Precious knowledge: The interconnections of welfare reform, education and literary studies

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Precious knowledge: The interconnections of welfare reform, education, and literary studies

by

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This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

Laura Marie Armstrong

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
For my children, Alexandra Paige and Joshua Payton.

And for myself.
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INTRODUCTION

The attack on welfare mothers in our public discourse is an issue that cannot be ignored. As literary and cultural critic Rosaria Champagne argues, we need to politicize the rhetoric surrounding welfare mothers and the welfare system; for “politicizing a lived moment connects that experience to the social orders of language, history, and critical theory, frames which make that experience material and recast men and women as political agents, not labels, tools, or victims” (3). Through critical examinations of welfare reform narratives, both fictional accounts and personal narratives, we can begin to challenge the existing social construction of the welfare mother in the United States. In order to do so, however, welfare mothers’ narratives must be visible in our classrooms. If, as Champagne suggests, “reading is the first step to political activism” (3), then we must supply our students with the materials to take that step.

Some of these students are, in fact, welfare mothers, as I am. My research on welfare narratives originally began as an assessment of the recently developed WE CAN! learning community at Iowa State. Although it is designed to be a learning community for ISU students who are receiving, or who have recently stopped receiving public assistance,
we have been unsuccessful in gathering enough members to form a community. In part, I believe we have failed because women on welfare are so very, very fragmented and isolated. And, in part, I believe it is because of the stigma and shame our culture attaches to welfare mothers which we then internalize, shaping a sense of self based on the false stereotype created by the media, the politicians, and commentators.

In order to challenge the dominant discourse’s social construction of the welfare mother, we need to read the lives of welfare mothers that are contained within literary narratives. Fictional representations of the world of welfare mothers can challenge cultural stereotypes in ways in which other forms of communication cannot. Catherine Belsey, professor of English and post-structuralist critic, illustrates this point:

Fictional (declarative or interrogative) texts, by contrast, marked as alluding only indirectly to ‘reality,’ informing without directly exhorting, offer a space for the problematisation of the knowledges they invoke in ways which imperative texts cannot risk. (Belsey 408)

Through the combined use of fictional and personal narratives, readers can gain insight into realities in which they themselves do not reside. The reading and analysis of these narratives from a cultural studies approach can confront the cultural stereotypes of readers by challenging
the reader to reflect upon the narratives in their social, political, historical context.

Literary and cultural critic David Richter defines cultural studies as the analysis of “the social, political, and economic influences on a variety of literary and popular texts” (28). Furthermore, Richter claims “the term culture studies is most often applied when the texts are disdained by the traditional hierarchies of aesthetic value or are social practices generally beneath the notice of historians” (28). The fictional and personal narratives of welfare mothers often fall into this category of texts. Because of the context in which many welfare narratives are produced and consumed, these texts generally fall short of the belletristic ideal of what constitutes “good” literature. It is imperative that we leave behind the theory of New Criticism when examining the welfare narratives and turn instead to a cultural studies approach because of the potential cultural work these texts can achieve. The narratives of welfare mothers can indeed challenge the stereotypes created by the dominant discourse, and through this challenge the texts can then provide a basis on which to create social change.

I am approaching the subject of welfare reform and the social construction of the welfare mother from a cultural studies perspective grounded in feminist and reader-response theory. The cultural studies
approach focuses on how texts are produced and consumed within the social, historical, and political framework of the culture in which the texts is produced and consumed. This approach is particularly useful in the study of texts which are not usually examined by academic discourses. Combined with reader-response theory, which locates the reader in a central position within the construction of meaning, and feminist theory, which examines gender, race, and class issues within both the production and consumption of a text, the cultural studies approach provides an exemplary manner through which a more complete analysis can be achieved.

The first chapter examines the plight of women on welfare in contemporary U.S. culture, focusing on several studies that provide the specifics of the legislative acts which direct the initiatives of welfare reform and their subsequent effects on higher education as a whole and the welfare mothers within our institutions.

Using the societal laws and attitudes examined in the first chapter, the second chapter explores how the social construction of the welfare mother is internalized by welfare recipients. Self-denigration is compounded by a lack of support within the academy that results in a lack of narrative and social agency of the women themselves both within and beyond the academy. I propose that in order to create and foster an
environment which is supportive and creates agency for women on welfare, the academy must actively include narratives containing the voice of welfare mothers.

With the belief that "the literary canon is, in short, a means by which culture validates social power" (Lauter 23), the third chapter begins with an analysis of the literary canon’s lack of inclusion of low-income women’s narratives and how the lack of inclusion is linked to the modernist approach to the study of literature in which many of the personal narratives written by low-income women would not be considered worthy of study based on their lack of “complexity” (Robinson 163). Because of the potential for automatic dismissal of personal narratives within a literature classroom, I promote the use of fictional narratives as a means to explore the social construction of the welfare mother and welfare reform through an analysis of African-American poet and adult educator Sapphire’s novel, *Push* (1996). Using Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule’s *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, I analyze how Sapphire gives voice to the interconnections of race, class, and gender within the social construction of the welfare mother. Following this analysis, I explain why the reading of welfare mothers’
narratives is so very crucial for all of our students within higher education.

I am selecting this project primarily because it is of major importance both professionally and personally. It is my intention to find employment as both an instructor of English and an administrator in student affairs within the U.S. college system, and I am deeply committed to low-income and "non-traditional" students. However, my connection to this research is much deeper than a professional interest. I tried at first to separate myself from the research, not to allow my reality to shape the paper. However, what I have come to realize is that I cannot be objective. My reality shapes what this research produces. I cannot claim an objective stance, nor do I want to.

I became a welfare mother at the age of nineteen. With just a high school diploma, I realized I would never be able to survive in this culture. I attended a community college and received amazing encouragement from my instructors who pushed me to pursue my bachelor's degree. I transferred to Iowa State University, majored in English, and graduated in the top 2% of my class with a 3.93 grade point average. I finished my undergraduate degree in 1996 and will finish my Master of Arts in English and my Master of Education in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in 2001. I completed my undergraduate degree while on
public assistance, and, in fact, most likely would not have completed my degree without it. Nevertheless, when I would disclose my status to classmates, staff, or faculty the most common response to my welfare participation was “Yeah but you are different, you’re doing something, not like the majority of them.” It is this label of difference that keeps welfare recipients alienated from each other. We do not know that we exist in the same classrooms, libraries, hallways, and cafeterias. We are too consumed with self-protection to realize that we are not alone, that we are not different.
CHAPTER ONE: WELFARE REFORM AND HIGHER EDUCATION

In 1992 welfare reform discourse began its ascension into our cultural conversation when the newly inaugurated Democratic president, Bill Clinton declared the following:

It's time to honor and reward people who work hard and play by the rules. That means ending welfare as we know it - not by punishing the poor or by preaching to them, but by empowering Americans to take care of their children and improve their lives. No one who works full-time and has children at home should be poor anymore. No one who can work should be able to stay on welfare forever. (Abramovitz 13)

From this point forward welfare and its reform took center stage in the political arena. Although welfare payments account for approximately one percent of the federal budget, the welfare recipient - the welfare mother - was the target of great scrutiny and stigmatization. The image of the lazy, unreliable, drug-dealing and abusing welfare mother who committed fraud on a daily basis was portrayed as the normative character sketch in our nation's newscasts, newspapers, and political debates. However, the average welfare grant, taking all states
into consideration, for a single parent raising two children is $4,500 per year (Alexander 150). The debate over welfare and its reform reached its climax with the passing of the Public Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Within this act Congress set new time limits and work requirements for welfare recipients and limited transitional grants for medical and child care for those who stop receiving benefits. Although the states were left to design their respective reform programs, the message was quite clear - get them off the dole, and do it now.

With this message translated into federal legislation, the opportunities for welfare recipients to achieve any substantive education have become, at best, difficult. Even for those involved in two-year and four-year degree programs, the safety net has disappeared. For instance, the federally mandated time for receiving benefits is now limited to a five-year maximum lifetime limit. Work requirements of twenty to thirty hours per week, not including education or inside-the-home work, are also demanded of welfare recipients under the legislation. Even without children, the time limits and work requirements create obstacles for successful completion of a two or four year degree. As educators within higher education, we need to turn our attention to this underprivileged population. Welfare mothers face the stigma, isolation, and shame
associated with receiving welfare while attempting to complete their education in a system which rarely has the support services necessary for them to succeed.

The welfare reform acts of the 1990s, in particular the 1996 act, have done considerable damage to the already limited educational opportunities afforded to welfare recipients; it is imperative that we, within academia, concern ourselves with this latest round of classism in the United States in the form of concrete legislative acts that limit educational advancement for the nation’s lowest socio-economic class.

The effects of welfare reform on accessibility to higher education for its recipients have been examined in several studies. In a study and subsequent book, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Income Work* (1999) sociologists Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein found that of their respondents “almost half (42 percent) told us they could not afford to leave welfare without further training” (81). That statistic is not that astounding; however, Edin and Lein further explain the national statistic for those enrolled in educational programs was 12.5 percent, yet 23 percent of their sample admitted to participating in furthering their education (81-82). The reason behind the discrepancy is simple. As Edin and Lein discovered, many of the mothers in their studies were hiding their pursuit of higher education from the respective
agencies for fear of being told that they could no longer continue (81). The fear was based on the work requirements and time limits that welfare reform legislation put into practice.

In order to illustrate the effects of these time limits and work requirements, Scott Wright explores the issues related to welfare reform policies as they pertain to higher education in his article “Despite Sallie’s Success Story.” Wright examines the narrative of Sallie Shows, a single, twenty-eight year old mother of six who, after several years on welfare, is now a straight A student at Santa Clara University.

Wright uses the narrative of Sallie to illustrate just how effective education can be in reducing the dependence on public assistance. He also uses Sallie’s success to criticize the recent government policies that now limit the benefits of those on welfare. Wright’s aim is to expose the current welfare legislation as impeding, not enhancing, welfare recipients’ chances to escape poverty.

Wright continues his argument by examining college enrollment levels of welfare recipients in various states across the country. What Wright discovers is that the percentage of welfare recipients enrolled in college dramatically decreased across the country after the 1996 act. Because welfare reform mandated that states be given the autonomy to restructure their welfare programs, the enrollment patterns vary from
state to state. Wright has also discovered that welfare recipients within states that do allow for education are not being informed of their options and are given only the "work first" mantra.

The welfare reform legislation of 1996 may have succeeded in moving people off the welfare rolls, but it has not succeeded in providing people with adequate education and training to earn a living wage. The demands of the welfare reform policies will only serve to further the gap between rich and poor in this country. It is imperative that colleges and universities become involved in these matters. Too many of our students are being pushed out the doors of our institutions on the basis of socio-economic class. Further action needs to be pursued by top administrators at colleges and universities working in collaboration with state legislatures and independent researchers to examine the role of education in aiding the poor to become self-sufficient.

In the article "How States Can Make Work Pay" Anthony Carnevale and Kathleen Sylvester examine the goal of the 1996 welfare reform legislation of work first and make work pay. Carnevale, the vice-president for public leadership at the Educational Testing Services and Slyvester, the director of the Social Policy Action Network, use various statistical data from across the country to illustrate that the concept of
work first is not a viable solution to the issue of welfare and, ultimately, to ending poverty in the United States.

Despite the great movement of many recipients off the welfare system, Carnevale and Sylvester use data from the Urban Institute which shows that most of those who have left the system have entered service or sales positions which rarely pay above the minimum wage and carry few or no health care benefits.

Carnevale and Sylvester then propose that the only way in which the United States can truly end the cycles of poverty is to invest in education at the post-secondary level. A study conducted by the Educational Testing Service in March of 1999 found that of the welfare participants in the study 31% had “minimal” skills equivalent to those of a high school dropout; 37% had “basic” skills equivalent to those with a high school diploma; 32% had “competent” or “advanced” skills similar to those with some post-secondary education.

Using this study, Carnevale and Sylvester illustrate how through an emphasis on post-secondary education, even just one to two years, most welfare participants can attain skills needed to obtain positions within the workforce that will allow them to break through the poverty line and not simply teeter on it. Carnevale and Sylvester further their argument by illustrating how through work-study programs across the
nation, welfare participants are not only gaining an education but also working, thus satisfying the political emphasis on work and gaining the necessary tools to escape poverty.

Carnevale and Sylvester use the statistical data to prove that education is the only viable means through which those in the underclass can and will escape poverty. It is ridiculous to assume that a single parent with "basic" or even "minimal" skills can or will achieve anything outside of a minimum wage, dead-end position.

Also it is as ludicrous to assume that anyone could feed, house, clothe, and provide childcare for a family on $5.15 per hour. In essence, what the 1996 welfare reform policy has done is turn families away from higher education and force them into just such positions. Carnevale and Sylvester explore the options that states have to increase the chances of a true welfare reform policy by using their monies to support the higher education of the poorest among us.

A study released this year by the Education Testing Services found that college is the better path for two of three welfare recipients. The study states that without such a degree in hand, a dead-end six to eight dollar-an-hour job is all that one could expect to obtain. With this reality, it is imperative that universities and colleges begin to examine and re-examine their positions within the latest round of welfare reform.
Vanessa Sheared, author of Race, Gender, and Welfare Reform: The Elusive Quest for Self-Determination, stresses this re-examination in the following:

Educators, in general, but adult educators, in particular, who are faced with the growing needs of providing service to marginalized women should reflect upon their role in the perpetuation of marginalization via the programs that they develop. Adult educators need to examine their curricula to make sure that they reflect the concerns, issues, and strengths of those it seeks to serve. This will require that the nature of their own marginalized status within their institutions be challenged. How can adult educators help women out of their oppression if adult education has not dealt with the marginalization of its own status within institutional structures? (Sheared 145)

The impact of institutional structures on low-income single mother students was examined in “Poor Single-Mother College Students’ Views on the Effect of Some Sociological and Psychological Belief Factors on their Academic Success.” Sociologists Nadine Van Stone, J. Ron Nelson, and Joan Niemann explore the relationship of sociological and psychological beliefs and their academic success. The study was conducted at a medium-sized university in the northwestern United
States. The participants of the study were enrolled at the university’s Single Parent Project, an initiative by the university to provide academic services, support services, and programming experiences for single parent students and their families. The study found that the support of family, both financial and emotional, were crucial to the success of these women. In many cases, it was for their children’s future that the women were attending college.

The support of peers was also crucial to the success of these women. The interactions between themselves and other women within the programs gave them both emotional and academic support. In addition to peers, the role of the faculty was also influential in the success of these women. The academic and emotional support that the women received from faculty greatly enhanced their ability to succeed on the academic level.

The influence of personal ambition, prior knowledge and experience, effort and discipline, and self-confidence was considerably less influential in the academic success of these women. The study illustrates there is a great need for systemic educational initiatives to be enacted by faculty within colleges and universities which aim to serve low-income women. The need for a positive and inclusive campus environment is essential for the academic success of these students.
Iowa State University started a similar program to the one studied by Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann in 1999 called WE CAN! which aims to serve women on welfare and other low-income women at ISU. Our pilot program at the moment is suffering greatly due to a lack of attention to the crucial elements outlined in the Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann study: we need to provide for more interactions with peers, faculty and staff and provide greater access to organizations providing support services within academics and student life. Furthermore, the program within the Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann study was very well connected throughout the university. Currently, WE CAN! has not been able to establish such connections with Iowa State's faculty, staff, departments, and administration. The women of this study repeatedly mentioned the influence of faculty on their academic success. This is a crucial link that WE CAN! needs to address and has not been attempted within our program. It is through research with emphasis on the fastest growing population within higher education that we can adapt and enhance our own programs aimed at serving the needs of low-income students, particularly students receiving public assistance.

Rather than creating programs from the top down, we need to think outside of that constrictive box and create programs based on collaboration with our students. We must listen to their needs and
wants within higher education. As Vanessa Sheared states in Race, Gender, and Welfare Reform: The Elusive Quest for Self-Determination:

Rarely are these women asked for their ideas, as was the case in the creation of the JOBS program. They do have something to contribute to the discourse. The contributions they make will not always differ from the dominant discourse, and that is okay. Whether women support the dominant discourse is not the issue. The issue is that their voices should be heard. If women believe that their voices are part of the discourse, they can take ownership for its consequences. (105)

In order to support our low-income women students and to challenge the stereotype of the welfare mother, it is vital that we, as educators, include the narratives of low-income women within our canon of academic discourse. Academia can no longer deny the existence of poor women in our culture and in our colleges and universities. We must validate their experiences and voices through an inclusive construction of low-income women’s narratives within the ivory tower. For too long, welfare mothers have remained silenced by a lack of inclusion of their own narrative voice within the dominant discourse. They have been defined by the dominant discourse that weaves itself through the media, political rhetoric, and the academy that leads them to
internalize the messages of worthlessness, forcing them to remain silent. The next chapter examines the welfare mothers’ internalization of the dominant discourse’s stereotype of themselves and explores how, through literary and personal narratives, this stereotype can be challenged.
CHAPTER TWO: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF WELFARE MOTHERS

"In a society in which money is the index of value, if I have none, I too am worthless. In our culture to be poor is shameful. These values have so pervaded our lives that even our sense of ourselves is determined by them" (Alexander 151). This sentiment is echoed in a study called “‘They Think You Ain’t Much of Nothing’: The Social Construction of the Welfare Mother” by Karen Seccombe, Delores James, and Kimberly Battle. The article discusses a qualitative study concerning the interpretation of welfare use by those on welfare. Seccombe, James, and Walters interviewed 47 mothers who received cash assistance in 1995 concerning the stigmatization of welfare mothers and why women used the welfare system. What they found was that many of the women had internalized the rhetoric of mainstream society. They viewed welfare mothers as unmotivated, lazy, looking for a free ride. At the same time, these women distinguished themselves as different from that interpretation; they viewed themselves as causalities of society, bad relationships, and the system itself.

The women of the study internalized that social construction, believing that if they wanted to work, they could. Yet at the same time, they discussed the lack of living wage jobs, affordable childcare, and
adequate health care as reasons to why they (the respondents) could not work. The dichotomy of “us” and “them” was so entrenched in these women that they could not see beyond it to realize that “us” is “them.” One woman went so far as to say that she was not on welfare, she just receives AFDC. AFDC stands for the cash assistance program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and is otherwise known as “welfare.”

These women acutely know the reality of a welfare existence in their own lives but are unable to empathize with others located within similar situations. Without the dialogic exchange of narratives with others like themselves, the women have no alternative through which to define themselves and others. Eventually they absorb the dominant culture’s discourse and distance themselves form their own identity. This point is also made by The Personal Narratives Group, a collective of feminist scholars, who examined the role of sharing life stories for women in *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*:

> Even in our world of printed facts and impersonal mass media, we consciously and unconsciously absorb knowledge of the world and how it works through exchanges of life stories. We constantly test reality against such stories, asserting and modifying our own perceptions in light of them. The significance of these exchanges
for women in clarifying social realities and challenging hegemonic oppression has often been profound. (261)

Unfortunately for welfare mothers the only exchange of stories has been a discourse controlled by mass media's false stereotypes. Welfare mothers have had no other option than to internalize as truth what they know to be false. Welfare mothers cannot challenge the negative stereotype nor find agency for themselves if the reality of their lives as valid is consistently denied in our culture. Welfare mothers' narratives are not included in our cultural narratives, nor are they included in the academy. In fact, it is difficult to locate a text which discusses, let alone challenges, a welfare mother's story. Without such a validated voicing of their experience, welfare mothers cannot claim narrative agency and thus, cannot claim a concept of self which includes the identity of welfare mother. Educational institutions play a crucial role in building accessibility to narrative agency through which a full sense of self may be realized.

Wendy Luttrell's *Schoolsmart and Motherwise: Working-Class Women's Identity and Schooling* examines how primary and secondary schooling combined with socio-economic class and racial identity form, in part, the working-class women's concept of self which, in turn, has a profound effect on any post-secondary education pursued. By focusing
on previous educational experiences in such a context, Luttrell found that it is this formation of identity through education that drove the women of her study to see themselves as unworthy of “somebody” status until they have obtained the legitimated and institutionalized knowledge located within formal education.

The interplay among course selection, teachers, and motherhood all had a profound effect upon the education that the women received or did not receive: “the overarching moral of these tales is that school divides female students within themselves and against each other in the struggle as a ‘somebody’” (Luttrell 9). By placing these female students in an organization that devalues the collective knowledge associated with relationships that many of the women possessed prior to school, and by valuing individualized knowledge associated with academics, our school system in turn aides in the creation of the split self: the ideal female student who is somebody and those who are not.

The concept of the idealized woman, to which Luttrell speaks throughout her work, is a determining factor in the lives of the majority of the women interviewed. Our culture’s stratified notion of which women are valued or not valued, who is heard or not heard, plays a crucial role in the development of identity within the entire U.S. educational system. As Luttrell stated “this is what the women are
accounting for in their stories: their places in a society where some women count as ‘somebodies’ and others don’t” (51).

With the mission of the U.S. primary and secondary school systems to instill in its students what knowledge is valuable and what knowledge is not, we are also, in full force, devaluing the work and knowledge of motherhood. The notion that any “motherwise” knowledge is a justifiable and legitimate way of knowing is all but blatantly ridiculed in our culture, by both men and women in and out of the educational system. Motherhood has never been remotely valued as an occupation in our culture and thereby is not accepted as a valued knowledge basis within our society. Luttrell found this evident within the women of her study.

The only way to remove the divides that separate the ‘somebodies’ from the ‘nobodies’ is to end the silences that surround the school system and the female experience within it. “The women’s stories remind us that what is most memorable about school is not what we learned but how we learned it” (Luttrell 122). Such silence continues the torturing of the child within the adult, without respite, as is evident in the narratives of the women who speak of their quest to obtain any form of higher education. Audre Lorde, African-American feminist poet and
activist, speaks of how silence operates within a body and how desperately we need to end our silences through language.

Because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said Tell them about how you are really never a whole person if you remain silent, because there’s always one little piece of you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don’t speak it out one day, it will just up and punch you in the mouth. (21)

Through Luttrell’s work we begin to see just how these silences, both institutionalized and self-imposed, create within the female student experience a conflicting sense of self. The desire to be heard, to be recognized as a “somebody,” is a powerful force within our society. Our current educational system values certain ways of knowing over others, furthering the gap between such knowledges through authorial voices within the educational system.

By examining work such as Luttrell’s, we begin to see how certain knowledge is validated through schooling at the expense of knowledge gained outside the school system. We also begin to see how gender,
class, sexual orientation, ability and race are all integral parts of the
formation of identity within an institutional setting. We see how familial
and relational ties may or may not intertwine to construct or challenge a
working-class woman’s success in the current educational system. The
missions within our various primary, secondary, and post-secondary
institutions within the United States have primarily remained the same,
focusing on those white, male, middle-class attributes held in such high
esteem within our society.

The work that Luttrell has done provides insights into why and
how the institutionalized value we place on certain knowledges is a major
force in identity development. As Luttrell states at the conclusion of her
work “acting on the desire to ‘be somebody’ – to be seen, heard, and
taken seriously as a citizen – is a necessary step toward change” (Luttrell
126). It is a step that working-class women and low-income women take
every time they walk in the doors of an institution of learning. It is now
time for the institutions to take a step toward these women.

This step, in part, can be taken within our literature classrooms.
Patrocinio Schweickart addresses the importance of literature as a
means through which a sense of agency is created. “Feminist criticism,
we should remember, is a mode of praxis. The point is not merely to
interpret literature in various ways; the point is to change the world. We
cannot afford to ignore the activity of reading, for it is here that literature is realized as *praxis*. Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers” (39). It is of utmost importance that we read the works of women that contain the various narratives pertaining to a woman’s life. “For feminists, the question of *how* we read is inextricably linked with the question of *what* we read. More specifically, the feminist inquiry into the activity of reading begins with the realization that the literary canon is androcentric, and that this has a profoundly damaging effect on women readers” (Schweickart 40).

Only through an acceptance of the authorial voice of women within literature will we be able to achieve a greater understanding and empathy for the women’s social, emotional, political, and physical world. “When women’s voices are omitted from the discourse, they cannot contribute their knowledge to the body politic. This negates their needs and concerns as well” (Sheared 23). Schweickart furthers this concept in her discussion of the development of a feminist theory of reading. Schweickart maintains that a feminist theory of reading “will identify literature - the activities of reading and writing – as an important arena of political struggle, a crucial component of the project of interpreting the world in order to change it” (39).
To achieve any change in our cultural structure, it is crucial that we include the voices of all women, not just those that easily fit into the hegemonic canon of literary and public discourse. Even within feminist dialogue, the diversity of socio-economic class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation has been limited and leads those of us who are outside of the accepted narratives further into an understanding that we are to remain voiceless, faceless, and nameless in our culture and in our academy. Linda Coleman discusses this aspect of feminist theory in her introduction to *Women's Life-Writing: Finding Voice/Building Community*.

Too often, however, even those of us engaged in feminist analysis have overgeneralized from limited or particular female experience and thus have seriously limited our understanding of the social construction of gender as well as genre. That is, we too often create a rhetoric that universalizes the nature of female experience, without regard for differences in historical circumstance, race, age, class, sexual preference, and ethnicity among other things. (Coleman 4)

Within human discourse, we have been limited to the thoughts and opinions of the dominant ideology, mainly middle and upper class white men. Only within recent years have the voices of women and other minorities been heard. Many women define themselves by their writing;
it is not a passing fancy or a tool of domination. Authorship for many women gives to them and to us, as readers, a voice so long denied. In *The Cancer Journals* Audre Lorde made this point perfectly clear:

The novel is finished at last. It has been a lifeline. I do not have to win in order to know my dreams are valid, I only have to believe in a process of which I am a part. My work kept me alive this past year, my work and the love of women. They are inseparable from each other. In the recognition of the existence of love lies the answer to despair. Work is that recognition given voice and name.

(Lorde 13)

We have yet to include low-income women’s narratives and, in particular, the narratives of welfare mothers. The struggle for low-income women to find identity within the literary canon is limited to a very few narratives which hardly touch the reality of welfare life and the role that education can play in claiming voice and validity. If we are not validated in the narratives we read and are limited to definitions of self through media and political rhetoric, we cannot claim any voice or validity in our culture:

The “feminization of poverty” might better be called the “maternalization of poverty,” for instance; and racism, sex discrimination, and homophobia often disproportionally affect
mothers. Nevertheless, in the larger culture's debates on these topics, mother's voices continue to be ignored. Even in women's accounts of motherhood, maternal perspectives are strangely absent. (Daly and Reddy 1)

The maternal perspective is lacking in all of our narratives, but it is doubly silenced by the exclusion of low-income mother's narratives within higher education discourse. We know, through various research studies examined earlier, that the most successful way to end poverty is through education. If we are to encourage low-income women to attend institutions of higher education, we need to include their voices within our academic discourse.

Although the academy has been successful in including a few women's narratives within such discourse, maternal narratives are rarely present:

Few fictional or theoretical works begin with the mother in her own right, from her own perspective, and those that do seldom hold fast to a maternal perspective; further, when texts do maintain this perspective, readers and critics tend to suppress the centrality of mothering. (Daly and Reddy 2-3)
In addition to the failure to include the maternal, the narratives that have been embraced within the community are not the voices of low-income women:

Certainly there are working-class novels, but the dominant form is that represented by the women within the bourgeoisie. This means that when contemporary Anglo-Saxon feminist critics turn to women writers, resurrecting the forgotten texts of these women novelists, they are, in one sense, being completely conformist to a bourgeois tradition. There is nothing wrong with that, it is an important and impressive tradition. We have to know where women are, why women have to write the novel, the story of their own domesticity, the story of their own seclusion within the home and the possibilities and impossibilities provided by that. (Mitchell 427)

Mitchell’s assessment is, in part, correct; we do need to understand the aspects of middle and upper class women’s lives. But we cannot stop at this level. We need to push beyond the acceptance of only middle and upper class narratives. Furthermore, the acceptance of such narratives has led to the exclusion of others that are not defined by the culture’s traditions of the bourgeois.
The knowledges of low-income and working-class women have been silenced by the dominant cultures; its lack of legitimacy that is represented by the academy's exclusion of the narrative voice of low-income women, in particular, welfare mothers within academic discourse. This failure of inclusivity results in the continuation of the myth of the welfare mother within U.S. culture. The combination of the exclusion of the maternal perspective and low-income women's narratives leads to a double silencing within the academy. We cannot challenge the social construction of such a mother if her voice is never represented within the discourse. We cannot use fictional narratives to explore and dismantle the culture's stereotypes if we cannot read/hear them. The low-income woman cannot find herself if she is invalidated by the lack of narrative agency in the academy. As Marianne Hirsch suggests: "Feminism might begin by listening to the stories that [welfare] mothers have to tell, and by creating spaces in which mothers might articulate these stories" (Hirsch 167).
CHAPTER THREE: THE NARRATIVES OF WELFARE MOTHERS

The women’s movement and the civil rights movement of the latter half of the 20th century challenged our academic and public discourse restrictions concerning gender and race.

Feminist theorists acknowledged the overwhelming significance of the interlocking systems of race, gender, and class long before men decided to talk more about these issues together. Yet mainstream culture, particularly mass media, was not willing to tune into a radical political discourse that was not proving one issue over the other. Class is still often kept separate from race. And while race is often linked with gender, we still lack an ongoing public discourse that puts the three together in ways that illuminate for everyone how our nation is organized and what our class politics really are. (hooks 8)

hooks’ criticism of feminist theory is substantiated by our literary canon, for although portions of the academy have responded by including texts that effectively confront issues of gender and race, canonizing them within the curricula and, thereby validating the experiences of those who had previously been silenced, the narratives of low-income women, in particular low-income mothers, have yet to be
included as a constant within academic discourse. If as Paul Lauter suggests "The literary canon is, in short, a means by which culture validates social power" (23), the refusal to explore the realities of socio-economic class within our academic discourse is an effective means of erasing the existence of classism in the United States and further silencing, through a lack of social power, those who are attempting to speak to the realities of low-income women.

The historical lack of inclusion of the narratives of working-class and low-income women writers such as Agnes Smedley, Meridel LeSeuer, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Tillie Olsen within our literary canon has contributed to this silencing. "Women have understood that we needed an art of our own; to remind us of our history and what we might be; to show our true faces – all of them, including the unacceptable; to speak of what has been muffled in code or silence" (Rich, Blood 249). Within the last decade there has been a movement toward reclaiming these authors and there is now a small canon of works that address the issues low-income women have faced in our culture.

Despite this movement, Smedley's Daughter of Earth, LeSeuer's The Girl, and Davis's Life in the Iron Mill all of which effectively portray the relationship of gender and socio-economic class, are rarely taught within our academic curricula. The exception is Tillie Olsen's short story "I
Stand Here Ironing" which has found its way into many introductory literature courses, but these are general education courses that rarely provide in-depth critical analysis of the context in which the text was produced.

Obviously, one short story cannot represent the complex lives of low-income women. Furthermore, most of these texts were written by white women between 1861 and 1940. The work of Smedley, LeSeuer, Davis, and Olsen provide an excellent historical perspective concerning the issues low-income women have faced in our collective history; however, they cannot represent the issues of contemporary low-income women. These narratives do not explore the interconnections of race, class and gender; they do not challenge the stereotype of today's low-income women. As Virginia Schein points out, "The inner-city welfare mother has come to represent the poor in the minds of much of the general public and policy makers" (15). Therefore, it is crucial that we not only examine the works of our literary mothers but of ourselves. "Stereotypes and statistics can be ignored, real people cannot. If we can peel away the negative connotations of 'welfare mother' and listen to the voices of impoverished single mothers, we can obtain an thorough understanding of their needs and the realities of their circumstances" (Schein 14).
Although the ideal would be to "hear" the voices of "real" low-income women, the reality is that many works that contain those "real" voices are far from what we would deem "Literature." When one is consumed with the realities of poverty, quality writing is not at the top of the list of priorities. Therefore, it is difficult to find narratives written by welfare mothers. For as much as we need to hear and read ourselves, the majority of narratives are disjointed at best. Lillian Robinson discusses the difficulties faced when attempting to include writings from those 'real' voices:

The anonymous 'Seamer on Men's Underwear' has a unique sense of herself both as an individual and as a member of the working class. But was she a writer? Part of the audience was moved as I was by the narrative, but the majority was outraged at the piece's failure to meet the criteria – particularly, the "complexity" criteria – of good art. (163)

Yet I would argue that even those narratives which are not carefully constructed deserve a place in our classrooms. Adrienne Rich suggests "one of the most powerful social and political catalysts of the past decade has been the speaking of women with other women, the telling of our secrets, the comparing of wounds and the sharing of words. This hearing and saying of women has been able to break many a silence
and taboo; literally to transform forever the way we see” (Rich, *On Lies* 259-260). This was true for me. It happened as I heard my first narrative by a white welfare mother, Anne Downey, in 1997 as I was driving home from class. I heard her speak on NPR’s *All Things Considered*. I pulled into the driveway and sat listening to her read her essay. I was amazed; it was so close to my own reality. I cried hard and long as she read. Not the superficial tears of sentimentality, but those tears that come from the very essence of who you are when finally recognize that you are not alone. Not different.

I include the piece because of how it transformed my life, my voice. It was the catalyst for the work I am doing now. I include it because it illustrates how our narratives are constructed in such a disjointed manner. It exemplifies how, although profound to myself, it is not a carefully constructed piece of writing. It demonstrates how easily a welfare mother’s narrative could be dismissed within a literary classroom on the basis of form not content; how, as Lillian Robinson discovered, the criteria for “good art” would undermine the validity of voice.

“I Am Your Welfare Reform” By Annie Downey

*I am the single mother of two children, each with a different father. I am a hussy, a welfare rider - burden to everyone and everything. I am anything you want me to be - a faceless number who has no story.*
My daughter’s father has a job and makes two grand a month; my son’s father owns blue-chip stock in AT&T, Disney, and Campbell’s. I call the welfare office, gather old bills, write for my degree paper, graduate with my son slung on my hip, breast-feeding.

At the welfare office they tell me to follow one of the caseworkers into a small room without windows. The caseworker hands me a packet and a pencil. There is an older woman with graying hair and polyester pants and the same pencil and packet. I glance at her, she looks at me; we are both ashamed. I try hard to fill out the packet correctly, answering all the questions. I am nervous. There are so many questions that near the end I start to get careless. I just want to leave. I hand the caseworker the packet in an envelope; She asks for my pencil and does not look at me. I exit unnoticed. For five years I’ve exited unnoticed. I can’t imagine how to get a job. I ride the bus home alone.

After a few weeks a letter arrives assigning me to “Group 3.” I don’t even finish reading it. When my grandmother calls later to tell me that I confuse sex with love, I tell her that I am getting a job. She asks what kind. I say, “Any job.”

It is 5:00 A.M. My alarm wakes up my kids. I try nursing my son back to sleep, but my daughter keeps him up with her questions: “What time is it? Who’s going to take care of us when you leave?” I want to cry.
It is still dark and I am exhausted. I've had three hours of sleep. I get ready for work, put some laundry in the washer, make breakfast, set out clothes for the kids, make lunches. I carry my son my daughter follows. They cling to me. They cry when I leave. I see their faces presses against the porch window and the sitter trying to get them inside.

I slice meat for $5.50 an hour for nine hours a day, five days a week. I barely feed my kids; I barely pay the bills.

I struggle against welfare. But I know that without welfare I would have nothing. On welfare I went from teen mom to woman with an education. I published two magazines, became an editor, a teacher. Welfare, along with Section 8 housing grants and Reach Up, gave my children a life. My daughter loves school and does well there. My son is round and at twenty months speaks wondrous sentences about the moon and stars. Welfare gave me what was necessary to be a mother.

Still, I cannot claim it. There is too much shame in me: the disgusted looks in the grocery line, the angry voices of Oprah panelists, the unmitigated rage of the blue and white collars. I am not what those voices say I am. I never buy expensive ice cream in pints. I don't do drugs. I don't own a hot tub. I am one of the 12 million people who account for less than 1 percent of the federal budget. I am one of the 96 percent of AFDC recipients who are mothers and the 36.6 percent who are white. I am one
of the 68 percent of teen mothers who were sexually abused. I am $600 a month below the poverty level for a family of three. I am a hot political issue. I am 145-65-8563. Group 3.

I have brown hair and eyes. I write prose. My mother has been married and divorced twice. I have never been married. I love Pablo Neruda’s poetry, Louise Gluck’s essays. I love my stepfather but not my real father. My favorite book is Love in the Time of Cholera by Gabriel Garcia Marquez; my favorite movie, The Color Purple. I miss my son’s father. I love jazz. I’ve always wanted to learn how to ballroom dance. I have a story, and a life, and a face.

The essay was then published in Harper’s in May of 1998. Written during the time of the conservative right’s all out attack (led by Newt Gingrich) on the welfare mother, Downey’s essay becomes a direct response to the political rhetoric surrounding the welfare mother and welfare system during the mid-1990’s. Anne Downey’s essay narrates the perspective of the much-debated and much-despised welfare mother. However, rather than the voice of political pundits or media commentators, Downey’s essay gives voice to the life of one welfare mother: herself. Relying on what she knows to be true, Downey provides an insight rarely heard in contemporary U.S. culture. The seldom-heard
narrative of life on welfare challenges the contemporary U.S. myth of the welfare mother.

Through her telling of life in the welfare line, at the welfare office, filling out endless forms and answering never-ending questions, Downey describes an obstructive and cumbersome system that does not provide her with “assistance” to achieve beyond the realm of poverty within which she is located. She explains the invisibility of the welfare mother within the welfare system itself - exiting unnoticed from the welfare office, the case number and group number taking precedence over her name. Downey gives her reader a nominal representation of the invisibility and anonymity associated with being a welfare mother.

Rather than providing a flat character sketch that is so common in descriptions of welfare recipients, Downey relates to her readers the complexities of the welfare mother. She breaks down the dominant culture’s stereotype that welfare mothers buy Ben and Jerry’s pint ice cream, hot tubs, and heroin with their welfare checks: “I never buy expensive ice cream in pints. I don’t do drugs. I don’t own a hot tub.” She further challenges the stereotype of welfare mothers as African-American, inner-city, illiterate women through her list of statistical data that provides contrary evidence and through her list of admired authors and writings: “I am one of the 96 percent of AFDC recipients who are
mothers and the 36.6 percent who are white . . . I write prose . . . I love Pablo Neruda’s poetry, Louise Gluck’s essays.” Through this claim of narrative agency, Downey shatters the notion that she is simply “a faceless number who has no story.” Her story, her reality is simply one we never hear within dominant discourse.

Unfortunately, the reality, the voice that Downey brings to her essay is clouded by a narrative that is not complete and lacks the “complexity” of which Lillian Robinson spoke. Without contextualizing the piece as I could because of my own situation, Downey’s narrative is scattered and confusing. The chronology of the piece is difficult, at best, to follow: “I slice meat for $5.50 an hour for nine hours a day, five days a week. I barely feed my kids; I barely pay the bills. I struggle against welfare. But I know that without welfare I would have nothing. On welfare I went from teen mom to woman with an education.” Her shifting from the present to the past and back to the present without guiding her reader through the narrative detracts from the validity of and the importance of her piece. The majority of other low-income women’s narratives that I have found are quite similar to Downey’s and lack literary devices needed for scholarly study as defined by academic standards.
However, the value of the writing and the reading of Downey’s piece cannot be understated. Using a cultural studies approach, Downey’s piece can be brought into a classroom to provide an excellent opportunity to discuss not only the content of Downey’s essay but also the context under which the piece was written. The lack of continuity in chronology and the relative simplicity of the narrative can prompt students to look further into how the realities of poverty – no money, little food, inadequate childcare, no health care and a minimum wage job- do not leave time for revisions and reflections on one’s writing which, in turn, leads to very little publishing of welfare mother’s voices in narrative form.

Due to the lack of published writings by low-income women in the latter half of the 20th century, the ideal of hearing “real” low-income women’s narratives within the contemporary literary canon has yet to come into being. If we do not read ourselves and others do not read of our lives in literary texts, we fail to exist in our cultural history. We remain voiceless, nameless. As Laurel Gilbert states in her essay describing her reality of life as a young, low-income, single mother:

My words, my stories don’t reflect any other words or stories being spoken about my kind. And I can’t find any other words or stories being spoken by my kind; it seems other women like me are
keeping their secret too, keeping quiet about their history. We’re all silenced by the expectations, perhaps because we’ve exceeded them. (Gilbert 105)

If we are to make an actual attempt at an inclusive literary canon, we need to demand that all voices are heard. Particular attention needs to be paid to the voices that have yet to be included. Paul Lauter discusses the constructions of literary canons and the power within public discourse to define our cultural history and shape our cultural future:

The creation of a new cultural history is, I believe, part of a larger process of building ‘an account of the world as seen from the margins,’ a necessary prerequisite to transforming the ‘margins to the center.’ That is a process in which writers of color as well as white women and working-class authors have long been engaged, responding from the very beginnings of ‘American’ culture to the imperative to speak for themselves and for others like themselves who had been silenced in history. (53)

Several contemporary authors such as Joyce Carol Oates, Dorothy Allison, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Sandra Cisneros have succeeded in bringing portions of the “margins to the center” in their work. Adding to the canon of working-class and low-income women’s
narratives, these authors are bringing to light the interconnections of race, class, and gender within their fictional works. In addition, many of these authors are beginning to find their way into our contemporary literature curricula which adds to their validity within our cultural history and discourse. However, the welfare mother's narrative is not located within any of these recent texts. Only one text, Sapphire's *Push* (1996), of which I am aware, actively pursues the welfare mother's reality.

In *Push*, Sapphire, an African-American performance poet and adult educator, attempts to represent the current lives of low-income women and welfare reform. She is actively working to bring one of the most marginalized voices to the center, to validate existence, and to challenge the stereotype. Turning to a fictional narrative in order to explore the realities of welfare reform and low-income women provides, perhaps, "the thing needed." Dorothy Allison, a working-class writer herself, explains:

I know the use of fiction in a world of hard truths, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth. The story of what happened, or what did not happen but should have – that story can become a curtain drawn shut, a piece of insulation, a disguise, a razor, a tool that changes every time it is used and sometimes becomes
something other than what we intended. The story becomes the thing needed. (Allison 3)

*Push* tells the story of Precious Jones, a sixteen year-old African-American low-literate welfare mother pregnant by her father for the second time. Growing up in an incredibly abusive household, Precious struggles to maintain her sense of herself as a human being through an active retelling of the details of the past and present physical, sexual, and emotional abuse Precious endures from both her mother and her father. Having already given birth, at age twelve, to her father’s daughter who was born with Down’s syndrome and now lives with her maternal grandmother, Precious, now sixteen, is again pregnant with her father’s child, for which she is expelled from her public junior high school.

Although abortion is a legal option for Precious, “as Alice Walker has pointed out, abortion has long been taboo in the African American community because, under slavery, children could so easily be taken form their birth parents” (Daly 104). Precious is vehemently opposed to this option. “I know too who I’m pregnant for. But I can’t change that. Abortion is a sin” (63). Brenda Daly discusses Precious’s choice in a recent essay:

Readers are not told where Precious has learned that ‘abortion is a sin,’ nor is it clear whether anti-abortion discourse, rather than
only her own desires, influence her choice to keep her child. We do know, however, that Precious identifies with the unborn child: because she wishes to be valued, to be precious, she is determined to value her unborn child. (112)

If Precious were to have an abortion, to kill her child as she says, that action would be tantamount to killing herself. Precious is so unloved and dehumanized by her own parents that to dehumanize her unborn child through an abortion would equate her, in her mind, to her parents. In a dream Precious remembers and witnesses her mother’s sexual abuse of a very young Precious. In the dream the Precious of today calls to the young Precious: “I call little Precious and say, Come to Mama but I means me. Come to me little Precious. Little Precious look at me, smile, and start to sing: ABCDEFG . . .” (59).

Shortly after Precious has the dream of mothering herself, she reaches down and lays a hand on her stomach, under which is her unborn child, and writes the alphabet. “Listen baby, Muver love you. Muver not dumb. Listen baby: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ. Thas the alphabet. Twenty-six letters make up words. Them words everything” (66). This similarity between the two scenes indicates Precious’s equation that to mother her child is to mother herself, and that through education, through literacy, Precious will be able to mother.
Very similar to the women interviewed in Wendy Luttrell’s study, Precious issues the declaration, “I wanna say I am somebody” (31). Precious’s active choice to give birth and raise her son is, in combination with education, her declaration of “somebodiness.”

After the expulsion from junior high, Precious enrolls in an alternative education program operated by a local community action agency in cooperation with the welfare office. In the alternative education course, “Higher Education Alternative/ Each One Teach One,” Precious gains not only literacy and knowledge, but also a sense of identity and efficacy through her instructor’s, Blue Rain, dialogic pedagogy. As she is gaining literacy and identity, she gives birth to her son, Abdul Jamal Louis Jones. She then moves out of her mother’s house into the Advancement House, a halfway house for young single mothers, and discovers that she has been infected by her father with the HIV virus. Even through these events, Precious continues to push in order to claim her right to personhood – her right to be visible and heard.

Written in the voice of Precious, the novel’s linguistic conventions are representative of a low-literate speaker, with nominal regard for conventional spelling and grammar. Furthermore, the language employed within the text is enhanced by and representative of contemporary culture’s use of expletives in everyday speech. Explicit in
the descriptions of physical and sexual abuse endured by Precious by both her mother and her father, *Push* provides insights into how and why Precious became who she is. Sapphire has purposefully constructed a character who “fits” the dominant discourse’s stereotype of the welfare mother – Precious is an African-American, inner-city, illiterate, second generation welfare mother. By creating appears to be a stereotype in her protagonist, Sapphire resists the stereotype by giving her a name, a story, a reality.

In quite a different way from Downey, who is white and educated, Sapphire actively challenges the stereotype of the inner-city welfare queen who wants nothing more than to feed off the system by giving Precious this language, this voice, and this story. Precious is not only a genderized subject but a racialized subject as well. Precious understands that she is the black, inner-city, illiterate, second generation stereotype of the welfare mother constructed by dominant discourse and that she has no right to claim her existence within a racist, sexist and classist system. “I know who I am. I know who they say I am – vampire sucking the system’s blood. Ugly black grease to be wipe away punish, kilt, changed, finded a job for” (31).

Furthermore, a representation of the welfare system is captured as Sapphire also constructs her novel to assertively place into her text the
language of welfare and welfare reform. Similar to Downey, Sapphire constructs welfare recipient’s reality of being reduced to nothing more than a number, a case, a file. “I don’t know what the file say. I do know every time they wants to fuck wif me or decide something in my life, here they come wif the mutherfucking file” (28). Terms such as “budget” and “workfare” and “AFDC” and “JTPA” and “the check” take on meaning as Sapphire constructs the reality of the women within *Push* who survive “on the system.” If one has never been on welfare, these words and acronyms have little to no meaning. These are not words used in the dominant discourse. However, within a welfare mother’s reality, these words control her world – her existence. As Precious continues to struggle to achieve literacy and a sense of self, her caseworker writes in her file:

Precious is capable of going to work now. In January of 1990 her son will be two years old. In keeping with the new initiative on welfare reform I feel Precious would benefit from any of the various workfare programs in existence. Despite her obvious intellectual limitations she is quite capable of working as a home attendant.

(119)

Despite all of her achievements, Precious is reduced to the file of the welfare system, limited by a system which does not want to see her as a
complex person with a history, a future, and a voice but as a number, a case, a file that has left the welfare dole. The welfare system is as abusive to Precious as her own parents: “File say what I could get, where I could go – if I could get cut off, kicked out of Advancement House. Make me feel like Mama” (115).

However, Precious pushes against the stereotype and abuse of welfare mothers and against the welfare system in order to give birth to herself. “The novel’s title refers not only to the physical act of giving birth but to the daughter/mother’s act of giving birth to herself through language” (Daly 107). Precious struggles to gain voice, both oral and written, throughout the text. *Push* could be construed as a contemporary slave narrative through which we read of Precious’s “push” toward freedom from an abusive home and an abusive welfare system through her educational achievements despite the overwhelming obstacles in her life: “I’m tired,’ I says. She says, ‘I know you are but you can’t stop now Precious, you gotta push.’ And I do” (97).

In the “Higher Education Alternative/ Each One Teach One” program operated by a local community action agency, Precious continues to push. “The Alternative,” as Precious names it, provides Adult Basic Education courses including pre-GED, GED, and family literacy educational programming. The pedagogy of “the alternative” and
of Blue Rain, Precious’s instructor, closely resembles Paulo Freire’s problem-posing education that he calls for in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed:\n
"In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire 64).

Blue Rain challenges the women of the class to see their world and the reality in which they live as changeable: “You could get your G.E.D. and go to college. You could do anything Precious but you gotta believe it” (73). She is firmly committed to the students’ abilities to create effective change in their lives through the attainment of written language and claiming ownership of education. As is noted in the welfare caseworker’s notes “the teacher, Ms Rain, places great emphasis on writing and reading books. Little work is done with computers or the variety of multiple-choice pre-G.E.D. and G.E.D. workbooks available at low cost to JTPA programs” (119). The structure of the course defies traditional methods of welfare training programs that focus on vocational training (Freire’s banking-style of education). As Jermaine, one of Precious’s classmates, observes, “If all they wanna do is place us in slave labor shifts and we want to keep going to school then that means they have a different agenda from us” (122).
Instead of the traditional vocational instruction, Blue Rain encourages her students to begin to critically view the world through dialogues within their journals to her and within classroom discussions, to recognize that their voice and experiences are valid points of knowledge: "I show them how the dialogue journal work. You know how you write to teacher 'n she write back in the same journal book like you talkin' on paper and you could SEE your talk coming back to you" (94).

The construction of the dialogue journal is a direct response to the structure of education that relies on the authority (teacher) disseminating information to the students below them. In addition it is Freire's belief that oppressors use the banking system of education to maintain oppression within a society through the use of a paternalistic approach to education:

The oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must therefore adjust these "incompetent and lazy" folk to its own patterns by changing their mentality. These marginals need to be "integrated," "incorporated," into the healthy society that they have "forsaken." The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not "marginals," are not people living "outside" society. They have always been "inside" – inside the structure which made them "beings for others." The solution is not to
“integrate” them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become “beings for themselves.”

(Freire 55)

Blue Rain’s course is a world in miniature in which she attempts to transform an educational paradigm and system that has failed Precious and her classmates. Rather than forcing Precious to conform to yet another pedagogical structure which is based in the banking-style of education, Blue Rain focuses on locating voices within her students: “Write what’s on your mind, push yourself to see the letters that represent the words you’re thinking” (61).

She challenges them to think beyond what they have been told in the dominant discourse. Blue Rain actively encourages her students to critically analyze how they have internalized the racism, sexism, and homophobia of our culture. Prior to this schooling, Precious idolizes Louis Farrakhan, hanging his poster above her bed. Precious is unable to critically analyze Farrakhan’s anti-Semitic, homophobic, misogynistic rhetoric because she is in a stage of development which allows her to identify only as an African-American. By introducing Precious to Harriet Tubman, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde, Blue Rain encourages Precious to begin to see herself as both Black and female. Through the reading of stories about members of her race and gender, via the narratives of
Tubman, Walker, and Lorde, Precious is able to begin to value herself as an African-American woman.

After reading *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, Blue Rain discusses with the class that a group of African-American men wanted to stop production of the film because of its representations of African-American men. Precious is now able to critically examine this claim and replies, "Unfair picture? Unfortunately, it a picture I know" (83). Relying on her subjective knowledge of being an African-American female, Precious is able to voice her dissent from members of her own race because she has begun to see the interconnections of race and gender.

The novel has profound implications for understanding the knowledge construction of young, low-literate, abused, low-income women within the higher education system. Understanding how these women come to knowledge is crucial to understanding how they can overcome the internalized stereotype of the welfare mother. One of the most instrumental works within the field of knowledge construction is Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule’ s *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (1986) which examines the construction of knowledge by women. Using a cross-section of women of various ages, races, and socio-economic classes, Belenky et al. construct a theory concerning how women develop knowledge, and in turn, a sense
of self. Although Belenky and her colleagues did study a diverse group of women, they did not pay particular attention to how race and class may be interconnected with gender. This has often been a point of criticism concerning their work; however, Belenky et al. also point out that "individuals' layered and nested identities were related to the issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation, and regional affiliation, and that all of these issues came into play in the process of cognitive development" (Love and Guthrie 17).

Belenky and her colleagues identified five different ways of knowing - silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge - among the women they studied. Rather than define these ways of knowing as stages of development, Belenky et al. describe them as epistemological perspectives, perspectives that are not fixed and static, with progression from one to the next, but a more fluid understanding of how knowledge is constructed by women.

These perspectives are very evident within the construction of the character of Precious Jones. Throughout the text, the reader is able to hear Precious move through the various perspectives as she gains insight into her own voice and sense of self through her attainment of literacy. The first perspective Belenky and her colleagues identify is silence.
“These silent women were among the youngest and the most socially, economically, and educationally deprived of all those we interviewed” (Belenky et al. 23-24).

As disadvantaged as one can possibly be, Precious exhibits many of the characteristics of the silent women of Belenky et al.’s study. “Words were perceived as weapons. Words were used to separate and diminish people, not to connect and empower them. The silent women worried that they would be punished just for using words – any words” (Belenky et al. 24). At the onset of the novel Precious declares her voice invalid: “My name is Precious Jones. I don’t know why I’m telling you that. Guess ‘cause I don’t know how far I’m going to go with this story, or whether it’s even a story or why I’m talkin” (3). Precious’ s inability to see the value of her voice, of her story, is representative of how the silent women of Belenky et al.’s study constructed the concept of language, voice and self: “They do not explore the power that words have either for expressing or developing thought” (Belenky et al. 25).

As mentioned above, many of the silent women were abused or neglected as children by their primary caregivers; therefore, “Those who might have told them about themselves and helped them begin building a sense of self never said a word” (Belenky et al. 31). Precious’s mother, Mary, never says a word to aid in the development of her daughter’s
sense of self. In fact, Mary never says a word to stop the sexual abuse of Precious by her father, abuse that the mother actually witnesses and then perpetrates herself. The silence of the mother concerning the abuse leads Precious to a further denial of the existence of self and voice until she is finally completely silent: “Kinnergarden and first grade I don't talk, they laff at that. Second grade my cherry busted... Secon’ grade they laffes at HOW I talk. So I stop talking” (36).

Because of the overwhelming desolation many of the silent women faced as children, many were not exposed to the language development associated with childhood activities in which language is explored and played with to find meaning. “The silent women had limited experience and confidence in their ability to find meaning in metaphors was lost in the sea of words and numbers that flooded their schools. For them school was an unlikely place to ‘gain a voice.’ For them the experience of school only confirmed their fears of being ‘deaf and dumb’” (Belenky et al. 34). Throughout Push, Precious makes reference to the failure of the school system to aid in her struggle to obtain a voice and sense of self.

The second perspective outlined by Belenky et al. is the positionality of received knowledge. “Unlike the silent, who think of themselves as ‘deaf and dumb’ and are unaware of the power of words for transmitting knowledge, women who rely on received knowledge think of
words as central to the knowing process. They learn by listening" (Belenky et al. 37). Precious exhibits several characteristics of being a received knower on her first day at the Higher Education/Each One Teach One program. When Blue Rain comments on how the class will decide what they will do, Precious responds “ain’ she spozed to know what we gonna do. How we gonna figure anything out. Weze ignerent. We here to learn. Leas’ I am” (42).

For Precious, knowledge and learning are constructed by what others know, not by what she knows. “While received knowers can be very open to take in what others have to offer, they have little confidence in their own ability to speak. Believing that truth comes from others, they still their own voices to hear the voices of others” (Belenky et al. 37). This aspect of received knowers is evident in the response of Precious to the class discussion of the G.E.D. class placement: “I’m the only one haven’t spoken. I wanna say something but don’t know how. I’m not use to talkin’, how can I say it?” (48). Precious has been silent for so many years and has been trained for so long to believed that her knowledge is utterly useless that when someone finally asks her about herself, she cannot speak.

Her position as a received knower can also be seen in the way in which Precious idolizes Louis Farrakhan. Farrakhan’s rhetoric gives to
Precious an answer for why she is abused by her father: "He [Farrakhan] is against crack addicts and crackers. Crackers is the cause of everything bad. It is why my father ack like he do. He has forgot he is the Original Man" (34). She accepts Farrakhan's binary hate speech as truth because of where she is situated in her cognitive development. This becomes challenged when Blue Rain dismisses Farrakhan as a "jive anti-Semitic homophobe fool" (74). Precious's blind acceptance of Farrakhan's authority is further challenged when her teacher comes out to the class as a lesbian. Precious is now faced with an extreme amount of cognitive dissonance in which she must begin to confront her positionality as a received knower, for she knows and loves Blue Rain, but she cannot continue to do so if she accepts Farrakhan's homophobic discourse.

As Precious continues in the class, she discovers her own voice. Although still in the position of being a received knower, Precious begins to challenge the dominant discourse:

I done learned to talk up. Ms Rain say it's a big country. Say bombs cost more than welfare. Bombs to murder kids 'n shit. Guns to war people – all that cost more than milk 'n Pampers. Say no shame. No shame. Most time it seem like hype, 'cause she say
it so much. But that why she say she say it – to reprogram us to
love ourselves. I love me. (76)

As the narrative continues, Precious gains more insight into herself
and others around her, and she develops more confidence in her ability
to know. “For all women the shift into subjectivism is an adaptive move
in that it is accompanied by increased experience of strength, optimism,
and self-value” (Belenky et al. 83). Precious begins to shift to a more
subjective knowledge perspective as defined by Belenky et al.: “the move
away from silence and an externally orientated perspective on knowledge
and truth eventuates in a new conception of truth as personal, private,
and subjectively known or intuited” (Belenky et al. 54). Precious also
exhibits her position within subjective knowing when Blue Rain
challenges Precious’s decision to keep her son and raise him. Because of
the safe dialogic classroom that Blue Rain has constructed, she still
respects Precious’s ability to know, and Precious is able to assert herself
and her knowledge: “tsak Abdul I don notin (take Abdul I don’t have
nothing) . . . I is be bt meet cdlls ed (I is best able to meet me child’s
need.)” (70-72). Precious begins to value her subjective knowledge as
valid when another has heard her voice. This change takes place
because Ms Rain provides a dialogic classroom in which every voice is
heard and validated.
Furthermore, within the construction of the dialogue journals, Precious is able to hear and exchange thoughts and ideas with a maternal figure located in the person of Ms Rain. The existence of Ms Rain and her encouragement of Precious through her education plays a fundamental role in the development of Precious within the perspective of subjective knowing. It is with Ms Rain that Precious begins to assert her voice, her subjective knowledge. "Miz Rain say value. Values determine how we live much as money do. I say Miz Rain stupid there. All I can think she don't know to have NOTHIN'. Never breathe and wait for check, check; cry when check late. Check important" (64). In this passage, Precious constructs her reality around what she knows to be true. Without the welfare check, the rent is not paid, the electricity is turned off, and you are hungry. The overwhelming panic that springs in your chest on the day the check is supposed to be in the mail but is not and the tears of frustration and fear when the check does not arrive the next day. Precious uses the position of subjective knowing to create a reality for readers that they cannot escape.

After Precious leaves her mother's house and finds room at a halfway house for herself and her son, her knowledge perspective begins to change again. She makes a transition to the fourth perspective, procedural knowledge, which Belenky et al. describe as:
The notion of “ways of looking” is central to the procedural knowledge position. It builds upon the subjectivist insight that different people have – and have a right to have – different opinions, but it goes beyond the idea of opinions as the static residue of experience . . . they are interested not just in what people think but in how people go about forming their opinions and feelings and ideas. (Belenky et al. 97)

Precious begins to examine how others come to formulate opinions and ideas through her experiences within the classroom, the halfway house, and an incest support group. “Connected knowers develop procedures for gaining access to other people’s knowledge. At the heart of these procedures is the capacity for empathy. Since knowledge comes from experience, the only way they can hope to understand another person’s ideas is to try to share the experience that has led the person to form the idea” (Belenky et al. 113). Through exposure to a variety of different people of various races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, Precious begins to define the world in terms of multiple realities.

When Precious attends the incest survivors support group, she is introduced to a diversity of women from various races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and socio-economic classes who have experienced sexual
violence in their lives. For the first time Precious begins to have empathy for those not of her race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and socio-economic class.

Girls, old women, white women, lotta white women . . . What am I hearing! One hour and a half women talk. Can this be done happen to so many people? I know I am not lying! But is they? . . . All kinda women here, princess girls, some fat girls, old women, young women. One thing we got in common, no the thing, is we was rape. (130)

Because Precious understands the validity of her own subjective knowledge, she is able to build connections with members of differing communities in an attempt to understand them. Precious begins to understand the world with more complexity than ever before. She can no longer define the world in binary categories of black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight. The acknowledgement of the existence of multiple realities is the first step in Belenky et al.'s fifth perspective, constructed knowledge. Belenky et al. defined constructed knowledge as an effort to reclaim the self by attempting to integrate knowledge they [the women] felt intuitively was personally important with knowledge they had learned from others. They told of weaving
together the strands of rational and emotive thought and of integrating objective and subjective knowing. (134)

Precious does not enter this fifth perspective within the novel. Although Precious is still located within a connected knowing perspective, she is situated to continue to challenge herself and her understanding of her world and move into the constructed knowing perspective.

Through a carefully constructed text and thoroughly developed protagonist, Sapphire is able to challenge the stereotype of low-income women within our culture. It would be difficult for a reader to leave the world of Precious Jones without a greater understanding of the complexities of the welfare system and those who struggle to survive in it. And yet, *Push* has not been included in many literature curricula, in part, because of the graphic representations of abuse. However, I found many syllabi on the internet that included *Push* on their reading lists, the majority of which are social science courses addressing issues of welfare reform and socio-economic class stratification. In addition to the social science disciplines, I discovered that *Push* was also being taught in adult basic education courses.

Within the field of adult education, Anson Green, an instructor of adult basic education in Texas, has published several articles relating to the challenges and innovations in the teaching of adult basic education.
Many of the students in Green’s courses are welfare recipients. In his article “Risky Business in the Classroom: Using Sapphire’s *Push,*” Green explores how Sapphire’s *Push* came to be used in his classroom. Green chose *Push* because of the novel’s representation of the interconnections between welfare and education. Green initially chose the “safe” passages from *Push* and shared them with the class. The class found the novel’s description of the first day of class quite real and often humorous.

However, Green had not chosen at that point to include any more of *Push* within his course. Indeed to teach a text which directly and aggressively confronts sexual, verbal, and physical abuse is always a risk in a classroom. “Sometimes this means going into areas that students feel are important but in which instructors may feel less secure” (Green 2). The graphic language of sexual abuse alone may offend students and instructors. An instructor must also understand the likelihood of having a survivor within the classroom. In fact, the estimates of women who survive some form of sexual abuse in childhood and/or adolescence ranges from one in three to one in five (Herman 12). With these statistics it is impossible to ignore the intrusion of incest into the college classroom, for in any given class, the probability exists that every third to fifth female student experienced some form of sexual abuse in her childhood. Yet, because of the overwhelming power of the text and its
portrayal of a young adult student, some have found ways to incorporate the novel in class, taking risks and literally pushing the envelope by challenging themselves, their programs, and their students. Such risks, when guided and carefully considered, can have enormous benefits for learners and educators alike. (Green 1)

It wasn’t until the students of the course began to read other sections of the novel and asked why the class was not reading the book in its entirety that Green considered the possibility that it was not the students who would reject or become uncomfortable with the text; rather his own discomfort with the text had made him so cautious:

Experience stories, often very revealing, are a large part of our curriculum, but, oddly enough, I had drawn a line between the fictional experiences of the character Precious Jones and the students' own real-life experiences, which in many ways were often no different. I sensed many felt I had let them down by not trusting their sensibilities when, in fact, I was insecure about my own comfort level with the material. The validation of their voices allowed us to work through the differences in our perceptions and interpretations of the material and was an educating and empowering experience for all. (Green 3)
Through the use of borrowed copies, the class chose to read *Push*. The low-income women students of Green’s class could relate to the world of Precious Jones. “Though fictional, Precious Jones' world was very ‘real’ to students. Her progress through a precarious world full of significant barriers reinforced areas where they still had doubts. It helped give meaning to many parts of their lives that they had previously seen as only ‘mistakes’ (Green 4). These “mistakes” are the internalized ideology of our cultural discourse which has determined that becoming a mother at a young age, dropping out of school, divorcing or never marrying are actions that constitute the “mistakes” of their lives. Green’s ability to analyze his resistance to the text allowed him to take the risk needed for his students’ continued progress in the course.

*Push* encourages educators and students alike to take risks. The novel presents numerous challenging themes pertinent to learners' lives, themes which learners often must begin working through in the safety, support and risk-free environment of the classroom. (Green 4).

Green has chosen to actively pursue a “radical introspective” approach within his classroom. James C. Hall defines radical introspection as
a pedagogical starting point from which to approach changes to our standard procedures. Radical introspection must be understood as distinct from all forms of narcissism and psychological reductionism. In practice, my construction of radical introspection presents a challenge to consumerist and managerial notions of education and the social good. I see it rooted in the liberal feminist notion of *the personal is political*, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s conception of the *organic intellectual*, and the African American tradition of prophetic Christianity. (Hall 5)

Using the concept of “radical introspection,” we can extend this examination of positionality from “a pedagogical starting point” to the overall starting point of anyone attempting to seriously learn or teach within our multicultural society. We are all engaged in the politics of our society and need to learn and practice the critical examination of our positionality within the discourses surrounding us both inside and outside the world of academia. As Gregory S. Jay eloquently states “before we get too busy celebrating our position at the forefront of the liberation of the culture, we must recognize that we are the problem. It is our racism, our sexism, our prejudice, our fear, our anxiety, our desires that we must confront and overcome” (161).
Therefore, it is imperative that narratives of and about contemporary low-income women be included within our academic discourses and, in particular, in literature classrooms, for “given the power of academic institutions to shape cultural priorities, institutional forms like curricula are central to the maintenance or modification of canons, not only in literary study but throughout the educational system” (Lauter 150).

The direct confrontation of *Push* with the cultural stereotypes of welfare mothers and low-income women can effectively challenge the reader’s own beliefs. As Elisabeth Hayes and Sondra Cuban, professors of education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, conclude:

*Push* may not reflect the lives of all or even most low-literate adults, but Precious certainly is not so different from them in her struggles. The question perhaps, is not whether Precious is completely realistic, but whether her story is believable enough that readers gain a new respect for low-literate adults’ strengths and potentials, as well as the challenges they face. (Hayes and Cuban 50)

We have seen through Anson Green’s inclusion of *Push* in his classroom how powerfully influential the novel can be for welfare mothers in resisting the stereotype assigned to them. I also argue that it
can be just as powerful in resisting the stereotype of welfare mothers for students who are not in the welfare system. Rosaria Champagne declares, "all forms of liberation depend on the active participation of allies" (5). Through an inclusion of narratives such as Anne Downey's personal narrative and Sapphire's *Push* in our literature classrooms, a challenge to the general population's conception of the welfare mother can be achieved. Audre Lorde explains how we need to look upon literature and literary criticism, to see the potential within ourselves as a whole community intertwined through literature:

> For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. For others, it is to share and spread also those words that are meaningful to us. But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth. (Lorde 22)

By challenging all of our students to look beyond the cultural stereotype of the welfare mother through fictional and personal narratives, we can effectively produce the social change so needed within our culture. This change cannot occur unless we, as instructors of
literature, are willing to take great risks. Teaching Sapphire’s *Push* within a formal classroom would indeed be a great risk. The graphic language of sexual abuse is bound to make many students turn away in disgust:

I feel Mama’s hand between my legs, moving up my thigh. Her hand stop, she getting ready to pinch me if I move. I just lay still, keep my eyes close. I can tell Mama’s other hand between her legs now ‘cause the smell fill the room. Mama can’t fit into the bathtub no more. Go sleep, go sleep, go to *sleep*, I tells myself. Mama’s hand creepy spider, up my legs, in my pussy. God please! Thank you god I say as I fall asleep (21).

I myself want to turn away when I read this passage and many others in *Push*. However, I know the amazing effect this novel can have upon its readers so I continue to “push” myself to read and analyze its content. The challenge for instructors is how to teach *Push* without having students turn away or, worse yet, blame Precious for her situation.

*Push* could be taught in a class which examines working-class and low-income women’s narratives; I would approach the texts from a cultural studies perspective grounded in feminist and reader-response theory. I would begin with Downey’s personal narrative, exploring how she challenges the stereotype of the welfare other and further discuss
how Downey's text is shaped by the social, political, and economic context in which she is located. I would then introduce *Push* and ask students to keep a reflective journal on their reading experience.

By means of a thorough classroom discussion of the reading journals, students would be encouraged to share their responses, both positive and, more importantly, negative, to the text. I would expect great resistance to a novel such as *Push*. I would expect that many students would either turn away or blame Precious. In order to deter students from blaming the victim of the narrative, I would come out as a welfare mother and incest survivor in the hopes of creating the same dissonance within my students that Blue Rain creates within her own students when she comes out as a lesbian. Through more discussion and reflection concerning the social construction of the welfare mother in our dominant discourse and how the narratives of Downey, Precious, and me all have similarities, it is my belief that students would, instead of turning away or blaming the victim, begin to see how our cultural institutions and systems are to blame for the poverty and abuse of young women, not the women themselves.

The inclusion of low-income women's narratives within our literature classrooms is necessary if we are to effectively produce even the smallest change within our culture. Throughout this paper, I have
attempted to illustrate how from a cultural studies approach grounded in feminist and reader-response theory, literature instructors and literary critics can begin to challenge the cultural stereotype of the welfare mother. Beginning with an understanding of the situations in which low-income single mother students are located due to recent legislative acts of welfare reform, the first chapter explored the relationship of welfare reform and higher education. The second chapter examined how the internalized stereotype of the welfare mother affects those receiving welfare and how through literary and personal narratives, we can begin to challenge such stereotypes. Building on the concept that literature is an effective means through which we can create social change, the third chapter examines the exclusion of narratives, Anne Downey's personal narrative and Sapphire's *Push* from our literature classroom based on the remnants of the belletristic foundations of the literary canon and argues that literature not considered “good” has a crucial place in our literature classrooms based on the cultural work these texts can produce. A discussion of the risks associated with the teaching of these texts follows with attention to one example of how to foster a classroom environment which would allow for the challenge of the stereotype of the welfare mother.
Whether the reader is a welfare mother who has internalized the stereotype of herself or a middle-class white male who has never met anyone on welfare, *Push* and Downey's personal narrative are an avenue into a reality that has remained silent and shadowed within our cultural discourse. The language of *Push*, the inclusion of the welfare system, the extremely abusive situations, the failure of the educational system, this reality has never before been seen in a literary work that achieved a mass publication. The inclusion of *Push* and welfare mothers' personal narratives within our literary classrooms bring a validation to the voices of contemporary low-income women that have yet to be heard.
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