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The Missing Story of Ourselves: Poor Women, Power and the Politics of Feminist Representation

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This essay focuses on a nationally touring installation entitled “The Missing Story of Ourselves: Poverty and the Promise of Higher Education.” This photographic and narrative exhibit—developed by low-income, student parents—presents complex, first-person views of what poverty and resistance through education look like from the inside out. In order to create a lens through which to view the exhibit, I analyze “stories” about poor women and welfare produced in contemporary political/public rhetoric and imagery, identifying a circuit through which bodies are represented and understood to mesh with dominant ideology; ideology in turn shapes and underwrites public policy; and public policy leaves its marks on the bodies of poor single mothers who are then interpreted as pathological “others” in need of further public and material control. Ultimately, I argue that only by trying our hand at more accountable forms of self-representation—as is the case in the exhibit—can we hope to disrupt this ubiquitous, self-replicating, and nearly impenetrable cyclical force of power, and in doing so redirect the policy that has such a profound and devastating impact on poor women and children in the contemporary United States.

Keywords: Higher Education and Poverty; Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996 and 2002); Poor Single Mothers; Poverty; Representations of the Poor; Welfare; Welfare Reform

“Until the missing story of ourselves is told, nothing besides told can suffice us/ We shall go on quietly craving it/In the missing story of ourselves can be found all other missing stories.” (Laura Riding Jackson, 1973: 111)

In the spring of 1986 I awoke in a shelter for battered women. I had four missing teeth, a broken clavicle and bruised ribs; in the small cot next to me lay my 8-month-old daughter, Heather, still traumatized by the brutalization we had suffered at the hands of her own father. With scant education and family support, few resources and no job, I had little reason for hope.

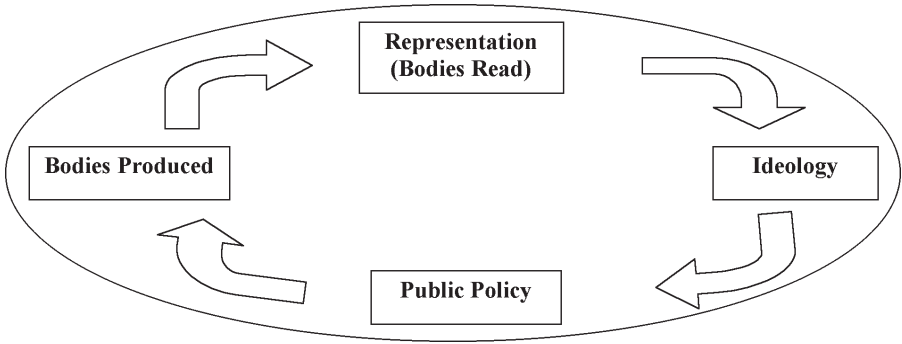
That morning we boarded a public bus to find our way to the welfare office where I had hoped to secure support with which we might begin to rebuild our lives. As we somberly boarded the bus, passengers recoiled, reacting to my wrinkled and still vaguely blood-stained clothing, unwashed hair, bruised and deformed face. I am quite sure that even my

beloved and beautiful child startled them with her blank and oddly aged gaze. As I held up the line by stumbling to count out my change, the bus driver looked from the infant in my arms down to the worn-out shoes I had purchased at the Salvation Army a week before, shook his head and raised his voice, painstakingly enunciating his words. "Don't bother," he shouted, perhaps confusing my tattered footwear and missing teeth for a loss of hearing and/or common sense, "the welfare office is only a few stops away. Sit down and get out of the way."

At the Department of Health and Human Services I was met with similar looks of disdain mingled with uneasy pity. Only my caseworker was clear and unequivocal. It would take at least two weeks to re-open my case and process my request for assistance; I could not apply for food stamps unless I had a rent receipt in my own name (which of course I did not); and state-issued medical coupons would only cover the repair of my one missing front tooth. The others—a bicuspid and two molars—he explained with unintended irony, were not considered medically necessary for someone "feeding at the public trough."

I was ashamed and humiliated. In that moment, however, I understood quite clearly that the bus driver, the caseworker, and those I came into contact with were all literally reading our bodies like texts, somehow finding my infant daughter and I pathological and aberrant and in need not of support or assistance, but of control, regulation, punishment and discipline. Further, the policy that this reading of the bodies of poor women and children assured, nay determined, that I would be destined to walk through the world with inadequate clothing, missing teeth, a distanced and shell-shocked child, and a body that would, as a result, continue to both evoke and justify fear and further punishing judgments. In that moment I came to appreciate the complexity of the circuit through which bodies are represented and understood in ways that reflect the dominant ideology. (See diagram below.) That ideology in turn determines, shapes, and reinforces public policy; and public policy leaves its marks on the bodies of poor single mothers of all ages, races, sexualities, and nationalities. These women are then interpreted endlessly as broken, scarred, dangerous and illegitimate others in need of further public and material control (Adair 2002).

My intimate understanding of this inviolate and closed cycle helped me to reframe childhood memories of being marked as "trash," "unworthy," "dirty" and "illegitimate." I became convinced that if I could only go back to school, I might be better able to understand, contextualize and counter this cycle; and that through higher education I could acquire the knowledge, skills and the authority needed to disrupt this ubiquitous, self replicating, and nearly impenetrable cyclical force of power. I imagined that with this power I might additionally begin to redirect, or at least to impact, the policy that had such a profound and devastating impact on my



life and on the lives of other poor women and children in the contemporary United States.

Poverty and the Promise of Higher Education

I returned to the shelter on that spring afternoon without help or hope. However, with a newfound and passionate desire to go to college so that I might come to understand and mitigate my place in the circuit of power, and with the assistance of kind, loving and patient women in the shelter—who had themselves been victims of both poverty and domestic violence—I began to intervene, to work to rewrite my own life and value in the world, to tell different stories to/of myself and others, and to dedicate myself to helping other poor women with a similar empowerment through higher education.

At the age of 32, after leaving the shelter, I enrolled in General Education Degree (GED) classes at a local community college. I entered school as a single mother, welfare recipient, and fragile student. Undoubtedly I lacked the skills, knowledge, self-esteem, and/or vision necessary to glean the full benefits of a liberal arts education and to earn a college degree that might enable me to work productively and to support and nurture my family.¹ Yet, at North Seattle Community College, and later at the University of Washington, Seattle, I was supported and challenged by dedicated, able and patient instructors who encouraged me to transform my life positively through the pathway of higher education. My passage was guided by those teachers whose feminist classrooms became places where I was able to build bridges connecting my own knowledge of the world to crucial new knowledge, skills, and methodologies. Dedicated faculty created exciting, engaging exercises and orchestrated intensely challenging discussions that enabled me to embrace a vast range of knowledge and to use my newfound skills to re-envision my gifts, strengths, and responsibilities to the world around me.

While in school I studied, attended classes, worked and cared for my daughter. I gratefully received minimal Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) "welfare" grants, food stamps and Medicaid. On a regular basis I sold my plasma at blood banks and engaged in paid medical experiments to pay rent and buy books for classes. And I learned and grew. Little by little the larger social, creative, political, and material world exposed itself to me in ways that were resonant and urgent, inviting me to analyze, negotiate, articulate, and reframe systems, histories, and pathways that had previously seemed inaccessible. The process was invigorating, restorative, and life altering.²

My journey, while joyous, was not anomalous. Indeed, in 1987, the year that I entered college, as many as 350,000 welfare recipients around the nation were similarly enrolled in institutions of higher education as a route out of poverty (Wolfe and Gittell 1997, 18). Prior to welfare reform in 1996, countless poor single mothers quietly accessed postsecondary education to become teachers, lawyers, social service providers, business and civic leaders, and medical professionals (Nightengale 2000). While education is important to everyone, my experience and research convince me that it is essential for those who will face the continued obstacles of racism, classism, sexism and homophobia; to those who have been distanced and disenfranchised from U.S. mainstream culture; and to those who have suffered generations of oppression and marginalization (Adair and Dahlberg 2003; Adair 2005).

Unfortunately, in 1996, Congress enacted the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* (PRWORA) as a part of welfare reform. This act gravely curtailed the ability of poor women to garner authority and to rewrite their own stories through education in a way that positively altered the trajectories and conditions of their lives. Composed of a broad tangle of legislation, PRWORA "devolved" responsibility for assistance to the poor from the federal to the state level, and through a range of block grants, sanctions, and rewards, encouraged states to reduce their welfare rolls by developing stringent work requirements, imposing strict time limits, discouraging "illegitimacy," and reducing the numbers of applicants eligible for services. Unlike previous provisions in AFDC and JOBS education training programs in existence when I first went to college, Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) restrictions from 1996 do not allow higher education to be counted as work and required a larger proportion of welfare recipients to engage in full-time recognized work activities. This Work-First philosophy emphasized rapid entry into the labor force and penalized states for allowing long-term access to either education or training (Adair 2001; PRWORA 2003; Adair and Dahlberg 2003).

Debates surrounding this crucial legislation in the mid-1990's illustrate the degree to which public imagery reading poor women as pathological drew from the material conditions of our lives and underscored an agenda

of increased control and punishment. As Mimi Abramowitz recalls, "In 1996, numerous legislators and witnesses made reference to 'welfare queen' stereotypes, as undeserving women who deliberately avoid both work and marriage; spend their welfare checks on liquor, drugs and fast cars; and produce large broods of children so as to qualify for even a larger government dole" (2000, 2). Throughout the fall of 1996, on the floor of the U.S. congress, women on welfare were characterized as dirty, oversexed and dangerous. Senator Mica of Arizona compared welfare mothers to alligators who if allowed would eat their own young, and U.S. Congressman Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania referred to recipients as "unfit parents who view their children as nothing more than increases in welfare checks" (Gustafson 2004).

This rhetoric underwrote a logic demanding that welfare recipients be removed from the rolls, made to work, and encouraged—some suggested that they be forced—to marry. Reform was designed to rehabilitate "undeserving" poor single mothers by bringing them squarely under the control of men in the home and in the workplace. This dramatic overhaul of welfare policy forced welfare-recipient students to leave college for low-wage jobs in record numbers. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in the first year of welfare reform, tens of thousands of poor women were forced to drop out of school. In states across the nation, the decrease in college enrollments among welfare recipients ranged from 29 to 82 percent (2005, 33).

I was a post-doctoral instructor at the University of Washington, Seattle, in 1996, when I lost three students to welfare reform. Two of the students left the state and the other, Tonya Mitchell, a young African American mother of twin girls, has stayed in contact with me and has since written a chapter in *Reclaiming Class: Women, Poverty and the Promise of Higher Education in the United States* (Adair and Dahlberg 2003, 113–118). Mitchell had wanted to earn a degree that would allow her to work as a nurse, and she was certainly capable and dedicated enough to do so. Nurses in the area make \$30–\$45 dollars per hour and there is a shortage of, and a great demand for, medical professionals who are people of color and members of the communities they hope to serve (Wages 2005). With a solid A grade average and hours of volunteer work at a low-income community medical clinic, Mitchell's future seemed promising and secure.

However, at the beginning of her junior year, Mitchell was assigned to work full-time in a nursing home. If she refused this Work-First position she would incur sanctions and lose food stamps, childcare assistance and medical insurance for herself and her twin daughters. On my last trip to Seattle I visited with my student who remains at that nursing home today. After working as an aide for the past ten years Mitchell is making less than ten dollars an hour. As a result, she and her young daughters are still struggling, living well below the poverty level, and she says she has given up hope.

Mitchell's experience is typical of "welfare leavers" who were forced to abandon school for work as a result of *PRWORA* policy. A study by the Urban Institute reported that:

50 to 75 percent of welfare leavers remain poor two to three years after leaving welfare. Most welfare leavers with incomes above the poverty line still have very low incomes: state-level leaver studies have found that about 90 percent of leavers have income below 185 percent of the poverty level. (Acs and Loprest, 2001).

Pamela Loprest estimated that in 2000 the median hourly wage for "welfare leavers" was \$8.06 per hour, and that "about a third of leavers work part-time and [only] a third have employer health insurance" (2001,18). As a 2006 study by the Associated Press confirms, welfare reform pushed poor women into work but not toward self-sufficiency. U.S. Census data reflect that the number of people relying on government services increased from 39 million in 1996 to 44 million in 2003. Although "welfare reform" reduced welfare receipt by as much as 60%, ten years after its implementation the overwhelming majority of welfare recipients work but remain poor and dependent upon services including food stamps, housing assistance, and Medicaid (Ohlemacher 2007).

Policy that prevents poor women from entering into and completing college degree programs that could lead to fiscal security and family health and safety, is evidence of the material impact of ideology. Such policy begins by reading poor women as unreliable, undeserving, and dangerous and concludes by indelibly marking our bodies and lives. I was able to survive by narrowly escaping the implementation of *PRWORA* policy. Mitchell and tens of thousands of others have not been so fortunate.

After completing my Ph.D., I was hired as a professor at Hamilton College but continued to be haunted by the memory of Mitchell and so many of my friends, colleagues and family members on welfare who would never have the opportunity to earn their way out of poverty and into stable and secure employment. And so, within months of arriving at Hamilton I began writing grant proposals and planning a program that would help poor student-parents earn college degrees. Through the funding provided by these grants The ACCESS Project was begun over nine years ago in the winter of 1999 (Adair 2003).³

The ACCESS Project at Hamilton College

The ACCESS Project (*Academic Coalition for full Citizenship through Education and Social Support*) at Hamilton College is an educational, social service, and career program that assists profoundly low-income, single parents in central New York in their efforts to move from welfare and low-

wage work to fulfilling and secure career employment through the pathway of higher education. Our program supports this increasingly “at risk” population through an intensive introduction to liberal arts education coupled with comprehensive social service, family, and career support. On a daily basis we assist our students with academic supports and address substantial obstacles such as lack of adequate childcare and transportation, domestic violence and battery, homelessness, eviction, utility shut-offs, hunger, and lack of self-esteem. As a result, in the years that our program has been in operation, our students have survived—indeed they have thrived—both at Hamilton College and in their nascent career pathways.⁴

The ACCESS Project adheres to the same rigorous academic standards for which Hamilton College is well known. Students work assiduously to complete coursework successfully and with distinction, and they graduate at unprecedented rates. For example, by the spring of 2006, over 90 percent of our first cohort had graduated with a four-year degree (and a GPA of 82.3 percent), and almost one-third of those students are now enrolled in graduate programs in medicine, law, education, social sciences, humanities and the arts.⁵ All of them are working in their chosen career fields and—unlike 44 million working poor—earning wages above the poverty level (Ohlemacher 2007). Not only were our students earning noteworthy grades, they were additionally providing better care for their children whose well-being, health, and school performances had been recorded and were noted to be substantially enhanced after their parents’ exposure to ACCESS. These ACCESS students also gained valuable experience, skills, and networking connections in paid and unpaid work and internships; and they increased their understanding of and commitment to the workings of our communities and the nation (Adair 2003). As a group ACCESS students have overcome enormous obstacles to complete their studies, their work, and to provide care for their children; and they have done so with courage, determination, and with increasing skills and confidence.

In honing sophisticated skill and methodological sets, ACCESS students begin to alter not just the surface skills and knowledge they hold, but they learn to alter the way they think, problem-solve, communicate, work, lead others and value themselves. They become increasingly able, educated, and engaged thinkers, community leaders and citizens in the fullest sense of the term. Critical and feminist analysis become perfect “operator’s manuals” for our students providing them with models that teach them to abandon their former traditional roles in civic engagement which required silence and invisibility. Through our work students come to understand that power and ideology “pulse along cultural isobars that shape and mark our own bodies as well as our thoughts” (Challenger 2005, 31). At a very practical level, they begin to see that knowledge empowers and that different viewpoints can compete, so that in the real material world they can fight back by analyzing, critiquing and speaking out.

When welfare reform reauthorization came up in 2002, my students and I were studying poverty, representation and public policy in the United States. In the year leading up to reauthorization we spent days speaking with politicians in Washington, DC and testifying before a congressional sub-committee. We made cases that we were sure would convince even reluctant legislators that it was in the nation's best interest to support those poor single parent students who were able and willing to earn college degrees. We showed tracing and political pundits charts from the U.S. Census Bureau tracing the clear and causal link between educational attainment and higher earnings, illustrating that this was particularly true for women of color, who rank at the bottom of the pay scale in the United States (American 2006). We even shared longitudinal income calculations, demonstrating that many of us had moved from being "tax burdens" to being "tax assets" to the state and federal governments by earning college degrees and moving into a more secure and stable employment stratum (Welfare 2000).⁶

Despite the efforts of so many, key legislation determining the reauthorization of welfare reform in 2002 proved to be even more punitive for low-income women attempting to earn higher education degrees in the United States. The House of Representatives' welfare reauthorization bill put greater limitations on individuals by allowing a maximum of three months of vocational training during a two-year period and counting only "job readiness education"—and not education that would lead to career development and sustainable wages—as work activity. HR 4092 increased both work hours for individual recipients and states' participation requirements. It failed to allocate sufficient childcare funds, and it allowed state superwaivers⁷ to take precedence over even minimal federal protections.

For many—certainly for my ACCESS students—the most egregious components of both the House and the Senate reauthorization bills were reductions in allowances for recipients to enter into education programs and in childcare funding. These bills, coupled with the ground-breaking \$1.5 billion dollars that was earmarked for federal TANF funds over the next five years, identified a narrow set of rigidly defined "marriage promotion" activities (PRWORA 2003). From the perspective of welfare students, this prohibition against education severely limits their ability to achieve personal fulfillment and independence through education, and for those who are single parents, the reduction in childcare assistance has dangerous implications. Support to needy families to feed and care for their children was denied and welfare mothers were prohibited from entering into educational programs. Instead, these welfare reform bills focused on encouraging and rewarding welfare recipient parents for their attendance at marriage formation clinics and workshops.

During the last county sponsored "family formation" seminar that I attended with student recipients—who were required to attend or risk

losing medical and food stamp benefits—we were reminded by a very enthusiastic pastor that a good and successful wife yields to both God and her husband, sometimes even against the perceived needs of her own children. When an ACCESS student participant asked a case-manager who was observing our seminar for his thoughts about higher education for the poor, he replied without a trace of irony:

Oh yes. Education is necessary in order to support and nurture your families. I strongly encourage you to support your husbands in going to school and doing whatever they can to make you and your children healthy and happy. Millions of wives—even my own mother—helped put their husbands through college on the GI bill, and we wouldn't be where we are today if it weren't for that sacrifice.

Obvious questions about heteronormativity arise from these mandates. In addition, participants asked the questions: “Who are poor people to marry?” “How does marrying a poor man and risking more children lift anyone out of poverty?” Such questions have been cleverly addressed by author Barbara Ehrenreich who reminds us:

Sadly enough, welfare recipients are unlikely to marry CEOs or even the residents of conservative think tanks; they're likely to marry blue collar men—a group whose wages have been declining since the 80s. So, the real question is: How many such men would a woman have to marry to lift herself and her children out of poverty? By my calculations, approximately 2.3, although, strangely enough, the conservative marriage advocates are not offering to abolish the laws against polyandry. (2001,15)

More fundamentally, legislation that denies poor women the opportunity to earn educational credentials, to be fulfilled as individuals, to be able to stand on their own two feet and care for their own children is born of a logic and rhetoric that suggests that all poor single mothers are bad mothers and that as a nation we can only value “legitimately” married mothers and their children. Such legislation is, or should be, a problem for all feminists.

As a result of reauthorization of *PRWORA*, the number of students enrolled full-time in programs of higher education further plummeted, from a high of 350,000 in 1992, to a low of 38,000 in 2002, or a reduction of almost 90 percent in ten years (London 2004). Knowing that higher education has the potential to lift poor women out of poverty, engage them in fulfilling and stable employment, give them a voice and authority, and help them raise healthy, happy and productive children, elicits the obvious question: “Why would legislators attempt through this legislation to punish and regulate the poor, sentencing them to lifetimes of poverty?” One answer, of course, is that there is economic pressure to provide employers with a ready-made, non-union, minimum wage,

compliant—some would argue forced—labor pool. Additionally, poor single mothers have been positioned, framed as it were, as a population that requires regulation, punishment and containment. Those with power and privilege have told stories of our lack of value, pathology and danger to others, perpetuating narrative productions from which we have been absent by design.

Wade Horn, the Bush administration's "Fatherhood CZAR" insists that we should not encourage education, since recipients have "failed in the past" (Ohlemacher 2007). This is the "they are not smart or motivated enough" argument. Others suggest that these poor single mothers belong in their places as low-wage workers. In Senator Russell Long's now infamous words, "If all poor women get to go to college who is going to iron my shirts?" (Patterson, 2000; 188). A third objection suggests that these women don't deserve to go to college, that they have broken the rules by having children, not marrying and engaging in "bad behavior." This is the persistent theme of Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation (Rector 2007). I reject all three propositions as unsubstantiated and insulting. Certainly these beliefs should not provide the foundation upon which to build law and policy (Adair 2007).

To Tell a Different Story

In the past two decades, public images of the alleged pathology and degradation of poor women and their children have permeated media and political representation in the United States (Hill Collins 2000; Lubiano 1992). As many scholars have noted, these stories rest on and reproduce virulent racist, sexist, heterosexist and ableist assumptions and understandings of poor women. Further, these often repeated representations underscore and are employed to justify punitive reform policy—as in the case of 1996 reform and reauthorization in 2002. These policy decisions have a real and immediately detrimental impact on our lives. *PRWORA* regulations and programs force us to work at low-paying jobs that do not allow us to pay our rent or feed our children properly; they keep us from being able to have our teeth repaired or afford heat; they force us to give up our right to privacy and to labor protections; and they prevent us from earning educational degrees with which we might be able to better our lives and alleviate the pain of material poverty (Adair 2002; Edin and Lein 1997). In a final irony our broken bodies are then read as examples and as proof of our degeneracy, depravity and the danger we pose to an inviolate society that rests on the articulation and maintenance of scripts of power and authority from which we have been effectively excluded.

By investigating this nexus of representation, ideology, policy and our own material lives, my ACCESS students and I came to understand that

stories have the power to transform our world. As a result, three years ago, we dedicated ourselves to dismantling and then re-telling our own stories, pushing back against those explanatory narratives that have devalued and ultimately harmed us, through our nationally traveling exhibit *The Missing Story of Ourselves: Poverty and the Promise of Higher Education*.⁸

In our 50-piece installation we represent visual and narrative points of view of contributors who are African American, Afro-Caribbean, Caucasian, Asian American, Latino, Native American and South East Asian, ranging in age from 18–58. Some of us were born in the United States and come from intergenerational poverty; others came to the United States from other countries as poor children. As a group we represent different faiths and sexual orientations; we come from settings that are both rural and urban and from both private and public educational institutions. What binds us is our common experience of being or having been profoundly poor as children or as parents who against all odds successfully entered into programs of higher education as a pathway out of poverty.

Ours are complex, first-person views of what poverty and resistance look like from the inside out. They allow us to delineate and map our own lives and values as well as to offer insights into larger ethical question of human value and community. We have responded to the challenge of finding our own voices and collective identity through *The Missing Story of Ourselves* by speaking together—personally, creatively, analytically and theoretically—in an effort to assure a crucial plurality and diversity of perspectives—and representations. In telling different stories of our value, and in exposing the processes of ideology through which our value (or lack of) is traditionally determined and disseminated, we hope to interrupt that closed circuit of desire that would otherwise mark and guarantee our place as “other” in cultural, social and legal matrixes.

The striking diversity of our students and exhibit contributors accurately reflects the demographics of poverty and welfare in the contemporary United States. Poverty is a complex phenomenon tied to but not coterminous with issues of race and gender. In 2006, over 60 percent of the poor in the nation were white, yet poverty disproportionately strikes people of color, women, the rural, children and the aged (American 2006).⁹ Despite a wide range of differences among poor women (as in any group), in public discourse they are most often metonymically reduced to singular images or stereotypes. In *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, Martin Gilens suggests that contrary to the statistical reality of U.S. poverty, the stereotype of the welfare mother is primarily a racial trope. Gilens illustrates that the vast majority of representations of the poor in the popular press over the past 45 years were drawn from and driven by racist images of “blacks as lazy . . . [views] that have prevailed throughout U.S. history” (1999, 27). Don Stewart identifies a broader stereotype of the poor when he notes that the public positions “all women on welfare as just like those

cheats we see on the news—fat, lazy, white trash living in a trailer park or a young, single, pregnant uneducated black mother living in a ghetto with five children who is selling her food stamps to buy alcohol” (1999).

Contemporary narrative productions orchestrate the story of poor women as one of moral and intellectual lack and of chaos, pathology, promiscuity, illogic and sloth, juxtaposed always against the alleged order, progress and decency of “deserving” citizens. Trying to stabilize and make sense of unpalatably complex issues of poverty and oppression and attempting to obscure hegemonic representation, these narratives reduce and collapse the lives and experiences of poor women to deceptively simplistic dramas, which are then offered for public consumption. The terms of these dramas are palatable because they are presented as simple oppositions of good and bad, right and wrong, independent and dependent, deserving and undeserving.

“Broodmares and Welfare Queens”

Against these simple, reductive and pejorative images, in *The Missing Story of Ourselves* we present complex stories that refuse the iconography of the poor woman as law breaker, bad mother, incapable worker, or degenerate citizen. Fransheneka Watson, a young African American woman, tells her own story of being supported by welfare when as a result of her parents’ death she moved in with her ill and impoverished grandparents, eventually becoming the sole support of her family at age 16. Despite working full-time, attending the University of Houston-DT and caring for her younger brother and aged grandparents, Watson is an honor student who hopes to provide counseling to low-income autistic children in the public schools.

Lynn Woolsey, a white woman, relates her life as a frightened, newly divorced mother of two in Silicon Valley, California in her essay. Although she was forced to turn to welfare she was able to go back to school and begin several businesses. With the goal of “serving our nation as an ethical, committed and capable public servant,” Woolsey eventually ran for public office. Since 1992 she has been Congresswoman Woolsey, ably representing the people of the Sixth Congressional District (CA) in Washington, DC. Similarly, Dr. Gita Rajan, originally from India, was thrown into U.S. poverty when after experiencing a devastating divorce she became solely responsible for the support of her young family. After returning to college, while working, using food pantries and securing school loans, she earned her Ph.D. and is now an award winning teacher and a gifted scholar and writer. Her latest book, *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the United States*, was released in 2006 by Stanford University Press to critical acclaim; in the same year her son earned his doctoral degree in neuroengineering.

Shannon Stanfield, a poor, single, white mother from America's "heartland" explains in her story that when she married right out of high school and followed her husband across the county so that he could pursue his career, she was confident she was doing the "honorable and reasonable thing." Yet, fewer than seven years later Stanfield found herself alone with "two small and rather traumatized babies, after being lied to, abused, and eventually abandoned" by the husband she had helped get ahead. Without any savings, with little education or work experience, Stanfield found herself at the mercy of the state. She was assigned to a Work First position but recalls that her wages "barely covered [her] rent and left nothing for baby diapers, utilities, or transportation." She adds: "Each morning I would leave my children to trudge off to a job that could never support us." Today, Stanfield, a rising university senior with an A grade average, declares that as a result of her entry into college—and for the first time in her life—she has been able to:

[T]ake my children and climb the stone walls built by hopelessness and helplessness. A new sense of purpose and value has delivered me and my children from a static, uncertain, and violent future. In college I have come to recognize and embrace my own potential as I reshape and stabilize my family's and my own future through knowledge, self respect and fulfillment. (Stanfield 2005, 29)

"Children Having Children"

The stereotype of the "Welfare Queen" attached to women needing financial assistance flattens out complexities to produce a trite, unavailing story of poverty. Similarly, the image of the teen mother welfare recipient simplistically underwrites much of the language of welfare reform. While the hot-button topic of "children having children" loomed large in welfare debates the number of unmarried teen mothers actually receiving benefits prior to 1996 was less than 0.5 percent of the total national welfare caseload (Sparks 2003, 20). Nevertheless, as Holloway Sparks points out, "the image of welfare mothers as poor, unwed teenagers who are inept, irresponsible and producing babies for monetary gain is alluring . . . These stereotypes reduce complexity and channel our fears toward an easy target. Stereotypes of incapable and evil unmarried teen mothers are used to justify social policy" (22).

Against these public and widely proliferated narratives, our colleagues push back with the missing stories of their lives. Claudia Garcia writes of surviving on welfare, leaving her family home, and having a child at age 16. Determined to change her life for the sake of her beloved child, and enduring hunger, exhaustion and family alienation, Garcia is now a doctor of Optometry with her own growing practice and a bright, happy

and well-adjusted, college-bound daughter. Garcia writes: "My daughter has learned that hard work and motivation will help her reach her own fullest potential. Being a mother, a doctor and a business partner can be exhausting. I find the strength that I need when I look at my daughter and see in her better opportunities because of the sacrifices I made for both of us" (2005, 11).

Jamala McFadden was the daughter of a welfare recipient and a single mother herself at age 15 in Chicago. With the aid of welfare and the support of a caring community and college faculty she graduated at the top of her class with a degree in political science from the University of Illinois, attended one of the top ten law schools in the country, clerked for a federal judge and now practices law at a prestigious law firm in Atlanta. She writes: "My son—now 13 (and already discussing college)—has been with me through it all. For those who believe that welfare is cyclical and repeats throughout generations — for this family, education has broken the cycle" (2005, 35).

Nolita Clark earned her GED at a Native American Academy and in the same year became a single teen mother. In her narrative she recognizes that "the cultural text of my devaluation, as written and read through public policy and welfare reform, suggests that my being a young, unmarried and pregnant woman of color, would mark me as being a problem, as an undeserving human being and mother." She goes on however to counter that: "The truth of my pregnancy was that it changed my life in remarkable and positive ways." She continues:

Contrary to notions about selfish and unprepared teens giving birth to uncared for babies, with my daughter's birth everything became clearer and better in my life. My daughter looks up to me to provide her with the love and guidance she needs to be successful in life. The life I had growing up was full of hardships and struggle; the fear that my daughter might have to experience the things I did at her age motivates me to get up every morning and continue on the pathway I began a few years ago. In contrast to the stories that we always hear about, becoming an unmarried teenaged mother was a positive, life-enhancing experience. (Clark 2007, 143)

In June of 2006, Clark graduated with a degree in Philosophy from Hamilton College. Her beautiful 5-year-old-daughter walked proudly by her side. In the near future Clark will enter law school where she plans to focus on U.S. tribal law, with the goal of serving low-income indigenous populations in New York State.

“Refusing to Work, Marry, or Follow the Rules”

The Department of Health and Human Services lists the goals of *PRWORA* as a reduction in “dependency by promoting job preparation, work and marriage; to reduce the percent of out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families” (PRWORA 2003). Underwriting this tripartite mandate is the portrayal of poor single mothers who are “lazy due to years of government programming, illogical . . . [,] out of control” and “crazed trying to meet [their] own selfish needs” (MacDonald, 2002b). These narratives representing poor women as dangerous parasites who have somehow violated the mandates of capitalism and heterosexism, invariably compare “unmarried mothers, misfits and spongers who are idle” to “legitimate and moral members of society who follow the rules, sacrifice and work” (2002c). As a result, policies that connect poor mothers to the public workplace are construed as narratives of rehabilitation that transform “dangerous” poor women’s bodies into those of the relatively unmarked classes, safely neutralized under covertures of work and marriage.

Against these reductive and dangerous images we offer Paulette Brown, who by her 40s had served as an enlisted medical assistant in the U.S. Army, a bus driver, a taxi driver, a waitress and a hotel maid, all while raising her two sons. Then, at the age of 41—without medical insurance, savings or job security—Brown suffered a heart attack and was forced to rely temporarily on welfare. Afterward, Brown changed her life by enrolling in the ACCESS program, where, she says: “Everyday I learn new skills, am exposed to new knowledge and ways of thinking. Education has complicated my story and provided me with a nuanced understanding of the racist, classist and sexist stories that mark me as ‘Other’” (Brown 2007, 140). Today Brown’s sons thrive (her youngest entered college in the fall of 2006). She works full-time for Catholic Charities and is completing a college degree in social services at Utica College of Syracuse University. She is a leader, mentor, advocate and role model for other low-income single mothers and fathers in our community.

We offer another motivational story of a poor, single mother, Stephanie Jones, who has worked full-time since the age of seventeen, attends college and studies with her sons at the kitchen table each evening. This year both of her children were on their school’s honor role. She writes: “My sons and I have begun to build our education together. Together we learn and grow. Being a worker, single mother, community member and student allows [me] to make a positive and substantial difference in our lives and in our community” (Jones 2005, 19)

Similarly, Rose Perez tells her own cautionary tale of “Welfare to Work” and the long-term benefits of allowing poor single mothers to earn

educational degrees as a route out of poverty. Perez begins by describing stories that marked her and her family as living lives of “laziness, selfishness and stupidity,” adding: “You all know the story. We have all heard it far too many times.”

After the birth of a healthy and beautiful son, Perez turned to the welfare office for assistance, and that story of her family’s alleged pathology took “a dramatic turn for the worse.” She explains: “To the welfare workers I turned to for help, my baby was ‘illegitimate,’ the child of worthless and even hopeless people.” Lecturing that she must work full-time or risk becoming a “generational freeloader” her caseworker required that Rose become “a better mother, [by] going to work at minimum wage without childcare assistance.”

Trying to “squeeze into the state’s version of a success story of independence” Perez worked full-time and asked a male acquaintance who was unemployed to babysit in exchange for a place to live. She recalls that:

One day, annoyed at my child’s normal 2-year-old behavior, this man snapped. He beat my child. Trying to cover up the bruises, he put my baby into a bath filled with scalding water. [My son] received third degree burns to his lower legs and feet. He has been permanently scarred since that moment. Each year at the Shriner’s hospital in Boston he has to have painful surgeries and skin grafts. The monster that did this to my son will spend the next twenty-five years of his life in jail. Yet the welfare office continued to judge, regulate and punish us. (Perez 2005, 36)

Even though this devastated mother was at work during the time, she was blamed for her son’s abuse, accused of making “bad choices,” of not providing sufficient care for her baby and of putting her own needs before his. Welfare caseworkers told her that she was “irresponsible for having a child without the protection of a ‘legal’ father” and Child Protective Services threatened to take her beloved child from her. To date Perez’s son has undergone over a dozen painful surgeries to stretch his skin so that his bones can grow. At age 11 he is an intelligent, loving, and responsible young man. As Perez nurtures, guides and cares for him, she is earning a college degree in criminal justice and working full-time at a shelter for battered women. She concludes by acknowledging that her “story is difficult to tell,” but adds that “In pushing back and telling a different story in *The Missing Story of Ourselves*, I want to show those with power that we are human beings with complex lives. If my story can change the mind of one policy maker, law maker or voter or give support to one frightened, hurt and silenced woman (as it has to me) then the effort has been more than worthwhile” (Perez 2007, 137).

“Welfare Scars Children”

Finally, contemporary rhetoric suggests that welfare itself is bad for the country and dangerous for the children it was designed to help. As a part of the *Republican Contract with America*, then U.S. House majority leader Newt Gingrich proposed that children of welfare mothers be placed in orphanages. His reasoning centered on the idea that out-of-home care would be better than the care—and alleged damage—unmarried welfare mothers would provide, and that cutting the emotional bonds and removing the modeling that poor women inflict upon their young would be good for the nation (Gershaw 1996, 3).

Robert Rector and Patrick Fagan, in “How Welfare Harms Kids,” offered a similarly frantic warning, adding that:

Overall welfare operates as a form of social toxin. The more of this toxin received by a child’s family, the less successful the child will be as an adult. If America’s children are to be saved [from their own mothers] the current welfare system must be replaced. Higher welfare payments do not help children; they increase dependence and illegitimacy, which have a devastating effect on children’s development. (1996)

For these “compassionate conservative reformers” poor women need only be forced to work and marry to save their children and the nation. In Rector’s view—articulated in an NPR debate with me and taped for *Morning Addition*—“the idea of poor women going to college is ridiculous. A good mother has a husband and works for her family; she doesn’t hide out in school” (Rector 2002).

Against these narratives and in contrast to the rhetoric of welfare reform that suggests that only through work and marriage can poor mothers and their children be redeemed, we present Bich Ha Pham, now an attorney who runs Hunger Action Network in New York City. As a child she recalls coming to this country with her family as a refugee from Viet Nam and needing welfare to secure food, clothing, utilities, school supplies and books that she would eventually use to gain economic security (Pham 2005). The assistance of welfare and access to higher education allowed Pham to achieve success by engaging in, rather than “hiding” out from, the world and her responsibility to others.

Teresa Willmore applied to college when her love of learning and life had been utterly destroyed by a difficult divorce and years of work that left her “feeling desperate, worthless, disgraced . . . demeaned and demoralized at the end of every day.” Teresa, once on welfare, returned to school. She recalls that “some of that weight lifted from my shoulders, and I knew a moment of hope.” Enduring “three of the most grueling and rewarding years of [her] life at Hamilton College,” Willmore graduated *summa cum laude* in 2003, with a GPA of 94.82 and as a member of Phi Beta Kappa,

bound for graduate school. Crucially, Willmore recalls the impact that her own transformative experience of education had on her two young children. She writes:

I now realize that the world consists of more than the need to fill my children's stomachs. I need to feed their minds as well. Today my son, diagnosed with ADD, after doing homework with me for so many hours, thinks he can succeed without the Ritalin. My daughter is a straight-A student. This happened while I struggled through my classes, and they watched their role model—me. Today I have a rewarding and productive job that in no way leaves me feeling demeaned, and I love, support, nurture, inspire and care for my children on my own. (Willmore 2005, 23)

And, I offer the image and story of my own daughter, Heather, who lay broken in that tiny cot in the shelter next to me 20 years ago. Now an honor student majoring in philosophy at Smith College, she writes of her life as the child of a welfare-mother student and of the long-term impact of higher education on our lives, remembering:

This is where my life began . . . and my mother's life, too. It is safe to say that without an education, neither of us would exist as we do today. My mother carried home a passion for education that could not help but make an irrevocable impression on my young mind. In me she fostered a reverence for knowledge and education that I clung to in the wake of material want. My mother's determination gave me hope for our future and a belief that we were worth more than what society credited us. Every night I would go to sleep knowing that she was awake, preparing for her classes and working to pull us out of the poverty we had both been born into. (Adair 2005, 8)

Heather concludes that: "Unlike so many people born into poverty, I have been given a renewed vision of life. In addition to the obvious economic, cultural and social benefits of our transformation, I have gained an intense respect for education, civic responsibility and moral engagement that will aid, shape and inspire me throughout my life" (Adair 2005, 7). My own child's understanding of the impact that higher education had in changing our lives materially, emotionally, and intellectually, reflects the life-altering transformation of so many of our ACCESS students and their children. They, as we, were once disenfranchised but through access to higher education are now fully able to participate in their own renewed vision of life—a life finally filled with hope and possibility.

Conclusion

The goal of *The Missing Story of Ourselves* exhibit, initially, was simply to tell our own stories, to replace stories that hurt and marginalized us with more positive, complex and "authentic" stories. Calling on the

early feminist tradition of embracing stories of personal experience that have been eclipsed in canonical productions of knowledge and power, we wanted to tell our stories, that were simultaneously personal and political, as radical alternatives to master narratives and to claims of objectivity. And yet, we were very aware of postmodern critiques pointing out that stories are always structurally essentialist. We also understood the notion that because our own language, narrative and identities are saturated with ideology, our stories are both suspect and risky. At some level we agreed with the argument that we cannot trust stories to reveal truth or to resist it let alone dismantle the status quo of the power structure. (Scott 1999; Stone Mediatore 2005)

Yet, in the final analysis we want to retrieve the epistemic value of the images and words of poor women precisely because our stories explore and expose the ways individuals constrained within the social matrix both capitulate to and resist ideology. We believe that stories from the margins, like those in *The Missing Story of Ourselves*, are crucial as they “critically test the prejudices that underwrite narrative norms and that are perpetuated by powerful knowledge producing institutions.” As Shari Stone-Mediatore argues: “On-going and serious engagement with such stories is the only way to keep knowledge production accountable to those outside ruling institutions and to sustain democratic communities” (2005, 118).

Creating our visions and sharing our stories and images have allowed all of us to think differently about our identities and relationships to larger ideologies that are designed to control, define and silence us. In solidarity, in *The Missing Story of Ourselves*, poor, single, parent-students push back by speaking back. Most of us have struggled, but we use those struggles to focus and increase our resolve to succeed and to understand. In doing so, we analyze and dismantle the stories, policies and belief systems that would otherwise diminish and demoralize us.

Crucially, telling our own stories reminds us that we are connected and indebted to others who have also been both misread and silenced. We hope that by telling our stories in venues of power and authority we will expose this system of exclusion. We call for a willingness to hear and value the stories of other marginalized men and women who attempt to articulate and theorize their own narratives of identity and experience. We are grateful for the opportunity to speak back, to rewrite our value in the world, to attempt to disrupt the insidious cycle through which we have been marked and then guaranteed as “other,” and to begin to tell “the missing story of ourselves.”

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the Poor Woman in American Literature, Photography, and Culture, *her research focus is studying representations of women on welfare and analyzing the impact of welfare reform, education, and public policy. Send correspondence to vadair@hamilton.edu.*

Notes

1. Most studies show that women who entered into post-secondary programs while on AFDC benefited from the programs and were able to earn college degrees successfully. See Joanne Thompson 1993; Thomas Karier 1998; Erica Kates 1998; and Peggy Kahn 2000.
2. I am indebted to Professors Marilyn Smith, Michael Kischner, Fran Schmitt, Tom Kerns, Barbara Boardman, Karen Stuhldreher and President Ron La Fayette at North Seattle Community College, and to Professors Joycelyn K. Moody, Sydney J. Kaplan, Donna Gerstenberger, Carolyn Allen, Gail Stygall, George Dillon and Steve Woodward at the University of Washington, Seattle.
3. We are grateful for the support of The State of New York, New York State Senator Raymond Meier, The Charles A. Frueauff Foundation, The Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida Counties, and members of the Hamilton College community.
4. In stark contrast, working poor, single mothers can barely cover their basic expenses, let alone pay for tuition and books. Any reduction in pay or benefits spells disaster as they must then choose between paying all of their rent or part of their heating bill. Additionally, child care assistance that is available to cover a mother's time at work cannot be used while mothers are in classes. Policy thus effectively prohibits poor working mothers from earning degrees and moving toward financial security and independence.
5. For analysis of why students drop out of The ACCESS Project please see *The ACCESS Project at Hamilton College Year End Report 2003*. www.hamilton.edu/college/access
6. Education enabled me to secure employment that has provided my entire family with stability and dignity. It is true that my education cost my home state more than \$30,000 to support me with food stamps, medical coupons, and housing and energy assistance while I earned college degrees. I am grateful for that support. But I also want to point out that within two years of working at Hamilton College I had paid back well over \$30,000 in state and federal taxes. Today I pay double that amount. If I am able to work for an additional 20 years, I will have paid more than \$600,000 in federal and state taxes that I would not have paid had I not earned those degrees. Supporting poor single parents as they move from being tax liabilities to tax assets makes fiscal as well as moral sense.

7. Superwaivors allow states to create employment programs for welfare recipients without adhering to state and federal labor protections.
8. *The Missing Story of Ourselves*. Please see: www.hamilton.edu/college/access
9. There are approximately 299,398,484 individuals living in the US: 80.2% of those individuals are white, 12.8% are black; and 14.4% are of Hispanic origin. In 2006, over 37,764,789 individuals lived below the poverty line: About 60% (22,657,417) of those individuals were white; yet, individuals are more than twice as likely to be born poor if they are black or Latino than if they are white. In 2006, 10.5% (22,657,417 out of 216,049,704) of White individuals were poor; 25.3% (8,968,940 out of 35,425,212) of black individuals were poor; and 21.8% (9,293,416 out of 43,306,059) of individuals of Hispanic origin lived below the poverty line. Similarly, although over 80% of the US population live in urban centers, urban poverty is about 11.2% of the urban population while rural poverty rates are higher at 14.2%. (U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2006. Retrieved August 2006: http://fastfacts.census.gov/servlet/CWSSTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S1701&-ds_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_)

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