

Contending with the Politics of Disgust

Public Identity through Welfare Recipients' Eyes

Lost are the voices of mothers who receive welfare, yet speak with pride and strength. (L. Williams 1995, 1194)

I began this book with a portrait of Bertha Bridges, a Detroit welfare recipient whose life was “a nightmare”—her words. Congressman Scott McInnis (R-CO) used her story as an ideological justification for his ideas regarding welfare reform, not Bertha’s ideas about improving her life. I characterized this behavior as a perversion of democratic attention: employing the story of a less-empowered citizen to advance one’s own political purposes. Absent a strong and effective National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) in 1996, what was the response of recent welfare recipients to the persistent misconceptions about them?

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 provide ample evidence of the public identity of the “welfare queen” in historical context, media discourse, and congressional debate. They document how cues of the “welfare queen” public identity undergirded both sides of the 1996 welfare reform debate. The discursive hegemony of this public identity prevents accurate information about welfare recipients from being integrated into citizens’ preexisting beliefs about the identities of welfare recipients. It also bombards welfare recipients themselves with “demeaning imagery of who society says she is” (L. Williams 1995, 1193; see also Steele and Sherman, 1999). To this point, I have emphasized how the public identity of the “welfare queen” played a role in shaping the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996. In this chapter, I want to focus on the more personal

political outcomes for mothers receiving public assistance just before and after 1996.

Two former welfare recipients have emphasized welfare mothers' response to the distorted images found in the media and Congress about them. Wahneema Lubiano writes:

The cumulative totality, circulation and effect of these meanings in a time of scarce resources among the working class and the lower class is devastatingly intense. The “welfare queen” represents moral aberration and an economic drain, but the figure’s problematic status becomes all the more threatening once responsibility for the destruction of the “American way of life” is attributed to it. (Lubiano 1992, 339)

Sandy Smith Madsen, another former welfare mother, concurs: “[M]ost welfare mothers know their precarious places and wisely, question nothing” (Madsen 1998, A44). Madsen’s article discussed the welfare agency experiences of welfare recipients who pursue higher education, to which I will attend later in this chapter. Recent empirical evidence reveals that many welfare clients would not challenge a situation unless it constituted a predicament extremely detrimental to their children (Soss 1999, 366).

My purpose in this chapter is to explore how welfare recipients contend with the politics of disgust in 1996 and beyond. Instead of exclusively using media and legislative documents, I seek a richer treatment of the complex reality of their lives by including the results of seven in-depth interviews and other quotations from welfare recipients themselves.¹ In addition to illustrating the four aspects of the politics of disgust—perversion of democratic attention; an inegalitarian communicative context; the failure of representative thinking; and lack of solidarity—I will again distinguish between the stereotypes and moral judgments of public identity and the facts regarding welfare recipients, despite decades of scholars’ previous attempts to do just that (Jennings 1994, 26).

The Perversion of Democratic Attention

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 show how our attention is drawn in very specific ways to the need for welfare reform through cues of the “welfare queen” public identity. The perversion of democratic attention emerges not sim-

ply in the story about Bertha Bridges or in the profile in this chapter of any welfare recipient. Another disturbing manifestation of democratic attention gone awry was the association of welfare recipients with animals, particularly animals with detrimental characteristics. These metaphorical associations again take the multivariied realities of welfare recipients' lives and reduce them to their most base common denominator. In this sense, such allusions are very closely related to psychological findings regarding cues of disgust as an emotion (Rozin, Haidt, et al. 1999, 332; Keltner and Haidt 1999, 513; Rozin, Lowery, et al. 1999, 575).

The reduction of women on welfare, and the women of color who are assumed to be, to animals is not a new phenomenon (White, 1985; Giddings, 1984). In chapter 2, I noted Senator Russell Long's term "brood mares," used to refer to the Black and Puerto Rican welfare recipients testifying before the Senate Finance Committee he chaired (West 1981; L. Williams 1995). This then turned into his ideological justification for workfare: "If they can find the time to march in the streets, picket and sit all day in committee hearing rooms, they can find the time to do some useful work" (quoted in L. Williams, 1995, 1184). By reducing welfare recipients to animals, Long first strips them of citizenship, then humanity. He goes further to propose a policy solution—"useful work"—defined on his terms, of course, not the terms of welfare mother activists. The abstraction of mothers from their respective political contexts for use as an ideological justification of the speaker's own imposed policy solution is a hallmark manifestation of the perversion of democratic attention.

The actions of Senator Long in 1970 were echoed by Representative John Mica (R-FL) in the 1996 welfare reform debate, as these text units from a *New York Times* article included in the media data set documents:

Today's debate featured a veritable menagerie of animal imagery. Representative John L. Mica, Republican of Florida, held up a sign that said, "Don't Feed the Alligators" and he explained: "We post these warnings because unnatural feeding and artificial care create dependency.

"When dependency sets in, these otherwise able alligators can no longer survive on their own. Now I know that people are not alligators, but I submit to you that with our current handout, non-work welfare system, we've upset the natural order. We've created a system of dependency. The author of our Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, said it best in three words: 'Dependence begets servitude.'" (Appendix A, 17)

The evocative image of an alligator, commonly thought to be a rapacious animal, was conveyed both visually by Representative Mica's use of a sign, as well as verbally. Despite Mica's assertion that he knows "people are not alligators" and Representative Barney Frank's (D-MA) verbal protest (without a counter visual), the image still serves as an ideological justification for a specific piece of legislation. As is the case with the "welfare queen" more generally, such animal allusions were raised by both sexes, as is evident from the words of Representative Barbara Cubin (R-WY):

Representative Barbara Cubin, Republican of Wyoming, drew a similar lesson from experience in her state. "The Federal Government introduced wolves into the State of Wyoming, and they put them in pens, and they brought elk and venison to them every day," she said. "This is what I call the wolf welfare program.

"The Federal Government provided everything that the wolves need for their existence. But guess what? They opened the gates and let the wolves out, and now the wolves won't go. Just like any animal in the species, any mammal, when you take away their freedom and their dignity and their ability, they can't provide for themselves, and that is what the Democrats' proposal does on welfare." (Ibid.)

In this case wolves—another animal culturally constructed in our society as rapacious, is used to communicate the same point.

In addition to their metaphorically associating welfare recipients with predatory creatures, members of Congress also emphasized a "tough love" approach to presumably recalcitrant welfare mothers: "Earlier, House Ways and Means Chairman Rep. Clay Shaw Jr., who shepherded welfare repeal legislation through the House, stated, 'It may be like hitting a mule with a two by four but you've got to get their attention'" (quoted in Polakow 1997, 7). Such repeated insults provide qualitative evidence of the perversion of democratic attention, a primary feature of the politics of disgust. Crocker, Major, and Steele, in their comprehensive review of social stigma, point out: "Many of the predicaments of being stigmatized involve awareness of how one is viewed by others, and constructions of the meaning and causes of others' behavior" (1998, 543). How do welfare recipients react to the problems of perversion?

Recent findings by Joe Soss (1999) confirm that many welfare recipients react just as Sandy Smith Madsen predicted: most do nothing, polit-

ically speaking, in response to this first aspect of the politics of disgust (367). Their immediate response to the media dissemination of the “welfare queen” public identity and the politics of disgust focuses on an aspect of their life that they can control their children: “On several occasions, women recalled turning off the television because they did not want their children to hear what was being said about them” (Soss 1999, 368).

My interviews further support Soss’s finding that welfare recipients know very well what is believed about them. Lapis, a 20-year-old mother of one infant who was also a new Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) recipient provides one example. Here, I’ve asked her what Congress would say about people who receive AFDC/TANF benefits:

They, ’cause pretty much a lot of the Congress people, they really don’t care too much about welfare because they are not the ones who need it. So they probably would, you know, say cut it off or something like that. Because they feel like it’s too many taxpayers paying money for women who don’t want to get a job and don’t want to take care of themselves or their kids. But once again it is not always that easy. When you are pregnant or you have a new baby, you can’t work all the time. You got to be cautious of your health from being pregnant and cautious of your baby’s health when your baby is first born and things like that. So, it’s not like you just want to sit back and collect the check that is not much.

Another interview with a former welfare recipient echoes Lapis’s comments. Isis was able to leave welfare and public housing following the death of a parent; she inherited a house with no mortgage and now works for a cable company:

Interviewer: What do you think Congress would say about women on welfare?

Isis: They don’t want nobody on welfare, they want to cut it completely. They don’t want to give them any incentives to go back to work, like child care, probably want to cut the child care, subsidized child care, too.

Interviewer: What do you think [former mayor of San Francisco] Willie Brown would say about women on welfare?

Isis: I think Willie Brown feels that we should be able to support ourselves, than welfare. I think to keep himself in office he’s saying

that he's for it. I don't believe he really believes that. So he's just trying to stay in office with subsidized housing and welfare.

Steele and Sherman (1999) have also documented the psychological responses of women on welfare. In concurrence with Soss, these authors focus on responses to behavioral stimuli—such as treatment at the social services office or by the police. Yet as the above quotations from the media data, Congress, and interviews show, discriminatory treatment is not the sole debilitating factor in the lives of welfare recipients. Many are also aware of the discursive distortions that exist as part of the politics of disgust.

A Communicative Context Marked by Gross Inequality

The very large microphones possessed by those who subscribe to the public identity of the “welfare queen” most clearly exemplify the problem posed by this second aspect of the politics of disgust. As I acknowledged in chapter 3, the media data set did not produce a unanimous stereotype that welfare recipients do not work. In fact, 26 text units presented welfare mothers who were either working or in job training programs. Yet a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of these units again reiterates the overwhelming deafening power of the large microphones.

The 26 text units portraying mothers as workers represent 4 percent of all the text units coded at *Public Identity*, occurring in 8 documents, or 5 percent of the 149-article sample. The emphasis in news media coverage centered on working a job—any job—in order to develop a work ethic believed to be lacking in the welfare population. The portraits of Desiree Stewart, Octavia Cavalier, and Rhonda Small, however, reflect a preexisting work ethic and the political value of economic individualism. In an article about microlending as a structural solution to poverty, the *Christian Science Monitor* presents two entrepreneurs, one of whom is Desiree Stewart:

Desiree Stewart's hair salon is just over one year old. The equipment is used, the pipes are bad, and there are no mirrors on the walls—yet. But the growing Chicago business is making a profit and, if things go as planned, the single mother will soon be able to get off welfare for the first time in seven years. (Appendix A, 54)

Although Stewart has spent seven years in the welfare system, it is unlikely that she was forced to begin her business as part of state or local welfare reform efforts, which center on finding a job—any job. Contrary to the notion of work-ethic atrophy attributed to welfare mothers who are long-term recipients, these excerpts demonstrate that change is possible with the right policies.

The focus of the *Monitor* article, however, is not on the journey of self-transformation that an individualist explanation of poverty would produce. Rather, it is on microlending as a potential structural resource for economically empowering women in pursuit of financial independence, not a rehabilitated work ethic in each woman. In this sense, Stewart is no different from many in the United States who seek a better life through a small business or education. The importance of structural assistance was likewise not lost on the second welfare mother entrepreneur portrayed in the article:

For someone like Octavia Cavalier in Alexandria, Va., \$250 was all she needed to buy a vacuum cleaner, gas for her car and some flyers to advertise her cleaning service. (Ibid.)

In keeping with the individualist nature of American political culture, however, the microlending program through which both Stewart and Cavalier obtained funding for a small business is considered unworkable in the United States for individualist reasons, including the behaviors of the American poor—specifically violence and distrust in inner cities.² Thus, many welfare mothers who follow the system and hope to get out from under with the quintessential American dream of owning a business must wait.

Rhonda Small is another welfare recipient portrayed as working and receiving benefits—a clear contradiction of the *Don't Work* stereotype:

Small, 22, says she opts to work because she believes it will give her financial independence. But battling long hours for low wages and job experience has, in turn, pitted her against the web of AFDC restrictions that tightly dictate how much she may earn and how she should seek work. Her waitress earnings alone would have caused her \$420 monthly AFDC check to be reduced according to a complex formula. But because Small delayed telling the District about her job, the cut went deeper than usual, to \$378. (Appendix A, 90)

The above paragraphs clearly portray welfare recipients as being willing to work, contrary to the idea that they are *Lazy* and want something for nothing. Elena Roman and others at her job-attainment program Future Works simply seek a wage that will keep them out of the system:

Several women at Future Works who were interviewed after the Governor [Christine Todd Whitman (R-NJ)] left said they agreed with limiting benefits, as long as decent-paying jobs—and training to qualify for them—were available. (Appendix A, 45)

The consensus for welfare reform as expressed by welfare recipients themselves could not be more apparent. Yet two key differences between these policy solutions and those in the dominant discourse emerge. First, Desiree Stewart and Octavia Cavalier reflect a very tiny percentage of the welfare population: recipients with access to small-business capital. Second, Rhonda Small and Elena Roman seek jobs that will keep them out of the system. This means, essentially, a job with a living wage.

Figures from the 2000 U.S. Census indicate that a woman without a high school diploma makes an average of \$11,432. The poverty threshold for a family of three (one parent, two children) in 2000 was \$13,874 (U.S. Department of Commerce, *Current Population Reports*, 2000). The poverty guideline used by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to determine welfare program eligibility, was \$14,150 in 2000. Obviously, it is not just *any* job that will bring a family out of welfare need. Prior to passage of the PRWA (1993), more than 40 percent of mothers on AFDC worked approximately 900 hours a year, closely mirroring the overall labor force participation of working mothers (Polakow 1994, 11), facts ignored by both the media and Congress. Working AFDC mothers were in 4 percent of the media text units and did not appear at all in the *Congressional Record* data set. *More than ten times that percentage actually worked prior to the 1996 welfare reform.*

The critical implication of this ongoing quantitative distortion speaks directly to the silencing of mothers receiving AFDC. Having scarcely a voice does not meet the standard for democratic participation, an argument I take up in chapter 6. Here, the inequality of access to mass communication unmistakably reveals the presence of the politics of disgust. From a qualitative level, the mothers who work are cited by name, age, location, and other general information of their lives—just enough detail for readers or viewers to dismiss their individual stories of hard work and

striving as exceptional (see L. Williams 1995, 1167) instead of being representative of the 70 percent of welfare recipients who work (Appendix A, 122). Thus the in-depth coverage of individual welfare mothers does very little to challenge the conventional beliefs of many Americans regarding the work habits of women receiving AFDC/TANF, largely due to a communicative context in which the portrayal of their lives hardly reflects their reality.

The Failure of Representative Thinking

The paucity of media portraits of working welfare recipients is a glut compared to the counterstereotypical portraits of welfare recipients in the content domain of reproduction. In chapters 1 and 4, I note the failure of representative thinking among members of Congress and its relationship to the problematic policy formulations concerning paternal identification and child support. Two examples from the media dataset articulate the clash of these policies with the reality of welfare recipients' complex lives and choices:

One night seven years ago, the ninth-grade dropout with a pretty smile went to a bar and met a man named Mark. "To put it bluntly," the shy, 32-year-old woman says now, "it was a one-night stand." She never knew Mark's last name, but their encounter led to the birth of her son. A few months later, the baby got sick, and his mother—who asked not to be identified because she's afraid of what her neighbors might think—quit work to stay home with him. Then she went on welfare. (Appendix A, 92)

Christiansburg—one town over from Blacksburg on the way to Charleston, West Virginia, to the northwest, or Roanoke, Virginia, to the east—was one of the first areas to feel the complexity of paternal identification policies under Virginia's new welfare reform programs. The woman with a pretty smile and a shy demeanor worried about a future on welfare in a small rural town—far from any inner city—because of the threat of "noncompliance" with paternal identification policies and the subsequent ramifications for her child.

The 1996 PRWA had no mandated exception to the termination of benefits based on incapacity to name the father for child support

enforcement. Congress left the decision to create exemptions in cases of rape or other extenuating circumstances up to the states. The Christiansburg mother may not perhaps present a sympathetic figure, given her admitted “one-night stand,” but similar cases abound. One woman in such circumstances is Mary Wilson, an Alexandria, Virginia, grandmother:

PHOTO [caption]: Mary F. Wilson, of Alexandria, receives assistance to care for six grandchildren, including Patrick, 11, far left, Chris, 3, and Rol, 4. She is unable to name the children’s fathers. (Ibid.)

Forty-eight-year-old Wilson faces the threat of benefit reduction because she is able to name only *some* of the fathers of her six grandchildren under her care. She remains resolved to address the situation by any means necessary:

There is Mary F. Wilson, a 48-year-old Alexandria woman raising her six grandchildren, who was told last fall that the family would lose some of the \$518 it received each month if she could not identify the father of 11-year-old Patrick. Wilson’s reply: Six men had fathered her daughter’s children, and her daughter was now in a mental hospital and incapable of cooperating.

“I will make it. I will do it any way to make ends meet,” Wilson said. “But you know, the kids shouldn’t have to suffer. . . . It wasn’t they that willed to be born here.” (Ibid.)

Former welfare mother and congresswoman Lynn Woolsey worked diligently to improve child support laws tied to welfare reform, a necessary component of poverty alleviation. Yet as most experts note, the fathers required to pay child support are often poor or unemployed themselves, thus pursuit of child support, although commendable, does not serve to completely eradicate poverty from the lives of many welfare mothers.

Had that plan [the PRWA] been the law when Woolsey found herself the sole support of her children, ages 1, 3 and 5, she might not have made it. Even with a couple of years of college, good health and a job as office manager at a small electronics firm, it took her three years to get off welfare. (Appendix A, 134)

Woolsey is not the average or typical welfare mother in terms of her skill or education level, though the article correctly cites her as typical in terms of race and marital status (“husband gone”). The article argues that as a former welfare recipient, she has a special insight into welfare reform. Yet regardless of Woolsey’s typicality, her statement reads no differently based on her welfare experience:

“When some people sit at home getting a check while other people have to work two or three jobs to make ends meet, of course working people are furious,” she says. “But I have faith in the American public that they will invest in welfare if it puts people back to work.” (Ibid.)

Yet the facts about welfare recipients reveal that the “feminization of poverty” for women considered part of the “persistently poor” is explained primarily by low wages paid to them, not the lack of a husband (Jennings 1994, 20; see also Martin and Giannaros 1990). Woolsey used her personal middle-class-based experience as a lens to analyze the lives of most welfare recipients, who lack her level of education or her previous economic status. Woolsey’s education—two years of college—empowered her to land a job paying a living wage as an office manager. However, postsecondary education was not the primary arena in which she sought to have effective influence in the welfare reform bill.

The representative elected to throw her efforts behind adequate child support rather than pushing for educational allowances that would encourage economic independence by facilitating welfare recipients’ ability to earn living wages for themselves. As I note in chapter 4, Woolsey, despite her unique status as the only former welfare mother in Congress, joined other women representatives in the fight for adequate child support, binding women to another source of financial support instead of encouraging education as a path to improved job opportunities for women on welfare.

Welfare recipients such as Sheryl Brisco consistently demonstrated an interest in pursuing an education. She challenged the welfare system’s right to ruin her life by terminating benefits for lack of work:

“I don’t think the welfare department should have the right to tell me when I have to drop out of school!” Brisco shouted in anger, then in tears. “I’m doing what I’m supposed to do. And on top of that, now you

all are telling me there's a possibility I won't be able to receive that check long enough for me to get my education?" (Appendix A, 117)

Brisco's dreams were also on hold in the era of welfare reform. At the age of twenty-two, she was studying office systems technology at Reynolds Community College in Virginia and receiving public assistance for two pre-school-aged children. Sheryl Brisco is not alone. Consider these similar experiences of four women from around the United States who pursued education despite the penalties they suffered for doing so:

First they gave me a hard time about my major. They saw that I was doing secretarial work for my father and told me they wanted me to get further training in that line of work because it was something I already had experience at. I told them that I was interested in child development and working with the deaf. But they told me I should forget those things, threatening that if I didn't change my major they would take away my childcare subsidy. . . . By the end of my second year of classes, I had an offer to work at a Montessori school. All I needed to get the job was my AA degree. That was when the welfare department decided to pull my childcare. They said they would continue to help with childcare while I was at work but not during the hours that I was at school. I was forced to drop out of school to go to work. [Salt Lake City, Utah—White female] (GROWL 2002, 6)

When I first spoke with my caseworker about going to school, she said she didn't think that I could enroll in school and remain on welfare. It was clear she was not willing to help me. I enrolled in college without even asking. In one year, I graduated with my A.A. degree in business administration. I wanted to continue towards a B.A. degree. That's where the problems started. My caseworker told me that I could not transfer. I informed her that I had two other friends who had transferred and were doing just fine. She said that she couldn't imagine it working out for me. . . . She told me I could make good enough money with an A.A., and that if I pursued the idea of transferring, my benefits would be stopped. When fall came and school began, I began submitting my school hours as part of my work hours. My benefits were cut off for four months. I filed an appeal and they had to back pay me for everything. But the hassles have continued. [Oakland, Calif.—Black female] (GROWL 2002, 7)

When my youngest child was five months old, I enrolled in a GED program, but my caseworker made me quit. She said I would need a babysitter, and welfare wouldn't pay for that, so I'd have to wait until all my kids had started school. . . . In 1999 I tried again with a computer program that had a contract with the Human Resources Administration. The welfare office approved it but six weeks later the office called me back and told me that I must leave the program. My caseworker said that I had to drop out and work wherever they sent me. They wanted me to work cleaning a park. I said no and walked out. After a month they cut off my transportation money. I couldn't afford bus fare, so I began walking from Brooklyn to the middle of Manhattan. For four months I walked six hours a day just to stay in the computer training program. Everything was going really well. I was really advanced; I knew how to type 65 words per minute, I was learning everything about Microsoft Word. I had one year left until graduation. I was really excited about the opportunity to become self-sufficient. The last four months of the program was an internship where they would have sent me to work for a company, on the payroll. If the company liked my work, they would hire me permanently, with benefits. But then welfare took away my child care money. For all these months, I had been walking, and here I was almost through the program, but now my babysitter quit because I couldn't pay her, and I couldn't leave my children alone for fear of them being taken away from me. So I had to leave the program. [Brooklyn, N.Y.—Latina] (GROWL 2002, 10)

Once I got a job, I was going to school two days a week and working three days a week at Cobble Hill Nursing Home. I worked in exchange for my welfare benefits—\$150 every two weeks. So I was working for 77 cents an hour. Cobble Hill liked me. The director of volunteers told me they were willing to send me to a college for training to get my CAN certificate and that they would be interested in hiring me on after that. The director was a beautiful person and saw my potential. This was the only time I can remember that I had been offered an opportunity like that. When I took the paperwork to BEGIN, they told me that I couldn't do it, that it was against regulations for me to leave their program and go to another one and that they would terminate my benefits if I tried. I cried like a baby. . . . I finally left the BEGIN school and found a better GED program elsewhere. Now I go to school and do an internship to fulfill my 35 hours a week work requirement. But they are now hassling

me about childcare and carfare. I had no problem when I was doing their slave work in WEP. Now that I have taken the initiative and am going to another school, the hassles have begun. They stopped paying the babysitter and asked me to fill out another set of forms before they will resume payment. I have done it but have yet to see the money. . . . [Brooklyn, N.Y.—Black female] (GROWL 2002, 14)

Sheryl Brisco and the women profiled above are choosing the proven path out of poverty for every racial and ethnic group in the United States since its founding: education. This path follows for the poor as well. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, the duration of welfare receipt drops 37 percent between recipients without a high school diploma and those with some college (Tin 1996, 3). At the time of the PRWA debate, 81.8 percent of welfare recipients did not have the education credentials to obtain jobs that would provide them with a wage and benefit package that would lift them above the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services guidelines for social welfare program (AFDC/TANF, food stamps, Medicaid, WIC) need. Yet postsecondary education was not discussed as a viable option. Only teen mothers—0.5 percent of the 1995–1996 welfare caseload (Sparks 2003, 180) were encouraged to finish high school.

Yet according to U.S. Census statistics, having a two-year associate's degree gains women more than double the average salary of a woman without a high school diploma. A bachelor's degree would nearly triple a woman's average salary. The 1996 PRWA eradicated the federal guarantee of an exemption from work requirements to pursue an education. Women like Sheryl Brisco were really forced to drop out of school. In the City University of New York system alone, welfare recipient enrollment after 1995 has declined by 82 percent (GROWL 2002, 3).

Women members of Congress chose to fight for a decidedly feminist issue, child support enforcement. This choice abandoned a more efficient poverty-reduction mechanism, postsecondary education. Seeing gender but being blind to class, the representatives failed to use an intersectional analysis and instead were susceptible to correspondence bias. The decades-old welfare situation of partially typical Lynn Woolsey does not correspond to the overwhelming majority of most contemporary welfare recipients' lives. This failure of representative thinking has linked women to another entity for financial support—men—rather than encouraging

their personal economic independence through productive education and living wages. How feminist is that?

Replicating the results of the congressional content analysis, welfare recipients also get conflated with teen mothers, even among the best-intentioned advocates. The most vocal responses among welfare recipients to the politics of disgust arise from former recipients like Lynn Woolsey, Wahneema Lubiano, and Sandy Smith Madsen—women who have an education that provided a path out of poverty rather than just a wage-earning opportunity. Similarly, in an “Open Letter on Single Parenting,” former welfare recipient and now law professor Vernellia Randall responds to former president George H. W. Bush and former vice president Dan Quayle’s attacks on single mothers with a rhetorical argument that both resists and embraces the public identity of the “welfare queen,” leading to very narrow policy options:

I have worked hard to provide my sons with a stable family and I think that you should know more about the type of family you are insulting. Let me tell you a little about my background: I became pregnant with Tshaka (age 21) in 1970 my junior year in college. I was 22 years old, poor and had to apply for welfare. I myself had been raised in a foster home. If I quit school because of pregnancy I was looking at going to work as a maid or a nurses aide. That was the best that I, an African-American without a college degree, could hope for. In fact, I had to lie to get welfare because at the time Texas would not provide welfare payments to college students. So I lied and told them I was unemployed. I am not proud of having lied. But a welfare system which refused to encourage and reward self-sufficiency is the worst of two evils. I can remember being advised to either have an abortion, get married or quit school. I did none of these. (Randall, 1992)

We see above that her description of her background justifies some aspects of the “welfare queen” public identity while resisting others. The writer is reinforcing two parts of the public identity: *System Abuse*, in her lies to the welfare office, and *Single-Parent Family*, in her refusal to marry. However, she also resists the stereotypes of laziness, refusal to work, and dependency, through her determination to complete a college degree. The open letter continues later to reinforce the image that most welfare mothers are teenage mothers, despite the fact that her own experiences began

at age twenty-two. She argues specifically for increases in funding to combat teenage pregnancy and to strengthen parenting skills and family support programs:

Teenage pregnancy is a problem precisely because the pregnancy interrupts the girl's education and thus her opportunity to make a decent income. Welfare does not provide a decent income, neither does minimum wages [*sic*]. At best they provide only a subsistence living. In a country with such an abundance of wealth it's incredible that we give many of our youth nothing more to look forward to than a third class education and a subsistence lifestyle.

If you, Mr. Bush and Mr. Quayle, want to strengthen families then you should support funding programs to prevent teenage pregnancies. You should support adequate funding for education so that every child in this country gets an education which is second to none. You should support programs that assure a job for every adult at an income which provides more than a subsistence lifestyle. You should support the funding of programs that provide for quality, inexpensive child care. You should support the revision of the tax code to allow unlimited deductions for child care through the age sixteen. . . . (Randall 1992)

Like Representative Eva Clayton (D-NC), Randall is not interested in lambasting welfare recipients. Yet she repeats the problem of Eva Clayton and Lynn Woolsey: she displays correspondence bias by conflating welfare recipients with teen mothers. As I have noted, in 1995–1996 teen mothers were 0.5 percent of the AFDC caseload—clearly *welfare recipient* should not be synonymous with *teen mother*! Moreover, like Randall, the median age of welfare recipients at the time of having the first child was 20.3 years (Tin 1996, 1). The average age of women receiving AFDC during the PRWA debate was *30 years*.

Though I focus in chapters 4 and 5 upon the irony of female members of Congress with a commitment to feminism as failures in representative thinking, male representatives are of course no less responsible for designing a policy that only re-tethers poor women to a patriarchal system. Yet in a democracy such as the United States, where descriptive representation is often the only hope for any representation of the underrepresented, the failure of representative thinking among women—be they members of Congress or former welfare mothers with a college education (or both)—is extremely disappointing.

Lack of Solidarity among Traditional Allies

African American and feminist political elites more frequently stand in solidarity with the poor. Yet as the content analyses of chapter 4 reveal, many African American members of Congress distanced themselves from adult welfare recipients and/or perpetuated the distortions of welfare recipients' identities. Interviews with Lapis, Chavi, and Neith all suggest their awareness that Black political elites do not necessarily represent the interests of the Black poor. Like Isis, they share a similar opinion of former mayor of San Francisco Willie Brown, an African American male who is also a liberal Democrat:

Interviewer: What do you think Mayor Brown says or has said about women on welfare?

Chavi: Um, that some, some people give their money to their men instead of taking care of their kids and they're just lazy and don't want to work and stuff like that.

Chavi clearly communicates her belief that Brown is no different from other political elites who may be less inclined to stand in solidarity due to their race.

Neith uses her personal experience with the mayor's office as an anchor for her beliefs about the former mayor's welfare attitudes:

Interviewer: Yeah, do you think anything ever changes?

Neith: No because I voted and different things for Mayor Willie Brown and things he was supposed to get done he never got done. The only thing he really got done was the Treasure Island thing, because where is the other part of the housing, there are only so many women who can go in that area. And they always get the good one; it is good to have good people living in those areas but the ones who really need it the most. Things are tricked too.

Interviewer: How do they pick and choose, they say, you said only the good ones?

Neith: I know a lot of people suffer from substance abuse yes, just like I went to Mayor Willie Brown with different things concerning my issues and he sent other people letters without sending me a letter, I had to fight for my housing.

Neith, who is not a substance abuser or one of the “good ones,” asserts that the mayor plays favorites and does not respond equally to all of his constituents, even when they meet directly with him, as Neith did.

Lapis’s comments speak to a broader lack of solidarity among Black political elites with welfare recipients:

Lapis: Mayor Brown [*laugh*] he . . . I think he’s pretty nonchalant about it too. ’Cause like I have heard him and his good friend, um, supervisor Amos Brown they, I heard them say things like we need to get all the poor people out of San Francisco and they consider people on welfare poor. So they care less about [it] really because they don’t need it.

Interviewer: So those two aren’t related they just have the same last name, right?

Lapis: I don’t know. To me it seems, well, they are good friends. I know that because Supervisor Brown is my pastor too.

Lapis’s comments regarding the Reverend Amos Brown (who, she correctly states, is *not* related to Mayor Willie Brown) also prove interesting. Amos Brown, pastor of Third Baptist Church in San Francisco, is also a longtime civil rights activist and until 2000 was also a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. The tension between the Black church–led mainstream civil rights movement and welfare recipients that I first identify historically in chapter 2 appears to continue today, judging from Lapis’s comments.

Public opinion polls further display the lack of solidarity of the mass public with welfare recipients. A 1997 poll by the Joint Center for

TABLE 5.1
Cross-Racial Consensus Regarding Welfare System Problems

Welfare System Problem	Blacks (%)	Whites (%)	Hispanics (any race) (%)
Fraud and abuse by welfare recipients	72	70	79
Encouraging poor women to have babies out of wedlock by giving cash assistance for children	70	74	70
Providing benefits so generous that recipients have no incentive to work	51	60	55

Data source: 1997 National Opinion Poll, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

TABLE 5.2
*Consensus Regarding Community Service Work
 Requirements, Selected Populations*

Q: In your view, should mothers on welfare be required to do community service work in return for their welfare benefits?

Population	Consensus	
	For (%)	Against (%)
Blacks	72	26
Hispanics	73	22
Whites	80	14
Men	78	18
Women	79	15
Democrat	75	18
Independent	75	13
Republican	83	13

Data source: 1997 National Opinion Poll, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

Political and Economic Studies, a think tank that specializes in African American issues, noted the ongoing consensus regarding both public identity and policy responses. Despite decades of research documenting the differences between Blacks and Whites on issues that cue race, the politics of disgust breaks down racial solidarity among Blacks who might be predicted to favor social welfare programs for a variety of reasons. For example, in responses to a national survey regarding an evaluation of the welfare system and its biggest problems, the cross-racial consensus was undeniable (see Tables 5.1 and 5.2).

The prevalent beliefs about the behaviors of welfare recipients—which have been disproven in this chapter, as well as by decades of scientific research—lead to a strong consensus regarding the policy solution of requiring community service work in exchange for welfare benefits across race, gender, and party identification (see Table 5.2).

The political isolation of welfare recipients, who express many of the same political values (Steele and Sherman 1999) and dreams for their children as do many Americans, is clear. Little solidarity with traditional allies exists despite welfare recipients’ desire to live and work independently. Consider the response of Neith:

Interviewer: The next question I have is what do you want your children to do when they grow up? Do you have any particular dreams for them?

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Neith: Um, basically I want them to get a career, go to school, go to college, and be what they want to be.

We see in this chapter the ways that welfare recipients are exactly like us *and* not like us. In other words, a diversity of experiences and complexity of lives emerge that are not reducible to unemployment and giving birth. Yet, the politics of disgust obscures the similarities and differences between welfare recipients and nonrecipients that are most relevant to their chances to escape poverty. Whether they have lofty dreams of a college education, a thriving business, or simply a living wage, welfare mothers face the conundrum of being required to work without structural supports for economic independence such as a college education or small business funding. Such supports are readily available to most American citizens; the only condition required is a modicum of financial standing, most often produced when workers are paid a living wage. Most of us assume, as Sheryl Brisco did, that if we play by the rules, we will reach the goal we have set for ourselves. The key difference is, unlike Brisco, usually we are right.

Conclusion

Confronting the politics of disgust—the perversion of democratic attention; the gross inequality of the communicative context; the failure of representative thinking; and the lack of solidarity among traditional allies—can be devastatingly intense, to use Wahneema Lubiano’s summation. The discussion in this chapter focuses upon clearing away the politics of disgust in order to present the words of welfare mothers themselves as they speak for themselves about the multifaceted realities of their lives, their political awareness, and the policy solutions they pursue to end their poverty. This chapter is designed to be an intervention in a discourse that largely silences them. Although they speak in mediated voices for themselves a certain percentage of the time, they are spoken *about* much more frequently.

The primary policy solutions emerging from welfare recipients’ words are the pursuit of postsecondary education and living-wage jobs, as well as dramatic increases in attention to the role of domestic violence in their lives. Since passage of the PRWA, many states have passed domestic-violence exemptions from paternal identification requirements, but the fed-

eral government has not yet mandated that all states do so. Similarly, only some states permit welfare recipients to count postsecondary education toward their work requirement.

The most recent renewal process, initiated by the administration of President George W. Bush, has focused on neither of these policy prescriptions. Instead, it has sought to promote and strengthen the incentives for marriage, an extension of using fathers as proxies for government support. The alternative path, encouraging women's economic independence, remains ignored. I discuss the Bush plan for the renewal of the PRWA in the epilogue. Yet it seems clear from even this brief recapitulation that the politics of disgust rolls on.

The personal snapshots featured in this section are admittedly and understandably sympathetic. Yet even the wealth of portraits and public opinion surveys enumerated in this chapter fail to consistently articulate any structural critiques. The mothers are characterized as fighting with a "bad" social welfare system that is portrayed as isolated from the country's other economic and political structures, particularly a changing labor market that requires low-wage service workers for growth and profit.

The ongoing evidence of the politics of disgust highlights a troubling problem for our democracy overall, not simply for the women saddled with the public identity of the "welfare queen." The emotion of disgust and its political manifestations continue to marginalize a significant percentage of an already disadvantaged population. We must consider where to draw the line, theoretically. Democratic theorists have long wrestled with the nature of participation in the polity. Feminist theorists have often argued for the inclusion of emotions in political rhetoric. In the case of the politics of disgust, can emotions really serve a liberatory, participatory purpose? Or must we, as a community, think carefully about which emotions are "democratic" and which are "antidemocratic? I take up this dilemma in chapter 6.