to change clothes serves to "keep [the cleaners] like we are under a contractor!" (Jack) and thus to signal that although they are formally in-house, they do not *really* belong *to the house*.

The cleaners' experienced marginality reveals how the neoliberal organisation of power gains momentum through the organisation of space based on "micro-geographies of segregation and separation" (Tonkiss 2017: 190). In university buildings, the 'unskilled' are separated from the 'skilled', the 'non-productive' from the 'productive', the 'dirty' from the 'clean', the 'no-name' from the 'prestigious', the 'periphery' from the 'core.' Break and changing rooms are thus *places that matter* for the universities' compliance with their own commitments to social justice.

Apart from their marginality in material space, what makes cleaning staff articulate their misrecognition as in-house staff so clearly? A glance at the cleaners' workdays serves to discuss their social-relational marginality.

Struggling over Social-Organisational Space to Participate

In this sub-section, I aim to recall that besides its material constitution, space is also produced through human engagement with it and the social networks this engagement creates (Massey 2005, 2009). The universities' spatial fabric thus unfolds, *inter alia*, through the typical activities of cleaners: arriving at the university at dawn; cleaning floors, desks, toilets and the library; replenishing toilet paper and soap; changing buildings; taking breaks in the workspace; and changing clothes in the corridor, classrooms and bathrooms, etc.

All the interviewees wake up between 2:30 a.m. and 4:40 a.m. Three of them begin their shifts at 5 a.m. and the other three at 6 a.m.; some of them work on the weekends and some work on weekdays only. No one receives extra payment for working so-called anti-social hours before 6 a.m. and during weekends. David, who is the father of three children, explains that before his job at the university, he works at another place together with his wife:

> We arrive there [at the other workplace] at 3:40 a.m. We work [there] for one hour and at 5 a.m., I go to the university. From five o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock, I'm a cleaning supervisor[4] and from eight in the morning until five in the afternoon, I'm a porter … That's my schedule, I work about twelve hours a day. (David)

4 Cleaning supervisors have the responsibility to ensure their allocated team of cleaners work correctly. All cleaning supervisors interviewed here are themselves cleaners.

In order to sustain a family, he works three jobs a day. Some cleaners report that the management continues outsourcing cleaners to supplement the insourced cleaning workforce but do not inform their in-house staff about this decision. Sara, who is a cleaning supervisor, explains that outsourced cleaners do not wear uniforms which poses the problem of identifying them and supervising their work. Jack clarifies that external

cleaners are usually not trained: "[T]hey don't know the chemicals. You see them using water solution to clean the top of the toilet and the water solution is only for the urinals!" Since outsourced cleaners are not trained, insourced cleaning staff spend extra time on instructing them which maps on top of their prevailing pressure to work quickly and efficiently. Sara summarises:

> [I]nstead of [hiring] their own staff who have only two-hours shifts, who've been asking for three-hours shifts, which were promised [to them], … they [the senior management] have a subcontracted agency working full-time! (Sara)

The institutional practice of allocating shifts to external cleaners and not to their own workforce seems to be particularly draining to the interviewees because they know that many of their colleagues work extra jobs to sustain themselves and their families. Sara stresses that this hiring practice "makes you feel like you are not a part of the university!" This experienced marginality stands in stark contrast to the universities' reputations. David tirelessly points to this hypocrisy: "[T]hat room where you sit to study, the worker who cleaned it, is being exploited." Similarly, Amy states that "the university has a big name but its integrity is very low." The mismatch of the universities' public portrayal and the cleaners' lived experience of marginality seems to reinforce the interviewees' impression that institutional commitments to social justice do not include cleaning staff.

The interviewees' experiences of the outbreak of Covid-19 further exemplify their felt misrecognition: "Overnight, because of a pandemic, we become the essential workers! (laughs) We're essential to everyone but, well, not very recognised!" (Rachel). Rachel's statement derives from her experience on a Saturday of mid-March 2020 when there existed little knowledge on the transmission of the virus.

> I went into this classroom at 6:15 in the morning to clean and tidy it. And it turns out that an infected student had been in that classroom the evening before! … My colleague … was there the following Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. And nobody told her anything! And the [infected] student had already informed the university that their test had been positive and asked to please inform everyone. And they told everybody except my colleague and me. (Rachel)

Her colleague David remembers that the cleaners learned about the incident only a couple of days later from a statement on the university's website. Rachel shares that her biggest concern is that she cannot trust that her employer will provide her with existential health information while her labour is critical to the health safety of everyone on campus. It is uncertain whether the cleaners were *not deemed important enough* to be informed or if they were *forgotten*. Either way, the responsible management did not seem to think about informing cleaners, who are particularly exposed to the risk of infection through their work.

This institutional exclusion from information is further echoed by the experience of Amy, a cleaning supervisor who, when she intended to attend an information meeting on the pandemic, was told several times by superiors outside the meeting room that this meeting was aimed at supervisors only. Although she was a supervisor herself, the senior management director approached her inside the meeting room to reiterate that the meeting was intended for supervisors only. She explains this incident by the fact that she had been vocal about professional injustices in the past and that therefore, "they didn't want me to be in the meeting because they don't want me to speak" (Amy).

Both cases exemplify the institutional marginalisation of cleaners from organisational information and participation. In the words of bell hooks (1989), managers did not give cleaners the possibility to "[talk] back" (p. 17), to react and pose questions during the unsettling moment of the outbreak of a global pandemic. This leads Amy to conclude: "So, you must not ask any question because you are minority. You just come here to work as a slave." She refers to the mouth several times: "We are nobody. We're just there to work and collect and shut the mouth" (Amy). She addresses me by referring to her colleagues: "Many of them will not do an interview with you… *Never*! Because the university keeps their mouths closed. And they're very scared" (Amy). Grada Kilomba (2008) understands

the mouth as "the organ of oppression par excellence" (p. 16). The exclusion of cleaners from organisational spaces where they may acquire information and speak *on their behalf* silences and marginalises them as subjects. To understand the chronic exclusion of cleaners from information, the cleaners' complicated relationship to their respective managements are of interest. David states:

> [T]he managers of the university are almost all British. So, I think there is still an ideological question that they don't want to recognise us yet as part of the university. Because most of the workers—cleaners, security, kitchen and maintenance staff and porters—are foreigners. We're Africans, Latin Americans… (David)

Rachel's remark adds to this:

> [W]e have the contract in-house, yes. … But I feel they think of us like a different kind of species, maybe, that they can devalue, discriminate against, and exclude, maybe because of our profession, of our work. (Rachel)

Although none of the interviewees makes an explicit link to race, cleaners frequently refer to their nationalities to explain power imbalances among cleaners and between different professional groups. According to Kilomba (2008), nationality often replaces race to signify "incompatibility with the national culture" (p. 64-65), which, in this context, represents the UK. From this perspective, the interviewees' quotations above explicitly hint at their experiences of *racialisation* ("Africans, Latin Americans"), *alienation* ("different species"), and *marginalisation* ("devalue, discriminate against and exclude") by the British, and supposedly white, senior management. As laid out before, both hooks (1989) and Freire (2005) stress that marginality defines a location *within* a system. The previous discussion has shown that marginalisation is a form of oppression that operates through both the built and the social environment. The interviewees' narrations demonstrate that they experience marginalisation—being pushed away from the centre through the institutional non-allocation of material and social space—as a dehumanising practice that is entrenched with racialisation and silencing.

Marginality as a Space of Systemic Knowledge and Potential Transformation

My last and central argument brings together Massey's (2005) understanding of space as "always under construction" (p. 9) and Freire's as well as hooks' conceptualisation of marginality as a location of potential systemic transformation towards social equality.

In the previous subsections, I identified that the institutional marginality of in-house university cleaners transcends economic exploitation. Their marginality is also a material and social relational experience of being *out of place* or, as Amy has put it, of being "somewhere *off*." In their work environment, cleaners experience a repression of their personhood. In other words, the systemic non-allocation of space to cleaning staff reflects a systemic reduction of cleaners to the labour they perform and thus their commodification. They may only occupy *the space they are hired to clean*. Outside their primary economic function, they do not have anywhere to go or stay within the university spaces.

Through Freire (2005), I understand oppression as an "instrument of dehumanization" (p. 54) that affects all participants in the socio-spatial system 'university.' This turns the marginal position of cleaners into a distinct location since the moral integrity of these institutions—which publicly commit to social justice—depends on the resistance of their most marginalised occupational group.

As a result, I now aim to shift the discussion towards the cleaners' marginality "not only … as … a peripheral space, a space of loss and deprivation but also of a space of resistance and possibility" (Kilomba 2008: 37). As laid out before, hooks (1989) understands the theoretical reflection on marginality by those who experience it as a powerful practice of resistance. Freire (2005) has called the conscious reflection upon—the process of becoming aware of—the power dynamics that stand at the core of one's oppression *conscientização*.

As if he echoed Freire's (2005) argument about dehumanisation, David addresses academics:

> [Y]ou are also being exploited because what you are teaching students—the true value of human and workers' rights—does not represent what is happening. The room where you write about these rights, that classroom, is being cleaned every day by a worker who is denied all those rights. So, what you're going to do in that classroom at this university is a sham. (David)

David argues that the university's public commitment to human rights is not performed by the institution itself because of how it marginalises cleaners. This paradox relates to Sara Ahmed's (2006) concept of institutional nonperformativity. Accordingly, commitments to social justice "are ways in which universities perform an image of themselves" (Ahmed 2006: 114) for the sake of their performance on the neoliberal market of higher education, for instance. In neoliberal capitalism, the public commitments by universities to social and moral values notably operate as brandings which is why the actual performance of these commitments may remain hollow. Amy, as already quoted, points to this nonperformativity: "[T]he university has a big name but its integrity is very low." David concludes his argument above in that he addresses academics: "So, if you come here [to support the cleaners], you need to come as one of us! Because you are *also* being unfairly treated because you are being lied to." He applies a relational understanding of power that connects the subjugation of cleaners to the status of academics, which corresponds to Freire's relational understanding of oppression: "[T]he situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress" (Freire 2005: 47). Connecting David's statement to Freire's theory, all subjects in the university system can be seen as "manifestations of dehumanization" (Freire 2005: 48) as long as cleaners experience a systemic marginality. David seems to understand oppression as a continuity of an unequal allocation of personhood (Therborn 2013) rather than as a dichotomy composed of 'oppressed versus oppressors' as Freire construes it. As a result, David does justice to the fact that academics and students, for instance, also do navigate university spaces as unequal subjects, just as scholarship on white supremacy in academia demonstrates (e.g., Arday & Mirza 2018). Not simply because academics are in more powerful positions than cleaners, they become oppressors of cleaners by virtue of their profession. However, following David's argument, as long as academics and students do not stand in solidarity with the most marginalised university staff, they are complicit in the respective university's nonperformativity of its own principles.

According to Freire (2005: 49-51), true solidarity by those in (more) power with those who are oppressed leads to the humanisation of all. He writes:

> Authentic help means that all who are involved help each other mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality which they seek to transform. Only through such praxis—in which those who help and those who are being helped help each other simultaneously—can the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped. (Freire 2016: 3)

Freire's considerations fit David's argument that if academics, students, and others aim to support cleaners, they need to "come as one of [them]" (David). This inclusive conceptualisation of a liberation struggle turns the cleaners' marginality into a collective space for systemic transformation so that all participants in the university system become full subjects.

The experiences and perspectives which the interviewees shared with me suggest that if the universities' decision to bring cleaners in-house was based on their commitment to social justice, this process remains incomplete. Consequently, bringing cleaners in-house encompasses more than insourcing them economically. To correspond to their own commitments, universities need to transform their built and social-organisational spaces so that cleaners can navigate these systems as full human beings. In consequence, *all* individuals on campus will navigate these systems as equally human.

How would such a humanising transformation of high-ranking London universities look like? Concerning the built environment, the institutional installation of *adequate* changing and break rooms would signify a systemic allocation of personhood to cleaning staff. Concerning the social-organisational environment, spaces of institutional decision-making and information would need to be readily accessible to cleaners and allow them *to speak*. In general, the universities' equality, diversity and inclusion strategies would need to extend to their non-academic staff.

The cleaners' theorisation of their own marginality and of transformative struggle inspires me to suggest that their knowledge about the systemic hypocrisies performed by their employing universities offer alternative concepts of these institutions. A reimagined high-ranking London university sticks to the principles and messages that serve as its branding and allows everyone—regardless of their occupation, ethnic background, gender and position in the institutional hierarchy—to navigate its spaces as full and equal persons. The cleaners' socio-political reflections and suggestions demonstrate how they *claim space* through their conscious identification of the power dynamics that lead to their marginality.

Conclusion

Cleaning produces—maintains—high-ranking London university spaces and their symbolic power. Conversely, institutional practices performed by these universities produce and maintain the marginality which cleaners experience despite their official status as in-house staff. In this study, a spatial approach to ethnographic interviews with cleaning staff has allowed me to examine institutional practices that perpetuate the cleaners' marginality.

The overall theme arising from the conducted ethnographic interviews was that cleaners feel "somewhere *off*" (Amy), "not very recognised" (Rachel), and "like [they] are not a part of the university!" (Sara). These lived experiences of marginality, I have suggested, reflect institutional practices that repress the cleaners' personhood. First, the lack of a changing and a break room denies staff—who work several shifts with breaks in between—the possibility to change clothes in privacy and to take qualitative breaks. Second, the misinformation regarding the employment of external cleaning staff and concerning the outbreak of a pandemic further signifies an institutionalised disregard for in-house cleaning staff as persons. In both their built and their social-organisational workplace, cleaners experience dehumanising treatment that transcends but is intertwined with the economic dimension of their struggles.

The interviewees' socio-political reflections and suggestions build the foundation for my central argument that their position is also one of systemic knowledge and potential transformation. Given that all three universities in question have distinguished reputations in social sciences and publicly commit to promoting social justice, the racialised misrecognition of cleaners situates them at a distinct location. The moral integrity of these universities depends on the resistance of their most marginalised professional group and those who stand in true solidarity with them.

My discussion has shown that the institutional process of bringing cleaning staff in-house remains incomplete. The interviewees' perspectives demonstrate that bringing cleaners in-house encompasses more than the guarantee of a minimum of financial and social security. Rather, cleaners will only truly be *in the house* if they can navigate the built and social-organisational environment of high-ranking London universities as full human beings.

The article expands the problematisation of white supremacy in the neoliberal university to non-academic university staff. Moreover, it exemplifies that both material and social space matter for the implementation of social justice—not only for those who experience oppression and exploitation but for all other subjects in a socio-spatial system. Ultimately, the humanness of *all* involved individuals is at stake.

The scope of this article did not allow me to explore how class and gender influence the interviewed cleaners' struggles. Future research shall address these aspects based on a wider ethnographic endeavour and ideally, on a participatory research design that allows the theorisation *with* rather than about cleaning staff and their situation in their employing institutions.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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