

## INTRODUCTION

In February 2009, I sat watching *20/20* with Diane Sawyer, who interviewed white, rural poor in a special program entitled, “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains.” In this documentary, Sawyer describes Central Appalachia, Kentucky as a place where children and families face unthinkable conditions, including a poverty rate three times the national rate, the shortest life span in the nation, toothlessness, cancer, depression, and an epidemic of prescription drug abuse. Sawyer hearkens back to the days of Robert Kennedy wherein he called on the rest of America to reach out and help the people of Appalachia. For Sawyer, these impoverished people are the “forgotten and hidden America” whose descendents go back to the legendary soldiers and pioneers in America such as Davey Crockett and Daniel Boone. Sawyer interviews the children and families of Appalachia and declares them “heroes,” who fight against all odds despite their depressing socio-economic conditions. She reiterates that this population is isolated by the steep hills of Appalachia, which engender a lack of transportation and structural problems that inhibit their quality of life, producing cultural hopelessness and despair for many. Yet, she concludes that these children and families have a resilient spirit of hope as they continue to fight these debilitating odds in search of a better life.

I sat there completely shocked. I was very grateful that a group of persons facing intergenerational cycles of poverty were seen as victims of economic structures and institutions that perpetuate such poverty and despair. However, I could not help but notice all *white* bodies within this report. Sawyer uses structural explanations of poverty when turning to the rural, white impoverished people of Appalachia, which raised

questions for me when turning to the insidious cultural representations of black poverty in America. Why has black poverty, particularly urban black poverty, been associated with personal irresponsibility to the exclusion of wider structural explanations?

I was troubled as I turned to the contradictions in American cultural representations of poverty. While the people of Appalachia are described as a heroic and a forgotten group who suffer from oppressive structures, urban black poverty in particular is equated with indolence and criminality. Within the media, urban black poverty is framed as being solely due to the moral culpability of blacks themselves. Moreover, poor, inner-city black women are labeled as lewd, promiscuous, and pimps of the welfare system. Within American culture, media images depict poor urban black women not as a forgotten group but as a group who seemingly has forgotten the importance of hard work, discipline, and morality. However, these women that the media vilifies were a part of my rural community where I grew up and did not reflect such representations. They braided my hair, sang in the same choir with me, and taught me how to be industrious and self-sufficient.

Simply put, urban blackness has become a signifier for poverty that is self-caused and self-generated in America. In light of the program on the white poverty of Appalachia, I wondered when *20/20* might do a program on poor blacks in inner cities that focuses on the structural problems that lead to intergenerational cycles of deprivation and despair for these groups? When could castigated urban blacks such as urban black women be described as a “forgotten group” in America, who needs to be reached out to and helped due to structural factors that inhibit their quality of life and flourishing? Because advanced capitalist formations in America and its objective and subjective goods

exclude poor urban black women's sense of flourishing and thriving, these women stand in need of economic relief and cultural flourishing.

Although I concentrate on urban black women's poverty in this study, I recognize that black rural poverty is equally insidious and impedes the flourishing of both men and women. Marla Fredrick's *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (2003) offers a fruitful anthropological analysis of North Carolina black women's impoverished conditions and how their spirituality is both a catalyst for social interactions and an interpretive lens used in formulating responses to their political and economic conditions. Rendered invisible within American cultural life, blacks within rural areas experience economic and social constraints as they suffer from lack of transportation, poor education, absence of healthcare, and more. However, I am concerned with the cultural portrayals of black poverty, which often focus on inner city blacks such as urban black women and men (i.e. thug, welfare queen, hustler, etc.). In addition, because the inner-city or "ghetto" is a dominant cultural construct that blames its residents for their deprivation, I offer a structural analysis of urban black women's poverty within a cultural context that identifies them as villains. To be sure, I want to avoid the faulty cultural logic that urban blackness is the "face of poverty" in America. However, urban poverty among blacks, particularly black women, continues to receive the most hostile and venomous cultural attacks as diverse societal institutions continue to blame them for their own deprivation.

Womanist theo-ethical discourse<sup>1</sup> has done well in arguing that cultural representations have reinforced black women's poverty. For example, Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Kelly Brown Douglas' *Sexuality and the Black Church*, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes' *If It Wasn't For the Women* address how deceptive cultural images of poor black women in the American media reinforce these women as the generators of their own poverty. While womanist theology and ethics has addressed cultural representations and images that contribute to the socio-economic subordination of poor urban black women, this discourse has not addressed the concrete economic miseries of these women or the manner in which culture and economy relate in structuring the life chances of poor urban black women. In order to interrogate the cultural and economic structures that maintain and perpetuate black women's urban poverty and especially these women's prospects towards thriving and flourishing, womanist theo-ethical discourse would do well to articulate cultural and economic factors that contribute to poor urban black women's deprivation as well as show how both factors ground the conditions for the possibility of thriving.

I argue within this study that in order for womanist discourse to explore the relationship and moral significance between culture and economy for poor urban black women, a social theory is needed that relates the economic and cultural spheres. Critical social theory as "ideology critique" performs this task insofar as it understands culture and economy as distinct yet interrelated factors that contribute to both the oppression and emancipation of persons within advanced capitalist arrangements. As a critical methodology, critical social theory can enable womanist discourse to not only interrogate

---

<sup>1</sup> This term should not be seen as monolithic. Womanist theologians and ethicists reflect a plurality of religious and ethical expressions. For this study, this term refers to the specific womanist theologians and ethicists I deploy in this work.

American political economy and its neo-liberal interests but also theorize a model of deliberative democracy that creates the possibility for securing subjective goods (friendship, respect, happiness, flourishing, etc.) and objective goods (food, shelter, sustainable income, etc.) necessary for poor urban black women's flourishing and well-being. The concept of thriving remains under-theorized within womanist discourse and critical social theory is important in providing a methodology for accomplishing this task.

I recognize that there has been much debate over non-black sources within black liberationist and womanist theologies and ethics. In *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narrative*, black and womanist theologians and ethicists argue for the usage of slave narratives as resources in black and womanist theological and ethical reflection. These black and womanist theologians and ethicists seek to “turn to indigenous African American sources” in order “to tell the slave’s religious story as the first source for today’s black theology.”<sup>2</sup> By privileging “indigenous” black sources as primary in black and womanist theologies, I am concerned that non-black sources may be seen as either unhelpful or harmful in theorizing black people’s oppression and desires toward fulfillment. For me, non-black sources can be equally important as black sources for theorizing black people’s survival, liberation, and flourishing within society.

I agree with Katie Cannon that the appropriation of sources within womanist discourse must be determined by how well they are able to illumine black women’s oppression and subsequent need for liberation and well-being. In the 1990s, Cannon aptly addresses the contentious debates that swirled around the usage of white feminist

---

<sup>2</sup> Dwight Hopkins and George C.L. Cummings (eds), *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narrative* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003): 3.

scholarship in womanist theorizing. Cannon asserts that every “African-American scholar who is consciously concerned with ‘the liberation of a whole people’ must work to eradicate the criterion of legitimacy that implicitly presumes an absolute incompatibility between womanist critical scholarship and White feminist liberationist sources.”<sup>3</sup> For Cannon, womanist scholarship must stay open to more creative horizons in research and writing. Consequently, she cautions that “[womanist scholars] staying open-minded as heterogeneous theoreticians may prove to be the most difficult ethical challenge in securing and extending the legacy of our intellectual life.”<sup>4</sup> In this dissertation, I contend that staying open to theoretical frameworks such as critical social theory remains important to the womanist project of emancipation and flourishing for black women in North America.

Within this study, I also substantiate my deployment of critical social theory with the ethnographic suggestions of cultural anthropologists of religion Linda Thomas and Marla Fredrick. Because womanist theology and ethics describes itself as emerging from the lived experiences of poor black women, this discourse would do well to make “theoretical room” for the complex subjectivities of these women. When poor urban black women are allowed to articulate their narratives and stories of difference, womanist discourse’s theological constructions will reflect how these women make spiritual meaning and the ways in which they articulate their subjective interests, needs, and desires toward thriving. When attending to these women’s experiences of difference, womanist theology and ethics oriented towards public policy can also consider a politics

---

<sup>3</sup> Katie Cannon, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1995): 131.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

of social recognition and redistribution in light of the individual needs and desires of these women instead of grounding itself in “identity politics.”

In this dissertation, I contend that critical social theory gives womanist theo-ethical discourse a critical methodology not only for interrogating the manner in which fallacious cultural images and American political economy and its neo-liberal interest contribute to the socio-economic subjugation of poor urban black women but also for providing the conditions for the possibility of thriving by theorizing the relationship between social recognition and redistribution. In order to offer a pragmatic program on poor urban black women’s prospects toward flourishing, the moral significance of recognition and redistribution must be articulated. The focus of this study is not only to disclose how economy perpetuates poor urban black women’s poverty but also the manner in which culture and economy relate in articulating the conditions under which poor urban black women can secure the necessary goods for their thriving.

Building on this introduction, there are four chapters. While Chapter One explores in greater depth the benefits of critical social theory for womanist theo-ethical discourse and its discussion of urban black women’s poverty, Chapters Two and Three uncover the crisis associated with poverty among poor urban black women within a post-industrial political economy. Chapter Two revisits the “Moynihan Report” in relationship to its womanist, black feminist, and black neo-conservative critics. This chapter maintains that the report can be re-assessed in light of its emancipatory interests and motivations, one emancipatory interest being its addressing structural poverty among urban blacks through the progressive liberalism of the Great Society. I contend that the progressive liberalism of the Great Society can be redeemed for its emancipatory

potential. It can provide a normative orientation for womanist discourse in developing a concept of thriving (politics of recognition and redistribution) in response to gross poverty among poor urban black women.

In Chapter Three, I offer a structuralist account of urban black women's poverty. Building on Marcellus Andrews, William Julius Wilson and Patricia Hill Collins, I maintain that it is not the cultural deficiencies of poor urban black women that cause their poverty as free-market ideology suggests, but rather the shifts in American political economy that have exacerbated economic miseries. This chapter uncovers the roots of a legitimation crisis in relationship to poor urban black women within our current post-industrial capitalist society. Since Reagan's administration in the 1980s, state decisions related to economic policy have been guided by free-market ideology and its neo-liberal interests that currently reinforce economic deprivation and social alienation for urban black women within our post-industrial society. Current free market ideology and its neo-liberal interests mask the real economic experiences of a black urban underclass. Moreover, this chapter notes that poor urban black women are not "totally over-determined" by their poverty. Although many of these women experience cultural despair and disappointment, they transcend such conditions and make meaning.

In Chapter Four, I employ the feminist critical theory of Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib in the development of poor urban black women's possibilities through a conception of thriving within womanist theo-ethical discourse. I argue that black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses would do well to explore the dialectical interplay between the "generalizable other" and "concrete other" in fashioning a model of deliberative democracy that theorizes the need for both social recognition and



redistribution in providing the conditions for the possibility of thriving for poor urban black women. I also maintain that the ethnography of Linda Thomas and Marla Fredrick substantiates my turn to poor urban black women as concrete others.

I conclude this study by returning to the major claim of this dissertation, namely that critical social theory can aid womanist discourse in illuminating urban black women's poverty and their prospects toward thriving. In addition, I explore the significance of this study for womanist, black feminist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses.

## CHAPTER I

# EXPANDING METHODS IN WOMANIST ETHICS: CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

### Introduction

Critical social theory as “ideology critique” is the unmasking of oppressive, capitalistic social structures and their reified languages and logics of domination in order to delineate under what conditions freedom and emancipation within such structures are possible. This dissertation is concerned with the importance of critical social theory for womanist theo-ethical discourse, which seeks to emancipate and empower poor black women. While womanist discourse has done well in explaining problems of culture related to poverty among black women such as cultural representations that reinforce the socio-economic subordination of poor black women, this discourse has not delineated the current economic inequalities and miseries of poor black women that are exacerbated and reinforced by American political economy and its neo-liberal interests.<sup>5</sup> I seek to provide a more nuanced interrogation of American political economy so that womanist discourse

---

<sup>5</sup> Neo-liberalism can be defined as a vision of society wherein competition of wealth is the dominant value and social decisions are made by unregulated markets. For example, neo-liberal attitudes can be seen in the myth of meritocracy that decides individual’s success or failure on individual merit related to work, savings, investment, risk and the like. This neo-liberal myth however does not uncover the institutional and structural constraints that impede individual flourishing. Neo-liberalism carries a belief in the “invisible hand” that regulates market transactions between individuals so that state regulation (or government intervention) of the economy is deemed as both un-natural and adverse. Neo-liberalism is not merely the privileging of a liberal economic structure that resists government oversight and intervention but is a philosophy of success through individual action and merit. Individuals become responsible for their economic success or failure, not the markets or structures. For neo-liberalism, individual merit and ambition become the hallmark of a responsible and deserving citizen, which signifies poor persons as irresponsible and undeserving, lacking ambition and merit. I refer to neo-liberal hegemony as the way in which neo-liberalism’s ideologies and practices determine identities and values that citizens internalize as ways of living. Refer to Dieter Plehwe, Bernhard J. A Walpen, Gisela Neunhöffer (eds.), *NeoLiberal Hegemony: A Global Critique* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

can make good on its own claim to deconstruct class oppressions among poor black women.

In order to offer a critique of political economy and a more nuanced class analysis within womanist discourse related to poor urban black women, a methodological turn within womanist discourse itself is needed that makes room for such interrogation of class and economic inequities. Critical social theory provides this necessary methodological turn. Within this chapter, I argue that Walter Benjamin and Jürgen Habermas' notion of "ideology critique" provides a necessary social-theoretical framework in exploring the relationship between culture and economy in structuring the life-chances of poor urban black women. I first review particular womanist theologians and ethicists' discussions of the manner in which cultural images and constructs perpetuate black women's poverty. I then turn to the benefits of critical social theory as "ideology critique" for womanist theo-ethical discourse.

### **Womanist Theo-Ethical Discourse & Urban Black Women's Poverty**

In the introduction, I maintained that womanist theo-ethical discourse has explored cultural aspects related to poor urban black women's socio-economic subordination. Womanist discourse has performed robust critiques of cultural representations that are most often associated with inner-city, poor black women and their families. Delores Williams, Marcia Riggs, Kelly Brown Douglas, Joan Martin, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes provide cultural critiques in relationship to poor black women in order to render visible black women's unique experiences of socio-economic oppression, which are qualitatively different from black men.

While Williams offers a historical sweep of how social-role surrogacy among black women such as “breeder-woman” contributed to the social and economic oppression of black women during antebellum and post-bellum periods, Gilkes provides a contemporary critique of cultural representations that thwart African-American women’s sense of thriving and flourishing.<sup>6</sup> She states, “[An] image, associated with the covers of *Newsweek* and *Time*, is the image of the impoverished welfare mother, the resident of public housing projects, the teenage mother, and the neglectful, crack-addicted mother, usually rolled up into one monstrous body.”<sup>7</sup> For Gilkes, such cultural representations of poor black women (which are inextricably linked to the “ghetto”) inhibit their quality of life. Because inner, city black women are rendered “monstrous” within American cultural life, measures towards justice and flourishing for these women are eclipsed.

In *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Douglas also provides thick descriptions of cultural representations of black women such as jezebel, sapphire, and welfare queen that have contributed to black women’s social, political, and economic subordination. Douglas notes that “most significantly...the Black woman as welfare mother remains essential to White hegemony because the white culture blames the woman for her impoverished condition and again deflects attention away from White, racist, patriarchal structures.”<sup>8</sup> Douglas identifies how culture makes black women morally culpable for their poverty and deprivation, which ignores the real interests that white, racist patriarchal structures have in maintaining the subordination of black women. Similarly, Martin also

---

<sup>6</sup> Refer to Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993) and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't For the Women* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't For the Women*, 197.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999): 53.

critiques the American cultural image of black women as non-agential in their work ethics and labor practices, making them morally culpable for their deprivation. While Martin is primarily concerned with demonstrating how black female slaves converted their coerced work into meaningful labor, Martin's project of black women's labor provides a needed critique of cultural notions that describe black women as possessing an absence of work ethics or healthy labor practices, contributing to their current impoverished status.<sup>9</sup>

Riggs is another womanist voice that explores how the "cult of true womanhood" contributed towards the social, political, and economic oppression of black women in the nineteenth century. This cultural norm of the "cult" directed women to be wives and mothers who possessed domesticity, purity, docility, and submissiveness. Riggs notes that this gender ideology contributed to the economic and social oppression of slave and free black women.<sup>10</sup> For example, because black slave women had to work for a living and were often raped by their white masters, they could not live up to this cult. Moreover, free black women had to work outside the home, often enduring low pay, hard work, and the risk of sexual harassment, which made it impossible for them to embody the cult. Consequently, they were inevitably labeled by American culture as "morally deviant." While Riggs overall project is to harness intra-group racial unity among blacks, Riggs offers a critique of culture and how cultural forms historically have shaped and reinforced the subordination of poor black women.

---

<sup>9</sup> See Joan Martin, *More Than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Marcia Riggs, *Awake, Arise and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994): 49.

Womanist discourse has done well in explaining problems of culture related to poverty among black women (i.e. cultural representations such as jezebel, welfare queen, “cult of domesticity,” etc. that reinforce the socio-economic and political subordination of poor black women). However, this discourse has not mapped out the present economic inequalities and miseries of poor urban black women that are generated by an American political economy.<sup>11</sup> It has not provided economic analysis, which enables one to understand how culture and economy relate in structuring the life-chances of poor black women. Because I am primarily concerned with poor urban black women due to the insidious cultural representations that often describe this group of impoverished black women, it becomes important to understand political economy in relationship to urban black women’s deprivation.

As described in chapter three, William Julius Wilson, Marcellus Andrews, and Patricia Hill Collins disclose structural shifts in political economy that have engendered intergenerational cycles of deprivation and poverty for urban blacks. Collins also demonstrates that black women’s poverty is qualitatively different than black men’s poverty. Wilson and Andrews cite the structural shift from an industrial economy to a post-industrial political economy, which is a political economy marked by increasing

---

<sup>11</sup> When referring to “political economy,” this study means those political ideas, structures, and norms that shape, guide, and determine economic practices and outcomes. When deploying the language of political economy, there is recognition that economic attitudes and practices in American life are always regulated by larger political values, projects, and goals. For a history of political economy in the West refer to Phyllis Deane’s *The State and the Economic System: Introduction to the History of Political Economy* and Werner Stark’s *History and Historians of Political Economy*. While Deane explores the origins of political economy as well as the impact of the scientific revolution on questions within the study of political economy, Werner restricts his study to methods and approaches in political economy. Both of these texts push beyond a discussion of economics merely as a science of market exchanges; these texts disclose how economic practices and outcomes are largely determined by social and political forces at a given historical period. This dissertation employs the language of political economy and argues that the American political economy possesses certain political and economic forces that have cultivated and maintained unjust economic outcomes for poor, urban blacks.

technology, professionalization, and higher levels of educational attainment, inevitably economically alienating those Americans who are under-educated and unskilled.

Because urban blacks have been the backbone of mainly unskilled labor, their labor has been left behind within a post-industrial society. Moreover, technological advances and forms of outsourcing have lowered wages among unskilled workers, which has affected persons across color lines, creating an American underclass. Yet, a black urban underclass experiences poverty in conjunction with racism, which gives them different experiences of deprivation within the American underclass.

Because womanist discourse would profit from exploring the relationship between culture and economy in analyzing urban black women's poverty, this discourse would also benefit from a social theory that explores the relationship and moral significance between culture and economy on questions of urban black women's poverty within capitalistic arrangements. To be sure, what is *not* needed is a vulgar Marxism that radically reduces culture to "the economic" or describes cultural forms as epiphenomena of economic arrangements. Instead, womanist discourse needs a social theory that relates culture to economy within capitalist structures that create crisis and oppression for poor, urban black women. I contend that because critical social theory explores the relationship between culture and economy within advanced capitalist arrangements, it can ally with womanist discourse in illuminating urban black women's unique experiences of poverty by attending to political economy and its relationship to culture.

Yet, one might ask, "Why is ideology critique worth employing within womanist discourse?" and "Why should womanist discourse avoid a vulgar Marxism?" Foremost,

America is already situated within advanced capitalist arrangements.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, when turning to the crisis and possibilities of poor urban black women within political economy, ideology critique takes seriously late-capitalist structures as they exist and the real crisis these structures generate for these women. Yet, ideology critique also recognizes that possibilities towards emancipation for these women are not about undoing one economic system for a more virtuous socio-economic arrangement (e.g. socialism). Instead, it is about taking existing norms and reconfiguring them within our advanced capitalistic structures in order to promote hope and thriving for such women. Empowering impoverished black women is about taking seriously their present political and economic realities and developing a political project that spells out the possibilities of liberation within such arrangements.

Moreover, vulgar Marxism does not take culture and economy as discrete yet interrelated spheres within society. Because Marxist analysis radically reduces culture to mere appearances of economic expression, it does not illuminate how both cultural forms and economic practices and structures collude in thwarting the life-chances of urban black women. Marxist expression also merely unmasks ideology as “false consciousness,” which does not generate relief or help for poor black women within advanced capitalist arrangements. What womanist discourse needs is a social theory that

---

<sup>12</sup> When referring to advanced capitalism, this term is not meant in the Marxian sense that capitalist modes of production are in its subsequent phase of decline and disappearance. This term is meant in the Habermasian sense that capitalism in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has colonized every aspect of life, turning everything into a commodity or transaction. Hence, advanced capitalism and its systems of commodification become cultural values that inform social relations. For example, within advanced capitalism, labor is no longer seen as a human possession worthy of respect but is seen as a commodity that is exchanged for profit-maximization within strategic corporate actions. In other words, labor loses its humanizing element and instead becomes de-personalized, nothing more than a commodity that is a part of economic transactions. Advanced capitalism sponsors a type of morality that de-humanizes social relations so that human social relations are used instrumentally as a means towards the end of market goals. Refer to Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), and *On Pragmatics of Social Interaction* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001) on discussions of advanced capitalism realities.



explores the relationship and moral significance of culture and economy in spelling out democratic possibilities of emancipation for poor urban black women. Ideology critique performs this task.

### **Critical Social Theory as “Ideology Critique”**

Although critical social theory dates back to Marx, critical theory is more notably associated with the Frankfurt School beginning in the 1930s and 1940s. While Frankfurt School critical theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse are the pioneers of this social-theoretical turn, Jürgen Habermas has emerged as a major theorist within this tradition. Moreover, feminist critical theory provides critiques of the theoretical frames of the aforementioned male critical theorists. Feminist critical theorists such as Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser disclose how gender and others forms of difference (racial, sexual, national, etc.) reframe key categories that are used in articulating a critical social theory of society.

Specifically, there are a set of concerns that Frankfurt critical theorists addressed in the mid-twentieth century. Critical theory is grounded in a particular political and social analysis: the analysis of the conflicting relationship between social classes within crises that are engendered by advanced capitalism. For these theorists, advanced capitalism and its systems of commodification generate a series of tensions created by the desire of the wealthy to be emancipated at the expense of marginalized people’s subjugation and exploitation. Hence, the starting point and major concern in critical theory was the problem of advanced capitalist political economy and its systems of commodification and alienation of humanity that dominated social relations, inhibiting people’s ability to realize their humanity and freedom to flourish. Specifically for later

critical theorists such as Habermas, it became essential to describe the crisis of advanced capitalist societies in order to delineate the conditions under which these capitalist arrangements could be transformed into democratic institutions that promote emancipation, flourishing and well-being for all members of society.

For this particular project, I turn to the critical social theory of Habermas and the feminist critical theory of Benhabib and Fraser. As I argue in this study, the critical social theory of Habermas, Benhabib, and Fraser address the economic sphere and its production of concrete economic inequities and class disparities (alongside cultural inequalities that reinforce economic oppression). Moreover, these three critical theorists enable this study to explore the relationship between culture and economy as morally significant for understanding the crisis of urban black women's poverty and possibilities in ameliorating their poverty in order to promote black women's flourishing. Taken together, these theorists enable a critical interrogation of oppressive advanced capitalist realities wherein poor, urban black women reside in order to spell out the conditions for the possibility of economic justice and human flourishing for these women.

Critical social theory is "ideology critique." Ideology is a deeply contested term. It is often reduced descriptively to a worldview that a particular group shares; or it might be reduced to a pejorative meaning. For instance, one might exclaim, "That's just ideological!" In this statement, ideology is not just seen as descriptive but as pejorative in that the speaker is also saying, "Your statement is ideological and therefore unreliable." The speaker presumes ideology in a subjective, pejorative sense as opposed to a "fact" which is presumed to be objective and descriptive. Theoretically, this negative notion of ideology can be seen in the works of Marx. For him, ideology critique is the

unmasking of “false consciousness” that represses and dominates the masses for purposes of economic exploitation. Within this project, the meaning of ideology should not be understood in any of these instances.

Understood within the Frankfurt tradition, “ideology critique” means “the project of uncovering the roots and possibilities of crisis within late-capitalist society.”<sup>13</sup>

“Ideology critique” is a form of criticism that discloses the roots and possibilities of crisis related to particular oppressive social realities at particular historical periods within late capitalist arrangements. It not only discloses the rational structures that give rise to repressive capitalist realities and situations marked by crisis but also seeks to prescribe the possibilities under which these crises can be altered into emancipatory arrangements and just social relations. In this study, I use “ideology critique” to uncover the roots *and* possibilities of capitalist crisis among poor, urban black women who experience intergenerational cycles of deprivation within a current American post-industrial political economy.

I also speak of ideology critique as a “critique set on redeeming.” As redeeming critique, ideology critique acts as a catalyst for social change or *praxis* through redeeming those contradictory social ideals within capitalist structures that may be oppressive but have emancipatory potential. This particular notion of ideology critique as redeeming critique has its origins in two Frankfurt critical theorists, namely Walter Benjamin and Jürgen Habermas.

In “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” Habermas explicates how Benjamin “reads” history and progress. He states:

---

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 2005): 15.

Benjamin's peculiar conception of history explains the impulse towards rescuing: There reigns in history a mystical causality of the sort that a "secret agreement (comes about) between past generations and ours." "Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim." This claim can only be redeemed by an ever-renewed critical exertion of historical vision towards a past in need of redemption...<sup>14</sup>

According to Habermas, Benjamin scans history in order to find redemptive emancipatory moments, sparks, and openings in a text or idea that are largely oppressive and negative. These emancipatory impulses and certain moments of the past are to be rescued and protected when turning to the future and its possibilities in the midst of a catastrophic, technocratic, capitalist world of socio-economic and political interactions. Turning to moments of the past is a critical remembrance oriented towards "awakening." Although Habermas ultimately disagrees with Benjamin's primary goals of using a redeeming critique in service to a theology of history, he nods toward Benjamin's "retrieval of emphatic experiences and utopian contents" associated with the critical potential of theorizing an emancipatory future.<sup>15</sup>

For example, the promise of the "American dream" is connected to the regulative ideal of democracy and freedom in America. While the gross poverty that persons experience (such as urban black women) disclose the American dream as pretentious and surreal, the dream image is deeply connected to the democratic impulses and desires that are central to America's quest to be "a land of liberty" for all. This utopian vision of democratic community, grounding the "American dream" image, is what is to be reclaimed and redeemed as we seek more just, humane arrangements.

---

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, ed. Fredrick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983): 136.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

Ideology critique recognizes and uncovers the ideological manipulation and hegemony<sup>16</sup> within advanced capitalist political economy but also understands that such ideological forms and interests may have emancipatory insights and ideals that can contribute to the realization of democratic arrangements and social change within capitalist structures. Discussing Benjamin's ideology critique as "redeeming critique," Habermas describes it as concerned with "doing justice to the collective fantasy images [dream images] deposited in the expressive qualities of daily life as well as in literature and art."<sup>17</sup> He further states that "These images arise from the secret communication between the oldest semantic potentials of human needs and the conditions of life generated by capitalism."<sup>18</sup> Benjamin's redeeming critique is a "grounded hope" that looks to the past not to restore the past but to offer motivation towards future emancipation based on new forms, theories, and regulative ideals within capitalist arrangements.

In my estimation, the importance of Benjamin's redeeming critique is that regulative ideals are always present as "impossible possibilities" (to use Niebuhr's language) by which we theorize and articulate social transformation of industrial and

---

<sup>16</sup>I refer to Antonio Gramsci's analysis of hegemony. He describes hegemony as the way people learn to accept as natural and in their own best interests an unjust, oppressive social order. A particular unjust order educates its citizens how to embrace as "given" certain beliefs and political conditions that work against their interests while serving the interests of the most powerful. If hegemony works as it should, there is no need for the state to employ coercive controls to maintain social order (i.e. heavy policing, torture, curfews, etc.). Instead of recognizing beliefs and practices as repressive, people come to accept these beliefs and practices as pre-ordained and part of the cultural air they breathe. Hence, for me ideology critique unmasks forms of ideology that are hegemonic in that they are seen as "given" and natural to social order rather than contingent, historical, and constructed out of imbalanced power relations that privilege the interests of the elite. Refer to Antonio Gramsci, *Further selections from the prison notebooks: Antonio Gramsci*, ed. D. Boothman, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pages 150-157.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 152. Idea of dream images is taken from Habermas' understanding of Benjamin's ideology critique. For more information on the function of dream images in Benjamin's work, refer to Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Projects* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) and Max Pensky, "Method and Time: Benjamin's dialectical images," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin* (ed. David Ferris), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

technological structures of exploitation, masked as “progress.” Such dream images (regulative ideals) contain the critical, liberative potential to awaken the pursuit of human flourishing and emancipation within human communities. Benjamin’s redeeming critique “juxtaposed historical artifacts with the ideals they promised,”<sup>19</sup> holding in tension the pretensions of these ideals alongside its critical promise and potential of emancipation. For Habermas, Benjamin sets out to uncover the hope hidden in our historical artifacts of technological, capitalist progress despite their oppressive and alienating structures and practices.

While “dream images” may provide the possibility of potential emancipation, Habermas’ “reading” of Benjamin’s redeeming critique does not acknowledge the ways in which dream images are contaminated and corrupted due to oppressive ideologies and their power relations that “encode” such images, compromising their ability to emancipate. Stuart Hall describes how ideologies and its concomitant power relations encode messages and practices within social discourses. For Hall, “these codes are the means by which power and ideology are made to signify in particular discourses.”<sup>20</sup> These codes refer to “maps of social reality” that “have the whole range of social meanings, practices, and usages, power and interest “written into them.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, these codes are “structured in dominance.”

Hall delineates what he means by codes as discourses “structured in dominance.”

He asserts:

---

<sup>19</sup> Ted Smith, *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 32.

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (Birmingham: Routledge & University of Birmingham, 1972-79): 134.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

But we say “dominant” because there exists a pattern of “preferred readings”; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized. The domains of “preferred meanings” have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs, the everyday knowledge of social structures, of “how things work for all practical purposes in this culture,” the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions...we must refer, through the *codes*, to the orders of social life, of economic and political power and of ideology.<sup>22</sup>

Hall’s understanding of how ideologies and their associated power structures and relations “encode” messages within particular discourses are germane to my discussion of “dream images.” Such dream images are not pure, pristine liberative constructs. Instead, these dream images are codes that are contaminated and corrupted by hegemonic social orders of interest and power that deploy such images for elitist benefit and gain. For example, while the “American dream” is encoded within the dominant discourse as an achievable position for all societal members (this is the “preferred reading”), the “American dream” is corrupted by “rank and order of power and interest” that render this image elusive and even oppressive for poor black women who are blamed and censured for their deprivation and lack in relationship to this American dream image.

The idea of meritocracy is another dream image within American political economy that is highly ambiguous – both potentially emancipatory and highly contaminated by dominant codes. The emancipatory insight in meritocracy is the idea that one’s merit through one’s own hard work, absent of structural constraints, should be able to produce achievement, meaning, and thriving for each person within society. Yet, this dream image of “using one’s efforts and labor to achieve flourishing” within American political economy is another code that is corrupted by hegemonic power

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

relations. Meritocracy is part of free-market ideology<sup>23</sup> which argues that impoverished people have not merited economic success because of their irresponsible behavior. To the contrary, wealthy persons are rich because they have merited such abundance through their commitment to economic practices of individual success.

This dream image is used to both vilify poor people and legitimate the wealth of the elite. Meritocracy does not take account of the economic structures and social institutions that impede persons regardless of their individual efforts. Consequently, success cannot always be achieved or judged by merit alone when turning to structural constraints. Meritocracy and its associated dream images are a part of hegemonic social relations that utilize such codes to maintain power and interest. If dream images are poisonous and contaminated, can (or should) they be rescued? Can we find ways to recover the power of dream images or must we live without them? Has the emancipatory potential of these images passed the point of no return?

While these dream images “are structured in dominance,” they are not “determined” because “it is always possible to order, classify, assign, and decode an event within more than one mapping.”<sup>24</sup> As acts of subversion, decoding dominant codes “contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand signification (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it

---

<sup>23</sup> Free-market ideology is closely associated with *laissez-faire* economic philosophy, which advocates for minimal government intervention in economic matters because the economic system has its own self-regulating apparatus that guarantees efficiency and fairness in the selling and buying of services and goods. For neo-classical economists such as Milton Friedman, the market guarantees economic and political freedom for persons to actualize their interests related to services, goods, and wealth. However, free-market ideology does not detail how structural problems arise within market mechanisms that create severe disadvantage and discrimination for particular groups.

<sup>24</sup> Staurt Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 134.



operates with exceptions to the rule.”<sup>25</sup> Decoding, then, uses an alternative mapping of social reality wherein dominant codes are questioned, challenged, and even re-valued as oppressive and socially constructed rather than “natural” and “given.” This decoding can be properly understood as “oppositional codes,” being codes that provide an oppositional and subversive reading to the preferred reading of social reality.

Within the context of poor black women, dream images can be critically reclaimed as “oppositional codes” read within the context of hegemonic power relations. Oppositional codes struggle over the meanings of such images through challenging the hegemonic preferred meanings and practices. A person who employs an oppositional reading may listen to the dominant discourse of meritocracy but will “read” every mention of this idea as “class interest” and “unequal economic structures.” This person is operating with what one can refer to as an oppositional code. An oppositional reading of dream images, in particular, recognizes the deep contamination and corruptibility of these images as they re-think and re-interpret these images toward possible emancipatory meanings.

Dream images are not to be rescued and reclaimed uncritically. Dream images are ambiguous, offering *potential* emancipation yet highly corruptible. They may express emancipatory ideals within human experience but also can be characterized as codes that advance the privileged members of society and suppress the voices of the unprivileged. Underneath dream images may lurk racism, the disenfranchisement of women, and the support of social policies that benefit the existing elitist social order. Hence, the task is to disclose the ambiguities of these dream images, chart its effects on poor black women, and construct possibilities by re-thinking and re-interpreting these images within the

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 137.

socio-economic context of poor black women. The task is to find ways to give liberative expression to dream images for poor black women in the face of what appears to be overwhelming contamination, fallibility, and corruptibility. The redeeming of dream images entails acknowledging a certain complexity and ambiguity of meaning that must be exposed so that such retrieval critically takes into account the inevitable corruptibility of images in constructing possibilities for poor black women.

When addressing the plight of poor black women, dream images within American political economy can be transformed into oppositional codes. Only through challenging, re-thinking and re-interpreting dream images and their preferred, dominant meanings can oppositional meanings emerge, which expose hegemonic power relations and their pretensions within American political economy. Moreover, such oppositional codes sometimes may only create spaces of resistance that sustain and enable poor urban black women to transcend the despair associated with dominant codes. Other times, such codes can create emancipative openings toward flourishing and thriving.

This critical redeeming of dream images is within human experience. The redeeming of dream images as oppositional codes has a long history within Black religious traditions and Black cultural forms. In fact, ideology critique as critique set on redeeming has been part of the subversive practices of Blacks for centuries. Within Black Christianity, African slaves' re-appropriation of American Christianity reflects a form of ideology critique, re-interpreting and re-appropriating dream images as oppositional codes to dominant codes. American Christianity was an instrument used to justify the racial and economic exploitation of blacks in North America. Scriptural texts were often utilized in support of slaveocracy and its insidious practices. The Bible was

deployed to legitimate the raping and “breeding” of black female slaves as well as the physical abuse and emasculation of black male slaves. Yet, black slaves rescued emancipatory moments of American Christianity in fashioning its own brand of Christian religious expression.

For example, while many slaves saw the ideological interests connected to the slave master’s usage of the Bible (particularly the Pauline epistles) in subordinating them, they highlighted the Exodus story in re-interpreting Christianity and the dream images of freedom, flourishing, and well-being for slaves or those who were the most despised and dispossessed.<sup>26</sup> The values and norms of the Exodus story became prophetic visions for many black slaves of what Christianity truly *meant* (in contrast to white Christianity) in light of their quest for freedom, justice, and love within the social arrangements of North America. Hence, slaves’ re-interpretation of the gospel demonstrated a struggle over the meaning of Christianity, its symbols, and practices, protesting the dominant preferred meanings of white Christian faith. While slaves’ oppositional reading of Christianity did not emancipate them from their chains, it provided them a space to transcend racial inhumanities, hoping towards a liberative future.

Similar to Black Christian religious expression, black cultural forms also reflect the redeeming of dream images as oppositional codes. The contemporary cultural image of the “thug” and “hustler” within political economy have been seen as “deviant” within a hip-hop subculture that is perceived as solely fostering violence, crime, gang activity, misogyny, teenage pregnancy, and lawlessness. By the American media and white (and

---

<sup>26</sup> Refer to seminal texts such as Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationlist Theory & The Foundations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

black) institutions of respectability, the hustler and thug have been criticized for their overt disregard of laws, opting to participate in an underground economy that engenders exploitation of inner-city children and women. However, artists and cultural critics such as Tupac Shukur, critically redeem the emancipatory ideals and dream images undergirding the “hustler” and “thug” for alienated black men, protesting the dominant preferred meanings of these labels.

In the 1994 album *Thug Life: Thug Life Vol. 1*, Shakur speaks about thug life as the way many inner, city black men gain respect and recognition in a nation that has “no pity” for them. He croons in a song entitled “Street Fame:”

Don't blame my mama  
Don't blame my daddy  
I know they wish they never had me  
In and out of jail by 12  
Failing out of school  
Cause I was livin' by the street rules  
Hangin with hogs  
Dropping bombs as a little locc  
I was gettin my respect but i was still rude

Cause I'm livin on the edge  
I'm blastin lead  
Wanted by the feds they got to take me dead  
So fuck it try to duck it in the inner city  
In the land of no pity  
I made it by the street fame...<sup>27</sup>

Shakur describes thug life as black men who are so radically alienated from the wealth-producing structures and institutions of society that they become capitalistic entrepreneurs on the inner-city streets to gain success and belonging (to attain the American Dream). Similar to “Street Fame,” in the rap song entitled, “I’m Getting Money,” Shakur says that he dedicates the song to “all the hustlers that get up every

---

<sup>27</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Street Fame,” *Thug Life: Thug Life Vol. 1* (1994).

motherfuckin mornin and put they work in...I see you - I see you boy.”<sup>28</sup> Shakur reminds his black male listeners (fellow thugs) that he “sees” them, he recognizes their desire to succeed and belong to a nation of abundance despite this same nation’s oppression of such men.

While contradictory and unclear as to whether it can be “emancipatory” for alienated black men, Tupac’s subversive, oppositional reading of the “thug” and “hustler” attempts to critically reclaim dream images of “belonging in a land of opportunity.” His oppositional reading of these terms exposes hegemonic power relations that exclude poor black men. It offers meaningful recognition that is life-sustaining for many black men locked out of the economic and cultural benefits of political economy although it is simultaneously death-dealing as violence, crime, and misogyny are deeply connected to this way of life. Although the effects and social actions of the thug may not be so favorable (expressions of crime, violence, and nihilism), the emancipatory ideals and aspirations of success and belonging for alienated black men that underlie the thug and hustler within American political economy may illuminate the forms of “resistance” that poor black men embody. Moreover, the values of success and belonging that ground the hustler and thug may contribute to the democratic reconfiguration of socio-economic arrangements that are just and inclusive of black men in America.

Ideology critique as redeeming critique recognizes that ideology is “Janus-faced,” two-sided. It contains errors, mystifications, logics of domination and techniques of hegemony and domination. However, if its dream images are critically retrieved, ideology critique may also contain utopian residue or surplus that can be used for social

---

<sup>28</sup> Tupac Shakur, “I’m Gettin money,” *Thug Life: Thug Life Vol. 1* (1994).

critique, progressive politics, and the re-envisioning of emancipatory arrangements within society. This re-envisioning towards emancipatory arrangements within society for poor black women involves critically redeeming dream images as oppositional codes in order to debunk current capitalist arrangements toward a more just, humane social order.

### **Poor Urban Black Women: Ideology Critique of Free-Market Ideology**

Central to this project is doing ideology critique as redeeming critique of the post-industrial capitalist crisis poor, urban black women face and endure. As discussed above, ideology critique is two-sided. It has two theoretical moves. First, it unmasks ideological distortions that seem natural and given, which hides their historical, contingent, and oppressive nature. It contests and “de-naturalizes” such ideological distortions that often appear beyond scrutiny or questioning. The task is to disclose the hegemonic interests involved in ideological distortions of late-capitalism that produce crisis. Second, ideology critique seeks to redeem and rescue the emancipatory potential within our ideological forms by searching for those ideals and dream images within political economy that often underlie our limited, even oppressive ideologies. Such emancipatory insights may be critically re-interpreted and used as oppositional codes that guide the creation of more just, humane social arrangements within capitalist structures.

As stated, within this project, I turn to Jürgen Habermas, Seyla Benhabib, and Nancy Fraser for these two theoretical moves in doing ideology critique of the post-industrial capitalist crisis poor urban black women confront. When referring to “crisis” within a neo-liberal, American political economy where poor urban black women reside,

I am referring to Habermas' conception of legitimation crisis. In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas argues that crisis is endemic to capitalist and advanced capitalist structures. Because capitalism is characterized by *class* societies where fundamental material interests of different groups are in opposition, social order cannot be secured purely through normative integration or a singularly shared world of values and norms.<sup>29</sup> Because of this normative fragmentation due to class forms of organization, crisis states take on the "form of a disintegration of social institutions" because state actions are not being discursively justified (actions are not legitimated by citizens' deliberative, democratic participation), leading to a loss of faith in institutions – in short a loss of legitimacy.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, Habermas' understanding of legitimation crisis is not merely an empirical question of if a political order can persuade people but is a *structural* question that asks whether the normative socio-cultural sphere can supply norms needed to justify the institutional/ policy/goal attainment sphere.<sup>31</sup> Habermas uses Talcott Parson's systems theory to describe the parts of a social system and how crises emerge. Unlike Marx who reduces all socio-cultural institutions to an expression of "the economic," Parson's systems theory of social integration needed for legitimacy is supported by the meaningful interdependence of discrete units of a social system being (a) the economy, (b) polity, (c) socio-cultural sphere.<sup>32</sup> Legitimacy depends on "interchange relations" between (b) and (c). A shared normative understanding (c) would need to supply the polity (b) with norms needed to justify polity decisions and actions. Crisis occurs when there are

---

<sup>29</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973): 27.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

disturbances in the economy due to the absence of shared norms needed to justify or legitimate institutional actions.<sup>33</sup> Hence crisis is a *structural* problem for Habermas that necessitates a structural answer, this answer eventually being discourse ethics or deliberative democracy within institutions which allows for shared normative consensus to justify institutional actions.

As I read Habermas, part of the task of ideology critique involves uncovering the roots of these crises in late capitalistic structures through exploring the relationship between culture, economy, and polity. When analyzing poverty among urban black women within a post-industrial economy, this notion of crisis critically explores the problem of legitimation in relationship to free market ideology that continues to shape cultural practices and economic outcomes that adversely affect the poor such as poor urban black women who are denied the opportunity to participate in the institutionalized decision-making process concerning policies that directly affect them. Erroneous images of poor urban black women within American culture are generated by free-market ideology and used by bureaucratic officials to shape policy towards socio-economic outcomes. Moreover, these cultural images conceal economic practices and structures of exclusion that continue to thwart the well-being of these women.

For example, the 1996 welfare reform bill TANF (Temporary Assistance of Needy Families) was fashioned by appealing to erroneous cultural depictions of poor urban black women who are directly affected by such legislation. TANF was developed in light of free-market principles, which assume that hard work and personal efforts among these women should secure for them a job at the end of their welfare term. In order to maintain systems of profit for economic elites, such free-market ideology does

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 5.



not take into account the absence of living wage and childcare as well as discriminatory labor practices in American economy that thwart poor urban black women from securing a job towards flourishing and well-being. TANF lacked analysis on how economic practices impact poor urban black women's sense of well-being.

Yet, ideological distortions of free-market ideology are driven by particular interests. When I refer to "interests," I mean those pre-understandings, which are derived from the interpreter's initial situation and guide his or her actions.<sup>34</sup> For Habermas, the precondition of knowledge itself is an understanding of human interest that grounds certain "pre-understandings" that shape our knowledge and forms of ideology. He notes that "interest structures" are always present within "the *lifeworld*, being the taken-for-granted collectivities that humans are a part of, that are "linked in...[their] roots to definite means of social organization."<sup>35</sup> Habermas maintains that even "facts" are guided by interest. He asserts that facts are first constituted in relation to the standards that establish them. He writes, "Access to facts is provided by the understanding of meaning, not observation."<sup>36</sup>

I agree with Habermas that all forms of knowledge are guided by interests.<sup>37</sup> Whether speaking about dominating forms of knowledge or emancipatory forms of knowledge, these kinds of knowledge are informed by interests, which carry with them

---

<sup>34</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968): 309.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>37</sup> For instance, in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas asks: "How is freedom possible?"<sup>37</sup> For him, freedom can only be explained by associating with humans the interests they take in the possibilities of emancipation.<sup>37</sup> Their knowledge and desire of freedom is inextricably tied to their interests and desires in possessing freedom. Interest itself is associated with the object of interest (freedom) and the desire humans have in wanting to experience freedom. Similarly, oppressive, hegemonic actions are also motivated by interest and shape ideology in relationship to this interest. Here, Habermas discloses that *all* forms of knowledge are guided by interests, not merely hegemonic forms of knowledge.

conceptual-perceptual schemes rooted in deep-seated structures of human action. Hence, in uncovering the roots and possibilities of crisis, critical social theory accounts for those interest structures that disclose the needs, desires, and wants behind hegemonic ideas and practices as well as emancipatory possibilities. This acknowledgment of the link between knowledge and interest is important in uncovering the falsity in the reification of forms of knowledge that often thwart liberative, democratic potential within society. Because all ideology is connected to interest, neither hegemonic nor emancipatory forms of knowledge can be reified and “frozen” across time and space. When linking all knowledge to interest, hegemonic knowledge and its reified language and practices can also be deconstructed in order to reconstruct possibilities under which emancipation can be actualized.

When turning to poverty among urban black women within a neo-liberal political economy, one can see the importance of disclosing the interest structures that underlie the forms of knowledge free-market ideology espouses and the legitimation crises it engenders. In the TANF welfare reform decision, hegemonic interests underlie the government’s usage of free-market ideology and its assumption that poor urban black women are impoverished because of their personal irresponsibility. The absence of structural analysis in such free-market ideology is guided by interests that bolster the capitalist aims of the wealthy classes. Because poor urban black women are seen as the perpetrators of their own poverty through deployment of cultural representations (such as jezebel, welfare queen, etc.), the post-industrial economic elite can continue to implement its profit-maximizing economic practices and strategies without needing to rethink how these economic practices adversely affect such women. The real interests of free-market

ideology are to maintain the *status quo* within American political economy so that the rich get richer at the expense of the poor. Legitimation crises facing poor urban black women within advanced capitalist institutions are guided by particular hegemonic interests that manifest themselves in both cultural and economic practices and institutions.

So far, I have discussed ideology critique as unmasking ideological distortions of free-market ideology and its neo-liberal interests within our post-industrial society. However, ideology critique not only unmasks ideological distortions within capitalist structures but also redeems emancipatory insights, ideals, and dream images of ideological forms within economy towards possibilities of more just, human social and economic arrangements. Consequently, this study articulates possibilities towards flourishing and thriving for poor urban black women.

### **Toward Prospects of Thriving**

When performing ideology critique as redeeming critique, there is a way of reflecting on the ideological distortions entailed within hegemonic interests in order to develop emancipatory interests that guide more just social relations within capitalist arrangements. For this study, a model of deliberative democracy that includes a politics of social recognition and redistribution is important in articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving for poor urban black women within neo-liberal structures of American capitalism. As discussed in chapter four, a model of deliberative democracy legitimates institutional decisions by enabling participation in rational deliberation of such issues, treating all citizens affected by such outcomes as moral and political equals.

In articulating deliberative, democratic possibilities toward thriving for these women, I turn to the critical theory of Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser.

Within womanist discourse, thriving is not category deployed. Liberation and survival are categories that are often deployed in describing poor black women's sense of wholeness and well-being. For example, Delores Williams argues that biblical texts reveal a God of survival for poor black women, not always a God of liberation as James Cone suggests.<sup>38</sup> While I do not seek to qualify categories in relationship to biblical texts within this study, I wonder if Williams' category of survival is non-liberative and unhelpful when exploring the possibilities towards flourishing for poor urban black women locked within oppressive socio-economic structures. When addressing these women's well-being, is it more helpful to describe their life chances in relationship to thriving? While survival is the reality of many poor urban black women, thriving expresses the goal of flourishing for them. I want to move past notions of functioning for poor black women to concepts of flourishing. Thriving is a more helpful category in that it takes seriously the spiritual and material flourishing and wholeness of poor black women that empowers them to live life more abundantly, despite dehumanizing capitalistic conditions.

---

<sup>38</sup> *In Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Delores Williams challenges James Cone on his uncritical appropriation of his biblical vision of God as Liberator. While Cone deploys the Exodus story and the Lucan gospel narrative as justification for God as Liberator of the oppressed, Williams questions whether God can be seen as such in light of other narratives within the Bible that depict God as a non-liberator. Can God be unequivocally interpreted as liberator of the oppressed in light of such Biblical narratives as Hagar in Genesis 16, which frames God as complicit with patriarchal oppressive structures? Can the Biblical text be mined for Cone's central claim that God is liberator of the marginalized in light of texts of terror that depict a God who agrees with violent oppression such as Israel's genocidal confiscation of the Canaanites' land?

In speaking of thriving, I mean the necessity for all persons (such as urban black women) to possess adequate economic, socio-political, and cultural resources towards flourishing and well-being to participate on par with their peers. Thriving deals with both redistribution and recognition in order to develop poor urban black women's prospects towards self-actualization and flourishing within American capitalism. Moreover, because these women stand in need of policy relief, their prospects of thriving entail a policy-focused agenda.

A policy-focused strategy is essential in articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving for poor urban black women. Emilie Townes rightly assesses the importance of policy in ameliorating the poverty of black women. She states, "Advancing public policies that see society as a necessary evil has truncated the lives of the poor, and many Black folk see current public policies as forms of genocide."<sup>39</sup> Many public policies have not alleviated inequality and inequity for impoverished urban black women but have perpetuated institutional injustice and inequity that exacerbates cycles of poverty among these women and their families. Moreover, many deadly public policies have a direct impact on Black women's lives such as welfare, healthcare, childcare, reproductive health, domestic and sexual violence, and the U.S. industrial prison complex. Because so many poor urban black women are oppressed, in part, due to policies that control their lives and bodies, it becomes necessary to talk about justice and thriving in relationship to public policies in North America.

In developing the conditions for the possibility of thriving for poor urban black women, the feminist critical theory of Benhabib and Fraser are deployed in discussing the relationship and moral significance between social recognition and redistribution within

---

<sup>39</sup> Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave, 2006): 124.

advanced capitalist economies. While Benhabib turns to the standpoint of the “concrete other” in theorizing a politics of social recognition, Fraser’s explores the importance of the relationship between social recognition and redistribution in articulating democratic prospects of flourishing and fullness of life for these women. For Benhabib, the standpoint of the concrete other conceptualizes the self as one who emerges out of narrative and context. The self is understood in terms of individuality and difference. Instead of poor urban black women being acknowledged merely as abstract persons with formal rights and agency, they should also be understood as specific beings with individual subjective needs, desires, and capacities. This study maintains that a politics of social recognition should conceptualize poor urban black women as “concrete others,” which takes into account their individual narratives, stories, and experiences in theorizing their lives and desires to flourish and thrive.

When turning to poor urban black women as “concrete others,” the complex subjectivity of these women should be considered. Discussed in more depth in chapter four, I refer to complex subjectivity as the desire for fullness of life and ultimate meaning. Turning to poor urban black women as concrete others involves theorizing poor urban black women’s complex subjectivity. Taking into account their subjective interests, desires, and needs remains important in conceptualizing democratic possibilities of thriving that are not merely imagined but internal to the conscious life of these women. Moreover, treating poor urban black women as concrete others also enables one to listen to how these women may perform oppositional readings to dream images of free-market ideology as they articulate their own prospects towards freedom and flourishing.

This turn to the complex subjectivity of these women can be substantiated by using ethnography. Because ethnography provides “theoretical room” in listening to the lived experiences of subjects, it substantiates a site on which to theorize and construct poor urban black women as concrete others. In this study, I coordinate ethnography with critical social theory in conceptualizing the poverty and conditions towards flourishing of these women. Coordinating critical social theory with others methods, womanist discourse (along with the other discourses treated within this study) would do well to turn to the complex subjectivity of these women in theorizing their lives and articulating conditions for the possibility of thriving. As argued in chapter four, the ethnographic suggestions of Linda Thomas and Marla Fredrick in listening to the lived experiences of poor black women are helpful to this study in conceptualizing these women’s lives and possibilities towards flourishing.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I contend that critical social theory can ally with womanist discourse in illuminating urban black women’s unique experiences of poverty by attending to political economy and its relationship to culture within American capitalism. While womanist discourse has done well in explaining problems of culture related to poverty among urban black women, this discourse has not mapped out the present economic inequalities and miseries of poor urban black women that are intensified and reinforced by an American political economy. It has not provided economic analysis, which enables one to understand how culture and economy relate in structuring the life-chances of poor black women.

Because womanist discourse would profit from exploring the relationship between culture and economy in analyzing urban black women's poverty, this discourse would also benefit from a social theory that explores the relationship and moral significance between culture and economy on questions of urban black women's poverty within capitalistic arrangements. Instead of a vulgar Marxism that reduces culture to "the economic" or describes cultural forms as epiphenomena of economic arrangements, womanist discourse needs a social theory that relates culture to economy within capitalist structures that create crisis and oppression for poor urban black women. Critical social theory performs this task.

I deploy Benjamin and Habermas' notion of "ideology critique" in exploring urban black women's crisis of poverty and possibilities of flourishing within advanced capitalist arrangements. Within free-market ideology, neo-liberal interests guide and fuel economic inequities and cultural inequalities that continue to impede the well-being of these women. Public policies that regulate the lives of these women are driven by real interests of the economic elite within American capitalism. Although free-market ideology and its neo-liberal interests are oppressive, the second task of ideology critique seeks to redeem the "dream images" within our limited ideological forms in order to articulate conditions towards flourishing within advanced capitalism.

While such dream images are corruptible and contaminated, there is a way to perform oppositional readings of these images in order to apply their liberative content towards more just, democratic arrangements for these women. However, only by turning to poor urban black women as concrete others, can one inter-subjectively understand how they may perform these oppositional readings. Deploying Benhabib and Fraser, this



chapter maintains that in order to articulate the conditions for the possibility of thriving, these women should be treated as concrete others within a model of deliberative democracy. When they are treated as persons with narrative and history, a politics of social recognition and redistribution can be theorized that is not merely imagined but internal to the conscious life of these women.

The next chapter explores a significant document that womanist theo-ethical discourse assesses in relationship to urban black women's poverty, being the "Moynihan Report." As the most contestable document in the last four decades surrounding urban poverty, The Report has been universally recognized as a document that degrades and pathologizes black women who suffer from urban poverty. Because black feminists and black neo-conservatives' critical interrogation of this report affects how womanists approach this document, I assess all three discourses in relationship to The Report. Most importantly, I offer a re-reading of this report in light of the progressive liberal aims of the Great Society.

## CHAPTER II

### THE “MOYNIHAN REPORT” & ITS CRITICS: THE LIBERAL AIMS OF THE GREAT SOCIETY

#### Introduction

It has been recognized that the “Moynihan Report”<sup>40</sup> is a document that degrades and pathologizes black women who suffer from urban poverty. Black neo-conservatives, black feminist theorists, and womanist critics have decried this document. Black neo-conservatives argue that the liberal, “nostalgic” assumptions and premises of the report foster and reinforce cultural deprivation within poor black communities by condoning social values of personal irresponsibility and dependency among poor blacks. In addition, black feminist and womanist critics contend that the report is racist and patriarchal because it deploys fallacious cultural representations of black women such as “matriarch” and “welfare mother,” establishing a “black matriarchy” thesis that blames and pathologizes black women for their poverty and the poverty of black families.

However, I disagree with their ideological readings of The Report because their discourses fail to address the intrinsic concerns that it has in light of the progressive liberal ideas of the Great Society and its interests in fighting poverty. These liberal ideas include: the recognition of American poverty as “structural poverty,” the necessity of

---

<sup>40</sup> In 1965, the most notably contestable report on urban poverty among blacks was written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan entitled, “The Negro Family and the Case for National Action,” which pejoratively came to be known as the “Moynihan Report.” I do not deploy this pejorative title for this document but instead refer to it as “the report.” It is also important to note that the report was meant to be an internal document for official use only by the President’s and his staff in reflecting on the status of the Negro family in order to craft policies that could effectively address the contradictions of the Civil Rights movement and increasing urban poverty among Blacks. However, this document was leaked to the press, gained national coverage, and became one of the most controversial documents on race in America. For more information on this, refer to Lee Rainwater and William Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967).

social compassion in protecting and promoting the interests of the most marginalized and vulnerable segments of society, and the responsibility of the federal government in ensuring “equality of opportunity” *and* “equality of results” against racial injustices. I offer a genealogical reading of this report in light of these liberal ideas of the Great Society and its War on Poverty, which keep the report irreducibly open in terms of interpretation and meaning. In light of the continual experience of urban poverty among black women in the twenty-first century, the emancipatory interests, aims, and intentions that the report represents are themselves worthy of re-assessing. Hence, this report is revisited in relationship to its critics in order to provide a different reading of the report in light of the liberal ideas of the Great Society and its emancipatory interests in fighting poverty. After historically contextualizing The Report within the progressive liberalism of the Great Society, I offer a genealogical reading of it in response to womanist, black feminist, and black neo-conservative critics.

### **The Progressive Liberalism of the Great Society and Its War on Poverty**

The progressive liberal ideas of the Great Society must be understood against the backdrop of the 1960’s Civil Rights Movement, the growing discontent over the legislative “gains” of this movement, the rise of black power militancy, urban riots due to increasing black impoverishment within urban areas, and the emergence of the War on Poverty campaign under Johnson’s administration. After Kennedy’s assassination, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed. However, the unifying moral vision of civil rights had become a divisive nightmare of racial anger and hostility. The Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown* decision and its mandate to integrate with “all deliberate speed” had become a

mockery of justice, with only 1.2 percent of black children attending schools with white children in southern states.<sup>41</sup>

Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 legally ended constitutional discrimination and overt forms of institutional racism, growing discontent in urban black communities emerged. For black urban communities, Civil Rights legislation did little to improve the life-chances of poor black communities. Although over 180 pieces of Civil Rights legislation had passed under the Johnson administration, many urban communities saw little visible results from these legislative gains. For example, police brutality and poverty intensified in urban cities such as Los Angeles and Detroit during the late 1960s.

This sense of discontent and disillusionment was nowhere greater felt than in the emergence of Black Nationalism and in the Watts and Detroit urban riots of the 1960s. Frustrated by a “pretentious justice” concealed under a liberal vision of Civil Rights, black militant groups began to espouse black power ideology that excluded all whites from black liberation. Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael warned that “integration was a subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy and reinforces, among both black and white, the idea that ‘white’ is automatically better than ‘black’ which by

---

<sup>41</sup> John A. Andrew III, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee: 1998): 24. To read about the development of the Civil Rights Movement, the national legislation produced by the Civil Rights Movement, and the growing discontentment due to absence of enforcement of these laws see Lewis Baldwin’s *The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Boundaries of Law, Politics, and Religion* (Notre Dame 2002); Baldwin’s *To Make the Wounded Whole: The Cultural Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis 1992); Baldwin’s *Freedom is Never Free: a Biographical Portrait of Edgar Daniel Nixon* (Alabama State University 1992); Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960 – 1972* (New York 1999); Mark Stern, *Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson, and Civil Rights* (New Brunswick, N.J. 1992). For Northern activities related to Civil Rights see James Ralph, Jr., *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge, Mass. 1993). These texts illuminate the achievements and contradictions of the Civil Rights Movement.

definition is inferior.”<sup>42</sup> Black power militants articulated that because white power will not give up power voluntarily, blacks must demand and wrest power out of the hands of whites. This demand for black power led to the Watts and Chicago uprisings. These uprisings empowered urban residents to politically protest the dehumanizing and debilitating conditions to which they were subjugated.<sup>43</sup>

Although the War on Poverty was initiated before the urban riots and included both rural and urban poverty, the war on poverty turned its focus towards urban poverty due to the urban riots and the discovery of worsening systemic poverty among black urban residents.<sup>44</sup> These urban riots reflected the gross poverty that was being experienced in urban areas, poverty that was structural and systemic. Consequently, the

---

<sup>42</sup> John A. Andrew III, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society*, 42-43.

<sup>43</sup> Gerald Horne in the “Introduction” of *Fire This Time* offers an insightful analysis of what led to the Watts urban riot. In part, a major factor that led to this riot was the “Red Scare” of the 1960s that shut down organizations such as the Civil Rights Congress (CRC), which provided community upliftment and self-empowerment for urban blacks. Based on socialist principles, CRC provided a form of hope and protection for urban black communities that suffered under the oppressive iron fist of white supremacy. However, with the fright of communism spreading into America, known as the “Red Scare,” organizations such as CRC were infiltrated by the FBI and destroyed, which led to the rise and influence of gangs (which possessed a form of Black Nationalism that was violent, misogynistic, and hyper-masculine). For more information on the Red Scare prior to Watts riot, see Dorothy Healey, *California Red: A Life in the Communist Party* (Urbana, IL., 1993); as well as the state of California collaborating with organized crime figures to crush the communist left: William Knoedelseder, *Stiffed: a True Story of MCA, the Music Business, and the Mafia* (New York, 1993) and Gerald Horne’s *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-56* (London, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> There were two phases to the War on Poverty. The War on Poverty and the civil rights legislative gains were both transpiring together as early as 1963. When Johnson took office after Kennedy’s assassination, he wanted to help people “who have never held real jobs and aren’t equipped to handle them... They were born to parents who gave up long ago. They have no motivation to reach for something better because the sum total of their lives is losing.” For Johnson, he wanted to address the structural and systemic problems of both rural and urban poverty that continued to generate social isolation, a lack of motivation, and an absence of opportunity for poor persons. Alongside the Civil Rights Act, Johnson’s administration was developing an anti-poverty commitment that needed to be developed into a legislative program. On March 16, 1964, Johnson sent Congress a social message declaring war on poverty, emphasizing the need for all citizens in America to share in the opportunity and wealth of the nation. This was the first phase of the War on Poverty. The second phase of the War on Poverty came in the aftermath of the urban riots of 1965. This second phase of the war on poverty emerged due to the urban riots’ disclosure of gross poverty among urban blacks at the height of the greatest civil rights legislative achievements. Consequently, Johnson’s administration primarily turned to emphasizing and addressing urban poverty (although rural poverty was an initial focus in the War on Poverty campaign). The second phase of the war on poverty included the introduction of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1963 by Johnson. This act established beginning social programs such as Job Corps and Head Start.

War on poverty campaign had to re-evaluate its rationale and anti-poverty policies from its initial focus on both rural and urban poverty in 1963 to the problems of urban poverty among Blacks. A new question emerged concerning urban poverty in America. Why was there such an increasing percentage of poverty in urban areas (which was constituted largely by blacks) after record breaking civil rights legislation achievements, in which the Johnson administration passed more than 180 pieces of legislation that corrected housing discrimination, desegregation, discrimination in employment, and more?

In light of this discontentment and disillusionment among urban blacks as many suffered from chronic, intergenerational cycles of deprivation and poverty (alongside other socio-political, economic, and environmental ills), Johnson articulates the ideal of the Great Society and its liberal tenets. At the University of Michigan in Ann Harbor, President Johnson declares his idea of the Great Society:

The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time...The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents...It is a place where man can renew contact with nature...It is a place where men are more concerned with the quality of their goals than the quantity of their goods...But most of all, the Great Society is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor.<sup>45</sup>

Johnson delineates this Great Society as a move towards a better humanity wherein social, educational, economic, and political ills are addressed by using America's abundance and wealth to provide opportunity and freedom for all Americans. He identifies this society as a regulative ideal that guides and measures our present efforts in pursuing a society of equality and human flourishing for *all*.

---

<sup>45</sup> Marvin Gettleman and David Mermelstein, *The Great Society Reader: The Failure of American Liberalism* (New York: Random House, 1967): 16.

The Great Society vision was predicated on a brand of progressive liberalism that is essential to addressing urban poverty among black women in the twenty-first century because it defends the poor, marginalized, and most vulnerable groups of society. The Great Society was a quest for freedom, justice, and equality wherein the abundance of America in the 1960s could be experienced by all societal members and groups. This vision is predicated on three particular progressive liberal tenets that I believe can be revived and enlarged in the twenty-first century in fighting urban poverty among black women. As seen in the report, these progressive liberal ideas include: the naming of urban poverty as *structural* poverty, the necessity of social compassion in promoting and protecting the interests and needs of marginalized groups, and the responsibility of federal government in ensuring “equality of opportunity” and “equality of results.” These three liberal principles take seriously the democratic commitment that frames the American promise and dream for all communities.

Anthony Cook provides a cogent analysis of the progressive liberalism that fueled the Great Society vision. He articulates the progressive vision and its “mission to extend the promise of democracy to the least powerful, wealthy, and accepted of the American population.”<sup>46</sup> Specifically, anti-poverty programs of the Great Society of the late sixties represent attempts to “better the condition of the most marginal and vulnerable segments of the American population, those most harmed by the transitions from a slave, rural, and agrarian society.”<sup>47</sup> These progressive liberal tenets sought to enable America to make good on its own promise in ensuring democracy, liberty, and human flourishing for all

---

<sup>46</sup> Anthony Cook, *The Least of These: Race, Law, and Religion in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 4.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Office of Policy and Planning Research, United States Department of Labor, March 1965: 3.

members of society. The progressive liberalism of the Great Society maintains that in order to actualize a democratically-oriented, justly-ordered society, America should defend the needs and interests of its least advantaged segments by identifying how structures perpetuate injustices in order to rectify these injustices. Moreover, this brand of progressive liberalism argues that “equality of opportunity” must be coupled with “equality of results,” which ensures the institutional mechanisms and resources needed to grant opportunity to under-privileged, alienated communities.

The report clearly articulates the necessity of “equality of results” in helping poor urban blacks out of poverty. It states:

The demand for Equality of Opportunity has been generally perceived by white Americans as a demand for liberty, a demand not to be excluded from the competitions of life – at the polling place, in the scholarship examinations, at the personnel office, on the housing market. Liberty does, of course, demand that everyone be free to try his luck, or test his skill in such matters. But these opportunities do not necessarily produce equality: on the contrary, to the extent that winners imply losers, equality of opportunity almost insures inequality of results. The point...is that equality of opportunity now has a different meaning for Negroes than it has for whites. It is not (or at least no longer) a demand for liberty alone, but also for equality – in terms of group results...it is now the demand for equality of economic results...The demand for equality of education...has also become a demand for equality of results, of outcomes.<sup>48</sup>

The report contends that new expectations were emerging for Blacks, expectations that go beyond civil rights and its sole language of equal opportunity. While the legal events that characterized the civil rights gains achieved liberty or freedom to participate in self-determination, it did not ensure equality, particularly equality of results. The demand for equality of results in education, employment, housing, and the like sat at the forefront of well-being for blacks existing in impoverished urban conditions. Because of this inequality of results, the report notes that many more blacks were falling further and

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 7.



further behind than those blacks that were moving ahead at unprecedented levels.<sup>49</sup>

Reflecting the progressive liberalism of the Great Society, the report communicates that equality of results would be the hallmark of success in overcoming the problems of race relations in America.

Johnson's social policies, such as Head Start and Job Corps, reflect the ideals of the Great Society, which were under-girded by these particular progressive liberal tenets, particularly the liberal tenet that articulates the need for "equality of results." Head Start was designed to address a structural absence of educational opportunities available to poor children (in which urban black children were over-represented). Similarly, Job Corps was another liberal policy that ensured that the federal government created residential centers to teach at-risk, young men and women new trade and vocational skills for employment. These liberal social programs communicate the need for federal government to create equality of results wherein the proper institutional avenues of access are in place to ensure opportunity for disenfranchised groups. These liberal ideas of attacking racial and economic injustices and structural poverty in order to protect and promote the interests and needs of marginalized groups legitimates and justifies the social policies of the Great Society such as Head Start and Job Corps. Within this historical context of race and poverty in America in the 1960s, the liberal ideas of the Great Society emerged and found its expression in the report.

Similar to Cook and Johnson, I find these progressive liberal ideas critical to ensuring access and opportunity for the most vulnerable segments of society in the twenty-first century. The progressive liberalism of the Great Society was an ideology and political choice that sought to make America a land of freedom, justice, and virtue by

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

addressing any obstacles that hindered the realization of the democratic experiment. Consequently, the three progressive liberal tenets acknowledge that a society's true realization of justice and freedom is measured by how well it attends to the interests and needs of its most alienated, oppressed groups and communities. Moreover, America's democratic experiment can only achieve success when the democratic sensibilities of equality and equity are extended to all persons, regardless of race, class, ethnicity, age, gender, sex, and the like.

America's democratic promise to all societal members can be realized for urban black women locked in intergenerational cycles of deprivation and poverty by hearkening back to these liberal hopes. Such liberal ideas privilege a social order that takes seriously how economic exploitation and oppression adversely affects poor, urban black women in society, thwarting their human flourishing and thriving. A model of human relationality based on interdependence, respect, justice, and care fuel these liberal tenets and provide a way of testing America's true commitments to economic justice and economic democracy for black women. This progressive liberalism of the Great Society and its focus on the economically destitute and socially alienated can be reclaimed in the twenty-first century in order to ensure equality for the most marginalized and vulnerable, one group being urban black women.

Moreover, these progressive liberal tenets reflected in the report enable an alternate reading of the report itself from the universally recognized contentions that it establishes cultural deprivation and pathology among blacks, particularly black women. In light of the progressive liberalism of the Great Society, I offer a genealogical reading of the report.

## **Black Feminists, Womanists, & The Report: A Problem of Pathology?**

There has been considerable debate and criticism concerning the report for the last four decades. Black neo-conservatives not only tend to question and refute the ideal, nostalgic assumptions of the Great Society and its War on Poverty that under-gird the report but also argue that the report fosters cultural deprivation among poor black communities. However, black feminist and womanist critics challenge the content of the report itself, claiming that the substantive nature of the report is racist and patriarchal. Specifically, black feminist and womanist critics contend that the report is racist and patriarchal because it deploys erroneous cultural representations of black women such as “matriarch” and “welfare mother,” establishing a “black matriarchy” thesis that blames and pathologizes black women for their poverty and the poverty of black families.

Black feminist and womanist critics’ assessment of this report as racist and patriarchal has contributed to the continued development of literature that expresses this ideological viewpoint. In this chapter, I offer a genealogical reading of this report rather than an ideological reading of the report as black feminist and womanist critics have done in the past. A “genealogical” reading of the report *deconstructs* how the report has been interpreted in the past, which includes interrogating social interests and powers that have produced such discursive interpretations.<sup>50</sup> A genealogical reading of this report resists the report being thematized as only racist and patriarchal but opens the report up to the

---

<sup>50</sup> As Michael Foucault discusses in his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History,” Foucault’s ideas of genealogy were influenced by the work Nietzsche did on the development of morals through power. For Foucault, genealogy is not a search for origins. Rather, it seeks to show how the plural and oftentimes contradictory past reveals how power influences and shapes truth. Hence, genealogy deconstructs “truth,” arguing that truth is oftentimes more a discovery of chance, supported by the operation of power or the consideration of interest. Therefore, all truths are questionable. In relationship to the interpretation of the report, I seek to disclose the influence of power and interest on the ideological reading of this report by black feminists and womanists in order to reveal the report’s plural aims when reviewed in light of the progressive liberalism of the Great Society.

plurality of aims, motives, and intentions when turning to the ideals of the Great Society out of which the report emerged. The report can be irreducibly open to meaning when analyzing it in light of the liberal ideas of the Great Society and its War on Poverty.

While appreciative of black feminist theorists and womanists taking on the report in relationship to discussing how poverty (as well as other interlocking oppressions) adversely affects the material realities of black women, my task in proffering a genealogical reading of this report reflects three primary concerns. Foremost, one concern is that such ideological readings of this report foreclose dialogue on many of the intrinsic concerns and ideas the report possesses about the structural nature of poverty and the role of federal government in ensuring equality and equity for a historically marginalized and oppressed group: blacks. In the late 1960s, no sustained analysis at the federal level dealt with the severe disadvantage blacks found themselves in due to centuries of institutional racism and an absence of structural opportunity. Another primary concern is the dearth of textual engagement with the report itself. Most black feminist theorists and womanist critics do not correlate what the report *says* in relationship to their assessments. In taking a genealogical path, a final primary concern is the importance of re-assessing the report as we confront the problem of urban poverty among blacks in the twenty-first century. The progressive liberalism of the Great Society reflected in the report holds promise in addressing the structural nature of urban poverty among blacks in the twenty-first century. This progressive liberalism also legitimates the necessity of social compassion in protecting and promoting the interests of the most vulnerable in lieu of neo-liberal ideology that characterizes America's current social and economic practices. My re-reading of the report addresses all of these concerns.

There has been a group of black feminist theorists and womanist theologians and ethicists that challenge and thematize the report as both racist and sexist because the report pathologizes black women, which “blames the victim.” In particular, black feminist theorists such as Hortense Spillers and Patricia Hills Collins thematize the report as racist and sexist. Moreover, womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas shares in this reading of the report. While these critics are fair in their assessments on the social *effects* of the report when reviewing the racially-charged social milieu of America in the 1960s, I disagree that these “effects” properly frame a critical reading on the meaning and intent of the report itself, particularly in light of the progressive liberal aims and motives of the document.

Hortense Spillers and Patricia Hill Collins argue that the report renders poor black women pathological by deploying negative cultural representations such as “matriarch” and “welfare mothers.” Collins notes that the report establishes a “black matriarchy thesis” which depicts black women as overly aggressive, unfeminine, and unable to fulfill their “womanly” duties such as the supervision of her children.<sup>51</sup> While Collins provides a sociological analysis of how these cultural representations exploit black women within the context of American political economy, Spillers provides literary criticism of such representations of black women found in the report. For Collins, these cultural representations such as “matriarch” and “welfare mother” exploit black women within American political economy in order to maintain the interlocking oppressions of race, gender, and class. While Spillers would agree with Collins, she offers an additional, different insight. She deconstructs the entire mythic, symbolic linguistic order that already over-determines black women’s bodies and identities so that these cultural

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 74.

representations are by-products of a larger racially-determined, oppressive linguistic social order. While Collins sees such representations as historically contingent within political economies and therefore to be resisted and transcended, Spillers identifies these representations as expressions of an over-determined, racially-defined linguistic order of “othering” that cannot be transcended. Hence, on close reading, Spillers is primarily concerned with how the report *unconsciously* participates in an entire mythic symbolic world of “American Grammar” that already over-determines and signifies upon black bodies and distorts black identities and agency.

When turning to terms such as “black matriarch,” “Sapphire,” or “Mammy,” Spillers would delineate these terms as part of a “locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth.”<sup>52</sup> These “confounded identities of black women however are “so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried underneath them to come clean.”<sup>53</sup> Consequently, the terms enclosed in quotations marks over-determined black female bodies that are perpetually “read” against these fixed and constant meanings.<sup>54</sup> Yet, these meanings emerge from a symbolic order within the white American psyche, what Spillers refers to as America’s grammar book.

When assigning meaning to black bodies, Spillers identifies the Atlantic Slave Trade as being the symbolic order of this American grammar that signifies particular social and psychic languages that are imbued with mythic meanings and identities about

---

<sup>52</sup> Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Counteremory: The “American Connection (Summer, 1987): 65.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. When speaking of such images “over-determining” black female bodies, I mean the way in which cultural representations and its meanings of black women as wanton, hypersexual, pathological, irresponsible and the like are imposed upon black female bodies and identities. These fixed, cultural meanings force black women and men to be seen, displayed, and interpreted through the interpretive lenses of an oppressive, mythical, and symbolic linguistic order.

Blacks since slavery. For her, this grammar of description improperly distorts black people's identity and agency in order to maintain white supremacy. For example, in the report, black women are termed "matriarchs." However, for Spillers, the report's deployment of black matriarchy must be interpreted within an American grammar or symbolic order that privileges patriarchal and patrilineal, familial arrangements. Consequently, "matriarch" becomes a symbolic and rhetorical move that is deployed to maintain white supremacy and its social norms, even if the report did not directly intend to achieve this effect. Within this American grammar, "matriarch" really reads against the norms of the "ideal" white nuclear family model. As a result, black single mothers as matriarchs enter into this entire grid of signifying actions within this symbolic order of America's grammar book, rendering black single mothers as inappropriate, inadequate socializing agents.

Moreover, Spillers contends that this symbolic order within America's grammar book involves mythic memory. This mythic memory is the memory in America's psyche of the silent, emasculated black male who is robbed of agency from slavery onward, the black female who becomes the independent familial leader and purveyor of instruction to the children, and the orphaned, fatherless black child.<sup>55</sup> This grammar of description becomes the "eternal reading" of blacks across time and history and "the female body and male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuvering, not at all gender-related, gender specific."<sup>56</sup> For example, she notes that black children's orphaned status must be understood against the privileging of a patriarchal order. The mythical representation of the orphaned black child is the dismissal of the kinship networks that

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 67.

black children found themselves a part of, being matrilineal and matrifocal, which provided “powerful ties of sympathy that bind blood-relations in a network of feeling of continuity.”<sup>57</sup> However, the white patriarchal nuclear family within this American grammar becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community, which perpetually describes the non-nuclear black family as “captive.” Hence, the report’s description of the Negro Family “borrows its narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify the captive person.”<sup>58</sup>

Spillers offers another example of how the report participates in this oppressive grammar of description. She argues that the black male is virtually silenced in the report. The Negro family has “not Father to speak of – his Name, his Law, his Symbolic function mark the impressive missing agencies in the essential life of the black community...”<sup>59</sup> Again, the silencing of all urban black men and fathers in the report can be traced to this mythic memory in the American psyche of the emasculated, non-present black male within the slave family. Because fathers were not allowed to name, raise, or protect their children, they experienced an erasure of name and body within the black family. Hence, black children are seen as victimized and oppressed due to the physical absence of the father. For her, the virtual silence of black men in the report can be properly understood when turning to America’s grammar book and its categorically fixed, symbolic meaning of the “Black male” as absent in the life of the black family and broader community.

Spillers’ indictment against the report is that it participates in an entire symbolic, linguistic order of “American grammar” that renders black bodies pathological. For her,

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 69

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 66.



the report's participation remains unconscious because it inescapably enters into an entire racial, mythic order of language and meaning that already over-determines the identities and agencies of black women and men in America. Consequently, the report's participation in racist and sexist distortions of black women (and black men) through language and cultural representations problematizes the report itself.

While Spillers interprets the report primarily as an expression of an "American Grammar" that pathologizes and distorts black women's identities and agency (as well as black men and children), Collins contends that cultural representations in the report such as matriarch "has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression."<sup>60</sup> While Spillers identifies "black matriarch" as reading against the fixed norms of a white, patriarchal nuclear family, Collins maintains that "black matriarch" serves the interests of American political economy that must exploit black women in order to maintain their economic, social, and political exploitation and subordination. For example, Collins notes that the representation of "black mammy" served the interests of a slave economy, wherein the domestic labor of black women was exploited towards the development of a white family. Being the image of an asexual black woman, mammy was used to justify economic profits and socio-political hegemony of black women in a political economy of slavery.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990): 67.

<sup>61</sup> Moreover, in *Black Feminist Criticism, Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, Barbara Christian notes that this controlling image of mammy was deployed to assuage the fears Western culture possessed of black women, particularly those female functions that black women performed that a Puritan society could not confront. Christian comments: "All the functions of the mammy are magnificently physical. They involve the body as sensuous, as funky, as part of woman that white southern America was profoundly afraid of. Mammy, then, harmless in her position of slave, unable because of her all-giving nature to do harm, is needed as an image, a surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female."<sup>(2)</sup> This controlling image functioned as social denial of the ways in which black women's sexuality was intricate to the social order of slavery and hence, to southern society. Because black women had to be physical and

While the source of the mammy's success is her ability to model appropriate gender behavior in white society towards American politico-economic success, the "source of the matriarch's failure is her inability to model appropriate gender behavior."<sup>62</sup> Collins examines how poor, single-parent black women as matriarchs and welfare mothers are incriminated as deviant and destructive in light of the "ideal" nuclear family model. Yet, this deviancy of "black matriarchs" and "black welfare mothers" serves a current political economy that blames poor black women for their own victimization. Portraying poor, single-parent black women as matriarchs and welfare mothers allows the dominant group to blame poor black women for the economic and social failure of themselves and their children, masking how inequalities within the economy generate economic oppression and deprivation for these women. Collins states, "Creating the controlling image of the welfare mother and stigmatizing her as the cause of her own poverty and that of African American communities shifts the angle of vision away from the structural sources of poverty and blames the victims themselves."<sup>63</sup> For Collins, these images and cultural representations in the report inevitably pathologize poor black women.

Similar to Collins, Kelly Brown Douglas, a womanist critic, also challenges the report for pathologizing black women by establishing the black matriarchy thesis. Douglas states, "The idea of the Black woman as a powerful matriarch, most commonly referred to in stereotypic language as Sapphire, was cemented in White Culture by a 1965

---

sexual as exploited labor for a slave economy, their female functions had to be reconciled with the cult of true womanhood in which white women had to be docile, feminine, asexual, and submissive. The mammy image had to reconcile the Puritanical promotion of the cult of true womanhood with the contradictory demands that black women be physical and sexual for economic profits and social hegemony. Consequently, mammy was needed to uphold the ideology of true womanhood itself.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>63</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 77.

report on the 'Negro Family' by Daniel P. Moynihan...<sup>64</sup> She further maintains that Moynihan identified family "disorganization" as the major weakness of the black community and, that in doing so, "clearly named the Black woman as the culprit."<sup>65</sup>

Douglas also asserts that the report "strongly implied that black women were responsible for the failure of black children to achieve."<sup>66</sup>

More succinctly, Douglas charges the report with "blaming the victim," which faults poor black women for their poverty and the poverty of the entire black family. In *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Douglas writes:

Because Black women could often find work while black men could not, the Moynihan Report blamed black women for depriving black men of their masculine right to provide for their families and, as he said "to strut" like a "bantam rooster" or "four star general." By blaming black women for the plight of black men and hence the plight the black family, the report directed attention away from the social, economic, and political structures – all of them racist and patriarchal – that actually deprived black men of work and relegated lack women to domestic labor.<sup>67</sup>

Douglas maintains that this report held normative patriarchal assumptions and familial arrangements that engendered "blaming the victim," being poor black women. She argues that the report attributes the causes of urban poverty in black families to black women who emasculate black men that they are never able "to contribute to the uplift and economic well-being of black families."<sup>68</sup> Moreover, Douglas notes that the report directs attention away from the racist and patriarchal structures that oppress and deny black women and men the work needed to lift themselves out of poverty.

---

<sup>64</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999): 51.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 52.

For Douglas, such cultural representations as “matriarch” function “to make White supremacy appear not only necessary but also natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life.”<sup>69</sup> Douglas contends that one must understand how “whiteness” culturally operates in the degradation of black people. Whiteness renders black people inferior by attaching to white power prerogatives, privileges, and economic surpluses.<sup>70</sup> In relationship to black women, these images (such as matriarch) are socially constructed and deliberately imposed upon black women to secure exploitation in the maintenance of the white capitalist status quo in America. Hence, Douglas highlights the inevitable consequences of these stereotypes: “vicious attacks upon Black bodies.”<sup>71</sup> She sees these representations as being critical to the achievement of unprincipled racist power.<sup>72</sup> Dissimilar to Spillers, Douglas implies that the report *consciously* participates in the degradation of black women in order to maintain white superiority and its concomitant privileges.

In assessing the various criticisms of Spillers, Collins, and Douglas, I share their concerns with how such erroneous, degrading images and cultural representations are used to pathologize poor black women in urban America. I also find persuasive their agreement on how poverty discourse is inextricably intertwined with such representations, such as Reagan’s multiple welfare reform speeches on “welfare mothers” in the 1980s. Such racially-charged, destructive images on America’s social landscape oppress and inhibit poor, urban black women’s quality of life. The social costs in using images as matriarch and welfare mothers are far greater than avoiding such terms

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

altogether. However, I am suspicious of their internal logic that this report automatically establishes pathology among black women because it utilizes such language and images.

Spillers' assessment is fair and persuasive concerning how the report may deploy language that is intended to be a part of a larger racializing, symbolic linguistic order in America that distorts black women and men's identities and agency. However, does this assessment ground the claim that *the report establishes* pathology among poor black women? Spillers does address that central to the identity of a racialized America is its linguistic apparatus, which distorts and subjugates black bodies. For instance, because the discourse on urban poverty continues to be racialized and often blames poor blacks, many persons could use the report and its language to buttress his/her own claims on black irresponsibility within an already racist linguistic order. While Spillers demonstrates how language can be deployed in a larger linguistic social order to oppress black female identities and agency, she offers no textual support from the report itself that grounds the claim that the report describes poor black women as pathological.

In addition, Spillers' reading of the report reduces its meaning to another instantiation of an expression of this American grammar, dismissing other motives and intentions the report has within a particular socio-historical context. Her reading of the report becomes ideological and gives too much attention to the over-determination of language and race itself, without giving equal attention to the socio-historical context of the Great Society and its progressive liberalism out of which the report emerged.

However, Collins would disagree and challenge Spillers' over-determined status of language and racial oppression for blacks. I agree with Collins that such cultural representations as "matriarch" and "welfare mother" serve the political economies of a

given historical time period. Collins rightly concludes that such racial, intellectual production and oppression can be deconstructed, resisted and transcended through alternate epistemological paradigms, knowledge production, and politics of empowerment that interrogate and expose the subjugated knowledge of an “American Grammar.” However, I am doubtful as to whether Collins’ charge that the report establishes pathology and a “black matriarchy” thesis among poor black women can be substantiated and maintained. Similar to Spillers, Collins does not provide textual support on the report’s claims in relationship to the charge she makes against the report. Consequently, the argument that the report establishes pathology and a black matriarchy thesis among black women remains dubious.

When turning to the report itself, I find a clear rationale as to why the report employs the language of matriarchy, which throws Collins and Spillers assessments into question. The report states:

There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Our is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.<sup>73</sup>

The report seems to intimate that its discussion of black matriarchy does not reflect any normative commitments to patriarchy. Instead, it highlights the status of many Negro families in relationship to the patriarchal commitments of an American society that devalues matriarchy in light of these values. The report explicitly states that black

---

<sup>73</sup> Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, 23.

matriarchy is about black families (primarily black women) that have been forced into this arrangement because of structural inequities and inequalities, which puts these single-parent families at a distinct disadvantage. As a result, one could reasonably argue that the report does not establish pathology or a black matriarchy thesis in relationship to poor black women.

Instead, my genealogical reading of the report discloses that the report reflects the contradictions and tensions of the language of black matriarchy that was present in the best of black sociological research during the mid-twentieth century. Because the report was grounded in what was considered the best black sociological research of the day, the report brings the sociological limitations of that research as well. The report primarily draws upon E. Franklin Frazier's sociological work on the black family. While Du Bois employed a concept of "family" that mainly turned to the empirical sociology of black families of late nineteenth century that was understood in racial terms, Frazier used a concept of "family" that took note of the great class differentiation within the "black community" and of the "pathologies" among the lower, urban black classes. In 1942, Frazier wrote:

The segregated Negro World in America is a pathological phenomenon which has pronounced in an acute form all the pathological phenomena that characterize social life...Segregation has distorted the Negro's outlook on life and has caused him to nurture resentments and to cultivate evasion and dissimulation as an art in order to survive...<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Franklin Frazier, "Brazil has no Race Problem," *Common Sense* 11 (November 1942): 364 as quoted in Mio Matsumoto, "E. Franklin Frazier on W.E.B. Du Bois: Sociologist, Critic, and Friend," *Souls* 7 (3-4): 63.

While Frazier maintains that the cause of this “pathology”<sup>75</sup> is due to a history of slavery and compulsory segregation wherein black men have been and continue to be emasculated by white society as black women inevitably begin to lead families, his description of “pathology” among Negroes was to account for the destructive behavioral-related symptoms that accompany poverty and lack of opportunity. This language of pathology and turn to class analysis in favor of eschewing the notion of the “race man” that constitutes black identity became Frazier’s new African-American sociology.

The interpretive lens that the report uses is Frazier’s black sociology, which examines the pathologies of urban poverty based on the realities of historical slavery and segregation. For Frazier, these pathologies in urban areas (such as crime, violence and delinquency) were the symptoms of the breakdown in black families due to a history of slavery, discrimination, and an institutional lack of opportunity. In other words, the language of pathology among poor blacks was about *outcome* and not cause. The outcome of institutional oppression upon blacks generated certain intergenerational social pathologies that had to be overcome.<sup>76</sup> However, the language of pathology was co-opted

---

<sup>75</sup> In *The Dark Ghetto*, black sociologist Kenneth Clark first described black urban poverty in relationship to pathology. He argues that chronic social injustices corrode and damage the human personality so that social pathologies are the results of debilitating and dehumanizing conditions forced upon ordinary people. Clark states, “Human beings who are forced to live under ghetto conditions and whose daily experience tells them that almost nowhere in society are they respected and granted the ordinary dignity and courtesy accorded to others will, as a matter of course, begin to doubt their own worth... These doubts become the seeds of a pernicious self-and group-hatred, the Negro’s complex and debilitating prejudice against himself.”(64) Clark’s deployment of “tangle of pathology” was not originally meant to pathologize blacks as intrinsically possessing deficient and deviant traits. Rather, this language of pathology was deployed to communicate how poverty results in poverty-related behavior.

<sup>76</sup> There is considerable debate on how structural economic oppression generates certain social pathologies among alienated, oppressed communities. Intergenerational cycles of poverty generate certain poverty – related behavior. This poverty-related behavior may not necessarily be totalized as representative of the culture’s only response to poverty. For example, poor, urban black communities have been as resilient and productive in poverty-stricken conditions as challenged by more destructive poverty-related behavior that often accompanies social and economic alienation. William Julius Wilson offers an insightful discussion on poverty and related behavior among impoverished communities in *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).



and used by the media to express the intrinsic cultural pathologies of poor blacks (which suggests a pathology that is endemic to the collective psyche or ancestry of the victims).<sup>77</sup> Consequently, the language of pathology (also known as tangle of pathology) within poor black communities became highly contestable. Yet, this discussion of black sociology is of paramount importance because the report sought to deploy, what it considered to be, the best sociological research in relationship to the question of race and poverty in the middle of the twentieth century.

Moreover, Spillers and Collins also do not account for the report's participation in an ideological debate on the causes of poverty as either due to poor blacks' deviant behavior and irresponsibility or due to the structural causes of urban poverty in the 1960s. After the contradictions of the Civil Rights legislative gains, key questions disclosed the ambivalence of American citizens surrounding the origins and nature of poverty and race. Should poverty be seen as an institutional and systemic problem necessitating structural changes? Or should poverty be perceived as a personal problem necessitating personal self-help and responsibility? The divide between the personal and structural became the center of contestation over how to respond to poverty at the federal level. There was the "culture of poverty"<sup>78</sup> thesis and the structural poverty argument.

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> There were certain Americans who blamed the culture of poverty in which the poor were situated in, especially in light of Oscar Lewis' work. Conservative scholars such as Oscar Lewis introduced an anthropological account of a culture of poverty among Mexicans in hopes that his study would "contribute to our understanding of the culture of poverty in contemporary Mexico, and, insofar as the poor throughout the world have something in common, to lower-class life in general." *In Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, Lewis does an anthropological study of five Mexican families in efforts to show a discernable pattern of family traits that constitutes intergenerational cycles of poverty and low attainment. While Lewis sought to focus on the family unit in order to get people "beyond form and structure to the realities of human life," his study was used to defend a culture of poverty here in America that identified black cultural deficiencies as the source of poverty rather than structural or societal issues that generated poverty and poverty-related behavior. Michael Harrington's *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, refuted the culture of poverty thesis that was circulating in the 1960s and 70s, which defined poverty as cultural deficiencies of a group. He argued that because the poor lacked the necessary

The report maintained the structural argument, which contended that poverty, especially among blacks, was due to a long history of systemic discrimination and absence of opportunity, which continued to impede poor, urban blacks. The report maintains that, “American slavery was profoundly different from, and in its lasting effects on individuals and their children, indescribably worse than, any recorded servitude, ancient or modern.”<sup>79</sup> Moreover, the report contends that “Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American.”<sup>80</sup> For the report, the causes of poverty are not seen in the individual; the causes are disclosed in a system that continues to generate poverty among the dispossessed, denying them the resources to escape impoverished conditions.

For the report, poverty analysis needed to turn to those structural conditions that continue to impede poor black families and communities. Johnson resonated with the report’s identification of structural poverty and used the report to formulate federal policy that could address urban poverty. This report sought to take up the structural and institutional argument of poverty in response to notions of poverty that placed the onus directly on urban blacks. The progressive liberal ideas of structural poverty, social compassion and the federal government’s involvement in aiding the poor are seen in the report’s insistence that these structural problems require social responses by the federal government (which produced social programs such as Head Start and Job Corps). While these social responses possessed their limitations (which are discussed below), the report

---

skills and education to break out of the cycles of poverty, they tended to see life as fate, an endless cycle from which there is no deliverance. Consequently, only by changing the environment of poor can they break out of this cycle. He argues that the problem of “two nations” can only be corrected by turning to America’s distorted economy. He deploys the phrase “culture of poverty,” but describes this phrase as the systemic oppression that leads to families (and hence communities) that are marked by poor health, unemployment, poor education, poor housing, mental distress, and low motivation for attainment.

<sup>79</sup>Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National*, 12-13.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

maintained that the federal government played a role in ameliorating such socio-economic miseries.

Based on my reading of the report, I disagree with Douglas' claim that the report ignores structural causes of urban poverty among blacks. Douglas asserts that "the report directed attention away from the social, economic, and political structures – all of them racist and patriarchal – that actually deprived black men of work and relegated black women to domestic labor."<sup>81</sup> Yet, Douglas offers no textual support from the report itself to substantiate this claim. In fact, her claim misrepresents the report's primary argument on the causes of urban poverty among blacks. The report contends that a history of slavery, discrimination and structural disadvantage have created economic miseries for urban blacks. It states that "the impact of unemployment [in 1960s] on the Negro family, and particularly on the Negro male, is the least understood of all the developments that have contributed to the present crisis."<sup>82</sup> It says that "as jobs became more and more difficult to find, the stability of the family became more difficult to maintain."<sup>83</sup>

It also argues that structural constraints and an absence of "equality of outcomes" between whites and poor blacks were at the roots of black urban poverty in America in the 1960s.<sup>84</sup> This textual evidence suggests that the report grounds its sociological analysis of urban poverty among blacks in the structural constraints that impede human flourishing and well-being for poor black families. The report identifies the structural causes of urban black poverty, which included slavery, growing urbanization, and

---

<sup>81</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 51.

<sup>82</sup> Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National*, 17.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>84</sup> Refer to pages 1-3 in the report on the discussion of the absence of "equality of outcomes" between whites and blacks which led to a growing underclass of impoverished people in the 1960s, many of these people being blacks.

discrimination that tended to produce matriarchal arrangements among poor black families that put poor blacks at a distinct disadvantage in a patriarchal society.

Black feminist theorists and womanist critics have offered an ideological assessment of the report due to its author, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Moynihan, a white male, writes the report at the height of racial unrest and black urban poverty in the 1960s. Black feminist historian Paula Giddings is correct in stating that it was likely that “no one was more shocked by the reaction to his report than Daniel Patrick Moynihan.”<sup>85</sup> She asserts:

He had taken pains to be racially sensitive. For example, he explicitly stated that the report concerned only a certain segment of the Black community and not the race as a whole. In fact, Moynihan cited evidence in the report that middle-class Black families put “a higher premium on family stability and the conserving of family resources than their White counterparts.” Moynihan also praised the strength of Blacks as a race...In fact, Moynihan was less harsh in his evaluation of the nontraditional family structure than E. Franklin Frazier had been in *The Negro Family in the United States*. Like Frazier’s, Moynihan’s thesis suffered from myopia...Though many took issue with Moynihan’s view of the problem, however, few criticized his suggestion for resolving it...<sup>86</sup>

Giddings intimates that it is intellectually dishonest to delineate Moynihan as a “white patriarch” who intentionally wrote a document to reinforce the culturally dehumanizing images of black women and communities. Instead, the report can be seen as untimely due to the racial unrest that characterized the 1960s and 1970s as well as due to the limits of black sociological language of his era that was chauvinistic.

Giddings provides a cogent assessment of the report and also introduces the “evaluative silence” in regards to the report’s inadequate suggestions for federal action (which was simply to strengthen black families through restoring black men as leaders of

---

<sup>85</sup> Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984): 327.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

black families through employment and education). Giddings' insights are reasonable and insightful in illuminating possible reasons for such ideological readings. Moreover, she also introduces a key problem within the report. The report incorrectly concludes that strengthening black families, *instead of a turn to structural solutions that are economic and social in scope*, is the federal government's answer to black impoverishment.

A genealogical reading of the report becomes important in assessing not only the explicit claims of the report but also the aims, motives, and intentions the report possesses in light of the progressive liberal ideas of the Great Society and its War on Poverty, which include: exposing structural poverty, articulating social compassion in protecting and promoting the interests of the most marginalized and vulnerable segments of society, and demanding responsibility of the federal government in ensuring “equality of opportunity” *and* “equality of results” against racial injustices. Black feminist and womanist critics, such as Spillers, Collins, and Douglas, have largely offered an ideological reading of the report as racist and patriarchal. Alternatively, I propose that the report be read as irreducibly open in meaning when textually engaging its claims and analyzing it in light of the liberal ideas of the Great Society and the War on Poverty out of which it emerged.

### **Black Neo-Conservatives & Liberal Ideals of the Great Society**

So far, I have argued that black feminist and womanist critics possess an ideological reading of the report, which dismisses the emancipatory interests, aims, and intentions of the report in light of the Great Society and its progressive liberal ideas. Similarly, black neo-conservative scholars have held ideological readings of the report as

well. These scholars have criticized the report, not in relationship to what it says, but in relationship to its liberal, nostalgic assumptions. In groundbreaking texts, black neo-conservatives such as black political scientist Charles Murray and black economist Thomas Sowell castigate the idealism of the Great Society and its liberal ideas that the report assumes and employs. As urban poverty rates among blacks worsened in the 1970s, despite key liberal anti-poverty legislation, these scholars began to question the reasonableness of such progressive liberal ideas found in the report. These scholars asked one question in light of the soaring poverty rates of the 1970 and 80s: Why was poverty worsening after such programs as Head Start and Job Corps, which characterized the Great Society and its liberal ideas that funded the War on Poverty? While Murray focuses on the problems of a welfare state and Sowell emphasizes the problems of liberal assumptions related to how racial groups achieve economic success, both maintain that the faulty premises of the Great Society and its progressive liberalism remain idealistic, void of empirical substantiation.

Murray castigates the nostalgic assumptions of progressive liberalism found in the report, which promotes a welfare state. In *Loosing Ground*, Murray contends that Johnson's social, anti-poverty policy was responsible for the greater rates of poverty years later, particularly in urban areas. Murray attributes the ineffectiveness of the social policy of the Great Society to its radical break with an American past that has construed differently the role of federal government, welfare, and poverty. Murray notes that the understanding of welfare and the federal role of government changed radically with Kennedy's administration from the time of the founding of the Republic. Prior to the 1950s, Murray maintains that there was a general consensus that while a society "does

not let people starve in the streets,” it makes “decent provision” for those who would otherwise be destitute.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, this provision was given only to those who met the qualifications, which tended to be workers who involuntarily were unemployed or widows unable to care for their children. Prior to the 1950s, the dilemma was how civilized society could take care of the deserving poor without encouraging people to become undeserving. In fact, Johnson’s administration knew this historical sentiment about poverty and welfare in America and consequently created the slogan, “Give a hand, not a handout.”<sup>88</sup>

Yet, for Murray, the Kennedy administration and Johnson’s War on Poverty program introduced two new faulty premises, namely: 1) poverty was due solely to structural problems in the system (hence, the discovery of structural poverty) and 2) most able-bodied on welfare would work if given the opportunity.<sup>89</sup> If America trains the chronically unemployed and the youngsters growing up without resources or skills, the able-bodied will receive jobs and be on their way to permanent self-sufficiency. Moreover, Murray states that these were the nostalgic assumptions of an intelligentsia who were constructing and implementing Johnson’s social policy. Yet, despite these assumptions and anti-poverty measurements, divorce, crime, and illegitimate births continued to climb higher in the 1970s. Why?

Murray turns to the liberal ideology that funded Great Society’s welfare programs. He writes:

---

<sup>87</sup> Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984): 15.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

Poverty [eradication] as officially defined is a matter of cash in hand from whatever source. The recipient of the benefits does not have to “do” anything – does not have to change behavior or values, does not have to “qualify” in any way except to be a recipient. To eliminate such poverty, all we need do is mail enough checks with enough money to enough people. In the late sixties, still more in the seventies, the number of checks, the size of checks, and the number of beneficiaries all increased. Yet, perversely, poverty chose those years to halt a decline that has been underway for two decades.<sup>90</sup>

Murray asserts that when social policy increased during the 1970s, poverty increased.

Murray suggests that this increase in poverty is directly correlated to the anti-poverty measurements and the liberal ideology that did not deal effectively and realistically with the source of such poverty: poor cultural and individual values and norms. Consequently, Murray argues that the Great Society and its policies did more harm for the poor, particularly black urban poor, than good.

Moreover, Murray attempts to demonstrate that the Great society could not pragmatically implement its own idealistic, progressive ideals. Murray writes that although the “coming of the Great Society triggered (and largely financed) intensive research into the questions of poverty and discrimination,” its federal efforts were “irresponsibly puny” in light of the increased poverty rate in urban areas.<sup>91</sup> He provides data that in 1950, social welfare spending for the public cost a little over 3 billion dollars, the equivalent of 11 billion dollars in 1980. Yet, in a country with 45 million people in poverty, it represented an annual expenditure of less than 250 dollars per poor person.<sup>92</sup> Murray maintains that if America experienced a “war on poverty” in the 1960s, what happened when turning to the 1970s only to see soaring impoverished rates, particularly within urban communities?

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.



However, critical problems arise regarding Murray's argument on the causal relationship between Johnson's liberal social policies and higher rates of urban poverty among blacks. First, Murray's contention that the Great Society's social policy programs generated higher rates of poverty in the 1970s suffers from an adequate analysis of economic history within urban areas. Sociologists such as William Julius Wilson and Marcellus Andrews take into account the problem of a shifting American political economy in which urban blacks were unprepared. Wilson chronicles economic factors that led to urban areas as bastions of in-opportunity, disclosing poor black communities as *vulnerable* communities. Wilson notes that due to modern industrial economy's transition from "product" serving to a "service" economy in the 1970s, joblessness became a great feature of urban communities which largely possessed less-skilled workers who were unqualified in the growing "service" sector that increasingly demanded educational qualifications.

This shift from an industrial economy to a post-industrial political economy has led to intergenerational cycles of deprivation and poverty among urban blacks whose unskilled labor is undervalued and who do not have the access to the type of quality education that can lift them out of poverty. Murray does not account for this transition in political economy when asking the reason for higher rates of poverty in the 1970s. This particular history of political economy in urban areas in the late 1960s (which will be further explored in chapter two) is completely ignored by Murray.

Second, Murray does not analyze the impact of the Vietnam War on the War on Poverty programs. James Lanier discloses that, in the long run, Johnson gave the greatest priority to the Vietnam War, not the War on Poverty. After 1965, the United States spent

twenty billion dollars while the Office of Economic Opportunity received less than two billion dollars for the War on Poverty.<sup>93</sup> The lack of funding for anti-poverty programs due to Johnson's increasing pre-occupation with the Vietnam War had adverse effects on how effective the War on Poverty could be. As one historian said, the war on poverty was declared but never fully fought.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, the problem of urban politics related to the CAP programs and consensus liberalism further undermined the goals and objectives of the War on Poverty.<sup>95</sup> Hence, the failures of the Great Society, its liberal assumptions, and the War on Poverty do not necessarily reside in its idealism as much as other political factors that hampered its full realization.

Similar to Murray, Sowell also interprets the Great Society and its progressive liberalism that the report embraces as utopian. He argues that the Civil Rights vision lost ground when it turned to irresponsible, liberal social policy as the solution to the problems of poverty among black, urban Americans. While, Sowell would agree with Murray's analysis that the Great society's social policy irresponsibly combated poverty based on the aforementioned faulty premises, Sowell provides an alternative explication

---

<sup>93</sup> James Lanier, "Seidman Lectures: Lecture Number One," *The Great Society Revisited: Success, Failure, or Remorse*, ed. Mel G. Grinspan (Memphis: Rhodes College, 1993): 13.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> The urban politics of CAP programs proved to be conflictual. Because Community Action Programs (CAP) sought to provide funding for local leaders and grassroots organizations in fighting poverty within their neighborhood, local politicians and bureaucratic leaders often were ignored related to development in local areas. This dynamic produced aggravation and political hostility between grassroots leaders and local politicians as these bureaucrats felt that their political authority and political agendas were being undermined by community leaders. Consequently, this affected how effective Community Actions Programs could be. This rift between politicians and community leaders shifted more energy and time towards urban politics rather than towards anti-poverty crusades. In addition, consensus liberalism limited the effectiveness of the War on Poverty program. For Johnson, consensus liberalism sought to guarantee that all affected parties related to a particular issue would benefit from a social decision. For example, When Johnson turned to improving public housing for the poor, he allowed private contractors to build houses with an assured profit margin, believing that both the poor and the private housing industry would mutually benefit. However, this was not achieved. Private contractors built the houses with very little control over quality, which compromised better housing for the poor. Consensus liberalism or the goal of allowing all special interest groups to benefit on a particular issue was thrown into question when reviewing Johnson's major public housing act passed in 1968.

of the failures of the Great Society and disappointments of the Civil Rights Vision. Sowell contends that the Great Society (as well as the Civil Rights vision) premise was that because “statistical disparities are moral inequities and are caused by social institutions, with group characteristics being derivative from the surrounding society, it follows that the solutions are basically political – changing laws and public perceptions.”<sup>96</sup> Political activity becomes most important, activity that includes courts, administrative agencies, legislatures, governmental policy, and private institutional activity. However, Sowell maintains that empirical verification does not demonstrate that political activity lifts groups out of poverty.

Sowell turns to poor groups in other countries who have improved their life-chances such as the Chinese in South Asia, the Caribbean, and the United States. He argues that the Chinese have intentionally and studiously avoided politics altogether in their rise out of poverty as a group. In country after country, they have maintained their own community institutions to adjudicate disputes, care for their needy, and minimize recourse to other institutions within the society they inhabited.<sup>97</sup> He notes that this pattern has been among the Italians in the United States and the Jews in a number of countries where anti-Semitic feelings excluded them from political rule or leadership. He notes, “Empirically, political activity and political success have been neither necessary nor sufficient for economic advancement. Nor has eager political participation or outstanding success in politics been translated into faster group achievement.”<sup>98</sup>

Sowell also corroborates this assertion that politics has not led to “faster group achievement” out of poverty, by turning to the rise of Irish people in America. He writes:

---

<sup>96</sup> Thomas Sowell, *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality?* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1984): 29.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

The Irish have been perhaps the most striking example of political success in an ethnic minority, but their rise from poverty was much *slower* than that of other groups who were nowhere near being their political equals. Irish-run political machines dominated many big city governments in America, beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century, but the great bulk of the Irish populace remained unskilled laborers and domestic servants into the late nineteenth century. The Irish were fiercely loyal to each other, electing, appointing, and promoting their own kind, not only in the political arena but also in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. This had little effect on the average Irish American, who began to reach economic prosperity in the twentieth century at about the time when the Irish political machines began to decline and when the Irish control of the Catholic Church was increasingly challenged by other ethnic groups.<sup>99</sup>

Sowell intimates that Irish Americans enable one to see an inverse correlation between political activity and economic success as a group. Moreover, he notes that while politics might benefit individual ethnic leaders, as seen with Irish political machines, this benefit among individuals does not translate into group success, particularly as it relates to economics.<sup>100</sup> Hence, Sowell intimates that the politicization of race as the impetus for group economic success is not empirically verifiable in history. He additionally turns to affirmative action policy in demonstrating that this policy has not lifted a great majority of blacks out of poverty in America.<sup>101</sup> Consequently, the Great Society and its policies ignore a historical body of facts that do not support the efficacy of political activity and policy in eradicating poverty.

While Sowell presents a provocative analysis on the efficacy of social policy in ameliorating and/or eradicating poverty, there is a central flaw in his analysis concerning the Irish people in America. As stated, he uses Chinese, Irish, and Jewish groups in countries to make his case about the lack of correlation between economic success and

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Refer to Chapter 2, "From Equal Opportunity to "Affirmative Action," in Thomas Sowell, *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality?*

political activity. In particular, he maintains that the Irish people gained economic success after the over decade-old Irish-run political machines were declining. Yet, Sowell does not in any way statistically or empirically disprove that the Irish-run political machines did not influence and shape the economic prosperity of the Irish people, only that these machines were declining during the Irish's rise of prosperity. The fact that these machines were declining when Irish people experienced economic prosperity does not verify that these political machines were inefficacious in ameliorating poverty among the Irish during the interim time before the decline of the political machines. Sowell's argument begins unraveling by *assuming that the decline of the political machines and the simultaneous rise of economic prosperity for the Irish meant that these Irish-run political machines were inefficacious in helping to secure economic success for the Irish.* This weakness in Sowell's contention is important because it may provide an opening to a potential correlation between political activity and economic success that he is arguing history denies. Moreover, this weakness also debunks the notion that progressive liberal ideas related to political activity are inefficacious and nostalgic in effecting economic transformation and uplift for marginalized communities.

My criticisms of Murray and Sowell reflect my contention that there are real possibilities in combating urban poverty among black women in the twenty-first century when returning to the liberal hopes of the Great Society and its War on Poverty. These liberal hopes are reflected in the aims, motives, and intentions of the report and its articulation of the structural problems that led to urban poverty among blacks. Moreover, the necessity of social compassion in promoting and protecting the interests of the most vulnerable segments of society is another liberal norm to be upheld in a current American

political economy that exploits the poor and the vulnerable for economic profits and blames the victim through neo-liberal hegemony. The federal government should take responsibility in ensuring equality of opportunity and equity against heartless exploitation and systemic oppression that poor persons, such as urban black women, continue to endure in the twenty-first century if the promise of democracy is to be actualized. Hence, the report is worthy of re-assessing in light of the Great Society and its progressive liberal norms, which are yet needed in combating urban poverty among black families in the twenty-first century.

Critics will respond that my reading of the report, in light of the progressive liberalism of the Great Society, is nostalgic. However, in the next chapter, I contextualize these liberal hopes and possibilities within the context of the urban underclass wherein poor, urban black women reside. These progressive liberal norms become real possibilities when investigating failures of the report, which were its prescribed solutions to urban poverty among blacks. It failed to situate urban black poverty (and more specifically, urban black women's poverty) within the context of Black political economy in order to uncover the root causes that engender urban poverty among blacks. Moreover, the complex subjectivity of poor urban black women is not included in addressing their poverty and possibilities towards flourishing.

In reviewing the report and its critics, their failure in articulating the problems of American political economy from the 1960s onward is most important to this study. While the report identified some structural problems economic and social in scope (i.e. absence of employment for urban blacks) related to black urban poverty, it failed to deconstruct shifts in American political economy that have economically and socially

devastated poor, urban black women within a larger American underclass. The interrogation into how American political economy has exploited and forgotten an underclass grouping within black political economy is essential in understanding poor, urban black female subjects who are in need of economic, social, and policy relief in the twenty-first century. I maintain throughout this dissertation that this relief is best pursued when turning to the liberal hopes and norms of the Great Society with its emancipatory interests in ameliorating poverty among poor urban black women.

### **Summary**

To conclude, this chapter offers a genealogical reading of the report to counter the ideological readings that black neo-conservatives, black feminist theorists, and womanist critics have often given in the past. My contention has been that these critics and their discourses have failed to address the intrinsic concerns and liberative interests The Report has in light of the progressive liberal ideas of the Great Society and its War on Poverty. While black neo-conservatives tend to question the liberal, “nostalgic” assumptions of progressive liberalism found in The Report, black feminist and womanist critics debunk The Report itself for its racist and patriarchal nature.

I suggest that the progressive liberalism of the Great Society and its War on Poverty can be norms that guide womanist approaches to urban poverty among poor urban black women in the twenty-first century. In agreement with Anthony Cook, I also maintain that the liberal ideals of the Great Society seek to fulfill the democratic promise in America to ensure freedom, access, and opportunity for all. These liberal ideals include: a) the recognition of American poverty as “structural poverty,” b) the necessity

of social compassion in protecting and promoting the interests of the most marginalized and vulnerable segments of society, and c) the responsibility of the federal government in ensuring “equality of opportunity” *and* “equality of results” against racial injustices.

My aim in interrogating the claims of Hortense Spillers, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kelly Brown Douglas was to expand their assessments and thematizations of The Report as racist and patriarchal by taking into account the multiple aims, intentions, and motives of the report in light of the liberal ideas of the Great Society. Moreover, the dearth of textual engagement when turning to The Report by these critics remains problematic. When probing the report, the report is concerned with structural poverty that has generated intergenerational cycles of deprivation among urban blacks as well as the need for social compassion in protecting the interests and needs of the most vulnerable within America. While The Report uses the language of matriarchy and welfare mother, I note that the usage of this contestable language reflects the best of black sociological research of the day used to ground the report in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, I demonstrate that this report does not attempt to establish a black matriarchy thesis that pathologizes black women. Rather, the report sought to speak of black matriarchy and social pathologies that have resulted from institutional inequities and inequalities that have intergenerationally oppressed poor, urban black women (as well as black men and children).

Furthermore, black neo-conservatives have named the progressive liberal tenets of the Great Society as nostalgic and utopian. Murray castigates the idealism of Great Society’s liberalism, arguing that worsening rates of urban poverty among blacks is directly connected to the liberal social policies and rationale of the Great Society.



Moreover, Thomas Sowell maintains that the liberal assumptions of the Great Society on the efficacy of political activity in lifting marginalized groups out of poverty remains questionable when turning to the failure of the War on Poverty. However, Sowell and Murray do not consider how the last four decades of economic history have adversely affected urban blacks. In addition, they do not anticipate that these ideals can be efficacious when empirically contextualizing black women's urban poverty within black political economy.

In reviewing The Report and its critics, their failure in articulating the problems of American political economy from the 1960s onward is most important to this study. In response to the failures of The Report and its critics, the next chapter uncovers the roots of a legitimation crisis in relationship to poor urban black women within our current post-industrial capitalist society. I argue that is not the cultural deficiencies of poor urban black women that cause their poverty as free-market ideology suggests, but rather the shifts in American political economy that have intensified and reinforced the economic miseries of these women. Womanist theo-ethical discourse would benefit by making a sociological turn in order to develop a more nuanced class analysis and critique of American political economy in combating oppressive elements of free-market ideology and its neo-liberal interests. I explore a major shift in American political economy from 1960s onward that has adversely affected persons across all races, producing a black urban underclass within a larger American underclass. I also provide a gendered analysis of the black urban underclass in order to spell out the unique conditions poor urban black women face.

## CHAPTER III

### THE INCREASING SIGNIFICANCE OF CLASS ANALYSIS: FREE MARKET IDEOLOGY & A BLACK URBAN UNDERCLASS

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I offered a genealogical reading of the report in light of the liberal ideas of the Great Society and its War on Poverty, which keeps the report irreducibly open in terms of interpretation and meaning. I argue that in light of the continual experience of urban poverty among black women in the twenty-first century, the emancipatory interests, aims, and intentions that The Report represents are themselves worthy of re-assessing. Hence, I revisit this report in relationship to its critics in order to provide a different reading of the report in light of the liberal ideas and interests of the Great Society and its fight against poverty. I also maintain that the report's critics fail to situate urban black poverty (and more specifically, urban black women's poverty) within the shifting context of American political economy and its exacerbation of inequities among urban blacks. Moreover, these discourses fail to capture the increasing significance of class in America and its impact on poor black communities across racial lines.

In response to these discourses' failures, this chapter offers a structuralist account of urban black women's poverty. This chapter argues that it is not the cultural deficiencies of poor, urban black women that cause their poverty as free-market ideology suggests, but rather the shifts in American political economy that have exacerbated economic miseries for these women. Problems in economy collude with cultural inequalities in intensifying the intergenerational poverty that urban black women

presently experience and endure. Since Reagan's administration in the 1980s, state decisions related to economic policy have been guided by free-market ideology and its neo-liberal interests that currently reinforce economic deprivation and social alienation for poor urban black women.<sup>102</sup> Yet, current free market ideology and its neo-liberal interests mask the real economic experiences of a black urban underclass. I explore a major shift in American political economy from 1960s onward that has adversely affected persons across all races, producing a black urban underclass within a larger American underclass. I also provide a gendered analysis of the black urban underclass in order to spell out the unique conditions poor urban black women face, which exposes the real interests associated with free-market ideology.

Along with black feminist, liberal and neo-liberal discourses, womanist discourse can make a social-theoretical turn in order to develop a more nuanced class analysis and critique of American political economy in combating oppressive elements of free-market ideology and its neo-liberal interests. I conclude this chapter by noting that urban poverty is not to be used as a signifier for all urban black women. Rather, poor urban black women are disproportionately represented within an American underclass. Consequently, it is important to address urban poverty among black women in the twenty-first century.

---

<sup>102</sup> Refer to essay by David Fuller on the shift in the dynamics of welfare policy since the Great Society under Reagan and Clinton's administration. Fuller, "TANF and the Libertarian and Communitarian Prescriptions to Poverty," *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*. 2006. Volume 1 Number 1. This essay defends the move towards a libertarian, free market model of welfare policy that has framed Reagan and Clinton's administration. Although I disagree with Fuller's argument in the virtues of this shift, this essay is important in understanding the logic of welfare policy under these administrations.

## **Critique of Free Market Ideology & Its Neo-Liberal Interests**

Before turning to historical shifts in American political economy that have exacerbated intergenerational cycles of urban poverty among blacks in the twenty-first century, it is important to note what a structural analysis of American political economy debunks. It debunks free-market ideology which blames urban poverty on the moral failure of poor blacks. This ideology contends that persistent poverty within black communities is due to a pathological culture wherein attitudes, behaviors, practices of crime, teenage pregnancy, devaluing of education, promiscuity, and more perpetuate impoverishment and non-attainment.

This free-market ideological reading of black urban poverty as due to black cultural deficiencies is grounded in a conception of free-market fundamentalism that finds its greatest expression in Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*. Friedman's capitalist manifesto was written in the 1960s at the height of social welfare reforms that were being formulated by Kennedy and later instituted by Johnson's progressive liberal agenda as discussed in the previous chapter. Friedman addressed a particular question that created great fragmentation between free-market advocates and welfare state promoters during the Great Society. In particular, the question on the role of government within market activity became central. Friedman argued that the role of government inhibited and vitiated economic efficiency when intervening in market activity with paternalistic, social welfare policies that largely did not achieve their intended goals and effects.

For Friedman, the logic of free-market economy is based on four uncontested assumptions, namely 1) that the market and government are discrete entities that should

be left to their own internal mechanisms; 2) that the market contains its own *laissez-faire* morality, which grants success to individuals who employ their hard work, talent, and efforts; 3) freedom in economic arrangements is itself a component of freedom broadly; and 4) economic freedom is also an indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom.<sup>103</sup> These four assumptions, for Friedman, can only be effective when government plays a minimal role in free-market activity. The state simply should be a “rule-maker” (setting rules of engagement for market sector) and “umpire” (being a whistle-blower, for example, on monopolies that adversely inhibit competitive capitalism and hence, economic freedom). The state should not be paternalistic because it thwarts the market’s self-sufficient, internal mechanisms that ensure the economic and political freedoms of its citizenry, who can experience the actualization of their freedoms and liberties through the market.

For Friedman, the supreme value of free-market activity is the maximization of economic and political freedom based on one of free-market’s central principles: voluntary and informed market exchange. In economic transactions, both parties enter the transaction voluntarily in order to mutually benefit from the exchange. Because of this voluntary exchange, Friedman asserts that “this exchange brings about coordination without coercion.”<sup>104</sup> For him, the hallmark of each economic transaction within free-markets is that it allows for political and economic freedom without coercion, that is, without an infringement upon individual rights and liberties. Consequently, he maintains that free-market logic entails within it the condition of freedom for all members of

---

<sup>103</sup> Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962): 8.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

society, which dismisses government's need to regulate economic activity in pursuit of these freedoms.

When addressing discrimination within the market or claims that the market inhibits minority group's freedoms, Friedman contends that the "free market separates economic efficiency from irrelevant characteristics" such as discrimination of color or religion.<sup>105</sup> He implies that economic factors such as efficiency always drive the economic human, never non-economic factors that could decrease his/her efficiency.

Friedman writes:

No one who buys bread knows whether the wheat from which it is made was grown by a Communist or a Republican, by a constitutionalist or a Fascist, or, for that matter, by a Negro or a white. This illustrates how an impersonal market separates economic activities from political views and protects men from being discriminated against in their economic activities for reasons that are irrelevant to their productivity – whether these reasons are associated with their views or their color.<sup>106</sup>

He suggests that non-economic variables such as racial or religious prejudice do not affect parties of economic exchanges because of its negative effects on economic efficiency, which rational economic actors would refuse. As a result, Friedman maintains that economic inequity and inequality, if it arises, should be resolved through appealing to the rational economic actor in terms of the ways in which such prejudiced behavior leads to economic inefficiency.<sup>107</sup>

Moreover, Friedman asserts that social welfare responses to inequality and inequity represent the greatest circumscription of freedoms because these welfare responses advocate a paternalistic role for government in matters of poverty. He states

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>107</sup> Refer to page 115 where Friedman states, "The appropriate recourse of those of us who believe that a particular criterion such as color is irrelevant is to persuade our fellows to be of like mind, not to use the coercive power of the state to force them [capitalists] to act in accordance with our principles."

that “paternalism is inescapable for those whom we designate as not responsible.”<sup>108</sup>

Within this statement, Friedman explicitly correlates poor people who are recipients of social welfare programs with those who are irresponsible. He gives an example of public housing and asks why the government does not simply give low-income participants a lump sum of money to purchase the housing they need instead of paternalistically providing subsidized housing. He responds that government is inadvertently admitting that “families being helped ‘need’ housing more than they ‘need’ other things but would themselves either not agree or would spend the money unwisely.”<sup>109</sup> Hence, for Friedman, the logic of social welfare programs expresses a direct link between these programs and representations of the poor as personally irresponsible.

However, Friedman’s “uncontested assumptions” that seem natural and “given” within his free-market reasoning contain particular interests. Foremost, Friedman’s claim that the market sponsors voluntary, non-coercive exchange, in fact, does not account for the real authority and hegemony that are features of much market exchange activity. For example, an employee might choose to exchange her labor for wages that do not bring her above poverty-level line. In this situation, Friedman’s logic dismisses how the employer’s authority to hire hundreds of applicants who are vying for the job can create a hegemonic reality wherein the employee is influenced (against her interests due to job security) to accept the employer’s exploitative job conditions and standards. In this case, market exchange activity is fraught with ambiguity wherein consent may not negate the presence of hegemonic attitudes and actions between these parties which express manipulative power relations. The assumption that free-market activity is physically

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 178.

non-coercive and therefore voluntary does not address the question of hegemony, which allows economic elites to maintain the *status quo* of excessive economic profit at the expense of low-income workers.

In light of this case, Friedman's other claims of the free market having its own discrete self-correcting, internal mechanisms and its own *laissez-faire* morality that rewards merit and hard work are also guided by hegemonic interests of economic elites in America. In the United States, the current Wall Street mortgage financial crisis is an example of the problems of governmental de-regulation of the free market economy. Because government began a series of deregulation policies during the Reagan administration, the financial markets were free to set mortgage terms and interests rates that proved to be exploitative to American homeowners.<sup>110</sup> While mortgage banks claimed that they sought to provide to the American public greater access to homeownership, many mortgage loan companies intentionally provided loans to American families at interest rates that they knew these families over time would be unable to repay, which predicted greater profit for these mortgage companies.

Clearly, mortgage companies possessed instrumental interests in loaning such money for housing to American families. Vulnerable potential homeowners were seen as mere instruments or commodities by financial agents who sold them to the idea of loans with exploitative interest rates. American families were a means to an end for financial elites. However, mortgage and financial companies mis-calculated their profit predictions and instead experienced financial failure and ruin alongside millions of

---

<sup>110</sup> Refer to these articles on the 2008 Wall Street Financial Crisis that erupted after a series of de-regulation policies: Michael Lewis, "The End," Portfolio.com, December 2008 Issue, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008> and Sairah Zaidi, "The Wall Street Financial Crisis: What It Means, And Why You Should Care," The Cauldron, September 29, 2008 Issue, <http://media.www.csucauldron.com/news>.



families. Friedman's logic of the free-market possessing its own internal mechanisms is belied by a series of governmental de-regulation policies that have created the greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Friedman's additional claim that *laissez-faire* morality ensures success based on merit conceals the interests of elites in how success is attained within the United States. Success is often not ascertained based on the efforts, talents, and merits of people. For instance, persons often attain economic and social success based on inheritance, birth, or ancestry. Others receive economic and socio-political benefits based on some kind of membership into an elite group or club that enables achievement and success. Friedman simply does not consider the critical force of power relations in determining groups who are born into affluence and those who seemingly are born outside of such privileged arrangements and opportunities. Economic and social privilege contradicts a free-market economy that only rewards based on merit. The hegemonic interests attached to notions of "meritocracy" within free-market ideology conceal the way in which socio-economic privilege undermines parity among societal members, which systematically excludes the less fortunate.

A final problem associated with Friedman's free-market ideology is the direct correlation that Friedman makes between social welfare programs and the "irresponsible" poor. As discussed in chapter one, such representations of poor persons as moral failures conceal how economic structures and practices engender a structural absence of opportunity, which thwarts poor persons' abilities to thrive and flourish. In particular, a more contemporary political scientist, Dinesh D'Souza, takes up Friedman's neo-liberal

logic of cultural deficiencies and personal moral failure in relationship to poor black communities.

Following Friedman's free-market logic, D'Souza articulates this "cultural deficiencies"/ "personal failure" thesis in explaining the causes of economic failure within poor black communities. He argues that the fundamental causes of black poverty are the cultural "deficiencies" and pathologies of black cultural life. D'Souza states:

The last few decades have witnessed nothing less than a breakdown of civilization within the African-American community. This breakdown is characterized by extremely high rates of criminal activity, by the normalization of illegitimacy, by the pre-dominance of single-parent families, by high levels of addiction to alcohol and drugs, by a parasitic reliance on government provision, by a hostility to academic achievement, and by a scarcity of independent enterprises...The civilizational crisis of the black community is not the result of genes and is not the result of racism.<sup>111</sup>

Similar to Charles Murray, D'Souza locates the crisis of black impoverishment within poor black communities wherein there is a breakdown of productive values that are needed towards social and economic excellence. However, D'Souza implies that this breakdown of values has its origins in a defective history of slavery and racism that blacks continue to employ in naming their own victimization.<sup>112</sup>

For D'Souza, attributing black poverty to white racism deflects criticism on these cultural deficiencies that impede black progress and attainment.<sup>113</sup> Although D'Souza

---

<sup>111</sup> Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism* (New York: The Free Press, 1995): 477-478.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 487.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 481. Prior to the "culture of poverty" explanation in delineating black poverty, a main explanation of black poverty advanced by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray in *The Bell Curve* was on inferior genes. Specifically, they argued that our most exigent social problems, from economic inequality to crime, reflect basic differences in the intellectual abilities of people within a modern society. These intellectual differences are largely due to genetically based differences that can be demonstrated across various types of IQ tests. Hence for Herrnstein and Murray, racial inequality is a reflection of basic differences, which lead to natural inequalities among people groups. Some scholars argue that the culture of poverty argument is a modification of the "genes" argument, supplanting "the intellectual deficiencies of Blacks" with the

claims that he is not “blaming the victim,” he does maintain that continuing to inveigh against the white perpetrator for the dysfunctional and destructive patterns of the black victim does not help give the victim much relief.<sup>114</sup> He identifies black culture as an “oppositional culture” that rejects the “white man’s worldview.” He posits that this “white man’s worldview” is equated with values of education, family, entrepreneurialism, and more. The black counterculture is characteristic of pathological behavior and oppositional values, impeding poor black people’s well-being in a competitive, technological, and merit-oriented society. Moreover, D’Souza argues that blacks use racism as an excuse to not be competitive and responsible in the market-driven society that we live in.<sup>115</sup> He posits, “Another problem is that by focusing almost entirely on the cause of pathologies, excuse theorists offer no coherent vision about what to do about them.”<sup>116</sup>

However, D’Souza’s cultural deficiencies argument is analytically flawed. He traces black cultural pathology to “deficiencies,” without giving a historical, systematic account on the causes of these deficiencies. One cannot offer this “coherent vision about what to do about deficiencies” that he refers to unless the underlying causes that are producing these deficiencies are adequately explored. While he attempts to show that black poverty primarily exists because of the *racist excuses* blacks (as well as “experts” in racial apologetics) continue to exploit, he never considers how structural factors foster the misfortune of poor black communities. D’Souza doesn’t ask how *economic*

---

“cultural deficiencies of blacks” that results in black poverty. This culture of poverty argument is also advanced in Lawrence Harrison’s *Who Prospers? How Cultural Values Shape Economic and Political Success* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 482.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 520.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

structures and systems dis-empower poor black communities, in which poor urban black women make up a large percentage. His analysis is isolated from the conditions of wealth and poverty, social exclusion and oppression, and historical circumstances. Black poverty is not about the “abilities,” “excuses,” or “behaviors” of a culture, but is largely about an economic, capitalistic system that continues to impose structural disadvantages on poor urban blacks.

Moreover, D’Souza incorrectly maintains that black’s cognitive abilities are substandard to Whites, Asians, and Hispanics, as demonstrated by their low levels of intellectual and academic achievement.<sup>117</sup> He does not acknowledge that a major barrier to intellectual achievement as well as employment prospects and productivity for poor persons is being able to purchase the schooling they need.<sup>118</sup> These intellectual and academic achievements are also conditioned by family structure and the quality of economic and social resources devoted to ensuring academic and economic success.<sup>119</sup> He does not take into account a long history of economic dis-empowerment that has not only severely crippled poor blacks but also has stagnated poor whites.

Similar to Friedman, D’Souza’s arguments are connected to real interests that conceal the practices of a post-industrial political economy and its absence of structural opportunities for poor, urban blacks. There has been a history of shifts in American political economy that have left a group of unskilled labor behind, affecting a disproportionate number of blacks in the inner city. Yet, by “blaming the victims,” economic elites that benefit and amass wealth from such structures are able to deflect

---

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>118</sup> Marcellus Andrews, *The Political Economy of Hope and Fear: Capitalism and the Black Condition in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999): 37.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

attention away from the need for radical reform and restructuring of American political economy. Moreover, by persuading the masses that the poor are morally culpable due to such free-market assumptions of fairness and parity, economic elites are able to maintain the immutability and inviolability of these economic arrangements. Consequently, blaming poor urban blacks (and in particular poor urban black women) hides the real economic experiences of a black urban underclass who continue to suffer from such economic shifts. Before turning to these economic shifts in American political economy that have exacerbated intergenerational cycles of deprivation for a black urban underclass, I want to clarify how I deploy the contestable term “black urban underclass.”

### **The Black Urban Underclass: Race vs. Class Debate?**

Near the end of the twentieth century, the debate over whether race or class was more determinative of black life-chances in America received widespread attention after William Julius Wilson’s *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* emerged. Wilson contends that “class has become more important than race in determining black life chances in the modern industrial period.”<sup>120</sup> He argues that “in the economic realm...the black experience has moved historically from economic racial oppression experienced by virtually all blacks to economic subordination for the black underclass.”<sup>121</sup> However, some black scholars did not resonate with Wilson’s thesis about the “declining significance of race.” Charles V. Willie interpreted Wilson’s discussion as a “race versus class” debate, contending that Wilson granted greater importance to the latter in black communal oppression. In contention with

---

<sup>120</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980): 150.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

Wilson's thesis, Willie countered that race and class form complex, interrelated oppressive conditions which are shared by all blacks that block economic opportunity and equality.<sup>122</sup>

Yet, Wilson clarifies his thesis on the rising importance of class among poor black communities in his subsequent books such as *When Work Disappears* and *The Truly Disadvantaged*. He maintains that he does not argue for the irrelevancy of race. Instead, he contends that race is of relative importance. He seems to imply that he is not participating in a "race versus class" debate. Rather, he is concerned with articulating how class structures the life-chances of a black underclass in qualitatively different ways from middle to upper class blacks. He asserts:

I am convinced that the recent developments associated with our modern industrial society are largely responsible for the creation of a semi-permanent underclass in the ghettos, and that the predicament of the underclass cannot be satisfactorily addressed by mere passage of civil rights laws or the introduction of special racial programs such as affirmative action. Indeed the very success of recent anti-discrimination efforts in removing racial barriers in the economic sector only points out, in sharper relief, other barriers which create greater problems for some members of the black population than for others, barriers which, in short, transcend the issue of racial ethnic discrimination and depict the universal problems of class subordination.<sup>123</sup>

Wilson communicates that current modern economic shifts have engendered a black underclass phenomenon that cannot be described merely as a result of racial oppression but rather, as a result of universal problems of class inequalities and inequities. This problem of class subordination is central to the life-chances of a black underclass is critical to Wilson's articulation of the *means* of justice for poor urban blacks. Racial programs will not solve a black underclass dilemma.

---

<sup>122</sup> Charles V. Willie, "The Inclining Significance of Race," *Caste and Class Controversy* (New York: General Hall, 1979): 145.

<sup>123</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race*, 166.

Rather, policies and practices that aim at structural changes in economic institutions are central to thriving for this underclass.

I understand Wilson to be countering singular, racial explanations for the poverty of blacks in order to articulate complex class analysis and economic history from the 1970s onward that adequately describe what is at stake for a black urban underclass. Class is of increasing importance as one analyzes the sources and causes of poverty among urban blacks. Hence, I do not interpret this discussion of the black urban underclass as participating in a race vs. class debate. Rather, I seek to critically re-interpret this debate, noting that the convergence of race and class constitute two factors (among other factors such as gender, sexuality, age, etc.) that uniquely structure the life-chances of a black underclass in a qualitatively different way than upper to middle class blacks.

To be sure, the language “black underclass” has been a controversial term within black feminist and womanist discourses. Scholars such as Teresa Amott have problematized the sexist connotations the “black underclass” communicates. Amott contends that these poor, black, single mothers in the “black underclass” are not presented as “agents of their own lives.”<sup>124</sup> Amott writes:

Black women have “survived and created meaning and dignity” as single mothers even though social policies in this country have been hostile to such nonnuclear families. These women do not construct their lives as half of a male-breadwinner, female-homemaker pair, but rather they see their roles as *single* mothers as central to their own lives.<sup>125</sup>

Amott maintains that the language “black underclass” does not account for black women’s agential capacities. Amott is concerned that the language of underclass

---

<sup>124</sup> Teresa Amott, “Black Women and AFDC,” in *Women, The State, and Welfare*. Ed. Linda Gordon (City: Publisher, year): 286.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

identifies poor black women as “pathological” and victims of racist, sexist, and classist oppressions without showing how poor black women subvert institutional and organizational forms of exploitation and discrimination. Consequently, she argues that the discourse on the black underclass further exacerbates the articulation and objectification of black women as non-agential beings.<sup>126</sup> For Amott, the term “black underclass” attaches moral guilt to impoverished blacks and fails to capture the resiliency and agency of poor black women.

I agree with Amott that the term “underclass” has been used in associating poverty among blacks with their own moral and behavioral failures. In fact, the Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal in the early 1960s referred to the underclass as “a vile and debased subhuman population.”<sup>127</sup> It then fell into disuse and became popular again in the 1980s with sociologists such as William Julius Wilson resuscitating it.<sup>128</sup>

However, sociologists such as Wilson are not deploying the language of the underclass in this same pejorative way as Myrdal. Wilson’s usage of “underclass language” took on more economic significance (rather than moral significance) in detailing the structural problems within American political economy that forced poor blacks into intergenerational cycles of poverty and deprivation. For Wilson, the language of underclass was an articulation of the plight of poor urban blacks who suffer

---

<sup>126</sup> The central point that Amott makes is that a structural analysis of poor black women within urban areas not only must take account of oppressive structures and systems that impede these women’s well-being but also must take account of the agential capacities of poor black women despite such structural oppressions. This argument should be distinguished from other arguments such as Robert Woodson (Founder of National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise) who contends that more responsibility should be placed on the agential capacities of these poor women. Clearly, Woodson’s argument contrasts with Amott’s major point, namely that *within a structural analysis of poverty among black women, an account of their agency is required.*

<sup>127</sup> Carl Husemoller Nightingale, *On the Edge: A History of Poor Black Children and Their American Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 1993): 205.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*



from marginalization within a larger post-industrial political economy. Wilson states that the underclass is a “heterogeneous grouping of families and individuals who are outside the mainstream American occupational system.”<sup>129</sup> The underclass signifies “individuals, who lack training, skills, experience either long-term unemployment or engaged in street crime, or families who are welfare dependent.”<sup>130</sup> Wilson posits that this term also signifies a group of urban people who “have been left behind” economically and socially.

For Wilson, the “black underclass” was meant to communicate the experience of social and economic alienation among poor urban blacks that created permanent, intergenerational cycles of deprivation and poverty. He maintains that the systemic oppression of poor urban blacks has ramifications in terms of social disorganization within these urban areas. Hence, he argues that the language of underclass does not convey cultural and personal moral failures of poor urban blacks. Rather, the term “underclass” conveys the structural flaws within American economic systems and social institutions that have created, perpetuated, and exacerbated poverty among poor urban blacks.<sup>131</sup>

Wilson is right to conclude that the language of underclass also suggests a group of persons that are not incorporated into the conditions that make class standing possible. Within classical Marxian class analysis, class standing presumes that persons participate

---

<sup>129</sup> Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 8.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> See also Douglas G. Glasgow’s *Black Underclass*. Glasgow separates the black “underclass” from lower income Blacks by several rough social criteria: an absence of generational socioeconomic upward mobility, the lack of real opportunities to succeed, and widespread anger and despair which arises from contact with mainstream institutions which economically, politically, and socially (albeit impersonally) reject them.

in both the division of labor and modes of production.<sup>132</sup> The black urban underclass suffers from four basic conditions that do not make class standing possible for them: 1) they are not underemployed but *unemployed*, 2) they are minimally or undereducated, 3) they are usually over-incarcerated, and 4) they are often homeless.<sup>133</sup> The shift in the urban economy in the late 1960s onward led to chronic unemployment and a structural absence of opportunities for poor blacks in urban areas (as discussed in the next section of this chapter). This shift in the larger American political economy restructured the political economy of urban areas, adversely affecting poor blacks who constituted the majority of urban dwellers. Consequently, these four basic conditions that many poor urban blacks suffer from became intergenerational features of urban centers wherein poor blacks resided. When referring to a “black urban underclass,” I am additionally referring to how an American post-industrial political economy has created and fostered these four basic conditions that determine the plight of many poor urban blacks and their lack of class standing.

---

<sup>132</sup> See “Class Struggle and Modes of Production,” “Capital, Volume One,” and Capital: Volume Three,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978) for this discussion. Marx’s discourse on class conflict and the necessity for communist revolution posits a key dilemma in the class struggle: the proletariat (or workers/laborers) must use their labor power to overthrow the capitalist regime wherein capitalists benefit the greatest from the labor of the proletariat. The problem with the “underclass” is that they do not participate in a key aspect that ensures class standing as worker/proletariat: labor. This chronic unemployment becomes a key feature of the underclass that puts them in permanent, intergenerational cycles of poverty due to their lack of class standing. The use of underclass also conveys another critical point: this lack of class standing is a systemic problem, not a behavioral problem of individuals.

<sup>133</sup> These four basic conditions are derived from Wilson’s description of the underclass in the *Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. He states that the underclass refer to inner-city neighborhoods “that are populated almost exclusively by the most disadvantaged segments of the black community, that heterogenous grouping of families and individuals who are outside the mainstream occupational system. Included in this group are individuals who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment or are not members of the labor force, individuals who are engaged in street crime and other forms of aberrant behavior, and families that experience long-term spells of poverty and or welfare dependency...I use this term to depict a reality not captured in the more standard designation *lower class* “(7-8).

While the discourse on a black underclass should detail the agential capacities of poor urban black women in subverting institutional oppression, I want to also note that the language of a black urban underclass communicates the dread, fear, hopelessness, and disappointment that often accompany a lack of class standing in America. While black feminists and womanists have attempted to highlight poor black women as agents, they have often downplayed the real existential despair that pervades underclass communities because of their experiences of economic and social alienation and abandonment within an American economy. As a result, my deployment of the “black urban underclass”: 1) refers to a black urban population that is not incorporated into basic conditions that make class standing possible; 2) takes seriously the dread, disappointment, hopelessness, and despair that often accompany underclass communities; and 3) accounts for poor black women’s agency in discussions of poverty and exploitation.

### **Historical Shifts Toward a Post-Industrial Political Economy**

I argue in chapter two that the report’s critics suffer from a robust analysis of urban poverty among black women because it fails to turn to particular historical shifts in American political economy since the late 1960s that have perpetuated permanent intergenerational cycles of poverty and deprivation among poor black urban communities. The report inadequately concluded that the disintegration of black families was the central problem which necessitated a policy recommendation to strengthen these indigent black families through restoring jobs to black males. Instead, these structural shifts in America’s political economy have created a growing American underclass marked by cycles of economic and social deprivation and dislocation. Urban poverty among blacks intensified and worsened due to these historical shifts in political economy,

which means that an analysis of American political economy must be done in order to understand the causes of urban poverty itself.

It is important to note that the structural disadvantages poor urban blacks presently experience are connected to a larger post-industrial economy that has created an American underclass that goes across color lines. From the late 1960s onward, the question of class in relationship to black urban poverty has been connected to how class structures the life-chances of an American underclass that is constituted by whites, blacks, and Hispanics. Economic shifts from manufacturing economies to increasing technological, service-oriented economies with its greater demand for educational attainment has left a permanent underclass of persons behind across racial lines, in which blacks disproportionately constitute a large percentage of this American underclass.

Marcellus Andrews' *The Political Economy of Hope and Fear: Capitalism and the Black Condition in America* describes the American underclass phenomenon as not reduced to a distinctively "black problem." Andrews argues that racism abets the more basic problem of class inequalities among poor black communities because of the "shift in the structure of the American economy toward a knowledge-and-technology driven system that offers huge rewards to brains over brawn, [which adversely affects most of the poor regardless of race] because they remain an industrial labor force in a post-industrial country."<sup>134</sup> Because a wider post-industrial political economy is a knowledge-based and technologically-driven economy, the most qualified must have access to quality education.

This post-industrial economy is also characterized by a greater demand for skilled labor and educated workers, which have led to a decline in the prospects for unskilled and

---

<sup>134</sup> Andrews, *The Political Economy of Hope and Fear: Capitalism and the Black Condition in America* , 3.

modestly educated workers, who are disproportionately Black and Latino (but which are constituted by many whites).<sup>135</sup> In fact, growth of wage inequality across color lines reflects an underlying shift in the fortunes of skilled and unskilled workers since the 1960s.<sup>136</sup> Highly educated workers, particularly those workers with a college education, have seen their wages rise substantially.<sup>137</sup> Dissimilar to scholars that attribute black poverty solely to white racism, Andrews maintains that the impoverished black condition in America is connected to capitalistic structures that have economically left behind an American underclass, pointing to greater class disparities that cut across racial lines in the twenty-first century.

However, Andrews does maintain that the convergence of race and class does reveal a different experience of poverty among blacks within an American underclass. He asserts that because blacks “were so badly discriminated against by historic American racism that they were unprepared for the sea change in the American and world economy that has utterly transformed our lives over the past three decades.”<sup>138</sup> He notes that because blacks have been historically oppressed by white supremacy, when such economic shifts occurred, “black people were completely unprepared for, and unable to take advantage of these shifts.”<sup>139</sup> Yet, Andrews maintains that “even if every racist white person in this country had a change of heart or moved abroad, most poor black people would be exactly where they are right now in the absence of major changes in government policy to address issues of poverty and economic inequality across color

---

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

lines.”<sup>140</sup> Because economic institutions and structures within a post-industrial political economy generate economic oppression for a black underclass, combating racial injustice alone will not lift poor blacks out of poverty. Instead, there must be a turn to economic structures and practices that vitiate the life chances of many racial members within an American underclass.

Andrews seems to be debunking a certain logic that makes racial oppression determinate of black poverty. Racial oppression is often articulated as the fundamental injustice that structures the poverty of blacks in America. For example, although womanist theo-ethical literature delineates the intersectional oppressions of race, class, and gender as defining the impoverished experiences of poor black women, they do not uncover the complexities of how race and class converge in defining the life-chances of black women locked within an American underclass contrasted with middle to upper class black women’s life-chances. I appreciate Andrews’ nuanced articulation of the complexities associated with how an American underclass affects a black urban underclass and its experiences of poverty. I also agree with Andrews’ assessment that the American underclass phenomenon and its problems of unequal economic structures go beyond race, as this permanent class affects poor whites and Hispanics as much as poor blacks, although blacks are disproportionately represented.

While Andrews discusses how capitalism and an American underclass are linked to the black condition of poverty in America, William Julius Wilson is primarily concerned with the unique impoverished experiences of a black urban underclass, which are not based singularly on race explanations and are qualitatively different than a larger American underclass. For Wilson, the truly disadvantaged cannot be seen as a

---

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

monolithic black community that continues to experience racial oppression. Similar to Andrews, Wilson argues that when racial oppression is seen as the primary injustice committed against blacks, it obscures how economic structures and class inequalities destroy the life-chances of a particular segment of black communities: a growing black underclass. Wilson agrees with Andrews that although there has been an emerging black middle class in the last three decades, there has also been an emerging black underclass in response to these economic shifts.<sup>141</sup> Yet, for Wilson, he focuses his analysis on detailing how these economic shifts have uniquely impacted black urban dwellers locked within a black urban underclass whose experiences of class and race create a different experience of poverty than a larger American underclass.

In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson argues that the social deprivation and dislocation of blacks in inner city life cannot be accounted for in terms of black cultural deficiencies. The social dislocation experienced among urban blacks must be seen as having complex sociological antecedents that range from demographic problems to problems of economic organization. Wilson discusses social structural constraints that have spurred black poverty and social isolation among black communities. Wilson discloses the emergence of a post-industrial economy:

There were substantial job losses in the very industries in which urban minorities have greatest access and substantial employment gains in higher-education-requisite industries that are beyond the reach of most

---

<sup>141</sup> Macellus Andrews provides an insightful discussion on the emergence of two black Americas from late 1960s onward. His major contention is that while the growth of a prosperous black middle class is one of “the greatest social advancements in the nation’s history,” this economic shift towards a post-industrial economy has created a black underclass, engendering wide economic difference within black communities. Again, while Andrews notes that this shift in the economy has created a permanent American underclass, blacks are disproportionately represented in this underclass phenomenon. Moreover, Andrews also briefly asserts that race-based policies such as Affirmative Action that have helped middle-class blacks in the past have no efficacy in helping the fortunes of a black underclass because the fundamental problem is the problem of political economy which extends beyond discussions of race and discrimination. Refer to Chapter 1.

minority workers. Inner city blacks are poorly matched for these unemployment trends. This is why Black employment rates have not responded well to economic recovery...<sup>142</sup>

Similar to Andrews, Wilson uncovers the chronic unemployment that post-industrialism introduced to poor blacks in urban areas. Because economic re-organization in the 1970s introduced structural causes and constraints for poor blacks, the culture deficiencies argument becomes inadequate because it doesn't consider black poverty within this history of economic revolution.

Moreover, Wilson also comments on a key structural constraint posed by a shifting political economy among poor blacks: education. Wilson posits that many "higher education" jobs did not really require "higher educational" training.<sup>143</sup> Wilson notes that industries were institutionalizing "job requirements" on "user friendly" higher technology that people could learn or operate without formal education.<sup>144</sup> However, formal education was associated with such skills. Wilson also argued that inner-city schools' education prepares minority youth for the low wage sector because these schools continue to be poorly funded, ill-equipped, and under-staffed.<sup>145</sup>

Wilson further accounts for the shift in American political economy and the adverse impact it had on urban, black dwellers. In *When Work Disappears*, Wilson chronicles economic factors that led to urban areas as bastions of in-opportunity, disclosing poor black communities as *vulnerable* communities. Wilson notes that due to modern industrial economy's transition from "product" serving to a "service" economy in

---

<sup>142</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 102. Wilson's *When Work Disappears* also introduces the emergence of a post-industrial economy and subsequently, a permanent black underclass.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 103. Also refer to Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, which discloses the racism in urban education that continues to position black youth at a distinct disadvantage.



the 1970s, joblessness became a great feature of urban communities which largely possessed less-skilled workers who were unqualified in the growing “service” sector that increasingly demanded educational qualifications. High school drop-outs and high school graduates in urban areas were faced with a “dwindling supply of career jobs offering the real earning opportunities [that were] available to them in the 1960s and early 1970s.”<sup>146</sup>

For example, Wilson notes that “New York loss 135,000 jobs in industries in which workers averaged less than 12 years of education and gained more than 300,000 jobs in industries in which workers had 13 or more years of education.”<sup>147</sup> For Wilson, these black communities began experiencing deeper, intergenerational cycles of deprivation and poverty not because of deficiencies within black culture but due to an American post-industrial political economy that was leaving the value of urban black’s labor behind, which led to the greater economic and social vulnerability of these communities.

Moreover, in relationship to the manufacturing jobs that were still present in the 1970s, the departure of these big plants and manufacturing jobs from urban to suburban areas triggered the demise and/or exodus of the smaller stores, the banks, and other businesses. In addition, urban blacks’ travels to suburban jobs proved to be problematic because 28% or less has access to an automobile.<sup>148</sup> Alongside many not having cars, travel expenses related to transportation was daunting for urban blacks. Wilson notes that

---

<sup>146</sup> William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf Random House, 1996): 30.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

“owning a car creates expenses far beyond the purchase price, which is costly.”<sup>149</sup> Many urban blacks ended up “spending more getting to work in suburbs than getting paid.”<sup>150</sup>

Wilson also notes that the erosion of wages and benefits forced many low-income workers in the inner city to move or remain on welfare. Hence, the “Moynihan report’s” discussion of welfare among black women as the result of a breakdown in families misses the key reason that urban black women tended to remain on welfare since the 1970s: due to a political economy that locked them out of educational advancement, and therefore, employment attainment with real earnings.

For Wilson, this structural lack of opportunity and advancement has profound ramifications on the social behavior of vulnerable black communities that found themselves economically and socially marginalized. This social behavior in impoverished urban areas is especially seen in the actions of youth and young adults.

Wilson notes:

Many young people grow up in this jobless, ghetto environment that lacks the idea of work as a central experience of adult life...they have little or no labor force attachment. These circumstances also increase the likelihood that residents will rely on illegitimate sources of income...in public policy debates on welfare reform, the discussion of behavior and social responsibility fails to mention the structural underpinnings of poverty and welfare. So the individual must change, not structures of society.”<sup>151</sup>

Wilson argues that neighborhoods that offer few legitimate employment opportunities, inadequate job information networks, and poor schools lead to the disappearance of work along with social behavior that reflects such dislocation and marginalization. Poor, urban

---

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 53.

black communities are communities that have experienced this disappearance of work, pointing to the structural nature of urban poverty.

Andrews and Wilson's discussion on the economic factors that led to deprivation in black urban communities challenges the neo-liberal narrative that poverty among urban blacks is due to cultural deficiencies in black culture as well as personal irresponsibility among black women who continue to be indolent and lazy, leeching to the system. Their historical findings suggest that American economic structures have primarily exacerbated the intergenerational poverty seen among urban black women.

Because urban poverty is a structural problem largely intensified by the shift in American political economy, economic restructuring, not merely personal improvement, becomes essential to improving the material realities of these communities, particularly poor urban black women who constitute a great percentage of these persons locked in perpetual cycles of poverty. Wilson concludes:

A program of economic reform, if it is to be meaningful, has to be directed not solely at improving the economic opportunities of poor black men, but also of improving the job prospects of poor black women. It would even be wise to include in this reform program the creation of publicly financed day care centers so that women can realistically pursue such opportunities when they arise.<sup>152</sup>

Wilson suggests that a program of economic restructuring must include improving the structural opportunities of both black men and black women in order for poor black communities to flourish. Wilson is right that poor urban black women are unprepared for opportunities in a service economy due to the absence of childcare (as well as healthcare, low wages, and more). Although Wilson acknowledges the need to turn to some basic

---

<sup>152</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978): 161.

needs of poor urban black women in ameliorating black urban poverty, I am concerned that his analysis does not include gender as a key variable in analyzing poverty among black urban communities (as well as Andrews' analysis). Consequently, I provide a gendered analysis of the black urban underclass.

### **A Gendered Analysis of the Black Urban Underclass**

Manning Marable states, "Demographically, Black poor people are distinguished from poor whites by certain social characteristics: they are largely more female, younger, and usually reside in the urban ghetto."<sup>153</sup> He further writes, "At all ages, Black women are much more likely to be poor than white females, white males, or Black males."<sup>154</sup> For example, black women not only suffer from structural constraints in employment opportunities but also are often the sole caretakers of America's most impoverished group: black children. As a result, urban poverty among black women must be distinguished and described differently than poverty among black men. What are the current experiences of urban poverty among black women within this post-industrial political economy?

I want to distinguish black women's poverty from black men's poverty in two respects. First, black women's experiences of inequities and inequalities are due to structural constraints in employment that keep them in traditionally female jobs as well as their experiences of poverty due to their unpaid domestic labor. Second, the impoverishment of black women is deeply connected to the poverty of black children.

---

<sup>153</sup> Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000): 58.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

Because black women's experiences of poverty are different than black men, a gendered analysis of the political economy of the black urban underclass is needed.

Germane to this discussion on a gendered analysis of the black urban underclass is Patricia Hill Collins' use of intersectionality as a theoretical frame in analyzing black women's experiences within the Black political economy.<sup>155</sup> Collins argues that when placing black women's experiences at the center of analysis of black political economy, their experiences of work and family are different than black men's experiences. This difference in experience between black men and black women is essential to understanding how American institutions and systems structure the constraints and/or possibilities of poor black women.

Collins' states that while "US black women are poor for many of the same reasons that US black men are poor – both lack access to steady, well-paying jobs that ensure an adequate income," she argues that "African-American women's confinement to a small segment of low-paying jobs reveals how race and gender converge."<sup>156</sup> Julianne Malveaux notes that women who escape traditionally female jobs enjoy higher wages. However, black women have had less success than white women in moving out of traditionally female jobs. She states, "Although the quality of work among black women [has] changed, it changed because black women moved from one set of stratified jobs to

---

<sup>155</sup> Black political economy is a term that originated in developmental economics. This particular term describes economies of the African Diaspora around the world that were impacted by Western colonial domination, hegemony, and exploitation. Within North America, political and social scientists began to appropriate this term in talking about the stratified economic experiences within black communities. Although Collins does not provide analytic clarity on this construct, she seems to deploy "black political economy" as a term that delineates class stratification and economic differences across black communities.

<sup>156</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "Gender, Black Feminism, and Black Political Economy," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 568. The Study of African-American Problems: W.E.B. Du Bois's Agenda, Then and Now*, (March, 2000): 45.

another, not because they left “typically” female jobs.”<sup>157</sup> Although black women (like black men) continue to experience a lack of steady access to well-paying jobs within the black urban underclass, black women continue to experience some of the lowest paying jobs due to traditionally female jobs that often pay the lowest wages.

Monica Jackson also notes the differences between African-American women and men in specific aspects of their labor market utilization due to women remaining in typically “female” jobs such as file clerks, typists, social welfare clerical assistants, nurse aids, and practical nurses. Jackson notes:

African American women do occupy typically “female” jobs to a great degree...In bread and butter terms, this translates into reduced earning potential for African American women. African American women remain one of the lowest paid race/gender groups, making only \$301 per week during 1989 compared to \$334 for their white counterparts and \$348 and \$482 for African American and white men, respectively.<sup>158</sup>

Jackson discloses the depressed economic conditions of African-American women due to wage inequity often characteristic of “female” jobs. Although black women have fared better than black men in the professional arena, a vast majority of black women in the poor-working class to underclass often receive the lowest wages, exacerbating the poverty they endure. Moreover, Jackson suggests that because “close to 42.8% of all African American families were headed by women with no husband present in 1988,” any programs or policies for change and development of urban black communities must focus on the labor market realities of poor black women.<sup>159</sup> Jackson and Collins’ discussion of the unique labor market realities of poor black women illuminate the unique

---

<sup>157</sup> Julianne Malveaux, *Slipping Through the Cracks: The Status of Black Women* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1986): 26.

<sup>158</sup> Monica Jackson, “And Still We Rise: African American Women and the U.S. Labor Market,” *Gender Issues* (Springer: New York, 2007): 62.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

ways that class, gender, and race converge in affecting the life chances of urban black women. Because black women constitute over half of the household heads in urban black communities, their future and prospects in the labor market will directly affect and impinge on the life-chances of Black men and children.<sup>160</sup>

Urban black women's work is also deeply impacted by the demographic shifts that have occurred in the inner-city since 1970, which are marked by a decrease in the median age of single, black female mothers. By the early 1970s, unwed, black teenage mothers populated over half of single-parent homes in the inner cities. Black teenage mothers tended to experience longer durations of poverty due to the disruption of their schooling, which contributed to under-employment or unemployment. Wilson states about inner cities that "Almost 40 percent of all illegitimate births are to women under age twenty."<sup>161</sup> He further states that "adolescent mothers are the most disadvantaged of all female family heads because they are likely to have their schooling interrupted, experience difficulty finding employment, and very rarely receive child support."<sup>162</sup> Wilson discloses that problems of work for poor, urban black women are deeply tied to age constraints. Although Collins does not uncover this demographic shift, this correlation between poverty and age remains important to understanding poor, urban black women's unique experiences of deprivation.

---

<sup>160</sup> For greater historical analysis on the percentage of black female single, headed homes and its affect on black families, refer to Delores Aldridge, "African-American Women in the Economic Marketplace: A Continuing Struggle," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Sage Publications): 129-154; A.L. Ferris, *Indicators of Trends in the Status of American Women* (New York: Russell Sage, 1973); J.J. Jackson, "But where are the men?" *Black Scholar* (December, 1971): 30-41; and Barbara Jones, "The Economic Status of Black women," in *State of Black America* (New York: National Urban League, 1983).

<sup>161</sup> Wilson, *Truly Disadvantaged*, 73.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

Alongside poor black women's experience of low wages within typically female jobs and problems of age related to work, Collins also ascribes higher rates of poverty among black women to their unpaid domestic labor. Collins writes:

Cooking, cleaning, home repair, and other domestic labor that African-American women do for free could also be done for pay. Moreover, despite the fact that caring for children is often seen as something that women "naturally" do better than men, child care also constituted unpaid labor. A considerable portion of Black women's time goes into caring for children – their own and those of others.<sup>163</sup>

Collins demonstrates that that the problem of the public/private dichotomy in relation to "labor" adversely affects the income opportunities of poor black women. Although poor black women's labor remains unpaid, "they do much of the shopping for housing, food, clothing, health care, transportation, recreation, and other consumer goods."<sup>164</sup>

Moreover, because of black women's depressed incomes and consumer racism, black women do not have the purchasing power needed to survive and flourish.<sup>165</sup> Although black women are castigated for being on "welfare"<sup>166</sup> and not working, they do not get compensated for their domestic labor.

My comparative claim of differences between black men and women in relationship to labor is not a claim of whose labor experience is worse. Poor black women within the black urban underclass experience race/gender hierarchies, which make their

---

<sup>163</sup> Collins, "Gender, Black Feminism, and Black Political Economy," 45.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Welfare is articulated as public assistance for poor, single women although welfare refers to an array of programs that aid women, children, the elderly, disabled people and more. Moreover, for a historical view on welfare policy in America and its relationship to race, class, and gender, see Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present* (Boston: South End Press, 1988); *Under Attack, Fighting Backs: Women and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996); and *The Dynamics of Social Welfare Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). These texts also address the population that welfare policy has historically aided the most: white women. Also refer to Hilfiker, *Urban Injustice: How Ghettos Happen*, Chapter 4, "Welfare in Modern America" for a discussion on how political economy has adversely affected black women, contributing to their welfare enrollments.



experiences of work, family, and poverty *different* from those of black men. Poor urban black women's labor experiences continue to be a critical factor in perpetuating their impoverishment, often leading to socio-economic and psychological frustration. Yet, poor black women have historically demonstrated their resilience within U.S. political economy.

Barbara Jones documents that black women have participated in the labor force at much higher rates than their white counterparts in the face of systemic discrimination, unemployment, and a structural lack of opportunity. Despite unemployment rates in the 1970s and 1980s among black women, black women continued to display a tenacious commitment to the labor force. Jones asserts:

Stevens et al. found that white women faced with unemployment are more likely than men to withdraw from the labor force, but patterns for black women were more like those of men, showing long-run responses to cyclical savings. Black women continue to seek employment in spite of initial failure to find jobs...When faced with prolonged joblessness, black women continue to seek employment at about the same rate as the total group of unemployed workers, which is predominantly male.<sup>167</sup>

Jones' findings suggest that there has been evidence of a strong commitment among black women to the labor force. As the economy shifted in the 1970s, black women's increased poverty and decline in employment was not due to their moral and educational laziness and underachievement. Jones demonstrates that black women were aggressively pursuing employment at an equal rate as males. Hence, Black women's increased poverty as a group was not due to a culture of indolence and unwillingness to work but rather due to structural constraints that no longer needed the unskilled labor of

---

<sup>167</sup> Barbara Jones, "Black Women & Labor Force Participation: An Analysis of Sluggish Growth Rates," in *Slipping Through the Cracks: The Status of Black Women*, eds. Julianne Malvaeux and Margaret Simms, 20.

black women (and also had not educationally prepared black women as skilled labor). Jones' findings on Black women's labor market experiences further affirm the agential capacities of poor black women despite systemic oppression and exploitation.

Alongside understandings of work, poverty among black women is qualitatively different from poverty among black men because of their role as caretaker to poor black children. Because a great percentage of black children are raised in inner-city, female single-parent households, black children are exposed and affected by the same economic and social constraints as poor black women. Like black women, the forces that exclude and alienate poor black children from meaningful participation in American economic and social life have had adverse effects on urban, poor black children's sense of growth and flourishing. These exclusionary forces include: the shift in urban economy as well as economic and social alienation by mainstream America.

In *Families in Peril: An Agenda for Social Change*, Marian Wright Edelman cites black children as the poorest in the nation. She writes:

Today black young children in young female-headed households are the poorest in the nation. While a black child born in the United States has a one in two chance of being born poor, a black child in a female-headed household has a two in three chance of being poor. If that household is headed by a mother under twenty-five years of age, that baby has a four in five chance of being poor.<sup>168</sup>

Edelman intimates that race, gender, and age among urban black women shape the economic constraints and life-chances of poor black children. Edelman notes that we "often overlook the increasing importance of the parent's age in determining the family's

---

<sup>168</sup> Marian Wright Edelman, *Families in Peril: An Agenda for Social Change*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987): 3.

income.”<sup>169</sup> The poverty rate among all families with heads under twenty-five was 29.4 percent in 1987, which was almost three times the national average then. Although the proportion of black women under the age of twenty giving birth has declined since the early 1970s, the percentage of those births to unmarried teens since 1970 soared 50%. Because black female teens are often undereducated or uneducated, their economic prospects are not good, which structures the constraints and possibilities of poor black children. One of the greatest ways poor, urban black women’s poverty structures the economic and social constraints of black children is education.

Annette Lareau argues that parents’ social structural location (or class standing) has profound implications for their children’s life chances. She states:

Before kindergarten, for example, children of highly educated parents are much more likely to exhibit “educational readiness” skills, such as knowing their letters, identifying colors, counting up to twenty, and being able to write their first names...Children of highly educated mothers continue to outperform children of less educated mothers throughout their school careers. By the time young people take the SAT examinations for admission to college, the gap is dramatic, averaging 150 points (relative to an average score of 500 points) between children of parents who are high school dropouts and those with parents who have a graduate degree. There are also differences in other aspects of children’s school performance according to their parents’ social structural location. Many studies demonstrate the crucial role of educational success in determining occupational success. Parents’ social class position predicts children’s school success and thus their ultimate life chances.<sup>170</sup>

Lareau’s findings demonstrate that social inequalities among children are directly linked to the educational level, occupational status, income, and life chances of parents.

Lareau’s findings then suggest that social inequalities among poor black children are directly linked to the educational level, occupational status, income, and life chances of

---

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>170</sup> Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003): 29.

poor black women. Because poor black women and their children are denied educational opportunities which are essential to a post-industrial political economy wherein employment opportunities are based on increased educational attainment, they face intergenerational cycles of deprivation and poverty, contributing to profound limitations relative to opportunities.

Lareau offers an example of how poverty affects black children within the educational system in urban areas. At Lower Richmond School in the inner-city of Richmond, Virginia, black students from kindergarten through fifth grade are served. To begin, the school looks forbidding. The building is “three stories tall and is surrounded by a high, gray chain linked fence.”<sup>171</sup> She describes the building as “old, with a dirt beige exterior and few windows “as well as “patches of paint blotched on the walls “to cover up regular graffiti.”<sup>172</sup> There is an asphalt playground with trees and patches of grass. Lareau remarks that Lower Richmond School’s physical landscape is more appealing than other inner-city schools in the Richmond area where “beer bottles and broken glass litter the school yard.”<sup>173</sup>

Although Lower Richmond School is one of the more accomplished schools in the inner-city, “about one-half of each class reads below grade level and about one-third of the fourth grade cohort is about two years below grade level.”<sup>174</sup> Moreover, Lareau posits that “the district is under pressure to raise test scores, but the budget is very limited, and shortfalls occur annually.”<sup>175</sup> Few parents attend or participate in the Teacher-Parent Associations. Despite these grim statistics, Lower Richmond School has

---

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

been well regarded by parents and educators for many years. In fact, a fourth grade teacher, Ms. Berstein, referred to Lower Richmond as a “cream puff” compared to other inner-city schools.<sup>176</sup>

This description of the inner-city school of Lower Richmond that poor black children attend can be understood more clearly in contrast to the many suburban schools in Richmond. In a suburb of Richmond, Swan school is different than Lower Richmond. Lareau reports that Swan school is a “sprawling facility” that “consists exclusively of one-story buildings that are spread out over the school grounds.”<sup>177</sup> The buildings also have “windows lining one entire wall of each classroom.”<sup>178</sup> Outside is an expanse of grass, where unlike Lower Richmond, Swan’s school playground “has an elaborate swing set and bars, with a red-hued mulch of shredded wood under the bars to protect children if they fall.”<sup>179</sup> Swan has no fence and the school looks open and inviting. In addition, it is located in a quiet, residential neighborhood where middle-class families live.

At Swan, most children in fourth grade, including underachievers, perform at grade level.<sup>180</sup> In reading, many students at Swan are two or three above grade level, signaling the quality of instruction as well as teacher-parent participation. Unlike Lower Richmond, Lareau states that “most children come from families where both parents are employed outside the home, often as professionals, such as lawyers, social workers, accountants, managers, teachers, and insurance executives.”<sup>181</sup> Parents keep a close eye

---

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 22.

on teachers and do not hesitate to intervene and ask questions as it relates to their children's welfare or progress.

Through offering a comparative look between Swan and Lower Richmond, Lareau demonstrates that the social class and standing of the parent(s) directly affects the opportunities and life chances of children within the educational system. Lareau shows that black children in urban areas suffer from the quality of education that is needed for greater opportunities. This lack of quality education is due to structural inequalities wherein inner-city schools continue to be underfunded, ill-equipped, and poorly staffed than suburban schools. Moreover, the poor quality education that poor black children experience is directly connected to the structural constraints imposed upon their mother who is often poor, black single, and young.

The economic and social alienation experienced by impoverished black women and children has greatly contributed to the educational and social challenges that face poor black children and youth. Carl Nightingale describes the painful feelings of humiliation, shame, frustration, and anger that poor black children experience from the poverty and job loss experienced by their families due to the "deindustrialization" of political economy. He discloses how poor black children protest socio-economic forces that continue to exclude them. He writes:

I have heard kids talk about shoplifting, for example, as a way of overcoming the barriers of over-inflated prices. African-American kids in Philadelphia of the 1980s and 1990s may be echoing African-American's historic struggles over segregated public spaces when they take over the back of trolleys, play loud music to establish their presence in streets and parks, spray paint their graffiti signature on the walls of buildings, or hang their sneakers by the shoelaces from telephone wires...And kid's derogation of "white men" and, more importantly, of police officers

reflects long traditions of resistance to the most visible agents of racism and social control in their neighborhoods.<sup>182</sup>

Nightingale reveals how black children attempt to subvert their poverty and structural oppression. While Nightingale does cite some of this aggressive behavior as detrimental to the well-being and flourishing of poor black children, he also intimates that this aggressive behavior is part of an infrapolitics of the poor directed at resisting hegemonic forces that constrain them.<sup>183</sup>

For example, Nightingale argues, “The phenomenal artistry of the folklore of the urban toasts, the language of the hustler, and all of hip-hop culture have helped immeasurably to articulate inner-city young people’s searches for self-worth...”<sup>184</sup> Poor black children are the recipients of the poverty and hopelessness that are features of poor black women’s realities. However, Nightingale demonstrates that poor black children resist and subvert such hopelessness, undermining the shame, humiliation, and despair that accompany intergenerational poverty. Black children experience the unequal burden of poverty due to the alienation that continues to plague poor black families, and in particular, poor black women.

Patricia Hill Collins’ gendered analyses of black political economy disclose the despair and resilience that poor black women and children often experience within a black urban underclass. When reflecting on how the economic resources of a black urban underclass are systematically exploited, one must acknowledge that the logic of free market fundamentalism and meritocracy obscures the real experiences of poor, urban black women. As Marcellus Andrews rightly assesses, “The problem urban blacks now

---

<sup>182</sup> Carl Husemoller Nightingale, *On the Edge: A History of Poor Black Children and Their American Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 1993): 48.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

face is that a terrible new synthesis of racism, free markets, and meritocracy has replaced the old system of organized Negrophobia that has been our nemesis for three hundred years.”<sup>185</sup> If the life-chances of poor urban black women are to improve, womanist discourse requires a critique of American political economy as well as a delineation of the unique experiences of urban poverty black women face.

To summarize, this study does not re-instantiate urban poverty as a signifier of blackness. It realizes that a current problem within the discourse of urban poverty is how urban poverty is employed as a signifier that over-determines black life in urban America. Urban poverty is delineated as the essentialized reality of urban black existence. For example, the impoverished urban black family of five children headed by Tonya becomes the image and representation of black life in the inner city. Within America, one culturally assumes that Tonya’s five children will be juvenile delinquents and/or unwed, pregnant mothers. Yet, this perception of black life is totalizing.

What about the single, black urban mother, Rene, who has one child and is going back to school to obtain her GED in order to progress out of her present economically challenging condition? What about Tracy who positively rears her three children towards educational attainment, driving them to church and other institutional sites for growth and cultivation? What about the family of four headed by Shelia and Dante who do not reflect the single-headed “black matriarchal” arrangement at all overwhelmingly assumed to characterize black urban life? What does one do with the multiplicity of experiences that frame urban life when urban poverty becomes the signifying force that over-determines urban black existence? As expressed in chapter two, the “Moynihan Report”

---

<sup>185</sup> Andrews, *The Political Economy of Hope and Fear*, 167.



does not effectively address the plurality of experiences that frame black urban life. Instead, The Report uses urban poverty as the signifying force to determine the experience of black urban life, despite its emancipatory interests connected to its fight against black urban poverty.

bell hooks argues that the depiction of black family life as dysfunctional and over-determined by urban poverty is “a tremendous assault on the creative and self-esteem of black people.”<sup>186</sup> hooks warns one not to totalize urban black life by turning to “the circumstances of those at the bottom.”<sup>187</sup> Instead, she maintains that the quality of life of urban Blacks should also be determined by the positive experiences of those black people “whose lives provided a testimony that when given equal access to jobs, education, and housing... could thrive as well as anyone else.”<sup>188</sup> hooks takes account of difference and plurality within black urban life and among black urban women and this is essential for understanding the complexity and ambiguity of black, inner city life.

This study does not reinforce signifying practices between poverty and blackness. For certain, poverty discourse can become ideologically dangerous when urban poverty becomes the signifier of urban blacks, and in particular, urban black women. Race and blackness do not equal poverty. The conceptual move in linking urban poverty with blackness totalizes the discourse on poverty as a “black thing,” that represents a black problem. Many sociological and economic studies not only demonstrate that white women have always constituted the majority of poor urban women but also show that there is a growing population of Hispanic and Latina women who comprise inner city life and poverty, which shifts the conversation away from equivocating poverty with female

---

<sup>186</sup> bell hooks, *Rock my Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem* (New York: Atria Books, 2003): 123.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

blackness.<sup>189</sup> Instead, this study recognizes that black women disproportionately constitute urban poverty in America, which necessitates uncovering the root causes and emancipatory possibilities for these women within post-industrial capitalistic crisis.

### Summary

Addressing the failures of the “Moynihan Report” and its critics, this chapter argues that it is not the cultural deficiencies of poor urban black women that cause their poverty as free-market ideology suggests, but rather the shifts in American political economy that have exacerbated economic miseries for these women. Womanist theoretical discourse must make a sociological turn in order to develop a more nuanced class analysis and critique of American political economy in combating oppressive elements of free-market ideology and its neo-liberal interests. I conclude this chapter by noting that urban poverty is not to be used as a signifier for all urban black women. Rather, urban black women are disproportionately represented within an American underclass. Consequently, it is important to address urban poverty among black women in the twenty-first century.

This chapter begins by providing a critique of free-market ideology. Performing ideology critique’s first theoretical move, I contend that Friedman and D’Souza’s arguments are connected to real interests that conceal the practices of a post-industrial political economy and its absence of structural opportunities for poor urban blacks.

---

<sup>189</sup> Refer to these articles and books on a growing Hispanic/Latino/a population in the American underclass: Heather Mac Donald, “A New Latino Underclass,” *The Dallas Morning News* (July 25, 2004); Roy Brooks *Rethinking the American Race Problem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); *In the Barrios: Latinos and the Underclass Debate* (Ithaca: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993); and Velez William, “Latina/o Sociology Pioneers: Joan Moore and the Underclass Debate,” *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Marriott Hotel, Loews Philadelphia Hotel, Philadelphia, PA, Aug 12, 2005 Online* 2008-10-10 [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p20623\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p20623_index.html).

There has been a history of shifts in American political economy that has left a group of unskilled labor behind, affecting a disproportionate number of blacks in the inner city. Consequently, blaming poor urban black people (and in particular poor, urban black women) hides the real economic experiences of a black urban underclass who continue to suffer from such economic shifts.

There is a history of shifts in American political economy that has severely crippled the black urban underclass in America. While Andrews uncovers how a post-industrial political economy has created a black urban underclass within a larger American underclass, Wilson discloses how a black urban underclass uniquely experiences poverty. Wilson and Andrews delineate the shifts towards a post-industrial political economy that have bred disillusionment among urban black communities. They chart how the late 1960s introduced a profound decline in manufacturing jobs in urban areas and a sharp increase in technological, service-oriented jobs that demanded increasing professionalization and higher degrees of educational attainment. The unskilled labor of these urban residents that had worked in these manufacturing jobs no longer could find work in a growing service-oriented sector. Consequently, their labor was left behind, creating intergenerational cycles of poverty marked by these conditions. Urban black men and women experienced poverty that had largely been structured by American political economy, which belies neo-liberal logic that the individual is responsible for economic success or failure.

Moreover, Patricia Hill Collins illuminates the unique experiences of poverty among urban black women, which involve issues centering on work, family, and children. Black women's poverty is qualitatively different than black men's poverty in

two respects. First, black women's experiences of inequities and inequalities are due to structural constraints in employment that keep them in traditionally female jobs as well as their experiences of poverty due to their unpaid domestic labor. Second, the impoverishment of black women is deeply connected to the poverty of black children. Womanist discourse must provide a critique of American political economy and disclose the unique experiences of poverty among poor urban black women in order to debunk current free-market ideology that continues to blame these women for their impoverishment.

So far, chapter one provides the theoretical framework of ideology critique in order to explore the moral significance between culture and economy in structuring the life-chances of poor urban black women within womanist discourse. Chapter two revisits the "Moynihan Report" in order to reclaim its emancipatory interests in grounding a progressive politics that can offer democratic prospects for poor urban black women. However, The Report and its critics failed to address problems in American economy relative to urban black women's deprivation. In light of the failures of The Report and its critics, chapter three turns to how American political economy adversely affects poor urban black women locked within an American underclass. While the report and its critics primarily employ cultural arguments in debating the character and effects of black women's poverty, chapter three argues that problems in economy have colluded with cultural inequalities in intensifying and reinforcing the intergenerational poverty that poor urban black women presently experience and endure. When identifying how shifts in a post-industrial economy have created deprivation for poor urban black women, neo-liberal interests of free-market ideology are exposed.

The Report and its critics also fail to listen to poor urban black women's complex subjectivities in theorizing their lives and prospects of flourishing and thriving. Chapter four turns to this failure. In order for womanist, black feminist, liberal and neo-liberal discourses within this study to conceptualize these women's lives and possibilities of thriving, their subjective interests and desires towards fullness of life must be heard. I turn to offering the conditions for the possibility of thriving within a model of deliberative democracy for poor urban black women.

## CHAPTER IV

### TOWARDS CONDITIONS FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF THRIVING: POOR URBAN BLACK WOMEN AS “CONCRETE OTHERS”

#### **Introduction**

This study has identified a central problem. The problem is this: advanced capitalist formations in America and its objective and subjective goods exclude poor urban black women’s sense of flourishing and thriving. I argue in this study that womanist theo-ethical discourse would do well to deploy critical social theory in uncovering the roots and possibilities of capitalist crisis for poor urban black women. In addition, I briefly discuss at the ends of chapters two and three that black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses addressed urban black women’s poverty in an objectifying manner in which these discourses have bracketed or suspended the complex subjectivity of these women themselves as determinate of the formation of public policy around poverty. These discourses operationalize what Benhabib delineates as the standpoint of the “generalizable other.” However, the turn to the generalizable other within these discourses has been inadequate because it does not account for the complex subjectivity and interests of poor urban black women in articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving.

As a correction, black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses would do well to explore the dialectical interplay between the standpoints of the “generalizable other” and “concrete other.” Moreover, the standpoint of the concrete other can be substantiated by turning to ethnography, highlighting the structural determinacy of urban black women’s poverty and the conditions for the possibility of

their survival and prospects of thriving. In this chapter, I draw upon the ethnography of Linda Thomas and Marla Fredrick to substantiate Benhabib's turn to the "concrete other." Moreover, I turn to Fraser's norm of participatory parity in exploring the moral significance between social recognition and redistribution. In articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving, I argue that black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses must rethink social recognition (through the standpoint of the concrete other) and theorize the relationship between recognition and redistribution.

### **Radical Deliberative Democracy: The Standpoint of the Concrete Other**

While chapters one through three perform the first task of critical theory (being the unmasking of oppressive, capitalistic social structures and their reified languages and logics of domination), this chapter performs the second task of critical theory, which uncovers democratic prospects of thriving by turning to a model of deliberative democracy. When speaking of deliberative democracy, I understand this term to mean "a model for organizing the collective and public exercise of power in the major institutions of a society on the basis of the principle that decisions affecting the well-being of a collectivity can be viewed as the outcome of a procedure of free and reasoned deliberation among individuals considered moral and political equals."<sup>190</sup> How might democratic electorates formulate and implement public policies differently if poor urban black women were considered moral and political equals within institutionalized decision making spaces? Through a model of deliberative democracy, these women are able to critically reflect and share within institutional settings their experiences of not only an

---

<sup>190</sup> Seyla Benhabib, "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy," *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996): 68.

absence of structural opportunities in education, housing, childcare, wages, and job training but also an absence of cultural capital that offers social recognition to them.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that while black feminist, womanist, and liberal discourses address how cultural images and inequalities contribute to the socio-economic subordination of poor urban black women, they do not critique American political economy nor do they include the complex subjectivity of these women themselves in articulating prospects of thriving within deliberative, democratic processes. I refer to complex subjectivity as the basic structure of human subjectivity, which is complex and multi-dimensional. Anthony Pinn, an African-American religionist, describes the notion of complex subjectivity through deploying Lewis Gordon's usage of the term.

I am aware of thinkers such as Lewis Gordon who argue that humans cannot be understood as subject or object, or even a combination of the two. Rather, humanity is best defined by "ambiguity," a complexity and multidimensionality. My sense of complex subjectivity is meant to maintain Gordon's notion of being. This basic structure or primary impulse accounts for the black Christian's talk of connection to the image of God in ways that subvert racist/sexist depictions of black as inferior beings.<sup>191</sup>

Within his project of Black religion, Pinn deploys the idea of complex subjectivity to describe how enslaved Africans (within North America) challenged and subverted fixed and over-determined black identities, which were produced by white colonial contact and conquest. White colonial power did not consider enslaved African's complex subjectivity in describing their humanity. White colonial power also objectified black

---

<sup>191</sup> Anthony Pinn, "Black Bodies in Pain and Ecstasy: Terror, Subjectivity, and the Nature of Black Religion," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 7, issue : 80-81.



bodies and identities in order to enforce hegemonic socio-economic and political attitudes and institutions such as chattel slavery.

However, enslaved Africans complex subjectivity can be seen in how they resisted and transcended such debilitating practices and institutionalized conditions. While enslaved Africans were victims of American slavery, they also found ways to employ their human creativity and potential toward transcendence and fullness of life. Pinn provides an example of the complex and multi-dimensional nature of African-American's human subjectivity by discussing their creative acts through decorative arts. He maintains that through textiles and decorative arts (such as quilts), African Americans rejected an essentialized understanding of self as chattel without a history. Instead, their complex subjectivity could be seen through the preservation of their African sensibilities and outlooks encoded in quilts and other "everyday" materials.<sup>192</sup>

Similarly, poor urban black women's complex subjectivities should be taken into account in order to fully understand how these women make meaning, assert their agency within neo-liberal structures of American capitalism, and articulate prospects of flourishing through deliberative processes. Turning to these women's complex subjectivities discloses how they challenge the fixed and over-determined identities of themselves that neo-liberal rhetoric espouses and black feminist and womanist discourses challenge. In order to demonstrate that urban black poverty does not over-determine these women's lives, poor urban black women's complex subjectivities must be theorized. Moreover, these women must be able to articulate their experiences of deprivation and possibilities of flourishing within institutionalized deliberative spaces where policies are formulated and implemented.

---

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 81.

Black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses speak about poor urban black women in an objectifying manner, in which the complex subjectivities of these women are suspended. Black feminist and womanist discourses thematize how cultural representations objectify poor urban black women, but they do not address how these women articulate their own experiences of deprivation due to the collusion of erroneous cultural images and neo-liberal economic practices. Moreover, as seen in the “Moynihan Report,” liberal discourse exposes urban black poverty as structural poverty, which necessitates structural solutions. Yet, as with black feminist and womanist discourses, progressive liberal discourse also neglects a critique of American political economy and errs by not attending to the lived experiences and articulations of poor urban black women in theorizing democratic possibilities towards their flourishing and fullness of life.

In the previous chapter, I maintain that neo-liberal discourse and its hegemonic interests suppress the experiences of poor urban black women due to its perpetuation of wealth-producing structures at the expense of the most vulnerable. While neo-liberalism is similar to the aforementioned discourses insofar as it does not attend to the lived experiences of these women, its reasons for bracketing poor urban black women’s complex subjectivity are different. The economic elite within American political economy overtly deploy neo-liberal rhetoric in order to reproduce the legitimacy of exploitative attitudes and practices within culture and economy. Consequently, neo-liberalism disregards these women’s experiences and desires towards ultimate meaning, which thwarts their prospects toward thriving.

In part, black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses have not turned to the complex subjectivity of these women because they solely operationalize what Benhabib refers to as the standpoint of the “generalizable other.” Within modern political theory, conceptions of justice and fairness tend to conceptualize the individual as the “generalizable other” in delineating a model of deliberative democracy that can ensure fairness within institutional decision-making spaces. For Benhabib, the standpoint of the generalizable other requires us to view each person as a rational being entitled to the same rights, autonomy, and agency we would want to ascribe to ourselves.<sup>193</sup> She writes:

In assuming the standpoint, we abstract from the individuality and concrete identity of the other. We assume that the other, like ourselves, is a being who has concrete needs, desires, and affects, but that what constitutes his or her moral dignity is not what differentiates us from each other, but rather what we, as speaking and acting rational agents, have in common. Our relation to the other is governed by the norms of *formal equality* and *reciprocity*: each is entitled to expect and to assume from us what we can expect and assume from him or her. The norms of our interactions are primarily public and institutional ones. If I have a right to X, then you have the duty not to hinder me from enjoying X and conversely.<sup>194</sup>

By acting in accordance with these norms of formal equality and reciprocity, the rights of each individual are confirmed. Each person possesses a legitimate claim to expect that these rights will be affirmed and enforced, through deliberative democracy, in order to experience objective and subjective goods within society. The moral categories and interactions that accompany the standpoint of the generalizable other are those of “right, obligation, and entitlement, and the corresponding moral feelings are those of respect,

---

<sup>193</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 158.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-159.

duty, worthiness and dignity.”<sup>195</sup> The standpoint of the generalizable other privileges commonalities and sameness in order to fashion a concept of formal equality and reciprocity in governing interactions within deliberative spheres of institutional decision-making. Consequently, when deploying this standpoint, individuality and difference are discounted within democratic community.

When turning to black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses, the standpoint of the generalizable other has framed their discussions of urban black women’s poverty and the subsequent need for justice and thriving for these women. For example, the “Moynihan Report” reflects the liberal discourse of the Great Society, which sought to achieve formal equality for poor urban blacks in terms of opportunity and outcomes. Johnson’s vision of the Great Society and its liberal discourse deployed a language of rights and autonomy toward conceptualizing justice and thriving. Similarly, black feminist and womanist discourses argue for the necessity in poor black women having autonomy from structural constraints and erroneous cultural production, which grants greater agency to these women in experiencing prospects of flourishing. While the standpoint of the generalizable other and its language of rights and autonomy are needed within these discourses, the achievement of rights, autonomy, and agency within deliberative spheres does not necessarily ensure prospects towards thriving for these women. For these discourses, identity and prospects of thriving for poor urban black women are defined by reference to their capacity for agency alone within democratic decision-making structures.

However, because imbalanced power relations and hegemonic authority problematize how difference is understood and embraced within democratic structures,

---

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 159.

identity and prospects of thriving for these women cannot be guaranteed solely by agency, rights, and autonomy. In agreement with Benhabib, “identity does not refer to my potential for choice alone, but to the actuality of my choices, namely to how I as a finite, concrete, embodied individual, shape and fashion circumstances of my birth and family, linguistic, cultural, and gender identity into a coherent narrative that stands as my life story.”<sup>196</sup> While the standpoint of the generalizable other is important procedurally in fashioning a model of deliberative democracy wherein poor urban black women can participate in issues affecting their life-chances and possibilities towards thriving, this standpoint does not go far enough in addressing the complexities of difference. “Difference” takes many forms – identity politics, otherness, diversity, pluralism, and struggles for social recognition – and each of these intertwined concepts complicates formal democratic principles such as equal respect and equal opportunity. Power relations that govern the value of such differences often hamper the achievement of meaningful social recognition within democratic, deliberative spaces.

Benhabib argues that in order to recognize the dignity of the generalizable other, there must be an acknowledgement of the moral identity of the “concrete other.” The concrete other is a vision of self that is particular, specific, and different. She asserts that “the standpoint of the concrete other, by contrast [to the generalizable other], requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity and affective-emotional constitution.”<sup>197</sup> Benhabib writes of the concrete other.

In assuming this standpoint, we abstract from what constitutes our commonality and focus on individuality. We seek to comprehend the needs of the other, his or her motivations, what she searches for, and what

---

<sup>196</sup> Seya Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 162.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

s/he desires. Our relation to the other is governed by the norms of *equity* and *complementary reciprocity*: each is entitled to expect and to assume from the other forms of behavior through which the other feels recognized and confirmed as a concrete, individual being with specific needs, talents, and capacities.<sup>198</sup>

The notion of the concrete other conceptualizes the self as one who emerges out of narrative, context and history. Instead of sameness, the self is understood by individuality. In order to understand the individual, one must hear his/her lived experiences. The norms of equity and complementary reciprocity require that each person exhibits more than the simple assertion of his/her rights and duties in the face of another person's needs. It requires that each person takes account of the individuality and subjective interests of the "other" in order to respond with "love, care, sympathy, and solidarity."<sup>199</sup> Because the moral categories that accompany such interactions are those of bonding, sharing, and friendship, the interactions of the concrete other are often seen as exclusively private, non-institutional ones.<sup>200</sup>

Because the generalizable other is seen as "public" and the concrete other as "private" within contemporary moral theory, these two standpoints are often viewed as incompatible and even antagonistic.<sup>201</sup> In part, these two standpoints reflect "the dichotomies and splits of early modern moral and political theory between autonomy and nurturance, independence and bonding, the public and the domestic, and more broadly, between justice and the good life."<sup>202</sup> Within modern liberal traditions (Hobbes, Rawls, Kohlberg etc.), this dichotomous characterization is linked to how justice is secured: by

---

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid. For more discussion on this dichotomous logic, refer to Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Agnes Heller's *A Theory of Feelings* (Holland: Van Gorcum, 1979).

theorizing autonomous selves who bracket more “personal” ends in order to reach consensus about public goals within institutional spheres of decision-making.

However, when addressing social injustices and economic inequities within political community, I find that splitting persons into “public citizens” and “private citizens” dismisses the personal narratives, stories, and memories that each person uses in determining what is valued as legitimate public goals, goods, and ends – hence, the common good. Relations of power and authority reify notions of a “common good” that are constructed from private interests and personal ends, which often adversely affect marginalized and alienated persons such as poor urban black women. Moreover, because each person’s concrete identity, memories, and histories impact how he/she experiences formal rights and agency, the standpoint of the concrete other is needed in theorizing the “generalizable other.” These two standpoints dialectically interact in shaping how individuals speak about their interests, desires, rights and agency towards survival and flourishing within the public sphere. Consequently, because “difference” structures interactions between selves in community, moral reciprocity is needed in which persons can imaginatively put themselves in each other’s place in order to understand each other’s particular interests and needs. This dialectical interplay sponsors “*empathetic listening*” within deliberative processes.

For black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses, this dialectical interplay between the standpoints of the generalizable other and concrete other is under-theorized. While poor urban black women’s *humanity* is affirmed through formal rights and autonomy (generalizable other), their *individuality* (concrete other) recedes into the background as a background condition for discourse on black urban poverty. While these

women may be granted formal rights and choice within America, neo-liberal attitudes and structures continue to circumscribe what they are actually capable of choosing. As a result, these discourses would do well to deploy the standpoint of the concrete other, which turns to the concrete identities, narratives, and experiences of these women who stand in need of relief. In order to conceptualize the generalizable other, these discourses must acknowledge poor urban black women as concrete others.

Dissimilar to neo-liberal economic formations and its objectifying discourse of poor urban black women, this dialectical relationship between the generalizable other and the concrete other engenders inter-subjective discourse, being “empathetic listening,” wherein poor urban black women can articulate their narratives and stories in order to promote mutual understanding within institutionalized decision-making spaces.

Alongside accounting for their rights, autonomy and agency, the particular histories and perspectives of these women can be equally acknowledged in understanding their unique experiences of deprivation and subsequent desires towards ultimate meaning and possibilities of thriving. When turning to the concrete other, the experiences of these women can be accounted for in order to theorize their lives and articulate their pursuit towards meaning and prospects of thriving.

The moral significance of acknowledging the individuality of poor urban black women is that their identities, subjective interests, and desires towards existential meaning are heard on their own terms. The dialectical interplay between the generalizable other and concrete other initiates ongoing moral conversation as a lifestyle on how we live as humans in community with one another. How we live as humans in community should involve mutual understanding in order to experience self-actualization



and well-being. Moreover, the standpoint of the concrete other suggests that human communities should *not* allow hegemonic relations and neo-liberal interests to speak on behalf of marginalized persons. Instead, this standpoint intimates an ethical perspective of empathetic listening that allows democratic electorates to enter into poor urban black women's unique perspectives of deprivation and prospects towards thriving.

While the dialectical interplay between the concrete other and generalizable other recognizes how poor urban black women's particular narratives and experiences affect their formal rights and agency within a model of deliberative democracy, Benhabib's theorization of the concrete other could benefit by using ethnography to substantiate its turn to poor urban black women as concrete others. Ethnography provides "theoretical room" in listening to the complex subjectivity of poor urban black women in efforts of capturing their articulations of difference, ultimate meaning, and prospects of thriving. I turn to the ethnography of Linda Thomas and her notion of a "return to the source" as well as Marla Fredrick's *Between Sundays* in substantiating the second task of critical social theory, which explores democratic possibilities of poor urban black women's thriving by acknowledging them as concrete others.

### **Substantiating the "Concrete Other": A Return to the Source**

In order to avoid discussing poor urban black women in a typifying and objectifying manner as black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses have, I turn to ethnography. Thomas' ethnographic suggestions are helpful in substantiating my turn to poor urban black women as concrete others. Within womanist theo-ethical discourse, Thomas argues that turning to the lived experiences of poor black women is

essential in theorizing their lives and visions towards flourishing. Thomas, a womanist anthropologist, challenges womanist methodologies to integrate ethnography into its methods in order to make good on its own claim, namely, that its theology emerges out of the lived experiences of poor black women.

In *Under the Canopy: Ritual Process and Spiritual Resilience in South Africa*, Thomas describes the experiences of poor South African women at St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission Church just outside of Cape Town, in Guguletu. At St. John's in Guguletu, she listens to the testimonies and lived experiences of poor people "who earn less than 178 Rand (R) (U.S. \$51) per month," and "who create meaning in their lives through rituals of healing despite the poverty, unemployment, and violence that they endure." While Thomas does not apply her ethnography to poor black women within the United States, her heuristic suggestions for conceptualizing poor urban black women's complex subjectivity by a turn to ethnography, nevertheless, can be useful to womanist discourse (as well as black feminist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses) in substantiating poor urban black women as concrete others.

Thomas posits that while womanists have used texts, literature, and history in their theo-ethical constructs, it is equally important to use ethnographic *procedures* that allow Black women's testimonies to be a source of doing womanist theology. "Not only should womanist scholars include historical texts and literature in our theological constructs and reconstruction of knowledge," says Thomas, "but we should also embrace a research process which engages poor black women who are living human documents."<sup>203</sup> Thomas contends that the benefit of ethnography allows researchers to

---

<sup>203</sup> Linda Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm, in *CrossCurrents*, Vol. 48, issue 4, Winter 1998-1999: 7.

access the direct speech of women as primary textual narratives. In addition, their narratives allow poor Black women's voices to emerge void of the researcher's interpretations.<sup>204</sup> For Thomas, "we can view books written about poor black women as secondary sources and employ anthropological techniques to collect stories and publish ethnographies of women who are still alive."<sup>205</sup>

Moreover, by using ethnography, Thomas contends that there can be a "return to the source" in understanding how poor black women are impacted by political economy and how culture might be used as a resource in articulating poor black women's blight and subsequent pursuit of flourishing. By return to the source, Thomas draws on Amilcar Cabral's use of the term.

Such an approach would utilize what Amilcar Cabral of Guinea Bissau called "a return to the source," which positions culture as an integral component of the history of a people and which also explores the dynamic between culture and its material base (that is class position). The level and mode of production determine dominant cultural forms. Thus, he asserted: "A people who free themselves from foreign domination will not be free unless they return to the upwards paths of their own culture." From this perspective, culture is a historically contested resource struggled over by those working for or against social change to justify their respective standpoint.<sup>206</sup>

For Thomas, when knowledge claims concerning poor black women are derived from ahistorical and non-contextual sources, such knowledge claims can be challenged by turning to the lived experiences of poor black women (whether in United States or in the African context of which she has studied) as resources for understanding their experiences of deprivation within capitalist formations of political economy. Such a

---

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Linda Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Paradigm," *Living Stones in the Household of God: The Legacy and Future of Black Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004): 46. For more information on the theoretical discussion of a return to the source, refer to Amilcar Cabral, *A Return to the Source: Selected Speeches*, ed. Africa Information Service (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

“return to the source” privileges poor black women’s speech, which takes seriously the historical and contemporary factors that give rise to these women’s marginalized experiences within American political economy. Moreover, one can guard against methods that dismiss the variegated cultural and structural experiences of these women’s deprivation and desires towards fulfillment.

Before delineating the possibilities of Thomas’ “return to the source” in making theoretical room for poor urban black women’s complex subjectivity, I have some hesitations about this theoretical notion. While Thomas acknowledges that historical texts and literature are important as sources, I am concerned about the suggestions she specifically draws when articulating the importance of ethnography for womanist theology and ethics. Should indeed all other sources be seen as “secondary” to ethnography in understanding the lived experiences of poor black women? While ethnography is an important resource within womanist theology and ethics, it doesn’t necessarily need to be seen as *primary* in doing womanist theology. Other sources such as fiction, historical autobiography, journals, research reports, sociological statistics, transcripts of recording of poor black women’s experiences are equally important in uncovering and understanding the lived experiences and complex subjectivity of poor black women. Ethnography is one source among the many sources that can be used to ascertain how poor black women make meaning within their daily lives. From my point of view, I have argued that critical social theory aids womanist theo-ethical discourse in disclosing and critiquing cultural forms and economic structures of American political economy wherein poor urban black women reside, which ethnography may or may not

capture. As a result, ethnography, coordinated with other methods and sources, can illumine poor urban black women's experiences within womanist theology and ethics.

Thomas' return to the source also assumes that a narrative return allows researchers to attain a certain authenticity from these women's direct speech about their lived experiences. Ascertaining authenticity of poor black women's lived experiences remains a difficult task. When the field researcher writes about poor black women, these women are, to some extent, no longer subjects and authors of their own speech. Their speech dissipates into the words and language of the ethnographer. As a result, the search for authenticity of women's direct speech does not retain a "pure form" that is then transferred to readers. Instead, the lived experiences of poor black women are already interpreted as the ethnographer describes the narratives and stories of these women. Consequently, distrust of modern interpretations of poor black women's experiences is not necessarily answered by using ethnography as if it is unmediated.

Moreover, this return to the source might reflect the ambiguities of "narrative return," which has been deployed in black liberationist and womanist theologies. In *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience*, Victor Anderson critiques the usage of ex-slave narratives in black and womanist theologies. He asserts that for a group of black and womanist theologians, "the ex-slave narratives authentically 're-present' slave religion."<sup>207</sup> For black and womanist theologians, these slave narratives "ought to have an authoritative function in the development of black liberation theologies, including womanist theology."<sup>208</sup> These narratives offer black theologians insight into the dynamics of theological interpretation

---

<sup>207</sup> Victor Anderson, *Creative Exchange*, 68-69

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

done by black slaves and provide black theologians with a *basic conceptual scheme* for framing black theology today.<sup>209</sup> For black liberationist theologians, this narrative return can be used as an interpretive device in describing and understanding black religious experiences of oppression, freedom, and liberation.

However, Anderson cites that these ex-slave narratives possess ambiguities that cannot be reduced to liberationist motifs of black and womanist theologies. These ambiguities are related to historical contentions that surround power imbalances between interviewer (white) and interviewee (black), how ethnographic accounts were actually conducted, and the ability of ex-slaves to recollect their actual stories and experiences (two-thirds of informants were at least eighty years old at the time of the interviews).<sup>210</sup> Moreover, Anderson states that for these black and womanist theologians, “ex-slaves’ talk of freedom is equivocated, as identical, with the ideology of Black liberation theology.”<sup>211</sup> He asserts:

In other words, what I take to be the lived theology – that is, the everyday and ordinary piety – of these ex-slaves, expressed in mostly Christian, evangelical, an abolitionist categories in their narratives, these theologians transform into instances of black liberation motifs from slave religion to the present. Here, ex-slaves’ talk of freedom is equivocated as identical with the ideology of black liberation theology. The effect is that it is not so much black theology of liberation that is in need of justifying itself to the black churches, which are typically evangelical in faith, liberal in politics, and reformist in social action. Rather, the black churches have to access their social and theological practices in light of a prior yet contiguous history of radicalism and subversion, struggle and resistance, suffering and hope displayed in the liberational forces of slave religion.<sup>212</sup>

---

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 69-72.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 68.

For Anderson, black and womanist theologians transform the ambiguous, multi-layered meaning of these narratives into instances of black liberation motifs. Because the complex meaning of slave narratives are equivocated with liberationist motifs, Anderson concludes that this “problem of equivocation” results in a hermeneutical tragedy for black and womanist theologies.

Anderson exposes the ambiguities in attempting to return to narratives in order to ascertain an authentic account of black experience. Similarly, I am aware of the hermeneutical dangers in deploying a “return to the source.” When turning to poor black women’s lived experiences as sources, it is helpful to recognize the ambiguities present when accessing the speech of poor black women, whose experiences are already being interpreted by the ethnographer or author.

Although ambiguities are present, Thomas’ “return to the source” offers a site on which to construct or substantiate a turn to poor urban black women as concrete others. As an African-American critical social theorist, I find Thomas’ injunction to “return to the source” having an important implication when deploying the standpoint of the concrete other. That importance is this: the lived experiences of poor urban black women check how differences, histories and narratives of these women are constructed and articulated within scholarly discourses and within deliberative spheres where policies are formulated surrounding poverty. For this study, a suggestion that I draw from Thomas’ position is that providing interpretive spaces within scholarly discourses (specifically womanist discourse for Thomas) in which the complex subjectivity of these women can be articulated gives substantive grounds on which to theorize poor urban black women as concrete others. For me, Thomas’ heuristic suggestions may offer some elements for a

theoretical conversation on exploring democratic possibilities towards the flourishing and thriving of poor urban black women.

Marla Fredrick's *Between Sundays* concretizes Thomas' heuristic suggestions by using ethnography to treat poor rural black women as concrete others. Fredrick discloses how poor rural black women make-meaning and subvert neo-liberal rhetoric through their spirituality. Fredrick explores the role of spirituality in the cultural production of rural black women's activism in Halifax County, North Carolina. Being a poor, rural area of the U.S. South, Halifax can be described as a place where racial divisions and economic injustices still threaten the economic stability and flourishing of most black residents. She remarks that blacks in Halifax endure social conditions that are "often characterized by limited access to job opportunities, community-health, health care, and equitable schooling."<sup>213</sup> She notes that black women in this county continue to use their faith and spirituality to influence and respond to such inhumane, social conditions. Fredrick asserts that studying the role of *spirituality* in these women's lives uncovers a key component of their motivation for acting in the world that liberationist notions of "religion" may not highlight, which then affects what analytic categories liberationist discourses might deploy as interpretive devices.

I understand Fredrick to be treating these eight poor rural black women as concrete others who themselves articulate a form of spirituality that is different from the black radical faith of liberationist theologies, such as womanist discourse. In the eight women whom Fredrick studied, their idea of spirituality moves beyond liberationist notions of an exclusively, political and radical black faith because it allows for what

---

<sup>213</sup> Marla Fredrick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): ix.



some refer to as desires that may seem “antithetical to power,” such as love, tenderness, and the search for communion.<sup>214</sup> For these women, the idea of spirituality “conveys creativity, the ability to invent, to re-interpret, to move beyond some of the limitations of ritual and static notions of religiosity.”<sup>215</sup> For example, Lynne did not trust the institutional life of the black church. Rather, she worked within the Citizens of Tillery, North Carolina (CIT), a community organization that promoted social action related to industrial inequities and other injustices Halifax citizens experienced. I understand Fredrick to be saying that the world refashioned by these women did not always coincide with traditional interpretations of black faith as radical politics in connection with black church spaces, characteristic of liberationist theological expression.

Instead, the communities that these women create and the personal transformation they inspire speak to the agential possibilities of their faith.<sup>216</sup> Such ethnographic awareness discloses the complexities and ambiguities entailed in the variegated, pluralistic religious experiences of these women of Halifax County. Fredrick suggests that traditional categories of “religion” that might be deployed in explaining poor rural black women’s experiences of faith might be re-thought in light of their lived experiences of *spirituality*. Moreover, as I read her, it is important to resist the imposition of categories on poor black women’s experiences by turning to these women’s complex subjectivity. Finally, Fredrick’s model may also be suggesting for careful readings of the lived experiences of urban black women, to see how they make meaning within their oppressive socio-cultural contexts. Such an ethnographic move may also inform what

---

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 12.

analytic categories are most useful in theorizing and conceptualizing the lives and democratic possibilities for poor urban black women.

I have intimated that Thomas' heuristic suggestions in using ethnography could substantiate conceptualizing poor urban black women as concrete others. Fredrick concretizes these suggestions by delineating poor rural black women of Halifax as "concrete others" who subvert neo-liberal rhetoric and practices. In addition, Fredrick's study of these women's complex subjectivity also provides oppositional readings from these women themselves of free-market ideology and its dream images. As stated earlier, a "return to the source" recognizes that culture is contested, interpretive terrain that is used to justify particular standpoints within American post-industrial political economy. Fredrick's work on eight poor rural black women of Halifax County provides cultural evidence of the oppressive workings of a post-industrial political economy and its adverse impact on these women, which further belies free-market ideology and its neo-liberal interests.

Fredrick provides a concrete example of how the poor rural black women of Halifax offer oppositional readings to dream images of free market ideology. One dream image of free-market ideology is access to educational opportunity in order to explore one's career path toward success. Opportunity for receiving a good education is part of the American dream wherein each person can be who he/she chooses to be. However, the types of educational injustices rural blacks experience in Halifax cause some of these women to offer oppositional readings of this dream image. During her residency in Halifax, Fredrick tutored a black female high school student in algebra. After explaining an algebraic equation to the student, Fredrick asked her did her math teacher explain it

this way. The student responded that her math teacher is really a biology instructor and does not know how to explain the material clearly.<sup>217</sup> The school district was short on teachers in her school and needed to reassign them to cover the necessary classes. Unfairly, in her sophomore year, this student “had no real math teacher.”<sup>218</sup> This lack of resources was characteristic of black schools. Consequently, the idea of a merger of some of Halifax’s white and black schools was proposed as a way to address the disparities between white and black children relative to education.<sup>219</sup>

However, Marie Carter, the first African-American woman elected to the Halifax County school board, heard “merger” with ambivalence. She provides an oppositional reading to the language of “merger,” which claimed to uphold American ideals of equality through desegregation of schools. As quoted by Fredrick, Carter states:

We wouldn’t want to subject our children to a lot of hostility just to say that they’re in a better, or, they’re getting a better opportunity. For instance, last year was the time that we’ve had black students to go to private schools...Would I send my kids there? No. It might be better. They might get better educated...But I would not send my children there. And the reason I say that is because it has always been a white only school. Just because you have a minority there, it might change the outlook, but not necessarily the inlook. See what I’m saying?<sup>220</sup>

For Carter, the idea and language of “merger” was not about the upward educational mobility of black children insofar as a potential merger could adversely affect black children’s morale in “white only” schools. Rather, the idea of a merger was aimed toward confiscation of power from black leaders (such as her) who sat on the Halifax County school board.

---

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 57.

Since the early 1990s, the Halifax County school board was predominantly African American. The turn in power on the school board to black officials has brought with it the hiring of an African-American superintendent and an increasing number of blacks as employees in the school system.<sup>221</sup> According to several informants, Fredrick maintains that whites wanted to retain leadership in order to ensure that whites would benefit financially from the system as teachers, administrators, and contractors for school renovations.<sup>222</sup> In other words, Carter interpreted “merger” as a direct challenge to the new power that African Americans have on the school board instead of a strategy to uphold the values of desegregation and the dream image of equal educational opportunity. In challenging the proposal of a merger, Carter reclaims the idea of equality of education by advocating for an equal funding policy among white and black schools in Halifax, which protects black leadership on the school board and promotes the interests of black students.

This case study holds important implications for treating poor urban black women as concrete others. Foremost, it suggests that poor urban black women may perform oppositional readings to dream images of free-market ideology. In carefully reading the lived experiences of poor urban black women, their particular narratives, histories, and stories become audible, which may expose imbalanced power relations and hegemonic authority that thwarts these women’s well-being. Such visibility and audibility effectively challenges neo-liberal rhetoric that blames urban black women for their deprivation. A suggestion that I draw from Fredrick’s study is that articulations by these women themselves can illumine educational and socio-economic practices that continue

---

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

to impede and constrain their sense of well-being, thriving, and flourishing.

Consequently, their articulations, in turn, impact how these women are represented in deliberative spheres wherein redistributive policies are formulated in response to their poverty.

### **Conditions for the Possibility of Thriving: Social Recognition & Redistribution**

For black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses, acknowledging the standpoint of the concrete other turns attention to the participatory weight of poor urban black women as concrete others within a model of deliberative democracy. This standpoint radicalizes deliberative participatory democracy in that it considers difference and individuality in conjunction with formal rights and autonomy (generalizable other). The possibility of “empathetic listening” emerges as the result of this dialectical interplay between both standpoints within the deliberative, democratic sphere. Moreover, ethnography substantiates this move toward empathetic listening. Ethnography, coordinated with other sources and methods, can substantiate turning to poor urban black women as concrete others who stand in need of cultural celebration and economic relief.

The standpoint of the concrete other also acknowledges the importance of articulating a politics of social recognition that addresses problems of difference, power relations, and authority. Within the context of deliberative democracy, a politics of social recognition, aimed at “empathetic listening” among citizens, can promote conditions for the possibility of thriving for poor urban black women. As stated in chapter one, I define thriving as possessing the cultural, economic, and social resources to participate on par with one’s peers within society. While I have addressed subjective goods (such as social recognition through the “concrete other”) as necessary conditions toward thriving for

poor urban black women, I have not addressed the relationship between objective and subjective goods in fostering prospects of thriving for these women.

As discussed in chapter two, progressive liberal institutions and practices, as reflected in the Moynihan report, expressed deeper values of thriving for all members of society. The report and its liberal ideals argued that the least advantaged need to experience equality of opportunity and results, if thriving is to be a possibility for all citizens of society. Within the logic of progressive liberalism is the idea that government should protect and promote the interests of those who continue to be oppressed and repressed in order for America to make good on its promise as a “land of liberty and justice for all.” However, progressive liberalism of the Great Society erred in two major ways. It did not provide spaces wherein poor urban black women’s lived experiences are heard and articulated in crafting structural solutions. As intimated in the report, progressive liberalism did not treat these women as concrete others by considering their complex subjectivities. Moreover, progressive liberalism did not consider a politics of redistribution as separate yet interrelated to a politics of social recognition for these women.

In light of progressive liberalism’s failures, the conditions for the possibility of thriving must explore the relationship and moral significance between social recognition of the “concrete other” and a politics of redistribution for poor urban black women. Although Benhabib does not explicitly connect her project of social recognition with goals of redistribution, Benhabib’s politics of social recognition (through the concrete other) implicitly acknowledges that cultural/symbolic inequalities often exclude marginalized groups from objective goods such as food, shelter, employment, health,

education and the like. Distribution and recognition are often not neatly separated from each other within capitalist societies. Economic inequalities and income distributive issues often have recognition subtexts in which labor market activities privilege activities coded “white” over “black,” “masculine” over “feminine,” and “heterosexual” over “homosexual.” Conversely, recognition issues have redistributive subtexts in which the diminishing of economic resources may impede marginalized groups from equal participation in aspects of cultural valuation.<sup>223</sup>

While Benhabib’s politics of social recognition (through the generalizable other and concrete other) provides valuable insights on how poor urban black women should be socially recognized within institutionalized deliberative spheres, her politics of recognition does not sufficiently address two problems that often plague approaches to “recognition of difference”: the reification of group identities and the displacement of redistribution. As stated in the previous chapter, poor urban black women are not a monolith. They have differing experiences of poverty. Moreover, these women stand in need of economic relief, which renders economic justice important to their flourishing. Benhabib’s “recognition of difference” (concrete other) does not address how to avoid the problem of identity politics (appropriating the same identity to all poor urban black women). Moreover, she does not discuss the relationship between subjective goods (social recognition) and objective goods (redistribution) that are necessary conditions for thriving.

Nancy Fraser argues that a politics aimed at “recognition of difference” usually employs an “identity model” approach, which reinforces these two aforementioned problems. Fraser describes this identity model.

---

<sup>223</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition,” *New Left Review* 3, May-June 2000: 6.

In this perspective, the politics of recognition aims to repair internal self-dislocation by contesting the dominant culture's demeaning picture of the group. It proposes that members of misrecognized groups reject such images in favor of new self-representations of their own making, jettisoning internalized, negative identities and joining collectively to produce a self-affirming culture of their own – which publicly asserted, will gain the respect and esteem of society at large. The result, when successful, is “recognition”: an undistorted relation to oneself.<sup>224</sup>

While this model contains insights on the effects of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and cultural imperialism upon marginalized groups within society, it treats misrecognition of persons as a problem of cultural depreciation and demeaning cultural representations. They strip misrecognition of its social-structural underpinnings and equate it with distorted identity. With the politics of recognition reduced to identity politics, the politics of redistribution is displaced.<sup>225</sup>

While this model appreciates that cultural injustices are often linked to economic inequalities, this identity model misunderstands the character of these links. Within this model, “economic inequalities are simple expressions of cultural hierarchies” in which “maldistribution can be remedied indirectly, by a politics of recognition” in that “to revalue unjustly devalued identities is simultaneously to attack deep sources of economic inequality.”<sup>226</sup> Consequently, no explicit politics of redistribution is needed. The politics of social recognition displaces a politics of redistribution, which could be seen as a reverse of vulgar Marxism (in which a politics of redistribution displaces a politics of recognition). Under the identity model, identity depreciation translates perfectly and immediately into economic injustice. Hence, social recognition counters mal-distribution as well.

---

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.



However, markets within advanced American capitalism follow a logic of their own, neither wholly constrained by cultural patterns nor subordinate to them. Markets generate economic disparities and inequalities that are not merely expressions of identity hierarchies. As discussed in chapter three, the shift from an industrial economy to a post-industrial economy and its associated economic miseries are the result of economic variables within labor markets and economic structures that cannot be radically reduced to cultural hierarchies and valuations. Economic miseries within America's post-industrial society have generated an American underclass in which poor whites are deeply affected as poor urban black women are. As a result, this "identity model" approach to social recognition does not fully address the economic injustices poor urban black women experience within a neo-liberal economy where mal-distribution occurs.

Moreover, this identity model tends to reify identity itself. Stressing the need to generate a healthy, affirming collective identity, it puts pressure on individual members to conform to a given group culture. Fraser notes that the overall effect is "to impose a single, drastically simplified group-identity which denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations."<sup>227</sup> As a result, the identity model approach ends up reinforcing misrecognition, obscuring struggles *within* the group for power and authority in representing it.<sup>228</sup> Because struggles within a group are hidden from view, this model reinforces intra-group domination and repressive forms of communitarianism and intolerance.

Within this study, womanist discourse singularly explains poor black women's socio-economic subordination as a problem of social recognition by appealing to the

---

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

history of oppressed black women as a group. This discourse contends that White supremacy and its associated cultural representations such as “matriarch” and “welfare queen” perpetuate economic miseries and impoverished, debilitating conditions for these women. This discourse implies: a) that white supremacy alone is responsible for poor urban black women’s economic miseries and b) that poor urban black women’s blight is akin to the oppressive history of all black women as a group. These two assumptions obscure the different character of economic oppression black women experience within an urban underclass that middle to upper class black women do not experience.

In similar fashion, as seen through the “Moynihan report,” liberal discourse reifies poor urban black women’s identity as suffering agents who are marked by single-parenting, fatherlessness, crime, and youth under-development. Liberal discourse does not disclose how poor urban black women are constituted by differing, multiple narratives and stories that reflect their experiences of poverty. Moreover, liberal discourse argues that the economic status of urban blacks would improve if structural solutions addressed the effects of slavery and discrimination upon poor blacks, which displaced the economic and redistributive problems that poor urban blacks confronted from 1960s onward due to shifts in American political economy.

I argue that for black feminist, womanist, and liberal discourses, the goal is to conceptualize struggles for recognition as distinct yet interrelated to struggles for redistribution so that neither displacement nor reification occurs. I find Fraser helpful in articulating the relationship and moral significance between social recognition and redistribution when exploring the conditions for the possibility of thriving for poor urban black women, who stand in need of positive cultural valuation and distribution relief.

Nancy Fraser argues that a politics of social recognition and redistribution are separate yet interrelated in ensuring participatory parity for all members within society. Fraser devises a two-dimensional conception of justice “that can accommodate both defensible claims for social [economic] equality and defensible claims for recognition of difference.”<sup>229</sup> She refers to this two-dimensional conception of justice as *participatory parity*, being each person possessing the cultural, economic, and social resources to participate on par with one’s peers within society (assumes equality of economic participation and respect of differences).

The notion of participatory parity encompasses both an objective condition and inter-subjective condition. The inter-subjective condition (being a politics of social recognition) “ensures that the institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem.”<sup>230</sup> It precludes institutionalized norms and cultural values that systematically depreciate some categories of people and the qualities associated with them that subordinates and impedes their flourishing and thriving.<sup>231</sup> Such inter-subjective condition recognizes that cultural norms can impede parity of participation for some groups whose difference is characterized as socially “deviant.” The objective condition (being a politics of redistribution) “precludes forms and levels of economic dependence and inequality that impede parity of participation.”<sup>232</sup> Moreover, “precluded are social arrangements and institutionalized deprivation, exploitation, gross disparities of wealth and income...thereby denying some people the means and opportunities to interact with other

---

<sup>229</sup> Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Verso, 2003): 9.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

peers.”<sup>233</sup> Fraser submits both of these inter-subjective and objective dimensions to the overarching norm of participatory parity in articulating a single integrated, normative framework for social justice.

The norm of participatory parity recognizes that social justice involves a singular approach and principle that integrates both a politics of social recognition and a politics of redistribution. Fraser notes that this two-dimensional concept of justice is irreducible to the other. These two conditions reflect the two-dimensional conception of participatory parity that attempts to ensure that the symbolic/cultural *and* material aspects of injustices are addressed. In addition, Fraser notes that discursive, democratic procedures are the best way of dealing with issues of recognition and redistribution. Hence, Fraser argues that “the norm of participatory parity can be applied dialogically and discursively, through democratic processes of public debate.”<sup>234</sup>

Fraser’s norm of participatory parity rethinks social recognition in addressing the problems of reified group identity and displacement of redistributive goals within deliberative democracy. This norm treats recognition as a question of social status wherein “recognition is not specific-group identity but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction.”<sup>235</sup> For participatory parity, misrecognition does not mean deformation of group identity but social subordination in that one cannot participate on par with peers in social life. Misrecognition is no longer reduced to a question of identity. Rather, it means articulating a politics that establishes the misrecognized party as a full member of society, capable of participating on par with peers. Establishing a misrecognized party as a full member in society involves turning to

---

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>235</sup> Nancy Fraser, Article, 4.

institutionalized relations of subordination, which are operative at multiple sites such as labor markets, property regimes, cultural spheres, and the like. Hence, through the norm of participatory parity, misrecognition is not reduced to the cultural sphere but is present at multiple sites which are cultural and economic in scope.

Fraser's norm of participatory parity is helpful when addressing oppressive aspects of culture and economy that contribute to the deprivation of poor urban black women. The norm of participatory parity is a "status model" rather than an identity model that situates the problem of social recognition within a larger social frame. From this perspective, societies are complex fields that possess not only cultural forms of ordering but also economic forms of ordering.<sup>236</sup> In societies, these two forms of ordering interpenetrate each other. Because cultural value patterns do not strictly dictate economic allocations nor do economic class inequalities simply reflect identity hierarchies within advanced capitalist societies, mal-distribution becomes partially decoupled from misrecognition. Hence, from this perspective, not all instances of distributive injustices can be overcome by recognition alone. A politics of redistribution is necessary. Hence, the norm of participatory parity mitigates the problems of displacement of redistribution and reification of group identity. When articulating prospects of thriving for poor urban black women, their prospects are not assessed in terms of group identity. Rather, their prospects of thriving are assessed by asking if each poor urban black woman has the cultural, economic, and social resources to participate on par with her peers within society.

Because poor urban black women do not presently experience participatory parity, they are limited on what they can *do and be* within America. Poor urban black women

---

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 6.

suffer from a lack of cultural resources due to the social stigmatization they continue to experience. They also suffer from political marginalization by an absence of social recognition, which vitiates their ability to participate in institutionalized decision-making structures. Moreover, they experience a structural absence of economic and employment opportunities, which leads to material deprivation and poverty. As a result, poor urban black women do not have the inter-subjective and objective conditions to participate on par with other groups and individuals within American society. This lack of participatory parity deeply affects their confidence and esteem as well as their economic status as societal members. This notion of participatory parity recognizes that cultural disrespect and economic inequities thwart poor urban black women's prospects towards self-actualization and thriving.

Understanding the distinct yet interrelated relationship between recognition and redistribution is central to articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving for these women. The 1996 TANF welfare reform debate is an example of how the "identity model" of social recognition displaced redistributive goals for poor urban black women. These women were invited to speak (as generalizable others) about their experiences of poverty at congressional hearings on welfare reform.<sup>237</sup> The few women that offered their experiences within these hearings were seen as describing the identity of all urban black women on welfare. Moreover, democratic electorates assumed that if these women were socially recognized (having the presence of such women at the "decision-making table"), redistributive goals for these women would follow. As discussed in chapter

---

<sup>237</sup> For information on the marginalization of welfare recipient voices, refer to Holloway Sparks, "Queens Teens, and Model Mothers: Race, Gender, and the Discourse of Welfare Reform," *Race and Politics of Welfare Reform*, eds. Sanford Schram, Joes Soss, and Richard Fording. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

three, inequitable experiences such as labor market discrimination, the absence of living wage and childcare, and a lack of transportation contribute to the continued perpetuation of these women's poverty. Yet, such mal-distribution was unaddressed because democratic electorates assumed that these women's material conditions would improve by socially recognizing them as they crafted such policy. Despite the goal of TANF to improve poor women's deprivation, mal-distribution persisted and the deprivation of poor urban black women was even exacerbated in some cases due to this policy. The case study of Cheryl Harvey illustrates this point.

In 1995, Cheryl Harvey lived in a poor, urban neighborhood in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with her five children.<sup>238</sup> She was on welfare. Because the children had been physically abused by someone outside the family, the entire family was in counseling and on medication. Cheryl decided that she would remain home (rather than work) to rear her children who were having personal problems. Under the welfare system at the time (Aid to Families with Dependent Children – AFDC), the government provided Medicaid health insurance benefits for Cheryl's family as long as she did not work. Consequently, fearing she would lose their Medicaid benefits, she did not apply for any jobs.

However, Cheryl's situation took a turn for the worse when Wisconsin instituted work requirements in an early form of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF – which replaced AFDC throughout the nation in 1996), which grounded the rationale of welfare in the neo-liberal assumption that poor women needed to develop work ethics in order to transcend poverty and flourish. Cheryl was required to work to receive basic income under Wisconsin's new welfare policy, but she could not find a job. She states,

---

<sup>238</sup> This case study was taken from Amy Gutmann's *Ethics and Politics: Cases and Comments* (Canada: Thomas Nelson, 2006): 357-359.

“I was going everywhere, even out in the boondocks, putting in applications. Nothing was coming up.”<sup>239</sup> Cheryl wanted to work – employment would mean independence from the welfare system, which she felt was degrading and limited her family’s opportunities in life. She worried about the effect of welfare on her children, saying it “gave them a negative outlook on things.”<sup>240</sup> Although she finally found a job, it offered no health insurance to her family. Consequently, Cheryl did not take the job. It was not that she was unwilling to work; she simply was unwilling to accept a job that would leave her family without health insurance.

In Milwaukee, Cheryl was not the only woman who was adversely affected by TANF. Other women complained that jobs were unavailable. Some women lamented over the problem of minimum wage, which could not support their families. Other women argued that they were not receiving the necessary educational and occupational training needed to get hired on particular jobs that paid enough to bring them above poverty level line. Many women in Milwaukee felt that the government’s decision of TANF was doing more harm than good.

In turning to black feminist, womanist and liberal discourses, their cultural arguments imply that if Cheryl’s interests and experiences are socially recognized within deliberative democracy, her material conditions of poverty would be directly addressed in efforts of improving her life chances. In applying the norm of participatory parity to Cheryl’s experience of TANF, addressing the possibility of thriving for poor urban black women is not just an issue of these women being socially recognized as concrete others.

---

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 358.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.



As individual members of society, they must be given the economic resources (through a politics of redistribution) to participate on par with their peers.

Through participatory parity, a politics of social recognition and redistribution can be theorized in a way that addresses poor urban black women's experiences of both misrecognition and mal-distribution. Cheryl's case study suggests that mal-distribution continued to affect her life chances as a poor urban black woman. A few redistributive issues that faced the immediate context of Cheryl include the absence of living wage, poor education, and inadequate healthcare and childcare. As discussed in chapter three, both wage discrimination and unpaid domestic labor continue to impede poor urban black women's economic well-being. Poor education for these women does not prepare them to compete in a post-industrial society. Moreover, inadequate healthcare and childcare create dehumanizing conditions for these women who are now demographically younger (teenage age) than in the early 1960s. TANF was unable to address such issues of mal-distribution that Cheryl endured because it turned to a politics of recognition that displaced redistributive goals for these women.

These economic injustices that face poor urban black women express deeper needs towards economic restructuring of America's post-industrial political economy, an aspect of economy that an "identity model" of recognition does not capture. While this study's aim is not to give an exhaustive account of how American political economy might be restructured, I do think it is important to gesture towards what broad actions of economic restructuring might be of principal importance in articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving for these women. Such economic restructuring might include: wage equity, affordable childcare, employment opportunities with on-site job training,

and educational opportunities for poor urban black women. When reviewing Cheryl's experience of deprivation, such broad actions of economic restructuring could benefit women who experience an absence of structural opportunities such as Cheryl.

In articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving, black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses must rethink social recognition (through the standpoint of the concrete other) and theorize the relationship between recognition and redistribution. The norm of participatory parity enables the aforementioned discourses to theorize how culture and economy are distinct yet interrelated in structuring the life-chances and opportunities of poor urban black women. A politics of social recognition would do well to not displace redistributive goals for these women. Moreover, a politics of recognition must avoid reifying "poor urban black women" as a group identity. I have maintained that poor urban black women can be treated as concrete others wherein their complex subjectivity is accounted for to uncover how they make meaning and transcend debilitating conditions of culture and economy. Moreover, when a politics of recognition (through the standpoint of the concrete other) is theorized in relationship to a politics of redistribution, poor urban black women's experiences of misrecognition and mal-distribution can be held together in articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving for them.

### **Summary**

This chapter argues that black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses would do well to rethink social recognition and its relationship to goals of redistribution. While these aforementioned discourses have operationalized the standpoint of the generalizable other in articulating prospects of thriving within

deliberative democracy, they have not explored the dialectical interplay between the standpoints of the generalizable other and concrete other. Because poor urban black women are constituted by differing narratives and stories of deprivation, their “differences” must be accounted for within democratic deliberative processes. This dialectical interplay between these two standpoints creates the possibility of “empathetic listening,” which enables democratic electorates to enter into the unique experiences of these women in crafting and implementing public policies.

I also argue that turning to poor urban black women as concrete others can be substantiated by using ethnography. Ethnography, coordinated with social critical theory, participates in patiently listening to these women’s complex subjectivities. While Thomas’ “return to the source” possesses limitations, it offers a site on which to theorize poor urban black women as concrete others within deliberative spaces wherein policy decisions are made. Moreover, Fredrick concretizes Thomas heuristic suggestions by treating poor urban black women as concrete others who articulate their complex subjectivities and perform oppositional readings to dream images of free-market ideology. As I read her, Fredrick’s study of these eight women may be suggesting for careful readings of the lived experiences of urban black women, to see how they make meaning within their oppressive socio-cultural contexts. Such an ethnographic move may also inform what analytic categories are most useful in conceptualizing the lives and prospects of thriving for poor urban black women.

While Benhabib, Thomas, and Fredrick provide ways of rethinking social recognition within deliberative democracy, Fraser explores the relationship and moral significance between recognition and redistribution. Because poor urban black women

stand in need of positive cultural valuation and economic relief, redistributive goals are essential to their prospects of thriving. However, the “identity model” has often reified group identity and displaced redistributive aims. As a result, the conditions for the possibility of thriving for poor urban black women should entail theorizing social recognition as distinct yet interrelated to redistribution.

Fraser’s norm of participatory parity conceives recognition as interrelated yet discrete from redistribution. Participatory parity ensures that poor urban black women have the inter-subjective condition (recognition) and objective condition (redistribution) in order to experience the possibility of flourishing. Participatory parity addresses both mal-distribution and misrecognition within society, without reducing the two to each other. Consequently, through participatory parity, one can see how culture and economy collude in structuring the life-chances of poor urban black women in America. In order to articulate the conditions for the possibility of thriving for these women, black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses should re-conceptualize recognition and its relationship to redistribution, which creates prospects toward meaning and fullness of life for poor urban black women.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FROM THIS STUDY

As stated in the introduction, this project emerges out of a my own personal wrestling with the ways in which poor urban black women are portrayed within American media and public policy (as indolent women who are impoverished due to their own moral failures) and how womanist theology and ethics has responded to such a faulty logic. Generated by the American media and neo-liberal rhetoric, stereotypical images of poor urban black women obscure and even mask the manner in which economic practices collude with fallacious cultural representations in generating cycles of deprivation for these women. As a critical social theorist deeply invested in womanist theo-ethical discourse and its privileging of black women's oppression and liberation, I am in this project particularly concerned with the ways that this discourse addresses poor urban black women's poverty and their prospects toward fulfillment and flourishing.

In this dissertation, I have advanced the claim that critical social theory can ally with womanist theo-ethical discourse in illuminating poor urban black women's socio-economic subordination but especially their prospects toward thriving and flourishing, which I find under-theorized in womanist discourse. Womanist theo-ethical discourse provides cultural analysis for explaining black women's historical and current socio-economic subordination. Yet, economic analysis has remained largely unaddressed, which does not allow one to explore the relationship between culture and economy in structuring the life-chances of poor urban black women. Poor urban black women continue to experience intergenerational cycles of deprivation and poverty because of a

post-industrial economy and its neo-liberal structures, attitudes, and practices.

Consequently, womanist discourse would do well to uncover the manner in which neo-liberal economic structures collude with deceptive cultural images in impeding poor urban black women's well-being and flourishing.

I began this study by positing that critical social theory as “ideology critique” uncovers the roots and possibilities of crisis within advanced capitalist arrangements. It performs two tasks that are essential to womanist discourse exploring the relationship between culture and economy. While the first task is unmasking capitalistic logics of domination and hegemony that oppress, the second task is articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving and flourishing within advanced capitalist arrangements. For womanist discourse, this first task involves exposing the legitimation crisis of free-market ideology and decoding its real interests and neo-liberal practices that reinforce the socio-economic subjugation of poor urban black women. As stated, free-market ideology employs both fallacious cultural images and inequitable economic practices that impede opportunities for these women to flourish. Moreover, womanist theo-ethical discourse has largely failed to address the second task, namely, articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving for poor urban black women within advanced capitalist arrangements. In order to offer a vision of human fulfillment and flourishing for these women, womanist discourse would do well to move beyond notions of survival to visions of thriving for these women who stand in need of economic relief.

After exploring a critical social theory as “ideology critique” that relates culture and economy to poor urban black women's crises within advanced capitalist arrangements, I turn to the ways that womanist theo-ethical discourse has taken up the

problem of culture in relationship to black women's poverty, through an analysis of the "Moynihan Report." Because womanist discourse has been deeply influenced by both black feminist and black neo-conservative readings of the report, I assess the ideological readings of all three discourses in relationship to The Report. Over the last two decades, womanist discourse has castigated The Report for buttressing fallacious cultural representations such as "matriarch" and "welfare queen" which contribute to the socio-economic subordination of poor urban black women. While black feminist discourse has equally castigated The Report for its reinforcement of destructive cultural representations about poor urban black women, black neo-conservative logic has blamed The Report for its progressive liberal aims that have bolstered the personal irresponsibility and cultural failures of poor black women, which womanist discourse has sought to debunk.

However, I disagree with these three discourses' (black feminist, womanist, and liberal) ideological readings of The Report. I offer a genealogical reading of The Report, which situates it within the context of the Great Society. Lyndon Baines Johnson's vision of the Great society contends that the American government should defend the needs and interests of its least advantaged segments by identifying the manner in which structures perpetuate injustices. Moreover, this brand of progressive liberalism argues that "equality of opportunity" and "equality of results" are absolutely essential in ensuring opportunity for under-privileged, alienated communities. My genealogy sought to rescue the liberal aims of the Great Society under-girding The Report, which anticipates a democratic vision of thriving and flourishing for poor urban black women.

While The Report can be positively assessed in relationship to the liberal aims that under-girded it, it failed in two respects. First, it largely attributed the socio-

economic oppression of urban blacks to the lingering affects of slavery and discrimination, which reduces the concrete economic miseries of poor urban black women to cultural inequalities. Although The Report discusses how unemployment contributes to the deprivation of black urban communities, it does not interrogate the manner in which a post-industrial society and its neo-liberal economic practices continue to frustrate the life chances of poor urban blacks, which prevents one from understanding the way in which culture and economy relate. Second, The Report does not make room for the complex subjectivity of poor urban black women themselves in order to understand their unique experiences of deprivation and poverty. Similarly, black feminist, womanist, and liberal discourses also fail in these two respects.

In response to these failures, this study offers a structuralist account of poor urban black women's poverty. This study uncovers how major shifts in American political economy from 1960s onward have adversely affected persons across all races, producing a black urban underclass within a larger American underclass. It is not the cultural deficiencies of poor urban black women but a post-industrial political economy and its neo-liberal practices that have contributed to the economic miseries of these women. Moving from the deployment of racism as the single explanatory factor contributing to black poverty, black political scientist Marcellus Andrews and black sociologist William Julius Wilson explore how such economic miseries are associated with the decline of manufacturing jobs in urban areas and a sharp increase in technological, service-oriented jobs that demand increasing professionalization and higher degrees of educational attainment. The unskilled labor of urban residents (such as poor urban black women)



who had worked in manufacturing jobs could no longer find work in a growing service-oriented sector.

Consequently, their labor was left behind, contributing to intergenerational cycles of poverty and cultural disappointment. Andrews and Wilson demonstrate that free-market ideology and its argument of “black cultural deficiencies” do not explain the economic miseries of poor urban black women in the twenty-first century. Rather, post-industrial economic structures have exacerbated and reinforced conditions that impede poor urban black women’s well being. When identifying how shifts in a post-industrial economy have reinforced the deprivation for urban black women, neo-liberal interests of free-market ideology are exposed.

While Wilson and Andrews are important in understanding the manner in which American political economy contributes to the socio-economic subordination of poor urban black communities, Patricia Hill Collins discloses the unique experiences of poverty among urban black women, which involve issues centering on work, family, and children. Poor urban black women continue to experience low wages within typically female jobs, unpaid domestic labor, and the responsibility of being the sole caretaker of black children. Their unique experiences of urban poverty are not solely grounded in misleading cultural representations but are also grounded in unfair economic practices within American political economy.

While it is important to unmask the ways that free-market ideology and its real interests collude with cultural images in frustrating poor urban black women’s well being, throughout this dissertation I foreground the necessity of articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving for them. In articulating prospects of thriving, I

have argued that black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses must explore the dialectical interplay between the standpoints of the “generalizable other” and “concrete other” within a model of deliberative democracy in order to account for how these women make meaning and articulate their own prospects of flourishing. Drawing upon feminist critical theorist Seyla Benhabib, I assert that this dialectical interplay between both standpoints fosters “empathetic listening” within deliberative democracy wherein the complex subjectivities of poor urban black women are considered and intersubjectively understood. Moreover, I turned to the ethnography of cultural anthropologists of religion such as Linda Thomas and Marla Fredrick for substantiating my turn to poor urban black women as concrete others.

Benhabib’s discussion of the “generalizable other” and “concrete other” are important elements of critical social theory and help to illuminate the social standing of poor urban black women within a black underclass. Her analysis is substantiated subjectively and materially in feminist critical theorist Nancy Fraser’s discussion of a politics of social recognition and redistribution. Because poor urban black women stand in need of cultural celebration and economic relief, black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses would do well to explore not only the “generalizable other” and “concrete other” but also Fraser’s distinction between a politics of recognition and redistribution. Fraser describes her theory as participatory parity. Participatory parity is each person in society possessing the cultural, economic, and social resources to participate on par with his/her peers. Fraser’s norm of participatory parity provides a larger social framework in which social recognition and redistribution can be addressed in a manner not reductive to “identity politics.” It also undertakes the manner in which

individual poor urban black women suffer deprivation in order to identify and determine the cultural, social, and economic resources they need individually to participate on par with their peers.

Fraser moves me substantively toward a politics of recognition that acknowledges that all poor urban black women are not equal in social, cultural, and economic needs. Therefore, one must address public policies relative to a politics of redistribution that recognizes individual differences within the class of poor urban black women. In this dissertation, I turn to the case study of Cheryl and the negative consequences of 1996 TANF welfare reform act, which exacerbated her poverty status rather than providing relief. The points explained in this paragraph represent the thesis I have been offering throughout the dissertation, namely that critical social theory offers womanist theological discourse a necessary methodological turn in order to relate culture and economy, which explores the relationship and moral significance between recognition and redistribution in articulating the conditions for the possibility of thriving for poor urban black women.

This study holds significance for black feminist, womanist, liberal, and neo-liberal discourses. Foremost, the deployment of critical social theory as “ideology critique” addresses the debate over sources and methods within womanist theology and ethics. There has been much discussion within black liberationist circles on what sources should ground its modes of doing theology. Should black and womanist theologies and ethics be grounded in only black sources? To what extent can white sources be used in constructing an ethics of liberation and flourishing for blacks in America? If one uses non-black sources or theories, how should they be appropriated? These questions frame

the problems associated with sources and methods within womanist discourse. Because womanist theo-ethical discourse explicitly claims to ground its theology in the lived experiences of black women, one might wonder how this turn to critical social theory deals with the “source and method” quandary.

I stand in agreement with Katie Cannon that the appropriation of sources must be determined by how well they are able to illumine black women’s oppression and subsequent need for liberation and well-being. As discussed in the introduction, Cannon aptly addresses the contentious debates that swirled around the usage of white feminist scholarship in womanist theorizing. She asserts that every “African-American scholar who is consciously concerned with ‘the liberation of a whole people’ must work to eradicate the criterion of legitimacy that implicitly presumes an absolute incompatibility between womanist critical scholarship and White feminist liberationist sources” (confer introduction, page 5). For Cannon, womanist scholarship must stay open to more creative horizons in research and writing. Consequently, she cautions that “[womanist scholars] staying open-minded as heterogeneous theoreticians may prove to be the most difficult ethical challenge in securing and extending the legacy of our intellectual life” (confer with the introduction, page 5). I contend that staying open to theoretical frameworks such as critical social theory remains important to the womanist project of emancipation and flourishing for black women in North America.

While womanist discourse rightfully prioritizes black women’s experience as primary in shaping its theology and ethics, I argue that critical social theory provides a rigorous critical methodology for the critique of hegemonic logic and structures that impede black women’s well-being within our current post-industrial political economy.

As method, it provides womanist discourse with critical conceptual and analytic tools for illuminating and unmasking oppressive realities that black women endure within advanced capitalist arrangements. It can also be deployed for the purpose of determining the conditions for the possibility of poor urban black women's thriving within these arrangements.

Regarding poor urban black women as "concrete others" and not solely as "generalizable others" as well as considering, in the politics of recognition, their complex subjectivities is essential for providing richer and deeper theological insights into the lived experiences of poor urban black women. What womanist discourse gains from Thomas and Fredrick's ethnographic practices is the discipline of empathetic listening. Rather than positioning itself as the voice of poor urban black women, womanist theo-ethical discourse would do well in its theological constructions to develop the practice of empathetic listening as clue to an understanding and articulation of poor urban black women's spirituality, personal transformation, and social action within their conditions of deprivation. Womanist discourse would do well to probe the ways in which these women make meaning in the world of faith and action as they endure economic dislocation and cultural alienation. The manner in which these women articulate their spirituality, faith, actions, and desires to thrive should be essential for womanist theo-ethical discourse on black women's urban poverty and flourishing.

Attending to the complex subjectivities of poor urban black women might enable womanist discourse to better describe in non-reductive ways the habits, practices, and meanings of poor urban black women's religious activities oriented toward transcendence. This study suggests that by turning to poor black women's spirituality,

one can see the myriad ways these women participate in creative agency. As Fredrick shows, if the black church is not engaged in political change, it does not mean that poor black women who may be a part of the black church (or women who may not be involved in black churches) are not engaged. These women embody their faith and forms of activism even when, at times, their church does not. When considering the complex subjectivities of poor urban black women, womanist theo-ethical discourse can track the manner in which these women make spiritual meaning and the ways they deploy their faith toward personal/public transformation, despite debilitating material conditions reinforced by American capitalism.

The turn to critical social theory in womanist discourse holds its greatest benefit for analyzing public policies directed toward the plight of poor urban black women. This has been a major focus of this dissertation. I contend that womanist theology and ethics oriented toward public policy requires a vision of radical deliberative democracy that addresses the manner in which social recognition and redistribution of objective goods ground the conditions for the possibility of thriving for poor urban black women. Womanist theo-ethical discourse acknowledges the significance of public policy insofar as it controls and regulates the material realities of poor black women. However, this discourse has not advanced a model of deliberative democracy that promotes flourishing and thriving for these women.

This study offers a model of deliberative democracy to womanist theo-ethical discourse that re-thinks social recognition and theorizes the relationship between recognition and redistribution. The poverty of urban black women is not only a theological problem; it is a political problem that necessitates responsible political and

economic responses. The radicalization of deliberative democracy through the dual standpoints of the “generalizable other” and “concrete other” enables womanist discourse to articulate a political strategy that foregrounds conditions under which the material realities of poor urban black women can be ameliorated.

This study can also provide insight for womanist, black feminist, liberal and neo-liberal discourses insofar as it interprets the manner in which culture and economy collude in the perpetuation of urban black women’s poverty. Dissimilar to neo-liberal logic that blames urban black women for their impoverishment and black feminist and womanist discourses that focus on aspects of culture in the maintenance of these women’s deprivation, this study demonstrates that inequitable economic structures and fallacious cultural representations work together in maintaining these women’s poverty. Oppressive economic structures and closure of opportunities for a black urban underclass must be critiqued and morally denounced instead of blaming the victims as neo-liberalism does. Fallacious cultural images that also devalue these women must be equally rejected. The moral problem is not these women. I have argued for the centrality of political economy, on one hand, and critical social theory, on the other, for understanding the formation of black urban women’s poverty in our post-industrial society that perpetuates intergenerational cycles of deprivation and alienation for them. Consequently, urban poverty-related behavior (i.e. crime, nihilism, etc.) is best interpreted as *outcome* of inequitable political-economic structural factors that maintain urban black women’s poverty.

My thesis, therefore, throughout the dissertation may now finally be articulated as this: critical social theory as “ideology critique” offers a rigorous method for womanist

theology and ethics for addressing urban black women's poverty and the conditions for the possibility of thriving within our post-industrial political economy of American capitalism. Critical social theory not only provides the conceptual and analytic categories and tools in interrogating and unmasking American political economy and its neo-liberal practices but also supplies a theory in creating the possibility for securing objective and subjective goods by theorizing the relationship and moral significance between social recognition and redistribution. Holding recognition and redistribution in a dialectical relationship enables womanist discourse to analyze public policies in order to determine if they offer each individual poor urban black woman the necessary economic, social, and cultural resources to participate on par with her peers. Poor urban black women need more than survival. They deserve to thrive.

It is my hope that this project can be used by womanists, black feminists, and other scholars who share similar interests in advancing public policies that improve the material realities of poor urban black women. I also hope that womanist theology and ethics can use this project in reflecting on the manner in which they do theology. Because womanist discourse positions itself as emerging out of the lived experiences of poor black women, a social-theoretical framework is needed that can make room for poor black women's complex subjectivities, which shows the plurality of these women's experiences, the ways they make meaning, and conditions under which they can thrive and flourish.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abramovitz, Mimi. *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy From Colonial Times to Present*. New York: South End Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999.
- Andersen, Margaret. *Thinking About Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1983, 2002.
- Anderson, Victor. *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious Criticism*. NY: Continuum, 199, 1998.
- Andrews, Marcellus. *The Political Economy of Hope and Fear: Capitalism and the Black Condition in America*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Arato, Andrew and Eike Gebhardt (eds.). *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 2005.
- Baker-Fletcher, Karen. "The Difference Race Makes." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, no.2 (1992): 7-15.
- Bell, Winfred. *Aid to Dependent Children*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966.
- Benhabib, Seyla (ed.). *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Brock, William. *Welfare, Democracy, and the New Deal*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Brown, Michael. *Race, Money, and the American Welfare State*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.

- Brubaker, Pamela. *Women Don't Count: The Challenge of Women's Poverty to Christian Ethics*. American Academy of Religion, no. 87. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994.
- Burrow, Rufus, Jr. "Development of Womanist Theology: Some Chief Characteristics." *Asbury Theological Journal* 54, no.1 (Spring 1999): 41-57.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Enter Womanist Theology and Ethics." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 22 (1998): 19-29
- Cannon, Katie. *Black Womanist Ethics*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism" Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. New York: Pergamon, 1985.
- Cohen, Elizabeth. *Making a New Deal*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Cone, James H. *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984.
- Crenson, Matthew. *Building the Invisible Orphanage: A Prehistory of the American Welfare System*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Davis, Angela. *Women, Race, and Class*. New York: Random House, 1981.
- DeParle, Jason. *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare*. New York: Viking Adult, 2004.
- Douglas, Kelly Brown. *The Black Christ*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999.
- Edelman, Marian Wright. *Families in Peril: An Agenda for Social Change*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.

- Farkas, Steve. *The Values We Live By: What Americans Want From Welfare Reform*. New York: South End Press, 1996.
- Floyd-Thomas, Stacey. *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
- Floyd-Thomas, Stacey. *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006.
- Fraser, Nancy. *Unruly Practices: Power Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1989.
- Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
- Funciello, Theresa. *Tyranny of Kindness: Dismantling the Welfare System to End Poverty in America*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994.
- Giddings, Paula. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984.
- Gilens, Martin. *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Goldberg, D.T., ed. *Anatomy of Racism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.
- Goldberg, Gertrude and Shelia Collins. *Washington's New Poor Law: Welfare Reform and the Roads not Taken, 1935 to Present*. Muscat: Apex Pr, 2001.
- Gordon, Linda. *Pitied but not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Grant, Jacquelyn. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.
- Hacker, Jacob. *The Divided Welfare State: The Battle Over Public and Private Social Benefits in the United States*. Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Harley, Sharon and Rosalyn Tarborg-Penn, eds. *The Afro-American Woman, Struggles, and Images*. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1978.
- Hawley, Ellis. *The Great War and the Search for Modern Order*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.

- Hayes, Diana. *Hagar's Daughters: Womanist Ways of Being in the World*. New York: Paulist Press, 1995.
- Heyward, Carter. *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Holmes, Barbara. *A Private Woman in Public Spaces: Barbara Jordan's Speeches on Ethics, Public Religion, and Law*. Trinity: Trinity Press International, 2000.
- hooks, bell. *Rock my Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*. New York: Atria Books, 2003.
- Hopkins, Dwight. *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999.
- Nightingale, Carl Husemoller. *On the Edge: A History of Poor Black Children and Their American Dreams*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.
- Katz, Michael. *Improving Poor People*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining The American Welfare State*. City: Owl Books, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Undeserving Poor*. New York: Pantheon Publishers, 1990.
- Kingfisher, Catherine. *Women in the American Welfare Trap*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.
- Lander, Joyce A., ed. *The Death of White Sociology*. New York: Random House, 1973.
- Landon, John. *The Development of Social Welfare*. New York: Human Sciences Press, 1996.
- Lareau, Annette. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.
- Lerner, Gerda. *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*. New York: Random House, 1972.

- Loewenberg, Bert and Ruth Bogin, eds. *Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life*. University Park: Penn State University, 1972.
- Malveaux, Julianne. *Slipping Through the Cracks: The Status of Black Women*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1986.
- Matthews, Marcia. *Richard Allen*. Baltimore: Helicon Publishers, 1963.
- Martin, Joan M. *More Than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000.
- Minks, Gwendolyn. *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.
- Mitchem, Stephanie. *Introducing Womanist Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002.
- Nadasen, Premilla. *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Newsome, Clarence. *Mary Mcleod Bethune In Religious Perspective: A Seminal Essay*, dissertation 1982, Duke University.
- Neubeck, Kenneth. *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Noble, Jeanne. *Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters: A History of the Black Woman in America*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1978.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Payne, James. *Overcoming Welfare: Expecting More From the Poor and More From Ourselves*. New York: Basic Books, 1998.
- Pinn, Anthony. *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*. NY: Continuum, 1995.
- Piven, Frances Fox and Richard Cloward. *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1971.
- Quadagno, Jill. *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Radford-Hill, Sheila. *Further to Fly: Black Women and the Politics of Empowerment*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

- Riggs, Marcia. *Awake, Arise, And Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1994.
- Rosetta E. Ross. *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights*. Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2006.
- Salomon, Larry. *Roots of Justice: Stories of Organizing in Communities of Color*. New York: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
- Schwarz, Jordan. *The Interregnum of Despair*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970.
- Secombe, Karen. *So You Think I Drive a Cadillac?: Welfare Recipients Perspective on the System and Its Reform*. New York: Allyn & Bacon, 2006.
- Simone, T.M. *About Face: Race in Postmodern America*. New York: Autonomedia press, 1989.
- Singleton, Jeff. *The American Dole: Unemployment Relief and the Welfare State in the Great Depression*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Solinger, Rickie. *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2001.
- Steady, Filomina Chioma. *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*. Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1981.
- Staples, Robert. *The Black Woman in America: Sex, Marriage and the Family*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1973.
- Terrell, Joanne Marie. *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African-American Experience*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998.
- Thomas, Linda. *Living Stones in the Household of God: The Legacy and Future of Black Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Townes, Emilie, ed. *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Thomas, Linda (ed.) *Living Stones in the Household of God: The Legacy and Future of Black Theology*.
- Thomas, Linda. "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm." *CrossCurrents*, Vol. 48, issue 4, Winter 1998-1999: 7-13.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Wallace, Phyllis. *Black Women in the Labor Force*. Boston: MIT Press, 1980.
- Ware, Frederick. *Methodologies of Black Theology*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2002.
- Weaver, R. Kent and Williams Dickens. *Looking Before We Leap: Social Science and Welfare Reform*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995.
- Welch, Sharon. *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation*. New York: Orbis Books, 1985.
- West, Cornel. *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*. New York: Penguin, 2004.
- West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon, 1993.
- West, Traci. "Agenda for the Churches: Uprooting a National Policy of Morally Stigmatizing Poor Single Black Moms." *Welfare Policy: Feminist Critiques*. Eds. Elizabeth Bounds, Pamela Brubaker, and Mary Hobgood. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999: 220-238.
- Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993.
- Wilmore, Gayraud. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Examination of the Black Experience in Religion*. Garden City: Anchor Press, 1973.
- Wilson, William Julius. *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Truly Disadvantaged: the inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, Inc., 1996.

Young, Iris. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University press, 1990.