Criminalizing Black Motherhood

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This article argues that the rhetoric of welfare reform shifts during three specific phases of the Cold War that culminate in the War on Welfare (1980–96), a war that is defined by the emergence of neoliberalism and its roots in the emergence of consumer freedom. I first trace how a war on poverty featured in the U.S. popular imaginary as it was shaped by the media and formulated in public policy. I then turn to how this popular imaginary was crystallized and contested in fictive representations of motherhood and welfare. Claudine (1974) is an early example of the regulatory practices of the welfare state and marks the discursive emergence of the War on Welfare while Sapphire’s novel Push (1996) marks the year that massive welfare reform legislation was enacted by the Clinton administration, a signature of neoliberals triumph. Lee Daniel’s subsequent film, Precious, an adaptation of “Push” is a reminder that in a so-called post-racial American the welfare queen stereotype is still very present.

Keywords: AFDC, freedom, motherhood, neoliberalism, Push, Reganism, state of emergency, War on poverty, War on welfare
neoliberalism and its roots in the emergence of consumer freedom. This model of freedom continues to leave its imprint on contemporary U.S. culture and racial stereotypes about motherhood and welfare. I will first trace how a war on poverty featured in the U.S. popular imaginary as it was shaped by the media and formulated in public policy. I will then read how this popular imaginary was crystallized and contested in fictive representations of motherhood and welfare. *Claudine* (1974) is an early example of the regulatory practices of the welfare state and marks the discursive emergence of the War on Welfare while *Sapphire’s* novel *Push* (1996) marks the year that massive welfare reform legislation was enacted by the Clinton administration, a signature of neoliberals triumph, while Lee Daniel’s subsequent film adaptation *Precious* (2009) is an example of the ever present stereotype of the pathological and undeserving welfare queen.

**Building White Suburban America**

At the beginning of the Cold War (1947–1964), post-war affluence and suburban housing were represented in the U.S. popular press as key features that set Americans apart from the Soviets. Suburban sprawl marked America as the land of plenty not only for housing opportunities but also for the consumer goods that were central to the middle-class household. In short, capitalist democracy afforded the benefits of comfortable suburban living while Soviet-style Communism supposedly created economic hardships, urban overcrowding, and poverty. This was the prevalent Cold War duality in the popular imaginary.

For many white Americans the suburban home was the buffer against urban and rural poverty. Suburbia was construed as the land of plenty where consumption came to be equated with individual freedom. New housing subdivisions were equipped with central heating, indoor plumbing, telephones, refrigerators, washing machines, and a car in every driveway, which defined a new national norm and civic identity. The setting of the 1959 debate about the merits of capitalism over communism between President Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in a suburban American kitchen was a significant example of the conflation between democratic freedom and America’s domestic ideal. Nixon’s opening message of the debate, “What Freedom Means to Us,” was devoted to representing America as a “classless society” due to an “extraordinarily high standard of living” that afforded “prosperity for all.” The positive features of American democracy were represented, visually, through the modern amenities that offered freedom from drudgery for American housewives. Nixon
argued that the two nations must struggle for “victory not in war but for the victory of plenty over poverty” and the way out of poverty was through a middle class, two-parent suburban home that was pointedly marked as white.\(^2\)

The Cold War debate of the 1950s had an idealized, racialized, and consumer-focused version of motherhood and domesticity at its center. Joseph Barry, a reporter for *House Beautiful*, claimed that foreign visitors appreciated American goods for “the freedom offered by washing machines and dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, automobiles, and refrigerators.”\(^3\) James O’Connell, Kennedy’s undersecretary of labor, argued that a woman’s ability to remain at home is what “separates us from the Communist world.” Therefore, American domestic practices of consumption, specifically, the icon of the suburban, domestic housewife, were crucial in setting America apart from its foe during the first phase of the Cold War. Strikingly, “[b]y 1960, suburban residents of single-family homes outnumbered both urban and rural dwellers and the detached house had become the physical embodiment of hopes for a better life.”\(^4\) Suburban homeownership and the freedom it signaled was the new American creed.

Persistent segregation and economic inequality made certain that suburban America, and by extension its central political identity, would remain white.

In vast new communities built by the developer William Levitt, which epitomized the suburban revolution, refused to allow blacks to rent or purchase homes. In 1957, not a single black family resided among the sixty thousand inhabitants of Levittown, Pennsylvania. … Meanwhile, under the slogan of “urban renewal,” cities used their power of eminent domain to remove the poor from urban areas slated for redevelopment.\(^5\)

The Federal Housing Administration would only ensure “economically sound” home loans, which in practice meant, “most black families were ineligible for federally insured loans.”\(^6\) In short, affordable housing for urban minorities was on the decline while suburban sprawl and white flight were on the rise. Housing was a central problem and a stark representation of racial inequality. Demand for housing was so high it was often difficult to make meaningful efforts to deal with slum conditions.\(^7\) Ultimately, slum conditions were the backdrop against which politicians called for “urban renewal,” but new, low-cost housing did not emerge after slums were razed, and fewer and fewer apartments were available in more limited areas of major city centers. “Urban renewal” was appropriately “known among some black activists as ‘Negro Removal.’”\(^8\) At a time in the 1950s and early ‘60s when the U.S. ideal of familial stability and consumption-driven success were touted as markers of western prowess, housing conditions for the poor were suspicious examples of uneven development.
The War on Poverty and the Other America

Because freedom was linked to the possibilities afforded by American democracy during the first phase of the Cold War, the persistence of unmet needs in the United States was associated with individual failures and anti-American values. However, as public awareness increased after the publication of Michael Harrington’s study on poverty, *The Other America* (1962), and Dwight Macdonald’s review in the *New Yorker* in 1963, poverty in political discourse began to be linked to specific, yet invisible, spaces where American capitalism had been stymied. The key feature of the second phase of the Cold War, marked by a War on Poverty (1964—1980), was that the onus of alleviating poverty was placed on the federal government by welfare rights activists and scholars. Kennedy instructed his advisors to study the problem of poverty and propose solutions\(^9\) and in 1964, Johnson returned to pre–Cold War freedoms—particularly freedom from want and waged a War on Poverty in order “to prove the success of our system” to the rest of the world.\(^10\) Domestic poverty and Cold War international efforts were once again directly linked. Welfare rights activists began to shift the discourse on welfare away from charity and towards rights and made some significant strides in alleviating structural racism within the welfare system.\(^11\) The national welfare state grew dramatically in coverage and poverty rates were on the decline.\(^12\)

Under the Nixon administration, public housing conditions and welfare were under increasing scrutiny. New Deal Programs and the Department of Housing and Urban Development were unable or unwilling to provide better housing for the poor. The future of housing support took the form of tax breaks for middle-class, white, suburban mortgages.\(^13\) As housing support for the poor was on the decline, so too was a crucial benchmark of welfare policy: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Nixon announced a plan to eliminate AFDC by ensuring a minimum standard of living for both the non-working and the working poor. The plan would later be known as the Family Assistance Plan (FAP) and would “reverse the post-New Deal trend towards federal government responsibility, by introducing revenue-sharing, a new federalism, and...abolition of the ‘failed’ welfare system in favor of a national minimum income.”\(^14\) With the help of U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, author of the landmark study “The case for National Action: the Negro Family” (1965), Nixon set out to end AFDC, Food Stamps, and Medicaid and replace them with a minimum income level of $1,600 for a family of four that may have reduced welfare families’ incomes. Moynihan was interested in ending welfare for unwed and single mothers
because he believed that giving financial benefits to single mothers
gave them the economic power to evict their husbands and create
non-traditional (and in his opinion inherently unstable) families.
More recent studies have shown that “AFDC itself had little impact
on women’s marital or childbearing decisions”\(^\text{15}\) but the causal link
was solidified in the public imaginary. Moynihan was selectively
building on the work of earlier sociologist who deemed Black female
headed households unruly, pathological, and the cause of varied
problems in Black communities.

Like Moynihan, \textit{Claudine} (1974), starring Diahann Carroll as
Claudine and James Earl Jones as Rupert (Roop), presents welfare
as a barrier to marriage but unlike Moynihan, counters the myth of
the lazy welfare queen and details a series of critiques against the
regulatory practices of the welfare state. Claudine, a hard-working
maid, meets Roop, a hard-working garbage-man, as he collects the
garbage at the suburban house she cleans. Roop and Claudine
develop a relationship in spite of her long hours at work, six children,
bus commute, and financial dependence on welfare.

In her weekly visits, the social worker, Miss Kabak, asks Claudine
if she has a job or a boyfriend. If Claudine lies and says that she does
not have a job or a boyfriend, then she’s committing fraud. If she tells
the truth about her job as a maid, her wages will be deducted from her
meager benefits. If she tells the truth about her relationship with
Roop, everything including gifts, meals, and beverages will be
deducted item by item from her welfare benefits. If she loses her
welfare check, she will not be able to feed her children. If she’s not
able to feed her children, social services will remove them. Claudine
and Rupert explain, “You can’t win” with the welfare state.

Roop explains that welfare forces him “out of the house because it
ain’t worth the crap” he’s got to go through, or the financial risk, to
marry Claudine. As Roop engages with the officials at the welfare
office, Gladys Knight sings “Mr. Welfare Man,” a song on the sound-
track for \textit{Claudine}, “keep away from me Mr. Welfare . . . I must div-
orce him, cut my ties with him . . . keep away from me Mr. Welfare.”
Claudine’s relationship with the welfare state is figured as abusive
and forcing her to “live against [her own] will.” For Roop to stay,
the viewer understands that Claudine will have to end her abusive
marriage to Mr. Welfare.

\textit{Claudine} details the bureaucracy and surveillance that put women
in a subordinate position to the state. Though the film staunchly
critiques the surveillance practices of the welfare state, the solution
is not the Family Assistance Plan, or guaranteed income, but, instead,
wage labor, “Jobs,” even after Claudine explains to her now pregnant
15-year-old daughter that even if they both work, their wages will
not equal even an entire salary of a white wage-worker. The concluding scenes of the film combine Claudine and Rupert’s marriage with Claudine’s eldest son protesting for “Jobs Not Welfare.”

Though there was recognition by the federal government that poverty continued to exist in America during the War on Poverty, and important strides were made in reducing poverty, the cost of welfare was receiving more attention and charges of welfare fraud and the undeserving poor were emerging in public discourse. The welfare queen was emerging as a member of the Black, undeserving poor.\textsuperscript{16} Cases of welfare fraud were receiving increased public attention in the 1970s and the federal government ultimately shirked the notion that it was the responsibility of the federal government to alleviate poverty where it continued to exist in the land of plenty.\textsuperscript{17} Instead, poverty would be reframed through generational pathology that emerged as a result of welfare, the loss of individual work ethic, and matriarchal family structures. Poverty would again be reframed through the racialized “other.” The Cold War anti-communist logic framed the persistence of economic need as the new enemy-within that required containment. Welfare mothers were characterized as parasitic, greedy, unnaturally dependent on the state (instead of a husband), and averse to work and were the fabricated stereotype used to justify a series of austerity measures that would demonize the poor and end welfare as we knew it.

**Race and Reagan’s War on Welfare**

Initially the War on Welfare (1980–1996) ushered in a new phase of the Cold War, marked by major federal policy changes and specific austerity policies, that were accompanied and facilitated by a shifting set of racialized and class-specific ideologies regarding freedom, home, and motherhood. The image of the lazy, licentious, and ultimately un-American Black welfare queen was central to the ideological constructs that justified the War on Welfare, which really became a war on the Black poor.

The image of the welfare queen was a crucial embodiment of the dangers of not entering the wage-labor system. She was represented as a criminal mother who chose welfare over work, was unburdened by restraint, and was physically marked by excess and greed—she was moreover unmistakably Black, obese, part of the under-class and a serious threat to domestic security. Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s assertion that “A country that does not take care of its domestic problems is not going to have an effective position abroad” underscores the link between domestic and international policy where the poor threaten to undermine the promises of American democracy and
Persistent Black poverty undercut America’s projected image of a land of success and freedom. Senator Moyinihan was a central figure in the War on Poverty and the War on Welfare. He was the Assistant Secretary of Labor during the Kennedy administration, part of the Johnson administration, and Counselor to the President for Urban Affairs during the Nixon administration. For Moyinhan, those who did not succeed given the benefits of American capital expansion were explained through family pathology, particularly in the figure of the overly powerful matriarch who either evicted her husband in favor of a welfare check or was unable to enter into new partnerships due to her dependence on and commitments to welfare. For Moyinhan, the so-called welfare queen key factors in constructing the image of the un-American woman, and her un-American family in the press and in policy statements.

By 1980, government programs that served the poor were increasingly framed through government inefficiency and fraud. During the War on Welfare (1980–1996) a series of federal initiatives were proposed in an effort to reduce or eliminate aid to the poor through ending Aid to Families with Dependent Children and turning welfare into workfare. Poverty came to be understood through the lens of culture, and pathology re-emerged to explain why people supposedly chose poverty and economic want over honest employment and economic “freedom.” Conservatives began to use the discourse of freedom to their advantage, and linked freedom to the free market to affirm that only those who work and consume are truly “free.”

Welfare was no longer formulated as being about meeting the basic needs of the poor as it had been during the New Deal, the beginning of the War on Poverty, and the welfare rights movement, but, rather, about dependence (un-freedom) on the state for care. Gradually, through the late 1970s and ‘80s one could not be “free” economically or psychologically without entering the wage labor system. As David Harvey notes, the free market was idealized as “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills [through] strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” The emergence of neoliberalism in the late twentieth-century differed from late nineteenth-century liberalism in that it substituted “market liberties” for “political freedoms.” As such, what came to be known as the War on Welfare narrowed American ideological constructions of freedom to market freedom, the freedom to work, and the freedom to own and control private property. Indeed, “the dark side of an American political culture of freedom and rugged individualism” shapes the public identity of the welfare queen. In the late 1970s economy,
where increasing numbers of women across the spectrum worked outside of the home, the early Cold War ideal (which had always been a white ideal) faded. Poor Black women welfare recipients (those erroneously cast by dominant discourse as the “typical” welfare recipient) were now deemed lazy and un-American for not working outside of the home, whereas in the 1950s they were demonized for not being married stay at home moms.

In his first presidential campaign of 1976, Ronald Reagan disseminated the myth of the criminal welfare queen who drove a luxurious pink Cadillac and had “eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veteran’s benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands...she’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income is over $150,000.”23 In short, she was a parasite on the state, and austerity measures would be implemented to free the state from her ever-increasing body and power. Martin Gilens documents how welfare debates and race are linked. While white images dominated the sympathetic coverage during the War on Poverty, Black images dominated the antagonistic coverage during the War on Welfare and took advantage of existing racial biases to garner support for ending social safety nets for the poor.24 The unmistakably Black, unemployed, and poor, Welfare Queen stood in stark contrast to the white, suburban mother who was neo-liberally free, dedicated to her family, and subordinate to her husband—and in contrast to the housewife of the 1960s and 1970s, this mother, unburdened by household labor, was “free” to labor outside the home.

After his successful presidential bid in 1980, Reagan’s first major blow to the welfare state was the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) of 1981. OBRA blunted congressional power by over-ruling committees with aggressive executive measures that forced Congress to implement austerity measures.25 There were limits placed on who could receive welfare payments. The income from step-parents would now be included, parents on strike would be excluded from receiving benefits, and the age of eligible children was reduced from 21 to fewer than 18. Benefit levels were reduced as states were allowed to figure in food stamps, housing subsidies, and Earned Income Tax Credits before awarding welfare benefits. Ceilings were placed on work and child-care expenses. Benefits would be based on net, not gross, income. Initial estimates were that welfare caseloads would decrease by 442,000, with a projected annual cost savings of one billion dollars.26 However, after the first eight to ten months caseloads and expenditures were trending back to pre-OBRA levels.27 In 1986 Regan appointed a White House study group on welfare to
recommend a complete overhaul. Their findings were coalesced into the Family Support Act of 1988, the second major blow to the welfare state. The purpose of the Family Support Act (FSA) was to revise the AFDC program to emphasize work, child support, and family benefits, to amend title IV of the Social Security Act, and to encourage education, training, and employment.\(^{28}\) In effect, FSA replaced welfare with child support payments, workfare, and childcare. Women were no longer expected to stay at home with their children beyond pre-school age, and welfare benefits were decreased across the board by turning state-sponsored welfare into forced workfare. Workfare was one of the most important features of the plan to get women off welfare rolls. Women who chose to remain at home and on welfare were deemed parasites on the state.

Paternity was also a crucial feature of the War on Welfare. Civil unrest during the 1960’s had been linked to economic inequality and ghetto life, and the solution for this unrest for the Commission on Civil Disorders was to “encourage young men to marry and form stable, male-headed households.”\(^{29}\) Verification of paternity was a tactic to force male financial involvement and by extension their emotional involvement with their children. A Child Support Enforcement Program was enacted to determine paternity. States would lose funding if a certain percentage of paternity cases were not solved. The nuclear-family model set the terms of financial responsibility, and was crucial in reducing the number of welfare recipients. In congressional hearings, paternity continued to be a central concern through 2000. “Serious attention must be paid to building the capacity of low income fathers to attain the economic sustainability necessary to maximize the potential for children to grow up free from poverty and dependence on the government”\(^{30}\) In part, FSA sought to police the sexual behavior and family practices of poor Black men and women. The non-nuclear family was increasingly associated with anxiety, frustration, and dysfunction in order to explain the persistence of inequality. So-called “matriarchs” who remained on welfare during the rise of neoliberal economic policies were portrayed as culturally deviant for maintaining female-headed households and creating civil unrest among men.\(^{31}\) Their sons were characterized as unsupervised gang bangers.

The War on Welfare solidified the turn of national discourses on poverty into a debate about the culture of the poor, and the Black poor in particular. Bill Clinton framed cuts in welfare benefits as policies designed to help the poor: to teach them discipline and the value and rewards of work. David Ellwood, Clinton’s chief welfare intellectual, coined the phrase “ending welfare as we know it,” but his plan differed considerably from the final bill Clinton signed. Ellwood’s plan
was dubbed “soft” because it did not envision cutting people off from all forms of public assistance (including guaranteed government child support). The final blow to welfare was when Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 and replaced Aid to Dependent Children with grants to states hoping or assuming that the “needy would make do with ‘the natural safety net—family, friends, churches, and charities.” Ultimately, the end of welfare as we knew it, was about ending AFDC (specifically federal support for un-married Black mothers) while Social Security, unemployment insurance, workman’s compensation, or veteran’s benefits were reframed as (male) entitlements. Though of course these “male” entitlements are now under attack in the post-9/11, post-racial era. The end of this phase of the war on welfare was more about ending female dependence, or as neoliberal economic theory would have it, “slavery to the state,” than to actually reducing poverty. The effect was to flood the labor market, decrease wages, and restore class power.

**Constructing the Welfare Queen for Popular Consumption**

Welfare and poverty policies do not occur in a cultural vacuum. Popular media, news stories and films set the stage for public debate, acceptance or resistance to certain policies. Sapphire’s *Push* (1996) is a representative example of the popular cultural narrative that circulated in the wake of ending welfare as we knew it, while Lee Daniel’s *Precious* (2009) illustrates that these developments are durative. Evident in each are the neoliberal discourses on freedom and home that served to justify austerity measures implemented during the War on Welfare. In these texts, the welfare queen, though stripped of her pink Cadillac, is made criminal by her abusive relationship with Precious and her attempts to fraud the welfare state. The Welfare Queen becomes the villain of a shocking tale of “the spectacle of the unfit mother, the one who had failed to be upwardly mobile.” She embodies the dangers of a welfare state and her youth heralds the need to implement austerity measures, now represented in the name of the child.

Mary Jones is the quintessential image of the excesses of the welfare queen. When Precious first describes her mother Mary, she explains, “I look at Mama. Scare me to look at her. She take up half the couch, her arms seem like giant arms, her legs which she always got cocked open seem like ugly tree logs…Mama can’t fit into bathtub no more.” Though Precious is 16, Mary has not left the house since she was 12 and delivered her father’s first baby. Her
refusal of waged work marks her as a prisoner in her own home. She had Precious out of wedlock. She is lazy
and makes Precious cook, clean, and run errands. She commits welfare fraud by lying about where Mongo, Precious’ first child, lives. And, finally, she is representative of the family-demolishing Matriarch that wields too much power over her family. She is a “picture of a dangerous motherhood that must be regulated and punished.”

Mary’s dysfunctional and dependent relationship to the state is linked to her abuse of Precious. Precious contextualizes her abuse through her mother’s failure to provide a secure home: “am I safe from Carl Kenwood Jones? … [Mother] bring him to me. I ain’ crazy, that stinky hoe give me to him.” Precious re-lives her sexual abuse through flashbacks, but the more pressing and immediate danger she faces is the physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her mother. Three months after she delivered her first child from her father, Precious explains,

Mary tries to kill Precious again just days after she delivers her second child by her father, this time by throwing the television set down a flight of stairs—a key feature of her over-consumption. Ultimately, she narrowly misses Precious’ head and her newborn baby, Abdul, but the reader/viewer understands that Mary is the criminally abusive parent, not Carl.

Indeed, Precious’ mother is represented as a continuing negative force in her personal and educational development. As Precious attempts to leave her family home and learn to read and write at Each One Teach One, her mother attempts to stifle her physical and educational mobility that are being promoted as her ticket to neoliberal freedom. It is her mother’s violence that Precious initially learns to resist: “she bedda not hit me…I am through being hit” and as a consequence she eventually decides she does not have to endure her father’s nightly visits anymore.

The familiar tale of women being responsible for their own rapes and for the rapes of others is at the center of the novel. These narratives emerge both as effects of, and in response to, the ways in which poverty policy and welfare reform were narrated and the figure of the Black mother that featured in their popular circulation. The “culture of poverty” looked to the way in which welfare mothers had become abusers not only of state gifts but also of their children. Increasingly the case for state intervention into lower-class homes was being
passionately made in order to protect helpless, uneducated, abused children while the needs (financial, emotional and sexual) of welfare mothers were neglected or criminalized.

The figure of the welfare queen was only a symptom of a cultural obsession with Black and poor motherhood, and their subsequent criminality during the 1980s and 1990s. Dependency as addition was coupled with dependency as freeloading on welfare checks. From the “crack baby” epidemic, to the burning of Ernesto Lara’s hands by his mother, poor Black mothers were pathologized and under constant media and governmental surveillance justified as a duty to protect children. The case of Ernesto Lara summed up the concerns of the War on Welfare quite neatly. In 1994, as the war was coming to an end, Ernesto’s mother plunged his hands into boiling water. He was found weeks later, locked in a room without medical attention, lying on a mattress covered in blood and urine. His mother was addicted to crack, the third generation in her family on welfare, conceived seven children out of wedlock, and was receiving AFDC, Food Stamps, and WIC benefits. Two days after the story broke, the Massachusetts Senate approved term limits on AFDC after two years, citing the Ventura case. What is notable about this case is how welfare benefits were linked to child abuse and justified limiting AFDC benefits across the board.

The Reagan Era slogan reminded the public that “Parents who can’t say ‘NO’ are creating a generation of misery” while The Washington Post article, “Crack Babies: The Worst Threat is Mom Herself,” explained that mothers who do crack are creating a national epidemic of young delinquents and damaged youth. In short, unfit mothers must be punished to prevent misery, dependency, delinquency, and pathology. As the War on Welfare was coming to a close, cases of welfare fraud and child abuse were in the headlines almost daily.

While the character of Mary reenacts the cultural stereotype of the pathological and violent Black mother, through the character of Precious, Sapphire’s Push re-scripts the purported cycle of poverty and offers an instance of a daughter who survives abuse to become the antithesis of the abusive welfare queen. She is a loving mother almost immediately. At 12 years old, she pleads to hold her baby, “Where’s my baby” she asks. “I know I had one. I know that.” She wants to lose weight, get a good education, find a good job of her own choosing, then get off welfare and finally find a home for herself and her children. She breastfeeds her son, Abdul, and regrets being denied the chance to breastfeed her daughter, Mongo. She hates crack addicts and women who abort their children. She reads to Abdul as she is learning to read herself and her desires exemplify the promise of upward mobility that can be achieved through education despite
rising odds. She is not only a good mother but she is also a member of the deserving poor because of it.

Education is represented as an entitlement of the deserving poor and the central vehicle through which Precious is able to become a good mother, escape her abusive circumstances, and enter the wage-labor system. However, the junior high school that Precious attends is much like her home where she is denied agency. The first scene in a school depicts the principal, Mrs. Lichenstein, pulling Precious out of the hallway and into her office before math class. The reason for the visit: Precious’ pregnancy. Mrs. Lichenstein tells Precious, “I see we’re expecting a little visitor... Sixteen is ahh rather ahh... old to be in junior high school.”49 When Precious explains that her grades are good, she’s done nothing wrong, and refuses a home-visit, Mrs. Lichenstein accuses her of being uncooperative. Ultimately she calls security and expels Precious for being pregnant and too old for junior high. The school serves only to further punish Precious, but is also representative of Reagan’s report “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform” (1983) that argued “American prosperity, security and civility” were at risk due to flagging educational advancements and morality of those “who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era [and who] will be effectively disenfranchised...from the chance to participate fully in our national life.”50 Reagan’s educational policy was deeply embedded in neoliberal economic policy that links citizenship to self-reliance.51 Mrs. Lichenstein marks Precious as morally reprehensible for conceiving her second child at the age of 16 and for being incapable of developing the skills to advance academically. Her perceived immorality and ignorance are linked. As a result, she is viewed as a threat to the prosperity of the entire school and is expelled.

The alternative school, Each One Teach One is fundamentally different. Here, Precious is given a voice through literacy-based education that allows her to form an identity for herself that can resist and name not only the violence she experiences in the home but also her desire to get off welfare.52 As Ms. Rain teaches the alphabet, Precious creates simple sentences for A, B and C.

A is fr Afr
(for Africa)
B is for u bae
(you baby)
C is cl w bk
(colored we black)53

Tellingly, Precious refers to her cultural heritage, motherhood, and race in these few basic sentences, which mark the beginning of her
education and the formation of her identity. These basic sentences will allow Precious to pay her education forward and teach her son to read—Each One Teach One. What gets eclipsed in the educational narrative is that the alternative school is part of the same state funded system that denied Precious an education for 11 years. The name Each One Teach One arose in part from Frank Laubach’s national literacy program that he developed from his experience teaching literacy abroad during the depression. When money ran out, anyone who knew how to read had to teach someone else how to read. The responsibility for education lies not with the state but with the individual who will pass on their knowledge to others. The austerity cuts to state-funded education during the War on Welfare were made inconsequential by the turn to individualism exemplified in the principle of Each One Teach One.

The “bad” mothers represented in many of the public discourses of the 1980s and 1990s served to substantiate the claims made by Reagan about “welfare queens” and to justify surveillance and prosecution of aberrant motherhood and ending welfare as we knew it. While Sapphire’s book reinforces some of the stereotypes of the bad welfare mother, Precious’ hard work and resiliency represent the possibility of a community safety-net for those willing to work hard. Furthermore, Precious conforms to the ideals of individualism and hard work that are the centerpieces of neoliberal culture that reinforce the increasingly common sense notion that social programs for the poor, not structural inequality, are actually to blame for poverty and bad mothering. Social welfare programs under the Reagan administration were seen as the root cause of poverty, stagflation, and downward mobility and bad mothers were to blame.

Repackaging *Push* for the Obama Era

When the subculture text *Push* reached main-stream audiences as *Precious* in the post-9/11, “post-racial,” Obama, it served as an ideological reminder of the infinite possibilities for social uplift that reified the free market as guarantor of individual freedom. Motherhood remains under intense scrutiny and surveillance, ostensibly to protect the child. Stories of horrific child abuse and infanticide have become so mainstream that they justify state interventions into the homes of low-income, inner city, Black households.

The case of Maryann Godboldo, a single, Black mother living on the West Side of Detroit serves as a case-in-point. When she refused to give her 13-year-old daughter, Arianna, Risperdal, an anti-psychotic, Child Protective Services ordered the child be removed from her home.
and placed in a psychiatric institution. Decisions to forcibly remove a child are based on “whether the home can control and supervise a child.” During court proceedings Assistant Attorney General Deborah Carley asked Godboldo questions about her employment, child support from Arianna’s father, and the conditions under which Arianna’s leg was amputated shortly her after birth. Carley’s questions were aimed at painting Godboldo as a lazy welfare mother who bore a child with a congenital defect out of wedlock even though Goldboldo says that she “NEVER received cash assistance from the state” and her daughter’s “defect” resulted from medical malpractice during delivery. The terms under which the Attorney General attempted to criminalize Godboldo have a long history within the welfare state. The simple fact that she does not work is somehow criminal and even Godboldo takes pains to disassociate herself from welfare. Motherhood and the home remain central features whereby the state manages and controls parent–child relations, and those families whose housing conditions are marked by poverty are at a disproportionate risk of being marked as unfit.

Though the War on Welfare succeeded in implementing new austerity measures and ending welfare as we knew it through Reagan’s convincing tale about welfare queens, motherhood remains under strict surveillance. The War on Terror was in part waged in favor of providing freedom to women in Iraq and Afghanistan and American women continue to serve as representations of freedom afforded by American capital. Thus, the contours of American motherhood remain central ideological tools for linking economic and politico-military initiatives. Women continue to be responsible for maintaining the health and economic security of the nation via the consumer-driven household—and the state is invested in identifying those who uphold the ideal and those who do not. The racialized legacy of the War on Welfare as class warfare continues to direct public attention to the wrong villain even at a time when the villainy of the one percent has been so blatantly on display.

Notes
4. Ibid., 264.
5. Ibid., 267.
8. Ibid., 25.
10. I am arguing that there are three distinct phases of the Cold War. In part, this argument turns on the decreased attention and prosecution of communist party members in the first phase. The Smith Act, used to prosecute Communist Party members, was limited in 1957. By many accounts the Red Scare was over by 1957. Certainly by 1964, the court was protecting rights of Communist Party members in *Aptheker v. Secretary of State*. Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 79. As the Red Scare ended, a new invisible enemy emerged: the poverty within and the War on Poverty began. The third and final phase of the Cold War was the War on Welfare.
11. For a detailed analysis of the grassroots welfare rights movement see Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*.
27. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 55.
43. Ibid., 19.
44. Ibid., 13–14.
45. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 6–7.
51. Soss et al., *Disciplining the Poor*, 22.
53. Ibid., 65.

**About the Author**

Adriane Bezusko is an instructor and doctoral candidate in contemporary American literature at Rice University. She is currently working on her dissertation, “Persistent Need: Reading Poverty in Post-War American Culture,” where she analyzes the post-war period through the framework of economic warfare. She argues that the economic and politico-military initiatives of the late 20th century recast the military practice of war as an ideological tool for managing the domestic crisis of unmet need.