

By Ashley N. Robinson 

Community as Commodity and Exploited Intimacies: Intimate Citizenship of Live-In Residential Staff

DISTINCTLY RECALL ONE troubling Sunday afternoon during my second year as a full-time residence hall director. I had just spent a weekend off-campus visiting family, and as I pulled into the parking lot of my residential complex, I was overcome by a complete sense of dread at the prospect of venturing inside to my apartment. I sat weeping in my car. Through tears, I watched students playing volleyball in the quad on that sunny afternoon. No crisis was in sight, I was not on-call, yet I was overwhelmed with the idea that by going back to the residence hall, I might be *needed*, and I would certainly be seen. I would be seen publicly as a role model, supervisor, advisor, and care worker. Though most days in my live-in career I did not sit in the parking lot and cry, spending the better part of a decade as a live-in residential staff member immeasurably shaped my identity and way of being in the world. Living-in always affected my decisions: Was I expected to invite or to not invite students into my apartment? Was it reasonable for my employer to indicate that I needed to adhere to the campus housing contract and limit the amount of alcohol in my kitchen? What did it look like to have friends over? What did it look like to have romantic partners visit? Was overwork and exploitation a necessary sacrifice for having a decent place to live? When was I working? When was I not working (was I ever not working)? During those years and the following ones in which I supervised live-in residential

staff, I often lacked a framework for understanding my own and others' experiences of residential life work as it related to the experience of living-in.

Given the professionalization of the field of housing and residential life over the past several decades and the high numbers of live-in residential staff in US colleges and universities, frameworks for considering the live-in experience are necessary and important. Live-in residential staff are undergraduate and graduate students and full-time staff who, as a condition of and as partial or full compensation for their employment, live in an on-campus residence hall. Such staff members' responsibilities vary, often including on-call emergency and crisis response, programing and education, advising and counseling students, ensuring compliance with safety and behavioral policies, and more. As of 2017, the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) reported that of their member organizations, most campuses had five or more full-time live in professional staff (ACUHO-I, 2018). In the same year, 2,155 US higher education institutions provided on-campus housing with the capacity to house 3.2 million students (ACUHO-I, 2018). Thousands of live-in professional residential staff and countless more part-time graduate and undergraduate live-in residential staff serve and educate millions of residential students in US higher education institutions. Meanwhile, scholars and practitioners in higher education have

become increasingly concerned with issues of early-career attrition within student affairs and residential life specifically. As Sarah M. Marshall, Megan Moore Gardner, Carole Hughes, and Ute Lowery noted in their 2016 study of student affairs attrition: “The field of student affairs administration tends to place extremely high and sometimes unrealistic demands on the time and energy of [staff]” (Marshall et al., p. 157).

What frameworks do we have to understand those demands of time and energy on live-in residential staff? Burnout is an often-used phrase within the field, and research such as R. Jason Lynch and Chris R. Glass’ (2019) work on secondary trauma offers useful ways to consider the impact of care work and crisis response work for live-in residential staff. However, such concepts tell only part of the story of the challenges of live-in work and do not take into account how everyday residential life and housing work is organized within a sociocultural and economic context that shapes staff experiences. Drawing on my experiences as a former live-in staff member, I sought to better understand how live-in work uniquely crosses the boundaries between public and private spheres of residential staff members’ lives.

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To uncover and consider the tensions of live-in staff members’ intimate lives and work, I used Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN), a research methodology of

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first-person writing that was pioneered and made popular for use in higher education research by Robert Nash. SPN is “based in personal experience and augmented by the relevant scholarship” (Nash & Viray, 2013, p. 8). I have analyzed the SPN that I offer here using Kenneth Plummer’s (2003) concept of *intimate citizenship*, which was introduced in a book of the same name. I offer two reflective vignettes of live-in residential work that illustrate my experiences of “doing intimacies” and the attendant tensions of intimate work in the neoliberal academy. Based on these vignettes, I consider two troubling areas: the control and surveillance of live-in staff’s intimate lives as “role models” and “responsible leaders” and the commodification of live-in residential staff’s intimate lives for consumption by student residents as paying customers. However, both of these areas have embedded in them potentialities for more humanizing residential life practices. As such, I consider how an intimate citizenship framework might create possibilities for critically reexamining residential spaces and residential work toward more humanizing aims for both residential staff and students.

What Is Intimate Citizenship?

PLUMMER’S (2003) CONCEPT OF *intimate citizenship* offers a new lens for understanding growing concerns about burnout and attrition among entry-level residential life staff. Intimate citizenship looks at “the decisions people have to make over *the control (or not) over one’s body, feelings, relationships; access (or not) to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc.; and socially grounded choices (or not) about identities, gender experiences, erotic experiences*” (Plummer, 2003, p. 14). Intimate citizenship helps us consider issues of access, control, and choice that manifest in people’s intimate and personal lives, viewing the issue of how to live a personal and intimate life not only as an individual matter, but as a public matter, mediated by a variety of public spheres. The issue of how to live a personal and intimate life is central to living a meaningful life and present nearly everywhere in college and university residence halls. By engaging with residential work as *doing intimacies*, and considering live-in staff as *intimate citizens*, we can imagine possibilities for more meaningful and authentic engagement in residential life.

Troubling the boundaries of the private sphere, Plummer (2003) explored how the *intimate troubles of determining how to live one’s personal life in a changing and complex world* are played out in public spheres. Plummer (2003) argued that there are myriad public spheres; spaces in which debates about “what does go on, and indeed should go on, in personal life?” (p. 73) are

conducted. College and university residential life, both as a field and as a practice in specific colleges and universities, constitutes one such public sphere. Concerns in the field with students' personal development, sense of community or belonging, values, and interpersonal skills are big educational questions that all have a common thread: *How should one live one's personal life in an academic residential community?* This question is debated and negotiated through research, professional conferences, student codes of conduct, learning outcomes, and organizational objectives. In this article, I explore how live-in residential staff take up this question through their work, within contexts that often exert control and limit access and choices for residential staff and students to engage and develop as intimate citizens.

How should one live one's personal life in an academic residential community?

My Narratives of Living-In

A CONNECTION BETWEEN THE personal and the public was the origin point of this project; in reading and discussing Plummer's (2003) book *Intimate Citizenship*, I saw myself and my own experience as a live-in residential staff member. To make meaning of Plummer's framework during a class discussion, I shared a story of my experiences of living-in. In telling that narrative, I developed new understandings of my own experience and noticed the analytical linkages to intimate citizenship, notions of work in the neoliberal academy, and, perhaps, possibilities for understanding live-in residential life work in a new way. To continue to build those analytical connections and possibilities, I have expanded on my narrative insights using an SPN methodology.

SPN is generated through a researcher's self-interrogation of their experiences but is not simply memoir. Rather, SPN scholars seek to "find a way to use the personal insights gained in order to draw larger conclusions for readers, possibly even to challenge and reconstruct older political or educational narratives" (Nash & Viray, 2013, p. 5). SPN draws on the scholar's intimate and personal experiences, bringing in the public sphere of research and literature to make sense of those personal experiences. SPN spans the private and public spheres of the scholar's life, making it a well-aligned method to consider the intimate citizenship of live-in residential staff.

I began with a narrative vignette to firmly situate this work within my own narrative and intimacies. I offer two more vignettes of my personal experience as a live-in residential staff member, which occurred over the span of eight academic years. I have developed these vignettes to illustrate the experience of "doing intimacies" for work within the neoliberal university, which I expand upon below. My personal experience and the theoretical framework of *intimate citizenship* are in relationship and conversation within this text, and the vignettes that I share are responses to three questions about intimate citizenship:

1. What *intimate troubles* did I experience as a live-in residential staff member? That is, how did I engage the question of *how to live one's personal life in a changing and complex world* specifically through my residential life work experience?
2. How did I *do intimacies* as a live-in residential staff member?
3. What were the challenges and joys of *doing intimacies* within live-in residential work?

Living in the Fishbowl

The tension of the public and private spheres within live-in work was conveyed to me early in my career as "living in a fishbowl." This admonition, shared with me during my first staff training as a Resident Assistant (RA), implied that I would soon be bereft of privacy. I would be in the fishbowl, unable to leave, and visible to onlookers at every moment. Every decision that I made no longer just represented me; it represented the department and the university. This was clearest to me in the expectation that I uphold the student code of conduct to the fullest degree, with no aberrations, for fear of being fired. What this meant, above all, was that I should now live in constant fear of being caught anywhere near alcohol. After all, I was now an enforcer of the student code, and in particular, the alcohol policy. This meant that I had the dubious honor of calling the police on rooms full of first years with half-full cans of Natty Light, pouring unopened bottles of Jägermeister down the bathroom sink, and definitely not going out on the weekends with my friends anymore.

I was not really a drinker anyway; I mostly served as a designated driver and enjoyed house parties because I was naturally extroverted, and alcohol seemed to bring everyone else up to my speed of chatter. But now, I felt that I had to distance myself from that scene—it was clear that any type of trip-up, even staying out past 2:00 a.m. if I hadn't gotten permission, would jeopardize my role as an RA. That would mean

the double shame of being a screw-up and losing my free room and board. Better to be on guard; making friends or romantic connections through an active social life was not worth having to take out more student loans.

When I finally turned 21, I was free to delight again in the social scene of the university and my friend group. Our campus was not dry, so I was allowed (suddenly) to have alcohol in the residence hall, and to drink on- or off-campus, so long as I was not drinking or intoxicated while I was on duty. More important, I felt less surveilled, less controlled, and less likely to lose my job. On one notable Wednesday night, I polished off the better part of a bottle of wine and then spent an hour chatting with the RAs on duty at the desk. I am not sure that was my finest moment, but the point is that I was no longer so fearful that choosing to drink and go to parties would result in job discipline. The rules that had governed my underage life were no longer burdening me, and I could make my own choices—ones that involved both being a role model and student leader and enjoying my social life as I saw fit. Or so I thought, until I graduated and became a live-in graduate hall director.

My comings and goings, and those of anyone else who entered my apartment were almost always noted by a supervisor, colleague, or student staff member.

Suddenly, just as when I became an RA, a new slew of formal and informal department expectations for my personal behavior were handed down. I was now even more of a responsible leader and a role model. The door to my apartment was in the lobby of the building, perpendicular to the main office and the RA duty desk. My comings and goings, and those of anyone else who entered my apartment were almost always noted by a supervisor, colleague, or student staff member. I went to graduate school at the same university where I earned my undergraduate degree. Something like half of my friends were still undergraduates, many of them RAs. I was advised to set “clear boundaries” because of my new role. No parties with undergraduates. No dating undergraduates. No going out for margaritas with undergraduates. Wouldn't it look weird to have undergraduate RAs over to my apartment just as friends? Yes, that seemed weird. Better not do that either. Say

goodbye to everyone because this job is even more important than the last one. This job pays for grad school and room and board, and at least some of my bills. Better to be on guard when I knew I was being watched.

Helping People

“I went into residential life because I wanted to help people.” This phrase was a frequent reminder that the real purpose of my work was care work. Of course, I did all kinds of other things that did not exactly fit into that description. Organizing thousands of keys into tiny labeled envelopes is not “helping people,” strictly speaking, but it got students into rooms in a residence hall where I was trying to create a safe and educational environment, thereby helping people. Making sense of mundane or administrative tasks in my “helping” philosophy was one thing, but it was quite another to make sense of crisis and trauma. Helping involved giving parts of myself to other people—sometimes big parts that were connected to my own pain. “Helping people” was more complicated than it seemed.

After many years working in residential life, I would often explain this aspect of the work as “being there for students during some of the darkest moments of their college experience—often in the middle of the night.” When I showed up to be with students, I had usually never met them before. There were over 12,000 students living on campus, and I knew a small fraction of them personally. However, I was the designated responsible and caring adult, dispatched via cellphone, arriving to rapidly establish a personal relationship and mitigate crisis. Within minutes of meeting students, they told me about things that they might have been concealing from friends and family for days, weeks, or months. Sexual assault. Disordered eating. Self-harm. Suicidal ideas. Relationship abuse. Failing all of their classes. I offered the care and investment of a family member or close friend, but I was a perfect stranger, paid to be there. I also made decisions and solved problems in ways that were with/for them, but were also always with/for the interests, liabilities, and reputation of the university.

It was almost always late at night. Not that these issues spontaneously developed late at night, but the weight of these students' personal struggles, the secrets that they carried about their own or their friends' intimate lives, became too heavy once the sun went down. So, there I was, many times over many years, opening up my heart for students to pour their problems into. Exhausted, sleepless, sad, angry—there because I was paid to be there, because they paid to be there so I could be paid to be there, I filled the role of instant helper. Eventually I went home, my brain and heart filled up

with some trauma or crisis or pain that was not even mine to claim or feel. Usually, I never saw the students again.

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Live-In Intimate Troubles: What Do They mean?

RESIDENTIAL LIFE STAFF ARE usually positioned as professional educators within the public sphere of residential life, occupying an objective space in a debate centered on what should go on in students' personal lives within a residential community. Even undergraduate RAs are called "para-professionals," situating them within the public and professional sphere first. However, my personal narratives show how live-in residential staff are *also* navigating the question of how to live one's personal life in a changing and complex world within the public sphere of residential life. Therefore, they share many of the same struggles and intimate troubles as the residential students with whom they work. The unclear boundaries of living where one works pulls intimate relationships with partners, children, and other significant others who may either live with a residential staff member or spend time in their residence into the public sphere of residential life. Constant physical closeness to work also means the daily experiences of developing one's identity, values, or beliefs occur within the public sphere of residential living. In addition, performing various types of care work, from advising students to responding to traumatic events, adds another dimension of doing intimacies in live-in residential work. My narratives indicate how live-in staff may struggle to develop as intimate citizens because their intimate lives are proscribed by the constraints of the organizational and economic structure of housing and residential life, which is characteristic of *neoliberalism* in higher education.

Neoliberalism is the prevailing form of contemporary governmental and social system in the United States. Henry Giroux argued in an article in the *Harvard Educational Review* that one of the primary

characteristics of neoliberalism is that "public space is portrayed exclusively as an investment opportunity" (Giroux, 2002, p. 428), with the democratic values previously characteristic of public spheres giving way to commercial values. Neoliberalism has reshaped public higher education as a private good concerned with individual interests, driven by free-market logics. Though I have not encountered any research that specifically addresses neoliberalism within housing and residential life, Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades (2000) have provided a comprehensive overview of how neoliberalism manifests across academia. Because student housing is a revenue-generating function of colleges and universities, such economic and market-driven manifestations are strongly embedded into residential life organizations. Two main themes in my narrative vignettes reflect neoliberal mechanisms: control and surveillance and commodification of live-in staff members' intimacies.

Control and Surveillance

Academic organizations and managers exert control and limit employee autonomy to seek revenue and cost-savings—one of the characteristics Slaughter and Rhoades (2000) noted in their work on the neoliberal academy. One such form of control is the surveillance of live-in staff. As I reflected upon in my first and second vignettes, living-in means always being watched. Personal missteps or moments of learning can almost always become professional mistakes with material consequences. A sense of constant surveillance can affect a live-in staff member's ability to do the intimate work of questioning and negotiating one's own identity, choices, values, and relationships. Therefore, the intimate citizenship that live-in staff develop is mediated by the definitions, policies, and protocols of their employer. Live-in staff may fear that their choices—in the case of my second vignette, choices about alcohol and social relationships—may have repercussions for their employment. This is true of workers in many professions, but separation from the work environment for live-in staff can be rare, particularly with on-call responsibilities and expectations that any "nights away" are approved time off. Getting away from campus can be difficult and as I described in my first vignette, leaving your privacy at the door of the residence hall can be emotionally exhausting.

Surveillance and control are often manifested in expectations to be a "role model" and "responsible leader" as a condition of employment. These seem to be worthy goals—to live your life in such a way that others see you as a leader and model. However, within a culture of surveillance, being a role model means that not only is one responsible for living a mistake-free life

in the gaze of their employer, they also cannot make mistakes in front of anyone else—namely their students. This is exacerbated because the staff member is in a frequent position of holding students accountable for their mistakes by “writing them up” for student conduct code violations. Being both a role model and a rule enforcer builds in an implicit and explicit expectation that what is to be role modeled is not a messy, authentic life, as much as steadfast adherence to the rules. To break those rules is to be both a bad role model and a hypocrite.

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Intimate Lives Commodified

Live-in staff are not just engaging with questions of intimacy while living and working in residence; their paid labor often involves *doing* intimacies. Essentially all humans do intimacies, not just in the form of sex and love, which are commonly linked to the idea of “intimacy” but also in other relationships and caring work (Plummer, 2003). Many types of work, such as nursing, social work, and sex work involve doing intimacies as one’s paid labor. Live-in staff do intimacies when they engage closely with feelings and emotions as part of their work, which may include the following:

1. Developing close relationships and emotional investments with the students they advise and supervise
2. Filling a role as a mentor and role model to residential students, particularly around shared minoritized identities
3. Comforting and counseling students in times of trauma, pain, and violence

Doing intimacies as part of one’s work is not, in itself, unethical or harmful. In fact, the traversing of private and public, and the sense of community and belonging that shared intimacies offer are the foundations of the communities that residential life seeks to build. The intimacies that live-in staff do as part of their work are central to the relational and developmental

aims of residential life. Furthermore, shared intimacies are likely a motivation for many live-in educators to pursue residential life work. As I reflected upon in my third vignette, I got into the profession to help people—as did many of my friends and colleagues.

The problems with doing intimacies as paid labor lie in the neoliberal commodification of residential life. Plummer noted that one of our contemporary *intimate troubles* is “the commodification and consumption of intimacies—the potential for our personal and intimate lives to become bound up with sellable objects” (Plummer, 2003, p. 27). In the case of live-in residential staff, the sellable object is the experience of living on campus, a process that involves their deep emotional and intimate investments, and which is offered as a commodity to student customers. The tensions in this arrangement arise when the “bottom line” is inconsistent with a staff member’s values, beliefs, or relationships with students. The bottom line determines what is the right or good thing to do, even in seemingly intimate situations.

What Can We Do in Residential Life and Housing?

NEOLIBERAL MECHANISMS ARE largely taken-for-granted in residential life and housing, but in fact, they exist in tension with the field’s educational concerns about intimate and personal development. Part of this tension is that the intimacies that live-in residential staff *do* are often not engaged in meaningful and humanizing ways but are exploited by organizational policies and practices that are characteristic of neoliberal higher education. I have experienced engaging in intimacies within neoliberalized residential life as a process of negotiating with mechanisms of control and commodification. The tension of constantly pushing against feelings of exploitation, control, and commodification burned me out as a live-in staff member. As a supervisor, it made me guarded and fiercely protective of the staff I supervised, while slowly eroding my belief in the educational and transformative potential of residential life against the overbearing influence of neoliberalism.

However, doing intimacies in my work and life as a live-in residential staff member also held the potential for transformative and meaningful shared experiences, relationships, and learning. My eight years of living-in were full of such moments of connection, joy, and shared intimacies with students and other staff. These were nothing short of life-changing to me. The fact that I *can* and *have* helped complete strangers through dark and difficult times has contributed to my intimate life in untold ways. My constant network of surveillance

living in a residence hall was also often a constant network of support, encouragement, and love.

Residential life, by virtue of spanning the private and public, has the capacity to generate deep feelings of love and connection, creating spaces for staff and students to develop intimate citizenship—to meaningfully engage questions of what it means to live a personal life in this complex contemporary world. For residential life organizations to do their part to overcome the dehumanizing effects of neoliberalism, they must reckon with the inherent tensions between corporatization and students’ personal development and learning. The increased need to focus on the “bottom line,” efficiencies, and revenue generation are not simply unfortunate by-products of declining public support for higher education, which can coexist alongside holistic student learning and personal development as the aims of student affairs and residential life. Public divestment in higher education is a function of neoliberal governance that is directly counter to holistic aims of student learning and personal development. As long as we treat students like customers, they will be customers, and live-in staff members’ intimacies will be commodities to be consumed—all transactional, not transformational.

Engaging Grounded Moralities

Perhaps it is possible to reclaim residential life from the grips of neoliberalism and reimagine live-in staff as role models for developing intimate citizenship with students. Plummer (2003) offered the idea of “grounded everyday moralities” as a model for developing intimate citizenship. Grounded moralities are “a key tool in understanding how people conduct their moral lives, one that can help us in seeing dialogues and the possibility of building intimate citizenships” (Plummer, 2003, p. 98). Building intimate citizenships for live-in staff may involve dialogue and storytelling; Plummer argued that it is necessary to tell stories about the everyday dilemmas of life, and how we overcome them (Plummer, 2003, p. 115). Confronting daily dilemmas is a shared human experience—one in which we can all be “role models” and “responsible leaders” for each other. Such dialogue and storytelling may not just shift the doing of intimacies from surveillance and commodification toward intimate citizenship for live-in staff but are also important to the intimacies that students do within residence halls. However, such a reimagining of college residence halls as generative and humanizing intimate spaces is not just a matter of engaging in more storytelling and dialogue of grounded moralities but situating that dialogue within an environment that adopts an ethic of care and ethic of love. Common practices such as consumer-oriented contractual relationships to students and literal and figurative policing of

students’ lives within residences require critical reexamination to create spaces for meaningful moral dialogue and development of intimate citizenships.

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Conclusion

LIVE-IN STAFF AND STUDENTS have never, even under the most stifling corporatized conditions, *stopped* developing their intimate and personal lives. The act of living, both with oneself and with others, is the primary condition for the exploration of how to live a personal life. However, this article reflects on the many ways that the conditions of residential life are often not conducive to meaningful personal and intimate explorations. Often, figuring out how to live a meaningful intimate and personal life happens *in spite of* the conditions created by residential life, both for students and live-in staff. As long as residential life organizations pursue corporatization and neoliberalism goes unquestioned, intimacies will be a commodity, and live-in staff and students will have to find ways to flourish and explore their intimate citizenship in spite of control and surveillance. I argue, instead, that a different path can be forged, that centers intimate citizenship and its development by resisting neoliberalism and pursuing everyday grounded moralities.

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