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## Beyond Repair: An Investigation of the Experiences, Interpretations, and Self-Construction of Black Women Welfare Recipients in the Deep South

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*Beyond Repair:*

*An Investigation of the Experiences, Interpretations, and Self- Construction of Black Women*

*Welfare Recipients in the Deep South*

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Abstract

Based on six in-depth interviews with Black women in the Metro-Atlanta area who have at some point in the past ten years received welfare assistance, this project serves to understand how Black women relate to the welfare system in the current moment. To best understand their circumstances, I set forth a three-part question: How do Black women welfare recipients experience the welfare system in the current moment?; how do they interpret these experiences?; and how do these experiences and interpretations lend to how they conceptualize, construct, and/or manage their identities as Black women welfare recipients? I argue that my participants experiences with the welfare system are varied based on their backgrounds of financial stability or instability and their adherence to or non-compliance with standards about work participation and the nuclear family order; this consequently influences their interpretations of their experiences which they express via whom or what they blame for their conditions of financial instability. Lastly, however, I argue that regardless of their circumstances and experiences, each of my participants believes that they are rights-bearing citizens who are a part of the mainstream American citizenry and thus adopt mainstream American values that center independence, work, and self-responsibility. As a result, through what I term *politics of distance*, my respondents are able to justify their claims on the welfare system as they conceptualize and construct their identities in adherence to the American value system.



**“The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.”- Ida B. Wells**

I dedicate this study to Black women, both living and dead. With every breath I take, I will use it to fight for our liberation.



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## Preface

*“The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman.” - Malcolm X*

I found myself in Black feminist text, both literally and figuratively.

When I read Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, for the first time in my “Introduction to Sociology” course, I immediately felt a confused sense of emotions comprised of sadness, passion, anger, and confusion, but the strongest of them all was a sense of relief. In this moment, I realized that I had for the first time ever found a language to express what I had always felt about my precarious position as a Black girl; I had found validation that the experiences that I knew to be true were not just distortions of my imagination; and I had found a community in which I saw myself reflected. As a part of a deeply personal inquisition, I began to indulge in Black feminist thought, politics, and theory through my academic courses and personal readings in which I became very familiar with the rhetoric of Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Assata Shakur & Patricia Hill Collins, to name a few.

It is also through Black feminist text that I came to this topic about Black women in the welfare system. I remember reading Dorothy Roberts *Shattered Bonds* for my “Sociology of Sexualities” Course in which upon learning that welfare was created for white women, I was overcome with a sense of rage, not because I did not think white women deserved welfare assistance, but because I had understood and even experienced the ways in which Black mothers in the welfare system had been uniquely and intentionally demeaned, devalued and oppressed. Therefore, when the time came to propose a topic for this project, I knew that it was now my turn to interject in spaces where Black women had experienced the most trauma.

I like to think that though Black women stand at the crux of inequality in a country that has often oppressed anyone who is a non-white male, I see this positionality as a sort of second sense, similar to the way in which Dubois describes, that allows me to see truths that others can not. Therefore, in the tradition of one of my favorite Black women truth tellers, Ida B. Wells, this project serves as what I am considering an exploration of truth and an initiation into the Black feminist conversation. By centering the voices and experiences of Black women in the welfare system in this research, I hope to continue to expose what has always been one of the most oppressive sites for Black women. In this regard, I hope this research lends to Black women’s ultimate liberation. “We have nothing to lose but our chains.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Assata Shakur.



# 1

## Welcome to the System

*“If the people cannot trust their government to do the job for which it exists- to protect them and to promote their common welfare- all else is lost.”- Barack Obama, An Honest Government- A Hopeful Future, 2006*

“Welfare definitely needs to be refined!” exclaims Toya, a 43-year-old single mother of two who has participated in the welfare system since she herself was a young girl. During our interview in a small coffee shop in Atlanta in January of 2019, Toya sipped her coffee as she often times shook her head in disbelief while we talked about her dissatisfaction with the conditions of the current welfare system. In the midst of the longest government shutdown in United States history, Toya often referred to the government’s temporary inactivity throughout our conversation. Upon her realization that government employees had not received pay during this thirty-five day time period, as a financially vulnerable individual herself, the conditions of government workers became quite personal for her. For Toya, the circumstances that were a result of the government shutdown intimately reflected the government’s administration of welfare programs; once again, here was an example of the U.S. government’s passivity, detachment, and self-interest that resulted in the neglect of its most vulnerable citizens. During our conversation, Toya expressed how she adamantly believed that the welfare system needed to be redefined:

“[Welfare] needs to be reprogrammed and switched up...How? There are many ways I am sure...I just know it shouldn’t be straight across the board because everyone has different situations. What if you run out of PTO days and they don’t pay you for one day? That one day can make or break a person whether they are married or single.... and just because I didn’t go

to college and get a degree does not mean I should be penalized. It's like "get a job," but they don't want to give us no money. I want to live in decent housing. I don't want to live in housing where the ceiling is about to fall and the landlord is whack."

As someone who has benefited from many of the major means-tested programs such as Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)<sup>2</sup>, Toya expresses that the welfare system lacks knowledge about the needs of low-income individuals which causes them to distribute insufficient funds, strict policies, and cumbersome procedures. At the end of our conversation, Toya says:

"Working people need help, married, single, or whatever. It's hard. It's so difficult. We just tryna make a way."

What Toya expresses summarizes how she feels about her experience as a financially unstable welfare recipient in the United States.

The United States welfare system and the programs administered by each federal, state, and local governments stands as one of the most highly contested and divisive functions of the state (Magoon 2009). The welfare system for centuries has divided both government officials and the public alike as debates that surround questions of entitlement, dependency, labor, expenditures, and taxes have been central to these tensions (Magoon 2009). As a result, the word "welfare" itself is a complex and weighted term that evokes a variety of meanings and interpretations, many of these connotations a result of the racialized, gendered, and class-based connotations that surround welfare policies. Because of this, Black women welfare recipients,

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix for welfare program abbreviation list

and more specifically, single, low-income, Black mothers in the welfare system have a complex history of marginalization and stigmatization within welfare politics (Hancock 2004).

Of the most notable eras in which Black women welfare recipients were at the center of the welfare debate was during the 1996 welfare reform. On August 22, 1996, with the intention to “end welfare as we know it,” President Bill Clinton received support for the passage of The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) (Mink 1998).

This act ushered in drastic changes to what was formerly known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) which would now become Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF). Outside of a mere name change, this new program introduced provisions such as drastically shortened lengths of reciprocity, punitive work requirements, and strict eligibility requirements with the intention to move families from “welfare to work” (Hays 1996).

Nevertheless, despite the bill’s passage as a victory for some, the provisions were a nightmare for others as it produced an even further economic burden for poor families by removing the safety net in which the previous policy provided (Hays 1996).

Even more, this new paradigm finally materialized anti-welfare rhetoric that was initiated in 1976 by President Ronald Reagan whom, with the intention to rally the support of both Congress and the public, popularized the myth of the “welfare queen,” a poor, young, lazy, single Black mother who participated in welfare fraud to support her lavish lifestyle (Hill Collins 1990). As a result of the reform and the circumstances that soon followed, scholars such as Angie-Marie Hancock, Patricia Hill Collins, Gwendolyn Mink, Lynne Haney, and Sharon Hays highlighted the deeply negative impact in which women, and even more, Black single mother welfare recipients faced with this legislation. Punishment via low wage employment, insufficient

benefits that push women further into poverty, and stigma and mistreatment from welfare administrators were some of the conditions that they defined as a result of the 1996 welfare reform (Hancock 2004; Hill Collins 1990; Mink 1995; Haney 1996; Hays 1996).

It has now been almost 20 years since the 1996 reform and there have been very few changes to welfare policies, and upon exploring the topic of welfare reform and the conditions of low-income, single Black mothers, I became intrigued by this question: Given that two decades have passed since the reform, does the welfare system continue to impact Black women welfare recipients in the same ways that were articulated by some scholars at the dawn of the 1996 reform? With this consideration, the purpose of my study is to explore the relationship that Black women have to the welfare system in the current moment. In order to capture these experiences, my research attempts to answer a three-part question: How do Black women welfare recipients experience the welfare system in the current moment?; How do they interpret these experiences?; and Lastly, how do these experiences and interpretations lend to how they conceptualize, construct, and/or manage their identities as Black women welfare recipients?

To answer these questions, I conducted six interviews with Black women welfare recipients in Atlanta who have received some form of welfare assistance in the past ten years. I argue that though some parts of their experiences are similar, they do not each share a single overarching experience. Instead, my participants experience the system in a variety of ways that I further argue are stratified based on their backgrounds of financial stability or instability and their adherence to or non-compliance with standards about work participation and the nuclear family order; this consequently influences their interpretations of their experiences which they express via whom or what they blame for their circumstances of financial instability. Lastly,



however, I argue that regardless of their circumstances and experiences, each of my participants believes that they are rights-bearing citizens who are a part of the mainstream American citizenry and thus adopt mainstream American values that center independence, work, and self-responsibility. As a result, through what I term *politics of distance*, my respondents are able to conceptualize and construct their identities in adherence to the mainstream American identity.

### ***The Origins & History of the U.S. Welfare System***

Literature on the modern welfare state usually centers capitalism, economics, spending, and labor which results in a variety of definitions of the welfare state; however, for my purposes here, I adopt what Esping-Andersen (1990) asserts as one of the most common definitions of the welfare state: a regime in which the state claims responsibility “for securing some basic modicum of welfare for its citizens” (19). In other words, though the aims of welfare regimes depend on the conditions of individual states where the goals can include the relief of misery, the preservation of social order and discipline, and/or the regulation of the labor market, welfare regimes are those in which a governing body provides grants, pensions, subsidies, or other resources to support its citizens (Trattner 1999). According to Michael Katz (1996), these grants and subsidies can take the form of means-tested programs or social insurance programs where the former provides resources for individuals who are in need and the latter for citizens who are unable to work. This distinction between the types of welfare resources is the basis that differentiates welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990).

Esping-Andersen (1990) argues that there are three types of welfare regimes: the corporatist welfare state, the liberal welfare state, and the social democratic welfare state. Corporatist welfare states are conservative in nature and are more concerned with class and

status rather than with the promotion of market efficiency and social rights; under this regime, the state will only interfere when a family is unable to provide for its members (Esping-Andersen 1990). In contrast, the social-democratic welfare regime values social democracy and works to “promote an equality of the highest standards” where everyone is a dependent of the state regardless of class or status (Esping-Andersen 1990, 27). Lastly, but most significantly for my purposes, the liberal welfare state is one in which means-tested assistance is most dominant (Esping-Andersen 1990). In other words, the liberal welfare regime distributes resources based on income requirements, and more importantly, is catered towards low-income, working individuals. This system prides liberal work ethic and emphasizes welfare as an option for those who are out of work, yet provides limitations to ensure that individuals continue to participate in the labor market (Esping-Andersen 1990). This is the model of the United States welfare regime. The United States system is also considered a “laggard state” in that it spends a smaller portion of its GDP on social programs (Skocpol 1995). Nevertheless, despite America’s categorization as a laggard, liberal welfare regime, the economic, social, and political conditions of America makes the U.S. welfare system distinct.

Welfare theorist, William Trattner (1979), conceives of the U.S. welfare state as highly influenced by European conditions. Trattner argues that welfare, in its most primitive form, erupted from ancient Eurocentric philosophy and religious doctrines that promoted charity, love for mankind, and the duty to perform good deeds. While the function of charity and support for the poor was originally a function of the church, when the state and the church became one entity, both these values and the responsibility to administer relief for the poor shifted to the state (Trattner 1979). Breakdown of the medieval economy and the rise of commerce, international

trade, and the money economy, birthed social disorder, social hardships, and economic issues, and to relieve these social ails, the Elizabethan Poor Law, the most primitive representation of welfare policy, was enacted as a means for the state to alleviate poverty (Trattner 1979). The structure and values of the U.S. welfare system erupted from this early European model.

In the United States, the 20th century proved vital for the solidification of the U.S. welfare system. Trattner asserts that with the rise of industrialization, capitalism, urbanization, and immigration in the early 1900s, economic insecurity and deprivation began to intensify, and poverty became defined as a social problem (Trattner 1979). Two policies from this era became important for the modern system: the White House Conference on Dependent Children in 1909 recreated the notion that welfare should be supplied by the federal government and centered the wellbeing of mothers and infants as a responsibility of the state; the Sheppard-Towner Act of 1935 created widow's pensions or mother's aid, later known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Temporary Aid for Needy Families, to provide cash payments to mothers to end the separation of children from mothers for reasons of poverty, to assist mothers so that they could stay home and care for their children, and to provide assistance for widowed mothers (Trattner 1979). The mid 20th century also proved significant to the legacy of welfare in the U.S.

The New Deal, a series of government assistance programs enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, were to stabilize the country after industrialization, capitalism, urbanization, and warfare produced economic insecurity and deprivation (Trattner 1979; Katz 1996). One of the most significant by-products of the New Deal was the creation of a two-track welfare system. The Social Security Act of 1935 established the first track which included social insurance programs or entitlements such as old age insurance and unemployment insurance to

aid the elderly, disabled, and blind, and in addition, dependent children, and the second track that included poor relief or means-tested assistance that would help individuals who were not eligible for entitlement programs (Katz 1996). Consequently, these tracks impinged on notions about who was deserving of welfare assistance and who was undeserving of welfare assistance; those who received assistance from the social insurance track were considered entitled to welfare assistance because they were either women who were responsible for caring for their families, children who were unable to work, or disabled or blind (Katz 1996). In contrast, individuals who were poor but had what was considered an invalid excuse for their lack of labor force participation and conditions of poverty were considered undeserving of assistance and subject to what soon became very stingy and highly stigmatized means-tested programs (Katz 1996). Participants in these programs were considered “getting something for nothing,” a characteristic that attributed their poverty to their pathology (Fraser and Gordon 1992, 322).

### ***Dependency, The Culture of Poverty & Policing the Poor***

Conversations about poverty in the U.S. commonly describe poor people as the cause of their own conditions (Gilens 1999). Michael Katz (1989) argues that this notion is a way to obscure the fact that poverty is a social condition. Of the explanations that focus on individual pathology as a primer for poverty, I want to focus on the frameworks of the culture of poverty and dependency but through a racial and gendered lens.

#### ***The Culture of Poverty***

Termed by Oscar Lewis (1959), the “culture of poverty” explains what he considers the deviance of the poor as a result of their interactions with poverty. Lewis contends that poverty creates a “subculture” in which individuals are subject to their “own modalities and distinctive

social and psychological consequences” (Lewis 1959, 2). Furthermore, because of the circumstances and deprivation in which these individuals face, he concludes that low-income individuals are pathologically defunct, criminal, and violent (Lewis, 1959). Sharon Hays provides further explanation about what this culture of poverty implies. She believes that according to this theory, the poor remain poor because they participate in a culture that has deviant values and practices (Hays 2003). In addition, she also interprets that the culture of poverty is thus cyclical and hardships such as low income, insubstantial living conditions, and lack of employment are passed down through generations (Hays 2003). What Lewis offers about the impoverished population has been adapted and circulated by other academics (Moynihan 1965; Harrington 1962), the public, and government officials who present a bias towards poor people.

Hays brings to point how the culture of poverty is intimately tied to ideas about individuals who live in segregated, inner cities which are areas with a large proportion of Black people (Hays 2003). She, along with other theorists, explore how racist notions that consider Black people as morally, socially, and economically inferior position Black people as most condemned by these notions of the culture of poverty (Hays 2003; Jones and Ye Luo 1999; Feagin and Vera 1995; Cazenave and Neubeck 2001). Attitudes about the pathology of Black people stem from anti-Black racism that dates back to the transatlantic slave trade that used ideas about the culture, physicality, and morality of African people to justify their commodification (Roberts 1997). As a result, anti-Black racism has integrated itself into the American culture and value system and these notions about the inferiority of Black people have been institutionalized and used to justify their marginalization. Furthermore, because poverty is tainted with these

racialized conceptions, so are ideas about welfare and the welfare system (Hill Collins 1990; Hancock 2004; Quadagno 1994; Gilens 1999; Casenave and Nuebeck 2001). While the culture of poverty highlights the racialized connotations of poverty, dependency theory helps to underscore the gendered connotations, and even more the intersection of the racialized and gendered associations with poverty.

### *Dependency Theory*

Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1994) theorize on dependency and how this term, within the context of the American system, is connected to very specific meanings that are laced with ideas about class, race, and gender. The term “dependency” is often used to refer to poor single mothers who rely on programs such as TANF to provide for her family. Much like the culture of poverty, dependency is seen as a result of moral and psychological flaws rather than as a result of economic hardships (Fraser and Gordon 1994). In addition, dependency became highly related to femininity; women have been defined as “co-dependent,” “afraid of independence,” and at times, even diagnosed with “Dependent Personality Disorder,” each factors that further stigmatized women’s dependency on government aid (Fraser and Gordon 1994).

This feminization of dependency, when layered with race, most stigmatizes Black women who had become the prime representative of dependency discourse by the 1970s (Fraser and Gordon 1994). Originally, Black women were identified as overly independent, a value that was in total opposition to notions of white womanhood that involved the reliance of women on men (Hill Collins 1990). Most famously, Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the *Moynihan Report* (Moynihan 1965) manipulated this belief of Black women and their dominance to assert that

“‘matriarchal’ families had ‘emasculated’ Black men and created a ‘culture of poverty’ based on a ‘tangle of [family] pathology’” (Moynihan 1965). By the 1980s, however, this image of the Black woman as the dominant matriarch was replaced by the image of a passive, lazy, and pathological young single Black mother, otherwise known as the welfare queen (Gordon and Fraser 1994; Hill Collins 1990). As a result, unwed, young, Black mothers became the personification of dependency (Gordon and Fraser 1994). What I have expressed via the culture of poverty and theories about dependency that highlight the pathology of poor individuals becomes the justification for institutions such as the welfare system to manage the behaviors of the poor.

### ***Managing the Poor***

Forrest Stuart defines “poverty governance” as the “supervision, regulation, and integration of impoverished populations into civil society and the market.” (Stuart 2016, 7). Poverty governance takes place through institutions such as the police force (Stuart 2016), prisons (McCorkel 2013; Kohler-Hausmann 2017), and rehabilitative services (McKim 2017), to name a few. With the rise of neoliberal logic and the principles of de-regulation and punishment that replaced the Keynesian principles of government intervention and rehabilitation, this management of the poor now consist of stigma, surveillance, economic disenfranchisement, isolation, and deprivation (Wacquant 2009; Stuart 2016; Roberts 2014). Furthermore, Loic Wacquant (2009) argues that the welfare system is also a site in which this regulation of the poor takes place. He offers that neoliberalism, which involves punitive governance, regulates and creates marginality via social and punitive policies (Wacquant 2009). Wacquant also offers that race becomes an important component within the state’s implementation of neoliberal logics

(Wacquant 2009). Dorothy Roberts, however, challenges Wacquant's theory about the interactions between race, class, and the state by suggesting an intersectional lens that shows that gender is also intrinsic to this interaction (Roberts 2014). For her, welfare retrenchment that was the result of a war against Black womanhood, and more specifically, the "welfare queen," is what legitimized the regulation of Black women (Roberts 2014). As a result, the welfare system became a "critical institution of social supervision" for Black women (Roberts 2014, 1778). In addition to what Roberts offers about Black women in the welfare system, several feminist welfare scholars also show the variety of ways in which women are managed via the welfare system.

### ***Women and the System***

Sharon Hays (1998) positions the origins of welfare as gendered. She contends that during the early 20th century, welfare became a way in which mothers and their children could survive when breadwinning male figures were absent for reasons of illness, death, or war deployment (Hays 1998). With this in mind, mother's pensions, which were championed by progressive women activist, not only became one of the original welfare programs in the United States but also helped to institute a gendered idealization of the welfare state (Hays 1998). Furthermore, in line with Hays's perspective about the gendered orientation of the welfare regime, scholars have theorized on how this manifest in the lives of women welfare recipients.

Some scholars have suggested that the central aim of welfare policies and the U.S. welfare regime is to encourage the nuclear family, a structure that relies on male wages and female domestic service (Fraser 1994). In a similar manner, other scholars further this notion by suggesting that welfare policies demand the dependency of women on men by punishing women



who do not adhere to the structure of the nuclear family (Gordon 1990; Fraser 1994). Other scholarship includes how the welfare system shapes labor markets in gendered ways (Riemer 2001; Sainsbury 1996), enforces a patriarchal and racialized social order (Brown 1999; Wacquant 2009), provides a moral expectation for women and womanhood (Roberts 1997), and denies women of full citizenship (Orloff 1993; Mink 1995). Given the breadth of literature that works to examine the impact of welfare in the lives of women, what follows are the theories and studies that most pertain to my own research.

Gwendolyn Mink in *Welfare's End* (1995) offers a critical analysis of the welfare system and the implications set forth by the 1996 welfare reform. She refers to the history of the welfare system and the origins of mother's pensions to further her argument that the current welfare system has only worked against women rather than assisting them in the ways intended (Mink 1995). She shows how the mother's pension system importantly recognized that women who had children and lacked either a husband or other financial means such as labor participation were in need of financial assistance; however, she conveys, the 1996 welfare reform has inscribed a moral regime, removed entitlement to benefits, infringed on the 13th amendment, and most importantly for her, denied mothers of their right to motherhood, caregiving, and financial stability, elements that she believes are vital to citizenship in the United States (Mink 1995).

Emerging from a similar tradition, Sharon Hays (1996) further explores the implications set forth by the 1996 welfare reform as she centers the narratives and experiences of women welfare recipients (Hays 1996). Hays centers citizenship and rights, similar to Mink, however, where Hays proves different is with her focus on the welfare system's moral proscriptions. Hays argues that the welfare system centers morals about "work and family, dependence and

independence, and competitive individualism and commitment to others” (Hays 1996, 28). In this sense, she suggests that PWRORA is not only a tool to manage the poor, but is also “a social experiment in legislating family values and work ethic” (Hays 1996, 10). For Hays, the work requirements that PRWORA sets forth also enforces the nuclear family value by deterring women from single motherhood via the threat of welfare dependency (Hays 1996). Hays highlights that this dynamic forces women to not only embrace the nation’s values but requires of them to manage “the push toward work and self-sufficiency and the pull toward home and the care of one's family” (Hays 1996, 53). Though feminist scholarship gives insight into the experiences of women in the welfare system, it is imperative to discuss how race changes this experience (Roberts 1997; hooks 1992; Hill Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991).

#### *The Intersection of Race and Gender in the Welfare System*

Black citizenship throughout United States history has been challenged. Ronald Takaki (1982) and Cornel West (1994), two scholars of race, propose that under white supremacy, it becomes important to deem Black people as unfit and without self-control, two traits that are central to the American value of self-governance. Further, George Fredrickson (1998) concludes that because Black people represent a degenerative race, there is no need to prepare them for citizenship but instead should segregate and isolate them because they pose “social danger” to white citizens. The welfare system is one institution in which these ideas about Black people’s inferiority is represented. Scholars such as Trattner (1999) and Quadango (1994) explore how the during the mid 20th century, Black people were intentionally barred from New Deal programs as a means to discourage their vouch for citizenship; Gilens (1999) discusses how racialized notions about welfare are disseminated through the media and other mediums and creates public hostility

towards Black welfare recipients; Brown (1999) discusses how President Johnson's fiscal conservatism motivated the creation of race-targeted programs. These conceptions and histories about race and the welfare system, however, take a gender blind stance that does not consider how both gender and race create unique experiences for Black women (Roberts 1997; hooks 1992; Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991).

Because of both white supremacy and patriarchy Black women have existed on the deviant side of social & political dichotomies which has warranted unequal & unfair treatment towards Black women (Hill Collins 1990). One of the most notable institutions of oppression for Black women lies within the welfare system where, since the 1960s, they have been most burdened by welfare policy provisions (Nadasen 2005). As Black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins, unpacks the stereotypical images of Black womanhood that were created by the white patriarchal system and used to maintain power over Black women, she describes the welfare queen or welfare mother, a single low-income Black mother who shuns work and exploits welfare benefits for her own personal needs (Hill Collins 1990). Classified as the cause of her own poverty, the welfare mother is not dependent on men nor has a male figure in her household, but continues to birth children, a reflection of her haphazard sexuality. Even worse, she passes her moral corruption to her offspring (Hill Collins 1990).

Ange-Marie Hancock's *Politics of Disgust* (2014) furthers how the welfare queen image has been used by policymakers to diminish Black women's citizenship and rights. Hancock argues that Black women's identities have been subject to the "perception, interpretation, and manipulation" enacted by those who wield power (Hancock 2004, 3). Unlike what Hill Collins offers that speaks more broadly about power and control, Hancock points to how the welfare

queen identity is utilized by the American political system to further and justify the policies of the 1996 welfare reform. Lastly, Hancock reminds that the ideology of the welfare queen endures even outside of the political and social context in which it is created because “public identity endures over generations and impoverishes the potential for empowered participation by citizens saddled with such identities” (Hancock 2004, 4).

Unlike Hill Collins and Hancock who place Black women welfare recipients in tension with white patriarchy and supremacy, Mink places the conditions of Black womanhood in tension with white womanhood to showcase the importance of considering how multiple identities affect women’s positionalities within the welfare system. Mink (1995) argues that the second- wave feminist movement compromised the rights of low-income women and women of color through their vouch for inclusion in the labor market. While white middle-class women were able to enter into the market as a means for financial independence, Black women and other women of color were forced to manage responsibilities both inside and outside of the home and were subject to oppressive low wage work (Mink 1995). Here she highlights that white middle-class feminist values override and silences the concerns of Black women (Mink 1995).

Review of the current literature on welfare suggests that Black women’s experiences with the welfare system are conditioned by the U.S.’s respective histories of classism, racism, and sexism that have seeped into the institution of welfare and have influenced the ways in which policies are created and administered. Therefore, given the strenuous conditions in which class, gender, and race provide respectively, this review underscores the importance of an intersectional approach in studies about the welfare system. Coined “intersectionality” by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), the “matrix of domination” or “interlocking systems of oppression” by Dorothy Roberts

(2001), and studied by other Black feminist such as bell hooks (1992), an intersectional approach considers how several layers of identities that include, but are not limited to race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity stratify the experiences of inequality and oppression. Consequently, when this expansive approach is not used, it renders invisible entire groups and their unique experiences (hooks 1992; Roberts 1997; Hill Collins 1990). Though some feminist welfare studies and race-centered welfare studies note the unique conditions of Black women within the welfare system, my study is unique in that it wholly centers Black women welfare recipients and treats them as “agents of knowledge” by using the accounts that they relay as evidence of their circumstances (Hill Collins 1990, 221).

### ***Methodology***

To accurately and appropriately understand the experiences of Black women welfare recipients, I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with six women who identify as Black or African American, live in the metro-Atlanta area, and at some point in the past ten years, have been a recipient of welfare assistance.<sup>3</sup> I conducted four of the interviews in person and two over the phone.<sup>4</sup> Because I wanted to unfold the life stories of my participants, sociologists K. Gerson and R. Horowitz (2002) believe that in-depth interviews prove the most accurate and appropriate research method. They contend that interviews provide “the opportunity to examine how large-scale social transformations are experienced, interpreted, and ultimately shaped by the responses of strategic social actors”; this is precisely what I sought to do with my

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<sup>3</sup> As a young, Black, college educated woman with a lower middle class background, I understand how my identity could influence my participants and the ways in which they attempt to relate to or other me based on this identity. I also understand how my identity could influence what they conveyed to me throughout their interviews, but I took all necessary measures to alleviate any factors that could persuade them to not give true and accurate depictions of their circumstances.

<sup>4</sup> See appendix for interview questions.

research (Gerson and Horowitz 2002, 201). To recruit participants, I used two main recruiting strategies: recruitment through a local organization that serves low-income women and snowballing from my personal networks. The organization that I use, which I call *United Victory Fellowship* is a church and community organization that provides services such as bible study, youth summer camp, a therapeutic counseling center, and what was most important for me, a weekly food pantry. In addition, as I am a resident of Atlanta that has a network that includes welfare recipients, I was able to rely on my personal connections to also recruit participants for my study.

Initially, I intended to only focus on recipients of Temporary Aid For Needy Families (TANF), Food Stamps (SNAP), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) because they are each needs-based services that require a certain income level for eligibility which would serve as a way for me to focus on only low-income individuals; however, my recruitment was constrained when I focused on only these programs which I later realized were not representative of the most popular benefits within the current welfare system, and more specifically, in Atlanta. Therefore, I expanded my research to include recipients who receive welfare assistance from any state-funded welfare program. As a result, the programs that are represented in my study include: Medicaid, a program that provides health coverage for low income individuals and families (Georgia Department of Community Health); WIC, which provides supplemental food and health care referrals for pregnant and postpartum women and babies less than five (Georgia Department of Public Health); TANF, which provides time limited income assistance to ensure the basic needs

for families with children (Georgia Division of Family and Children Services); Disability,<sup>5</sup> which provides support for disabled individuals (Social Security Administration); Social Security, a program that uses income tax dollars to assist retired elderly citizens, disabled workers, or individuals with a deceased parent or spouse that formerly participated in the labor force (Social Security Administration); Unemployment, which provides temporary cash assistance for individuals who are out of work due to no fault of their own (Georgia Department of Labor); and Food Stamps, which provides an allotted amount of funds for low-income individuals to use towards food for themselves and their families (Georgia Division of Family and Children Services).

Additionally, amongst the programs in which my participants participated, both means-tested programs and entitlement programs are represented. The inclusion of both of these types of programs resulted in the variation of socio-economic backgrounds, ages, marital statuses, and motherhood statuses which ultimately provided a more expansive look at the experiences of Black women welfare recipients. Lastly, to make a comparative analysis between the experiences of the participants in my study and Black women welfare recipients in the past, I limited the time frame of reciprocity to ten years. Two of my participants, however, also referred to their experiences outside of this time frame, but what they convey about their past experiences influences their current perceptions of the welfare system.

The second major component of my research positions my study in a particular locale,

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<sup>5</sup> There are two types of programs to assist disabled individuals. The Social Security Insurance Program (SSI) is a mean-tested program for individuals who have never been employed or do not meet a minimum number of work credits. This program is not the same as the Social Security Disability Program (SSDI) which is a social insurance program that provides disability benefits for individuals who have worked for a certain number of years and have made contributions to the social security trust fund (Social Security Administration). My study has recipients that receive benefits from both of these programs.

Atlanta, Georgia. First, Atlanta is an urban city with one of the largest populations of African Americans. The 2010 census reports that of the 486,000 people that live in the city, 52.4% of the population is Black or African American (United States Census Bureau 2010). In addition, Atlanta also stands out as particularly poverty-stricken; as of 2018, Georgia's poverty rate was the 10th worst in the country (Center for American Progress 2018). The 2010 census shows that 24% of the population in Georgia, primarily concentrated in the urban Metro Atlanta area, lives in poverty with a median household income of \$49,398; of those in poverty, 24.8% are African American (United States Census Bureau 2010). The number of poor people who receive social benefits such as unemployment insurance, affordable housing, and health insurance in Georgia is also low when compared on a national level (Center for American Progress 2018). Given this demographic information, I feel that my study will be positioned in a landscape that provides a useful background for what my study explores.

### ***Outline of Chapters***

While in this current chapter I reviewed the literature on the welfare system and discussed my methodological approach, in the second chapter, I provide more context about the current state of welfare in the United States and Atlanta, Georgia. This information includes a layout of Georgia specific programs, ranks of the most popular welfare programs, and context about the institutions that administer these programs to provide the background that helps to better position the experiences of my recipients. I then unpack my cases and show the experiences of my participants through four categorizations: the reasons why they sought assistance, their overall interactions with the welfare system, their experiences with stigma, and their modes of survival. I find that my participants' experiences are dependent upon their



backgrounds of financial stability and their adherence to the traditional family wage frameworks.

In my third chapter, I outline how my participants interpret their experiences which I argue can be seen through whom or what they place blame on for their circumstances. These interpretations, furthermore, highlight their value and belief systems that condition how they view themselves and the welfare system. I find that their interpretations are also dependent upon their financial background and adherence to the family wage standard. Finally, in my fourth chapter, I explore how my interviewees conceptualize themselves based on their experiences and their interpretations of their experiences. I argue that they express this through what I term a *politics of distance* in which they conceptualize and create a distinction between themselves and other recipients who they believe are undeserving of welfare benefits in order to construct themselves as closer to the ideal American citizen. Through this chapter, I am able to see how the myth of the welfare queen still remains, and in fact, is maintained by these Black women themselves.

## 2

### Mapping the Scene

*“We just suffer.”*

I sit in front of Angie, a 32-year-old Black woman as she shakes her head in disappointment and rubs her expecting belly throughout her interview. Soon, Angie will give birth to her fourth child but she is noticeably weary when I talk to her about her pregnancy. Given her experiences with financial instability and her interactions with the welfare system, she tells me her thoughts about how much more difficult her circumstances will become as she tries to provide for herself and her children as an unemployed, single mother.

Angie first entered the welfare system when she had her first child at the age of 22. Angie, who had earned her high school diploma but did not attend college, went straight into the labor force upon graduation, but when she learned of her son’s diagnosis of autism, she could no longer work because she had to care for her child. Angie very soon had two more children, but because her financial circumstances were so strained, she had to place her second child under the care of a family member. Still, Angie desperately needed assistance to care for her family. While she has, at some point in the past 10 years, been able to secure Food Stamps, TANF, Medicaid, and WIC benefits, she did not do so without a battle with the welfare system; she has endured intense and lengthy processes, long lines, and never-ending waiting list, and despite these circumstances, she still faces the constant threat of eviction, lack of basic utilities, and low monetary resources to fulfill her other needs. “We just suffer,” she says, a statement that captures

what for Angie depicts what it means to be a Black single mother who receives welfare benefits in Atlanta in 2018.

This chapter lays out each of the cases in my study to show how my interviewees experience the welfare system. I first explain the landscape of the welfare system in the United States and Atlanta to provide demographic context for their experiences. I then explore each of their individual cases using four categories to measure and compare their experiences. I argue that my participants' experiences are patterned in ways that show how the factors of financial stability prior to their entrance into the welfare system, in addition to their adherence to or denial of the “family-wage standard” as defined by Nancy Fraser, stratifies their experiences into two types of recipients, the *short-run recipient* and the *marathon recipient*, and in addition, stratifies their experiences into a three tier hierarchy.

### ***On the State of Welfare***

*“Trump doesn't know what it is to be poor. He don't know how these people are living. He don't care. Look at how he cut off the government and stuff, ya know? How those people gonna feed their family?”*

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2015, at least 21.3% of the U.S. population participated in a means-tested government assistance program each month (U.S. Census Bureau). Means-tested programs or public assistance, refers to benefits that are specifically for people who fall within a particular income bracket and are considered in need of financial assistance; Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP or Food Stamps), and Section 8 housing supports are each examples of the most widely known public assistance programs (Katz 1996; Trattner 1999). Additionally, means-tested programs are usually what the public refers to when they speak about welfare benefits, and as a

result, are usually the programs at the center of debates about welfare assistance (Magoon 2009; Gilens 1999). The other major category of government assistance includes social insurance programs; about 23.8% of the population participates in one or more of these programs that are dependent on criteria such as age, disability, or unemployment (Tanner 1999). Individuals who benefit from income supplements provided by social insurance programs are usually those who have contributed to the labor market and are entitled to this assistance as compensation for their contributions (Katz 1996). Social Security, Disability, and Unemployment are each examples of social insurance programs. Furthermore, this split between the types of welfare programs is laced with gendered ideas that not only influence who receives which benefits, but also influences what is thought of the recipients who benefit from one group of assistance rather than the other.

The maintenance of heterosexual families with a male breadwinner at the head of the household is deeply inscribed into the United States welfare regime and thus attributed to the creation of a gendered welfare system (Fraser 1994). This gendered order and ideas about family wage that confines women to the private sphere and men to the public sphere is what Fraser terms the “family-wage standard.” As a result, this separation influenced a three-tier welfare system. The top tier includes social insurance programs that were to protect families who had male breadwinners who could no longer participate in the labor market due to illness, disability, unemployment, or old age (Fraser 1994). The second tier, though more common in countries other than the U.S., includes programs that provide direct support to women who are full-time homemakers. The third tier includes limited and stigmatized means-tested programs for those who do not fulfill the family-wage standard (Fraser 1994). This three-tier system remains present within our current welfare regime, however, it is extremely outdated with current conditions and

further complicates the welfare system for families that are becoming more and more unlike the ideal nuclear family. Conditions such as the inability to provide for a family with only one income source, the rise in the employment of women, high divorce rates, and homosexual partnerships that create new familial arrangements trivialize the family-wage standard and creates a “welfare crisis” because the system is unfit to handle the consequences of a less stable economy and more differentiation amongst families (Fraser 1994). As a result, not only are citizens not supported by the welfare system in the most adequate manner, but individuals who fall outside of this familial and labor order continue to face constrained and stigmatizing circumstances. As my study will later show, this becomes a very important consideration for my participants’ experiences.

### ***“Welcome to the A”: Mapping the Welfare Scene in Atlanta***

“Stronger Families for a Stronger Georgia” reads the tagline of the Georgia Department of Human Services, one of the main offices that administers public assistance programs in Georgia (Georgia Department of Human Services). The main welfare programs in Georgia include TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, Low Income Home Energy Assistance, Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Social Security Insurance (SSI), Housing, the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), School Meal Programs, Subsidized Child Care, PeachCare for Kids<sup>6</sup> & Cash Grants, each of these programs costing at least \$20 million every year (Georgia Center for Opportunity 2019). In Atlanta, 22.4% of the population lives below the

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<sup>6</sup> As mandated via Title XXI of the Social Security Act to provide healthcare for uninsured children in the U.S., Georgia created the PeachCare for Kids Program to provide healthcare for children under the age of 18 who do not qualify for Medicaid (Georgia Department of Human Services 2019).

national poverty line<sup>7</sup> and is mostly comprised of African Americans and women between the ages of 25-34 (Center for American Progress 2018). Despite the high rate of poverty in Georgia, the state spends only 6.19% of its funds on assistance programs which, compared nationally, is one of the the lowest rates of state spending for government assistance programs (Center for American Progress 2018).

While most of the programs are administered by state and local government agencies such as the Georgia Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), Georgia's private sector also plays a role in the distribution of aid for individuals and families in need; churches, community organizations, and non-profit organizations provide resources such as food, clothing, and educational services to low-income families, and the resources they provide fill in the gaps that are left by the formal welfare system. By the 1990's, the decline and retrenchment of welfare benefits caused a surge in public and private emergency food banks, clothing centers, and shelters across the country (Schram 1995). For example, with the reduction of Food Stamp benefits, food insecurity became a major issue that resulted in a surge in food banks and soup kitchens (Schram 1995). Termed the "privatization of public assistance," these substitute services became publicly funded while privately administered and owned by private organizations, churches, and corporations (Schram 1995). I witness this intermingling between public government assistance and private institutions up close because I recruited some of my participants from a local church and community center.

United Victory Fellowship is a small church in the Southern region of Atlanta with a congregation of about 30 people. In addition to the church's religious programs which includes

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<sup>7</sup> For a family of 4, the poverty line constitutes a combined income of \$25,750 per year or less (Census Bureau).

Sunday services, a children's ministry & bible study, United Victory also acts as a community center that provides child care, adult classes, a women's group, and the most popular service, the Wednesday evening food pantry. United Victory is an administrator of the Federal Emergency Food Assistance Program which in Georgia is named Georgia Nutritional Assistance Program or GNAP (Atlanta Community Food Bank 2014). Under this program, the Georgia General Assembly gives grants to food banks around Georgia to purchase food that is then distributed to food pantries, child care centers, shelters, after-school programs, and group homes that service a large percentage of needy children and families (Atlanta Community Food Bank 2014). To be eligible to receive food items such as canned vegetables or frozen produce from these pantries, recipients must have a child under the age of 17 in the household and in addition, receive assistance from either TANF, Food Stamps, Public Housing, WIC, Medicaid, Peachcare, free or reduced school lunch or minimum wage (Atlanta Community Food Bank 2014). The pantry must then submit a monthly report that documents each person who receives food via their services in order to keep their eligibility as a food pantry. In what follows, I will provide an in-depth breakdown of the experiences of the women I recruited from both United Victory and my own personal network.

### ***Unpacking the Cases***

Ranging from the age of 32 - 73, the 6 Black women I interviewed, Daphne, Angie, Veronica, Toya, Dorinda, and Nora, are each residents of the Metro Atlanta area who either currently receive some form of welfare assistance or have received some form of assistance in the past 10 years. In Toya and Nora's case, however, though they do currently receive government assistance, in their interviews they also refer to their past experiences with the

welfare system.<sup>8</sup> Each of the interviewees in my study are mothers with children ranging from age 11 to adulthood, and all except for Toya and Veronica are unemployed for reasons that include disability, inability to secure employment, or, in one case, lack of viable and affordable child care options for a disabled child. Additionally, most of the women in my study are single except for Veronica who is married and Nora who lives with her long term partner. Lastly, in terms of benefits, the group has collectively received assistance from both means-tested and social insurance programs and have participated in at least two or more programs at one time; these programs include Medicaid, WIC, Temporary Aid for Needy Families, TANF, Disability, Social Security, Unemployment, and /or Food Stamps.

In my analysis, I use four categories to capture my participants experiences: the reasons why they sought assistance, their overall interactions with the welfare system that includes their interactions with welfare administrators, the process to apply and maintain benefits, and the sufficiency of their benefits, their experiences with stigma, and their modes of survival. Literature about women and the welfare state describes conditions in which women face such as degrading treatment from welfare system personnel, stigma from the public, difficult application processes, and insufficient benefits that require survival tactics to make ends meet (Mink 1998; Henrici 2006; Hays 2004). Therefore, with the intention to capture the similarities and differences between the experiences of Black women welfare recipients immediately after the 1996 welfare reform and the women within my study, I adapted these conditions as units of measurement to make this comparative analysis.

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<sup>8</sup> Though my study intentionally highlights a ten year time period, the women who refer to their experiences with benefits outside of this time period still receive benefits today which, rather than compromising my study, lends to my comparison of how welfare benefits have changed or remained the same over the years.



First, I found that my interviewees' sought welfare assistance for either one of three reasons: disability, job loss, or previous history of financial instability. Secondly, in terms of my participants' overall interactions with the system, I used a scale of either positive, neutral, or negative to operationalize their encounters. Most of my interviewees indicate either a neutral or negative interaction that is influenced by either experiences with lengthy and difficult application processes, demeaning and detached treatment from welfare officials, or insufficient benefits. I also categorize based on my interviewees' feelings of stigma which my participants indicate as either non-existent, felt from welfare workers and administrators, or sensed from society at large. Finally, for the last category, my participants indicate that they either rely on food banks and pantries, have to outsmart the system, or rely on familial support networks as a means for survival. Overall, via my participants' experiences, I conclude that my participants are either one of two types of welfare recipients: one that I term the *short-range recipient* and the other, the *marathon recipient*.

The *short-range recipient* is an individual whose entrance into the welfare system is conditioned by sudden and unforeseen circumstances such as disability or job layoffs. In this case, up until their entrance into the welfare system, these individuals were able to provide a stable living for themselves and their families without welfare assistance. This is not to say that these individuals are necessarily of a higher social class than the marathon recipients, though this is oftentimes the case, nor is it to say that these individuals do not experience financial strains; instead, I want to convey that because of circumstances such as constant and long term labor market participation or multiple sources of income, these recipients were more or less able to make ends meet, but when they run into financial emergencies, they need assistance. In some

cases, with the exclusion of a few unique circumstances<sup>9</sup>, the short-range recipient is able to exit the welfare system.

Alternatively, the *marathon recipient* classifies those who have been a recipient of some form of welfare for a significant amount of time which in this case, I classify as about 10 or more years. Therefore, because marathon recipients usually come from a background of generational poverty where at times they benefited from welfare assistance when they were children, marathon recipients are more financially vulnerable than their counterparts and thus have a longer and more reliant relationship with welfare benefits. This classification, however, does not presume that each marathon recipient is extremely poor nor does it suggest that marathon recipients never experience any form of social mobility. For example, some marathon recipients may face extreme poverty which causes deep reliance on the system to the point in which they need assistance from many benefits to survive, while others, who have higher levels of financial stability, may still rely on at least one form of welfare assistance to fill their financial gaps. The point here is that both have been unable to fully escape the welfare system.

Further, while the short-range recipients prove vulnerable to unforeseen disruptions such as unexpected unemployment and disability, the marathon recipient's vulnerability to these same conditions are two-fold. In this case, circumstances such as childbirth and child rendering do not just provide financial strains, but moreover, become huge burdens that require financial assistance from the government in order to manage. Overall, each of the categories I use to capture my participants' experiences leads to this classification of the types of welfare recipients.

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<sup>9</sup> The exception to this are elderly and retired individuals who receive Social Security which they are able to receive throughout the remainder of their lives and individuals who suffer from permanent and severe disabilities who are able to receive Disability assistance as long as they are disabled. Their long term interaction with the welfare system does not fall within what I contend with this classification.

### ***Reasons for Applying***

*“I needed to take care of my family. I knew we weren’t going to be able to afford groceries since I didn’t have the job any more so it was something that I had to do. I didn’t have a choice.”*

As mentioned, the reasons why my interviewees applied for welfare benefits were motivated by either job loss, disability, or a prior history of financial instability. First, Daphne, a 65-year-old single woman with 1 adult child, decided to apply for welfare benefits immediately after she was laid off from her permanent job. “Before then I was making enough money to have grocery money. I had a full-time job and my income fulfilled my necessities,” Daphne informs me. Though Daphne was eventually hired for a part-time position, she faced a significant wage decrease where she made only \$200 a month which is about 25% of the monthly income of someone who earns the Georgia minimum wage of \$5.15/ hour (United States Census Bureau). Though Daphne only provides for herself, \$200 a month was still not enough to pay rent for her one bedroom apartment on the Southside of Atlanta, nor was it sufficient enough to pay for utilities, food, and personal items. “I needed something to supplement my income,” she advised, therefore, via food stamps, she hoped to alleviate some of her financial burdens. Eventually, when Daphne, who is now retired, turned 62, she was also able to receive Social Security benefits; however, upon her withdrawal of Social Security, the amount of food stamps she received was lessened.

Similar to Daphne, 46-year-old Veronica was also laid off from her job and applied for food stamps, but unlike Daphne, Veronica was the mother of four young children. Dependent on solely her husband’s income, Veronica “knew [she wasn’t] going to be able to afford groceries,” and she needed to find a way to feed her family. She says that when she applied for food stamps,

she knew that it “was something that [she] had to do.” Veronica went through the application process and was able to prove her eligibility to receive food stamps. In addition to food stamps, Veronica also filed for unemployment and received a weekly unemployment check. Upon her eventual employment, Veronica was no longer eligible for welfare benefits.

While Daphne and Veronica pursued welfare benefits because of financial emergencies that were a result of job loss, 67 year old Dorinda also encountered an unforeseen financial emergency that caused her to seek welfare assistance- “I was 50 when I went on disability,” she explains, “I had back problems...and I had had two operations on both of my hands. I worked with my hands and that’s why [I had to apply for disability].”<sup>10</sup> Unable to work because of her medical issues, Dorinda could no longer gain income so she applied to receive Disability benefits which automatically made her eligible to receive Medicaid. Dorinda also receives Food Stamps, and when she turned 62, Social Security.

I classify each Daphne, Veronica, and Dorinda as short-range recipients. First, as the short-range classification describes, up until abrupt and unforeseen financial disruptions, each of these women indicate that they were able to provide for their families and raise their children without welfare assistance. For example, Veronica, who is the only married woman of the group, has the benefit of two incomes, while Daphne had always received income from two jobs. Likewise, Dorinda also notes that “[she] always worked and... made good money when [she] worked,” therefore, she never had to rely on welfare benefits to provide for her three children. Upon their respective encounters with a financial disruption, Daphne, Veronica, and Dorinda had to obtain welfare benefits to continue to support themselves and their families. Lastly, in line

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<sup>10</sup> The Disability program that Daphne receives benefits from the entitlement program, SSDI.

with what I describe as the short-run recipients' usually temporary need for welfare benefits, Veronica is an example of a short-run recipient who no longer has to rely on welfare assistance; Veronica's re-employment resulted in her loss of eligibility for Food Stamps and Unemployment benefits, an indication that her income surpassed the maximum income threshold for these benefits. Veronica's circumstances stand in complete opposition to the conditions of Angie and Toya whom I classify as marathon recipients.

First, Angie and Toya were both exposed to the welfare system when they were young children. In Angie's case, Angie's aunt, who was the parental guardian of Angie and her siblings, received welfare assistance to help care for her nieces and nephews when they were children. Similarly, when I asked Toya how she learned about welfare assistance and why she decided to sign up for benefits, she responds-

“I mean coming from the hood everyone was on [welfare]. My mom was on it, but I didn't know it until I got of age when she started sending me to the store with food stamps. Like everyone in my neighborhood was on it....I hate to say it, but it was a way of life. So that's how I knew about it.”

Angie describes her interactions with poverty as familial and intergenerational, a circumstance that is common for individuals who grow up in financially unstable families where it is almost impossible to escape these conditions; poverty, in this sense, is literally passed down from generation to generation (Roberts 1997; Moynihan 1981).

Angie also describes how welfare was “a way of life” in her community which suggests that the conditions of the immediate environment in which she was raised is also a factor that informs her continual interactions with poverty and financial instability. Similarly, Angie also grows up in what Toya calls “the hood,” or what academics term “the urban ghetto” (Whitehead

2000) or “the American ghetto” (Cutler et. al 1997) to describe this isolated and segregated low-income, majority African-American, urban community that exist in cities throughout the United States. Within these communities, systematic racism and segregation, lack of localized jobs, and lack of investment into the community contribute to extreme rates of often, inescapable poverty (Vergara 1995). In this regard, from the time they were children, Angie and Toya have battled cycles of financial instability that have made upward financial mobility severely difficult to achieve. In accordance to the marathon recipient typology, on top of their experiences with welfare as children, as adults, both Toya and Angie have received some form of welfare assistance for the past 10 years.

I introduced Angie, the 32-year-old single mother of what is to soon to be four children, at the beginning of this chapter. Angie was initially pushed into the welfare system when she had her first child; her financial vulnerability was gravely exacerbated when her son was diagnosed with autism because to care for her son meant she could not work. This unfortunate position highlights the push and pull between the home and work that are a result of women’s vouch for entrance into the public sphere (Mink 1995; Hays 1996). As a result, over the span of the past 10 years, Angie has received Food Stamps, TANF, Medicaid, WIC, and Disability<sup>11</sup> benefits to care for her family. Similar to Angie, Toya was also pushed into the welfare system upon the birth of her first child, but unlike Angie, Toya became a teenage mother at the age of 15. Without a high school diploma, high paying job, nor financial assistance from her family to help raise her child, she sought the help of the welfare system in the same manner in which she saw her mother and community members do to provide for their own families. Moreover, as she raised her two

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<sup>11</sup> The Disability program referred to her is the means tested disability program, SSI.

children, she has at some point over the past 10 years received what she calls “the full package” which includes Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the program that is now TANF, Food Stamps, and WIC. Even today, though her children are now young adults, she still receives Food Stamps benefits.

Angie and Toya were both extremely financially vulnerable before they entered into the welfare system, and as a result of the financial burdens in which children provide, they are deeply reliant on welfare assistance as a means to take care of their families. Notably, Toya and Angie’s circumstances as marathon recipients looks very different from those of short-run recipients such as Veronica whom despite mothering four children, was able to survive without welfare assistance up until her financial emergency. This comparison underscores the importance of a serious consideration of the background circumstances of individuals as a notable factor that informs cyclical, and perhaps, unpreventable poverty. This becomes an important factor throughout the remainder of this study.

The final participant in my study, Nora, is an outlier within this classification of short-run and marathon recipients. Nora is currently 75 years old and has three adult children who she conceived with her ex-husband prior to her current long-term partnership. When she had her first child in her mid-20s, both Nora and her husband were unemployed; she notes that when she gave birth, because “no one was working...bills had to be paid and [they] had to eat,” she decided to apply for welfare assistance. She eventually received what she also termed the “full package” which at the time included Food Stamps, WIC & AFDC. Eventually, though both she and her husband began to work, she still received welfare assistance; however, when she and her

husband divorced, he became the primary guardian for her children which made her ineligible for welfare benefits. Currently, Nora only benefits from Social Security.

Unlike the other recipients, Nora's experience does not align with either the short-run recipients category nor the marathon recipients category because of two important conditions: first, besides her indication of both her and her husband's unemployment, she does not give a clear indication of either financial struggle nor financial stability prior to her entrance into the welfare system; secondly, since Nora's husband gains custody of her children, and as a result, causes the termination of her benefits, this concurrently removes any indication that her reciprocity would have been long term or short lived. Overall, because of these two factors, I can not place Nora within a particular welfare recipient group which I believe simply highlights her status as an outlier within this category; however, this is not always the case for Nora as her experiences prove relevant within other patterns. Overall, from what is indicated via this category, I find that the reasons why these women enter the welfare system and the two different types of welfare recipients that are informed by these circumstances particularly connects and even more, influences the participants' overall interactions with the welfare system.

### ***Interactions with the System***

*“[Visiting the welfare office] was like going to the DMV. You would go to the office. You were assigned a caseworker. You had to wait. You had to fill out paperwork. Give up all your information. List the father. You had to do all of that. It was an all-day thing. When you knew you had to go to the welfare office, you knew you were gonna be there all day.”*

Within this categorization, I operationalize my interviewees' overall interactions with the welfare system via a scale that indicates an overall positive, neutral, or negative experience. This scale collectively measures the recipients' interactions with the system's processes and



procedures, interactions with welfare office administrators and personnel, and the sufficiency of their benefits. Of the responses, the participants indicate either an overall neutral or overall negative experience with the welfare system. Through what the interviewees expose about their backgrounds in the previous section in connection with their respective interactions with the welfare system, it becomes clear that these categories are correlated. As a result, I argue that my participants' backgrounds and interactions with the welfare system impinge on whether these individuals adhere to the family-wage standard as set forth by Nancy Fraser which furthermore, works to stratify their individual experiences.

### *Positive Experiences*

In comparison to the attitudes of the other respondents, Daphne is the only woman that describes her experience with the welfare system as positive. When I ask Daphne to talk about the process to apply for food stamps, she describes how she first had to call the welfare office to make an appointment, and then, on the appointment date, she “[had] to stand in this long line cause everybody goes [to that office].” Though Daphne does point out that she has to wait in a long line even after she schedules an appointment, she doesn’t express frustration with this part of the process, a characteristic that is quite different from traditional experiences of welfare recipients in which waiting serves as a way for authoritative figures to impose power over its subjects (Schwartz 1974). She furthermore notes that since the process moved to the computer, she no longer has to visit the office which simplifies her process even more- “I just sign up on the computer if anything changes, and then they decide.”

Daphne then describes how once her name was called, she met with a representative who “tell[s] you what you’re eligible for,” and after that, “[the welfare office] gives you whatever you

will receive when you are there... so you know [about your benefits] before you leave that office, and you know when it starts.” Daphne describes how the food stamps are then loaded onto an EBT debit card each month on the same date. “It’s an easy process,” she resolves. Likewise, when I asked Daphne how she felt during this whole process, she laughs and responds “I felt wonderful. I was good.” Daphne notes that not only was she happy to receive her food stamps benefits, but she was also satisfied with how she was treated by the welfare office administrators- “They were very one on one, very personal, very confidential.” Nevertheless, though Daphne describes her interactions with the welfare system as positive, when I ask her about the sufficiency of her benefits, she gives a neutral response. She indicates that initially when she first began to receive food stamps, she was happy with the amount she received because “it made buying groceries easier”; however, after she started to receive her social security check, the amount of food stamps she received decreased to \$15 per month. Therefore, in response to my question about if she felt that the amount of money she received via her social security check balanced what she no longer receives in food stamps, she responds that it does not, but she does not particularly show dissatisfaction with this, but instead “just wonder[s] why it’s only \$15”.

### *Neutral Experiences*

Veronica, Dorinda, and Nora each indicate a neutral attitude about their interactions with the welfare system which I define as individuals who express both negative and positive feelings about either the system’s processes and procedures, interactions with welfare administrators or the sufficiency of their benefits. The experiences of both Veronica and Dorinda best exemplify the attitudes expressed by this group. When Veronica describes her process to apply for food

stamps, similar to Daphne, she displays a positive attitude. She indicates that she first completed an application to prove her eligibility and had 30 days to complete the full process. During this time, she completed two rounds of interviews with SNAP administrators to further prove her eligibility. After the initial process, Veronica did not have to return to the office and instead was able to re-certify online every 6 months just like Daphne. Veronica does not express dissatisfaction with the application process and even notes that she “never had any difficulties”; however, she does inform me that she was not given a lot of guidance nor information when completing the process- “I didn’t know how the process worked... I didn’t know what they were looking for...I just had to do it and wait for a response,” she says. She even indicates that the only reason she knew how to apply was because “[she] learned when [she] saw someone else apply for it.”

Though Veronica expresses that she did not find the application process particularly difficult, she does express frustration with the program’s lack of transparency, and her treatment by the administrators in the welfare office: “They definitely treat you like you are just another person. There is no warm & comfy, no letting you know it’s gonna be okay. Everybody is there just to do their jobs and that’s it.” What Veronica expresses about the impersonality of welfare personnel is a common expression amongst welfare recipients; as mentioned in the first chapter it is possible that this treatment derives from notions about the moral and pathological deficiencies of the poor which could perhaps explain why Veronica is treated as lesser than by the welfare office personnel (Hays 1996). Nevertheless, despite these complaints, once she was approved for food stamps, Veronica was satisfied with what she received; Veronica’s family of 6 received about \$1,100 a month in food stamps. “We never had to worry about food,” she indicates, but

providing food for her family only alleviated a portion of her financial burden; the cash assistance she received with her unemployment benefits was not sufficient enough to take care of her other needs. Veronica relied on her husband's income and a small weekly unemployment check to fulfill her other financial obligations, and after 2 years, she was no longer eligible to receive an unemployment check. Therefore, despite her assistance with food, she still found herself struggling to provide for her family.

Dorinda, the interviewee who applied for assistance to help mitigate the financial burdens and effects of her disability, differed from Veronica in her feelings about the process to receive disability assistance-

“It’s horrible because you gotta keep going back for little things. Then you have the judge. Then you got to go to trial. And I did all my research myself and the lawyer didn’t do anything, but the lawyer got \$10,000 of my money.... It’s like this- see the first time I went, I didn’t have a lawyer. So the second time I went, I had a lawyer...they’re gonna give it to you with the lawyer.”

Here, Dorinda indicates a number of complaints about the application procedures. She first describes how the process to apply is time-consuming because she has “to keep going back [to the disability office] for little things.” When she refers to these “little things” it is possible that Dorinda points to the vast amount of paperwork that she must submit which must include doctor’s notes, medical bills, and “other information that relates to the alleged disability” in order to file a disability claim (Social Security Administration).

This process also requires Dorinda to take time out of her day and expend resources such as travel expenses to go to and from the office constantly at irregular times. In addition, after she has completed and submitted most of the required paperwork, she must then attend a court

hearing in which a judge has to render her eligible to receive benefits. This process in itself is also lengthy and inconvenient. Lastly, Dorinda refers to how she must educate herself on the application processes and court proceedings for her disability benefits despite the existence of her lawyer. She then insinuates that her lawyer was a sort of prop that she only needed to be taken seriously by the court. Dorinda describes how even though she was eventually deemed eligible for disability benefits, she felt cheated, not only because she was unaware that the lawyer's payment would be taken out of her first disability check, but also because she did not feel that the lawyer was helpful throughout the process. To make matters worse, in the midst of these circumstances, Dorinda continued to deal with the physical ailments of her disability and the financial burden in which it has caused.

What Dorinda expresses is not a rare circumstance for disabled individuals who attempt to receive assistance from the system. The Social Security Disability Insurance Program, the program that Dorinda applies for, gives benefits to individuals who are “[unable] to engage in substantial gainful activity,” and are ‘insured,’ or in other words, have worked for a longer period of time and have paid Social Security taxes; however, since 1981, when the requirements became more strict, the disability program has been particularly difficult to navigate, and even further, makes proving eligibility for these benefits difficult, much like what Dorinda experiences (Hays 2004). Fortunately for Dorinda, she was able to hire a lawyer whose presence bolstered her claims for eligibility, but for many others who are not as fortunate, despite the endless amounts of paperwork and several unexpected trips to the disability office, these women are denied eligibility and must depend on other welfare programs to manage the cost of their disability (Hays 2003).

Though Dorinda expresses a negative attitude about her experiences with the process to apply for disability, she does not indicate difficulties with her application process for food stamps or Medicaid, arguably programs that are not as strict as the disability program. Additionally, Dorinda expresses that “at times,” many of the benefits she receives are helpful. For example, Medicaid allows her to continue to visit medical doctors to manage her health, and her disability benefits help her to pay for other expenses such as housing and clothing. At other times, though, she expresses that her benefits are not as useful. For example, once Dorinda became eligible for Social Security, she was no longer eligible for Disability. Additionally, similar to Daphne, once she was eligible for Social Security, Dorinda’s amount in food stamps decreased to \$13 a month, and her Social Security check did not make up for this loss. “I was struggling,” she informs me. At a point, Daphne was able to fulfill a significant amount of her needs and consequently, expressed satisfaction with the array of benefits she received; however, as soon as this changed, she became more financially unstable which altered her feelings about the system. Both Veronica and Daphne express feelings of satisfaction with some parts of their experiences with welfare while for others they are dissatisfied.

### *Negative Interactions*

Of each of the respondents, Angie and Toya express the most negative feelings about their experiences with the welfare system. Unlike the other respondents, they find flaws in each the processes and procedures to apply for and maintain benefits, interactions with welfare administrators, and the sufficiency of their benefits. First, in terms of the process to apply for benefits, both Toya and Angie speak of how time-consuming and invasive the application process is. Toya describes how it is “an all-day thing” to visit the welfare office which is filled

with a lot of waiting, paperwork, and questions. She also describes how she has to “give up all [her] information” and even the names and information of her children’s absent fathers; this dynamic is an example of the intrusive nature of the welfare system that uses surveillance as a means to punish recipients (Hays 1996). Angie similarly describes how she “[has] to sit up in this big waiting room for long periods of time.” “You betta take a lunch,” she advises to further point out the lengthiness of the day.

Additionally, as single mothers, this process is particularly burdensome because they have to bring each of their children to the office in order to prove their eligibility for TANF & WIC, “You got to take all your children down there...and they are crying,” Angie describes, but if you don’t bring them, “you won’t get anything,” she explains. Furthermore, in Angie’s experience, not only is a single visit to the welfare office lengthy but the approval process, particularly for housing in her case, also takes an extensive amount of time.

“We was tryna get some section 8 help, and...we were told that we have to go to the doctor to get a doctor statement to show that that’s what’s wrong with him, running round and round in a circle... It takes too long in Atlanta...he is on a waiting list... and so we just suffer.”

Next, while Angie doesn’t speak of how she is treated by the welfare administrators, Toya describes how “they always seemed frustrated.” She felt like “[she] was on their nerves” and as if “they are giving [her] this money out of their paycheck.” Similarly to Veronica who expressed that the welfare workers were not “warm and cozy,” Toya also describes what she felt as the impersonability or lack of care by welfare personnel, another expression in line with the history of how welfare administrators use stigma and devaluation to undermine welfare recipients (Hays 1996).

Lastly, Angie and Toya both feel as though the benefits they receive are significantly insufficient for their circumstances. For example, Angie points out what she believes is a flaw with the housing system that has proven burdensome for her-“ It takes so long to get housing, especially in Atlanta. There are too many people. You can forget about it. The shelters are crowded and there are not enough,” she expresses in disappointment. Moreover, Angie’s inability to secure housing places a burden on the funding that she does receive from other programs. For example, rather than using the funds she received with TANF to provide clothing and other necessities for herself and her children, this money is diverted towards rent and utilities. Similarly, for Toya, though she received TANF, WIC, and food stamps, she notes that she continued to struggle. “\$218 a month...that’s not enough,” she explains as she references her monthly TANF checks. “We got to pay rent, electric. Your lights may get turned off.... It was not enough.” Both Angie and Toya described how the welfare assistance that they receive still leaves them financially unstable.

Overall, I argue that taken together, the recipients’ background circumstances and their adherence to traditional family and wage labor standards stratify my participants' experiences. As mentioned via Nancy Fraser’s explanation of the “family-wage standard,” ideas about the nuclear family and labor participation are inscribed into the welfare system which stratifies the types of programs in which individuals participate and consequently, informs their treatment; individuals who most conform to ideas about the nuclear family and wage labor are most supported within the welfare system while those who do not comply are most stigmatized (Fraser 1994). The 1996 Personal Work and Responsibility Act (PRWORA) or reform represents how the family wage standard is reinforced via welfare policies. This act set forth four main goals:



1. Provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives
2. End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work and marriage
3. Prevent and reduce the incidence of out of wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies
4. Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families (PRWORA )

As exemplified via the stated goals of PRWORA, the welfare system became obsessed with two major ends- to promote work and to manage families, tactics that the Clinton Administration and other supporters of this reform believed would promote independence and personal responsibility (Fraser & Gordon 1997; Hays 2004). Nevertheless, similar to what Fraser contends, PRWORA, and more broadly, the welfare system works to reinforce dominant cultural and social values that not only governs those within the system but also those in the broader context of society.

As a result, women who do not adhere to these standards are subject to punishment, a tactic that not only serves as a way to punish deviant subjects but also functions as a way to deter onlooking women from non-compliance with these standards (Hays 2004). Furthermore, this punishment includes not only sanctions such as stigmatization and financial immobility, but participation in the labor force can also act as a form of punishment (Hays 2004). For example, mothers who fail to marry or mothers who get a divorce must enter into the work sphere to provide for their children; however, they are burdened by circumstances such as lack of time to spend with their children and perform caretaker duties or expensive child care cost because they are unable to stay in the home to care for their children while at work (Hays 2004). Therefore, my participants compliance or lack thereof with what Hays sets forth about the family wage

standard combined with my participants background of financial stability, stratifies them amongst three tiers that indicate who is most valued by the welfare system, and as a result, informs how and the extent in which they are able to navigate the welfare system. The tier system I use is an adaptation of the three-tier system in which Hays describes that I mentioned earlier in this chapter.<sup>12</sup>

Veronica is a sort of “golden child” and thus, she is the only recipient who is a member of this first tier because she is married and employed; in addition, she does not indicate that she comes from a background of financial instability which lessens her level of financial vulnerability. As a result, she is better able to navigate the welfare system when she runs into a battle with financial insecurity, and as a reward for her adherence to these standards, she escapes the welfare system. Daphne and Dorinda are a part of the second tier of this classification of the most valued members within the welfare system. This categorization includes those who do not experience backgrounds of financial instability prior to their entrance into the welfare system and fulfill at least one characteristic within the family wage standard: either they marry or work. In the case for both Daphne and Dorinda, they participate in the labor force, but they are both single mothers, therefore, their push into employment, according to Sharon Hays, can be seen as a form of punishment for their lack of adherence to the nuclear family standard (Hays 1996). Nevertheless, because employment, in the eyes of the welfare system, serves as a way to rehabilitate citizens and create new, morally virtuous and independent citizens, they are eventually relieved from some of the punitive welfare measures that result from their single-motherhood. Thus, when they experience financial instability because of factors such as

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<sup>12</sup> See page 24

unemployment, disability, and old age, their participation in the workforce warrants them eligible for entitlements such as unemployment or Social Security, benefits you can only get if you are currently or formerly employed, to mediate their circumstances with poverty.

Lastly, Toya and Angie fall within the third and final tier. This tier comprises individuals who have backgrounds of financial instability and do not comply with either part of the family-wage standard; their rejection of these values, in addition to their long term history with the welfare system makes them extremely vulnerable within and outside of the welfare system. These women are most subject to punishments for their in-adherence to the family-wage standard which traps them within a constant cycle of poverty. Even when these individuals are eventually able to fulfill one of these standards, such as the case with Toya who eventually attains employment, they are still attached to the welfare system in some way. This premise positions participants such as Angie and Toya as most oppressed by the welfare system, which via what they express about their experiences, proves true.

### ***Feelings of Stigma***

*“You are feeling like, not ashamed, but like ‘Man, I just need some help. Don’t make me feel no kind of way... Don’t judge. I’m just tryna get on my feet’.”*

Another category that I used to understand my participants’ experiences was via their indications of stigma towards them by family members, community members, or the general public. First, I want to point out that I do not include feelings of stigma or the following category, modes of survival, within my broader argument about the stratification of my recipients experiences with welfare. This is because most of the respondents either did not indicate any feelings of stigma against them or explicitly noted that they never experienced any feelings of

stigma from others, and likewise, many did not express a form of survival to make ends meet. In this regard, I felt I was unable to connect these categories to the patterns that I found because of this lack of responses; however, what these women set forth in these categories still provides information that helps to contextualize their experiences.

Toya is the only participant who explicitly indicates feelings of stigmatization. She notes that because most people in her community benefit from welfare, she never felt judged by her friends and family, but she did, however, feel stigmatized by welfare workers. She describes that when she would visit the welfare office as a young mother, welfare workers made comments such as “‘How old are you?’ ‘You got a baby?’ ‘You shouldn’t have been fast out there.’” In addition, Toya also felt that the welfare workers also made her feel like “a desperate person” scrounging for help. She expressed how she felt that they treated her as though to say “At least [you] got a roof over [your] head,” even though she didn’t have electricity or hot water. In other words, Toya feels as though the administrators felt they were doing her a favor even if the benefits she received were minimal. This treatment that Toya describes that repudiates her stance as a teen mom are laced with ideas about her sexuality and moral deficiencies, a case that is common for Black women and women of color (Roberts 1997).

### ***Modes of Survival***

*“Let’s say that there is an emergency, what do you do?”*

*“You got to go to food banks and churches. United Victory is good. Two times a week you can go in there and get food.”*

It is notable that each recipient indicates that at least one of their benefits is insufficient for their living conditions. This indicates that my interviewees' experiences with insufficient

benefits is a characterization of the modern system. With this in mind, I became interested in what tactics they used to make ends meet. The respondents expressed answers that aligned with three different strategies: the use of food banks and pantries, outsmarting the system, or network support. First, both Angie and Dorinda indicated that in times of serious need, they use the resources provided by food pantries and churches to help feed their families. Dorinda, for example says, “I was struggling” as she references the \$13 a month she receives in food stamps. “That was one of the reasons I had to go to [United Victory’s food pantry],” she informs me. It is apparent that the government aid that my participants receive leaves gaps in their income that private institutions work to fill. Welfare recipients, as a result, not only have to travel from agency to agency to scrap together resources to provide for their families, but this reliance on these organizations to fulfill these needs also restricts the effectiveness of these agencies because of the high demand for their services (Schram 2017). For example, food banks may have to distribute less food to their constituents because of their limited resources. As a result, this circumstance continues this cycle of poverty (Schram 2017).

Another strategy that these interviewees expressed was via outsmarting the system. For example, when Dorinda hires a lawyer because she knows that would improve her chances of approval for disability benefits, she employs a mode of survival. In addition, Toya discusses how in order to keep her benefits, she negotiated with her employers to “pay [her] off the books,” a term that refers to when employers pay their employees without recording the payment nor taking out taxes- “If you spoke to the employer and let them know ‘Look, I’m getting xyz benefits,’ he will just say, ‘Okay. I will pay you off the books.’” Therefore, because Toya was able to get paid off the books, she was able to stay

within the eligibility bracket to continue to receive her benefits. “I needed my food stamps,” she explains.

Lastly, some recipients relied on their networks to assist them with their circumstances. For Toya, when she couldn’t afford to pay for water or electricity, she notes, “[I had] to ask people for money.” This was the only way she was able to pay for these utilities. Angie also used her network to help alleviate her circumstances, but unfortunately for her, she had to make the sacrifice to split her family- “I have another boy that is moved in with my brother because I just couldn’t afford to take care of him,” she states. Though not ideal, Angie knew that both she and her son would be better off if he were under the care of someone else who could provide for him. This too is a method of survival.

With this chapter I sought to answer the question, how do Black women welfare recipients experience welfare benefits in the current moment? Through what I describe, there are some common experiences amongst the women such as their shared experiences as food stamps recipients in addition to their expressions of disapproval of the sufficiency of their benefits; however, I find that my participants’ experiences are more varied than they are similar. As I express, this is because their submission to the family wage standard in addition to their backgrounds of financial instability stratifies their experiences. This stratification, furthermore, is also present within their interpretations of their experiences which I will explore through the next chapter.

# 3

## The Blame Game

*“And you know what? I blame Trump. He don’t do nothing to help nobody!”*

Throughout my interview with Dorinda, she frequently refers to the current president, Donald Trump, as the catalyst for not only her own difficulties with financial instability, but moreover, the conditions of all poor people in America. In Dorinda’s eyes, since the president “doesn’t do nothing to help nobody,” a clear indication that she believes it the responsibility of the president to help citizens in need, she has developed a sense of disappointment, and even, resentment towards President Trump and his accompanying administration. When I ask Dorinda, about what she would change about the system, she immediately responds “Impeach Trump first!,” an even further demonstration that Dorinda believes her conditions are the fault of the president’s lack of concern or action. This interpretation, however, is not only unique to Dorinda, but, in fact, is shared with other women in this study.

In this chapter, I build upon the experiences of my participants by offering an extension of my first question that simply ask what are the experiences of Black women welfare recipients in today’s context. I now ask, given their experiences with the welfare system, in their eyes, what do these experiences mean? In other words, this chapter explores the ways in which my participants interpret their experiences. By emphasizing my participants’ individual interpretations, I aim to challenge monolithic narratives that circulate singular ideas about what it means to be a Black woman who receives welfare assistance. As Black women, particularly

single, low income Black mothers, have been historically oppressed, marginalized and stigmatized by the welfare system, it is often presumed that all Black women welfare participants experience the welfare system in a negative way, and thus express negative attitudes about the system and their experiences. This assumption, however, is untrue; via my previous chapter, I have undone the former part of this conclusion by showing the diversification of experiences amongst the women I interviewed, and through this chapter, I show that this latter notion is also false.

Throughout my conversations with these women, it became clear that one of the most significant ways in which my participants indicate their interpretations is through whom or what they blame for their conditions with financial instability. Whom or what these women blame exposes their worldviews as it highlights what they believe to be true about themselves, the society in which they live, and the systems that govern them. Furthermore, I found that what my interviewees expressed aligned with three different categories which I have termed *blaming the system*, *accepting the system* or *blaming fate*. For the women who blame the system, they feel that due to inefficient, unsubstantial, and in some cases, racist policies and institutions, they continue to suffer financially despite the presence of welfare assistance. In contrast, women who accept the system believe that it works in the way in which it is intended and thus, they accept the provisions and policies that are offered. Lastly, for the women who blame fate, they believe that they suffer financially due to inevitable circumstances that are not necessarily a product of their own or another's action, but are conditions in which almost everyone will at some point confront. Each of these categories indicate the varied ways in which Black women welfare recipients understand their circumstances.



### ***Blaming the System***

*“\$109 every 2 weeks. That’s \$218 a month. What am I gonna do with that? I [had] two kids, one [was] in pampers. WIC is over when the baby is 5, and when you use all of that month’s worth of WIC checks, you have to buy milk and stuff out of pocket, so you know I don’t have nothing for that cushion. What if the stroller gets tore up? I got to go and buy a stroller, you know? So all these little things like buying clothes, buying socks and all these things that people don’t think about, that \$218 is not gonna do it for me.”*

Toya is amongst the three women who indicate an interpretation that is in line with the blaming the system framework. As mentioned, Toya is a single mother of two children who has a long term relationship with the welfare system. She began to receive benefits upon having her first child at the age of 15, and currently, at the age of 43, she is still involved with the system. Toya describes that even throughout her time on AFDC, Food Stamps, and WIC, she consistently struggled to make ends meet, a struggle that she believes is due to an insufficient and out of touch welfare system. As she experiences lengthy and difficult application processes, unfair procedures, stigmatizing treatment and language, insufficient benefits, and an overall outdated system, Toya, similar to Angie and Daphne who also express this interpretation, believes their interactions with poverty are the product of a government that does not value nor care for its low-income citizens.

First, I want to note that the term ‘system,’ as it is expressed by my respondents, describes macro-level institutions such as federal and state governments, micro-level institutions such as local welfare offices, in addition to the actors involved in these systems, such as the President, Congress Members and welfare office employees. Therefore, in accordance to my participants’ definition that characterizes “systems” via notions about power relationships, the term system

used here refers to any institution or structure that holds authoritative state power. It is also of note that besides one specific case, most of the women who express the blaming the system ideology do not place blame on the system as the cause of their financial stability, but rather they blame the system for its failure to alleviate their circumstances. As I prove in my introduction, though there is sufficient evidence to support that poverty is socially constructed via factors such as capitalism, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination, these women do not hold these same views. More importantly, through their rejection of this belief, these women indicate that they perhaps conceive of poverty as natural or a way of life which explains why they believe it is the government's duty to mediate these unavoidable circumstances.

Dorinda, an elderly woman who has been a recipient of each Social Security, Disability, and Food Stamps, is another participant who blames the system for her circumstances. Unaffordable health issues are what caused Dorinda to seek financial help, but her difficulties with navigating the system only proved more of a burden. Similar to Angie, Dorinda also describes her discontent with the system in which she feels does not help to alleviate her circumstances but instead contributes to her difficulties. First, Dorinda describes her feelings about the difficult process she had to endure in order to claim eligibility for disability benefits- "It's horrible because you gotta keep going back for little things, then, you got to go back for the judge, and then you got to go to court." This process that Dorinda describes as "horrible" is one hand an indication of her discontent with the system, but on the other hand, shows that she feels that the time consuming and inconsiderate nature of this process is excessive and unnecessary, and is moreover, a condition that she believes she should not have to encounter in order to receive help. This treatment, as she expresses, is undeserved. Dorinda also talks about how

during this process, she had to hire a lawyer to help with the proceedings, and though the presence of an attorney is not mandatory, she describes how when she first went through the court proceedings without a lawyer, the process was more difficult and she was eventually proven ineligible for disability benefits. To bolster her claims and make her process easier, she hired a public attorney for her appeal; “They’re going to give [eligibility] to you with the lawyer cause they figure the lawyer is gonna get paid,” she tells me, a statement that was in part proven true because after her appeal with the lawyer by her side, she was proven eligible for disability benefits.

To Dorinda’s surprise, however, the lawyer’s pay was taken out of her check: “I did all my research myself and the lawyer didn’t do anything but the lawyer got \$10,000 of my money,” Dorinda says. Similar to what she has already expressed, Dorinda indicates another situation in which she felt inconvenienced, and even, taken advantage of during her application process. Overall, the hardship that the application system provided for Dorinda lends to her attitude about the government’s role in her condition of financial instability. Later in the interview, upon asking Dorinda if she believed that the benefits she received were adequate, she gets to the heart of what she feels about the system whom she blames for her conditions- “Sometimes. But other times not really. That’s one of the reasons I had to come to the church cause I was struggling. It’s really the government.” Here, Dorinda directly connects the insufficiency of her benefits and her battle with financial instability to the government. She goes on to explain that the governments lacks sympathy or concern for poor individuals because they have never experienced poverty themselves-

“Trump doesn’t know what it is to be poor. He don’t know how these people are living. He don’t care. Look at how he cut off the government and stuff. How those people gonna feed their family?...The system makes it so hard for them to get food stamps, to try to get on welfare, to try to get housing and everything. They make it really hard.”

In Dorinda’s account, her basis for blaming the system results from beliefs about how the government should interact and govern its people. She notes that they are disconnected because they do not share the same lived experiences and because of this, she believes the government is unable to express sympathy for those whom they govern. She uses the government shutdown that was occurring at the time of our interview, which, as I mentioned earlier, resulted in the lack of pay for government officials for almost five weeks, as a direct example of their lack of concern. Additionally, Dorinda interprets the government as adversarial to poor people. She expresses how they “make it really hard” for poor people to live decently; Dorinda’s conception makes their actions seem almost intentional. From this interpretation, I argue that Dorinda feels that the government should function in a way that is a lot more sympathetic and a lot more caring, a stance that they would take if they had a better understanding of the circumstances of the poor. Toya expresses similar feelings about the ways in which the government’s lack of understanding about poor people leads to the continuous cycle of poverty for the poor.

Of the interviewees who blamed the system for their continuous battles with poverty, Toya, a 39-year-old mother of two, was the most adamant. She too expresses that the services distributed by the system are neither adequate nor realistic. For example, while she received TANF and WIC, she still had difficulties providing for her family-

“We couldn’t pay rent. I wasn’t on Section 8. I would get plenty of food stamps, they gave them once a month, but the [monetary] assistance, that’s not enough. We got to pay rent, electric...It’s a struggle. You got to ask

people for money. Your lights may get turned off. So as far as the actual [monetary benefits], it was not enough.”

Though Toya expresses that she was, for the most part, secure with food because of her food stamps, she barely escapes homelessness because her other benefits proved incapable of helping her make ends meet. Because of this, as she expresses, she suffered in her day to day to find ways in which she could keep running water and a roof over her family’s head. Toya must then look to alternative resources outside of the system to care for her family, a function that she feels the welfare system should have been able to fulfill.

Toya, similar to Dorinda, also feels that the system is inadequate because it is highly disconnected from the people it serves: “I feel like they should really do their research to help people to live decently.” However, because this is not the case, like Dorinda, she believes that benefits are distributed unrealistically and is one of the main reasons why poverty is continuous. In addition, Toya also believes that the system does not provide enough information or support to relieve people of their conditions with poverty- “I think that’s what these agencies lack. They lack giving information on how to do, where to go and all of that.” In this sense, Toya expresses how this lack of transparency serves as a barrier to resources that would help impoverished people. Overall, through both of these statements, Toya expresses what she believes is the purpose of the welfare system: it should mediate the conditions of poverty; however, though she and Dorinda both express this belief about what the government ought to do, Toya differs from Dorinda in that she does not express the government as adversarial nor does she see their faults as intentional. She instead expresses these issues as oversteps that need to be remediated.

Lastly, upon asking Toya what she would change about the welfare system, I found her answer particularly insightful. Toya confidently proclaimed that the system should invest their money in job and skill training so that individuals on welfare could get out of poverty-

“Show me how to balance my money or manage my money, or direct me to a place where they won’t charge me an arm and a leg to show me how to do stuff... providing information is really at the top because people really just don’t know. Because if this is a generational thing, like my mom and grandma were all on welfare, don’t nobody know nothing, clearly. So provide some classes with info on where I can go to get a better job, where I can go to take class where I don’t have to pay tuition but really learn a skill so when I do go to that job, I can get over \$15 an hour.”

Toya expresses that it is the government’s responsibility to better equip welfare recipients and poor people with resources that would encourage social mobility, such as work and education. For Toya, providing what are essentially, rehabilitative programs, should be a main goal of the welfare system; however, because they lack providing these services, generational poverty persist at the hands of the system.

First, it is of note that changes in PRWORA intentionally integrated the services that Toya calls for as a way to encourage workforce participation which, via training and schooling, the government officials who supported the bill believed they could help participants to achieve. Therefore, what Toya expresses could be an indication that these programs do a poor job at fulfilling the goals that they set forth. Secondly, it is also of note that what Toya calls for has been contested by feminist welfare scholars such as Gwendolyn Mink who characterize the rehabilitative aims of the PRWORA as problematic and reflective of a flawed system that not only inappropriately manages poverty because it is based on ideas about the pathology of poor people, but also pushes mothers into a punitive labor system (Mink 1995). Though I do not

disagree that the rehabilitative aims of PRWORA are based on stereotypes about welfare recipients, and that in some cases, via coercion and punishment, push women into troubling circumstances, I do think it important to take seriously that Toya, who is a welfare recipient herself, challenges what Mink sets forth.

Of all of the interviewees who expressed the blaming the system ideology, Nora's interpretation is quite different in that she actually does blame the system for creating circumstances that influence financial instability, as opposed to the other participants who believe the system just fails to alleviate circumstances of poverty. While Dorinda and Toya blame the government, Trump, and the welfare system for not alleviating providing the assistance and resources to mediate their financial instability, Nora's interpretation offers that discrimination that is implemented by the system is to blame for the circumstances of poor Black people in particular-

“I was reading something about women that get food stamps. They say more white people get them than Black, especially the ones all out in the rural areas and stuff. But you know the finger is always gonna be pointed at us, the down and trodden people...people that's in need, poor people, low-income people...we're the ones that they put in that category, us Black people. We're the ones that they always saying cause the problems.”

First, I interpret the “they” that Nora speaks of as both white people and the broader system, two bodies that she conceives as one entity which I believe is her expression of white hegemony. For Nora, despite this reality that shows that White individuals and families who live in rural areas receive more welfare services like Food Stamps, for example, Black people who are depicted as both “down and trodden” and “poor,” are characterized as the main recipients of welfare, a belief that Nora uncovers as untrue which supports that Black people are used as a sort

of scapegoat for welfare policy issues (Quadagno 1994). As a result, Black welfare recipients, most notably, Black single mother recipients who experience this discrimination the most, are impacted negatively by this discourse as the stereotypes that the system sets forth materializes in marginalizing and demeaning ways like the circumstances that I spoke about in the second chapter. In this regard, Nora's interpretation offers that racial bias and discriminatory rhetoric as distributed via the system is to blame for marginalizing Black welfare recipients.

What I conclude through my participants' expression of the blaming the system ideology is that they believe that the welfare system is intended to support families who struggle financially, and secondly, that they are entitled to the services that the government offers to assist low-income families. For the blaming the system group, they see the welfare system solely as a means to survive when in circumstances of financial hardship. Therefore, when these women feel that the system falls short of this goal, they indict the system for not functioning properly, an action that shows that they see themselves as rights-bearing citizens who are entitled to government assistance when they can not provide for themselves, a claim in which, according to the history of Black women and their identities as both women and Black people, has proven strenuous (Mink 1990; Quadagno 1996).

Secondly, what is also notable about this group is that, unsurprisingly, they do not interpret their continued financial struggles as impinging upon their own moral or social failures. This expression deviates significantly from what the legacy of welfare policy in the United States has hoped to tell poor people about themselves and their morality; this message conveys that poor people's financial struggles are "a matter of personal responsibility," and that "personal transformation such as the acquisition of skills, commitment to work ethic, or the practice of



chastity" will alleviate them of their financial struggles (Katz 1989). Even more so, as Black women, the attempt to persuade the public of Black women's moral deficiencies is two fold. Nevertheless, what these women express in the blaming the system group is contrasted by those who adopt the accepting the system interpretation.

### *Accepting the System*

*"I do wonder why it's only \$15 a month...[but] I just accept it."*

Daphne is the only participant who does not indicate any form of blame, but instead indicates an acceptance of the system. Where the "blaming the system" respondents interpreted their hardships as perpetuated by faulty and insufficient systems, Daphne believes the system works in the ways in which it is intended, and thus accepts her circumstances, even those that are unfavorable, without much resistance. Throughout the interview, Daphne constantly reminds me of her circumstances prior to being laid off from her job—"Before then, I was making enough money to have grocery money. I had a full-time job and my income fulfilled my necessities," she notes at one point in the interview. Taking pride in her record of constant participation in the labor force, Daphne expresses that applying for welfare assistance was a last resort which shows that for Daphne, welfare assistance should only be used as an emergency measure rather than a replacement for work.

When I learned that Daphne only received \$15 a month in food stamps, I was shocked by how little money this was to buy even a week's worth of groceries, let alone a month's worth, but when I asked Daphne about if she thought this was sufficient, she indicates that it is not, but then goes on to refer to the scale that is used to judge how much money a household should receive in benefits—"They have a scale that they go by for your household depending on your income, your

house size, your utilities. So they give it to you based on that,” she says as a way to justify her low amount of monthly food stamps. Through this statement, Daphne also expresses a sense of trust in the logic and process of the welfare system and how they distribute services even though she receives an extremely low amount of food stamps benefits and is not necessarily satisfied with the amount. After I asked Daphne if she had any other thoughts about her food stamps, she responds that “the process of food stamps and social security is something taking getting used to after you worked for 30-40 years. It’s a difference in not being employed and drawing a set income.” This expression hints at her devaluation of welfare benefits in comparison to work. Daphne had experienced working her entire life to provide for herself and her daughter, and because she is no longer employed, she does not expect the system to fulfill her income in the same way in which a job does. Moreover, unlike the respondents who blame the system, Daphne does not see the welfare system and its services as something in which she is entitled, but instead sees it as favor from the government that can provide at least a little assistance.

Furthermore, unlike the blaming the system respondents, Daphne’s interpretation suggest that she has adopted notions about what poor individuals ought to think of themselves. While she does not explicitly suggest that she views herself as morally deficient, she does seem to give much weight to the fact that she is unemployed and as a result, will accept little from the government because of this. For Daphne, labor and employment are the ways in which she ought to provide for herself, and because she is unable to do so, she measures what she deserves based on this, a narrative that reinforces ideas about labor and work as imperative to living in the United States.

### ***Blaming Fate***

*“With a family struggling due to no part of their own...assistance from the government...is not a bad thing. Sometimes everybody needs a helping hand.”*

Veronica, whom as I mentioned earlier, is a 46-year-old mother of 4 that lives on the outskirts of the Southern region of Metro-Atlanta, an area that houses majority middle-class families. Veronica and her husband, both working-class people, moved their large 6 person family into a 3 bedroom apartment in this area to provide better schooling and social opportunities for their children. Nevertheless, providing for her family in this more expensive region proved burdensome, and when Veronica was laid off from her job, her husband’s income alone was not sufficient enough to make ends meet. Veronica knew that she would need extra assistance until she could find another job, so she immediately applied to receive food stamps. Ultimately, Veronica did not view her financial circumstances as a fault of her own nor a fractured system that was unable to provide for her, but instead, she viewed her situation as a matter of fate; for Veronica, financial struggle can happen to anyone at any moment. What Veronica expresses is what I term “Blaming Fate,” an ideology that describes how given financial circumstances, more specifically, financial conditions in America, most people will experience financial instability either temporarily or permanently. In other words, respondents who blame fate do not necessarily blame themselves, the system, nor a person for their conditions, but interpret their financial struggles as almost inevitable conditions.

First, one of the most indicative expressions of her feelings about the inevitability of poverty is Veronica’s expression of sympathy for people who struggle financially “due to no fault of their own.” These individuals are “people who have gotten laid off their jobs...have sick kids

and have to be at home with their children...or may not have transportation.” They experience strenuous circumstances that cause financial difficulties, but most importantly for her, do not cause these troubles for themselves. What Veronica indicates is an expression of her ideas about who is deserving and who is undeserving of financial assistance; in this case, those who struggle “due to no fault of their own” deserve welfare assistance. In addition, because Veronica believes that chance and fate are to blame for her financial situation, she expresses that she has adopted what she terms a “you have to do what you have to do” mentality because she believes that nothing tangible is responsible for circumstances: “I needed to take care of my family,” she says. “I knew we weren’t going to be able to afford groceries since I didn’t have the job anymore so it was something that I had to do. I didn’t have a choice.” Even when Veronica describes how food stamps are helpful but does only a little to alleviate her overall financial circumstances, she notes, “I mean it’s still a struggle, but you just make it work.”

In this regard, though she does not identify anything as the cause for her circumstances, she does express a certain personal responsibility to alleviate her circumstances; this characteristic is quite different from the participants that blamed the system who feel that it is the government’s job to alleviate their financial struggles. Overall, what Veronica offers is a view about poverty and financial instability that contends that financial troubles are inevitable. This ideology, I argue, is reflective of the conditions of financial inequality and instability for non-upper class citizens within the United States that are a result of factors such as market demands and the outsourcing of jobs (Schept 2015). In this sense, Veronica believes that almost everyone at some point will most likely experience financial struggle; this is a norm of life in America.

Via each the blaming the system, accepting the system, and blaming fate categories, each of the participants express their unique views about their conditions which I overall argue are a result of both their experiences and their adaptation of particular morals and values that are unique to the American system. First, similar to what my previous chapter proves, there still exist a correlation between those who experience longer and deeper relationships with the welfare system and their less positive perspectives of the welfare system. For example, both Toya and Angie who currently or previously had some of the most difficult financial circumstances and interactions with the system, both express blame on the system for not alleviating their circumstances with poverty. As expressed, both of these women have experienced backgrounds of financial instability since childhood, a condition that they interpret as the fault of the system who doesn't provide enough funding, training, transparency, nor benefits that are most appropriate for their conditions. This pattern of disapproval that is shared amongst my most impacted participants further highlights that though many of my participants experience financial hardships, negative interactions with the system, and insufficient benefits, it is the low income, lowly educated, single Black mothers that must rely on the stingiest and most stigmatized programs, endure the most difficult, and inconveniencing processes, and experience the most reliant relationship to welfare benefits. Their vulnerability points to the fact that still, in 2018, these mothers are most marginalized and oppressed by this system.

Lastly, via their expressions within this chapter, my participants hint at their worldviews that have been conditioned by both their backgrounds and experiences, but also by the broader values and beliefs of mainstream society. For example, through Daphne's lack of blame for her circumstances, she articulates her notions about the importance of work which she believes is a

necessary component in which everyone should participate; those who do not are subject to stingy benefits that they deserve because of their lack of labor force participation. Moreover, the notion that she expresses is at the center of mainstream beliefs about work, and through the next chapter, I will further explore how the American value system impacts my participants' personal value and belief systems.

# 4

## Politics of Distance

*“The benefits for welfare have changed tremendously over the years especially for the younger generation...In today’s time...it ain’t the same. They can go down there with two or three kids and don’t know where the daddy is at and they will give them at least \$100 for each kid.”*

Daphne shakes her head in disapproval as she describes what she believes to be a stark difference between the welfare system of the past and that of the present. Though Daphne herself was not involved with the welfare system “back in the day,” she concludes that what she believes was the welfare systems’ strict past does not compare to what she feels is the leniency of the system today. In her comparison, Daphne insinuates that because of this lax system, younger generations receive benefits that they do not deserve, especially young women who have numerous children and absentee fathers. What is the most compelling about Daphne’s comparison is the way in which she enacts a separation between herself and the women she describes. Though she receives benefits from the same welfare system that she classifies as less strict, she separates her recipiency from that of the younger generation of women who have “two or three kids and don’t know where the daddy is at.” In addition, through this separation, Daphne also hints at her value system as she condemns these young women for what she believes is their irresponsibility, deficiency, and moreover, undeservingness. Ultimately, what she expresses is a disassociation, and even more, stigmatization of a group that she believes is not only different from her but is in some way less morally inclined than she is; Daphne enacts what I term a *politics of distance*.

The last question that I aim to answer through this study extends from the previous two: given both the experiences of my participants and their interpretations of these experiences, how do they conceptualize themselves, portray themselves, and/ or construct their self-identity in light of these conditions? I argue that through employing a *politics of distance*, an expression that defines the separation that my participants create between themselves and other welfare recipients, indicates how the women in my study conceptualize, and as a result portray themselves. First, through the justifications that my interviewees use to make this separation, they express their individual politics or ideas about morality, poverty, family, race, and gender that align with mainstream American political values which consequently causes them to reinforce stereotypes and stigmas about welfare recipients. Secondly, I argue that these women are also able to justify their own claims on the welfare system via this separation, and further, indictment of other recipients as undeserving. Lastly, I believe that as a result of this process, my interviewees construct and represent themselves as morally righteous individuals, a negotiation to combat ideas and stereotypes that would depict them as otherwise.

### ***Defining Politics of Distance***

Borrowing from sociologist Ranita Ray's "identity of distance" and historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's "politics of respectability," the term *politics of distance* describes the process of stigmatization, and furthermore, separation in which my interviewees employ as a means to showcase themselves as morally righteous, and furthermore, deserving of the welfare assistance they receive. Ray coined the term "identity of distance" to describe how young, economically marginalized Black and Latina women use the feminist narratives of independence, self-respect, and self-development to distance themselves from negative stereotypes about their



sexuality that characterize them as overly sexual and thus, at risk of teen pregnancy. She describes how these young women subscribe to this identity not only through the stigmatization of young mothers, but also via the policing of their bodies and the bodies of their loved ones (Ray 2017). Furthermore, what Ray contends about the young women in her study builds on Higginbotham's *politics of respectability*.

Higginbotham's study, which analyzes early 20th century Black women in the Southern Baptist church, discusses how Black women who were considered the gatekeepers of the newly freed African American community employed tactics of 'respectability' in order to gain recognition and respect from white citizens (Higginbotham 1994). For these women, respectability was conditioned upon an adaptation of white, middle-class lifestyles and behaviors that centered cleanliness, especially in grooming and apparel, morality, modesty, and a commitment to the family. These tactics were intended to mitigate Black people's status as an inferior race (Higginbotham 1994). Additionally, much like Ray's focus, sexuality was central to this notion of respectability; Black women had to manage their appearances and behaviors as a way to combat stereotypes about their promiscuity which, during the antebellum period especially, was used as a justification for their rape and sexual abuse (Collins 2000; Higginbotham 1994).

Furthermore, Higginbotham describes this politics of respectability as an appropriation of rhetoric from biblical teachings, philosophies about racial self-help, Victorian ideology, and the core democratic principles of the United States Constitution which includes equality, self-respect, and professionalism (Higginbotham 1994). Ultimately, as a way to be taken serious, make claims on political rights, and redefine the Black American identity, politics of

respectability became central to the Black woman identity; however, the maintenance of this image relied on the devaluation and condemnation of those who did not conform to this value system. Nevertheless, via this “highly self-conscious concession to hegemonic values,” Black women were able to gain autonomy and create self-definition via distancing themselves from racist stereotypes (Higginbotham 1994).

Taken together, the term that I use, “politics of distance” acts as a more time appropriate and context appropriate extension and adaptation of what Ray and Higginbotham offer in their studies. Through my use of Higginbotham’s politics of respectability, I first hope to relay that what my interviewees describe is not just about identity, but is a form of politics in the way in which Nancy Fraser would describe as “something...contested across a range of different discursive arenas and among a range of different publics” (Fraser 1994). Additionally, much like the way in which Higginbotham describes with the 20th century Southern Baptist Black women, my interviewees also adopt the principles of a socially dominant value system, but in this case, these principles are aligned with ideas about the ideal American citizen. As mentioned in the introduction, the standard American citizen is one who expresses traits such as independence, moral righteousness, work ethic, labor participation, and submission to the family wage structure and order.

Lastly, Higginbotham’s term politics of respectability contextualizes the experiences of Black women specifically and defines their notion of respectability politics as central to the experience and construction of Black womanhood; this is also true for the women in my study; however, while Higginbotham’s Baptist women constructed their identity via a conscious and explicit acceptance of respectability politics as political “opposition to the social structures and

symbolic representations of white supremacy,” this cannot be deduced about the women in my study. Thus, I adopt Ray’s term, identity of distance, as a way to underscore that my study is more concerned with micro-level relations between individuals and small groups rather than macro social structures and institutions. As a result, I argue that my participants expressions of distance are not necessarily a group effort nor a conscious political disruption, but rather, personal image maintenance that is used to further their own individual agendas. Via expressing this politics of distance against men, Mexicans, and most commonly, the single, young Black mother, my participants construct themselves as different from these groups.

### ***Welfare is Not for the Boys***

*“I feel like I’m bias between women and men when it comes to welfare....I have always felt like me personally being a person who is on public assistance that no men should be able to be on public assistance”*

One of the first expressions of a politics of distance lies within Toya’s thoughts about men who receive welfare. For her, there are important considerations about her experience as a woman on welfare that she believes should disqualify men from receiving assistance. During her interview, she highlights the distinction between her conditions as a woman and the conditions of men to propagate her claims on welfare benefits-

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but welfare came about back in the day when there was a war going on, and it was developed for women whose men were out to fight and [welfare] is how they were getting help. And so I always knew that and I have always felt like...men should not be able to be on public assistance because he was gonna get a job. It is more difficult for women with children.”

According to Toya’s interpretation, men should not receive welfare assistance because they have an advantage in finding work and do not have to take care of children, a privilege that she

believes she does not have as a woman and mother. It is noteworthy that Toya does not conceive of them as undeserving of benefits because of their moral failures, an attitude in line with ideas about the undeservingness of the poor, but she instead frames them as *over-deserving*, or in other words, in a position of advantage in comparison to who she thinks ought to benefit from welfare assistance.

What Toya articulates rest on two major assumptions: men are more favorable in the labor market and men do not take on the role as caretakers; Toya's assumptions, moreover, are based on gendered ideals about work and family that have been instituted into the American value and belief system, and subsequently, adopted by Toya. Prior to industrialization and the emergence of the capitalist system, the home sphere was the main economy where home made goods were able to fulfill the needs of families; however, with the creation of factories and "factory-produced commodities," an emphasis was placed on producing for profit rather than solely need (Davis 1983). As a result, men began to work and gain profit in the now, masculine public sphere, and women were left to work in the feminine private sphere which led to a re-definition of women's roles as the "housewife" or "the guardians of a devalued domestic life" (Davis 1983). This white, middle-class standard for womanhood became an expectation for all women, while the expectation of labor market employment became standard for all men. Toya's attitude that reflects this ideal social order lingers throughout her separation between the men who are "gonna get a job" and her own situation as a mother and caretaker who will have a much more difficult time finding employment.

Additionally, in accordance with the idea that men are required to work in the public labor sphere and women required to take care of the home, the welfare system also experiences

this gendered split as welfare programs such as TANF and Food Stamps are for the care of children and the maintenance of the home, spheres that have been defined as traditionally feminine. Therefore because market labor is considered a masculine sphere, men who do not work are stigmatized as pathologically deficient. This is even more true for men who receive welfare assistance who, rather than working for their living, rely on the government for help. Ultimately, what Toya expresses not only reinforces stereotypes about both masculinity and femininity, but also allows for her to conceptualize her own circumstances and thus, through this opposition to men, construct herself as deserving of welfare benefits.

***It's Not Just a Black and White Thing***

*“When I first moved here...it was predominantly Mexican. It seemed like they outnumbered us at the welfare office. It would be a handful of Black women, a handful of white women, and the rest was Mexican.... I didn't feel any kind of way about that...But I started feeling different about it when I started seeing how the Mexican thing worked.”*

Another group in which Toya “others” are the Mexican welfare recipients within her community. Toya informs me that the area in which she lives has a large Mexican population, and accordingly, the Mexican residents outnumbered the other populations at the welfare office- “It would be a handful of Black women, a handful of white women, and the rest were Mexican.”

At first, Toya notes, she did not think much of this, nor did it bother her that there was a huge Mexican population present in her community or at the welfare office; however, after a while, Toya began to question what she notices-

“Seeing [Mexican men] at the Home Depot picking up work, being paid off the books, and still getting welfare benefits...I was feeling some kind of way because the women have a man that's working from sun up to sun down, he isn't paying any taxes, and he is bringing home cash money. Why do [they] need food stamps and extra money?”

Toya believes that there is an advantage in the fact that Mexican women are able to receive untaxed income from their husband's jobs in addition to welfare benefits. Similar to how Toya characterizes men who receive welfare, she describes the Mexican population within her community as another group whose privileged conditions should disqualify them from receiving welfare benefits.

First, what Toya concludes about the Mexican population that receives government assistance conflates all Mexican families, and more specifically, Mexican women into a monolithic group with one type of experience. The Mexican welfare mother in Toya's eyes is someone who is not necessarily participating in the labor market herself, but is married to a hard working husband who is able to provide for the family via extensive and laborious work, and most importantly for Toya, work that is paid "under the table," or not subject to income tax. Because of these circumstances, Toya insinuates that the Mexican women who receive welfare are cheating the system. Interestingly though, Toya is the one participant who speaks of how she ask her employers to pay her under the tables so that she can keep her welfare benefits, yet, she is able to justify for herself that the conditions of Mexican families are different from her own. What Toya expresses is a direct expression of a politics of distance where she sets her condition, though the same as the group in which she others, as different; thus serves as a means to bolster her claims on the welfare system.

Secondly, Toya's observations highlights ethnic conflicts between lower class communities which on one hand shows the diversity of experiences amongst lower income people, but more appropriately for my purposes here, is another way in which Toya is able to create herself and her circumstances as distinct. Particularly because the people she describes are

Mexicans in America and because I argue that she adopts notions from the mainstream American value system, it would not be uncommon for her to subscribe to the ideas and biases that believe this group's presence in this country is unsolicited and unwelcome (Ngai 2004). Though she does not explicitly indicate discrimination about the Mexican welfare recipients in her neighborhood, her insinuations rely on stereotypical ideas about Mexicans who gain access to the privileges of American citizens without citizenship or significant contribution to American society. Mexican immigrants are thus characterized as exploitative of American resources and systems, though this is less likely to be true of the Mexicans that Toya sees in the welfare office given that non-citizens are only eligible for WIC and in very rare cases, emergency Medicaid benefits, programs that represent a small portion of the welfare programs available (National Immigration Forum 2019). Nevertheless, ideas about Mexican citizens can affect both Mexican citizens and Mexican non-citizens alike, and Toya's ideas reinforce this circumstance. Again, this is another case of how Toya distances herself as she furthers stereotypes about a group whose circumstances she conceptualizes as very different from her own; however, Toya is not the only participant who employs a politics of distance that reinforces stereotypes about another group in order to make claims on her own benefits.

### ***The Queen Reigns On***

*“Well a lot of our young Black women today have gotten themselves caught up in having babies without any support from the baby's daddies, so they are having two or three or four babies and they can't get out to go work, and they have to have support from the government.”*

What Nora describes as an irresponsible and reckless young mother who is “caught up” with several children and deadbeat fathers alludes to a decades-long stereotype about young Black mothers who are involved in the welfare system. The welfare queen or welfare mother

characterizes a young Black woman who is single, unemployed, financially marginalized, morally deficient, and exploitative of the welfare system to receive benefits for her own personal needs (Hill Collins 1991). Furthermore, classified as the cause of her own poverty, these women are not dependent on men nor have a male figure in their households, but continue to birth children due to their haphazard sexuality. Even worse, these mothers pass their moral corruption to their offspring, and overall, stand as a moral, political, and economic liability for the nation (Hill Collins 1991). Furthermore, the most popular iteration of this politics of distance is one in which my interviewees distinguish themselves from the young Black mothers that they stereotype as welfare queens.

First, similar to Daphne, Nora compares her experience with the welfare system of the past to what she perceives as the experience of welfare recipients in the present. Within this explanation, she describes how “younger people” have a less intensive experience, particularly “young Black women” whom she believes have an easier time getting government assistance even though they “have gotten themselves caught up in having babies without any support from the baby’s daddies.” Nora further explains what she feels about these young women’s reciprocity-

“I would describe them as tryna get over. Um, It has a lot to do with laziness too, you know? And then, you know, getting over cause you see a lot of young mothers out there with hair done nails done, you know? They are all fabulous and the kids looking raggedy and tacky...It’s sad but that’s what they are using the money for instead of using it for their children cause that’s what it’s all about. It’s about the children, you know?”

Nora’s description of these mothers characterizes them as lazy, manipulative, and neglectful, a perception that deeply aligns with rhetoric about the welfare queen that I described earlier. In this



sense, Nora suggests that these mothers are so morally deficient and self-absorbed that they are first able to receive money that they do not deserve by “getting over” on the system, and to make matters worse, they use the money that they wrongfully receive to fulfill their own desires such as hair and nail maintenance. Thus, these mothers are so self-centered and neglectful that they allow their children to suffer at their expense, a moral deficiency in which Nora shuns, especially as she asserts her ideas about motherhood and childbearing where she believes that the mothers’ lives should surround their children’s needs rather than their own needs.

Lastly, Nora also offers a critique of the current welfare system whose policies and procedures she believes are so lenient that they allow these women to take advantage of the system; however, as Nora chuckles, she informs me that “all of that is getting ready to change” because the Trump administration is saying that “[young Black mothers] got to go out there and get a job.” Despite her disapproval of the lifestyles of the women she describes, when I ask Nora if she agrees with the Trump administration, she does not readily concede: “It depends on the situation,” she responds, “cause you have young ladies with two or three kids. They gotta get somebody to take care of the kids. It depends.” Though, Nora does indicate an awareness of the difficulties that these mothers face to find and pay for child care as a result of their involvement in the labor market, she still characterizes these young mothers as lazy and irresponsible.

Daphne, who believes similarly to Nora about the younger generation of Black mothers who can go to the welfare office with several children with unidentified fathers and receive “at least \$100 for each kid,” sets herself as a deserving elderly woman in opposition to these undeserving young mothers-

“They are getting more than we are, and we need it. These young girls are getting \$600- \$700 a month in food stamps and then they are selling them and getting money off of them. The seniors just have to do the best they can with what they have, and we should be getting much more.”

As Daphne is one of the recipients who expresses dissatisfaction with the amount of food stamps benefits that she receives, which in her case is \$15 a month, it is clear that she believes that what these mothers receive in comparison to her own benefits is unfair. For someone like Daphne who has worked her entire life up until she was laid off, it is possible that her feelings are motivated by this. Even more, as an elderly citizen, she states that they “need it,” which is another indication that she feels that she is more entitled to these benefits. Both of these descriptions mimic ideas about who deserves government assistance which in this case, impinges on labor market participation by able-bodied individuals and ideas about the needs of the elderly (Katz 1989). In addition to her construction of young Black mother recipients as less deserving, Daphne also describes them as criminal to further explain why she is more deserving. She explains how rather than using their food stamps to fulfill their grocery need as intended, these women instead sell them to “[get] money off of them.” With this statement, Daphne hints at the immoral, irresponsible, and even criminal nature of these recipients who despite receiving large sums of welfare benefits, use them improperly. Daphne’s description is similar to Nora’s sentiments about how these mothers are constantly “getting over” on the system. Overall, for Daphne, this is even more reason why elderly citizens should receive much more assistance than what they currently receive.

Similar to Daphne, Veronica also speaks about the welfare mother does not deserve the amount of benefits she receives. She discusses how she knows mothers who sell their food stamps for money that they use for their own benefit-

“The ones that sell their food stamps to use the money to buy things that they want as opposed to using the stamps to take care of their family...the ones that I have seen are the young Black mothers... I know of some.”

Through Veronica’s description, we again see another description of the morally deficient young Black mother who is only concerned with her own agenda.

What I found to be most indicative of this attempt to distinguish oneself from the immoral young Black mother was Angie’s description of the welfare queen- “There are people who use [their benefits] for stuff besides taking care of their kids. We see it here in the church. The children come to church and they don’t have no coats...They are the ones who suffer.” Furthermore, Angie herself is a young single Black mother with multiple children with absent fathers, a characterization that is commonly associated with the welfare queen; however, Angie’s description and moreover, disdain of these neglectful mothers positions herself as distinct from them. The characterization and stigma that my interviewees express against the young single Black mother underscores several complex dynamics.

First, what each of these interviewees indicate via their descriptions of the immoral, irresponsible, lazy, and undeserving young Black mother serves as an example of how despite assertions about the mythology of the “welfare queen,” the image of the welfare mother has transcended time, though the use of the terms “welfare queen” and “welfare mother,” are less popular. Furthermore, the iteration of this century-old stereotype in the current moment points to what Angie Marie Hancock describes as a “politic of disgust,” or the way in which public

identities are “developed and shaped for political goals as ideological justifications for public policy” (Hancock 2006).

Specifically, in terms of the welfare queen, Hancock’s theory contends that in the 1960s, President Reagan created the image of the welfare queen to justify and gain support for limiting resources allocated towards the welfare system (Hancock 2006). Via the use of attitudes about race combined with presumptions about class and gender, Reagan was able to rally the support to implement public policy that would deter welfare queen’s across the nation. Consequently, as Hancock describes, because the public identity of “citizens who lack political equality” consist of others “perceptions, interpretations, and manipulations,” these identities endure over time and “impoverish the potential for empowered participation by citizens saddled with such identities” (Hancock 2006). In other words, the manipulation of the image of the Black welfare mother that is laced with racial, class, and gender stereotypes, became the prevailing image about Black women welfare recipients, but most importantly, their devalued position disallows the true images that they create for and about themselves to be disseminated in the same way as the image of the welfare queen. What is most important for her is that these images, despite the termination of the economic, political, and cultural conditions in which these images erupted, continue to condition how single Black women welfare recipients of particular welfare programs are both represented and treated. The women who identify this welfare queen help to promote the existence of this image.

Nevertheless, while several scholars such as Hancock and Collins have done the work of uncovering the racial, class, and gender biases instituted in welfare policies and programs, and consequently, places this phenomenon in conversation with white supremacist, patriarchal, and

neo-liberal capitalist values, my study hones in on a different dynamic (Hancock 2006; Hill Collins 1990). While the continued existence and impact of the welfare queen trope shows that it is important to continue this discussion about how welfare policy represents institutionalized discrimination that most profoundly affects those at the intersection of race, gender, and class, in this study, I am interested in how and why these values that indict Black women have become reiterated and deployed by Black women themselves.

First, to explain this phenomenon, I turn to Patricia Hill Collins to understand the process of othering as a means for self-construction. Collins believes that the social world works in dichotomies that allow for one group to measure itself against the other. She explains that the former end of the dichotomy is what marks what is deemed appropriate while the latter side marks all that is deviant (Hill Collins 1990). Furthermore, the recognition and institution of “otherness” and marking oneself in relationship to the other is what allows for the maintenance of this subjugation because the “other” clarifies what it means to be normal (Hill Collins 1990). Moreover, this process has two main results: first, it gives those who are on the former side of the dichotomy the authority to define existing symbols or stereotypes and utilize their power to exploit these symbols, and secondly, because those who are characterized as the “other” are not included in what is right, they become a threat to social order (Hill Collins 1990). Hill Collins uses this theory to explain the domineering images and stereotypes of Black womanhood that have been exploited, circulated, and used to maintain power over Black women (Hill Collins 1990). Interestingly though, as my interviewees engage in politics of distance, they participate in the maintenance of symbols about groups whom they place themselves in opposition to such as men, Mexican welfare recipients, other Black women.

Some studies treat the internalization and expression of stereotypes about one's own group as a form of survival. For example, within the dynamics of the politics of respectability, individuals demoralized and othered Black people who did not align to this standard of living as a means to protect the collective identity of Black womanhood. Likewise, for Ray's identity of distance, the young girls stigmatized young mothers in addition to policing their own bodies as a means to protect themselves from stereotypes about their sexuality. Perhaps, my interviewees that express a politics of distance also express this othering as a form of survival. For instance, Angie's stigmatization of the young Black mother could be motivated by her own proximity to the factors that help to name these other women as welfare queens; therefore, as a means for survival, Angie deflects this image via a politics of distance. Nevertheless, I do not believe my study has enough evidence to conclude that my participants use politics of distance as a means for survival; however, as I have demonstrated throughout this last chapter, I believe my study instead shows that via my participants' expressions of politics of distance, they showcase their individual politics about morality, poverty, family, and work that are adaptations of a mainstream political consciousness.

Though the positionality of these women as Black women welfare recipients technically places them in opposition to some of the notions about race, gender, and class that are distributed via the mainstream American value and belief system, I argue that these women still adopt this rhetoric because they conceptualize themselves as different, and as a result, express themselves as different from what the American value system believes of their identity. In this case, because these women see themselves as different from those within the groups they stigmatize, it is acceptable for them to also express stigmas against other oppressed individuals.

Lastly, what I argue about Black women's adaptation of mainstream political values challenges ideas about group or identity solidarity and ideas that all Black women have adopted a value system that is outside of mainstream political values. What these women engage in is self-identity work, rather than collective identity work which is what makes the women in my study different from other groups of Black women throughout history such as the 20th Century Southern Black Baptist women. The term "identity work" refers to "the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1348). The women in my study engage in self-identity work to further their own agenda rather than the identity of Black women as a collective.

In addition, with the existence of Black feminist theory and politics that aims to center and elevate the voices of Black women and articulate a value system that is specific to Black womanhood, these movements and the ideas that they set forth can be misinterpreted as representative of a group identity. In this sense, the voices of a few Black women and their political standings become the voice for all Black women, especially when the stakes are high, public, and involve a fight for rights and freedoms. Similar to what Kimberlé Crenshaw contends, the fault of identity politics lies in that it "frequently conflates or ignores intra-group differences"; ignoring intra-group dynamics does not take into consideration the ways in which other variables such as class and sexuality, alter experiences and worldviews (Crenshaw 1991, 1242). What Crenshaw offers is similar to what other identity scholars highlight that contends that both "structural" factors and the settings where identity is performed can limit aims towards a united collective identity (Glass 2009). For example, as I express throughout my study, the of

my participants are stratified based on economic standing in which some participants are less economically stable than others; this affects the ways in which they interpret their experiences and can lead to differing identity construction outcomes. In conclusion, as mainstream American citizens, these women believe themselves to have access to political rights and liberties, value a set of moral and political beliefs that are demonstrated through democratic principles, and in this sense, have claims to the welfare system assistance. In other words, despite the negative history that America has with race, class, and social status that has resulted in unequal circumstances and discrimination for individuals who are non-white, non-middle or upper-class men, most of my interviewees still themselves as citizens of mainstream American culture.



## Concluding Remarks

Based on six interviews that I conducted with Black women welfare recipients in Atlanta, their narratives reveal that though they share a common footing as Black women, their diversification of morals, backgrounds, beliefs, experiences, and interpretations result in their varied expressions about the welfare system. What my study most relays is that social class and adherence to white, patriarchal, middle-class dominant order is where the welfare system is most active in terms of whom it favors and whom it denies. Welfare is inappropriately considered a site in which class dynamics are assumed, but as my study shows, intra-class dynamics and levels of financial vulnerability play a significant role in conditioning my participants' experiences. Additionally, white middle-class values as they are ingrained into the structures and institutions of the U.S. will continue to prove dominant unless rejected.

Moreover, as an extension of Black feminist literature about the United States welfare regime, what becomes most important for me is that the welfare system remains a site of oppression that is most burdensome for low-income, single, Black mothers, so much so, that even Black women themselves take part in maintaining this oppression. Women such as Toya and Angie who are the most vulnerable participants in my study told their stories of struggle that were, at most times, furthered by the welfare system. What is most troubling though, is that Toya and Angie's stories are only a few amongst the many poor, Black women across the country who experience similar conditions. In this regard, my study also proves the urgency of intersectional approaches that not only focus on the intersections of race and gender, but also takes seriously the implication of class because without this framework, the overwhelmingly brutal

circumstances of those most indicted by the United States's history of racial, gender, and class discrimination would remain unseen.

Furthermore, through my research, I answer how the women in my study experience the welfare system which I prove is varied based on their backgrounds and adherence to the family-wage standard. In addition, I answer how my interviewees interpret their experiences with the system by exposing how via whom or what they blame for their circumstances, they convey their belief system which informs what they feel about their experiences. Finally, I answer my last question about how these experiences and interpretations are conceptualized by my participants by revealing that through enacting distance from other recipients, they see themselves and construct themselves as full rights-bearing members of the U.S. polity. However, even after this research, I am still left with a number of questions: whom or what actually is to blame for the circumstances of financial instability and the lack of sufficient resources to help the most impoverished people?; what are the implications for Black womanhood if even Black women themselves attack other identities within this group?; if the current model of the welfare system is insufficient, what is the alternative?; is the welfare system actually beyond repair?

Though I am unable to fully answer many of the questions that I pose, I am able to provide a few things to ponder upon. First, I believe my study shows that it is important to take serious the accounts of Black women themselves and what they themselves express as their needs. As my research indicates there is a diversification of backgrounds, experiences, values, and moreover, expressions of Black womanhood that not even my study captures the extent of. Therefore, in instances such as when Toya describes needs such as free schooling, job training, and other resources in order to achieve social mobility, though this need expresses an opposition

to what feminist welfare theorist argue about these services, we should take what these theories set forth, but also balance with real lived experiences of individuals who operate within these systems. Secondly, while I particularly focus on the welfare system and the effects of this system in light of the history of Black women's treatment in the United States, Black women's marginalization is not unique to the welfare system. Other institutions such as schools, the prison system, child protective services, and rehabilitation centers, to name a few, also have histories that continue to marginalize, surveil, and police Black women, especially low-income Black women. This points to the need for continuous exposure of these circumstances and the rejection of these oppressive conditions.

Lastly, while I am critical of the welfare system, I found myself constantly questioning, if not the system that is in place now, what would an alternative system look like? In line with my attempt to keep the women in my study at the center, I posed this question to my participants. Both Daphne and Nora indicate that elderly people should receive more benefits; Dorinda speaks of how she wants to refurbish old, abandoned buildings to create shelters to alleviate homelessness in the city; Angie and Toya both indicate that universal housing policies that would provide free housing to both low and middle income people would help alleviate a majority of their circumstances with financial instability. In my own opinion, though not as cost effective, I think an adaptation of a social-democratic welfare regime that I discuss in my first chapter would prove a valuable framework to adopt. These considerations could prove transformational to the welfare system that is, in its current state, seemingly beyond repair.

**Appendix 1: Program Abbreviations**

ADC: Aid to Dependent Children

AFDC: Aid to Families with Dependent Children

GNAP: Georgia Nutritional Assistance Program

PRWORA: Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.

SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as Food Stamps.

SSI: Supplemental Security Income

SSDI: Social Security Disability Insurance

TANF: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

WIC: Women, Infants and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program

## Appendix 2: Interview Questions

1. What benefits do you or have you received?
2. When did you first start receiving benefits and how long have you been receiving them?
3. Tell me about why you decided to sign up. Describe to me what this was like for you.
4. (If not answered in previous question) Tell me about how you got by before you decided to sign up for benefits.
5. Tell me what it was like to sign up.

### Prompting Questions if necessary-

- a. What did you have to do to be eligible?
- b. Where did you go?
- c. Did you have to meet anyone?
- d. How did you feel?
6. Describe to me what it was like receiving these services.
  - a. Can you give me an example of a time or period while receiving these benefits that most stands out for you.
7. Have you ever lost eligibility? If so, Why? What was this experience like?
8. Tell me about how you got by after you signed up for benefits.
  - a. Did anything change from before?
  - b. (If not answered)-Do you think the benefits you receive are sufficient/suitable? Why or why not? What are your other needs?
9. Do you know other black women who receive benefits? Have you ever talked to them about their services?
10. How have others ie family, friends, employers etc. responded to you receiving benefits?
11. Describe to me your feelings about how people who are struggling financially are treated.
  - a. Describe to me your feelings about the way Black women who receive benefits are treated.

### *Demographic Questions*

1. Are you currently employed?
2. What is your household income?
3. What is your relationship status?
4. Do you have children? How many?

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