

Biographic Currency in Crisis

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EARLY IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, I found myself sitting in a drive-thru in Oakland, California, watching a family of four siblings move from car to car asking for change to buy food and find a place to live. Alternating responsibility for the “big ask,” each made a similar bid with an open hand, speaking through half-closed windows, which drivers rolled up before stopping to hear the downward bargaining request for dollars, then change. I could hear the driver ahead of me telling the oldest, a young black man who could have been anywhere from sixteen to twenty, that he should seek help at the local welfare agency or shelter. By the time they reached me, standing around the youngest, waiting for him to deliver the speech, I had already dug into my cup holder. Pushing the money for my meal into his hand I somehow hoped for connection, a nod that would distinguish me from the others, though I drove off soon after the encounter as everyone did. However much I replayed the scene and wished to do it over again, less typically, more responsibly, the first driver’s advice stuck with me. Common as it is to refer people in need to local agencies that process requests for financial and in-kind aid, it is also common to associate welfare offices with a hard-to-navigate maze of paperwork, interviews, and extensive documentation that simultaneously legitimates and delays help.

Curious to know what kind of maze the family might face, I decided to visit the local welfare office, which had just been renamed the Eastmont Self-Sufficiency Center. A newly redesigned storefront in the Eastmont Mall in Oakland, it was conceived on the model of local police offices in shopping centers, a socially embedded location meant to forge continuity between neighborhood, aid, work, banking, reading (a library was upstairs), eating, and even adoption (an adop-

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tion “kiosk” spit out forms from an ATM-like machine downstairs if you wanted a child or wanted to find out how to place one). I walked over to the Center’s service window to ask for a packet of application forms and was refused. Welfare forms were considered valuable and manipulable if given outside the supervised context of an “application class” that guided formal submission. I sat for the video lesson urging compliance with the policies outlined in the 107-page application packet that required documentation of all family relations, reproductive status, parental names, their physical markings, and all institutional affiliations that might substantiate claims to destitution, abandonment, or immediate hunger.

Structured in this way, the protected process of writing for aid shapes the transactional relationship between “demonstrated need” and institutional resources, between institutional grant writing and federal funding, between federal funding and public support. This circuit of funding routed through biographic disclosure and verification points to the critical importance of filling out forms; it sets into motion an evaluative and economic relation across institutions and applicants, creating units of value in an assistance economy.

In this article I argue that the written practices of social welfare and advocacy organizations, full of biographic details tabulated in forms, reports, and interviews, translate into a kind of life-writing that can secure or lose institutional funding, funding for applicants, and political support. I call the successful product of writing for aid *biographic currency*, a unique—and meager—form of value created from approved descriptions of suffering. The layers of documentation that lead to biographic currency, including bureaucratic paperwork, publicity campaigns, and political proposals featuring narratives of the poor, collectively constitute a *functional* form of life-writing, which defies, in many ways, our typical understanding of life-writing. Rich as the conventional genres are to our appreciation of unique lives and social contexts, functional life-writing flattens biography to generate comparisons and distinctions among applicants using culturally coded life details. From age and race to bank accounts and thumbprints, the documentation of identity and personal resources probes in order to reconstruct a multipurpose profile that can be used to transfer funds, monitor clients, publicize programs, define political priorities, and criminalize aid requests, all in an effort to define the purpose and limits of assistance.

The “success” of biographic currency, then, is complicated. I suggest here that the peculiar value of it not only explains the twin impulse to investigate and aid, but also indicates the steady construction of an assistance economy defined by the production, exchange, and rejection of applicant biographies. Because biographic currency is not a recognized unit of value in social welfare history, I develop its analytic potential by discussing a social movement that publicly challenged the political efficacy of selective assistance by directly targeting the administrative mechanism behind it.

Moving past the New Deal’s celebration I focus on the most referenced point of its denigration: the 1960s. As aid expanded dramatically to incorporate new programs and new populations systematically excluded from social services, black women suddenly became the face of aid expansion, and tensions between federal policy and local budgets reached their peak. Protesting the loss of benefits in the midst of publicized provision, recipient-activists and their advocates repurposed functional life-writing and turned it into a political vehicle to renegotiate the terms of aid while protecting payments in their existing form. By turning application forms into political devices intended to challenge and trigger the redistribution of aid, women of color¹ rede-

¹ The Welfare Rights Movement emerged as a coalition of Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Mexican American women and others, inspired by the United Farmworkers Movement, which was organized by César Chávez. Because African

ployed the categories that organized the scope of welfare. This multipurpose, activist use of functional life-writing, when effective, leads to *critical biographic currency*. Even as it occupies functional channels to stimulate aid, critical biographic currency also “talks back” to the form of delivery in a bid for institutional reform. Limited space prevents a full narrative of the many dimensions of the Welfare Rights Movement, which dissolved by 1975, but a focus on the political and economic value of writing for aid lends new insight into resistance through representation.

This line of argument follows the considerable scholarship on the split categorization of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor developed by Michael Katz, Robert Bremner, William Trattner,² and many others who emphasize moral assessments as a dominant factor in the form and extent of social welfare provisions. Distinctions between the two categories help isolate the role of third-party identity descriptions in accessing and ending support. I emphasize the biographic character of these distinctions inasmuch as they identify the race, ethnicity, age, gender, family relationships, and sexual lives of recipients and trade it for aid on the premise of documented behavioral reform.

Following Kimberlé Crenshaw’s³ research principle of intersectionality in the context of social welfare reveals the central importance of biographic details in the simultaneous construction of merit and stigma. Dorothy Roberts, Mimi Abramovitz, Linda Gordon, and Nancy Fraser have all traced how the gendered and racialized “face of poverty” has influenced welfare practices, to define what kinds of aid went to particular kinds of people and what images signaled the effectiveness and undesirability of aid to the poor.⁴ Acknowledging that recipients of all races and genders have experienced the stigma of emergency and longer-term assistance, why then should the face of poverty be represented with such biographic particularity? Repeated studies of American public opinion show that the word “welfare” is dominantly associated with the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, whose recipients are predominantly women, with women of color accounting for half.⁵ More specifically, the face of stigmatized aid, post-1960s, was racially coded as an African American woman, the welfare queen who illegally siphons aid coffers for personal gain.

American women came to represent the “face of welfare” in the 1960s and 1970s, this article focuses on the management of this public face vis-à-vis administrative protocols of aid determination, which affected all recipients.

² See: Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Linda Gordon, *Pitied but not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Robert Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (New York: New York University Press 1956); and Walter Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1974); Mimi Abramovitz leads the reformist history of welfare which neglected gender and race as formative influences on methods, range, and purpose of welfare policy. See: Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present* (Brookline, MA: South End Press, 1988). See also: Linda Gordon, *Women, the State and Welfare* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); and Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Press, 1997).

³ See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* (Vol. 43, No. 6), 1241–1299.

⁴ Nancy Fraser and Mimi Abramovitz popularized the reformist history of welfare that incorporated gender and race as formative influences on methods, range, and purpose of welfare policy. See: Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present* and Nancy Fraser, “Women, Welfare and the Politics of Needs Interpretation,” *Hypatia* Vol 2:1, Philosophy and Women Symposium (Winter, 1), 103-121. See also: Gordon, *Women, the State and Welfare*, and Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*.

⁵ For the most comprehensive of these studies, see Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Probing the construction of the welfare queen exposes a historical turn toward criminalizing long-term claims. Consistent preoccupation with deceit and a stubborn refusal to work remain enduring themes in public aid programs. But as the welfare queen achieved notoriety, administrative documentation became the locus of detection and termination. Dorothy Roberts, Wahneema Lubiano, Rickie Solinger, Barbara Cruikshank, and Ange-Marie Hancock have historicized the popularity of this potently fictionalized, distinctly racialized figure, which has persisted for the last fifty years.⁶ Barbara Cruikshank and Evelyn Brodtkin have argued the link between documentation and identity-inspired disentanglement most explicitly, calling for a renewed analysis of administrative politics (Cruikshank) and depoliticization (Brodtkin) that transform social policy through back-channel revision of bureaucratic protocols.⁷

Biographic currency—and its critical supplement—foster a new analysis of the relationship between a publicly stigmatized “welfare mascot” signaling the problem with aid and administrative protocols that channel aid. This prototypical profile addresses the recurring problem of nonuniversal support, which demands highly visible narratives of the undeserving to prompt ongoing revision of administrative practices that determine eligibility.

In the rest of the article I will examine the resurgent interest in the Welfare Rights Movement (1961–75) through a biographic lens, tracing the relationship between public profiles of need and of nondesert relative to writing practices in the welfare office and activist reframing that organized women in the movement, as well as legal challenges to rejected appeals. Attention to biographic framing helps link funding mechanisms to representational mechanisms, taking the welfare office as a site of contestation over common strategies that control the flow of aid.

CHALLENGING WELFARE APPLICATIONS

Shortly after President John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson announced that the United States would “make war” on domestic poverty. Kennedy’s nascent New Frontier programs,⁸ which were meant to address “unanswered questions of poverty and surplus,” were expanded and converted into the Office of Economic Opportunity, headed by Sargent Shriver. The agency was given the latitude to authorize interventionist social welfare programs and distribute funds from the federal government to local communities—and, most intensely, the inner city.⁹ Di-

⁶ See: Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*; Wahneema Lubiano, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Ministrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means,” in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 323–363; Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999); Evelyn Brodtkin, *The False Promise of Administrative Reform: Implementing Quality Control in Welfare* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Rickie Solinger, “The First Welfare Case: Money, Sex, Marriage, and White Supremacy in Selma, 1966, A Reproductive Justice Analysis,” *Journal of Women’s History* 22:3 (Fall 2010) 13–38; and Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

⁷ Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower*; and Brodtkin, *The False Promise*.

⁸ In connection with both the “creative impact” and the “race relations” theories of origin, the New Frontier programs are generally tied to the publication of Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* and John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society*, which captured the public imagination and targeted poverty as a specific issue that the Kennedy administration could address. The creative impact argument emphasizes Kennedy’s desire for a lasting legacy in social policy. The race relations theory argues that urban unrest prompted dramatic policy measures to appease civil rights leaders. See Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (Harmondsworth, NY: Penguin, [1962] 1981) and John Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, [1958] 1998).

⁹ David Zarevsky, *President Johnson’s War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (University City, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 100–109.

rect funding marked a radically different government response that bypassed states with federally supported employment training, experimental antidelinquency and relief programs aimed at integrating the poor into the middle class.¹⁰ The War on Poverty did not initially posit economic redistribution as a centerpiece of the program. Rather, it targeted the “culture of poverty,”¹¹ which explained economic destitution as a condition that bred an adaptive mentality, sustained in an encapsulated environment that was at odds with middle-class values and behaviors.

Ambitious and quickly institutionalized, the Office of Economic Opportunity was charged with ending poverty and eliminating racial inequality through the Great Society programs, which included midlevel community organizations designed to keep welfare agencies accountable and infuse residents with a commitment to life transformation. The community action agencies engaged aid recipients in welfare reform and developed local social services, sponsoring a bottom-up system of political empowerment and an expanded notion of aid.¹² Conceived as a set of programs to help the least advantaged transform institutionalized inequalities and life chances, the Great Society initiative nevertheless became the target of mass protest among AFDC recipients, activists, and social workers. What explains the federal endorsement of institutional change and empowerment of the poor in tandem with large-scale protests against aid administration?

Many scholars have given competing accounts of the merits and flawed principles of Johnson’s social service reforms: inadequate resource allocation, disproportionate focus on delinquency, the unstable status of entitlements, aid as a labor control strategy, and the two-tiered racialization of social welfare programs.¹³ This analysis largely focused on structural elements and implementation. Martin Gilens and Ange-Marie Hancock have complemented these theories, the former with a study of public attitudes toward antipoverty programs and the latter examining the public identity of the welfare queen in news media and congressional records. They address value-laden representations of the AFDC program and its recipients and how they became the subject of public disgust, racialization, and dwindling support against the grain of general support for helping people in need.¹⁴ Such representations give insight into the fragility of biographic currency, particularly the way it expands temporarily in proportion to its predicted demise as public attitudes change. Underfunded programs quickly shift their mission to resource conservation, creating new rationales for limiting aid to highly visible beneficiaries who trigger an ambivalent or openly hostile response.

¹⁰ Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 34.

¹¹ The “culture of poverty” argument also functioned as a political euphemism for race, addressing racial inequality by developing a new name for pervasive economic disadvantage, which made “overrepresentation” of minorities in the bottom quintile of the economy a matter of habituation to lack of education and opportunity, inherited by learned modes of survival rather than “race.” Disentangling the two would prove more rhetorical than substantive as the connections between poverty, genealogy, migration, and the history of race relations in the United States pressured the similarities. For the first articulation of the “culture of poverty” concept, see Oscar Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty,” in *Urban Life: Readings in Urban Anthropology*, ed. G. Gmelch and W. Zenner (1966; Prospect Heights, NY: Waveland Press, 1996). For subsequent reinterpretations, see Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (1984; New York: Basic Books, 1994). See also Daniel Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for Action* (Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965).

¹² Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 91–101.

¹³ See *ibid.*; Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*; Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); and Margaret Weir, Theda Skocpol, and Ann Orloff, eds., *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

¹⁴ Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*; and Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*.

In the last decade, several books have refocused attention away from stereotypical representations and toward the protest movement that countered Johnson's programs. Each emphasizes narratives by recipients and advocates who developed strategies to expand, critique, and unsettle welfare policy. What emerges from those books—*Welfare Warriors*, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, *Storming Caesar's Palace*, and *Brutal Need*—are rich interview accounts that include life stories of recipients, scholar-activists, and lawyers, their contributions to the Welfare Rights Movement, and a metaconscious use of biographic framing in welfare activism.¹⁵

CRITICAL BIOGRAPHIC CURRENCY

The Welfare Rights Movement began primarily as a case for dignity—insisting that women be seen and treated respectfully by public administrators, especially with regard to the AFDC program. From 1961 to 1966 local groups of mostly African American women banded together to protest “midnight raids”—when welfare workers arrived at the recipient's home in the middle of the night looking for a “man in the house.” Evidence ranged from an actual man in the bed to the presence of a male relative, a razor, a pair of men's shoes, any of which was supposed to indicate that the woman had a means of support for her children that disqualified her from welfare.¹⁶ Fighting “man in the house” laws, forced sterilization, and unjustified termination of aid constituted the core organizing activity for recipient groups across the country.

Educating women not on aid about available benefits often occurred in the context of shared experiences in training programs, in the neighborhood, and on the street, as a way to recognize and compare modes of survival.¹⁷ In Annalise Orleck's *Storming Caesar's Palace*, the women who organized the Las Vegas welfare rights group narrate collective life histories across generations to reveal contradictory sources of support and harm, from extended family and farm labor to an anonymous working life on the periphery of the city. Neighborhoods filled with strangers who migrated from southern states introduced new tensions and opportunities for solidarity.

Six million African Americans moved from the South to northern and western states looking for employment between 1915 and 1970. The Great Migration was the first voluntary relocation of the African American majority, though more often than not resettlement in other states did not bear out the promise of a better life.¹⁸ Annalise Orleck's *Storming Caesar's Palace* details the flow of migration and gendered labor to Las Vegas, where shantytowns on the city's periphery had no plumbing, electricity, public transportation, or clean water. The lengthy preparations necessary for the most basic domestic tasks—from baths to meals—took up hours a day. Women were left to perform such work but also had to earn in the city as well, balancing two jobs, one at minimum wage and the other running a serious deficit. At work, accidents on the job rarely generated worker's compensation benefits, and for mothers whose careers ended in disability, raising money was a matter of ingenuity and shared strategies among similarly situated women. Before disability was formally separated from other aid to mothers requesting assis-

¹⁵ Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Annalise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Martha Davis, *Brutal Need: Lawyers and the Welfare Rights Movement, 1960–1973* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Charles Reich, “Midnight Welfare Searches and the Social Security Act,” *Yale Law Journal* 72 (June, 1963): 7, 1347–1360.

¹⁷ Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace*, 101.

¹⁸ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010), 9.

tance, work histories disappeared into the present. Their subjects became nonworking, unskilled, single parents. In 1965 Social Security did absorb income supports for disability, formally separating the program from the administration of the AFDC program, emergency assistance, and job placement services. However, African American women were often shuttled back and forth between offices, caught between programs and eligibility requirements.¹⁹

The narratives shared in Orleck's interviews differ from the institutional biography of the poor, unmotivated woman of color who supposedly applies for welfare solely to avoid work. Organizers of the movement in Las Vegas— Ruby Duncan, Alversa Beals, Rosie Seals, Essie Henderson, and others— offered various explanations for unemployment and the need for benefits. Collectivizing struggle across specific lives and the immediate present changed the meaning of an individual appeal for support. Rather than a declaration of dependence—according to public discourse about aid²⁰—alternative explanations reveal a bid for recognition that black bodies *do* break under pressure and often labor under the radar of recognized work. Manual labor, racial exclusion, and job instability limited the possibility for family-supporting income. Sudden and unrecognized disability hindered workforce reentry, thus complicating the notion of “unwillingness to work.” Against the backdrop of multiple generations of women moving away from farm labor, factory labor, or domestic violence, the long history of vulnerability and bare earnings made modest state supplements seem like “cup holder change;” inadequate but useful. Through mutual education, conversations with college-educated activists, and family members with first-hand experience, the racial exclusions of the New Deal needed to be reconciled with the notion of citizenship and equal rights. Benefits represented a claim to entitlements. Rather than excuses, these politically charged narratives of exclusion and need were meant to outline fundamental omissions and penalties that persisted within the “new” social services.

Premilla Nadasen's *Welfare Warriors* also identifies welfare mothers' narratives of life experience as a method for challenging omissions in social policy and more publicized social movements. Through direct engagement with politicians and civil rights leaders, the life stories of African American women specifically prompted renewed attention to forced and voluntary migration, uncompensated domestic labor, starvation, food stamp policy, children's health, and sterilization.²¹ Straddling human rights claims and social rights claims, their political engagement claimed full citizenship, a recognized right to public benefits, and a redefinition of welfare that worked to neutralize the stigma of AFDC. This view resonates with T. H. Marshall's²² description of progressive demands for civil, political, and social rights, though in lieu of progression, welfare rights groups compressed their claims and pursued them all in a period of fifteen years before and after Johnson's declaration of the War on Poverty. Following the promise of expanded aid, small groups banded together to protest the uneven distribution of payments between women of color and white recipients, facilitating peer advocacy and the production of critical biographic currency, one case at a time.

¹⁹ Frederick Wiseman, *Welfare*, VHS (Cambridge, MA: Zipporah Films, 1975).

²⁰ See Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependence,” in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the Postsocialist Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

²¹ For a detailed history of the connections between the birth control movement, welfare, and the sterilization of black women, see Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*.

²² See T.H. Marshall and Tom Bottomore, *Citizenship and Social Class* (London: Pluto Press, 1987).

THE CRISIS STRATEGY

Local efforts, however, did not organically come together. At the “Poor People’s War Council on Poverty” in Syracuse, New York, scholars and civil rights activists discussed the potential for a national movement with representative leaders from every region and supervision by long-time veterans of various social justice organizations, from the Students for a Democratic Society to the Congress on Racial Equality.²³

Sociologist Frances Fox Piven and political scientist Richard Cloward played a pivotal role in that conference and in the inauguration of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), conducting research that claimed a discrepancy between the numbers of people eligible to receive aid and the number actually receiving aid. Citing a one-to-one ratio between aid recipients and “eligibles” not on aid, they argued that welfare provisions were administratively designed to reduce the number of recipients despite federal policies that endorsed broad social benefits. In a preliminary essay, distributed in 1966, called “Organizing the Poor: How It Can Be Done,” they proposed a radical strategy: “The discrepancy [between recipients and those eligible for aid] is not an accident stemming from bureaucratic inefficiency; rather it is an integral feature of the welfare system which, if challenged, would precipitate a profound financial and political crisis. The force for that challenge, and the strategy we propose, is a massive drive to recruit the poor onto the welfare rolls.”²⁴ The “crisis strategy” as it was called, involved a minimal-commitment mobilization that required only that more of the eligible poor apply for aid and receive some training about how to apply effectively. Working with activist administrators and allied social workers in targeted cities, they argued that the flood of approved and pending applications would prompt a reconceptualization of welfare’s inadequate casework structure. Rejected applications would be legally challenged until accepted, and the gap between eligible and actual recipients would be closed in bankruptcy—proving that welfare was underfunded and offered in bad faith. According to Piven and Cloward a politically embarrassing crisis would ensue, and they would propose a guaranteed annual income for the poor to quell the crisis.

This strategy would turn applications into a vehicle for political mobilization while recipient-activists would turn welfare offices into sites of contest, where forms and verifications could be submitted and taken away, debated and used to appeal to higher administrative authorities. Critical biographic currency would not come easily, and sit-ins proved it as the intensity of protest escalated and organizers fought to position aid applicants as watchdogs over protocol, capable of calling attention to eligibility stalled by flawed interpretations.

However polished the proposal seemed, support for the crisis strategy was not unanimous. Law scholar and poverty rights lawyer Elizabeth Wickenden warned that long-term implications of enrollment could prove devastating to public perception of the poor as “chiselers,” not to mention a sudden loss of benefits when the government eventually constricted the amount issued for claims.²⁵ The NWRO chair, George Wiley, argued that interventions should target the needs of current recipients rather than recruitment, and this became the formal stance of the national organization. Among recipient activists Piven and Cloward’s research was either celebrated or called into question as a device to support their predetermined strategy.

²³ Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 24, 33–34.

²⁴ Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, “The Weight of the Poor,” *The Nation*, May 2, 1966, 1.

²⁵ Davis, *Brutal Need*, 49.

Founder of the Los Angeles welfare rights group Mothers Anonymous Johnnie Tillmon embraced the strategy but repositioned application-based activism as a vehicle to claim mothers' rights.²⁶ For national organizers, mothers' rights were not persuasive enough to secure crucial public support. But, important to many African American mothers who participated in the early phases of welfare activism, the political agenda included a strategy to value women's domestic labor and the right to stay at home with children (rather than leaving them in the care of others in order to pay for childcare). Cutting across time and race, the mothers' rights argument mirrored a nineteenth-century program for white widows, one of the first federal welfare programs. As local women's clubs advocated more broadly for the protection of all single white mothers from forced employment, a national push coalesced for new legislation to guarantee mothers' rights. The policy passed, securing pensions for women under the auspices of maternalist social policy that prioritized domestic labor over workforce entry.²⁷ Mobilizing women around a similar theme, Tillmon advocated for African American women on welfare to redefine AFDC as a pension program for domestic labor, opposing forced entry into the marketplace. The racial particularity of "forced labor" turned the pension proposal into a critical commentary on working conditions after slavery.

In all cases, whether supporting, resisting, or repurposing the crisis strategy, recipients and organizers attempted to link individual claims to larger, rights-based arguments that captured the "sociological imagination." C. Wright Mills described this link as the point of contact between an individual biography and larger social events and desires that pressured the articulation of life, a mode of imagining abstract concepts and top-down decisions from the perspective of those wrestling with the existential fallout from social change.²⁸ While Mills emphasized the sociologist's role as biographer, Patricia Hill Collins revalued the point of contact between lived experience and social change with standpoint epistemology, which locates value in the articulation of personal encounters with institutional exploitation at the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Even if an academic-activist frames intersectional insights within a larger discourse or intervention, for Collins the person who stands at the intersection and bears witness to stifling social pressures proves more important than the professional (including Collins herself).²⁹ Relative to the production of biographic currency, which secures its value through professional mediation, standpoint epistemology seems to conflict with institutional simplification or bureaucratization in aid programs. Alternatively, critical biographic currency gains its value from the coproduction of eligibility and critique by pointing out the flaws and inefficacy of procedures and professional judgment. For welfare activists interested in harnessing changes proposed by the federal government, application forms that framed hardship could be used to reverse the impact of top-down decisions and pressure new policies from frontline interactions.

The "special grants campaign" best illustrates the strategy, as it hinged on a single typewritten form to redirect the flow of aid to the welfare-poor.³⁰ As the NWRO's most successful initia-

²⁶ Kornbluh, *Battle for Welfare Rights*, 168.

²⁷ Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* (Boston: Belknap Press, 1995), 10.

²⁸ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3–24.

²⁹ See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 22–23; and Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning From the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33:6 (1986), 14–32.

³⁰ Wherever "welfare-poor" is used, it refers to aid recipients surviving on limited resources who challenge the adequacy of benefits, along with advocates who use their benefit levels to argue for a minimum family wage.

tive, it aimed to educate organization members about special household allowances buried within welfare regulations, releasing a flood of new money based on a checklist designed by legal services that included items that the federal government considered necessary for every family. A checked box indicated a missing item and a dollar allocation for purchasing a child's winter coat, a dining room table, a full set of dishes, and the like. Legal services and welfare recipients collaborated to inject a new form into the welfare agency, claiming an income supplement up to one thousand dollars per family, from an overlooked provision in the federal handbook.³¹

Activist administrators and social workers took federal manuals, new directives, and new forms, which were all framing devices used by professional mediators and applicants, and helped craft the representation of need as a functional request and an institutional critique. Circulated instructions and interpretive strategies outside welfare agencies converted coded internal regulations into textbooks studied by applicants and their advocates in order to achieve eligibility. Applications for special-needs grants increased nationwide thanks to this supplementary framing device that transferred resources from the state directly to poor families receiving welfare.

Though mothers on welfare filled out the form and educated peers about its potential, organizers, lawyers, academics, and other advocates developed and shepherded claims through labyrinthine protocols as federally supported advocacy organizations. Hence, professionals were embedded critics working on behalf of recipients. They played an essential role in this form of activism as they relentlessly pushed for new provisions to rectify inadequate, inefficient aid distribution. And those victories performed a complicated service, intervening in procedure and life-representation, using one to upend the other.

This relationship explains the dynamic responsible for critical biographic currency because it describes an inevitable partnership. The successful submission of biographic details to aid organizations requires professionals and lay advocates to frame and scrutinize biographic production in order to match and counter institutional objectives. Claims that bid for access to a pool of resources funded with public support often seemed surrounded in administrative rules that demanded legal intervention.

In one of the most pivotal administrative law cases in the last century, the lawyers who advocated for applicants with multilevel arguments related to citizenship, property, and rights for the poor also developed methods of challenging administrative rules that prematurely terminated applications.³² *Goldberg v. Kelly* emerged out of the modified crisis strategy as thousands of applicants were routed to legal aid centers, creating a pool of patterned violations to choose from.³³ *Goldberg v. Kelly* marks the apex of the movement to reorganize economic relations between classes at a moment when federal and state welfare programs were redefined away from "charity" toward "entitlement" based on the documented struggles of America's poor. It reflected the most robust claims of the Poverty Law Movement, which developed in tandem with the Welfare Rights Movement. Threading individual life circumstances through due process claims, poverty lawyers partnered functional forms and protocols with a persuasive legal theory

³¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

³² Cover, Fiss, and Resnick's procedure casebook leads with *Goldberg v. Kelly*, calling it a defining moment in administrative law because it exposed the existential impact of procedure on life resources, foregrounded the importance of client dignity in the context of vigorous legal representation, and set the stage for a long-running debate about the limits and possibilities of activist-lawyering. See Robert Cover, Owen Fiss, and Judith Resnick, *Procedure* (Westbury, NY: Foundation Press, 1988).

³³ *Goldberg v. Kelly*, 397 U.S. 254 (1970).

that enlarged the citizenship rights of the welfare-poor to include protection of aid-as-entitlement.³⁴

The group claim depended on the consistent demonstration of harm in the absence of a pretermination hearing. In *Brutal Need*, Martha Davis interviewed the lawyers who mounted the case from the Mobilization for Youth offices in New York, a legal services unit created by the Kennedy administration, and Ed Sparer's Center on Social Welfare Policy and Law, housed at Columbia University. As the demonstration of harm pivoted around "brutal need," the framework for the case emphasized brief, tightly crafted biographies of the recipients that narrated their encounters with public assistance to the point of hunger, homelessness, and destitution in every instance. "The MFY complaint . . . was unusually long: twenty-eight pages detailing the stories of each plaintiff. The lawyers felt that they had to put in as many facts as possible because at first blush, what with all the rules and regulations governing welfare, the fair hearing procedure looked fair enough. Only when the recipients' stories were told did it become apparent that the system of holding hearings *after* termination resulted in extreme hardship."³⁵ Each account of the client's interactions with the welfare bureaucracy concluded with a statement of need that demonstrated the worst impact of wrongful benefits termination. Local welfare offices in New York, particularly those with expansive aid policies, became the target for rigorous legal challenges. In the absence of consistent aid determinations justified by stated procedure, the plaintiffs' legal team argued that premature terminations cause starvation, homelessness, and burdensome dependence (on friends instead of the state).

Altagracia Guzman attracted considerably more attention than other plaintiffs in the case. She received a check for \$85 every two weeks and \$80 a month from the father of her four children. On this limited allowance, Guzman managed to sustain housing and food for herself and her family. However, her benefits were discontinued when Guzman refused to sign a form authorizing the welfare agency to sue her children's father, an act that would have formalized his monthly contributions and rerouted a portion of his child support to the state. Though he contributed regularly to the household without institutional prompting, the lawsuit would have split his payment between Guzman and the welfare agency, effectively forcing partial reimbursement of benefits through legal action, or termination of benefits for not submitting the form authorizing prosecution. Thus, termination of her AFDC income revolved around a slip of paper authorizing the state to sue for its own support.³⁶ Legal representatives challenged the state's relentless drive to collect all available resources from the recipient and relatives to the point that social welfare programs actually compromised informal family support agreements while urging recipients to seek additional help beyond the state.

Below, a collection of final sentences in four client narratives show how lawyers framed administrative mistakes in existential terms, arguing for "survival income" as a right rather than a privilege.

³⁴ The legal theory that provided the basis for claiming welfare as an entitlement evolved from Charles Reich's influential article proposing that citizens who experience financial crisis from unpredictable changes in job availability and other life-sustaining resources merit government support. Arguing that certain professions and corporations receive government subsidies to sustain operations, he advocated a parallel benefit for "intervention in the private suffering of individuals." See: Charles Reich, "The New Property," *Yale Law Journal* 73 (April 1964): 5, 732-784. For the welfare-specific follow-up to this article, see Charles Reich, "Individual Rights and Social Welfare: The Emerging Legal Issues," *Yale Law Journal* 74 (June, 1965): 7, 1245-1257.

³⁵ Davis, *Brutal Need*, 89.

³⁶ *Goldberg v. Kelly* Case Docket, 62 (Supreme Court of the United States, October 1969), 20a-30a.

1. Mrs. Frye currently has \$40 to support and maintain her and her eight children. She has no other assets and no possibility of obtaining any.
2. If Mrs. Guzman's case is terminated, she will be completely unable to support herself and her four children or to provide any of the necessities of existence.
3. Plaintiff Kelly has no assets, no means of support, and remains unable to work pending further surgery, which was occasioned by his 1966 automobile accident. Since he was terminated, Mr. Kelly has been living on the charity of his friends.
4. Plaintiff deJesus is totally without means of support and has no family. He received temporary shelter from a friend who is himself a recipient of public assistance, but at present is without shelter or financial assets.³⁷

In every instance the client's urgent need is both present and past, awaiting a decision and yet also functioning as a stand-in for a subject position that does not refer to the actual life but rather illustrates the point at which the state becomes responsible for the survival of its citizens. Such representation heightened the meaning of struggle but also froze the terms of recognition. The subjects of aid were helpless, often homeless, and unable to survive without state support. While survival thankfully contradicted the representation of impending death, the clients considered most suited to the case effectively handed over self-representing claims (which bore a direct relationship to life needs) for issue-representing claims (which used biographic illustration to sharpen the stakes of impact litigation).

In *Brutal Need*, Martha Davis recounts an interview with David Diamond, a supervising lawyer at Mobilization for Youth, who remembered an early phase in case planning when clients were selected to represent patterns of administrative error. John Kelly's name would be the placeholder for a class-action suit. In some sense, Diamond sympathized and wanted to win the case so Kelly could receive compensation, but he had difficulty seeing Kelly as a person, instead seeing his plight as an "occasion" for broad legal impact.³⁸ Similarly, Piven and Cloward encouraged leaders of the Poverty Law Movement to link their litigation strategy to the organizing potential of the Welfare Rights Movement, which was dominantly represented by African American women demeaned and shut out of public assistance programs. Though the beneficiaries of aid varied across race and gender, the "face of welfare" had already become the black woman—triggered by high-profile discrimination and resistance. Since then, Latina mothers have become the most visible welfare mascots in political campaigns and teen pregnancy ads that project the strain of resources against the pressure of "illegal" need.³⁹ In other words, highly visible biographies are used both to argue for restricted access to aid as well as to raise the profile of critiques. Critical biographic currency emerges only when claims challenge protocols while gaining access to institutional resources, yet the method of critique consistently wrestles with the implications of simplified oppositional appeals.

Nonetheless, access to resources proves compelling to applicants and advocates alike. Impact litigation during the Poverty Law Movement managed to change the stakes of aid by using procedural norms and functional life-writing to overwhelm the welfare bureaucracy with qualify-

³⁷ Ibid., 14a–35a.

³⁸ Davis, *Brutal Need*, 90.

³⁹ Ruby Tapia, "Impregnating Images: Visions of Race, Sex, and Citizenship in California's Teen Pregnancy Campaigns," *Feminist Media Studies* 5:1 (2005). For poignant parallels to the Welfare Rights Movement, see Grace Chang, *Disposable Domestic* (Cambridge, MA: Southend Press, 2000).

ing cases the system could not conceivably handle. Realizing the gap between federal policy and local budgets, frontline decisions attempted to make up for the difference by closing cases while struggling to keep up with eligibility rules that changed daily. Professional advocates handled what beneficiaries and aid workers could not: close scrutiny of policy changes and bureaucratic discrepancies presented to legal aid offices throughout all major cities. Such scrutiny helped to identify the implications of premature case closings. When eligibility requires exhaustion of all other resources, the purpose of aid is bare survival. Biographic currency for the client is equal to the amount of money required merely to survive, while critical biographic currency for the movement rests on the political value of survival income. As the boundary between state and personal responsibility shifted, the political value of aid claims soared.

Goldberg v. Kelly was decided for the plaintiffs. Justice Brennan wrote the majority opinion, citing the importance of “human stories” that bear witness to the plaintiff’s “brutal need.” Brennan decided the procedural issue of pretermination hearings and in the process affirmed aid as the property of the person who cannot live without it, subject to justified termination with due opportunity to contest.⁴⁰

Anthony Alfieri, writing on the legacy of poverty law, has pointed to the contradiction between the empowering social reform agenda of activist litigation and the production of stock stories featuring passive indigents, incapable of surviving without legal intervention. In the decades since *Goldberg v. Kelly*, a significant body of scholarship has emerged on poverty law and the reinscription of subordination in cases meant to champion the dignity and rights of the under-represented.⁴¹ Even if produced on behalf of institutional reform, critical biographic currency still flattens the expressions of identity, desires, and agency. And the cost of narrow appeals can easily exceed the benefits realized in the lives of those represented.

Even as the case and the activist movements that complemented it took applications for aid as a central strategy linking life needs to federal funds, the implications of biographic restructuring were less than clear at the time. Profiles of recipients played a unique role in the escalation of judicial review, community rights education, and large-scale activism, but they also served as a taken-for-granted tool (described as “human stories”) to transform social welfare policy. In this way, critical biographic currency yields an ambivalent result. A successful critique that retains benefits may also stigmatize those who “figure out the forms.”

CRITICAL BIOGRAPHIC CURRENCY AND THE POLITICS OF FORMS

As such, the strategy had a limited life span. Control over representations of poverty and the people who ask for aid shifted from administrative debates over interpretation to new forms of inquiry that constrained qualitative claims. By 1972, the Subcommittee on Fiscal Policy of Congress’s Joint Economic Committee had been formed to address the crisis that mass enrollments produced in welfare administration. Administrative reform narrowed the channels that activists, recipients, and lawyers had used to enforce broad income redistribution and the rights of the poor. “Administrative reform reduced the risk of countermobilization against restrictions on welfare, in part because it did not overtly breach the integrity of *theoretical entitlement* to welfare

⁴⁰ *Goldberg v. Kelly*, section 1, citing *Kelly v. Wyman*, 294 F. Supp. 893, 899, 900 (1968).

⁴¹ Anthony V. Alfieri, “Reconstructive Poverty Law Practice: Learning Lessons of Client Narrative,” *Yale Law Journal* 100 (1991): 2107. See also Lucie White, “*Goldberg v. Kelly* on the Paradox of Lawyering for the Poor,” *Brooklyn Law Review* 56 (1990): 861–87; and Lucie White, “Subordination, Rhetorical Survival Skills and Sunday Shoes: Notes on the Hearing of Mrs. G,” *Buffalo Law Review* 38 (1990): 1–58.

promised by statute and supported by law, while in practice initiating a process of *effective disentanglement*.⁴² Closing interpretive opportunities and converting discretionary decisions into calculated justifications (literally, checking boxes with points and numbers), welfare's "text" turned quantitative. In addition to a series of losses that rolled back the expansiveness of *Goldberg v. Kelly*, poverty lawyers began to lose traction in a movement that had secured more victories in the previous five years than had ever been accomplished in the history of legal advocacy for the poor in the United States.⁴³ Quality control, which may, methodologically at least, be considered a form of quantitative control, transformed the methods of decision making that understood cases as multiauthored texts into data entry problems that triggered calculative contradictions and flaws by omission.

A central figure in arguments for Quality Control was the "welfare cheat," blamed for the excessive enrollments that stole payments from the truly needy. The Chair of the Congressional Committee, Russell B. Long, argued forcefully for renewed control of managers, clients and payments using this new method of analysis on the model of mathematical proofs, outlining each step of aid-determination with tables and calculations that measured the welfare worker as much as the client, and penalized states for not meeting performance (reduction) goals. This "needs-calculus" reinforced the legitimacy of welfare documentation and investigation as a means to identify and transition people in need into the workforce, to constrain a runaway entitlement program either unable to catch up with the total numbers in poverty or manipulated by welfare strategists.

Quality control and the welfare cheat—who grew in personality and physical detail, until she became the welfare queen—combined to force a shift in the status of critical biographic currency and its ability to reconstruct social welfare policy. Microanalysis was urged by administrative reforms and public analysis that, in search of the "cheat," criminalized every recipient. Hotlines appeared across the country to encourage another layer of reporting, recording, and case closing to supplement the administrative apparatus with a "neighborhood watch" campaign.⁴⁴

The Welfare Rights Movement ended with a legal commitment to due process—a right to appeal aid decisions—even as the demand for documentation and quantification of forms multiplied. Narrowed definitions of entitlement and reduced funding for activist lawyering further dissolved the structure that allowed critical biographic currency to transform individual applications into a collective reform strategy. The legacy of activism quickly faded into a foreshortened assessment of robber-baron lawyers and academics recruiting the poor for votes, a story countered by oral histories, occasional but significant studies of recipient-activists, and now a resurgence of analysis tracing an alternative feminist agenda among poor women of color in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁵

The welfare queen reshaped the meaning of activism and emerged with great detail on Ronald Reagan's 1976 campaign circuit. Public suspicion and a national budget crisis had already ripened the link between organized recipients and organized "welfare rings" that purportedly

⁴² Evelyn Brodtkin, *The False Promise of Administrative Reform: Implementing Quality Control in Welfare* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 105.

⁴³ Edward V. Sparer, "The Right to Welfare," in *The Rights of Americans*, ed. Norman Densen (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 66.

⁴⁴ Barbara Cruikshank, "Welfare Queens: Policing by the Numbers," in *Tales of the State: Narrative in Contemporary U.S. Politics*, ed. Sanford Schram and Philip Neisser (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 116.

⁴⁵ The best example of this analytic recuperation vis à vis feminist movements of the same period is Premilla Nadsen's "Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights," *Feminist Studies* 28:2 (Summer 2002): 270–301.

moved from state to state in an effort to purge public coffers through false applications. The durability of the welfare queen, with her “80 names, 30 addresses, 12 social security cards and . . . collecting veteran’s benefits on her four non-existing deceased husbands” (details that are repeated as often as there are articles about her), reconstructed the public biography of welfare recipients in a stereotypical form aimed at publicly reducing the political legitimacy of activist women on welfare and restricting general need claims through revised procedures and writing requirements.

WELFARE WRITING AS LIFE RE-WRITING

Revised procedures changed the capacities of functional life-writing. No longer a vehicle for activist demands, welfare writing was turned into a behavioral contract, a means to enlist recipients in their own normative reform. This shift has largely been sponsored by the “new paternalism,” as described by its architect, Lawrence Mead. While the AFDC program accommodated long-term assistance, which indirectly addressed systemic problems with job availability and inadequate income, the new program featured limited survival budgets, term limits on aid, and mandatory work requirements. To mark its distinction from ADFC, in 1996 policymakers passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which authorized a new program called Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). Funded by federal grants, the act encouraged competition between states for reducing rolls and the placement of “customers,” instead of clients, in minimum-wage jobs. The new competition rewarded governors and agency reformers who best economized TANF funds, much as customers were considered successful for leaving aid behind.

Though these changes developed from the welfare debates of the 1960s, Mead describes their evolution from experiment to policy without reference to the Welfare Rights Movement. Instead, he argues that the 1960s marked a turning point when welfare no longer supported working-class parents, down on their luck, but had expanded to encourage a weakened work ethic among particular populations with “behavioral problems” that kept them poor.⁴⁶

According to Mead, savings from bloated welfare programs could be reapplied to the working class, restoring the original purpose of public assistance. Shifting low-income support to middle-class income support (through tax policy, home loans, and educational grants and loans) would also shift the locus of biographic currency and its critical counterpart away from the poor. Reducing public support through the biographic mascot of nondesert helped refocus political resources on different institutions (notably banks, the Internal Revenue Service, and colleges), prompting new applications—and a new locus of political support—for the expansion of middle-class entitlements.

However, funding for welfare recipients who also petitioned for college grants presented a cross-class dilemma. Though a fraction of total recipients, the tension revealed the limited life trajectories planned for aid applicants. Vivyan Adair highlights post-PRWORA challenges for college students receiving food stamps and health care for young children.⁴⁷ Seen as a way out of poverty, college morally countered the new policy with a new crisis strategy. The crisis of do-

⁴⁶ Lawrence Mead, “The New Politics of Poverty,” in “Why the Poor Are Still with Us,” special issue, *Public Interest* 103 (Spring 1991): 3–30.

⁴⁷ Vivyan Adair and Sandra Dahlberg, eds., *Rethinking Class: Women, Poverty, and the Promise of Higher Education in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003). See also the ACCESS program mission statement, which appears on the Hamilton College Website, <http://www.hamilton.edu/access-project?>; and selections from the traveling exhibition featured in the American Association for Colleges and Universities newsletter, http://www.aacu.org/ocww/volume33_3/fromwhereisit.cfm?section=1.

mestic violence and the “poverty trap” positioned welfare as an income supplement to exit poverty and abuse. Rather than focus on payments designed for bare survival, a new generation of advocates insisted on reinventing a traditional path out of poverty: college. Positioning college grants as welfare, and welfare as an “exit strategy” from poverty provoked open debate about who should receive public support for higher education. Though he maintained that supplemental support for college is necessary, Charles Murray infamously argued that directing such support to women on welfare insulted working-class, two-parent families who saved and took out loans to put children through school, while recipients bypassed work and attended college on government grants, with childcare, food subsidies, and unearned health care.⁴⁸

Regardless of the gap between perceived and actual funding, the cross-class conflict over aid distribution again prompted a feedback strategy that made use of bureaucratic forms. Advocating new routes to benefits without sacrificing aid, Adair designed a program that enabled low-income parents seeking a college education to attend Hamilton College, a private liberal arts college in Clinton, New York. Telling her own exit story, from poverty to a doctoral degree, Adair attracted public interest beyond Hamilton, including additional institutional offers of support and new opportunities to rethink the path of forms that would generate funding for different institutional combinations. Developing an exhibition from the life stories and portraits of program participants, the biographic currency of low-income families who “made it” circulated to expand the network of collaborators in social services, legal aid, and educational institutions.⁴⁹ Consciously participating in the production of biographic currency, resistance functions behind the scenes as a critical pedagogy of forms, only to surface in funded affirmations of new trajectories unanticipated by PRWORA’s temporary aid programs. In this case, functional life-writing that links aid applications in social services to college admissions essays operates in the ambiguous space between normative self-representation and dramatic social mobility in an effort to rethink institutional alliances.

The effectiveness of subtle, if not masked, recombination can indeed produce new life trajectories for aid recipients and critical biographic currency as well, yet not without eventually articulated feedback. In *Notes from a Welfare Queen in the Ivory Tower*, Laura Harris challenges the reward claimed by middle-class mobility if it requires suppression of past experiences with welfare bureaucracies, food stamps, and the struggle to secure an education for oneself as well as one’s children. Tracing her own path to tenure as a professor at a small liberal arts college, she argues both personally and in the name of unseen welfare mothers in the academy, that the “price of the ticket” into a middle-class livelihood reinforces class inequalities by silencing creative methods of survival among recipients and classifying them as fraud. Advocating subtle and explicit strategies to claim maximum benefits from academic institutions, she refuses the accusation of fraud or theft.⁵⁰ Much like recipient organizers forty years earlier, this critical claim to entitlements highlights the insufficiency of payments designated to maintain life.

And to the extent that employment at academic institutions goes on to confer status through approved paperwork—the submission of manuscripts, applications for tenure, and evaluations that monitor classroom instruction—it becomes clear that biographic currency is not limited to the welfare office. Harris compares the indentured recipient, working off benefits

⁴⁸ See Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 178–195.

⁴⁹ Information from discussions with the author at the conference “Representing Poverty: American and European Perspectives,” held at the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., March 13–14, 2009.

⁵⁰ Laura Harris, *Notes from a Welfare Queen in the Ivory Tower* (Face to Face Press, 2002).

in low-wage positions, to the indentured academic. Saddled with personal debt that reduces monthly income to that of entry-level service positions, academic employment can end up reproducing starting-line inequalities instead of transforming them. The unimagined transition from welfare to doctorate (unimagined, at least, from the perspective of welfare policy) may cost more than it yields in comfort, earnings, and a perceived status that restricts disclosure of personal history to usable, or teachable, parts. Writing as a queer woman of color formerly on welfare, Harris's production of critical biographic currency rests on the disclosure of details outside the standardized form, prompting a reverse discomfort to unsettle the claim to diversity and equality in the Ivory Tower.

While this critique accounts for the cost of admission it also exposes the constraints on biographic currency. Functional life writing that helps gain access to college grants or employment opportunities differs according to the formal requirements of the funding institution and the value of other affiliations attached to the proper name. Because many affiliations diminish rather than confer benefits, Adair and Harris both offer to revise these constraints through the production of new narratives that reconstruct political alliances, binding the welfare office to the financial aid office, the eligibility center to college admissions and hiring committees. Throwing biographic currency into crisis or reform, novel yet eligible applications challenge scripted impossibilities with a bid for support that doggedly refuses normative integration. Functional life writing, in this sense, far exceeds an instrumental account of elaborate or ineffective forms. Rather, it calls for critical engagement with the continuum of writing practices that consistently unsettle and redefine the terms of distributive justice, citizenship, obligation, and the limits of assistance. [A]