

From Safety Net to Tight Rope: New Landscapes of Welfare in the United States

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**Abstract**

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As the recession plays out, unemployment rises, and public and private sector resources become increasingly in-demand, geographic poverty scholars have a unique opportunity to challenge the poverty logic of late capitalism and rigorously examine the role of race, gender and place in poverty processes. This research extends beyond an analysis of TANF as a policy fixed in time and place. Rather, it examines TANF and public assistance broadly as part of larger political, economic, and cultural processes that shape popular discourses on poverty and the experiences of those living in poverty. This paper analyzes public assistance in three interconnected ways: First, through a structural analysis of the neoliberalization of welfare and poverty, this research explores the ways in which past and current histories of economic restructuring intersect with localized discourses of race, gender and deservingness. Second, the research focuses on popular and political discourses about welfare in order to better understand the ways in which recipients and those in poverty are positioned in American society. I argue that under the terms of neoliberal capitalism the focus on welfare dependency has eclipsed alternative analyses of what drives and shapes poverty. Popular and political rhetoric overwhelming defines poverty as a

crisis of dependency on welfare. Though this limited lens, the reasons for poverty are understood largely as behavioral or pathological and therefore mainstream policy solutions have focused on the scales of the home and the body. Third, through in-depth interviews in King County, WA and Jackson County, MO, this research examines the role of the political economy, class, race, gender, and place in shaping the identities and feelings of citizenship of those on public assistance. This dissertation highlights the complicated and sometimes contradictory ways in which those on TANF respond to poverty, popular discourse, and economic restructuring.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction: Identity, Social Exclusion and New Landscapes of Welfare**

A curious and important trend has emerged in poverty research in the United States. There has been a significant shift in the dynamics of public assistance programs resulting in fewer families utilizing cash assistance and more people piecing together public and private resources to make ends meet month to month. In 1979, 82 out of 100 eligible families in poverty were able to access cash welfare; in 1996, it was 68 out of 100 (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). In 2010, this “welfare to poverty ratio” dropped to 27 out 100 eligible families on cash assistance

(ibid). Under the previous welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, a single parent in poverty could count on a welfare check, food stamps and Medicaid to cover major expenses and, for the most part, this public safety net would lift them above the poverty line (Allard, 2009). Importantly, families could move across town or across the state and have the AFDC check mailed to them, assured the amount of assistance would stay the same (ibid). Today, there is not a single state where a family could live and rely on the current program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, to get them to even half the poverty line (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). As the role of cash public assistance diminishes, families in poverty are relying on a patchwork safety net of employment, charities, churches, non-profits, and familial help to make ends meet. These resources, from an aunt who can provide childcare to a church that offers additional food and clothes are, for the most part, geographically fixed (England, 1996). Further, the conditions of receipt for safety net programs vary greatly from state to state and from welfare office to welfare office.

As the “welfare to poverty ratio” indicates, fewer families are utilizing TANF and the reasons and repercussions have not been fully fleshed out. In this project, I explore how neoliberal governance and hegemonic constructions of poverty are creating new landscapes of safety net receipt and political subjectivities for low-income families. Neoliberal economic restructuring has been a large-scale project that has influenced the discursive and material conditions of poverty and inequality in the United States. While neoliberalism is an important structure in shaping the current dynamics of poverty regulation, this dissertation also critiques claims that promote hierarchal and historical relations of race, class, gender and other markers of identity (Staeheli and Brown, 2003). Framing representations of the impoverished and the regulation of poor ‘others’ solely in terms of neoliberal economic restructuring obscures other

relationships, particularly the raced and gendered assumptions that have led to care work being all but ignored in national debates around welfare. Further, neoliberalism alone does not account for a long history in the west of criminalizing and controlling the poor (England, 2008; Morrill and Wohlenberg, 1971; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Piven and Cloward, 1971). I situate neoliberalism as one phase in capitalist poverty management that has dramatically reshaped the safety net, altered the discourse around the reasons for and solutions to poverty, and intensified racial and gender inequalities. Poverty and public assistance receipt can therefore be seen as at the intersection of several inter-related processes including race, class, gender, place and capitalism, with each of these processes woven into the history, structure and influence of welfare policies (Morgen, Acker and Weigt, 2010).

The heart of this dissertation lies in examining the ways in which the production of poverty and control of the poor intersect with neoliberal governance and poverty management to constitute particular political subjects (Goode and Maskovsky, 2001; Soss, Fording, and Schram, 2011). Current framings of poverty position poor subjects as ‘other’ producing their own poverty and distinct from middle class identities. These subjectivities are produced through “myriad social relations that are in turn contextualized in space and time” (Staheli and Brown, 2003, 773). Identity, while fluid and complex, is also place bound (Pulido, 2000). The categorization of class difference is a spatial process of negotiation and contestation around who ‘belongs’ in particular places. Bodies and spaces are intimately connected as some identities are seen as normative and ‘natural’ in privileged spaces (such as white, heterosexual men in the public sphere) and other bodies are seen as needing control and reform and therefore limited in which spaces they can inhabit (such as women and men of color). Welfare discourse and its attendant assumptions about race and gender can be seen as a form of class making or keeping

the poor ‘in their place’, be it in the blighted urban core of a post-industrial city or in low-wage employment in a booming metropolis. My work therefore frames poverty and public assistance as spatial processes. Poverty management is contingent on locally articulated racialized, gendered, and classed representations of safety net receipt (Bonds, 2009). The lived experiences of gender, race, and class take shape in actual spaces, and the lived experience of place is ordered through overt and covert understandings of who is poor and why (Lipsitz, 2011). These place-bound understandings of which bodies belong influence the neighborhoods, forms of employment, resources, and livelihoods of impoverished families.

Building from these ideas, this research examines how specific places and spaces produce political subjects through distinct encounters (both discursive and material) with their communities and the state across and within locations. Through a comparison of King County, WA and Jackson County, MO, I theorize the ways in which neoliberal poverty management has been taken up in distinct places and the ways that the impoverished understand, react and resist these dynamics. My project explores the “socio-spatial relations” and daily practices and meaning making of those in the safety net (Pulido, 2000, 16, in Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, 2010). I utilize a comparative case study analysis of two communities differentially situated in terms of their current reaction to neoliberal economic restructuring, their structuring of urban space, and their specific routes to addressing poverty and welfare receipt. I have used the county as the scale of analysis for each place because this is the scale of the TANF data I utilize. Both sites, however, can be seen as primarily urban and centered around the major city in each locale. Through tracing the differences in these urban areas across time and space, this dissertation explores the erosion of poverty programs and what this means for growing inequality in the U.S.

I argue that transformations of safety net programs over recent decades are expressions of capitalist economic restructuring that create particular subjectivities for those in poverty which shape their identity and their opportunities. As examined in the third chapter, the history of ‘welfare’, from English Poor Laws to the first Mothers’ Pensions programs has been one of exclusions, social control, and a tense scalar interplay between stakeholders from the international to the community level. Keynesian shifts in the political economy and the growing power of social justice groups from the 1950s to the 1970s led to an increase in the welfare rolls, greater agency for those seeking assistance, and improved transparency in the administration of welfare across places in the United States. The neoliberal “roll-back” of safety net funding and the “roll-out” of surveillance and regulation of those on assistance can be seen as a reaction to the Keynesian shift in the economy and the social and cultural changes of the 1960s (Mitchell, 2004; Peck and Tickell, 2002). There has always been a close connection between race, gender, capitalist processes and controlling the poor. What is different about this moment in the history of poverty governance is that we are simultaneously seeing a reintensification of punitive measures policing and vilifying the poor while also experiencing neoliberal discourse that makes poverty management seem neutral and even beneficial to those in poverty as well as broader society. The discourse claims that through avoiding welfare and taking on waged labor, people can be better parents, better role models, and better citizens.

Through the representation of the ‘welfare mother’ who is dependent on government benefits and is alternatively pitied and vilified by society, neoliberal discourse creates an alternative position of the masculine ‘worker-citizen’, a self-sufficient, independent individual (Brown, 1997; England, 2008; Staeheli and Brown, 2003). Alternatively, this position can be seen in a Foucauldian sense of the “docile body”, one that is “flexible, self-reliant and self-

disciplining” (Peck, 2001, 6). While there are many other forms of identity that are salient for those in poverty, they encounter these powerful and opposing subjectivities at the welfare office, in their communities, and at the job site. While growing income disparities show that those in poverty may not be able to easily change their economic circumstances, through enlisting in workfare or choosing to avoid TANF altogether, they can potentially alter how they see themselves and how they are viewed in society. By taking on work and/or rejecting cash assistance, impoverished parents can reject the stigmatization of the ‘welfare mother’. These choices are complex and can be contradictory; seeking freedom from the surveillance of TANF and the stigma of dependency benefits the neoliberal regulatory project of cutting the TANF rolls and maintaining a plentiful low-wage workforce (Peck, 2001; Piven, 2001). As seen in the ‘welfare mother’/ ‘worker-citizen’ dichotomy, neoliberal poverty governance ignores the raced, gendered and capitalist dynamics that cause poverty and instead frames the conversation in terms of the behaviors and personal choices of the poor. This legitimates the regulation of the poor and absolves communities and politicians from creating more caring and inclusive policies and conceptions of justice (Bonds, 2009; Staeheli and Brown, 2003).

### ***Race, Gender, Place and the Production of Neoliberal Subjects***

This research draws on and contributes to geographic, feminist, and anti-racist poverty analyses through examining poverty and welfare receipt at the center of historical, geographic, political and economic processes that marginalize those in poverty. I argue that discursive representations of poverty and the poor are produced in place through local material conditions and histories (Bonds, 2009). Through an in-depth, comparative qualitative approach nearly 20 years after welfare reform, my research offers several important contributions to scholarship

concerned with poverty governance. First, I utilize a spatial comparison between two case studies to understand the ways in which race, class, gender, and neoliberal economics shape people's experience on TANF and their choices to reject assistance. Through situating the specific processes of neoliberal poverty governance in local conditions we can lay bare the multiple articulations and contradictions of late-capitalism (Peck, 2003, 230). A detailed spatial comparison strengthens this contribution through illustrating contradictions and patterns between neoliberal welfare policies and their material and discursive repercussions. Second, I explore what happens to those families who are kicked off, timed-out, reject, or are rejected from cash-assistance. While in some cases welfare recipients continue to be 'tracked' after they leave the rolls, these studies are very limited and do nothing to address those who never applied or were diverted from assistance. Through over 70 interviews with low-income parents, this research sheds light on the extremely important question of why people leave or reject TANF and what happens to them when they no longer access cash-assistance. Third, this project contributes to new forms of poverty knowledge through theorizing the identities and forms of agency taken on by those in the safety net. Hegemonic poverty research focuses on measuring and evaluating programs such as TANF but does not robustly consider the role of these programs in shaping the political agency and subjectivities of those who receive and reject assistance. Poverty programs and poverty governance have important political, economic, and psychological effects that differ across time and place (Morgen, Acker, Weigt, 2010). Through an in-depth study in two places, I tease out what the differences and similarities in each setting can tell us about the repercussions of poverty management. Through this analysis we can better understand the agency of a growing population of low-income families subjected to the punitive measures of the safety net.

This dissertation contributes to a long history in geography of “understanding the spatial variations in the severity and persistence of poverty” (Morrill and Wohlenberg, 1971, 3) and in analyzing the production of poverty through the exploitative effects of capitalism, racism, sexism and other power dynamics (Harvey 1982; 2005; Lawson 2012; Massey, 2004; Pred and Watts, 1992). Since the 1990s, many geographers have positioned welfare reform as a part of a broader neoliberal project that seeks to manage the poor (Harvey 2003; McDowell 2004; Peck 2001; Sparke 2005). Geographers have argued that neoliberalism is part of a far-reaching political and economic agenda which has included extensive cuts to government spending on social services, tax incentives to promote businesses and corporations, a breakdown of union power, and a strong emphasis on privatization and the free market (Harvey, 2003; McDowell, 2004; Peck, 2001; 2002; Schram, 2000). The economic restructuring associated with neoliberalism has resulted in changes in the labor market or a shift from Keynesian “breadwinner” jobs that include benefits to flexible, low wage, and part-time labor (Peck, 2001; Schram, 2000; Sparke, 2005; Staeheli and Brown, 2003). Geographic critiques have focused on the uneven devolution of welfare states, mainly across developed nations; the role of governments and institutions in public service delivery; and the role of neoliberalism in the production of new international divisions of labor (Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, 2010; Peck, 2001; Sparke, 2005; Staeheli and Brown 2003).

I engage with these critiques and expand on them to study the ways in which neoliberal economic restructuring, local spatial politics and poverty management together form particular discursive and material conditions for those in poverty. Capitalist poverty governance has been taken up in different ways based on local representations of poverty and geographically situated economic climates. In the American south, for example, the welfare system historically denied benefits to African Americans in order to keep them in low-paying agricultural labor (England,

2008; Nakano Glenn, 2002; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001). This idea still exists in many cities where the a racialized and gendered spatial imagination creates and reiterates divisions of labor that push African American women into low-paying care sector employment that ironically separates them from caring for their own children (Lipsitz, 2011; Nakano Glenn, 2002; 2010). While work has historically been required for welfare, (see England, 2008), today's workfare programs are the most expansive, requiring longer workweeks for fewer benefits (Piven, 2001; Kittay, 1999; Schram, 2000).

Neoliberalism, far from being a singular policy with uniform effects, has 'taken place' unevenly, and this is illustrated in my case studies (Peck, 2001). For each of my case studies, the economies, politics and social climates have been deeply affected by neoliberalism albeit in different ways. King County and Seattle in particular is considered an example of a major American city successfully adapting to neoliberal economic shifts through restructuring its local economy, attracting investors in competitive markets and building a workforce to support these changes (Sparke, 2005). Evidence of this growth is illustrated in the rapid rise of affluence in the area, with a local media bragging that King County had more millionaires than Manhattan. Jackson County and Kansas City represent a different end of the spectrum; the vulnerability of industrial cities to remain competitive amidst the pressure to restructure. Neoliberal restructuring operates in tandem with workfare programs and cuts to the welfare rolls to create significant downward pressure on wages in low-skill labor markets (Piven, 2001; Harvey, 2003; Peck, 2001). Through the discourse of the neoliberal worker-citizen, the culture of 'work-enforcement' is felt for all low-income families, not just those on safety net programs. These effects, however, vary according to the political economy and social climate in which they take place. Through juxtaposing two counties who have adapted to neoliberalism in very different

ways, I theorize how those in poverty are implicated in these local discursive and material projects of neoliberal economic restructuring.

Recently, geographers have focused on the construction of the social categories of ‘poor’ and ‘non-poor’ and how these productions of poverty are imbedded in processes of not only neoliberalism but also racialization, and the structuring of place along identity markers (Bonds, 2009; England 2008; Lawson 2012; Peck, 2001; Staeheli and Brown, 2003). Space plays a major role in processes of social categorization because “local cultural relations, such as the material and discursive production of race and class, are specifically bounded. That is, they are produced in places through local geographic contexts and social histories” (Bonds, 2009, 130). Place matters for those in poverty from the policies in their community to the categories of social difference and the construction of political subjectivities (Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, 2010). When less Americans apply for and receive TANF, the physical and discursive spaces where welfare recipients claim their benefits and make a case for their inclusion as citizens in American society diminish. As cash-assistance becomes a smaller part of how the poor make ends meet, private safety nets precariously fill in the gaps, moving recipients’ claims to less-politicized spaces such as homes and community centers. The production of citizen-workers also means that care-work is devalued and more single parents must take on waged labor. Capitalist workplaces become a primary site of encounter between different economic classes. These “spatially situated encounters may activate governance processes that reinscribe hegemonic scripts about poor others” (Elwood and Lawson, 2013, 5). In seeking to avoid the stigma of the ‘welfare mother’ and take on employment, impoverished parents may find themselves further marginalized as the racial or classed ‘other’ outside of the middle class ideal and be the object of discrimination in the workplace.

This analysis unpacks the gendered and racialized discourses that are part of poverty management and the structuring of urban spaces. Feminist geographers study the ways in which places, “from bathrooms to call centres, from urban parks to teaching spaces” are produced by the people and power relations that inhabit them (Bondi and Davidson, 2005). Places, however, do not produce fixed identities and shared experiences. Rather, places are the site of contested meanings based on the diverse social interactions and networks of power which occur there. All places are made up of networks of domination, oppression, cooperation, and resistance and these networks produce the meanings of locations (Massey, 1994). As argued by McDowell (2001, 31):

Clearly, depending on their position in the social structure, people are differentially located in space, with differential abilities and opportunities to overcome what geographers refer to as the frictional effects of difference.

In analyzing TANF, the abilities and opportunities for recipients are based on agency, past and present political economy, local values and feelings about poverty, and these are bound in gender and racial norms. Welfare recipients experience place based on factors such as their race and gender that in turn affect their access to resources where they live (Bondi and Davidson, 2005: 17; Massey, 1985; 1994).

I build on these arguments by theorizing my case study sites as two alternative spatial imaginaries in terms of what bodies ‘belong’ and are ‘excluded’ from urban space. Neoliberalism is just one part of the creation of subjectivities and identities along class lines. Historical differences in terms of population growth and each counties’ place in the national political economy has created spatial ordering in terms of racial and class segregation that varies in each site and has important repercussions for identity. Kansas City is considered primarily a ‘donut city’ where the urban core lacks investment compared to the more affluent suburbs. While the

history and current dynamics behind these trends are complex, it has led to a racial divide where African Americans (and to a lesser extent, Latinos) are spatially marginalized in the urban core and away from the best employment, schools, and neighborhoods. Conversely, Seattle has historically had a much smaller African American population whose residential access to the city was very limited. Trends such as ‘back to the city’ movements in Seattle have pushed people of color to the less expensive suburbs of the city. In both sites, there is a ‘spatial mismatch’ between the privileged spaces of economic investment and the ‘forgotten places’ where marginalized communities largely reside (England, 1996; Wilson and Bauder, 2000). Racist associations between African Americans and public assistance as well as white spatial privilege has led to different experiences in place along racial lines (Gotham, 2002; Lipsitz, 2011; Omi and Winant, 1994; Pulido, 2000; Roediger, 1991; 2005). Through analyzing the ways in which the spaces and markets in each of my case studies are racialized and gendered, I challenge the hegemonic poverty knowledge claim that opportunities are neutral and based on merit.

These factors together influence the particular regimes of poverty management taken up in each locale as well as the identities and political subjectivities of the impoverished. Neoliberal subjectivities are based on a liberal, worker-citizen model that frames employment as the ideal way to contribute to society (McDowell, 2004; Tronto, 2001). Requiring work for public assistance receipt forces parents to leave their own children behind in order to prove their contribution to society. This rhetoric devalues, depoliticizes and ignores the importance of caring for children, families and communities. The welfare reform legislation of 1996 and specifically TANF is of particular importance to feminist research not only because welfare overwhelming affects women-headed families, but also because welfare discourse defines work in particular ways that often ignore the critical work of caring for families (England and Lawson,

2005; McDowell, 2001, 2004). Although the original intent of welfare was to promote children being cared for in the home by their mothers, this value has been all but lost in current poverty policies. Proponents of workfare programs assert that if recipients are not required to work, the government continues to promote welfare dependency. They argue that through employment recipients can become self-sufficient and fully contribute to their community and country (Schram, 2000). Making this rhetoric more ironic, politicians and caseworkers often encourage welfare mothers to become self-sufficient through ‘entrepreneurial’ ventures such as starting child-care agencies. The value of care is mediated through the market as low-income mothers are not valued as caretakers of their own families but as ‘entrepreneurial’ agents.

As TANF recipients are required to work for welfare benefits, forced to leave welfare, or reject assistance they stream into the labor market en masse, competing with other low-wage workers (Piven, 2001; Peck, 2001). This creates a surplus of low-wage workers in the United States that greatly benefits employers looking to cut labor costs (Piven, 2001; Harvey, 2003; Peck, 2001; Watkins, 1993). Corporations who hire welfare recipients can, “virtually deduct wage costs from their taxes and they often receive direct subsidies” giving them ample incentives to hire welfare workers (Piven, 2001, 145). Further, workfare programs allow contracted employers to hire recipients at or below minimum wage, driving down wages in those sectors (Piven, 2001). While access to employment is integral to recipient’s livelihood, the types of jobs available to them often do not provide a living wage or benefits such as paid sick leave or health care (Edin and Lein, 1997; Glenn, 2002; Schram, 2000). Typically, recipients leaving the rolls make below the federal poverty level, or about \$9 to \$10 an hour (Urban Institute, 2012). Welfare recipients are required to take employment in jobs that offer little current or future

security, often making it harder for them to leave the conditions of poverty (Piven, 2001). In addition, it takes them away from their homes and caring for dependents.

Feminist geographers and others have argued that discourses on proper employment and gender roles of women of different races and ethnicities greatly affect the ways in which mothers on welfare are perceived in society and treated while on welfare (England, 2008; Gilens, 1999; Glenn, 2002; Soss, Schram and Fording, 2011). Racialized constructions of poverty play an important role in understanding neoliberal poverty governance and conditions of safety net receipt (Soss, Schram and Fording, 2011). While narratives about the sexuality of women and especially women of color have been pervasive during national debates on welfare, these narratives play out in specific ways across place. The idea of the overly sexual, indulgent, and dependent African American mother has implicitly influenced welfare policy nationally but has specific influences depending on current and past racial histories. After 1996, the strictest TANF policies were more likely to be adopted in states where minorities made up a larger percentage of recipients (Nuebeck and Cazenave, 2001). Historical and current labor migration patterns, prevalence of ethnic or racial groups, and local gender norms all contribute to not just the specific TANF policies but to how recipients are viewed and what resources are available to them. TANF policies at the state and county level are informed by and reinforce local mores about “deserving” families, excluding some families from the rolls altogether or moving some people welfare quickly (ibid).

My research takes these themes a step further by closely theorizing how these daily practices and discourses influence the political subjectivities of low-income parents. I pose questions about how neoliberal economic changes as well racialized, classed and gendered spatial structures affect how those who are on, timed-out or rejected public assistance view their

inclusion in their community and their right to urban space. If part of the spatial narrative of Seattle and King County is that of success, of high-tech industry and millionaires in every neighborhood, then how do these narratives and encounters with privileged bodies impact the identities of those on the ‘losing’ end of neoliberalism? If Jackson County and Kansas City has been framed as post-industrial and if minorities are further marginalized within this framework, then what does this do to the aspirations, agency and voice of the impoverished? Through a comparison of each site I challenge the ‘success’ of welfare reform and the logic of neoliberalism by exposing the subtle and explicit forms of racism, sexism and class politics that are reinforcing inequalities and exclusions to public spaces.

### ***Overview of the Dissertation***

In the following chapters, I explore the intersection of welfare receipt, material conditions of poverty, and the identities of low-income families through my case studies of King County, Washington and Kansas City, Missouri. My project seeks to understand the ways in which historical legacies of welfare policies, neoliberal economic restructuring, and the social production of poor “others” influence the resources available to, and the coping strategies of, people in poverty. In the next chapter, I discuss my methodology and contextualize my project. Using feminist praxis as the theoretical foundation of my research, I outline my path to this project to illustrate my intellectual and personal connection to this topic. I describe feminist research ethics and how this specifically relates to power and epistemology in my project. Feminist research praxis rejects the idea of scientific, masculinist, absolute, objectivity and argues that all research is partial and situated in particular times and spaces (England 1994; Haraway 1991). Here I provide detailed information about my methods and why this was the most appropriate approach to reaching my research goals.

Through national, state, and county level data from the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families I present several snap-shots of TANF receipt that appear throughout chapters of the dissertation. The quantitative portion of my research is complemented by in-depth interviews and participant observation at welfare offices, which provide a deeper understanding about the experiences of public assistance. I conducted 72 interviews over 18-months of fieldwork. My interview subjects mainly self-identified as African American and as women and most had experience on TANF. I also interviewed men and women who had been on other safety net programs to allow for comparison. To better understand the conditions of applying for and receiving TANF, I conducted participant observations of welfare offices in both research sites. This mixed-method approach produces analysis that is both empirically grounded in specific places and times but also that highlights broader themes in neoliberal governance and poverty management.

In chapter three, I provide a historical analysis of welfare in the United States. I begin with this in order to illustrate the ways in which welfare policy responds to and recreates a stratified American society, differentiated specifically by race, class, gender and geography (Piven, 2001). This chapter, however, clearly acknowledges a long history in the West of vilifying and othering the poor. I argue that broader capitalist, racist and sexist dynamics have led to this particular moment in poverty governance. The history of welfare in the United States has been marked by phases of government intervention and withdrawal, of increased access and heightened impediments, of growing diversity among recipients and backlash to perceived changes in the deservingness of recipients. In addition, the political economy, race and gender together have shaped who has access to welfare historically and what types of surveillance and resources they receive and are subjected to. While these ideas have been threaded throughout the

history of assistance, the modern epoch of welfare is unique in one particular way: the use of work and the idea of the work ethic as a way to regulate parents, and mothers in particular, on public assistance (England, 2008; Piven, 2001). I highlight not just the changes in welfare policy over the past 100 years but also the continuities in how dominant discourse constructs the deservingness and non-deservingness of certain populations of the poor across place and time. I demonstrate that it has been the actions and struggles of those in the safety net and attendant social justice movements that have often created more generous benefits and more compassionate poverty policies (Piven, and Cloward, 1971). I situate neoliberal poverty governance as part of historical and geographical processes that have led to the construction of the poor as a concrete group in need of reform.

In chapter four, I focus on the discursive and material role of work-enforcement in the changing landscape of welfare. TANF and workfare more generally are used to regulate low-wage labor markets and govern the behaviors of low-income individuals (Piven, 2001; Watkins, 1993). In the modern discourse of welfare, work is utilized not just as a requirement for receiving welfare but in the more wide-reaching way of indoctrinating all classes of Americans to believe that assistance is not an entitlement but rather conditional on work (Peck, 2001; Staeheli and Brown, 2003). The conditionality of welfare and derogatory representations of those in poverty are not new. Today, however, the discourse of work-enforcement is the most far-reaching and care-work is more devalued than ever (Bonds, 2009; Piven, 2001; Soss, Fording and Schram, 2011). Guided by discourse on market fundamentalism and personal responsibility, this social contract, though never complete and often contingent on race, ethnicity and class, has been replaced by a dogmatic focus on requiring work in order for poor mothers to receive aid (Piven, 2001; Fraser and Gordon, 1994). I analyze the ways in which employment represents

another space of governance for welfare recipients where they may face harassment, discrimination and marginalization based on the race, gender or status as a welfare recipient. I argue that work programs and the culture of work enforcement (i.e. through the threat of time limits and sanctions) provide a workforce for low-wage labor markets while simultaneously allowing for increased surveillance of welfare recipients. Examining the culture of work enforcement through a spatial comparison of two case studies illustrates how policy and the neoliberal project interact and utilize poor bodies in similar ways (Bonds, 2009).

In the final empirical chapter, I extend this analysis to understand what the neoliberal regulatory project of safety net assistance means for the subjectivities, identities and agency of low-income parents. The model of the ‘welfare mother’ is juxtaposed with the ‘worker-citizen’ subject position and through regulation and vilification, impoverished parents are pressured to conform to the latter. I also explore the ways in which access to and experiences in welfare programs influence the identities of recipients and how this may be different across places and within racial and gender lines. I conclude with examples of resistance of the neoliberal worker-citizen model and alternatives ways in which those in poverty seek to understand their identities as dignified, valued, and in power. Through a comparative case study analysis, I theorize what localized factors contribute to impoverishment, provide agency, and produce different subject positions.

### ***Conclusion***

In sum, through an analysis of the neoliberal regulatory project and the racialized and gendered construction of impoverished ‘others’, this project examines poverty and welfare receipt at the center of historical, geographical, cultural and political-economic processes. These processes create and recreate unequal power dynamics and subject positions, solidifying a more

stratified American society. I investigate the ways in which the poor piece together a patchwork safety net of locally contingent resources, from employment and familial help to non-profit services and entrepreneurial labor. Through the vilification of welfare receipt and the idealization of the worker-citizen, low-income parents are entangled in a culture of work-enforcement in which through becoming ‘independent’, they may also reify the neoliberal regulatory project by working in low-wage jobs. I examine the ways in which work enforcement and encounters on the job can reinforce gender and racial inequalities and produce new formations of poverty in terms of those who are ‘just getting by’ and living paycheck to paycheck. Finally, this project explores the rejection of public assistance and alternative subject positions and identities taken on by those in poverty. In each of these themes, I theorize how urban space is raced, gendered, and classed with low-income families increasingly unable to access privileged sites such as desirable neighborhoods, places of employment, and other resources. While these alternative positions are complex, I argue that they offer spaces of hope and resistance, paving the way for new discourses and poverty policies that value care work, dignity, and interdependence.

## **Chapter II. Subjectivity, Identity and Comparative Poverty Analyses**

My project is a comparative examination of the social, historical, political, and economic processes that produce poverty and influence the identities and experiences of those in poverty in America today. More specifically, this research investigates public assistance receipt at two field sites, Jackson County, MO and King County, WA, and through comparative analysis, explores the “socio-spatial relations” of those in the safety net (Pulido, 2000, 16 in Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, 2010). My project seeks to understand the ways in which historical legacies of welfare

policies, neoliberal economic restructuring, and the social production of poor ‘others’ influence the resources available to, and the coping strategies of, people in poverty. Specifically, I analyze welfare as a barometer of an increasingly unequal America and I do this through examining the subjectivities and political agency of one of the most vulnerable populations in the United States: those who utilize the safety net to make ends meet.

In this chapter, I begin by presenting my research design. While I will discuss the epistemological decisions behind this design and the details of implementation more specifically in later sections, I first provide an overview of the project. Using feminist praxis as the theoretical foundation, I outline my path to this project to illustrate my intellectual and personal connection to the research. I begin by describing my own close connections to the safety net and how this greatly influenced my worldview and future path as an academic. I also outline previous related research endeavors that provided inspiration and theoretical foundations to my current research. I tell this tale of my personal path to the project not to provide “authenticity” but rather to illustrate the ways in which my positionality uniquely shapes my research and how I relate to the theory and fieldwork. I close this section by examining how this positionality limits my interactions in the field and what I can “know”.

In the next section, I unpack feminist research ethics and how this specifically relates to power and epistemology in my project. Feminist research praxis rejects the idea of scientific objectivity and argues that all research is partial and situated in particular times and spaces (England, 1994; Haraway, 1991). I examine the ways in which the politics of knowledge production has previously influenced research on welfare and how I chose to navigate this dynamic in my own research. Questions of power and privilege are especially important when conducting work with people on public assistance, a group who routinely are required to divulge

information about their daily lives in order to receive the resources they need to live. Finally, in this section, I describe how power, identity, and agency were not just variables in the research process but indeed an explicit part of the process of research design and fieldwork. I will provide examples of the ‘performance of the field’ and analyze how the ‘encounter’ was shaped by my own positionality as a white, privileged academic who had lived across these spheres.

Next, I outline my analytical approach to the research design. Here I provide detailed information about my methods and why this was the most appropriate approach to reaching my research goals. A flood of research followed the passage of welfare reform from diverse disciplines and with divergent agendas. Feminist, critical race, and critical poverty scholars argue that much hegemonic research on welfare reiterates discourses and material processes that marginalize those on public assistance through positioning them as dependent, victims, lacking agency, and/or complicit in their own poverty (Lawson 2012; Morgen, Acker and Weigt, 2010; O’Connor, 2001). My research design utilizes quantitative data from the U.S. Department of the Census and the Department of Health and Human Services as well as in-depth interviews with recipients and gatekeepers and participant observation in welfare offices. But a mixed-method approach alone does not address the gaps in mainstream welfare research. I finish this section by describing how a feminist ethic of care influences research questions, design and interpretation of results. Through analyzing the safety net through an ethic of care and social justice, this research project questions whether or not public assistance provides justice and dignity to those who utilize it. As part of my research design, I argue for the importance of comparative spatial analysis in order to uncover contradictions in neoliberal poverty governance and the ways in which place, race, gender, and poverty policies intersect. Place-poverty connections are an under-developed aspect of poverty research (Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, 2010). Through

comparative analyses, we can better understand place-specific poverty processes that highlight the broader role of economics, politics, gender and race in producing privilege and marginalization.

### ***Introduction to the Research Design***

This project is an interpolation between a) quantitative statistical data about public assistance receipt, b) in-depth interviews with those on assistance as well as those that administer safety net programs, and c) participant observation in welfare offices. I conducted a similar research design in two research sites, Jackson County, MO and King County, WA, each with comparable TANF policies and contrasting demographic and political-economic climates. These methods as well as the use of two field sites helped answer the questions: How do workfare regimes play out in specific places with different political economies and histories of assistance? What are the public and private survival strategies of those using safety net programs? And finally, what are the ways in which public assistance use influences the political agency and identity of those on assistance? While initially the “statistical portrait” of welfare users was a large part of my project, through the research process I discovered that statistics such as “work participation rate” offered less to my project than I imagined. While still important, quantitative data is used in my dissertation to highlight particular examples of material conditions and/or subject positions rather than as a defining feature.

Interviews with those on safety net programs provide the bulk of data for this project. I conducted 72 interviews across field sites mainly with those who had been in the safety net. I also conducted 9 interviews with ‘gatekeepers’ or those that administer workfare assignments, safety net benefits, or act as advocates to those applying to or on the rolls. The majority of those interviewed were African Americans with smaller numbers of whites and other races (see Table

One). The interviewees had experience with a range of public assistance programs including TANF, SNAP, unemployment insurance, disability insurance, Medicaid, and Women Infants Children (WIC). In addition to interviews with those on public assistance I also conducted several interviews with people that administered either safety net programs or worked in non-profits targeting low-income communities. Finally, I completed several participant observations in King and Jackson County welfare offices. While most of my research involved sitting in the office and observing the interactions and general climate of the space, on one occasion I shadowed a person who was checking in with their case-manager to for a more in-depth examination of the caseworker-client relationship.

**Table One: Self-Identified Gender and Race of Research Participants**

	<b>Jackson County, MO (38 interview subjects)</b>	<b>King County, WA (34 Interview Subjects)</b>
<b>Women</b>	32	32
<b>Men</b>	6	2
<b>African American</b>	29	27
<b>White</b>	6	4
<b>Latino/a</b>	2	1

<b>Other</b>	1	0
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### *My Path to This Project*

In this chapter I make my epistemological and methodological positions and decisions as explicit as possible in the hopes of producing scientifically rigorous but situated knowledge about public assistance receipt and identity. To do this, I begin by locating myself as the researcher and outlining my own positionality and reflexivity *Vis a Vis* this work. Positionality refers to how we are positioned “in relation to multiple, relational social processes of difference” which include gender, race, class, age, and other markers of difference (England, 1995, 298). Feminist positionality as an epistemological approach recognizes varying relations in the hierarchies of power and interrogates the ways in which this influences our research questions and the way we analyze the data (England, 1994). Reflexivity refers to a sensitivity and acknowledgement of our own power and privilege as a researcher (England 1994, Rose, 1997). Together, these concepts push the researcher to challenge and question our values and ways of knowing while also accepting that our knowledge is always situated and partial (England, 1994; Rose, 1997). In the past decades, feminist researchers have explicitly stated their positionality through reflexive pieces at the beginning of their work. While I will discuss partial knowledge, reflexivity and the politics of fieldwork more specifically in the next section, in this section I reflect on my path to this project and the ways in which this path has influenced my positionality.

This project emerged from my master’s thesis that involved a discursive analysis of welfare in news media during the build-up to and aftermath of welfare reform (1995-2007). The questions asked in my master’s research and continued in this current endeavor became dear to me much earlier in my life. Growing up in Kansas City, I saw first-hand the effects of neoliberal

economic restructuring in my community. While Kansas City is not strongly considered a “Rust Belt” city, its economic roots have primarily been in blue-collar professions such as manufacturing and shipping. My father, a blue-collar worker in the manufacturing sector, lost his job when I was in grade school, and for the next ten years my family was economically unstable. To support our family, my father worked several jobs including selling used cars and moving to rural central Wyoming for a job opportunity. My mother, who had been caring for the children for several years, went back to work as a sales clerk making minimum wage. Throughout this time, we utilized public and private forms of aid. As soon as we could, each of my sisters found jobs and my family worked together to make ends meet. One job in particular liked my work ethic so much the boss gave me two raises in a year that meant at fifteen I was making more money than my mother.

Then, when I was in high school, my father suffered a massive heart attack which left him unable to work. Navigating the system to receive medical benefits took nearly a year, during which time my family lived on savings and my father cashed in his retirement plan. One vivid memory from this time period was my father, angry and red-faced, repeating, “I fought for this country, I deserve this money. It just shouldn’t be so damn hard”. While like many working-class men my father did not prioritize being healthy, I fully believe the weight of being unemployed, moving around the country, and trying to raise a family was a major factor in his health issues.

Telling these vignettes about my family is more than merely navel-gazing. Growing up relying on various private and public forms of assistance to make ends meet greatly altered my identity and how I understood assistance and those who used it. In the media and in more affluent circles I encountered, people on assistance were positioned as lazy, complicit in their poverty, promiscuous, dependent on welfare, and lacking ‘values’. What I encountered in my

neighborhood, at school, and in my family was quite different. First and foremost, public assistance users were not a monolithic category. People were on and off different forms of assistance for very different reasons. Second, the people I knew were working or trying to find employment in a city that was in a consistent recession. Third, we did, in fact, have values and voices but it appeared that very few people found them important. Watching my sisters go through the indignity of trying to receive and stay on public assistance or seeing my neighborhood decline due to lack of investment in inner-city infrastructure changed how I viewed the safety net, poverty and justice. It was these experiences that ultimately led me to study the ways in which neoliberal poverty governance produces particular subjectivities and influences the identities and political agency of those marked as ‘poor’.

During college I began a long journey of learning to bridge the chasm between being a working-class person at a privileged, private school and being a privileged, private school college student at home. In college courses it astonished me how self-proclaimed feminists and leftists discussed low-income groups. The discourse ranged from universalizing, “Why do the poor eat so much junk food?” to victimizing, “It’s not their fault. They are just uneducated”, to villainizing, “it’s because they don’t respect themselves”. In addition, the white, middle class perspective was almost always the dominant perspective in the curriculum, for example when I teacher stated, “This is a new generation of students. I can assume you’ve all traveled out of the country” or when another argued that “work is good for women because it offers freedom”. Both of these statements ignored broad populations of people with different experiences. For me, those statements left me feeling isolated, ashamed and angry. Often, when I brought up these issues with friends I often got the response of “you’re being uptight/touchy/taking it too personally”. Whatever the intentions, at my college and at universities across the country,

working class and working poor people were either left out of the discussion all together or spoken about from a dominant gaze.

While these conversations in and out of the classroom left me seeking justice for marginalized groups in the academy, I was unable to replicate that passion at home. I had been cultivating a counter-identity of a culturally middle class person for a number of years. This largely amounted to rejecting anything that represented my working-class family or neighborhood. This rejection reached mammoth proportions upon entering college and finding a new “intellectual” middle class to aspire toward. After meeting many of the families of my middle class friends, I loathed the way my parents spoke, what they ate, where they shopped, and the life decisions they did not make (namely not traveling out of the country or going to college). While this may seem like an average young person’s passing reaction to their family upbringing, mine was rooted in class shame, a shame brought on by repeated messages in the media, in academia, and from encounters with my middle class friends. This was one of the most difficult times in my life, when I felt torn between intense loyalty and love for my family and a fear that reaching my intellectual and class aspirations meant parting with a portion of our shared identity forever. My experiences in college left me asking: Why did mainstream American discourse frame those in poverty as criminal and lazy? Why was there not a stronger backlash against these constructions by the middle class or the poor themselves? Why do some low-income people feel ashamed of their identities and how does this lead to self-governance? And, what research is being done and can be done to address political-economic, racial and gender inequalities without reiterating patterns of dominance?

Given these lingering questions, in my master’s research, I wanted to examine the subjectivities of those marked as ‘poor’ and uncover what political, economic, and social

processes reinscribe these material and discursive conditions. While a popular national narrative tells us that the 1960s and 1970s were a hotbed of economic social justice activism, from the community organizing of poor mothers in New York City, to the national Welfare Rights Movement, since the 1980s movements for economic rights have dwindled (Peck, 2001). With strident calls for welfare reform in the 1990s and the bipartisan passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, many advocates of the poor were left asking how these changes happened with little response from the left (Albelda and Withorn, 2002). I wanted to know what, if anything, changed and how current discourses of ‘the poor’ as dependent and undeserving of public assistance became common sense.

While I understood that race and gender played an important part in the positioning of the poor as irresponsible, as I entered the Geography program I learned more about the function of neoliberal economic restructuring in the shifts from Lyndon Johnson’s federally mandated War on Poverty to conservative academics’ recently intensifying argument of a Culture of Poverty. In developing my master’s thesis I wanted to examine the important changes in how our nation disciplines, manages, and views the poor and the influence of race, gender and economic restructuring on the already fragile safety net (Albelda and Withorn, 2002). I conducted a content and critical discourse analysis of articles on welfare reform in *Newsweek* magazine. I sought to unearth the ways in which these discourses are spatialized through discussions of scale and place in the articles. Through this analysis, I observed that welfare recipients were continually positioned at certain scales in contrasting ways. Mainstream discourse on welfare had changed from a Keynesian approach in which the national government largely mandates and administers poverty policy to a neoliberal approach that values the flexibility of state and local governments in creating welfare programs. While dominant poverty policies have long fixated on the

behaviors of the poor, welfare reform reiterated the idea that poverty is a choice of the poor and that the federal welfare state encourages these bad choices (Fitchen, 1981, in Lawson, Jarosz, Bonds, 2010). The scales of the national, state, local, and body were utilized in the media to illustrate the “right and wrong” places of welfare reform. In addition to specific scales, the sample articles also represented welfare recipients as residing at certain reoccurring places. These included run-down neighborhoods, basketball courts, the couch, responsible fatherhood meetings and over-run government offices. What struck me most about these representations was what Sanford Schram describes as “discrimination by stealth” in which welfare discourse does not explicitly state race, gender or class but instead “hides them in plain sight” in order to play on the cultural biases of many Americans (2000, 185).

Through describing an unkempt home or a busy basketball court, the authors used space to conjure up images of the undeserving welfare recipient. Recipients were often positioned as ‘others’ outside middle class values and ways of life. Pundits on either side of the welfare debate evoked this idea, either by arguing that welfare recipients were able to “move up the ladder” or “transition their values” through reform or conversely that they were “too far off the grid” or “emotionally and mentally unable” to benefit from changes in TANF policy. Each of these themes illustrated the new geographies of welfare reform as rooted in political economy, race, gender, and spatial processes. These also illustrate how spatial discourses are used to ‘other’ welfare recipients as outside an idealized and imagined middle class.

### ***Feminist Research Ethics***

My research is guided by my theoretical and epistemological stances about the politics of fieldwork developed largely through my own positionality and through feminist research ethics. In particular, feminist debates about the relationship between epistemology and methodology

were core to my research design. For decades, feminist theorists have called for transparency in the positionality of the researcher, highlighted situated and partial knowledges, questioned the power dynamics between the researcher and researched (reflexivity), and challenged notions of what constitutes “the field” in fieldwork (England, 1994; Haraway, 1991; Katz, 1994; Peake and Kobayashi, 2002; England and Lawson, 2005; Rose, 1997). While I have outlined aspects of my positionality in the previous section, in this section I will build on this idea and go in-depth into the ways in which feminist research ethics and a focus on putting care into research influenced the creation and implementation of this project.

First, this research is based on the idea of situated and partial knowledges. In other words, “knowledge as located and partial, and the subject as multiply constituted, non-transparent and shifting” (Nelson, 2000). Situated knowledge is a direct challenge to the objectivity or “god trick” of much scientific research that seeks out “universal truths” through positivist methods (England, 1994; Haraway, 1991). Feminist researchers argue that all research is influenced by ideology and politics and that the researcher cannot conduct work in a vacuum (England, 1994; Haraway, 1991). In critiquing the idea of objectivity, feminist theorists propose that ethical research is aware of the limits of knowledge production. Rather than seeking out one truth, situated knowledges are a way of illustrating the complex, shifting and multiple realities encountered in the field, the lab or anywhere research occurs (England, 1994; Rose 1993). Situated knowledges appreciates the partial knowledge and context of both researcher and subject and recognizes that each are located within time and space and in relation to power (Nelson, 2000).

In designing this project, I felt that my experiences with public assistance and living in each case study site would be a strength in conducting research and not an Achilles heel. Based

on what I felt was my ‘insider’ status, I believed I could tell a more complete story than Ivy League academics or detached statisticians. This was, of course, a naive assumption. Instead, this perceived notion of being a local often made it more difficult for me to interpret the results of interviews or led me to false assumptions when reading statistical data about poverty in each county. I had to continue to interrogate my assumptions about welfare receipt and about poverty and remind myself that my knowledge even of myself as a researcher was limited (Rose, 1997). My loyalty to my home city and protective stance toward my sisters who had been on welfare made it particularly important for me to try to come to the data with as much impartiality as possible. Long discussions with my advisor, husband and friends helped me balance my passion for my research with an eye toward presenting the results as nakedly as I could. Through my fieldwork I realized that partial knowledge does not just apply to outsiders but may be even trickier to navigate for those, like myself, who admittedly harbor close connections to their research.

Another important contribution of feminist research praxis to field research is troubling the power relationship between researcher and subject. Feminist methodologies challenge the notion of researcher as unbiased and distanced from the subject while also questioning the dichotomy between subject and object (England, 1994; Haraway, 1991; Katz, 1994; Rose, 1997). Many feminist research projects begin with the goal of ‘giving voice’ to ‘others’ that are marginalized or silenced by dominant groups or discourses. While the intentions may be good, this approach may reinforce the power dynamics between researcher/expert and subject/pupil. Feminist researchers are left asking, “How do we incorporate the voices of others without colonizing them in a manner that reinforces patterns of domination?” (England, 1994, 242). In order to combat this, feminist researchers have taken steps to highlight the role of subjects as

experts of their own lives and to break down the distance between themselves and their subjects (England, 1994).

In my research, power dynamics are especially important because of the population with whom I conducted research. I was working primarily with safety net recipients, a diverse group who politicians and the media have routinely essentialized and universalized. Many of the people I interviewed were very battle-worn and wary of ‘authorities’ because they often held the key to their livelihoods. While I had thought of myself as an ‘insider’, someone who could relate to their experiences, I was perceived as an academic and a white, middle class ‘other’. The entire research encounter was caught up in complex dynamics of power and privilege and this limited my access to specific types of knowledge about the interviewees. For example, I conducted one interview in a fast-food restaurant near the home of a young, African American interviewee from Kansas City. While at first she was quite talkative, as the interview continued she became much quieter providing only short answers. After the brief interview drew to a close I offered to give her a ride home. As soon as we entered the car, she explained that being with a white woman with a recorder in her neighborhood meant you were talking to someone you shouldn’t be talking to. She was afraid of being called a ‘snitch’ and therefore wanted to be perceived by other patrons as uncooperative with me.

This particular encounter illustrates the realities of power dynamics of class and race and how this changed my interview interactions. While I had hoped that offering to conduct interviews in fast-food places near the subjects’ home would provide a sense of comfort and make transportation easier, my privilege status blinded me toward possible concerns this might raise for the people I was ostensibly trying to benefit. In an America that continues to be segregated by race, class, and education (among other things), the site of a white and black

woman together not merely raised eyebrows but greatly influenced what knowledge was conveyed during the interview process. My research and the interpretation of the results were influenced not only by my own positionality but also by the way my positionality influenced the research encounter.

Power dynamics between researcher and subject played out through other forms of self-censorship in my interviews and were often heightened by the presence of my recorder. For example, while interviewing a woman in her 40s, she asked me to turn off the recorder while she had a phone conversation with her husband to discuss buying liquor for the night. She was afraid she would get “in trouble” and did not want herself associated with alcohol. When interviewing a family member I was told to not include the parts where she used ‘foul language’ and was asked to turn off the recorder to discuss her working while on the rolls. Each of these examples illustrates that in my project, what is at stake is quite different for the subject and the researcher. I came to each interview nervous about getting good answers, worried that I might get strange looks from other people for doing an interview, and apprehensive that I would not get enough interviews. Interview subjects, however, often came to the research encounter not fully knowing my intentions, where the data was going, how their answers would be interpreted and what the implications of the interview might be. While I did try to make my intentions and the research process as clear as possible, I was also a total stranger recording important details about their lives. The emotional impacts of the safety net had left many of the research subjects eager to tell their stories but hesitant to divulge key aspects of their lives. What was at stake was a potential call from social services or even the arrival of the police at their door. This difference in stakes is one factor that reiterates power relations between researcher and subject.

So what did I do to mitigate this issue? I first turned to the literature on feminist research ethics for specific examples. Unfortunately I found a lot of the literature difficult to implement in the field. How do I create empathy and mutual respect with a person I've just met, who I will only encounter for an hour and who may view me as a threat or as just another naïve white girl? But I had to do something and in my case I did three things: If people had children I asked lots of questions about them; I asked their advice on few things and finally, if all else failed I used humor. I asked questions about their ages, what the kids were interested in and if appropriate, I offered anecdotes about my role as a proud aunt and said I was excited to be a mom someday. One less successful strategy that occurred in Kansas City was telling subjects that I grew up around there in hopes of letting them know I was a hometown kid. While growing up I considered my neighborhood part of the Kansas City inner city, my subjects *did not* and considered my old neighborhood "ugly, but a good place to live". Discussing my neighborhood in interviews was at best irrelevant to subjects and at worst furthered my isolation from them. By being sensitive to my privilege *Vis a Vis* the research subjects I hoped to both respect their expertise, time and contributions and also establish a caring research environment. In a major way, I was performing my "localness" in each site to build up my connection to the subjects. I also played down my education. On the other end, the participants were also performing by hiding certain aspects of themselves and presenting others.

In addition to challenging the dichotomous relationship between researcher and subject, feminist theorists have also questioned what constitutes the field and when and where the fieldwork 'ends' (Katz, 1994). While in many situations (particularly given the constraints of academia) it is necessary to delineate a field and subjects in order to create a research project, in reality these lines are blurry and unstable (*ibid*). While we establish artificial boundaries

between ourselves and our fieldwork and subjects this displacement may reinforce the power-laden dichotomies that critical research seeks to break down. Feminist researchers have argued for a “space of betweenness” in which we embrace that we never really leave the field but are neither inside nor outside (Katz, 1994). This concept returns to the idea of partial knowledge and multiple contexts. As Katz states (1994, 72):

By operating within these multiple contexts all the time, we may begin to learn not to displace or separate so as to see and speak, but to see, be seen, speak, listen and be heard in the multiply determined fields that we are everywhere, always in.

The idea of the field as constituted and part of us is salient in my research because each of my research sites I also considered home. In many ways, I can never really leave the field. Despite this, in navigating this space of ‘betweenness’, I knew I could not create conditions that would lead to some ‘authentic’ experience or ‘truth’ because this is a false goal (England, 1994; Katz, 1994). Rather, I sought to temper some of the anxiety of the research encounter while I also encouraging the interview subjects and myself to think through complex ideas. Because I spend considerable time in each location it was difficult to compartmentalize when I was ‘in’ the field, for example conducting an interview at a barbeque restaurant or ‘out’ of the field in which I was eating at the same barbeque restaurant with my parents<sup>1</sup>. Further, because of my attachment and familiarity with each location, it is at times more difficult for me to see the field through the eyes of the interviewees. This does not, however, mark me as an ‘insider’ in either context. Problematizing the field means recognizing the power dynamics that allow me to define the field and ask the questions which in many ways highlights my privileged status (Katz, 1994). This includes the fact that I was paying the subjects for their interviews. The monetary interaction shaped the interview in that it could be seen as a form of ‘work’ and that I was

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<sup>1</sup> This happened over the summer when, arriving at my parent’s house after conducting interviews, my father suggested we go to a very popular Kansas City BBQ place where I had been meeting with subjects earlier in the day.

looking to get something particular from the subjects. By paying them first I sought to alleviate this dynamic but it still reinvigorated the power imbedded in the encounter. The importance of being an insider or outsider or something in-between greatly influences the type of data I collected and the ways in which I analyze and interpret this data. As part of the politics of knowledge production, I tried to make the boundaries between researcher and subject part of my analysis. Each of the above examples of feminist epistemological and methodological approaches seeks to establish an ethical research agenda through reflection on the power and privilege that occur when working with subjects. It also illustrates the limits and potentials of gathering and subsequently interpreting ‘data’ and information gathered in the field.

### *Analytical Approach*

Through a comparative geographic analysis of Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) and other relevant safety net programs in America, this research seeks to understand the ways in which state-funded anti-poverty policies play out in specific contexts. While I began with a focus on TANF, I quickly expanded my research to incorporate numerous programs in the safety net. Generally, the American safety net is considered to be a network of publicly funded programs assisting those in need and including Medicaid, Medicare, Food Stamps (or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), Social Security, and unemployment insurance, among others. I focused on TANF because as a cash-welfare program targeted at poor families, it has received intense focus from the public and politicians. Through interviewing recipients of other safety net programs I was able to broaden my sample to include men, people over 65, and those who were kicked off or could not qualify for TANF. I chose two sites to conduct my research, King County, WA and Jackson County, MO. Through a comparative geographic

approach to poverty research I am able reveal how place-specific economic processes, cultural, and political attributes relate to poverty processes. Through teasing out key similarities and differences in how low-income families experience the safety net, we can better theorize how gender, race, place, and poverty governance intersect to create particular subject positions and forms of political agency. King County, WA and Jackson County, MO were chosen as a comparison for a number of reasons including key similarities and differences at the county and state level (discussed in a later section). Importantly, both sites have very similar TANF policies and requirements while featuring important differences in terms of political economy, historical approaches to public assistance and racialized spatial structures of the city.

My research design employed a mixed-method approach to investigate the resources available to those in poverty and the ways in which poverty governance and public assistance receipt influence the subjectivities and identities of those in the safety net. Because this research uses a geographic approach to understand the safety net, I began with data collection and analysis on poverty and public assistance receipt in order to uncover spatial patterns in safety net use. National and state level data came from the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families while some data (such as employment information and income) for counties and census blocks was collected through the Census American Community Survey. I also turned to policy organizations such as the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (a think tank focusing on publically funded programs and fiscal policies affecting low income people) for data on the influence of the recession on safety net participants. This was especially helpful in comparing data between states.

I specifically sought data on the demographic (age, gender, race, marital status, education and job availability) and participation characteristics (time on assistance, benefit levels,

sanctions) of safety net recipients in the decade since welfare reform and particularly before and after the recession (2005-2010). This timeline was necessary because it began when TANF programs had been in place for 5-9 years and generally had stabilized after the rapid changes following TANF implementation. The starting point of 2005 was also important because it captures the landscape of the safety net before the recession and budget cuts greatly changed the policies at the national, state, and local level. Following data collection, I created maps, graphs and tables to highlight important features in the data. I compared King and Jackson County by factors such as unemployment rates, poverty rates, and sanction rates in comparison to percentages of populations on public assistance. I also looked at factors such as race and the severity or generosity of TANF policies. While statistical analysis can provide an important portrait of poverty, this data must be supplemented with on-the-ground analysis from those implicated in the safety net. Indeed, as I began to interpret my data collection, I found that the statistical profile I created was necessary as a background to the qualitative research I conducted.

### ***Comparative Case Studies: King County, WA and Jackson County, MO***

The second phase of my research involved an in-depth reflexive, comparative analysis of King and Jackson County to examine what resources are available to recipients and how the experience of safety net policies shapes the subjectivities and daily practices of impoverished parents. In order to understand the resources available to those in poverty and the ways in which public assistance influences the feelings of exclusion and belonging of recipients, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews in each research site. In Jackson County, I began by contacting the Career Assistance Program's Full Employment Council. Primarily focused on job preparation

and training, the Full Employment Council services a variety of clients from displaced workers to new high school graduates. It is a requirement that TANF recipients in Jackson County attend this program and therefore the council estimates that it services 95% of Jackson County's TANF clients. This initial contact was a point of departure for recruiting TANF recipients for interviews through snowball interviewing. I began by speaking with a caseworker that contacted her clients and gave them my phone number. After setting up about 10 interviews, the subjects contacted with their neighbors and family members and by the end of my first research visit I had completed about 20 interviews total. Because people contacted family and friends, there were strong patterns in geographic and demographic data in my first set of interviews in Kansas City. This included a large sample of young African American women who had been or were currently on TANF and lived in two particular neighborhoods in historically racially segregated areas. While overall this research visit was a success, for my second visit I attempted to broaden my interview pool by recruiting people from other safety net programs.

In King County, interview subjects were first contacted through the Workforce Development Council and Parents Organizing for Welfare and Economic Rights (POWER). The Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council provides job-skills' training to workers who have little or no employment experience and are at or below poverty level. POWER is a non-profit TANF advocacy organization that works with recipients to not only train for new employment but also help them locate resources such as child-care, health care and educational opportunities. Neither of these initial recruiting tactics gained significant momentum and I turned to recruiting participants through a community health clinic in the Central District, the historical seat of African Americans in the Seattle area. Through short conversations with people throughout the two days I worked the booth, I gained insight into the frustrations, suspicions and

general antipathy toward public assistance. This is where I found the bulk of my interview subjects and it also greatly influenced my decision to expand my sample beyond just TANF as I heard stories about the difficulty of getting on TANF and the frustration of trying to make ends meet across different forms of public and private assistance.

In each research site, I conducted interviews in public places (generally fast food restaurants or coffee shops near their homes) that lasted about 1-2 hours. I began each interview by asking subjects about their age, educational background, length of time on TANF, number of children, marital status, and if they live in an urban, suburban or rural location. I asked recipients what jobs they were seeking or had previous experience with. If they had been on TANF I asked why they left (because they found a job, they reached time limits, or other reasons). I asked subjects how they currently access food, childcare, healthcare, and other resources and if they believe this may change after leaving welfare. Subjects were asked about where additional resources came from, for example healthcare from the government, childcare from a family member and food from food banks and church. They were asked about the recession and if and how they think it might influence their lives. The first half hour of the interview generally focused on getting to know the participant, setting the tone of the interview and asking questions about the resources available and survival strategies of those in the safety net. While I had a set of questions with me, often the interviews took on their own dynamics as participant's highlighted issues that were important to them.

In the second part of the interview I turned toward examining the ways in which safety net receipt influences the feelings of inclusion and exclusion and performativity of those in need. This was by far the most difficult part of the research process. Indeed, "if identity and meaning are difficult to specify at a theoretical level, they become still more slippery and

problematic in the context of fieldwork and interviews with ‘real’ people” (Nelson, 2000, 44). To explore the feelings of identity and agency of recipients I began by asking about the types of jobs they did and what they liked and disliked about the jobs. I asked how many hours a week they worked and in what ways their workfare employment (if applicable) was tied to their benefits (for example, did they receive subsidized childcare if they worked)? I asked if they believe workfare will help them get a job in the future. I asked if they believe welfare recipients should be required to work and why or why not. I explored rights to the city and spatial privilege by asking subjects about the places and spaces they felt they belonged and where they felt isolated, excluded or controlled. I also asked the subjects about the activities and organizations in which they were involved and if this changed while on welfare. Many of the research subjects cited church and informal social groups as major sites of community engagement. I also asked participants about voting and their feelings about the responsibilities of people and federal, state and local government. While I originally did not intend to discuss private forms of the safety net, recipients often brought up their preferred reliance on non-profits and charities as opposed to the scrutiny and surveillance involved in utilizing public assistance.

Following the interviews I wrote field notes recording the tone of the interview and any important cues that may not have been picked up by the recorder. When I had finished the bulk of my interviews and they were transcribed, I coded the data to look for patterns in what types of employment and resources were available and how this relates to age, race, gender, number of children, marital status, and their location. I used both NVivo and hand-coded the interview data using analytic categories to search for themes and patterns related to care work, waged employment, feelings of discrimination and strategies for making ends meet. Hand coding was necessary because while questions about resources are more straightforward, asking how

subjects feel about their employment and experience on welfare needs to be addressed through finer analysis. The data was all in a narrative form and hand coding allowed for the information to be understood in context.

I analyzed the data looking for patterns in how subjects viewed their employment and the ways in which they may relate employment to their identity. For example, I looked for connections between types of employment and feelings of respectability and connectedness to society. I noted how responses varied by subjects of different locations, races, and genders. Questions about identity and political agency were intentionally open-ended to allow for an investigation into whether the experience of being on assistance has led to greater community or political participation. This also allows me to explore if welfare recipients are acting out citizenship at different scales and in ways different from traditional practices such as voting. I also tried to spatially code the data by interpreting the responses in terms of places of belonging and exclusion. For example, I looked for patterns of the spaces of exclusion, such as the job site, middle class neighborhoods or the welfare office. I compared these responses across my field sites to understand how neoliberal economic processes were similar or different in their effects on self-identity.

Through comparing King and Jackson counties, we can see how similar workfare programs play out in particular geographic contexts. Taken together with the quantitative data, the qualitative interviews help reveal how place-specific economic processes, and cultural and political attributes relate to poverty processes. Throughout the research process, I was particularly attentive to the scale of resources, noting if recipients utilize federal, state, or county government funded sources as well as privately funded resources such as non-profits and charities. I conducted a reflexive geographic comparison across King and Jackson counties but

also looked for patterns in responses from subjects in rural, suburban and urban areas. Because Jackson and King County have similar unemployment rates and TANF policies and requirements, I analyzed the qualitative data to see if other factors such as race, length of time on TANF or geography influence the types of resources available and utilized. This information supplemented the quantitative data from phase one, allowing for a finer grain of analysis.

### ***Theorizing Poverty Across Place***

Through utilizing a feminist epistemological approach to research, I attempt to highlight the agency and value of subjects' knowledge about their daily experiences and identities. Another element to understanding the processes that lead to poverty is contextualizing these processes in place. Place can be considered in three ways: locale, or the actual setting of social relations; location, the geographically and historically situated locale; and finally as a sense or conceptualization/feeling that people have of a particular location (Agnew, 1987 in Nelson, 2000). This research situates place as a methodological and analytical concept that is historically and geographically constructed through social, political and economic processes (Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, 2010). Through an analysis of welfare policies we can delineate roughly what states or localities have more generous benefits, higher rates of people leaving welfare for work, and/or lower poverty rates. From this, we can ask what creates these conditions. Is the local job market strong? When people leave welfare are they better off financially? Is the stigma for receiving welfare less severe in this place? A comparison of two places through interviews can make these questions more clear. By listening to the experiences of those who have gone on, timed out or rejected assistance, we can better theorize the role of administrative rules, forms of work enforcement and local cultural attitudes toward assistance that reinforce or potentially alleviate

the conditions of poverty. We can also understand how those in poverty take up neoliberal governance and how this varies across places according to the above factors.

While geographers argue expressly for the importance of place in understanding poverty governance, much hegemonic poverty research has often neglected the places of poverty in lieu of focusing on people (for exceptions see England 2008; Lawson, Jarosz, and Bonds, 2010; Morgen, Acker and Weigt 2010). *New Poverty Studies*, calls for an increased attention to place as an important element of poverty. In the edited anthology, *The New Poverty Studies: The ethnography of power, politics, and impoverished people in the United States*, Judith Goode and Jeff Maskovsky state (2001, 17):

Poverty is a direct outgrowth of uneven capitalist development; the meanings, practices, and identities of those who are impoverished vary across *geography, history, and multiple axes of difference*; and that poor people engage in a number of collective and individual strategies that are designed not only to survive the conditions of poverty but also to change them.

The editors argue for the importance of geographically specific studies. These studies can highlight patterns across scales and tease out the role of economic restructuring, race, gender, or other attributes in understanding poverty. In public policy, Rebecca Blank has written extensively on the necessity of understanding local characteristics when studying the intersections of poverty and policy (2005). Alice O'Connor argues that structural and cultural theorizations of poverty are limited and insufficient on their own and must be supplemented by research on the ways these theorizations play out in place (O'Connor, 2001). Local level analysis and attention to place are essential to poverty research because social relations of “power, privilege and difference” (Lawson, Jarosz, and Bonds, 2010) are uneven across place in ways that can elucidate broad patterns and more responsive poverty policy.

### *TANF in Washington and Missouri*

While I unpacked the key differences in my two research sites in the introduction and I will elucidate these further in the empirical chapters, here I will describe important features of each location and the TANF policies of the states in which my counties are located. King County was chosen as a research site because of the diverse economic activity within the city and because of the amount of social services available in the area. Home to Seattle, King County has seen a number of layoffs since the beginning of the recession. In 2007 its unemployment rate was 3.7%, compared to the current unemployment of 8.3% (U.S. Census; 2007). King County is a relatively wealthy, highly educated and predominantly middle-class county with a long history of progressive politics and support for social programs. In addition, Seattle is the most educated city in the country with 52.7% of its population holding a B.A. or higher (U.S. Census; 2009). King County is 74% Caucasian, 13.4 Asian, 7.7% Hispanic, 6.2% black, and 1% American Indian (ibid). King County's poverty level is slightly lower than the national average (9.9% compared to 13%). While Seattle is a major part of the county, King also contains substantial suburban and rural areas.

Jackson County, home to Kansas City, provides an important comparison to King County because of its contrasting current and historical trends in terms of race and urban spatial control as well as the influence of neoliberalism on the site. Like King County, Jackson County has seen its unemployment rate more than doubled since the recession from 5% in 2007 to 10.9% in 2009 (U.S. Census; 2009). In general, the county has a libertarian political climate and like many metropolitan counties in the Midwest has experienced economic downturn and rising crime rates in the last 30 years. The county's educational statistics are similar to the national average with 23% of individuals having a bachelor's degree or higher (compared to 21% nationally). Jackson

County is 73% Caucasian, 22.7% black, 7.9% Hispanic, 1.9% biracial, and 1.5% Asian. While King County hosts many non-profits and state-sponsored social services, since 1996, the main resources available for those in poverty in Jackson County have been church-based charities (Gotham, 2002). In addition, while each county has similar unemployment levels they vary considerably in terms of racial, educational, and social demographics. Like King County, Jackson County is home to a major city but also contains both suburban and rural areas.

Importantly, both sites have very similar TANF policies and requirements. I base this assessment on both a post-welfare reform (2001) study of the intensity of TANF policies across the states and the Urban Institute’s Welfare Rules Databook. According to the 2001 study, states were measured on the intensity of their programs in terms of the i) actual work requirement policies (for example how many hour per week people were required to work), ii) encouraging work (or providing incentives to work such as allowing people to earn more while still retaining benefits) and iii) time limit policies, or how long people can be on assistance without facing penalties. States were judged against one another and in accordance to nationally mandated rules. States could be deemed high, medium or low intensity in these key measures. Both Missouri and Washington were considered “low intensity” for work requirement policies and “high intensity” in the severity of their time limits. They differed in terms of encouraging work with Washington being medium intensity and Missouri being low intensity. In addition, comparing other aspects of the TANF program by key features from the Welfare Rules Databook also illustrates similarities in policies across each state. The results are presented Table Two below:

**Table Two: TANF Rules for Washington and Missouri**

Criteria	Washington	Missouri
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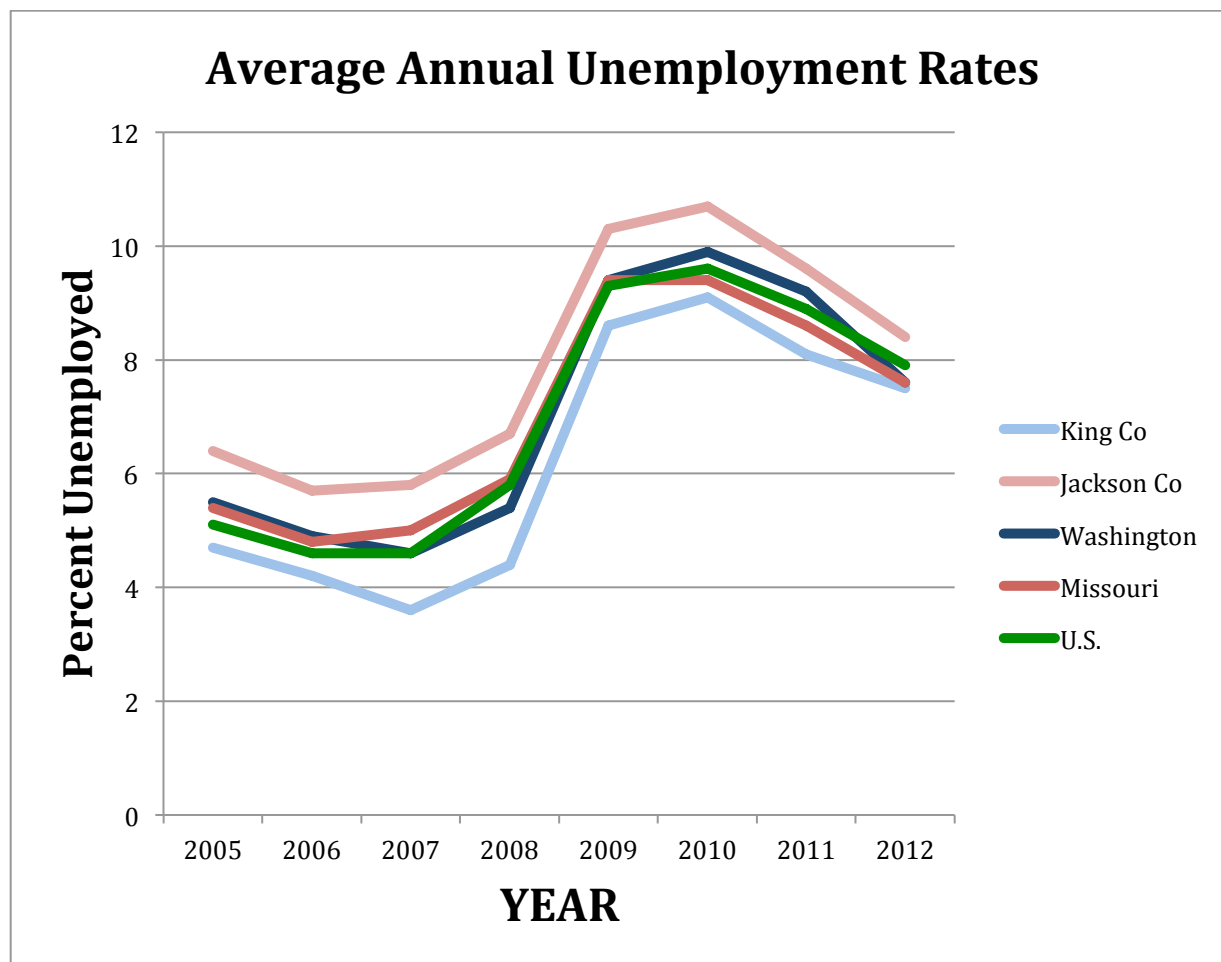
Assets Disregard for Eligibility Determination	No	No
Applicant Asset Limit	\$1,000	\$1,000
Recipient Asset Limit	\$1,000	\$5,000
Treatment of Vehicles as Part of Asset Limit	Counts value in excess of \$5,000	Excludes values of one vehicle
Are Two Parent Families Allowed on TANF?	Yes	Yes
Immigrant Eligibility	Yes	No
Marriage Incentives	No	No
Lifetime Time Limit	60 months	60 months

*Source: Urban Institute's Welfare Rules Databook years 2005-2007*

By comparing the TANF rules in each state of my case studies, we can see that on the books, they are quite similar in policies. Through analyzing the varied economic trajectories over the past 30 years and differential urban spatial structures of King and Jackson Counties, I am able to then extrapolate how these factors impact the policies as they play out in each place and influence the identities of those on TANF.

Another factor I compared for each place was how each site reacted to the recession. I calculated this by comparing unemployment rates at the national, state, county level. Figure One illustrates that each location had similar upward spikes during the recent recession. To help interpret the graph I have marked King County and Washington in blue shades and Jackson County and Missouri in red shades:

**Figure One: Average Annual Unemployment Rates by county, state and U.S.**



This graph shows that despite each place's different narrative about economic vitality and differences in its labor force, the recession impacted each scale in similar ways but with varying degrees of intensity. Jackson County, for example, had the highest overall unemployment throughout each year while King had the lowest.

While there are similarities in TANF rules and the effects of the recent recession on unemployment, it is important to note that each state's TANF caseloads reacted very differently to the recession. According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, Washington and Missouri had similar numbers of individuals on TANF in 2007, with Washington having 112,583 clients and Missouri 111,780. In 2008, each state hosted similar unemployment rates, 6.3% and 6.5%

respectively. With the onset of the recession, both states' unemployment rates grew by about 3% to 9.2% for Washington and 9.5% for Missouri. Between 2007 and 2009, however, each state experienced dramatic changes in the number of families on TANF. Washington increased its welfare caseloads by 11% to 124,937 TANF recipients. Missouri, however, cuts its caseloads by 8.8%, or to 101,916 TANF recipients. Because of this, Missouri's "welfare to poverty ratio" or the number of families eligible but not receiving assistance nose-dived during the recession. Through looking at these statistics in terms of welfare policy and economic climate I am providing a snapshot of the different approaches each place takes in incorporating the impoverished into poverty policies. In the following empirical chapters I add meat to these statistics through recipient responses.

### *Conclusion*

The following chapters help to situate my case studies as part of broader neoliberal economic restructuring that frames and produces poverty in specific ways. I ask how and why public assistance receipt faces such an undesirable social stigma and the ways in which 'independence' and 'productivity' are defined in terms of engagement with labor markets. While in chapter three I argue that stigmas associated with public aid have a very long history, I examine what makes this neoliberal moment remarkable and complex. Today, neoliberal discourse ignores the role of race, class and gender as very important social processes that shape the opportunities and experiences of individuals. Through this discourse, poverty is seen as a result of an individual's inability or unwillingness to participate in the labor market or their choices to act in 'irrational' behaviors such as having children without a breadwinning partner. Those in need can break free of these stigmas through work and leaving welfare. Through in-

depth interviews in two comparative case studies, I unpack the local strategies to move welfare recipients to work and the ways in which these strategies are not neutral but rather based on historical and geographically situated ideologies about race, gender, class and capitalist economies. If the goal of this project is to not merely describe but also interrogate and change the inequalities that are potentially reinscribed through poverty governance we must closely examine these policies across place. Through analyzing people's experiences with the safety net we can uncover strategies, ideas, and even policies that create more equitable economic conditions and increase the political voice and agency of those in poverty.

### **Chapter III. How did we get here? A history of spatialized social control through welfare policy**

Today, there are 44 million Americans in poverty, with 35 million under the age 65 and therefore potentially qualifying for cash welfare assistance. Despite this alarming number, only 4.4 million Americans are currently on TANF, 75% of which are children (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). As America hobbles out of recession and private and public safety nets continue to struggle to serve a growing population, it is imperative to understand how those in need are making ends meet today and under what conditions. The current safety net landscape reads like an ironic joke, as after years of privatization and cutbacks to essential programs, inequality

reaches a record high and more people need assistance to make it through each month. Given the high level of need, why are so few people on TANF and what do those who are not on welfare do to get by? In addition, what is it about certain welfare programs, such as TANF, which creates such a discrepancy between those who qualify and those who receive aid? These are questions at the heart of this project and this chapter.

In the previous chapter, I began to create a snapshot of the spatial differences in political economies and TANF programs in my case study sites. In creating scholarship, a snapshot can be very helpful in ascertaining current patterns across places of a specific population, allowing the researcher to tease out the role of variables such as the local political economy or constructions of race and gender at that moment. But, as with any form of narrative, it is limited, and can only tell part of the story. A historical analysis of welfare can help fill this gap in knowledge by revealing long-term patterns in welfare policy and discourse as spatial processes. The history of welfare policies has been one of spatial unevenness, where policies and experiences on assistance were vastly different at the state and local level. There have also been considerable regional geographies based on migration and immigration patterns of minorities. Like residential segregation, welfare policies and the labor regulation that attended them were a form of spatialized social control, limiting what bodies and behaviors were allowed and accepted in various sites such as the home and the workplace. Women and people of color were excluded in their rights to space and this has repercussions in the political voices and identities of the impoverished today. In this chapter, I examine the history of welfare programs in America in order to situate present day theories, discourses and policies that effect who receives safety net resources and under what conditions. Through examining historical patterns and shifts in welfare, we can better understand which populations were included and excluded from the rolls,

and uncover past regulations, forms of surveillance, and the role of the local in program administration.

### *Listening to History*

While there are studies that trace welfare historically (see Cloward and Piven, 1971 for example), much welfare scholarship begins from two points of departure: the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s, and the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996. Research focusing on these time periods can highlight important changes in the political economy or the shifts brought on by welfare reform but they can also overemphasize the importance of these events in examining the safety net today (Staheli and Brown, 2003). A more thorough history can illuminate how we, as a nation, came to such moments as welfare reform and provide evidence to dispel myths about those in the need. By listening carefully to history we can also face our past more honestly without romanticizing some periods or demonizing others based on current assumptions. An example of the power of history comes from Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon's seminal 1994 work, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State". Here the authors analyze the language of dependency from its origins in preindustrial European feudal relations to its current usage as a psychological trait of those in particular safety net programs. In asking, "how did we get here?" the authors unpack the tacit gendered and racialized assumptions that underlie "dependency" as a keyword in welfare debates. Through charting the course of welfare policy in the U.S., I build on their work by excavating the role of gender, race, class and spatialized social control in the creation and implementation of welfare programs. This sets the foundation for the next two chapters in which I challenge the welfare discourse, "or taken-for-granted

commonsense belief that escapes critical scrutiny”, utilizing both historical documentation and ethnographic research (Fraser and Gordon, 1994, 310).

Scholarship that does historically analyze welfare often lacks a spatial examination. The battle over control for welfare administration between localities, states and the federal government is a key element in the history of the program and has created incredible geographic variability in who receives aid and their experiences. In many cases local and regional characteristics such as political economy or demographic makeup greatly influence poverty policy in place (Peck, 2001). For example, in her article, “Welfare Provision, Welfare Reform, Welfare Mothers”, Kim England illustrates that from its beginnings, the story of welfare has been of multi-scales and uneven geographies (2008). In establishing Aid to Dependent Children in 1935, “political and social geographies were the basis of many of the debates and subsequent compromises over the various programmes” (2008, 147). There is clear evidence for this even in the language of the 1935 legislation. In the original draft of ADC, Congress was asked to include language that states should pay “a reasonable subsistence compatible with decency and health”, thus providing a nominal standard in ADC administration across the states (ibid). Congress denied this request and instead inserted the clause “as far as practicable under the conditions in such State” and therefore codified their autonomy in setting the standards of ADC (ibid). As illustrated later in the chapter, the geographic tug-of-war between local, state, and national scales was not limited to a particular region, and was not just indicative of ADC. Additionally, the geographies of welfare are closely connected to local constructions of race and gender, and in particular, differential ideals about the proper role of women based on the woman’s race, class or assumed behavior. Examining the uneven conditions of welfare created

by geographic variation challenges the assumption that states and localities are the “best” place for welfare administration and questions the logic of “50 individual welfare states”.

I begin with a historical analysis that illustrates the ways in which welfare policy responds to and recreates a stratified American society, differentiated specifically by race, class, gender and geography (Piven, 2001). Specifically, I argue that welfare, like the courts or the education system, is a form of racialization in that it associates particular racial groups with specific sets of meanings and economic opportunities (Lipsitz, 2011; Pulido, 2000). Further, I highlight not just the changes in welfare policy over the past 100 years but also the continuities in how dominant discourse constructs the deservingness and undeservingness of certain populations of the poor. Finally, I will demonstrate that it has been the actions and struggles of those in the safety net and attendant social justice movements that have often created more generous benefits and more compassionate poverty policies (Piven and Cloward, 1971). While welfare has often been described as stagnant, monstrous, and the very definition of government impotence, I emphasize that when more equitable policies have occurred, it has almost always been due to the collective voices and actions of those in poverty. This provides hope for more generous income supports in the future.

Through a historical analysis of key welfare policies from the Mothers’ Pensions programs of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the reauthorization of TANF in 2005, I argue that welfare reform and its future iterations are part of a long trajectory of poverty policies that punish, regulate, and stigmatize the poor. I argue that welfare policy is not and has never been neutral but instead creates and exacerbates racial, gender and class biases. I contend that work requirements have often existed for the most marginalized populations of recipients and that these requirements are used to enforce work norms and maintain a pliant national work force. In

addition, for a century, states have had considerable control over aid policies and have used this control to exclude specific populations from the rolls and push them into the labor force. Local articulations of race and gender continue to play a major role in state and municipal welfare rules and through local administration, welfare policy has been a tool through which to boost regional economies and buttress gender and racial biases. It is in error to say that welfare was ever principally under the control of the federal government, however, even during times of heightened federal jurisdiction welfare policy and discourse separates the poor into the deserving and undeserving. Those deemed undeserving were either kept off the rolls entirely or subjected to strict requirements and surveillance (Piven and Cloward, 1971). As this work is not a policy analysis but rather an examination of welfare as a means of constituting specific subjects, I also highlight the role of social justice movements in fighting for the rights and entitlements of those in poverty and/or in need of aid. Through offering alternative analyses of the reasons for poverty and reimagining political subjectivities, I argue that gains in justice for the poor have historically emerged from those active in specific academic and social movements. These examples provide new forms of poverty knowledge and create spaces of hope for the future.

### ***Welfare Knowledge***

In order to understand the relationship between the experiences of those in poverty and their relationship to the safety net, it is first important to understand welfare policy as a structure that articulates mainstream discourses or common knowledge about certain populations of the poor. In *Poverty Knowledge*, Alice O'Connor argues that in forming poverty policy, politicians often utilize seemingly neutral national level data on poverty (2001). Far from neutral, O'Connor argues that poverty research, and the knowledge that creates and reiterates it, are "an

exercise of power, in this instance of an educated elite to categorize, stigmatize and neutralize the poor and disadvantaged through analysis that obscures the political nature of social and economic inequality” (2001, 12). Current welfare policy can be seen as one of many stages in poverty policy in which ideology and politics triumph over a more critical understanding about complex poverty processes (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001; O’Connor, 2001). From its history, welfare policy and poverty policy in general has always relied on what “we”, an imagined society who share similar values, know about “them”, the poor. In this way, welfare is as much about discourse as it is about material conditions in that the discourse around welfare and safety net programs actively shapes the policy and material conditions for recipients (Bonds, 2009).

The dominant narrative of welfare and poverty in the U.S. relies heavily on a perceived knowledge of the poor. This knowledge is based on spatially situated ideas about race, class, and gender that, while indeed changing across time and place, are startlingly similar to discourses from the first Mother’s Pensions programs that emerged a hundred years ago. Further, the discourse of welfare and its attendant arguments about deservingness and dependency are used to turn a blind eye toward the broader political economy and local and national narratives about gender, race, and class (Piven, 2001; O’Connor, 2001; Peck, 2001; Schram, 2000). Together, this ‘knowledge’ about welfare was and is not about understanding the race, gender and political economy dynamics that lead to welfare receipt and is instead focused on addressing and managing the characteristics and behavior of those on the rolls (O’Connor, 2001).

While social scientific research has played a large role in creating poverty knowledge in the U.S., so to has welfare programs themselves (O’Connor, 2001). Social welfare institutions influence discourses on the poor by the categories they establish for providing or denying aid to people based on certain characteristics such as employment, number of children, income, or

residence. These categories can be official, such as in setting income limits in order to qualify for welfare or implicit, such as steering certain women or populations away from welfare or into work. A telling example of the convergence of national level poverty data as well as practices of welfare programs in creating and reiterating discourses about the poor comes from Bill Clinton's campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it". This oft-quoted phrase heralded a seemingly new landscape of welfare, one in which states and even localities had the flexibility to tailor their programs to their specific needs, where recipients could break the cycle of dependency through work, and where the government would now have greater discretion in offering *benefits* to responsible *individuals* as opposed to providing *entitlements* to *citizens* (England, 2008).

The language of "ending welfare as we know it" is extremely telling in that it taps into an assumed shared national narrative about welfare in the U.S. This powerful phrase and its attendant assumptions effectively narrowed the parameters of the welfare debate and reiterated a politically loaded discourse about welfare. It did this in three connected ways: First, it assumed that the American people wanted to break from previous policies and embark on a new, ostensibly better path in safety net policy. Second, it implied that in late 20<sup>th</sup> century America, there was a shared general knowledge of the history and current state of welfare policy and its social implications and that this knowledge was objective, rational and scientific. Third, and most importantly, Clinton's words exposed a hidden truth about how poverty policy is created and implemented: that constructing poverty policy is greatly influenced by dominant perceptions of how we 'know' the poor.

While this particular phrase is just one example of the formation and dissemination of poverty knowledge, a history of the debates around and specific legislation of welfare offers a pattern of discourse that has led to current, national assumptions about who deserves help and

under what conditions. As I turn to several key phases of welfare policy I highlight two major themes prevalent in each period: a) that welfare policies constitute subjects in ways that are raced, gendered and classed and b) there has always been a complex spatial politics to welfare and this has often been manifested through a tug-of-war between states rights and civil rights but also through the sites of subject formation such as actions in welfare offices. While I have stated that this dissertation is not a policy analysis, through situating the responses and actions of those in the safety net in the historical context of changes in the welfare system, I challenge notions about welfare that are often presented as facts or common knowledge. I begin with a historical analysis in order to illustrate the ways in which welfare policy responds to and recreates a stratified American society, differentiated specifically by race, class, gender and geography.

### *Mother's Pensions: Creating the Spaces of White Femininity*

When all is said it is the mother, and the mother only, who is a better citizen even than the soldier who fights for his country. (Theodore Roosevelt, 1908. First International Congress in America on the Welfare of the Child).

In many ways, welfare in the United States has its roots in the Poor Laws or “Poor Relief” from Western Europe dating back to the sixteenth century (Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Piven and Cloward, 1971). While providing relief was in part a moral imperative, it also was utilized to prevent social upheaval and control labor markets (Piven and Cloward, 1971). For example, as Europe moved from a feudal to industrial-capitalist system, there were often times of revolt and rioting by displaced workers throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Changes to poor laws happened concurrently in an attempt to assuage the masses by providing a minimum level of relief (Piven and Cloward, 1971). Relief laws also helped regulate labor markets. For example, if there was a shortage of labor in factories or in the fields, relief benefits

would be scaled back, forcing more people to work to survive (ibid). There were also social deterrents toward receiving poor relief. While the term pauper emerged in the sixteenth century to merely describe anyone who was poor, by the industrial revolution the term was used to stigmatize those who relied on relief (Fraser and Gordon, 1994). To receive relief meant you were a pauper and to be a pauper connoted corruption and degradation of character (Fraser and Gordon, 1994). Charity experts in the nineteenth century argued that while poverty could cause pauperization, a state of pauperization, or dependency, could itself cause poverty (ibid).

While mother's pensions carried over many of the qualities of English poor laws, there were other factors at work that created this unique program. Mother's pensions was the first mainstream program that dealt with families specifically (Mink and Solinger, 2003). As part of the Progressive Era of the 1890s-1920s, the question was "should pensions or allowances be paid from public funds to mothers of dependent children?" (ibid). Under previous relief programs for the poor, children who lost the bread-winning parent were sent to orphanages or ended up living on the street. Specifically, mother's pensions made it possible for widowed or abandoned mother's to raise their children in the home. The problem was not that the mothers were dependent it was that they did not have a man to depend on (Mink and Solinger, 2003; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001). Proponents argued that children are entitled to good mothers and that mothers should not be deprived of their children just because they were poor. While many recipients of poor relief were believed to be able-bodied, employable and therefore responsible for their own poverty, in contrast, widowed mothers were looked upon as sympathetic and deserving aid because their place was in the home, caring for children (Mink and Solinger, 2003).

While the necessity for a safety net for widowed mothers gained great momentum after the first program was passed in Missouri in 1911, it was far from being uncontroversial. Proponents stated that mother's pensions were a less expensive alternative to housing women and children in public institutions and offered a 'means' test to make sure only the most deserving mother's were allowed to receive benefits. Critics, however, lobbied numerous arguments against pensions, including: that private charity was more efficient and scientific than government programs; pensions would discourage thrift and industrious habits and encourage dependency; fraud and deception would be practiced and a "mendicant" class of society created; pensions created a dangerous precedent of welfare as an entitlement rather than a charity (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001). Many of these arguments against mother's aid reflected a distrust and even fear of the poorer classes from elites who thought that aid programs such as mother's pensions would give too much freedom to those in poverty. For example, Robert Hunter, a progressive era scholar and *advocate* for the poor stated that public aid provided a "culture bed for criminals, paupers, vagrants and for such diseases as inebriety, insanity, and imbecility" and that "the dependency of the adults infects the children, and the foulest of our social miseries is thus perpetuated from generation to generation" (in Patterson, 1985, 22). In many cases, the motives behind both the proponents and critics of aid were closely connected to national and local ideals about the roles of men and women of different races in terms of work and care.

As illustrated by the quote that begins this section, mother's pension programs reflected larger discourses on gender and motherhood prominent in America at that time. The discourse of citizenship was often evoked to describe both the proper role of mother's and the potential of their children to contribute to society. In a speech to the Senate and House following the First

International Congress in America on the Welfare of the Child, President Theodore Roosevelt reported that an estimated 200,000 (roughly 2.5% of the entire population) of American children were orphaned (Roosevelt, in Mink and Solinger, 2003). Each of these children, he argued, represented the loss or gain of an enlightened citizen and that “the interests of the nation are involved in the welfare of this army of children no less than in our great material affairs” (ibid). He went on to argue at length that poverty is not a legitimate reason for breaking up the family:

Surely poverty alone should not disrupt the home. Parents of good character suffering from temporary misfortune, and above all, deserving mothers fairly well able to work but deprived of the support of a normal breadwinner, should be given such aid as may be necessary to enable them to maintain suitable homes for the rearing of their children. The widowed or deserted mother, if a good woman, willing to work and do her best, should ordinarily be helped in such a fashion as will enable her to bring up her children herself in their natural home.

In addition, upper-middle class women reformers such as Jane Addams, Florence Kelley and the Abbott sisters saw mother’s pensions as an opportunity to reinforce the importance of women as care givers and to equip poor women with middle-class family values of raising children and maintaining a suitable home.

While in some ways mother’s aid was an important step in the recognition of women’s care labor, the programs discriminated greatly based on the race, culture, behavior and morality of the mother. These created specific geographies of social control across scales such as the region, state, and municipality. They also regulated what spaces certain groups could inhabit from the home to the work fields. Mother’s pensions programs explicitly targeted white, Americanized widows while openly excluding women of color, many immigrants, and women who had children outside of marriage. A lasting assumption of the time was that the poor were more susceptible to immorality and more likely to suffer lapses in judgment and therefore needed regular surveillance, regulation and guidance (Mink and Solinger 2003; Neubeck and Cazenave

2001; Piven and Cloward 1971; 1997). Because of this, mother's pensions sought only to provide for the "best mothers", those who were virtuous, religious, celibate, hard working, modest and thrifty (Mink and Solinger, 2003). In order to assure that only deserving mothers received pensions, lawmakers wrote statutes that specifically denied benefits to mothers who were not "physically, mentally or morally fit" (Patterson 1985).

In order to ensure that mothers did not fall into immorality or get a "free ride", recipients were subject to various forms of surveillance and often required to accept guidance on household and family matters. The most well known of these regulations was the suitable home requirement (England, 2008; Piven and Cloward, 1971). As will be discussed further, in order to receive aid, mother's had to pass a test that they provided, both in their physical home and through their own character, an environment to raise children in a similar capacity as middle class women. This was difficult given both the conditions of poverty and the variance in enforcing and judging the suitable home. In addition, Mother's Aid programs regulated the dietary, kinship, and household choices of mothers to make sure she was a proper person, morally, physically and mentally (Mink and Solinger, 2003; Paterson, 1985). Restrictions included that women be widowed or abandoned (as opposed to divorced or never married), that the first child received the full amount and other children received half or less, that the mother could not work outside the home, and that she could not have a boyfriend or male companion while receiving a pension (ibid).

Mother's aid programs had incredible spatial unevenness across states and localities. Because the programs were administered by states and localities, there was significant geographic variance in who was eligible, the benefits they could receive, and the social controls enacted for receipt (England, 2008). For example, by 1920, 40 states had enacted mother's

pensions laws (ibid). Of the ten states that did not, the majority were in the south, including Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky and New Mexico (ibid). These were also the states that had the highest percentages of women of color (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001). As stated earlier, suitable home requirements were used to prevent “undeserving mothers” from utilizing aid and just being non-white or an immigrant was often enough to be considered unsuitable. In her 1965 history of AFDC, Winifred Bell argues that the suitable home requirement in Mother’s Pensions exacerbated geographic unevenness and carried dire consequences for poor women:

The very vagueness of the ‘suitable home’ eligibility condition guaranteed its adaptability to local and regional mores, and, as evidence shows, statutes rarely made any pretense of spelling out the meaning of ‘fit’ or ‘proper’ parents or ‘suitable homes’. Local workers were relied upon to infuse the terms with meaning, and, in doing so, they tended to restrict the programs to nice, Anglo-Saxon widows and to move separately but in concert to protect their young programs from Negro and unmarried mothers who might well attract criticism. (In Piven and Cloward, 1971).

So, in denying aid to certain populations of mothers and controlling the spaces open to specific bodies, caseworkers and administrators built legitimacy for their program while simultaneously stigmatizing and marginalizing poor mothers. Although women of color and unmarried women were among the most impoverished in America, states and localities still denied benefits to them based on the assumption that women of color could and should work while raising children and that unmarried mothers should not be rewarded for their ‘bad’ behavior.

Race, gender, space and political economy were closely connected to ideas of who was deemed deserving of aid. Southern states wanted to maintain their “competitive advantage relative to the industrial North- cheap African American agricultural workers” (England, 2008, 147). For black mothers in particular, being a woman did not exempt them from hard physical labor (Glenn, 2002). If black women were allowed an alternative to agricultural labor, white

southern farm owners would have a shortage of labor and therefore potentially need to pay more for workers. Further, dueling ideas about African American women that began during slavery also influenced the lag in mother's pension programs in the south, namely that African American women were lazy and needed to be taught work ethic and that they were not "good" mothers and therefore did not deserve to stay home and raise their children (England, 2008; Gilens, 1999). During slave times, as an act of defiance, black women would work, raise children and try to create a community on the plantation (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001). While they carved out a semblance of a life as a form of resistance, this led many white farm and business owners to argue that black women did not require the same special treatment white widows did (Glenn, 2002; 2010).

It is impossible to separate the roles of race, gender, and political economy in developing welfare policies from the white and male privilege of spatial control. Many of the states that never established mother's aid finally enacted laws after World War I and in response to the growing number of white widows in the region. Others, such as South Carolina and Georgia never enacted mother's pensions but rather began welfare programs after the federally mandated 1935 Social Security Act. While in many cases African American or immigrant women were not explicitly excluded from programs where they existed rather the criteria for receipt was developed in a way that often made sure they were ineligible (England, 2008). Given these absences and restrictions it makes sense that in 1931, as Mother's Pensions were about to shift to ADC, 82% of participants were widows, 96% white, 3% black, and only 1% other races (Mink and Solinger, 2003). In addition, the vast majority of African Americans on the rolls were from two industrial North states, Ohio and Pennsylvania. This form of poverty management pushed

minorities into certain spaces (such as fieldwork) while simultaneously denying them entrance into others (such as caring for children in their own homes).

Mother's pension programs created several lasting legacies. First, the programs promoted the importance of certain mother's caregiving as "work". Good mothers, even poor mothers, should not have to balance work and caregiving because raising children was reproductive labor. Second, poor mother's were "entitled" but had to defend their pensions by giving up social controls over the spaces of their bodies, their homes and their employment. Third, while popular discourses championed the idea that mothers contributed to society through raising good citizens in the home, only certain populations of mother's were entitled to stay home with their children. This included middle class and affluent white women who often depended on a breadwinner and widowed poor women who were deemed deserving of pensions (Glenn, 2002). This furthered white and middle-class privilege over the home as a site of work and care giving. Finally, benefits were very modest, often \$10 a month for one child and \$5 a month extra for any other children. Many mothers' were unable to support themselves on their pension and often sought-out informal labor, risking much in the process (Mink and Solinger, 2003). Mother's pensions was another form of a gendered and racial spatial contract in that it was used to maintain gender relations by punishing poor women who had children out of marriage and excluding them from spaces belonging to white, upper middle class families. It also reinforced racist notions of proper motherhood and reiteration the subordination of black women and men by forcing them to work. While the national political rhetoric extolled the importance of motherhood in creating new citizens, a full quarter of married black women were working at the time mother's aid programs were enacted compared to only 3.8% of married white women (Glenn, 2002; 2010). As Americans entered into the Great Depression and labor,

race, and gender relations shifted, some poverty advocates saw an opportunity for more generous welfare benefits through federal regulations. This, they argued would solve some of the spatial unevenness across places and open up new spaces of identity for marginalized groups.

### *Aid to Dependent Children: Codifying Social Exclusions*

The very phrases “mothers’ aid” and “mothers’ pensions” place an emphasis equivalent to misconception of the intention of these laws. These are not primarily aids to mothers but defense measures for children. (Committee on Economic Security, 1935).

As part of the broad income supports of the Social Security Act, mother’s pensions became Aid to Dependent Children in 1935. The Social Security Act itself emerged out of larger conditions in the political economy in the 1930s. These included the collapse of the American economy during the Great Depression and the resultant collective movement of workers fighting for economic rights (England, 2008). As part of a Fordist-Keynesian class compromise, in addition to ADC, the Social Security Act (and later amendments to it in 1939) created a minimum wage, unemployment benefits, survivors insurance, and promoted the Federal Housing Association (ibid). While the effects of the SSA as poverty policy were unprecedented, it still relied on assumptions about proper labor and care roles based on race, class and gender. The argument for income supports relied on a model of a nuclear family, with the father as breadwinner and mother as caregiver. Roosevelt himself made clear the assumed primary audience of SSA by stating that the plan would, “give some measure of protection to the average citizen and his family” (in England, 2008, 145). The “average citizen” was a male whose primary responsibility was to care for his family through employment. In accord with this gender contract, ADC followed suite with mothers’ pensions through promoting the importance of

women in the home and caring for their children. This also helped cement proper spaces of identity formation across racial, class and gender lines.

At the time, ADC was still primarily meant for widows and was thought of as a temporary source of income until women could qualify for Social Security. Importantly, though, ADC nationalized mother's pensions by providing joint federal-state funding (England, 2008; Mink and Solinger, 2003). States had to follow certain federal requirements in order to get federal grants (Piven and Cloward, 1971). While there were no national moral criteria for receipt of ADC, the program gave states the flexibility to impose various requirements and set their own benefit levels. Because of this flexibility, many states were able to carry over the discriminatory practices and forms of surveillance from mother's pensions into the new program (England, 2008; Mink and Solinger, 2003). For example, states enacted rules against non-marital motherhood and heterosexual cohabitation. Also, although the new system provided more money to states for single mothers of dependents, need alone did not equal receipt. In many states, the same raced, classed, and gendered ideals of motherhood followed directly from mothers' pension programs into ADC (England, 2008). This again created uneven geographies of ADC receipt and differentiated experiences while on ADC. National regulation, however, meant more permanence in benefits and more favorable views of people on ADC (Gilens, 1999; Mink and Solinger, 2003).

Perhaps the most important legacy of Social Security Act was the separation of the safety net into two tracks, social insurance and public assistance (England 2008; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Mink and Solinger, 2003). Fought for during the class struggles of the 1930s, social insurance included unemployment and old age insurance. Social insurance programs were considered contributory because they were tied to the wage earning and employment history of

the recipient (Fraser and Gordon, 1994). Social insurance sought to preserve men's ability to care for their wives and children in the case of unemployment and old age. Single-mothers were also separated into two tracks; one considered social insurance and the other considered public assistance. The first, Survivor's Insurance, was for widowed mothers with children who were in good marriages with men who qualified for social security (Mink and Solinger, 2003).

Survivor's Insurance was automatic, national, and more generous than welfare (ibid). A true entitlement, recipients did not have to fight for it and did not have to undergo surveillance to receive the benefits. The creation of Survivor's Insurance removed most widows, especially white widows from the rolls. Public assistance, unlike social insurance programs was looked upon as "non-contributory" and funded through tax dollars (England, 2008). Aid to Dependent Children, as well as Old Age Assistance<sup>2</sup> fell into this category. Benefitting those that did not qualify for Survivor's insurance those left on ADC were divorced, never married or married to the wrong men. In effect, each track replaced the income of the breadwinning male (Tronto, 2001 in England 2008). In this way, women on both forms of assistance were seen as being dependent on the government rather than a husband (England, 2008). How society viewed the deservingness of the recipients of each program, however, greatly varied by region and locality.

As stated above, not all poor single mothers and indeed, not all widows were able to receive benefits. Despite facing dire poverty, racism and the inter-connected southern political economy together meant that many African American women did not qualify for assistance. Between 1937 and 1940 only about 14%-17% of ADC recipients were black (England, 2008). This was for several reasons. First, ADC included locally administered work rules; if black

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<sup>2</sup> As per England's work (2008), Old Age Assistance was separate from Old Age Insurance and meant to cover those not eligible for the latter.

women were needed for labor they could not apply. This is illustrated by remarks made in the 1940s by a state field supervisor:

The number of Negro cases is few due to the unanimous feeling on the part of the staff and board (of the welfare agency) that there are more work opportunities for Negro women and to their intense desire not to interfere with local labor conditions. The attitude that they have always gotten along and that 'all they'll do is have more children' is definite. (in Mink and Solinger, 2003, 90)

In Louisiana in 1943, for example, the state welfare agency adopted a mandate to exclude any ADC application as long as there was work in the cotton fields (Mink and Solinger, 2003).

While agricultural work was not the sole domain of African Americans they did make up the vast majority of workers in that sector. Similar occurrences existed with Native Americans and Latinas in the American West who were kept from the rolls (England, 2008; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001).

Second, and relatedly, African Americans were more likely to be encouraged to work than their white peers (Mink and Solinger, 2003). Federal officials consistently warned local welfare agencies that pressured young single mothers to work, many of whom were women of color. Third, while civil rights groups pushed to have a non-discriminatory statute included in the Social Security Act, prominent members of Congress removed this from the final act. Allowing state flexibility meant that locally contingent forms of spatialized social control based on race, femininity, and work continued under ADC (Mink and Solinger, 2003). While the Federal Bureau of Public Assistance warned states to repeal conditions that targeted certain populations (such as black agricultural workers or immigrants) most states simply ignored these recommendations without federal reprimand.

Those who did make it onto the rolls faced strict surveillance and discipline. The home and body were particular sites of state and local invasions into poor women's privacy. Suitable

home requirements in some states allowed officials to check a recipients' home for evidence of "man in the house" or "substitute father" (England 247; 2008). In Michigan, for example, ADC recipients had to sign a contract stating, "I will not have any male callers coming to my home nor meeting me elsewhere under improper conditions" (in Mink and Solinger, 2003, 90). Often local officials were more likely to conduct searches with women of color (Quadagno, 1994 in England 2008). Through the end of the 1940s, federal pressure on states and civil rights activists fought hard to force states to allow more impoverished African American women on ADC. Due to these efforts, by 1948, people of color made up 30% of the rolls. In each of these examples, welfare and poverty management was about not just limiting the assistance rolls but also a particular form of racial and gender control that limited the political voice and spatial rights of people of color and women. By separating who belonged in the home caring for children and who needed to be utilized in low-wage work, poverty policy helped form the spatial imaginary of those in poverty.

The racial make up of ADC was very geographically uneven. By the beginning of WWII, northern states such as Illinois had many more African Americans (173/1000 families) on the rolls compared southern states such as North Carolina which had with a higher rate of impoverishment but only 14/1000 people of color on the rolls (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2003). In New Mexico and Arizona, the federal government caught agencies openly denying welfare to Native Americans (*ibid*). Despite the passage of the Social Security Act, Nevada went 20 years without a federal program and an internal letter revealed this was in large part to avoid giving money to Native Americans (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001). Racial discrimination in policy, while not explicitly written into legislation, was widespread and well-known. Jane Hooey, Director of Federal Bureau of Public Assistance from 1936-1953, when asked if New Mexico

and Arizona, tried to exclude Mexican kids, responded, “Yes, without any question. That is why they had the citizenship requirement on the laws...think of having a citizenship requirement for a child!” (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001, 42). Here we see that welfare policy also shaped and controlled immigrants by pushing them into labor and buttressing their exclusion from American identities and rights.

In addition, residence requirements also varied by geography with the majority being in states in the Deep South and northern industrial belt (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001). Residence requirements meant that recipients had to prove they had lived in state for at least a year in order to be eligible for benefits. This again, was racially coded in that it targeted migrant workers (the majority of which who were African American), immigrants and those moving from the south to the north. In order to make ends meet, migrant laborers were required to move across state lines to find work in the fields. Not only did this necessity prevent them from benefitting from ADC, the 1935 Social Security Act also denied pensions to any agricultural laborer (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001; Piven and Cloward, 1971). In addition, the mechanization of agriculture, the prevalence of explicit racism, and the rise of manufacturing jobs in the North led to the Great Migration of African Americans from the south. While this migration began early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, over five million African Americans moved to the north from the passage of ADC to the Civil Rights Era (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001). To illustrate the magnitude of this move, while in the beginning of the 1900s, over 90% of blacks lived in the south, by the 1960 about half now lived in the north (Piven and Cloward, 1971). Although economic and social conditions were generally better in the north, there were high rates of unemployment in the manufacturing belt, and poverty among African Americans was high. In order to prevent large numbers of African Americans or other migrants from receiving ADC, states enacted specific residency

requirements. As we will see in the next section, however, this was merely a temporary solution to growing unrest in the northern cities. Residency requirements can be seen as yet another example in which the bodies of poor subjects and their access to privileged spaces were managed and policed.

But why did geographic variation matter? In short, geographic differences in welfare policies created a triple-bind for women of color and almost guaranteed their continued impoverishment and isolation in the most destitute neighborhoods and labor markets. First, places with the highest number of people of color (such as the Mississippi delta) also had the highest rates of poverty. Second, as in the south and southwest, these areas also had the least industrialized economies and the least lucrative jobs that were often un-unionized. Third, welfare policies in these areas were the most restrictive and the least generous. In *Regulating the Poor*, Piven and Cloward argue that lawmakers in high minority areas took advantage of mainstream sentiments of racism and sexism in order to force the most marginalized and least sympathetic groups into the labor market as a means of keeping wages low (1971). Denying relief to these groups was an integral part of creating a pliant workforce and white, male control over the spaces people of color and women could inhabit. Allowing states and localities to discriminate in terms of who received aid (in addition to blatant discrimination in terms of education, employment and housing) insured that those who were poor (people of color, women with children, and to a lesser extent, the elderly) would stay spatially and economically segregated. Mothers of color had to care for children while simultaneously working in the least lucrative jobs and often without the opportunity to get on ADC. While this triple-bind may have been most prevalent in the American south, it was a national phenomenon. While federal regulation of aid in 1935 did lead to some more inclusive practices, these were geographically

uneven and in many cases the federal government turned a blind eye toward discrimination. It would take a national campaign to expose these injustices and open up the welfare rolls for the first time in its 50-year history.

***AFDC and Welfare Rights: Fighting for Rights to the City***

I'm a woman. I'm a black woman. I'm a poor woman. I'm a fat woman. I'm a middle-aged woman. And I'm on welfare. In this country, if you are any one of those things- poor, black, fat, female, middle-aged, on welfare- you count less as a human being. If you're all of those things, you don't count at all.

Johnnie Tillman "Welfare is a Woman's Issue" 1972.

In the early 1960s, it is argued that America "rediscovered poverty". In truth, middle and upper middle class Americans became more aware of the severity of poverty through a few important events. One was the 1962 poverty expose novel, *The Other America* by Michael Harrington. In the book, Harrington argued that about one quarter of Americans lived in poverty and contended that they were rejects, living parallel but incredibly different lives than the average hopeful, middle class American at the time (Patterson, 1985). While the book was not an instant bestseller, it was read by John F. Kennedy who then set up committees to study poverty. In February 1962, JFK became the first U.S. president to give a speech to Congress entirely devoted to welfare policy (Mink and Solinger, 2003). Two years later, Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty speech during the State of the Union address drew even more attention toward economic inequality in the U.S. Also in the early 1960s, many civil rights campaigns turned their focus to the growing economic inequality between blacks and whites in American inner cities (Piven and Cloward, 1971). As many African Americans moved north, they faced tough working conditions, unemployment, underemployment, and overt racism they

had hoped to leave behind in the south. These contestations can be seen as movements to expand the rights to urban space by previously segregated ‘others’ particularly low-income people of color (Lipsitz, 2011). By 1964, mass rioting began in inner cities across America, as African Americans demanded more rights, better living conditions and access to ‘white’ spaces (Piven and Cloward, 1971). While national and local campaigns took different routes to alleviating poverty (through, for example, changes in segregation policies) welfare rights advocates argued that a major component of black oppression and poverty was due to their lack of access to welfare and the ability to care for their own children in their home. Without guaranteed income supports, African Americans were unable to opt-out of racial division of labor that subordinated them or to assert their rights to places and space occupied by whites. Poverty was now on the national agenda and growing numbers of urban poor were agitating for change. These were just a few of the reasons that after 50 years of welfare policy, a national relief movement focused on women and children finally emerged.

While there were many policies enacted at the national scale associated with the War on Poverty and the Civil Rights movement, in this particular section I focus specifically on the National Welfare Rights Organization and related movements for a few reasons. First, in the mid 1960s, federal attention to poverty avoided connecting economic problems to welfare because unlike white male unemployment, welfare reflected an unsympathetic face of poverty (Gilens, 1999). Dominant discourses in the 1960s constructed poverty as an economic issue for white men but represented African American poverty as a result of dependency and not as a form of spatialized social control that regulated the behaviors and movement of minorities in urban areas and from regional migration (Fraser and Gordon, 1994). Second, I focus on welfare rights because there are many narratives highlighting the role of federal policies in addressing poverty

and inequality during the 1960s. The welfare rights movement, and its demands for dignity for the poor and rights to urban space, is a story that is not often told. While conservative and liberals alike reference the 1960s as the beginning of a “welfare roll explosion” they do not often examine the racial, gender, and spatial components that caused the rise in the welfare rolls during this time. By focusing on this important movement, I will illustrate one way that activists challenged the exclusionary practices of the welfare state. While even its founders now argue that National Welfare Rights Organization was short-lived and not a great success, it did leave a lasting legacy and offers an example in which the discourse on welfare recipients shifted in a positive way, even if only for a brief moment.

In 1962, ADC became Aid to Families with Dependent Children. The name change from ADC to AFDC was due to the fact that for the first time in its history, states were required to allow caregivers on the rolls. By the mid 1960s, a network of social justice movements were growing in power and by 1965, this also included a strong Welfare Rights Movement. Proponents wanted welfare to be a national right and pushed for safety net ‘entitlements’ for poor mothers. Welfare Rights groups argued that all women, not just the affluent had the right and the choice to care for their children in their homes and that public funds should ensure this right. At the same time, state welfare programs bristled with civil rights campaigns. States, particularly in the south, refused to allow African American women on the rolls through intimidation and deception in local offices. Ultimately, social justice programs made giant gains in protecting the privacy and entitlements of poor mothers and opening the spaces where they ‘belonged’ to include in the home with their children.

By the 1970s, welfare rights groups had greatly increased the number of the poor on the rolls and the benefit levels for those on AFDC. In 1960, for example, there were only 745,000

families on the rolls. By 1972, there were over 3 million (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). In addition, welfare rights groups had used the legal system to formally punish states and localities that had unfairly prevented poor women from receiving AFDC and the specter of legal trouble had helped ensure these doors would stay open for the near future. For the first time in its history, welfare policy had federal muscle behind it and even southern states increased the numbers on welfare and the benefit levels. Unfortunately, however, geographic variability, while not as pronounced, was still a serious issue in the administration of welfare. The legacy of state control over relief policies could not be easily erased. As a result of past differences in programs, by the end of the 1960s benefit amounts across states were unrelated to each other. To address this, the federal government required states to update their AFDC need levels by 1969 but not to increase their payments. The improvements to welfare did not address the disconnect between need and benefit levels that existed across states or the spatial unevenness within locations in terms of access to employment, strong neighborhoods and good schools.

Further, most of the gains made in welfare policy occurred in a few northern cities. The backbone of the welfare rights came from taking advantage of a critical mass of inner city African Americans agitating against inequality and substandard living conditions. Welfare rights had a distinct geography in northern cities for several reasons: 1) As examined previously, the mechanization of agriculture and overt racism had led to many African Americans migrating to northern cities looking for greater opportunities. While many African Americans were able to take advantage of manufacturing jobs, others were left unemployed and in poverty but unable to receive AFDC. The welfare rights movement rallied around this group. 2) In accord with national priorities and anti-poverty rhetoric, the federal government had put in place several funding programs to address urban poverty. Much of this money was geared toward addressing

northern cities who were beginning to feel the effects of deindustrialization, 3) Elite, mainly white city leaders were frightened of rioting and the unrest of the urban masses and sought to placate them through increases in the welfare rolls. In this way, through allowing more people of color on welfare, whites could still control their urban environment 4) Northeastern cities were also home to many universities with students eager to become involved in social justice movements. As these students graduated, many of them became leaders in organizations focusing on poverty. Using their educational and familial connections (as well as their passion for social justice), they were able to effectively create changes in their cities. The result of this meant a change in the perceived geography of poverty. By the 1970s, critics of welfare used the image of the blighted inner city as the stage from which to attack the welfare state.

### *Neoliberalism and a 'Return' to Local Governance of Poverty*

By the 1970s, the welfare rights movement, along with the women's movement and civil rights groups, had made serious gains toward addressing spatial, racial, and gendered divisions of labor and exclusions from social space. The 1960s and early 1970s overall marked a time of strong social, economic, and political gains for marginalized groups in the United States. It was at this time, however, that the relative prosperity of the Fordist era came to a dramatic end. Described by Peck as deindustrialization, the global economic restructuring of the 1970s was characterized by spatial shifts in capital, or capital flight, in which a profit "squeeze" led corporations to disinvest in the American manufacturing sector, close plants, and move abroad for cheaper sources of labor (Peck, 2002). In addition, deindustrialization meant the

restructuring of domestic markets toward more flexible, or business-friendly labor supplies (Peck, 2002). This also ushered in new forms of spatialized social control for impoverished families.

Deindustrialization was only one, albeit very important, part of a global shift toward neoliberal policies in the 1970s. As stated by Linda McDowell, “neoliberalism, in the last two decades or so, has assumed the status of dominant narrative or regime or truth in the western world” (2004, 146). Working hand in hand with the economic recessions of the 1970s and early 1980s, the broad and contested framework of neoliberalism represented a far-reaching political and economic agenda enacted and reinscribed by leaders of multinational corporations, economic theorists, and policy makers. The rhetoric of neoliberalism gave overwhelming power and autonomy to global markets and policy makers. Business owners used this seemingly neutral medium to reverse the Fordist social contract between businesses and workers and reorganize urban spaces (Peck, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Sparke, 2005). The neoliberal restructuring of the global economy led to a crisis in the American labor market and it is estimated that 32-38 million American jobs were lost due to a newly emerging spatial division of labor (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982). Business leaders used the threat of capital flight to weaken the labor movement which it believed was supporting “over-paid, underproductive, and spoiled” American workers (Peck, 2002). By using the rhetoric of neoliberalism, business leaders argued that, “American workers should be paid what they are worth according to the market; not what unions can negotiate for them” (Peck 2002: 198). This had a major effect on cities such as Kansas City who were primarily based in manufacturing and had a strong working class population.

The effort to “zap labor” and increase profits management not only restructured labor and capital globally but also began to implement changes within the American labor market. This

resulted in a rise in “non standard” labor throughout the 1970s and 1980s and over 20 “right to work states” or non-unionized states located mainly in the American south (Peck 2002, 189). Businesses utilized the realities of an economic recession, the weakened labor movement, and capital flight to break down traditional seniority systems and increase in flexible labor, such as part-time, contract, temporary, or casual labor (Peck, 2002, 189). The shift from manufacturing to service industry jobs added to the influx of low-wage, unstable employment that offered few if any benefits (Peck, 2002, Sparke 2005). While some believed that by the 1980s strong class realignment would have halted neoliberal restructuring, by the Reagan era American workers felt more isolated, insecure and traumatized (Peck 2002, 203). In what Bluestone and Harrison called “The Great U-Turn”, by the 1980s neoliberal policies had destroyed the progressive economic and social advances of the civil rights and feminist movements only two decades before (Peck 2002: 191). These were profoundly spatial processes that left certain regions (such as the Rustbelt) in disarray. These changes along with the previously occurring white flight from inner cities dramatically changed the spatial structures of industrial urban areas and the racial balance between cities and suburbs.

At the same time, the religious right and conservative academics gained greater social power and launched a major backlash against the 1960s progressive movements. In his two terms as president, Reagan frequently attacked “big government” and critiqued programs such as welfare for enabling dependency. At the same time, the religious right and conservative academics such as Robert Rector argued that the welfare state undermined family values and the American work ethic (Staheli and Brown, 2003). While workfare existed before, politicians pushed for welfare mothers to be required to work in order to receive welfare. Work-for-welfare gained political momentum and states were allowed to “experiment” with different welfare

programs. Governors such as Tommy Thompson in Wisconsin were heralded for cutting the welfare rolls locally and putting workfare into effect.

Much of the rhetoric around welfare at the time had implicit and explicit racial undertones and focused heavily on the reproductive bodies of poor women. Politicians invoked the “welfare queen” to build an argument against public spending on the safety net, welfare dependency and the undeserving poor. For example, when asked what to do about the growing welfare state, journalist and pundit Midge Decter stated plainly: “What is needed is not a new government program, but a new ethos- one in which these little girls will be encouraged to keep their knees together until they grow up and find husbands” (in Frum 1995, 65) This comment illustrates the ways in which welfare critics evoked the poor body, the “other” and sought to remove people of color from white privilege spaces. It further cemented what George Lipsitz calls “the spatial imaginary” between races by reinforcing the suburbs as the proper place for white, middle class identities and the blighted inner-city as the home of poor ‘others’. Welfare policies, through economic policies and social rhetoric that romanticized a return to hierarchal gender and race relations, also shaped urban spaces and reinvigorated physical, economic, and cultural separations between people of color and whites (Lipsitz, 2011).

As a reaction to this perceived shift in the American political and economic climate, Bill Clinton campaigned in the 1992 presidential election on the idea of a “new liberalism” marked by the creation of a “third way” of politics that connected common sense economic policies with common sense American values (Duggan, 2003). “New liberalism” meant a return to classic liberalism and claims of individual freedom and state restraint (Brown and Staeheli, 2003) while the “third way” indicated a mixture of progressive politics and market rationalism (Duggan 2003). For many of those engaged in debates around poverty, Clinton’s inauguration was filled

with hope and expectations (O'Connor, 2002). For the first time in a quarter century, real wages began to rise for all earnings segments of American workers (Peck 2002). The new president campaigned on improving wages and job opportunities for those living in poverty (O'Connor, 2002). Poverty scholars and advocates hoped that this meant an end to the “victim blaming” which characterized Reagan’s social policies and a stronger focus on the realities of employment opportunities and social control of the poor (O'Connor, 2002). Despite these hopes, Clinton championed the discourses of small government, personal responsibility, and the free hand of the market. Clinton’s third way promoted efficiency in government through adopting a business approach to administering social programs. It was these ideas that shaped the 1996 welfare reform legislation.

The shifting economic and political discourses of the 1990s led to a change in the language of welfare reform. In this positive economic climate, politicians and neoliberal economists chose not to focus on overtly negative rhetoric that demonized the poor, such as the example of the welfare queen, but instead heralded work as a way for the poor to achieve independence and personal dignity (Schram, 2000). While still utilizing sentiments of teen motherhood and out-of-wedlock births from the conservative attacks on welfare mothers in the 1980s, the neoliberal shift in welfare reform discourse appealed to the general public by utilizing neutral language to discursively connect changes in welfare state policies with improving market efficiency and personal work ethos. The language of the bill itself was steeped in assumptions about proper work ethic, gender roles and self-sufficiency (Kittay, 1999; Schram, 2000; Skocpol, 1992; Soss, 2004). Hegemonic discourses about what it meant to be on welfare permeated through society, influencing how employers, community members, and recipients themselves

viewed those on welfare. This was strongly illustrated in the welfare reform bill and its attendant changes to the cash-benefit entitlement program that became TANF.

### ***Conclusion***

After two failed bills, Congress passed and Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Illustrating the moral and economic concerns at the heart of reform, the first sentences of PRWORA declared marriage as the foundation of a successful society. The act also reinforced the notion that recipients must work in order to receive welfare. The bipartisan welfare reform bill altered the previous welfare system in two important ways: First, it replaced the cash entitlement program of Aid to Families with Dependent Children with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The new TANF included 60-month lifetime limits for welfare receipt and changed the language from welfare entitlements to welfare assistance. Unlike AFDC, TANF did not guarantee that families with young children who lived under the federal poverty would receive assistance (Teller-Elsberg, Folbre, and Heintz, 2006).

Second, it shifted responsibility for administering welfare from the national government to states. Thus, 50 individual welfare states began. While, as this history has shown, states have always wielded considerable power in administering welfare, PRWORA actively encouraged differences in state policy including who was admitted on the rolls and under what conditions. Welfare reform gave the states considerable flexibility in determining the length of time allowed on TANF, the amount of benefits, and the hours of work required to receive benefits. While in the past welfare advocates argued that geographic variability reinforced racial and gender biases, by the 1990s, many Americans believed we lived in a post-racial, post-oppression world. This was, in fact, not the case. While spaces of belonging and exclusion for women and people of color have changed from 100 years prior, this history implicated welfare as part of larger white,

male and privileged attempts at spatialized social control. Through establishing welfare for white mothers, early programs codified the home as the space of white, middle class women. Women of color were extremely limited in what resources they could access and what employment they could take. Civil rights campaigns opened the spaces available to marginalized groups but neoliberal economic restructuring and rightist attacks on welfare reinscribed racialized spatial imaginaries of who 'belonged' in places such as the home, financial districts or the suburbs. These themes greatly influenced the rights and political voices of low-income families through limiting both their subject positions and material conditions. In the following chapters, I will unpack the repercussions of these geographically uneven welfare policies.

#### **Chapter IV. The Culture of Work Enforcement: Controlling Undisciplined Bodies**

Ladies with initiative and drive will get out of the welfare system. But a lot will have to fall before they realize there's not going to be a safety net below them anymore. (Kansas City, MO employer whose company hired subsidized welfare recipients, quoted in 2007)

Between the passage of welfare reform and the beginning of the recession in 2008, the welfare caseload shrunk from 5 million families to 1.5 million, the lowest number since 1968 (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). As illustrated in Chapter Three, throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, welfare rights advocates fought hard to allow greater access to welfare and other forms of public assistance for all those who qualified. Largely because of these efforts, by 1979, 82 out of 100 families with children in poverty were receiving AFDC, a statistic known as the “poverty to welfare” ratio. As neoliberalism and conservative politics took hold in America, attacks on the welfare state increased and the poor faced more barriers to receiving safety net programs. People of color also became increasingly isolated in inner cities and other locales that lacked investment (Lipsitz, 2011). Welfare was firmly associated with blighted post-industrial cities or impoverished and criminalized rural areas (ibid; Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, 2008). This led to greater limitations in accessing jobs, safe neighborhoods and basic resources. The homes of welfare mothers were again facing serious scrutiny, as public discourse decried the ability of the impoverished to care for their own children. Workfare was a way to control the bodies, homes, and identities of low-income parents. It simultaneously was a potential “spatial fix” for places like Kansas City through controlling a low-wage and vulnerable workforce necessary for the struggling urban economy. For cities such as Seattle, workfare programs also held the potential of bolstering growth by supplying workers for an increasing service sector economy.

Consequently, during this time the poverty to welfare ratio began to decline. By the end of 1996, 68 out of 100 needy families were able to secure TANF benefits and by 2010, only 27 out of 100 families in poverty were receiving welfare.<sup>3</sup> While employment for those on and leaving TANF increased in the early years following welfare reform, employment rates for TANF recipients have decreased since 2000 (Urban Institute, 2007). Meanwhile, between 1996 and 2010, poverty rates increased by 17%, up to 46.2 million people (U.S. Department of the Census, 2010). The unemployment rate for America as a whole also increased, from 5.4% in 1996 to 9.6% in 2010 (ibid). These numbers illustrate that since welfare reform, the role of cash assistance as a safety net for families in poverty has dramatically decreased even while employment opportunities have weakened. The culture of work enforcement created by neoliberal economic restructuring paired with raced, gender, and classed ideas about reforming the behaviors of low-income families is re-shaping forms of social control. Shifts in poverty policy from providing benefits to requiring employment as well as the pressure of localities to adopt market-driven solutions to inequalities has led to new spatial practices of subjectivity and identity (Lawson, Katz Lecture, 2012). Through a focus on work, welfare policy today is altering not only the spaces of encounter between class actors but also the rights to space for marginalized groups (Lawson and Elwood, forthcoming).

So, while poverty rates have increased or remained steady since the mid 2000s, the number of families with children who access TANF has fallen dramatically. Studies have shown that the decline in the TANF-to-Poverty Ratio (shown above) and the drop in TANF caseloads over the past 16 years can be attributed to both less people applying for TANF and more people

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Center for Budget and Policy Priorities 2012 "TANF weakening as safety net for poor families"  
<http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=3700>

exiting. What are termed “close the front door, open the back door” policies are practiced throughout the U.S. and focus on making welfare harder to get on and easier to get off (Urban Institute, 2007; ACF, 2007). Also, since 2000, TANF leavers have experienced either stagnant or declining wages and the amount of TANF leavers experiencing deep poverty has grown from 25.3% in 2000 to 31.6% in 2005 (Census, 2010). Perhaps the most concerning, about 20% of those leaving TANF are not working, do not have an employed partner, and do not receive cash assistance from other sources (Urban Institute, 2007). With the role of the public safety net diminishing, more families in poverty are reliant on private safety nets, either through family support, temporary employment, charities and non-profits. These private safety nets themselves are often volatile and unreliable, with funds available changing from month to month and year to year (Allard, 2007). Given these conditions, how are those in poverty making ends meet?

As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, my research seeks to fill several gaps in knowledge about the discursive and material positions of those in poverty. First, there is relatively little research about the role of place in access to safety net resources, both private and public (Allard, 2009; Blank, 2007). As the role of TANF decreases, where you live is playing a bigger role in the survival strategies of impoverished families. In 1995, a mother in poverty could count on her welfare check, food stamps and Medicaid to cover her major expenses and, for the most part, allow her to make ends meet. In the same year, an AFDC check alone lifted 62% of children out of deep poverty (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). Importantly, she could move across town or across the state and have her AFDC check mailed to her, assured the amount of assistance would stay the same (Allard, 2009). Today, there is not a single state where a poor family could live and rely on their TANF check to get them to even half the poverty line (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). This means that low-income families are more reliant on other resources,

such as government and non-government assistance and tenuous employment. These resources, from an aunt who can help mind the baby to a church that offers additional food and clothes are, for the most part, geographically fixed. No two places in America can offer the exact same safety net resources. The safety nets available to those in poverty are increasingly contingent on where someone lives and this means potentially uneven access to desperately needed services and assistance (Allard, 2009). Although welfare reform spawned a significant amount of research, much of this work ignores the role of spatial unevenness in access to resources and rights to employment and urban spaces. Although welfare reform gave more responsibility and power to the states to determine policies, there has not been a robust consideration of the role of local TANF policies on the identities and material conditions of those on, timed out or rejecting the rolls. For example, in a 2007 study conducted for the Administration for Children and Families Office of Policy Research Evaluation, when discussing the role of local programs, the researchers argued that “if you’ve seen one TANF program, you’ve seen *one* TANF program” (Urban Institute, 2007, italics mine). There is considerable variation not only in welfare policy but also in other place-specific safety nets at the state, county and local level, each having different effects on the lives of those in poverty (Allard, 2009; Urban Institute, 2007). Further, not only do TANF policies and programs differ across localities, but so do the historically and geographically situated discourses about those in poverty and who deserves help (Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, 2008). We do not yet understand how these ethos are perceived by potential and current recipients and the ways they may affect the material and identity positions of those in poverty.

Second, scholars need to know more about the strategies that families utilize to survive in an era of a patchwork safety net. Prior to 1996, low-income families could rely on a few

programs to cover expenses and many were housed in the same office or neighborhood. Today, the safety net is much more diverse, and potentially involves more time and effort to acquire the necessary resources to pay rent, buy a winter coat, access transportation, get medical care, and put food on the table. While there has been substantial research in terms of who receives TANF, the percentage of recipients engaged in work activities, the number of families leaving welfare, and the proportion of recipients who face barriers to employment, these numbers do not tell us much about how families in poverty are surviving month to month. Since welfare reform, the real value of a TANF check has decreased by 30% nationally and much more in some states (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). While living in poverty has always been precarious, today families must make due with a shrinking public safety net, an uneven and often volatile private safety net and a lack of jobs that offer livable wages and benefits (Edelman, 2012, Piven, 2001; Peck, 2001). We still do not know enough about what resources, if any, fill in the gap left by TANF and how these public and private safety nets may vary by space, race, and gender. Research about poverty needs to not only collect numbers but also collect stories and strategies from those who use public and private safety nets.

Finally, because research has shown a growing number of eligible families who do not receive benefits, research about the safety net must include the stories of those who do not receive TANF, either because they left the rolls for whatever reason or they rejected assistance entirely. While media outlets have proclaimed that people not taking up assistance is a cause for celebration of the success of welfare reform, the statistics about the employment opportunities and poverty levels of those eligible for TANF paint a more cynical picture. There are currently 4.4 million people on TANF, 1.1 million of who are adults. In contrast, there are 35 million working poor adults who hover at the poverty line but do not receive welfare (Allard, 2009).

About half the jobs in the United States pay less than \$34,000 a year and a quarter pay less than the poverty line for a family of four (Edelman, 2012). During the “Great Recession”, TANF caseloads remained stagnant in most states and even decreased in a number of others (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). Research concerned with those in poverty must focus on the reasons why TANF is less accessed and how the changing safety net is influencing the material and identity experiences of the poor. The voices of those who are intentionally rejecting TANF are essential to understanding the new landscape of public assistance in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Through interviews with low-income adults in two diverse locations this dissertation will shed light on these questions and bring us closer to understanding the ways in which social control is enacted through the spaces of poverty management.

Specifically, this chapter will focus on the discursive and material role of work as a form of social control that reinforces the isolation of welfare recipients in particular spaces such as inner-cities and in low-wage labor markets. As illustrated in Chapter Three, the history of welfare in the United States has been marked by phases of government intervention and withdrawal, of increased access and heightened impediments, of growing diversity among recipients and backlash to perceived changes in the deservingness on the rolls. In addition, the political economy, race and gender together have shaped who has access to welfare historically and what types of surveillance and resources they receive. While these ideas have been threaded throughout the history of assistance, the modern epoch of welfare is unique in one particular way: the use of work and the idea of the work ethic as a way to regulate parents, and mothers in particular, on public assistance (England, 2008; Piven, 2001). In the modern discourse of welfare, work is utilized not just as a requirement for receiving welfare but in the more wide-reaching way of indoctrinating all classes of Americans to believe that assistance is not an

entitlement but rather conditional on the actions and personhood of those that are in need (Peck, 2001; Staeheli and Brown, 2003). The conditionality of welfare and derogatory representations of those in poverty are not new. Race, ethnicity, behavior, marriage status, sexuality, and many other factors have more often than not decided whether someone was able to receive assistance (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2003). What is new is the near complete erosion of the ideology that the state and society have a responsibility to support care work (Morgen, Acker and Weigt, 2010). Guided by discourse on market fundamentalism and personal responsibility, this social contract, though never complete and often contingent on race, ethnicity and class, has been replaced by a dogmatic focus on requiring work in order for poor mothers to receive aid (Piven, 2001; Fraser and Gordon, 1994).

Work participation is utilized in many ways. The most tangible is demanding recipients to engage in workfare to “earn” their checks. Work is also used as a deterrent to those who may be qualified to receive TANF but do not want to undergo the surveillance and regulations of the program and therefore cobble together multiple formal and informal means of assistance to make ends meet. Finally, work is used as a discursive tactic to demarcate between the deserving and undeserving poor. This tactic has important repercussions for all Americans. By framing work as tantamount to self-sufficiency and independence, many Americans then judge those in poverty by their employment status (Piven, 2001). Those in poverty must look for jobs not just to make ends meet but also to be deemed deserving and full, contributory citizens. The discursive use of work as an indicator of deservingness for poor mothers affects their feelings of inclusion and worthiness in society (Schram, 2000). Through each of these tactics, work-enforcement manages the bodies, identities and spatial access of low-income families. With so much on the line, actual TANF regulations coupled with the discursive implications of work together create

enormous pressure for parents in poverty to look for jobs no matter the economic climate or the labor market where they reside (Piven, 2001; Peck, 2001). In this chapter, I explore the implications of these issues for those seeking, on, or rejecting assistance.

### *The campaign for workfare*

Conservatives have persuaded liberals that there is nothing wrong with obligating able-bodied adults to work. Liberals have persuaded conservatives that most adults want to work and need some help doing so. Patrick Moynihan in Peck, 2001.

It took only two decades to dismantle the important gains made by the welfare rights and other movements to improve access to economic rights and reduce the stigma of being on assistance (Piven, 2001). While these gains were uneven and incomplete, evidence strongly suggests that in years following the struggle for welfare as an entitlement, poverty decreased among single mothers and wages among the working poor increased (Cloward and Piven, 1977). The campaign to end welfare emerged at the intersection of political, economic and cultural processes. It was proclaimed a “consensus”, terminology which assumes that all the actors are on board. In reality, the consensus was a power deal between conservatives, the business community, and state and national government. The discourse that created a new landscape of welfare was in many ways a political sleight of hand: by focusing almost exclusively on the behavior of welfare recipients they were able to conceal the important role that workfare would play in labor markets and the spatial control of localities. While Democrats and Republicans may have historically tangled over TANF time limits or family cap rules, in the past 30 years the idea of work has emerged as a popular and common-sense solution to decreasing the TANF caseloads. As illustrated in Chapter Three, work has been required of certain populations of poor mothers (especially immigrants and women of color) since the earliest welfare programs. But by

the 1970s, the rise of neoliberal discourse as well as growing numbers of married and unmarried mothers joining the workforce led to more politicians calling for mandatory workfare policies. Supporters of workfare argued that the government could not fiscally support people getting “paid for doing nothing” while so many other mothers were able to balance work with child rearing. Others, such as Bill Clinton, argued that work would give those in poverty a sense of pride and allow them to be strong role models for their children. These arguments and others led to “the workfare consensus” that helped pass Welfare Reform in 1996 (Peck, 2001; Morgen, Acker and Weigt, 2010). Since then, the idea of work has played an integral role in welfare policies as well as how Americans view the deservingness of those in poverty. This has been a spatial process. Through vilifying the spaces of welfare- the inner-city, the welfare office, the homes of impoverished parents- the discourse has created new spaces and subjectivities for the poor. While low-income families may not have the economic or social mobility to inhabit the spaces of privilege, such as universities, safe neighborhoods, and employment security, they are able to frame themselves as workers. This can create new spaces of impoverishment such through low-wage employment. This shift further makes invisible the work of care done by poor families and limits their political voice.

As Chapter Three’s historical genealogy of welfare illustrates, aid for mothers has never been entirely about economic “need”. For most of its history, welfare has been about excluding certain populations and demarcating between the deserving and undeserving poor. The motivations behind these exclusions have many and often-overlapping causes, including upholding raced and gendered divisions of labor, financial constraints at the state and local level, regulating the bodies and livelihoods of marginalized groups to certain spaces, and maintaining capitalist power structures to the benefit of the wealthy. Those who applied for benefits after

1996 faced a program vastly transformed from the old AFDC. These changes were evident from the funding structure of welfare to relationships between caseworkers and recipients. To promote local control over welfare, TANF now provided lump-sum block grants of federal money to the states with the sum of the grant frozen at pre-reform levels<sup>4</sup> (Bernstein and Greenberg in Kuttner, 2002). As caseloads began to plummet, the block grant system allowed states flexibility in spending their leftover TANF dollars. This gave states a major incentive to cut the welfare rolls and divert the funds to an array of other projects. Critics of welfare reform warned politicians that the block grant system, while potentially advantageous to states during times of economic prosperity, would in the long term penalize poorer states and leave the safety net of all states incredibly vulnerable during a recession. Further, the legislation ended the *right to welfare*, dismantling the achievements of the Welfare Rights and other social justice movements to make welfare an entitlement increase rights to the city for low-income families and people of color.

The idea for workfare did not happen overnight nor was it the brainchild of one theorist or one school of thought. Before Clinton, four presidents had experimented with workfare programs to varying degrees with programs dating back to 1964. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the federal government encouraged states and localities to develop their own workfare programs in order to “see which ones catch fire and become guiding lights” (in Mink and Solinger, 2003). In other words, workfare was not a new idea. What was different, however, was the discursive construction of workfare as universally accepted and beneficial

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The federal government spends a little less than \$20 billion a year in block grants to the states for TANF. This number did not change from 1996 till 2009. In 2009, President Obama, as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment act, invested \$5 billion into TANF to spread out over several years.

(Peck, 2001). Described as the “workfare consensus” (Peck, 2001), and a “national revival movement” (Ehrenreich, 2003) advocates utilized public opinion polls, surveys of welfare recipients, and voting exit interviews as proof that Americans now expected those in poverty to get paychecks, not welfare checks. While liberals bristled at some of the more punitive aspects of welfare reform such as family caps and conservatives furrowed their brows over increasing federal subsidies for childcare, each side seemed to agree that work was the answer to welfare dependency. Through incorporating would-be welfare recipients into local labor markets, neoliberal policy makers hoped to maintain a low-wage workforce in places both benefitting from and struggling with neoliberal restructuring. Through my case studies I will elaborate on this point.

So how did workfare become constructed as a common-sense solution to welfare dependency? While state officials and caseworkers took on the tedious and difficult task of creating actual programs for recipients to train for and attain jobs, for many politicians, business leaders and scholars, workfare took on a much more broad and euphemistic meaning of maintain social and economic control over “undisciplined others” such as women of color. Workfare became the signifier of “the new welfare” that was localized, efficient, and regulatory (Peck, 2001). In the discourse of welfare reform, the *representation* of work and workfare became more important than the actual policies and plans toward securing employment for some 2.7 million adults on welfare<sup>5</sup>. For Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, language was a battlefield, and changing the discourse of the debate was “more important than legislative achievements” (Peck, 2001, 95). Workfare came to be considered common-sense not through

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This number represents the number of adults on TANF in 1997. According to PRWORA, states needed at least 25% of their caseload in the workforce in 1997 and 50% by 2002. For two parent families this was 75% in 1997 and 90% by 2002.

an actual political and popular consensus but rather through strategic promotion from policy-makers and business elite. Workfare programs were a seemingly neutral way of controlling labor markets, urban spaces, and poor ‘others’.

Similarly, politicians built a case for workfare through utilizing neoliberal language of local control, flexibility, and small government. Local contexts and new spaces of welfare played an important role in arguing for expanded workfare policies. The same year he passed the Family Support Act, a bill that was praised by Clinton and in many ways a precursor to welfare reform, Ronald Reagan called upon states and localities to lead the way for building workfare programs, stating: “There are a thousand sparks of genius in 50 states and a thousand communities around the nation” (in Mink and Solinger, 2003). Politicians cited “models of success” in places such as Milwaukee and San Diego as examples of local reforms. For proponents of workfare the success of local programs were based in getting recipients into employment with the other details sometimes obscured by the excitement of perceived triumph. Most models for these stories were too new to make lasting judgments but were still cited as examples of local success. Although politicians in favor of reform argued that the changes would allow greater flexibility to states and localities, in practice, reform still represented a “one-size-fits-all” approach. A few voices at this time hinted at the potential drawbacks in requiring workfare across diverse geographies with different demographics and political economies:

Different parts of the country - and different jurisdictions - have varied implementation problems. States with many legal immigrants, such as California and Texas, are worried the loss of immigrant benefits will hurt their local economies. Cities such as Detroit that have a high percentage of residents on welfare, plus a small inner-city job base, worry about transporting beneficiaries to suburban or rural locations where work can be found. (In “As Welfare Exits, States Try to Make Workfare Work” in the Christian Science Monitor, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1996)

The discourse and tangible requirements of work-for-welfare were widely accepted despite great local level variations in terms of political economy and access to transportation to get employment. The incredible difficulty of implementing this system across very different places was often left at being merely “worrisome”. The local model was juxtaposed against bureaucratic, inefficient national level stagnation, signifying new geographies of welfare-to-work success (Peck, 2001).

The language and spatiality of welfare did not completely change, however, as the bodies and homes of recipients remained an important site of contestation. The discourse of reform framed the problem of poverty (or more accurately, welfare dependency) at the scale of the individual and home rather than highlighting structural issues such as lack of employment and access to education (Schram, 2001; 2006). Using paternalistic language, proponents argued that requiring work would break the cycle of dependency on government programs and teach “middle class values” to impoverished adults. In an article describing the first few months after welfare reform, a volunteer with a faith-based organization that moved recipients into jobs stated that her goal was “not just to find them (recipients) a job, it was to instill in them morals and godly values” (*The New York Times*, 1996). In another example from New York City, Giuliani supported workfare by stating that requiring work would help recipients “maintain work discipline. It’ll maintain self-respect” (ibid).

Still another part of the argument was that workfare would teach work ethic to a dependent population and allow for middle class and affluent actors to control poor families. A 1997 *Washington Post* article describes the sweat and grime of a hard day’s work for one welfare recipient:

Wearing her regulation Day-Glo orange vest, Harden sweeps methodically toward Sanitation Garage No. 7, bracing her trash cart against the downhill slope as she whisks up a crumpled

wrapper and soft drink cup. Harden's hair is listing forward and sweat beads her upper lip as she shakes final bits of rubbish into the waiting garbage truck and makes for the supervisor's office to get a \$ 38 credit toward her welfare check. "The minute I get home, these shoes come off, I get in the shower and hit the bed," she says. Harden, 42, is a draftee in New York City's war against dependency, one of 38,000 welfare recipients required to work off their monthly checks by sweeping streets, cleaning parks and doing other municipal chores. Beneficiaries with children are required to work 20 hours a week, and New York's special state "home relief" recipients -- jobless men and women who have no dependent children -- are required to work off their cash grant, housing allowance and food stamps at the minimum wage.

(In "New York's Workfare Pick's Up City and Lifts Mayor's Image"

August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1997)

The language of war here invokes the idea that through work, Harden has switched ranks and joined other American citizens in fighting dependency. Of course, Harden did not enlist in this war but rather was drafted through welfare reform. In another example, a writer for the *San Jose Mercury News* the author argued that while workfare may be flawed, it would have benefits. The author stated that, "at least the taxpayer won't feel they are paying to maintain the something-for-nothing ethic" (1997). The assumption of these arguments was that the poor, and specifically those receiving assistance, were not currently working hard enough and that through workfare they could earn the money and the respect of middle class tax-payers.

When articles did interview welfare recipients, the authors used quotes and examples to illustrate that even those on welfare supported the workfare consensus. The vast majority of these articles featured welfare recipients that were in favor of requiring recipients to work. For example, an August 1996 article in the *New York Times* quoted a welfare recipient praising workfare, stating:

They should've done this a long time ago," said Elizabeth Elder, who works in Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx, picking up trash. "If they had, there wouldn't be children having children. Maybe if they knew they had to come to work every morning, it would make them more ambitious." Ms. Elder, 29, has four children, ages 12, 8, 7 and 5. Had rules been stricter when she was younger, she said, she might have "thought twice" about some of the choices she made.

In "Many Women on Workfare Express Hope"

*New York Times* August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1996

Bringing this idea home, in the official photo of Clinton signing PRWORA into legislation, amongst the surrounding crowd of suits and ties and flanking the president are two African American former welfare recipients. This photo was another way of establishing the consensus on workfare through a physical representation of the “welfare mother” in accord with overhauling the welfare state. It was through language and representation that politicians, business elite and others could control the conversation and change the landscape of assistance.

### ***The workfare and poverty management at the local level***

Through these tactics The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act passed, requiring single parents to work 30 hours a week in job-training, employability programs, and/or standard forms of employment (Peck, 2001, Urban Institute, 2011). In 2010, work participation was mandatory for 3 out of every 5 adult recipients (Urban Institute, 2012). This was true regardless of geographic location, gendered and racial barriers to employment, the number of children someone had or their access to childcare. As another example of the “one size fits all” approach implemented as part of welfare reform, the work participation rate meant that all states must have between 30%-50% of their caseload working in order to receive federal welfare dollars. This number remains unchanged no matter the local or national economic climate or other barriers to finding employment. States can also manipulate their work participation rate to ensure they continue to get federal dollars. For example, Mississippi has one of the highest TANF work participation rates in the country but also has one of the highest rates of mothers in poverty. Why? Mississippi has been accused of only allowing the most educated people onto their TANF rolls as well as the ones with the fewest work barriers (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). This

allows them to keep their WPR high while not addressing the more significant issue of the feminization of poverty.

Also importantly, the economic landscape has changed greatly since the introduction of work as a requirement for welfare. The United States' economy was strong at the time welfare reform was passed and this, along with the Earned Income Tax Credit, as well as changes in welfare policies facilitated the dramatic decrease in the rolls. However, since 2000, the United States economy has suffered two recessions, the second, of which "The Great Recession" increased unemployment in the United States to 10%. My research suggests that the new landscape of welfare reform today relies on three related imaginaries: the promotion of low-wage labor, the devaluing of care-work by poor parents, and the construction of the poor as "other" (England, 2007; Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Naples, 1997). Each of these aspects can be seen as a form of spatialized social control that manages the mobility of impoverished families. In the next few sections I paint a picture of the conditions of workfare since 2000 and unpack two areas of analyses: the role of workfare in the production of a low wage labor force and the devaluing of care work under welfare reform and neoliberalism more generally.

Since reform, workfare has taken on different roles in the lives of those on assistance. From my research findings, I found that work-for-welfare can be loosely separated into three areas. These include *workfare*, or mandatory work-experience activities in exchange for receiving welfare. The most well-known and documented form of work-for-welfare, workfare entered the popular lexicon in the 1980s and has since become a common requirement for receiving benefits. The next is *transitional benefits*, or when a recipient has found employment (often through the welfare agency) but is still able to get some TANF benefits such as childcare or transportation vouchers. The difference between this and workfare is that a recipient is

working independently from receiving TANF but is still able to get benefits as a way to help him/her transition to “self-sufficiency”. If the recipient loses the job, they have the possibility of returning to workfare. The amount and duration of transitional benefits has been a point of contention amongst republicans and democrats since 1996. The final category is what, through interviews, I have come to call *intentional rejection*, or when a person may be eligible for TANF but chooses to navigate the job market on their own, intentionally working sometimes two or more jobs to avoid applying for TANF. Across both of my research sites I found that interviewee’s moved through each of these phases throughout their lifetimes. These categories are indeed constructed around the data I collected and cannot entirely capture the complex and fluid experiences of those in poverty and the safety net.

### ***Work and low wage labor markets***

Amidst the supposed “workfare consensus” there were a number of scholars who challenged the idea of working for welfare. While politicians and welfare officials argued that work was a universal good and that recipients themselves were clamoring for employment opportunities, poverty scholars questioned the logic of workfare and challenged the motives of reform. One of the strongest critiques was that welfare would further cement a marginalized low-wage labor force and create competition among middle-income and low-income workers. Since the 1970s, wages have remained relatively stagnant and the value of the minimum wage is decreasing (Piven, 2001). Wages for those who make less than half the average income in the U.S. have grown a mere 7% since 1973 (Edelman, 2012). As stated at the beginning of this chapter, there are 35 million working poor adults who hover at the poverty line and about half the jobs in the United States pay less than \$34,000 a year and a quarter pay less than the poverty line for a family of four (Allard, 2009; Edelman, 2012). The poverty rate for single mothers is at

40% even as America begins to recover from a recession (Edelman, 2012). These numbers indicate that there is growing instability for employment in the United States, a trend that covers many educational and income levels. As the poverty to TANF ratio declines and people are less able to rely on a safety net, many seek one, two or even three jobs to make ends meet. More people relying on low-wage employment to survive means that businesses have the upper hand and do not need to increase wages or offer benefits in order to retain a profit. Scholars have argued that this, added to the work requirement of those who are able to seek assistance, has created instability and inhumanity in low-wage labor markets.

Work enforcement is spatialized social control in that by relegating the poor to employment that does not lift them from poverty, welfare policies also regulate the spaces they inhabit. For example, Francis Piven and Barbara Ehrenreich closely followed the implementation of workfare and its influence on low-wage labor markets (2001; 2002). In their findings, local governments used workfare contracts to replace union employment in jobs such as waste management (Ehrenreich, 2002; Piven, 2001). In Baltimore, public school janitors and city bus drivers were replaced by welfare workers who cost the city only \$1.50/hr. (Piven, 2001). Replacing the workforce with subsidized welfare workers creates class strife and further undermines people on TANF but lowering public support for those on assistance (Piven, 2001). While before welfare reform, the stereotype of welfare queen elicited ideas of a lazy, immoral urban mother, workfare may create new derogatory assumptions about welfare recipients as “stealing jobs” from the deserving American middle and working class. These conditions make it very difficult for the impoverished to access privileged spaces and to gain power and political voice.

Critiques on workfare have highlighted places such as Tommy Thompson's Wisconsin or Giuliani's New York City, where TANF recipients were required to work in jobs that were "contracted out" to corporations as examples of the ways in which workfare undermines employment stability (Piven, 2001; Peck, 2001). In order to encourage work, welfare reform allows employers to deduct welfare wages from their taxes and receive direct subsidies from the state or federal government for hiring TANF recipients (Piven, 2001; Schram, 2000). Employers could also avoid paying recipients a minimum wage by defining the work requirements not as "work" itself but as training in punctuality and personal hygiene (Piven, 2001). Piven pointed out that in Mississippi, businesses could pay TANF workers a mere \$1 an hour, with the state making up the rest of the benefits (Piven, 2001). This shift of control over benefits from the government to states and then to businesses greatly influences the experiences of welfare recipients and their reasons for leaving the rolls. While in the 1960s and 1970s, low-income people were able to seek assistance in times of economic hardship, today the safety net is less accessible and businesses have more power over the conditions of work.

Critiques of the role of neoliberal, pro-market ethos of the past 40 years also argue that the power of the business elite means that workfare recipients are utilized as indentured labor for whatever industry is in their geographic location. This mirrors the times before the welfare rights movement, when women of color were kept off assistance in the American south and rural areas because their labor was needed in white homes and the cotton fields. Today, depending on what jobs are available or what industries have the greatest influence in an area, recipients may have very different experiences in their workfare programs. Recipients in New York replaced union-contracted city workers and were required to pick up trash and scrub subway trains ("Welfare Reform Incorporated" Washington Post 1997). In Mississippi, welfare recipients are required to

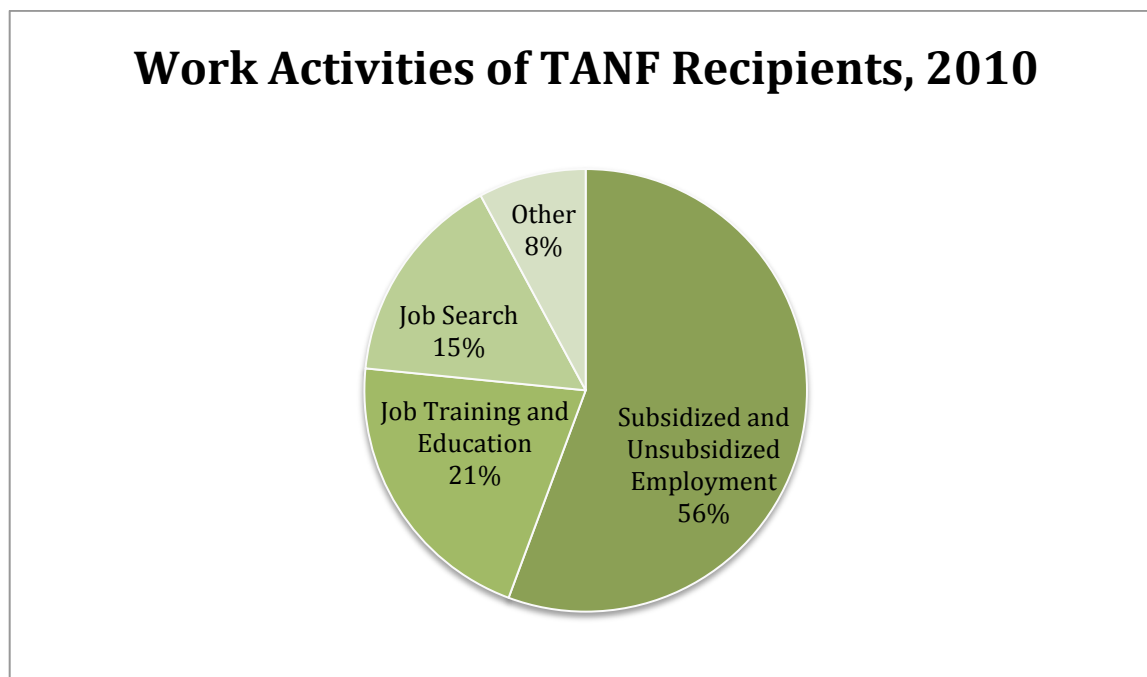
work in chicken and catfish processing plants and the state Department of Health and Human Services may refuse welfare from those who choose to quit their jobs (Piven, 2001). This raises a number of concerns. As welfare receipt moves from becoming an entitlement to a “contract” and as this contract further devolves from the power of state governments to private corporations, welfare recipients have limited choices in regards to employment. While having benefits tied to a job you are strongly pressured to take is problematic at any scale and in any location, the point of these examples is that recipient’s experiences on welfare and their opportunities after leaving the rolls are closely connected to the local political economy.

***The promise of local solutions and the curse of dead-end jobs.***

One of the biggest arguments for workfare was that each program could be flexible to local labor markets as well as the needs and challenges of local welfare populations. In an ideal world this meant that recipients would be trained to the growing sectors of their local economies, with caseworkers adept at teasing out the personal strengths of recipients and navigating their employment barriers. Critiques of workfare argued that this would give unrestrained power to local and regional businesses. My research found that yes, the local political economy did play a major role in the employment opportunities for recipients but that this was very uneven and often did not result in moving out of poverty. The types of work activities and the types of employment varied by site and local labor markets as well as local policies influenced the differences. A little over half of my research sample was either on TANF or had been in the past 2 years. Of this subset, all had some experience with workfare programs. The ideal of caseworkers was to have a large share of their caseload in “unsubsidized employment”. This meant full or part-time employment in public or private sector jobs that were not subsidized by TANF dollars. This can include employers who receive a tax credit for hiring welfare recipients

and TANF recipients who were self-employed. As seen in Figure 2 below, nationally this made up the largest percentage of work activities, 38%. The job search process also counts as a work activity and makes up 16% of national work activities. This could mean searching for employment using resources in welfare offices such as computers with Internet access or discussing employment openings with a caseworker. It could also mean navigating the job search process on their own, finding job openings through word of mouth, on foot searches or want-ads. Job search activities need to be supervised by a caseworker and must be done daily. Work preparation includes mental health therapy, life skills training or substance abuse training. A caseworker and health practitioner must evaluate a recipient before they can use this activity to qualify for work. In all areas, recipients are required to record and report their job-search activities to a caseworker or else face sanctions for not participating in work-related activities. Job training, making up one-fifth of the national average can be wide ranging in definition but often included computer skills workshops in TANF office or on the job. Finally, the category “other” can include educational credits and providing child care to other TANF recipients.

**Figure 2: Work activities for TANF recipients nationally, 2010**

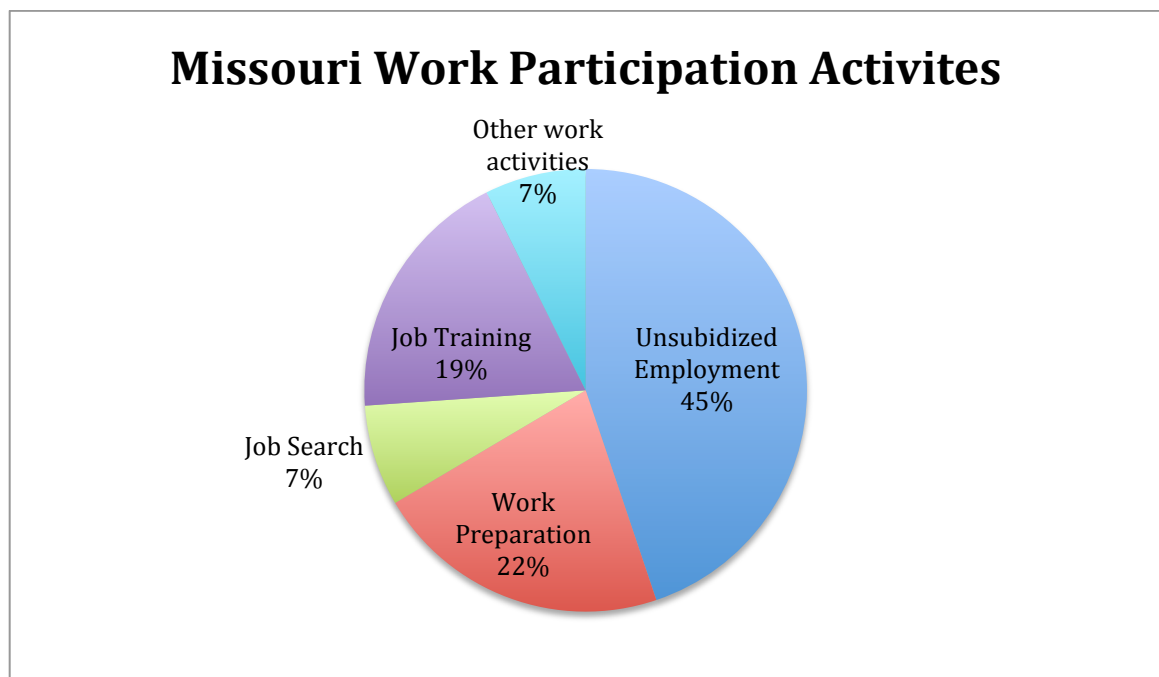


*Source: Urban Institute, 2010*

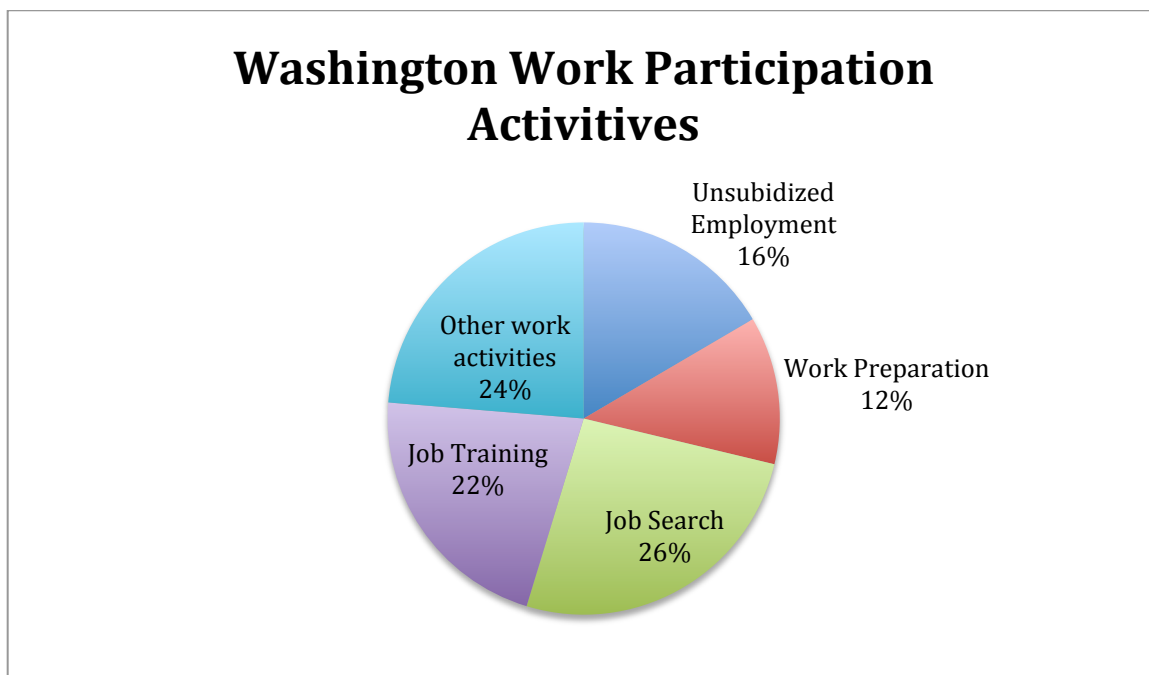
As you can see from Figures 3 and 4, of work participation activities, the activities engaged in differed by each state where I conducted research. This 2010 data was collected from the Office of Family Assistance as part of their study titled, “Characteristics and Financial Circumstances of TANF Recipients”. The data is broken down only to the state level and does not provide a picture of what types of employment recipients engaged in or how this varies across urban, suburban and rural areas. While this information is supplemented by my interviews, the data on work participation activities can provide clues as to the different landscape of welfare in each state. For example, in Missouri, unsubsidized employment made up almost half of all employment activities while the job search made up on 7%. These are very different than both the Washington and national statistics. In Washington, unsubsidized employment makes up on 16% of work activities while “other” comprises one-fourth. These

differences are rooted in policy. In Missouri, once you are on welfare, they strongly encourage work and spend considerable state dollars to make sure recipients get into the workforce. Washington, on the other hand, is one of few states where educational activities are prioritized, and state funds are given to community colleges to help train and educate TANF recipients. Just by looking at the state level we can already begin to tease out geographic differences in terms of work activities.

**Figure 4: Missouri Work Participation Activities**



Source: U.S. Office of Family Assistance

**Figure 5: Washington Work Participation Activities**

Source: U.S. Office of Family Assistance

When interviewing recipients in Jackson and King counties about their work activities, the job-search was an important site of struggle for the people I interviewed, often testing their patience and tenacity at finding work during an economic downturn in which jobs were incredibly scarce. In Jackson County, there was a strong spatial mismatch between where living wage jobs were located versus where impoverished families lived. The inner-city itself did not necessarily lack employment but rather jobs that offered benefits and upward mobility. One recipient in Kansas City described waking up early to apply for a job at a fast-food chain in her neighborhood. She “dressed-up”, wearing nice slacks and a button-up shirt and brought with her any documents she believed would be needed if she were lucky and hired on the spot. When she arrived at the restaurant with her 17-year-old son, who was also planning to apply for a position, she found “a line around the corner” full of applicants. While her son stayed behind to talk to a

number of his friends who had shown up earlier and were waiting in line, the woman, crestfallen, returned home. She said that while later she felt some guilt over not staying and applying, she also felt that given her resume (she had worked mainly as a health aide), and her advanced age she did not believe she would be competitive for the position.

Another woman in Kansas City shared a similar story in which when, through word of mouth, an employment opportunity at a newly opening grocery store spread throughout her housing complex. “Everyone was really excited,” she stated, especially because the grocery store was on a bus-line in the city and offered more than minimum wage. She, however, was not as enthusiastic. While some of her neighbors began to envision working alongside their friends and making good money, she asked, “How many people can they hire?” She also thought, however, that the job was an opportunity to get off welfare and therefore applied along with “pretty much everyone else in the building”. Echoing the sentiments of the previous interviewee, she said that the store ended up hiring only a few people and most were young people working as grocery baggers and stockers for minimum wage. Years of disinvestment in the central city meant that most desirable jobs were spatially out of reach for welfare recipients.

Still others used the job search process to bide their time until they found a job they really wanted and even expressed a desire to move to new locations to get the job. Most people were optimistic and grateful to have benefits to help them while they waited to line up a good job. Like many Americans, the vast majority of my sample considered themselves workers, whether or not they were currently employed. For the optimistic people, assistance was a necessary part of their life, a chance to breath and regroup after being laid-off or having a child. While not across the board, many of these people were younger (less than 30) and had only been on welfare a short time. There were significant variations in this optimism across my field sites as well.

Interviewees from the Kansas City area were much more cynical about job opportunities than those in Seattle. Many Jackson county interviewees discussed moving to bigger cities, such as Atlanta, Houston or Chicago to find better opportunities. In Seattle, recipients were more likely to either be optimistic about finding jobs or blame themselves for their lack of employment. This strongly suggests that the local economy plays a major role in not just the opportunities but also recipient's views of the opportunities around them. In Kansas City, it is generally acknowledged that there are a lack of "good" jobs, ones that pay a living wage and offer benefits. In Seattle, the economic story includes the growing high-tech and health care industries, which paints a vibrant picture of the future of the city and its residents. Whether these jobs are attainable, however, remains questionable.

In another example of the spatial mismatch between the places low-income live and the privileged spaces of secure employment, one of the major themes with workfare among interviewees was the placement of job opportunities relative to their homes. As geographers have pointed out, economic restructuring and privatization of resources has created a growing spatial mismatch between where jobs and services are located and where those in poverty reside. My two case studies of Seattle and Kansas City illustrate opposite patterns of spatial mismatch relative to employment. Kansas City exhibits a pattern similar to Rustbelt cities in which economic restructuring has led to a donut-shape where the inner city lacks the employment opportunities that now exist mainly in the suburbs. Many of the poor in this area however take advantage of the cheaper rents in the inner city and must commute using a precarious public transportation system to their workfare employment. As I will elaborate in a moment, in my interviews in Jackson County, the number one concern with requiring work was finding feasible employment. As stated by one mother living in the city, "Things are really rough out here. We

do what we need to do to have money." For her, this included living with her mother while working multiple jobs and mowing lawns for extra money. Previously she had found a job in the suburbs but quit after being unable to commute long distances and still care for her children. This example illustrates that workfare not only ignores the spatial mismatch created by neoliberal disinvestment in inner cities but also the complete lack of consideration for the care work of poor mothers.

As hinted above, in King County, however, a burgeoning urban core has created many service sector jobs but higher rents have pushed those in poverty to far-off suburbs. The commute in some cases is 2 hours via bus to the central business district. Because TANF guidelines limit the value of assets at \$1,000-\$5,000 many recipients do not have reliable transportation to take them to and from job or training centers. In Seattle, those on the rolls expressed difficulty in finding employment anywhere near the places they could afford to live. For many, this means seeking education to better their chances at getting the jobs available in King County. As the state numbers on job activities suggest, about one-fourth of the people I interviewed in King County took advantage of the educational opportunities. These examples illustrate concerns within cities but do not even touch on the difficulties of finding employment for participants in rural areas where there is even greater competition for employment and even fewer resources or transportation options. Aside from just managing TANF work requirements, recipients often rely on a network of services such as subsidized childcare, Medicare, and other resources provided by county, city, and private agencies that are very infrequently centralized. Without in-depth interviews with those who have experienced workfare we would not fully understand the role of that urban spatial structures play in determining the work opportunities of welfare recipients.

Due to spatial mismatch and economic restructuring, interviewees felt that they were in a cycle of dependency, but not on welfare, on low-wage work. This is illustrated in both locations by the types of jobs worked by my interviewees (see Table 3). For them, the job search requirements were the beginning of a cycle of finding a job that would not pay well, finding another job to make ends meet, quitting or getting fired from one or more of the jobs because it was too difficult to juggle multiple, and then reapplying for TANF. They did not question their own work ethic. They believed they were doing what they were supposed to do, often working more hours than the average person but the work itself was not paying off. A keen sense of awareness and resignation accompanied their job searches, knowing that it would take more than a new job or economic growth to change their situation. One recipient from Kansas City, seemingly exasperated by my questions about her employment status since the recession, stated, “Things weren’t good here before! What recession? Maybe things were good for *you*”.

**Table 3: Recent Employment of Interviewees**

	Jackson County, MO (38 interview subjects)	King County, WA (34 Interview Subjects)
<b>Job Search Activities</b>	9	9
<b>Health Care (CNA, aide)</b>	8	6
<b>Contract employment</b>	1	6
<b>Manufacturing</b>	3	0
<b>Waste Management</b>	6	0
<b>Not Working</b>	11	4

<b>In school</b>	0	6
<b>Other (in addition to primary job)</b>	17	6

This sentiment was most strongly expressed in interviews with recipients in the Jackson County area. I spent one afternoon with my mother and father going to conduct interviews on the west side Kansas City neighborhood of Wyandotte, a sprawling historically Latino area that loomed large in Kansas City's history. My parents joined me because it was where my father had spent years working and living and he wanted to revisit his old house. Located next door to the deteriorating remnants of the cattle stockyards that were the backbone of Kansas City's economy for nearly a century, Wyandotte had recently made national news as the site of Google's high tech Internet experiment. Driving through the downtown of the neighborhood was startling. Almost every single business had been boarded up. There were no cars driving along the main roads and nearby an old hospital complex had signs throughout the empty parking lot advertising "For Sale". Across the vacant stockyards in the distance you could see the glimmering skyscrapers of downtown Kansas City but here everything seemed covered in a veil of dust. My parents dropped me off at the DHHS office where I spent the afternoon interviewing caseworkers and their managers. One manager explained in detail the many opportunities available for job seekers. She gave me a folder of information on the different support networks available for searching for a job and finding childcare and transportation help. When she left for a meeting I was passed along to caseworker that had been with the office since right after the passage of welfare reform. Her outlook was more measured, stating that there were supports available, there was money for childcare, etc. but there just were not enough jobs.

“All the jobs here are pawn shops, body shops and thrift stores” she said with tension in her voice.

While the lack of jobs was a major concern among caseworkers and recipients alike, the lack of “good” jobs was perhaps more pronounced among those who were on TANF and working. Again, these included people who were engaged in workfare activities to receive cash assistance and those who were working and transitioning off of assistance but receiving other benefits such as healthcare. In his seminal study, *Workfare States*, Jamie Peck argues that while a common discourse is evident in workfare, each workfare project is different, shaped by the history and institutions in place, even at the local level (2001). Still, he predicted that the Riverside model, one that eschewed education and training for cheap and “speedy reentry into paid employment” would spread quickly across America. The employment I found most prevalent for those working while receiving welfare benefits were health care aid, such as a certified nurse assistant, public services such as garbage pick-up and recycling sorter, and part-time employment for contract, such as vendors at national sports games. These were similar across both sites, illustrating that despite different positions in the political economy, each city was incorporating low-income parents into employment in similar ways. The repercussions of these incorporations were also similar at the state level for each research site. The dependency on low-wage markets can be seen Table 4 that compares the parental employment of low-income families:

**Table Four: Parental Employment of Low-Income Families with Children Under 18**

	Full-Time and/or Full Year	Part-Time or Part Year	No Parent Employed
National	44%	34%	22%

Washington	43%	39%	17%
Missouri	48%	34%	18%

While this chart represents low-income families, or those at twice the poverty line and it does not break down to my two case study sites, it does illustrate the point that low-income people are indeed working but that their wages are not moving them into the middle class. My research in each site further supports this. In both King and Jackson Counties, my interview subjects described the difficulty of working, being unable to care for your children and still not leaving the conditions of poverty. This took a toll on their mental and physical health. It lays bare the contradictions of neoliberalism and market fundamentalism (Peck, 2003). It also challenges the discourse that the poor are lazy and do not work. Over 40% of parents are working full-time and still considered low-income. I argue that the current labor market abetted by neoliberal restructuring as well as exclusion of people of color and the poor from privileged spaces is creating new spatial relations of poverty management. This involves removing the poor from making direct claims on the welfare state and the government in offices or in the streets and instead places them in low-wage labor markets and less-able to move to places where they can better access employment, good schools and other resources.

***Live with it or quit: race and gender in structuring job opportunities***

These trends in low-wage labor markets were made further complex by racist and gendered discrimination recipients faced on the job. My research illustrates that the intersectional position of race and gender together are greatly influencing the employment opportunities of the working poor. According to Kenneth Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave in *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor*, much research on welfare fails to frame means-

tested safety net programs as part of a socially constructed, gender, race and class hierarchy and instead focuses mainly on the work behaviors of the those on welfare (2001). They argue “the greatest bias here is in the questions that go unasked, and therefore unanswered” (212: 2001). In studying the outcomes of workfare, mainstream American researchers frame success in terms of ending dependency (O’Connor, 2001). These include compiling the percentage of recipients who are employed, tallying how much recipients make per hour and quantifying the number of hours worked per week (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2003). By framing the questions thus, researchers can then frame their analyses in terms of tweaking current workfare programs or adjusting the “carrots and sticks” approach to changing recipients behaviors (Piven, 2001; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001; O’Connor, 2001; Soss, 2004).

The reason much mainstream research fails to ask questions about race and gender or to interrogate the role of the capitalist political economy is closely connected to maintaining the power of business and political elites:

To acknowledge that poor people are affected by societal organizing principles of race and gender would mean having to address the consequences of racial and gender inequalities in interpreting the effects of welfare reform policies. Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001.

To this quote I would add neoliberal economic restructuring as an important factor in the production of worker-citizens who are themselves differentially racialized and gendered.

Other scholars argue that because of the discourse of “the welfare queen” and because of the many barriers that TANF recipients face when securing employment, employers may be unlikely to hire recipients. When asked about the likelihood of local businesses hiring recipients, Robert T. Jones president and chief executive officer of the National Alliance of Business, stated, “Business is not in the business of providing jobs for welfare recipients”. Another employer argued that the recipients she encountered had “not had much structure in their lives...they won’t

take routine supervision at work. A study conducted by the National Partnership for Women and Families, stated that almost 60% of service providers said that employers “were often reluctant to hire recipients, and almost a quarter of providers said employers often did not want to pay equal wages to welfare recipients and non-recipients doing identical jobs” (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001, 195). Finally, in a quote taken in the months following welfare reform, the president of Kansas City’s Full Employment Council, a partnership organization that links welfare recipients with jobs stated that:

We had mistakenly assumed that the \$500 monthly subsidy was sufficient motivation for the businessmen to hire our participants. But increasingly we got feedback from employers who said, 'Send us people who get to work on time, can read and follow instructions and want to stay on the job'. ('Welfare to Work: the Kansas City Experience 1994-2007' 2007)

The hesitation to hire welfare recipients emerges from assumptions about who receives welfare and often focuses the problem on the presumed behaviors of the recipients. These stereotypes are often linked to discourses about race and gender and thus the barrier to employment continues after a person leaves welfare. In addition, while the barriers to employment for recipients and those in poverty more generally are very real, by framing the argument in terms of their “lack of skills” or “flawed work ethic”, the problem is seen as a “cultural” or personal issue. This depoliticizes poverty and the need for public assistance and does nothing to address issues of structural racism, sexism and classism. Further, while welfare offices often talk about creating “bridges” instead of “barriers” for welfare recipients, these would often require large scale structural changes as the local level, such as better access to GED classes or community colleges, improvements in transportation and affordable, publicly funded childcare.

Many people I interviewed had personal experience with glass ceilings and dead-end jobs. Initially I thought I'd find this trend to be stronger in Jackson County because of its history of de jure segregation and racial tensions. Interviewees of color in Seattle (and in particular African Americans) felt that because they were a smaller minority they had less power than African Americans in urban centers with a higher percentage of minorities. Subjects in either site heavily believed that they had been discriminated against based on their race, gender or status as a welfare recipient. One woman in Renton, WA said that she had been very happy working at a garbage sorting center and had even passed a test to get promoted. She strongly felt, however, that because she was a welfare recipient, her employers looked at her as temporary and unreliable. She also felt discrimination from her co-workers who were all men. Another recipient in the Kansas City areas was working and transitioning from welfare but found the pay-off was not there. She received almost no benefits from her job at an elder-care facility. In nice weather she worked under-the-table gardening and landscaping, jobs which paid much more than her full-time position. While she enjoyed both jobs, she continually saw white women being promoted over her. Her frustration led her to quit her main job. Currently she is living on SNAP benefits and part-time work. In their zeal to move women from welfare into work, policy makers ignored the realities of the local labor market options available to welfare mothers and those outside the neoliberal elite (Kittay, 1999, 137; McDowell, 2001, 2004; Schram, 2000, 2006).

My own and other research findings (Morgen, Acker and Weigt, 2010; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001) that African Americans are more likely to be required to work than other groups and that this is based on the lower value associated with the motherhood of African Americans. This is very likely connected to historical framings of African American women as good workers and bad mothers. It is also connected to the need for white America to manage

and control racialized others. In both sites, African Americans were also more likely to report that they faced discrimination on the job. People of color and especially African Americans, at the bottom of a race, class, and gender hierarchy felt they were the “last-hired and first-fired” and were also more likely to filter in and out of welfare. While discrimination was a major influence in terms of keeping jobs there were other reasons recipients filtered in and out of the job market and on and off welfare. These based on a number of factors such as availability of child-care, local economic climate, access to transportation and attainability of other safety net resources both public and private (Allard, 2009). But it was parents of small children and multiple children that seemed the most likely to go on and off welfare in my study sample. Some did not know of any affordable childcare available. Others did not trust the childcare given by TANF dollars and wanted to rely on the more tenuous availability of family members caring for their children.

Another important theme that emerged from my research is the devaluing of care work for low-income parents. The dogmatic focus on employment for TANF recipients begs the question: who is watching the children? Feminist theorists argue that workfare devalues the importance of care work. My research puts the work of feminist and care ethics theorists into conversation with critical race theory and geographers in order to argue for greater value and legitimacy to multiple forms of work at multiple sites (England, 2008). As stated in Chapter Three, the logic behind Aid to Families with Dependent Children was to allow widowed or abandoned mothers to stay home with their children (Piven and Cloward, 1971). Workfare policies were a dramatic shift from this early ideal. Proponents of workfare argue that times have changed and more mothers today are entering the workforce. The implicit comparison is that if middle class mothers are now working, so should welfare mothers (Douglas and Michaels, 2005). This comparison elides the widely varying labor market prospects and social resources of

middle class and working-poor women. Overall though, while times may have changed, the burden of care labor still falls primarily on women (England, 2007; Tronto in Hirschmann and Liebert, 2001). In addition, because welfare reform made it more difficult for two-parent families to qualify for benefits, the vast majority of cases are children of single parents, mainly mothers. Feminist theorists argue that that the definition of work in welfare policy is situated within a patriarchal value system that ignores and devalues the critical role of motherhood and care (England and Lawson, 2005; McDowell, 2001, 2004; Nagar et al, 2002).

Scholars argue that the discourse questioning the parenting skills of TANF recipients emerges from all parts of the political spectrum. In an article written for *Newsweek* in 1995, Hilary Clinton stated that, “The love (of children) can be as rich and the values as sound in the homes of Watts as in Westchester, in Harlem as in Highland Park” (1995). While Hilary Clinton is trying to debunk myths about parenting of impoverished inner city residents, the fact that this statement even needs to be made illustrates that welfare receipt and poverty status alone are enough to question the ability to care for dependents (Burnett, 2007). Because the care-work of impoverished parents is not valued in post-industrial America, they are forced into the role of worker-citizens with little regard to their child-care needs, to local work opportunities, or very legitimate concerns for their own autonomy and choices.

The rhetorical foundation for workfare was that welfare recipients needed to work in order to “earn their keep” or maintain their part of the social contract. This, however, was based on very limited and flawed research that impoverished parents lacked work ethic or had spent generations on the dole. This was also based on racially constructed ideas about who is a good mother. While the concept of “cross-generational dependency” became a common-sense way of thinking about life under AFDC, data and interviews paint a different picture of the typical

single-mother in poverty. First, as illustrated in Chapter Three, many mothers in poverty, particularly African American women in the American south, did not qualify for welfare for most of its history. Through excluding women qualified for employment in agriculture or domestic work and through state residency requirements aimed at migratory laborers, AFDC rules were able to deter great numbers of the working poor particularly African American and immigrant women while simultaneously controlling the behaviors of the impoverished and their access to privileged spaces. Even after civil rights and other social justice groups successfully rallied for impoverished families to access AFDC and other necessary safety net programs, many single-parents on welfare worked to support meager benefits. One Kansas City resident took on the risk of working “under-the-table” because without that source of income she would never be able to make ends meet. She said, “I’ve been employed forever even if it was under the table. The money I got from welfare was a joke; it isn’t like you could live on it” (Personal interview, 2010). For many, working, even if under the table, was a way of proving to themselves and their communities that they were good mothers. In this way, recipients challenge the workfare regime and create their own identities around care-work and the value of their labor.

In addition, some parents intentionally avoided work because they wanted to be able to care for their own children. For example, two young mothers who wanted to be interviewed together both shared that they wrote down the places they applied to and reported to this information to the welfare office over the phone, just as they were supposed to, but were not actively looking for work. “Where am I gonna work?” asked one of the women. “I have my child. I don’t have time to work”. Others did not trust the childcare available to them and wanted to be able to care for their own children. Ironically, starting child care services is on the ideas

often discussed in welfare policy as an income generator for low-income women. While they may watch others children, they are unable to receive benefits to raise their own.

This illustrates that single mothers in particular face increased barriers to caring for their children in the new landscape of the safety net. Even with employment, many two-parent families struggle to make ends meet. The family wage has always been a myth in that at no time in American history has a majority of men been able to support their families single-handedly (Gordon, 2002). While there may be benefits--psychological, economic, political—to employment, the worker-citizen model implied that poor mothers do not contribute to their children, to their communities or to society (England, 2007; Johnson, Duerst-Lahti and Norton, 2007). This has been especially true for women of color whose ability to be good mothers has always been at question (Nakano Glenn, 2002; Duffy, 2007). The argument was that mothering was valuable to the well being of society only when that mothering took place in two-parent families (Johnson, Duerst-Lahti and Norton, 2007). Single-parents, however, not only did nothing of value but actually were detrimental to their children and communities. These attacks on the parenting skills of those on welfare were especially vitriolic against single mothers of color (Nakano Glenn, 2010). While use of the term “welfare queen” had waned by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the discursive work of decades of gendered racism questioning the morality of mothers of color had been laid.

While these critiques nominally target any parent receiving a welfare check, they are especially aimed at poor, black mothers. As illustrated in Chapter Three, over the history of welfare in the United States, much discursive work has been done to implicitly associate welfare, black mothers, and lack of work ethic. As stated by Gwendolyn Mink in Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001:

The racialized gender politics of welfare have yielded reforms that subordinate women of color disproportionately, both ideologically and in their practical effects. Poor women of color suffer stigmas applied only to them (lazy, matriarchal, baby machines).

These stigmas are applied not by directly chastising women of color but rather by utilizing specific racial codes, such as through geographic references or just by using the term “dependency”. Both politicians and the media often rhetorically connected welfare dependency with specific spaces such as inner cities, urban poverty and housing projects (Burnett, 2007; Johnson, Duerst-Lahti and Norton, 2007). The problems of single-motherhood, dependency and lack of work ethic were all racially coded to the point where today “welfare dependency” has become code for “black laziness” and “inner cities” (in Neubeck and Cazenave, 210: 2001; and also Schram, 2000; 2006). In modern welfare discourse there are two racialized and gendered arguments that feed one another and lay the basis for policy: 1) That poor mothers, and especially poor mothers of color, are not contributing to society in their care labor. They are, in short, bad mothers. 2) That because those in poverty are unable to properly care for their dependents, they should therefore have to work. This research, however, argues that American society’s lack of value for the care labor of parents in poverty more accurately reflects racist, sexist and classist processes inherent in our social fabric as well as political and economic institutions than it does measure the care present in low-income and impoverished households.

### ***Conclusions***

This chapter argues that welfare is at the center of geographic, gendered, racialized and capitalist processes. While geographers have made the case for the importance of understanding the role of place in terms of social justice, my research specifically interrogates welfare reform and its attendant policies as creating multiple geographies of opportunity and vulnerability in terms of labor and motherhood. As stated by Peck, “State-level welfare policies come in fifty

flavors, reflecting as they do a wide range of local economic, political, and institutional conditions” (2001, 133). I would add that in addition to these factors we must also understand the changes in the safety net as a reconfiguration of spatialized social control. By removing welfare mothers from more explicit forms of rights claiming and into job markets that are unreliable and regulatory, their political voice and spaces of inclusion are diminished. As stated by Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, “representations of the poor and poverty rest on a host of imaginary landscapes about who belongs, who is an outsider and who has a right to a place and its services” (2008, 737). As illustrated in both King and Jackson Counties, the poor are still spatially situated in places and spaces that limit their opportunities to jobs, education, and other resources. Subjects in King County were more hopeful about being included in the more lucrative parts of the local political economy while in Jackson County subjects spoke of moving to more hopeful locations with better access to jobs and good schools. In both places the subjects were very aware of the barriers they faced to employment and the contradictions in poverty policy and capitalist discourses on upward mobility. In the next chapter I will take up what these forms of spatial control and access to place means for the practices of citizenship and identity formation for impoverished parents.

## Chapter V. Managing Poverty and Managing Space

Welfare regulates recipients in such a way that they cannot but fail to meet imposed standards of personal responsibility. The welfare queen becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy to be restaged by welfare recipients in their daily struggle to make ends meet... Their regulation becomes self-legitimizing. (Schram, 2000, 55)

While workfare programs receive considerable attention in welfare discourse, they are only one part of a larger regulatory system that manages and stigmatizes those in poverty. In chapter three I focused on the role of the political economy and racial and gender oppression in shaping patterns of safety net receipt and exclusion in America. These exclusions and the eruptions that occurred as low-income families fought for greater access to previously denied benefits led to the discursive creation of ‘the welfare mother’. The vilification of welfare recipients has been a racial, gender, and capitalist project, placing many of the social and economic problems of late capitalist society on the shoulders of individuals (England, 2008). In chapter four I analyzed work enforcement as one of the material articulations of the discursive construction of the welfare mother and its attendant assumptions of dependency, personal irresponsibility, and moral inadequacy. Because the goal of welfare policy has shifted from alleviating poverty to alleviating dependency, today simply asking for help is itself justification for supervision and regulation. Work programs and the culture of work enforcement (i.e. through the threat of time limits and sanctions) provide a workforce for low-wage markets while simultaneously allowing for increased surveillance of welfare recipients (Piven, 2001). These processes can be seen as a form of spatialized social control in that the poor are limited by economic and social forces in the places they inhabit.

In this chapter I extend this analysis to query what this regulatory project of safety net assistance means for the subjectivities, identities and agency of low-income parents. Current framings of welfare de-politicize poverty and reinforce the connection between economic status

and identity. The production of the poor is closely tied to historically constructed mainstream American notions of race, class, and gender (Bonds, 2009). Discussions on welfare are ultimately discussions about space, politics, identity and agency but these larger issues are hidden amidst the intense focus on the behaviors of those in poverty. When we debate welfare we are debating who belongs in our society and whose voice and experience is heard and valued. We also are contesting what it means to be a full member of society and what behaviors, practices and roles are constructed as ‘us’ and ‘other’. Research about poverty, emerging from mainstream news outlets, social scientists, or federally funded agencies (or any mix of the three), focus heavily on the faults of the poor or ignore the poor altogether (as argued in Maskovsky and Goode, 2002; O’Connor, 2001). The “poverty research industry”, utilizes large-scale, quantitative data and makes broad claims about those in poverty (O’Connor, 2001). These claims then disseminate through political speeches, newspaper stories and course syllabi and reiterate raced and gendered discourses about ‘poor others’. These large brush-stroke analyses often ignore the role of space, the political economy, class, gender, and race in the production of poverty and the agency of marginalized groups. This research highlights the ways in which the neoliberal construction and management of poverty is a form of citizenship production, of demarcating those who belong and do not belong in mainstream American society.

I examine here how specific places and spaces produce citizen-subjects through distinct encounters (both discursive and material) with their communities and the state across and within locations (Lawson and Elwood, forthcoming). This research focuses on daily practices and the creation of meaning and identity for those in poverty and in the safety net in place (Nelson, 2000). I focus on the exclusions produced through welfare policies as important sites where identity is created. These sites can be empowering, allowing a person in poverty to assert their

claim on the U.S. as a full citizen (Soss, 2000). They can also be spaces of exclusion, where current or would-be recipients are further marginalized through the atmosphere of the welfare office or interactions with a caseworker. Many times, welfare spaces are not solely positive or negative but can be seen as almost always political: “the welfare system is where the poor make their most pressing claims, negotiate the policy decisions that affect them most directly, and come face to face with the state’s capacity to protect” (Schram, 2000, 1). Neoliberal cuts to the welfare state have meant that not only are there fewer people making these political claims but that the welfare office itself is being transformed from a place where the poor come to receive aid to a ‘job-search’ facility, focused mainly on finding employment for applicants (Morgen, Acker, and Weigt, 2010). These jobs, however, do not often change the conditions of poverty.

I explore how access to and experiences in welfare programs shape the identities of recipients and how this may be different across places. As examined in chapter three, geography has played an essential role throughout the history of welfare, as states and localities battled against the federal government for control over administering aid. Since welfare reform, public assistance has de-scaled from the stronger federal guidelines under AFDC to the belief that local flexibility is best. Debates around public assistance have been, “debates over geography: where welfare ought to be and what form it should take there; how places (for example cities, households, regions, the nation) and movements (migrations, household reconfigurations, etc.) ought to be constituted through the welfare state” (Staeheli and Brown, 2003, 771). Due to the devolution of welfare programs, there is now considerable variation not only in welfare policies across locales but also in other place-specific safety nets at the state, county and local level, each having different effects on the lives of those in poverty (Allard, 2009; Urban Institute, 2007). Further, as welfare has been repurposed to focus mainly on work-enforcement, the job market

and the job site have become new spaces in the neoliberal project of poverty management. The restructuring of welfare means that where you live greatly influences access to and experience on TANF as well as influences the availability of employment for those who reject or do not qualify for welfare.

First, in this chapter I build an understanding of how identities and political subjectivities are remade through engagements with local labor markets and forms of poverty management. I explore the ways in which the subjectivities of my respondents are produced through their interactions with the welfare system. This system itself reflects and reproduces neoliberal rationalities which frame subjects as personally responsible, self-sufficient and unencumbered by care work. The worker-citizen model, embroiled in racialized and gendered assumptions, is utilized in welfare discourse to demarcate between the deserving and undeserving poor. I study the ways in which neoliberalism, racism and sexism together help target and frame those in poverty as ‘other’, an undeserving group whose values, behaviors and identities are not in line with mainstream America. These include the scrutinizing process of applying for safety net resources, the use of sanctions to punish recipients, and the public discourse of shame associated with benefits. I emphasize the ways in which this subject formation is profoundly spatial, occurring through practices at welfare offices, workplaces, and the home. I also illustrate that poverty regulation and safety net rules are a form of social control that maintain the class, race, and spatial boundaries between privileged and marginalized actors.

Second, I question the ways in which the cultural and political constructions of poor subjects influence the identities of those in the safety net. Utilizing Foucault’s idea of governmentality, I ask how the material and discursive spaces of neoliberal subjectivity influence the daily practices and the production of meaning for low-income parents. Utilizing

my interview data, I seek out the parameters of self-governance employed by low-income parents as they negotiate the terrains of assistance. This includes investigations into their feelings about themselves, other recipients and the system as whole. It also includes examining the ways in which people perform in the spaces of assistance and in their communities. I explore the ways in which the regulation and surveillance faced by many while applying for or on TANF has led them to reject assistance all together and what this means for radical politics and the neoliberal project. As all identities and subjectivities are fluid and complex, I focus on the ways in which people interpret their position in ways that cannot be simply categorized as rejecting or accepting the neoliberal model or the discourse of the 'welfare mother'. While many safety net recipients may share similar ideas and assumptions of welfare discourse, they also offer alternative ideas about care work, self-sufficiency, the value of labor, deservingness, and what it means to be on the rolls (Morgen, Acker and Weigt, 2010).

Third, I examine the ways in which the discursive and material constructions of poor subjects influence the agency of low-income families. What are the strategies and coping mechanisms utilized in order to navigate the everyday struggles of being poor in America with a threadbare safety net and unreliable job market? As the middle class declines, what does the discourse of shame around need mean for political agency in the U.S.? How do people sustain dignity, community, hope and self-love in the midst of a cultural, economic and political project meant to cast every person in self doubt and in competition with their neighbors? Neoliberal discourse and the regulatory project of welfare has positioned agency for poor families in rather singular terms of getting off welfare and finding employment. This makes agency even more complex for when a person rejects welfare due to its paternalism or finds employment and leaves the rolls they may also be reinforcing neoliberal subjectivity. In other words, "in the act of

rejecting subordination, the subject reiterates its subjection” through following the neoliberal narrative of self-sufficiency (Butler in Bondi, 2005, 106). While taking on this complexity I also point toward spaces of hope where new forms of subject formation are emerging through hybrid identities. I ask how, through re-centering welfare as a social justice issue, we can open up the potential for a discourse of inclusion that addresses and promotes the political agency of those at the margins.

### ***Subjectivity and identity in the field***

Recalling my discussion of methodology from chapter two, I will briefly go over the complexity and importance of researching identity and subjectivity for my project. While identity, subjectivity and agency are difficult to investigate at a theoretical level, they are even more complex when taken into the field (England, 2006; Nelson, 2000). This involves a balancing act where the researcher must “theorize informants as concrete, critical human beings while examining the material and discursive processes that constitute them as subjects” (Nelson, 2000, 44). Recently, the idea of ‘identity’ has undergone major theoretical shifts, from the idea of a static self to a relational, fluid notion of identity formation (Massey, 2004). As Massey has stated, “we do not have our beings and go out and interact, but to a disputed but none-the-less significant extent our beings, our identities, are constituted in and through those engagements, those practices of interactions” (2004, 5). Within this dissertation I have explored the historical roots of welfare policies and the daily struggles and strategies taken on by those qualified for assistance, it is necessary to critically engage with what this history of exclusion and regulation, what these daily struggles mean to those in poverty. How have these processes been taken up and internalized by those they directly affect? Exploring how the practices and meanings of

being marked as 'poor' and the regulations involved influence the subject formations of recipients is an essential component in understanding poverty processes.

Theories of the subject and subjectivity are incredibly important to feminist geographers in their understanding of the role of discourse and how people produce and make meaning in their lives (Rose, 1995). An increased focus on subjectivity and identity has had a major impact on what feminists study and also how they study it, influencing feminist epistemologies and methodologies (England, 1994). Rejecting the self-knowing, authentic, and centered subject of humanism, many feminist geographers have taken up a post-structuralist approach to subject formation (Brown, 1997). Critiquing the citizen-subject of liberalism, i.e. the unencumbered, independent, heterosexual man, feminist scholars argue that there is no 'master subject' but rather fragmented and de-centered subjectivities (Fraser, 1989; Rose, 1995). This decentered subject emerges from social, political, economic and spatial processes and discourses. Feminists have paid particular attention to the ways in which subjects and identities are socially produced and contested (Brown, 1997) and the ways in which gender, race, class, sexuality and space all influence subject formation (Young, 1990). Influenced by Foucault, feminists contend that subjectivities are contested, multiple and always located within networks of power and knowledge production (Foucault, 1977; Young, 1990). Subjects are not merely the bodies on which power acts but rather are part of systems of meaning and discursive constructions. Critics of Foucault argue that he equates subjectivity with enslavement to individualism and self-identity and some feminist geographers have critiqued this as too grim and passive (Sharp, 1999). Through focusing on ways in which subjects are constructed and produced we can create more emancipatory subject positions.

The work of Judith Butler has added to feminist understandings of subjectivity and identity through her theorization of the performance of identity (Butler, 1990). By introducing the concept of performativity into social theory, Butler sought to illustrate the social construction of gender and to move theory away from the idea of a concrete, *a priori* idea of ‘man’, ‘woman’ or ‘sexuality’ (Brown, 2000). Butler theorizes the subject as desiring attachment to identity categories created by regimes of power (Butler, 1990). The subjects’ need for attachment to an identity makes it vulnerable to subjugation. Identities are constituted through repeated bodily performances (Brown, 2000; Butler, 1990; 1993). Extending from Butler’s idea, performance of identity can be seen in how individuals perform in terms of their membership in a given gender, class, or race. The idea of performance requires an understanding of space in that where the subjectivity is performed affects the meaning of the performance and therefore its influence on subject identity (Sharp, 1999). Butler argues that identities are a “regulatory fiction” forged through the projects and knowledge regimes of those in power that socially sanction the norms and expectations of individuals (Jackson, 1999). For impoverished parents this means being pressured to work even while caring for small children. It also means being relegated to the specific spaces of disinvestment such as inner cities and poor rural areas that maintain their vulnerability to market and social forces (Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, 2008). Critics charge that Butler leaves us with a somewhat negative and stagnant view of subjectivity, arguing that there can be non-subordinating forms of subject formation (Allen, 2006).

In the quest to understand the subject we come to the idea of identity. Identity is how we see ourselves, the subject. Identity is influenced by the practices and meanings we encounter in everyday life. Feminist scholars have moved away from essentialist notions of a fixed identity to framing identities as culturally constructed and changing across time and place (Brown, 1997).

Like the subject, feminist geographers contend that identities are always embroiled in power relations. Identities, as social constructs, are embodied by social relations such as class, gender, race and sexuality (Young, 1990). Because of this, identity is an important site of politics in that it is a place of contestation of material and discursive conditions (Bondi, 2005). Importantly for this chapter, poststructural theory argues that identity is often constructed in terms of difference or what it is not. This ‘othering’ is directly related to power in that naming what identities are accepted and what are marked as ‘other’ is a form of social categorization and marginalization (Lawson, 2012). In understanding the ways in which welfare recipients identify, it is also important to acknowledge the role of space in creating identity and difference. In this chapter I will focus on the bodies of welfare recipients as well as physical spaces such as the home and welfare office as important sites of identity and subject formation.

Having briefly investigated the ways in which feminists view subjectivity and identity, here I turn toward how these ideas were operationalized in my fieldwork. Examining experiences of the safety net in the subject formation of those who utilize and reject safety net programs is a concept that is difficult to pin down. Most people are not used to articulating ideas such as identity, agency and subject formation. In chapter two I examined the feminist methodological stance that all interviews are performances for both the interviewer and interviewee (England, 1994). While I attempted to construct a space where my interview contacts felt comfortable expressing their experiences on safety net programs, I also understood that because of power dynamics and high stakes on both sides, I would be gathering data that was already interpreted by the research subjects and further interpreted by my own positionality. In navigating this space of ‘betweenness’, I knew I could not create conditions that would lead to some ‘authentic’ experience or ‘truth’ because this is a false goal (Code, 1995; England, 1994;

Katz, 1992). Rather, I sought to temper some of the anxiety of the research encounter while also encouraging the interview subjects and myself to think through complex ideas.

I was interviewing people whose very survival was based on how they answered questions to caseworkers and other personnel who would then determine if they received SNAP, TANF or funds to allow them to heat their apartment over the winter. They were used to editing themselves, crafting answers that only provided the necessary information. One person I interviewed stated, “She (the caseworker) is not your friend, not your therapist. She wants to make sure you aren’t cheating. The office is not a place to disclose”. Most respondents described a persona they took on in the office or with a caseworker, as that of an eager, optimistic team player, even a sycophant. The goal was to not raise eyebrows, not draw attention to themselves and appear to be on board. These strategies I saw from my interviewees were extremely telling in and of themselves, but I needed more. I needed to be able to gain a modicum of trust from a population taught not to trust. To this end I developed a few strategies to put the interviewee at ease and tease out the influence of welfare policy and practices on the subject formation of those in need.

I conducted my interviews in spaces and places that were familiar to those I was interviewing, mainly fast-food restaurants that they suggested. I also picked out private areas in the back of the restaurant or in a secluded booth. In order to facilitate an open dialogue, I sought out a conversational mode of interview where I put the recorder and my questions to the side of the table and shared my own experiences while also asking questions. I often began this part of the interview with a friendly question about the interviewee’s children or family. When people asked me about children I told them I was engaged and couldn’t wait to have my own children. While this was honest, I also realized that it made me seem more approachable and led to some

really wonderful anecdotes and advice from the interviewees about their first loves or raising their children. I left most of the questions open-ended and let people change the path of the conversation or bring up issues they were interested in discussing. Most of all, I listened. This way I could better examine the meanings people attach to their daily lives and experiences (Nelson, 2000).

Although I employed these ‘best practices’, I still encountered barriers to answering my research questions. These small gestures, of course, did not mitigate the power relations that are always a part of the research encounter (Wolf, 1996). As previously mentioned and illustrated in the table below, the racial demographic of my research sample was heavily African American. As a white person living in a racial state, this changed the research dynamic, particularly when trying to discuss race and racism. Most of my interviews took place in neighborhoods that were predominantly African American. As I discussed in chapter two, a white woman sitting with a recorder and talking to a person of color raised suspicions from many people at the interview site who believed that my interview subject was either in trouble or ‘being a snitch’. This reaction occurred in both Seattle and Kansas City. In addition, when I would ask questions that attempted to understand if there were racial differences in the experiences with the safety net, the answers from African Americans seemed edited and they were quick to change the subject. I cannot be sure if this was because of power dynamics based on race but it was clear that there was racial component that influenced my interviews. Despite these limitations, I was able to elicit strong and telling responses from many interviewees that I will detail in the next two sections.

**Table 5: Self-Identified Gender and Race of Research Participants**

	<b>Jackson County, MO (38 interview subjects)</b>	<b>King County, WA (34 Interview Subjects)</b>
<b>Women</b>	32	32

<b>Men</b>	6	2
<b>African American</b>	29	27
<b>White</b>	6	4
<b>Latino/a</b>	2	1
<b>Other</b>	1	0

### ***Worker-citizens and the spaces of exclusion***

A declining percentage of leavers report exiting welfare due to work and a growing percentage report leaving for reasons likely related to welfare rules  
TANF Caseload Composition and Leavers Synthesis Report, 2007.

When you ask questions about identity and subjectivity, in many ways you are asking questions about agency and the places where people feel they belong or are excluded. Citizenship in the U.S. and many countries is tied to the perceived contribution that you make to a society (England, 2008; Tronto, 2001). In most liberal western political theory the citizen has been conceived as a white, heterosexual, property-owning male who makes contributions through work in the public sphere (England, 2008; Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Kittay, 1999; Schram, 2000; Sparke, 2005). This particularly embodied citizen is also considered to be autonomous, rational, and equal to other citizens (Kofman, 2008). In this dominant notion of citizenship, the citizen acts out his rights and obligations in the public sphere through such political activities as voting. Based on property ownership, women, the poor and many people of color were kept from full citizenship through *de jure* and *de facto* regulations until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As time has passed, however, property ownership has been replaced with ‘work’ as a prerequisite for citizenship (Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Tronto, 2001). Called the ‘worker-citizen

model', this connection between public sector labor and contribution to society was solidified through the creation of safety net policies in the 1930s aimed at bolstering a familial ideal of the breadwinning father and the caregiving mother (Tronto, 2001). Women who worked and men who could not earn a wage that 'allowed' their wives to stay at home were marginalized under this ideal. Because the work of women, the poor and people of color were not valued or even recognized, they were again considered non-contributory and excluded from full-citizenship (England, 2008; Schram, 2000). People's 'selves' or identities were closely connected to their work and therefore tied to their feelings of citizenship and inclusion in American society. They were also shaped by the spaces in which they inhabit and where they feel excluded.

The rise of neoliberal economic restructuring, however, has intensified the relationship between work and identity in ways that favor the most powerful. Neoliberal policies have rolled back safety net programs and greatly changed the individual's relationship to the state (Harvey, 2003; Peck, 2001; Schram, 2000; 2006; Sparke, 2005). These changes have important implications for subject formation. As argued by Sanford Schram, subject formation has been reinscribed under neoliberalism with a more explicit focus on the role of economics in identity (2000). As illustrated by policies such as welfare reform and its attendant workfare programs, current mainstream notions of citizenship are not just concerned with the individual as a rational actor in regards to the state, civil society, and other citizens but also the individual in relation to the market (England and Ward, 2007; Harvey, 2003; Peck, 2001; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Sparke, 2005). The rollback of government programs has worked in tandem with the neoliberal ideology that the free market will address inequality and fulfill the needs of all Americans (Tronto, 2001).

Neoliberal subjectivities provide one way of understanding the identity formation of low income parents who encounter safety net programs. While I have explained theorizations of

neoliberalism and its influence on welfare programs and waged labor markets in previous chapters, here I will examine how this form of governance creates particular subjectivities centered on the ‘worker-citizen’. I utilize the concept of neoliberalism to mean “a specific cultural project and set of hegemonic discourses-or regime of knowledge- that constructs subjects and spaces” (Bonds, 2008, 52). Neoliberal shifts are both material and discursive in that they prescribe specific policies (i.e. workfare) while simultaneously reframing work as the best way to illustrate being a ‘good’ parent. Neoliberal rationalities and neoliberal practices of government exercise the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, where government is not limited to power from the state but also includes a diverse network of disciplinary approaches such as using the self-discipline, technologies and multiple other institutions in society (Foucault, 1991; Mitchell, 2006; Rose, 1999; Sparke, 2005). In this way power is diffuse and de-centered and self-government plays a larger role.

Neoliberal governmentality, as a knowledge/power regime, is associated with particular subject formations and codes of conduct based on liberal ideas of self-hood (Bondi, 2005; Brown, 1997; Larner, 2000; Mitchell, 2006). Neoliberal governmentality works through “installing a concept of the human subject as an autonomous, individualized, self-directing, decision-making agent at the heart of policy-making” (Bondi, 2005, 106). As an economic, political and social project, neoliberalism relies on a self-governing for both the government and its citizens in order to seek out profits and foster reliance on the market. According to this logic, empowerment comes from being self-reliant and from interacting with the market through employment and consumption. This conceptualization of the subject puts low-income families and communities in direct competition with one another for scarce resources. Further, it vilifies and isolates those who are in need by labeling them as ‘dependent’ while ignoring the very real networks of

dependency we have in our society (Tronto, 2001). The care work and building community are placed at the margins of the neoliberal subjectivities.

This construction of 'individuals' is, of course, not gender and race neutral but rather encoded through race, class and gender dynamics (Bonds, 2009). A large part of the self-governing of welfare recipients emerges from the very real work done through the discourse of the 'welfare mother' or the 'welfare queen', even as a major aspect of neoliberal governance advertises itself as a gender and race neutral project. In other words, we are all equal in the eyes of the free market and hard work, not gender, race or other forms of privilege, matter the most in becoming self-reliant. This, however, ignores the gendered and racialized historical and current rhetoric that has been used to justify the regulation and surveillance of welfare recipients. Neoliberal discourse and policies have constructed the poor as lazy, criminal and needing supervision. In order to be deemed deserving and entitled, however, the poor must submit to this regulation as well as self-govern in ways that promote market fundamentalism. Through gaining employment and getting off welfare, the poor can participate in their own self-governance rather than submitting to subordination (Bondi, 2005). Employment is seen as a universal good while staying home caring for children is labeled as 'laziness'. That this freedom also benefits the wealthiest and most powerful while undermining care work is a carefully concealed part of the narrative.

The production of neoliberal subjectivity and the marginalization of care work go hand in hand are reproduced both through welfare discourse at large and in specific the interactions between recipient and caseworker. The vast majority of those I interviewed for this research were mothers and fathers. For each person I interviewed, taking on welfare was directly connected to their caregiving responsibilities. In other words, the main catalyst for entering the

rolls was having a new child in the context of a society without well supported maternity leave and childcare (England, 1996). This was true for people that were on welfare for the first time and for those that had entered and exited more than once. Most of the people I interviewed were working when they or their partner became pregnant but they realized immediately that the job would not be enough to support their family. It was not just that their jobs did not pay a living wage. Their jobs often did not offer benefits such as paid maternal/paternal leave, affordable health care or on-site childcare. Their jobs treated them as if they were independent wage earners, not as mothers, fathers, and caregivers (England, 1996; Kittay, 1999; Schram, 2000).

So, although care-giving was the catalyst for many to apply for welfare, once you walk through the door, the agenda revolves around finding a job. The promotion of the neoliberal worker-citizen goes beyond just ideology to actual policies and practices that greatly influence the caseworker-client dynamic. (Morgen, Acker and Weigt, 2010). The process of finding a job often begins with an “individual responsibility plan” sometimes called an “employment development plan” or other similar contract that outlined the responsibilities of the recipient to find work in a timely manner (Congressional Research Service Report, 2012). While the idea of a contract alludes to the idea of negotiation, there is a strong power dynamic that shapes the roles between those who develop and those who sign and are obliged to fulfill the contract. One welfare recipient told me that her “individual responsibility plan” had already been filled out by the caseworker prior to her appointment, making her feel like she was just a number and that the worker wasn’t listening to her needs. She said, “I think she just had a pile of them, already filled out. This isn’t Russia or nothing. Plus, I have work experience. I don’t want any ol’ job” (Personal interview, 2010). The pressure to get a job in today’s neoliberal culture means that the

quality of the employment and the worker themselves are not prioritized. What is paramount is finding any job or facing consequences.

In many situations, the caseworker writes the contract and tells the recipients what they have to do to ‘comply’. This can include applying for a certain amount of jobs per week or month as well as attending job-readiness and life-skills classes. Below is an example of the language from a sample individual responsibility plan from the WorkFirst program in Washington State:

I agree to report in person as directed by my job search counselor and sign in each day to verify my attendance. I will attend workshops, job clubs, hiring events, and other activities as directed by my job search counselor.

I will contact employers each week as directed by my job search counselor. I will follow through on job leads I get from my job search counselor and I will accept a job if offered.

I have adequate childcare and transportation has been addressed.

If I cannot attend as directed, I will call the number listed above on the same day and explain why I cannot come in.

I understand that if I do not call in on the same day, it will be considered an unexcused absence and that three unexcused absences in a month may result in sanction.

The language in the above plan stresses both work and discipline. For example, recipients agree to “accept a job if offered” without the freedom to negotiate for a job that might offer benefits or otherwise be more desirable. Through actions such as agreeing to “sign in each day” and “call in on the same day” recipients acquiesce personal privacy and are being conditioned by the policy to accept regulation or be punished.

If TANF recipients do not comply, they face sanctions and potential termination of their benefits (Morgen, Acker and Weigt, 2010). The threat of sanctions and their actual implementation loomed large in the interviews I conducted. Sanctions can range from a partial reduction of the grant to a lifetime ban from TANF and the majority deal with work compliance. There is also significant geographic variability in the use of sanctions from places such as Texas

which enacts a full family sanction after the first strike resulting in 21% of families being sanctioned to states such as Iowa which have less strict policies and report 0% of its caseload under sanction (Congressional Research Service Policy Brief, 2012). While national TANF reporting shows that full-benefit sanctions only affect about 1% of the overall caseload, almost every person I interviewed had experienced some form of sanction that resulted in a cut to their grant. Supporting national level data, the majority of these were work-related sanctions resulting from non-compliance (as opposed to other rules such as family cap policies or drug use). These included things such as missing a meeting, not working the full 30-40 hours a week, or not reporting their hours and activities to a caseworker. One woman I interviewed in Seattle, now on disability, discussed people in her neighborhood who were navigating the TANF employment process stating, “the state is sanctioning these parents for not getting jobs where there’s no jobs and there’s no childcare, they’re sanctioned for that” (Personal interview, 2009). While many people did in fact face sanctions, it was also the threat of sanctions that influenced the behavior of the recipients I interviewed (Soss, Fording and Schram, 2011; Watkins, 1993). In this way, people self-governed by following rules that they felt invaded their privacy or were condescending because they needed the TANF check to survive.

The culture of work-enforcement prods clients into work even when they may not be ready. This is highly stressful for mothers (and fathers) who are already under the stress of caring for children under precarious economic conditions. Many people in my study admitted to feeling intimidated and timid around their caseworkers if they felt they were unable to take on employment. For example, one woman I interviewed named Stella was 8 months pregnant when she walked into a Seattle office with 2 small children in tow:

They said the application should go through within ten days and for me it was a month and a half. Then, as soon as I was approved I was asked to do a job

search right away. I guess I was a little angry and I asked why, if I was just going to have to quit the job in a month or so. The caseworker asked me how I planned to care for my children if I didn't have a job. Then she softened a bit and said that it's better to have a job and work as much through the pregnancy as possible and as soon afterward as possible. She said it was good for me too. I had gone through so much already to get that (TANF) that I didn't want to mess with it. I got a job a little over a month after having my baby. I didn't want to but it was for the best, I guess. (Stella, Personal interview, 2009).

This example illustrates the prominence of the worker-citizen model and its attendant assumptions about the deservingness of applicants. This is further complicated by Stella's race (she was African American) because, as shown in Chapter Four, race was an important factor in whether recipients were pressured to find employment. Recipients who would like to stay at home with their children face stigma, pressure and in some cases financial sanctions for 'non-compliance' or not applying for jobs. This example also highlights the discourse of the value of work even when faced with significant care obligations. While the woman in the above example had some misgivings, she also felt getting a job was "for the best" and that if she did not follow the regulations she would lose the benefits that she had invested time and money to receive. This form of governance works at both the level of the caseworker and the client; the client self-governs by taking on employment in order to fulfill the expectations of her given by the caseworker and society.

### *'Teaching' self-sufficiency*

Caseworkers participation in the subject formation of welfare recipients is part of a larger ideology coming from federal and state welfare policies. In my interviews with caseworkers and documented in other forms of research we see that post-welfare reform, the jobs of caseworkers has shifted from providing aid to finding work for recipients (see also Morgen, Acker, and Weigt, 2010 and Watkins-Hayes, 2009). This is stressed from the top down, and great pressure is placed on retaining higher levels of work participation. One recipient, when discussing the

caseworkers in her office stated, “they have to be hard...hard-lined. If they don’t they get in trouble” (Nora, Personal interview 2009). The neoliberal worker model puts caseworkers in a complicated position as many are either not qualified as job specialists or are limited by the job conditions in the local political economy. As one caseworker in Kansas City said:

Between you and me, I’m not totally sure where I am supposed to be sending these people for jobs. We have some contacts, for example with the stadiums (Kansas City sports teams). But those are temporary. People come in here expecting me to have a career waiting for them. We don’t. We just don’t. I’m not saying it’s hopeless at all, but it’s difficult. (Personal interview, 2010).

Here we see that while a work-first approach may be the ‘bottom line’ at welfare offices today, enforcing these policies is difficult. Caseworkers, however, found that even in situations where they could not secure jobs for clients, they could help people become ‘more responsible’. As one caseworker stated:

In many scenarios, they can’t get a job right away. So, when I do see them I try to teach them the basics...how to take care of themselves. Some of these people really, actually don’t know how (Personal Interview, 2010).

The culture of work enforcement is clearly not a neutral discourse that simply wants to ‘empower’ recipients. The paternalistic tone of the caseworker here is echoed strongly throughout welfare policy and discourse, heard from politicians, in the media and in the welfare office (Soss, Fording, and Schram, 2011). The neoliberal subject is constructed as able, independent, and competent. By contrast, the welfare mother is positioned as unable to care for herself and her children, and in need of management and supervision from the state and other members of society. The discursive and material effects of neoliberal subject formation are made clear through the culture of work-enforcement and regulation.

Another example of the disciplinary structure of TANF comes from the relatively new enactment of drug testing applicants before they can receive benefits. Although politicians and

applying for TANF or SNAP. The act also authorized states to randomly drug test recipients and to sanction anyone who tested positive for drugs while on TANF. Today, drug testing has expanded to requiring a test at the time of application with, in many states, the applicant themselves paying for the drug test and being reimbursed for the money once they pass the test. As of 2012, 19 states required testing of either applicants or recipients. Currently, however, legislators from 31 states have proposed 82 bills that would test recipients or applicants and there have also been recent bills in the House and Senate (ASPE Issue Brief, 2011).

While the conditions of being tested (whether randomly or based on suspicion) and the effects of testing positive vary from case to case, the arguments for drug testing are quite similar across states. In most scenarios, legislators cite drug testing as a way to make sure that limited resources (for TANF) go to populations that are worthy of the grant and that tax-dollars are not paying for people to use drugs at the detriment to their families and communities (ASPE Issue Brief, 2011). For example, repeating a popular sentiment when it comes to drug testing, Kansas house speaker Ray Merrick, in arguing for tests for recipients stated, “We need to tighten it down. If I’m giving you something, I ought to have something in return”. What is being implied in this statement is that taxpayers and those who ‘contribute’ to society should only have to pay for the most deserving of the poor, i.e. those without drug use or other mental and physical barriers. Another reason cited for drug testing is to deter people from applying for TANF if they are using drugs. This will cut down those who are applying to TANF by scaring away people who fear they may fail a drug test. Indeed, this sort of subtle form of letting people decide not to apply on their own was listed as a ‘positive’ in many state debates about including drug use rules for TANF. Most of the debates did not counter that this might also prevent parents with serious addiction issues from getting the help they need. A third reason is to ‘protect’ communities and

families from drug use and identify those on the rolls who use illegal drugs so they can be diverted to treatment programs. While this was the most altruistic of the arguments for randomly testing TANF recipients, it ignores the real state of the safety net in which there is precious few resources for drug and alcohol treatment and that most states have not yet set up official programs for those who do fail the tests. Each of these rationales for drug testing is steeped in a paternalistic language inherent in the discourse of poverty management and governance. Welfare recipients are positioned as the undisciplined, irrational mothers that need to be taught and tamed by welfare rules. They are being protected from themselves.

Given the rapid increase in proposals for drug testing TANF recipients you would think that substance abuse among recipients must be a major problem. In reality, there is significant variation in studies quantifying the use of drugs among recipients. In general though, most studies have concluded that substance abuse for welfare recipients ranges from mirroring the greater American population (2-4%) to being slightly higher (10%) when alcohol use or prescription medication is also included as a 'substance'. The relationship between substance abuse and poverty is complex and drug testing legislation does not prioritize finding treatment but rather keeping those who use drugs off the rolls. Because of this, there have been many critics of drug testing TANF recipients and some state laws (such as in Florida) are currently in the courts for invasion of privacy (ASPE Issue Brief, 2011). Despite critiques, drug tests are gaining and not losing momentum and are now being applied more widely to other programs such as SNAP and unemployment benefits. Here we see both the neoliberal and a raced, gendered and classed paternalism coming together to govern impoverished bodies. Simply by needing welfare, the poor are considered undisciplined, immoral, suspect and needing reform.

This suspicion and the need to regulate their behavior guide drug testing rules. Recipients are left with little choice if they want to continue receiving much needed benefits.

I discussed this lack of agency in an interview with an advocate who worked for a non-profit aimed at helping TANF mothers become ‘self-sufficient’. Mary was an African American mother from Kansas City who had gone through the AFDC and TANF programs. As this was my third interview with her, I was more candid and asked her if she felt the recently passed drug testing rules in Missouri constituted an invasion of privacy:

What do you think I think? And what I think doesn’t matter anyway. It’s just the way it is. If they want the money, they can do the test. If they don’t want to do it they don’t get anything. I tell them you can either do what they want and try to make something of yourself or just be indignant. If they want the check they don’t have a choice  
(Mary, TANF advocate, Jackson County, Missouri, 2011).

The response here from an ‘advocate’ for welfare recipients raises a number of questions about the repercussions of the regulatory neoliberal project and the subjects it helps to create. On the one hand neoliberal discourse positions employment and self-sufficiency as the routes to empowerment and personal freedom. On the other hand, those subjects at the bottom of the race/gender/class hierarchy are punished for questioning this discourse and identifying with other subject positions such as that of a mother or a responsible citizen. This lack of control and choice and how it affects the recipients themselves will be taken up in the next section.

Drug testing, work-enforcement, and the devaluation of care labor are just a few examples of the regulatory project of neoliberal poverty management and how it occurs in specific places such as encounters at the welfare office. In this section I explored how poverty policies and the knowledge regimes that influence them create particular subjects. Neoliberal regulation seems to reinstate older tropes of villainizing the poor that have their roots in previous centuries, from the ‘Poor Laws’ in England to Mothers’ Pensions in the U.S. The

power/knowledge regime associated with neoliberal governmentality has led to particular subject formations for those in poverty premised on specific ideas about the value of work, self-sufficiency and personal responsibility (Bondi, 2005). I examined the construction of the worker-citizen and how this plays out in the welfare office and in the relationship between client and caseworker. I analyzed specific forms of management of the poor (such as drug testing) and how these are part of a larger regulatory system of neoliberalism. In the next section I explore how neoliberal subject formations influence the identities of those in poverty.

*The sites of identity formation*

I *am* a worker and I *do* support myself. (Interview respondent, personal interview, 2010).

I walked into the welfare office and they treated me like a piece of crap. What did I do? I got poor? But my husband lost his job, I have no job, we've been looking for ten months! We've gone to every interview! But it's still my fault. That's what I have to live down (Interview respondent, personal interview, 2009).

In this section, I ask how the forces and discourses around neoliberalism, dependency, and deservingness are taken up by those in safety net programs and by those who intentionally reject such programs. These experiences, from the application process to being pushed into the low-wage labor market, shape “the identities and the meaning of politics” for those in need of assistance (Nelson, 2000). Welfare reform, while re-entrenching ideas about race and gender embedded in legislation since mothers' aid, also dramatically reshaped “the relationships between individuals, families, citizens, communities, and states” (Staeheli and Brown, 2003). I will illustrate how cutbacks to the welfare state have influenced the webs of interdependence between family members and changed the relationship between families and private and public safety nets. I also examine the ways in which the discourse around ‘the welfare mother’ influences the internal feelings and decisions of those who chose to seek or reject assistance and

how this differs along the lines of race, gender and place. I investigate the ways in which the current landscape of assistance has shaped people's feelings of belonging and exclusion. In this section I also highlight the role of place in intensifying or ameliorating people's sense of inclusion. These places include each research site but also spaces of encounter and enforcement. The differential spatial power relations include interactions at the office, in the labor market and in the homes of the impoverished.

### *The office*

The welfare office looms large in both research on welfare and in the experiences of people in the system. Interactions at the welfare office have the potential to embolden or marginalize the impoverished; people can leave feeling in control or utterly powerless. During at least two points in the past century, claiming welfare has been considered, at least by some, as an emancipatory political act. Both feminist and civil rights activists argued that far from shameful, welfare receipt was a claim of citizenship and a physical and financial representation of redress of individuals and communities upon the state (Piven and Cloward, 1993; Soss, 1996, 2000). Linda Gordon called welfare a "fundamental type of citizenship participation" through seeking redistributed resources (in Soss, 2000, 6). Welfare as an institution can be seen as a new site of political action, part of an expanding repertoire of political spaces (Brown, 1996; Soss, 2000). For some recipients, the welfare office is the most specific and tangible interaction with the government and their most common form of political participation (Jones, 1990). Today, though, the welfare office is often framed as chaotic, bureaucratic and the site of marginalization, humiliation and coercion for recipients. For these reasons, the welfare office is an essential aspect of understanding the identities of those on public assistance. Here I will analyze the role of the office as an important space of subject formation.

As part of my field research, I conducted several participant observations in King and Jackson County welfare offices. While most of my research involved sitting in the office and observing the interactions and general climate of the space, on one occasion I shadowed a person who was checking in with their case manager. Although in the previous section I touched on caseworker/client relations, here I will expand on the importance of the space of the welfare office and the role of these interactions in shaping the identities of recipients. The office is important not only because it is the ‘face’ of the welfare program but also because it conveys the discourse of poverty management and influences the material conditions of those who walk through the doors. Today, the term ‘welfare office’ may be inaccurate in that the building itself holds many community services such as the Women’s Infant Children Program or mental health services. In conducting my field research I sought to observe and tease out if there were similar or different discourses at work across programs.

The TANF process begins by either seeking out an application online or going to a Department of Social and Health Services office. The first scenario assumes you have access to and experience with the Internet and the latter involves blocking off a large segment of time (sometimes taking all day and a number of visits) to wait at the office and speak with a caseworker. When you walk through the door, you are often first met by one or two security guards and, in Jackson County, you must go through a metal detector. Each time I entered an office I was asked for my credentials and my driver’s license which was carefully inspected. As for my credentials, I stated that I was “doing a school project” to which, in one office in Jackson County, was met with a smirk and the quip, “have fun”. In general, all the offices had a similar lay out, where clients sat in chairs facing the offices where they would eventually talk to a caseworker. In some cases the offices were decorated with posters espousing empowering

slogans such as “you can do it” or “persevere” with scenic landscapes behind the writing. In most cases, however, the only things on the walls were codes of conduct such as no smoking, no weapons, keep voices to a minimum, please wait patiently until we call your number. From the sparse decorations to the furniture, the entire office is minimalist and uninviting.

The climate of the welfare office speaks volumes to the stakes at hand for many of the people waiting. While it is full of families and children the atmosphere during each of my six visits was tense and somber. People did not interact with one another and most did not speak with the other people in their own parties. One woman told me that while she was waiting she began a conversation with another person nearby. After a few minutes, “the woman behind the desk said that if I didn’t stop chit-chatting and fill out those papers they weren’t going to help me at all” (Personal interview, 2009). She said it was incredibly embarrassing to be told not to talk in a public place while her children were right there, watching their mother get scolded. She stated, “I wanted to tell her off. But you can’t”. Despite the focus on efficiency as a stated goal of Washington and Missouri TANF offices, many of the people I observed were there before I arrived and still waiting after my two-three hours of observation. In both sites I witnessed people leaving the office in tears.

Once clients are called upon, they begin an interview process if they are applying for TANF. In my case studies they were either asked to conduct an immediate job search (in Missouri) or asked to consider a diversion program that would provide an immediate lump sum of cash instead of enrolling the family (in Washington). In addition to providing information about paternity, their living situation, their citizenship, and their family members, applicants are required to give proof of their financial circumstances. This involved providing detailed information about their possessions (such as a home or car) and their earnings. For one

interview subject, Molly, this was traumatic. Molly is a multi-racial single mother who worked full-time but was recently moved to part-time because the restaurant she worked at was losing profits. She was on TANF and WIC when her daughter was young but had left after finding full-time employment. Now she was back in the office hoping for some temporary “last resort” help. She had her daughter with her when she entered a case manager’s office and handed over her paper work:

I give her my bank statements, a letter from my property manager about how much I pay in rent, my pay stub, a statement from boss about my tips, all the information about Mike (her daughters father). I mean, I had everything. Then, after we talk about some other stuff, she gets to my financial information. She asks if I have saving and I said no. She asked if that was my only bank account and I said yes. Then, she asked me if I do online banking. I’m not sure where she is going with this so I say, yes. Then she asks me to log into my bank account right in front of her. I just stared at her. It was an invasion of my privacy. But I did it. I did it because I was on the spot and I felt like I had to (Molly, Personal interview, 2009).

Molly said she felt embarrassed that she did not speak up for herself but that the alternative of not receiving benefits was too dire. She said she felt depressed long afterward not at the single act that had occurred but that she had been made to feel like a suspect, a liar and a bad mother. She ended up rejecting the meager assistance offered and taking on a second job. This encounter illustrates the ways in which the welfare office, while ostensibly a site for citizens to claim their economic and social rights, has become a place marginalization and exclusion. Given Molly’s race and gender and class position, these encounters create further inequalities and political voicelessness of the most marginalized populations in the U.S.

Those who do accept assistance continue to come to the office to check in with caseworkers about their work activities or their earnings. Across my interviews recipients stressed that each office was different and that caseworkers and managers varied significantly between sites. Gerry, a white woman in her 50s who had been on both AFDC and TANF said,

“It all depends on the office. For instance, the (blank) office is considered one of the most punitive you can go to in the King County area. They’re all different. They say they are trying to get uniform but they aren’t. It just depends.” Some of my interviewees swore by certain offices and others had preferences of male or female caseworkers (women were often determined to be more hard-lined). In the minds of recipients, where you went and who you got were vital in whether you secured resources. This variability increases the feelings of powerlessness as people learn not to rely on a system but rather to view welfare as chance and random. The neoliberal ideal of ‘local discretion’ here is taken to the extreme at the welfare office where recipients try to gain some control through ‘going to the right place’ or getting the best caseworker.

While the interactions at the welfare office are often considered important to the client, the larger effects on society and political agency are not considered as important. Poverty and its management are framed as social issues or stemming from behavioral problems and the welfare office is positioned as a facility that manages individuals needs. Because of this, welfare claiming is often not considered a pressing part of political agency. As Fraser states, welfare claims are viewed as “private-domestic or personal-familial matters in contradistinction to political matters” (in Soss, 2000, 7). This happens not only because the welfare office is not considered a traditional political space but also because those that frequent the office are some of the most politically, economically and socially marginalized populations in America. Society views welfare recipients as ‘others’ outside of mainstream citizenship roles and because of this they are controlled through encounters at the welfare office and through poverty regulations that loom large over their activities in their home and communities.

*The spaces of the ‘other’*

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that part of poverty management is the control of the bodies and spaces of ‘poor others’. Measured against the white, middle class spatial imaginary of the orderly suburbs, hegemonic discourse frames welfare recipients as inhabiting the disorderly, crime-filled, and decaying inner city. Their behavior and their spaces need to be controlled to allow elites to maintain access to the privileged spaces of lucrative labor markets, the best schools, and the most prestigious neighborhoods. These differential subjectivities are based on the idea of worker-citizen as an autonomous, self-reliant being. This ideal is culturally constructed based on race, gendered, and classed ideas of who is a productive citizen and who belongs (Bonds, 2009; England, 2008). It is based on white, heterosexual male who is unencumbered by caring responsibilities (Rubin, 2001). As argued in chapter three, neoliberal reforms to the safety net rely on constructions of the poor as “an other”, a group that has created their own poverty and is personally responsible to pull themselves out of it (Schram, 2000). As stated by Bond, “punitive neoliberal initiatives are produced through cultural representations that cast some poor as deserving of state assistance, and some as lazy, criminal and undeserving” (2009, 419). This is done through a number of practices such as social categorizations that distinguish the “poor from the non-poor in ways that justify political economic inequality, institutional arrangements and identities” (Lawson, 2012). These categorizations are often based on racial and ethnic stereotypes about the behaviors of those in need. Through categorizing specific populations as poor and by positioning the behaviors and choices of those in poverty as flawed we can legitimate regulating and excluding those below the poverty line.

An example of this can be seen through a comparison of Social Security vs. TANF. Social Security is considered a contributory program, one in which Americans ‘pay in’ through their tenure as workers and then get the returns upon their retirement. Because it is tied to work

and is contributory, most Americans consider people that receive Social Security a deserving population and the program is fiercely defended by numerous powerful advocacy groups. Social Security keeps 21 million people out of poverty a year, including half the elderly and many disabled Americans. Importantly, its benefits are guaranteed and increase with the rising costs of living, making it a true entitlement. Compare this to TANF, which as this dissertation has argued, is seen as a non-contributory program and therefore its recipients are viewed as the undeserving poor. TANF recipients are not constructed as workers or as contributing members of society, despite the fact that many have been lifetime workers and parents. TANF block grant spending has been locked since 1995 at 16.6 billion dollars total for all states, meaning that the real value of a welfare check has decreased by 30% (CBPP, 2012). In no state will a TANF check lift a family out of poverty. The reason this matters is that categorizing people as poor and then further categorizing some as deserving and undeserving greatly influences their material opportunities and political voice which leads to identity differences. The spaces and identities associated with welfare receipt are the least valued and the most controlled.

This control is in part accomplished through knowledge regimes or “authoritative poverty knowledge” that frames poverty through the discourse of free market ideology and as a “self-contained problem in need of management and intervention” (Lawson, 2012). Through authoritative poverty knowledge and the policies it informs, ‘the poor’ have been constructed as a concrete group that are flawed or unable to compete in the modern era (Bonds, 2009; Lawson, 2012; O’Connor, 2001; Watkins, 1993). Authoritative, mainstream poverty analyses focus heavily on quantitative benchmarks such as the work participation rate or the federal poverty level. This reinscribes poverty as a separate category, a quantification rather than a relational social, political and economic process (Goode and Maskovsky, 2001). Further, these

benchmarks reinforce neoliberal conceptualizations of work and productivity. Through the lens of authoritative poverty those in need of assistance are deemed productive citizens when they hit certain benchmarks, such as obtaining employment or leaving public aid. This separates poor people from social relations such as race, class, gender, citizenship status, sexuality and other identity markers (Lawson, 2012).

The work participation rate is one particular example that illustrates the limits to authoritative poverty knowledge. As addressed in the previous chapter, the federally mandated work participation rate for TANF requires that states have 50% of their single parent caseload working for 30 hours or more a week. For two-parent families, the percentage of the caseload is 90% and they must be working 35 hours a week. People who receive TANF must work as soon as they are able or within 24 months, whichever comes first. In 2005, the Budget Deficit Reduction Act made the WPR more strict by narrowing the definitions of work activities, counting more groups of individuals in the states' participation calculations (or who is qualified to work), and imposing new penalties for noncompliance with work verification plans (Welfare Rules Database, 2010). There has been incredible geographic variation in how states have reacted to the WPR and the changes due to the Budget Deficit Reduction Act. Mississippi has achieved one of the highest TANF work participation rates despite its population facing serious economic hardships including a higher than average unemployment rate. Mississippi has been accused of doing this through only allowing certain populations onto their TANF rolls including the most educated and people with the fewest work barriers (CBPP, 2012). This allows them to keep their WPR high and meet federal benchmarks while not addressing the social processes that cause the state to have the highest poverty rates in the country. This is not to pick on Mississippi per se, rather I am highlighting how the focus on quantitative targets for measuring poverty

obscures an analysis of the reasons people become poor and therefore do not offer effective solutions.

Neoliberal processes have constructed the poor as ‘other’ and this framing allows for the management of the poor through punitive welfare policies and increased surveillance of those on assistance. In many ways, the ‘welfare mother’ is the encapsulation of the poor as ‘other’. Very similar to the ‘welfare queen’, the ‘welfare mother’ is framed as the opposite or other of the responsible, free neoliberal subject. She is chained to her dependence on public assistance and unable to help herself. The places she inhabits (such as the welfare office or the inner-city) are managed through not only welfare policies but also social, economic and political processes that work to limit her power to ‘invade’ other spaces held by elites. But what political and economic ‘work’ does this construction do and how does it influence the identities of those on public assistance? What does the vilification of the welfare mother mean for poverty activism and the agency of the impoverished?

In one of my first interviews in Kansas City, I spoke with a mother who was attempting to enter TANF for the first time. Kayla had been working in the healthcare field and had received a few small promotions over the years. She was now making \$13 an hour, nearly \$6 more than where she had began at the minimum wage. She also was getting extra money from a second informal job she took on whenever her schedule permitted. Her family members helped with watching her children while she was at work. Her older child was doing well, getting good grades and playing sports for the local school team. Kayla herself was in good health. Recently, however, Kayla had given birth to her second child. Her job, while she enjoyed it and thought they treated her well, did not offer paid maternity leave so she took sick time to recuperate and spend time with her new baby. She was hoping that TANF would allow her to go to part-time at

her work and provide access to health-care for herself and her children. Without TANF, health care costs would eat up over  $\frac{1}{4}$  of her paycheck each month. She also wanted to try to move to a bigger apartment so that she could have a nursery. She counted herself lucky that so far she had not needed to pay for childcare.

While she held one child and the other drew on scratch paper with crayons, Kayla recounted her experience applying for TANF. She went into her appointment feeling she had nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of. TANF was meant for women like her, she had thought. Women who needed a little help to help themselves. She thought of herself as responsible, a good mother, a hard worker. While she was aware that the stereotype of a ‘welfare queen’ existed, she did not feel that it applied to her or to the other handfuls of women she had met throughout her life who utilized assistance. She came to the appointment with all the paperwork and identification that was asked of her and she assumed that while the meeting might not be fast (she figured it’d be like taking her daughter to the doctor) it would be formulaic and straightforward. When she met with her caseworker, however, the tone was quite different than she expected. Almost immediately, the caseworker wanted to know about the father of her newborn. “So, this is not the same man as with your other child?” the caseworker asked. Then the conversation turned toward employment. When Kayla admitted that she wanted to voluntarily go back to part-time work so that she could spend more hours at home with her two children, the caseworker scoffed. “We don’t do that. And, if you can work full-time now you should do it”. After about twenty more minutes of discussing jobs, Kayla brought up her children again. “I don’t remember what I said, but something like, ‘I have a newborn, I can’t work all day’. The caseworker just looked at me like I had exasperated her. Actually, she gave me a look that said, ‘well, you should have thought of that before!’ After that, the caseworker

had my number. She thought I was a deadbeat”. Kayla stated that she had been “stupid” going into the meeting thinking that she’d be special, that people in the office would just know she was a good person and not a cheat. While Kayla was eventually able to get on TANF, she told that during the experience, she “was treated like a welfare queen. I am *not* a welfare mother.”

In this example we see one way in which welfare recipients may internalize the worker-citizen model and reject the idea of being a welfare mother. This is based largely on how people identify as individuals. In the above example Kayla was not necessarily upset that people who apply for TANF are treated a certain way, she was upset that she was treated like a TANF recipient. This was a major theme in my interviews. All of my interview subjects were aware of the stigma of being on the dole but most of them did not feel that the stereotype applied to them. This was based on their perceptions of their own work ethic, personal values and class position. In many cases, a good deal of the interviews were spent with people explaining that *were* hard-workers or that they really did not want to be on TANF or SNAP but that they had no choice. Over half of my research subjects described themselves as middle or lower middle class and people often identified as having ‘middle class values’. This theme stretched across racial, gender, and geographic lines in that the sentiment was strong in all groups that I interviewed. Although low-income families may not be able to economically or residentially separate themselves from the spaces of the ‘welfare mother’, they are able to separate themselves through their own self-identification. The neoliberal worker-citizen model and its opposing subject formation of the ‘welfare mother’ are incredibly powerful narratives in our society with major material and discursive implications. People do not self-identify as welfare mothers out of self-respect and self-preservation, wanting to align themselves with a subject position that is valued

in our society. These alternative ways of viewing themselves allow for a modicum of dignity and express the complexities of why people turn to welfare.

***Racialized narratives of poverty in King and Jackson Counties***

The disciplinary effects of the neoliberal subject model are not evenly felt or experienced by all people. As argued by Bonds, “the construction of individuals as self-determining and autonomous is, of course, culturally coded by the dynamics of race, class, and gender” (Bonds, 2009, 419). Recipients may experience prejudice and inequalities based on their position in a race, class and gender hierarchy in the United States. The worker-citizen model and the welfare policies it supports purports to be both gender and race neutral, not targeting or benefitting anyone based on identity markers. Neoliberal subject formation, with its focus on the autonomous individual, hides the very real and important gendered and raced consequences (England, 2008). For example, the language of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act spoke of “pregnant individuals” rather than mothers and much data from the Department of Health and Human Services do not break down families by gender (England, 2008). Through culturally and politically neutral language such as ‘personal responsibility’ and ‘individualism’ Americans avoid the broader economic and social processes that lead to inequality and unequal citizen-subjects. The spotlight shines brightly on the individual who is deemed dependent and blamed for his or her own poverty. The language of “personal responsibility allows the cultural biases of welfare to be hidden in plain sight” (Schram, 2000). The neutral worker-citizen model ignores the differences in life trajectories across gender, race, and geography (Morgen, Acker and Weigt, 2010). It also ignores the roles of TANF participants as mothers, fathers and caregivers.

Racial and gender stereotypes are an important part of poverty governance in America and the identity formation of those in the safety net. Punitive welfare policies and diversion from welfare assistance are both greatly influenced by racial, gender and class sentiments that are differently situated across places. For example, my research has found that since the recessions in 2001 and 2008, white people are more likely to join or stay on the rolls than African Americans. As Table 5 shows, since 2000 white people have remained at about 32% of the TANF rolls while African Americans have dropped during this time of economic hardship. This supports the research of Neubeck and Cazenave, which argues that African Americans are more likely than other racial groups to be ‘diverted’ from public assistance and particularly TANF, or are more likely to be pushed off the rolls or sanctioned (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2003; Soss, Fording and Schram, 2011). These and other studies have shown that states with the highest numbers of people of color on the rolls have the most punitive welfare policies (Morgen, Acker and Weigt 2010; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Schram 2006). African Americans are more likely to face sanctions and other regulations such as drug testing. So, when people of color are admitted to public assistance they are more likely to face punitive and paternalistic attitudes and rules than their white counterparts (Soss, Fording and Schram, 2011). Despite the myth of a welfare and employment meritocracy, the race, gender and geography of recipients have material consequences for their safety net experiences.

My research also found patterns among the responses to particular interview questions concerning the worker-citizen model along racial and gender lines. During interviews I specifically asked respondents if they felt they had been pressured to find employment even if they were not ready. Feeling not ready could include being pregnant, believing they lacked necessary skills, or that they needed physical or mental health counseling, for example. While

the majority of these respondents were specifically discussing the TANF program, in a few cases with men in Jackson and King Counties their experience was in being diverted from applying for disability benefits and toward work. While in many cases the interviewees expanded on their answers at length here I provide a snapshot. There were also differentiations between my two research sites as the following tables show:

**Table 5:** Interview question: *Did you ever feel that you were pressured into working when you were not ready/unprepared?*

<b>Jackson County, MO (38 interview subjects)</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Maybe and/or a little bit.</b>	<b>I don't know/no opinion</b>
<b>Women</b>	21	2	3	6
<b>Men</b>	4	0	2	0
<b>African American</b>	22	2	4	1
<b>White</b>	2	0	0	4
<b>Latino/a</b>	1	0	1	0
<b>Other</b>	0	0	0	1

**Table 6:** Interview question: *Did you ever feel that you were pressured into working when you were not ready/unprepared?*

<b>King County, WA (34 Interview Subjects)</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Maybe and/or a little bit.</b>	<b>I don't know/no opinion</b>
<b>Women</b>	24	3	4	2
<b>Men</b>	1	1	0	0
<b>African American</b>	23	1	4	1
<b>White</b>	2	2	0	0
<b>Latino/a</b>	1	0	0	0

An alarming number of people I interviewed felt they had been pressured to work when they were not ready, but this was especially prevalent for African Americans. While the bottom line of welfare offices is “any job is better than no job” this was not true across the board. My sample of white and Latino races were rather small so it is more difficult to draw conclusions from this sample. But, given that 22 out of 24 African Americans in Jackson County and 23 out of 24 in King County felt they were pressured to work when they were not ready illustrates that the culture of work enforcement is exceptionally strong and closely applied to African American recipients. During interviews, African Americans were also more likely to accept that they had to work even if they had small children but they just wanted more preparation.

Further, in my interviews, subjects from Jackson County expressed greater pressure to work than their King County counterparts. They were more likely to articulate fear of sanctions for non-compliance and intimidation from caseworkers in accepting any job. While in the previous chapter I showed that research subjects in both research sites felt they had faced discrimination while on the job, we see here that there are important differences across sites in terms of pressure to work. In interpret in terms of historical labor market segmentation that has been and is currently more pronounced in the Jackson County area than in King County. For over 100 years, Jackson County has had a sizable African American population which has faced severe job segregation and segmentation. Part of the local narrative of race in Kansas City includes African Americans, and in particular African American women, working when their white counterparts were at home. While this is true in Seattle as well, because the African American population in King County is smaller, there was perhaps less of a chance for these racialized assumptions to take hold in place. These questions are a very specific example of how locally situated ideas about race and gender play out in welfare policies and influence the

identities of low-income women. The historical position of black women as workers in Jackson County may indeed lead to pressure from case workers to make them work. The job site is a ‘natural’ place for women of color in Jackson County. Without a comparison between the two case studies I would not be able to tease out these differences that have important effects for the material conditions and discursive framings of welfare recipients today.

In addition to recipient experiences in their relationships with caseworkers in the welfare office, the job site also proved to be an important place where recipients had differential experiences based on race. Being at the bottom of intersections of race, class and gender is often a major reason why people need assistance in the first place. They take these identity markers with them to their job and the workplace may reinforce their marginalization. Almost every single person of color I spoke with stated that they felt they had been discriminated against on the job. The forms of discrimination described were diverse but in over half the situations they culminated with the interviewee quitting their job. Again, we see differences, across my case studies. Most people who eventually left their job because of discrimination were respondents from Jackson County. They were also the respondents who were more likely to be working in predominantly male occupations such as manufacturing and waste management. These two occupations (as described in the previous chapter) together made up the largest segments of employment in my Jackson County research sample. They stated that while they enjoyed the work, they did feel that the men, and in particular white men, stigmatized and belittled them and this caused them to eventually quit. In King County, on the other hand, most of my research subjects were employed in the predominately female and often more racially diverse care sector. While the subjects had different feelings toward the actual employment, only one reported quitting her job because of discrimination. This illustrates that the local labor markets and the

jobs offered to welfare recipients must be scrutinized not just in terms of availability but also in terms of the racial and gender order of that sector. If there are jobs but the occupants of them are hostile toward welfare recipients than it not only effects the economic position of recipients but also their feelings of inclusion in the workplace. An in-depth spatial comparison allows us to see these distinctions that would be unclear otherwise.

Gender is also incredibly important when understanding the experiences of low income families as they navigate the safety net. In fact, “one of the most remarkable, but least remarked on, facets of welfare restructuring is that most of the people affected by or involved in the everyday work of welfare are women” (Morgen, Acker and Weigt, 2010, 114). And, if you zoom out beyond TANF, you’ll find that men are also specifically disciplined and regulated in safety net programs based on the model of male breadwinner. For women, however, the neoliberal subjectivity is premised on the assumption that all people have similar care responsibilities. It ignores that people and especially women are responsible for raising small children and that this responsibility is often what brought them to TANF in the first place. This devaluation of care work is most obviously witnessed in the general culture of work enforcement that is the backbone of TANF. Work enforcement was true for people with small children, women who were very pregnant, and people who were seeking to qualify for an exemption because of physical or mental disability. In fact, in 2009, single parents with a child under age six made up almost half (48.5%) of all families included in the Work Participation Rate (WPR) or the number of families with a work-eligible parent who is not able to be disregarded (Congressional Research Service Policy Brief, 2012). In Missouri this number was 62.2% while in Washington 42% of the WPR was made up of single parents with a child under age six. While according to the 2012 Welfare Rules Data Book single parents can be exempt from work while

caring for children while on TANF, the length of exemption and the conditions to qualify vary greatly across states. Ten states offer no exception from work in order to care for small children, 11 states offer 3-6 months, and 24 states allow for a maximum of 12 months exemption from work<sup>6</sup>. In each case, these exemptions carried caveats and further rules. For example, in many cases, states would allow the work exemption for the first child or for only one child and then the mother would have to work during any subsequent pregnancies and births.

Other cases denied work exemptions based on characteristics such as the recipients age (for parents under 25), the child's age (over two years old), or the recipients education (no GED or high school diploma). In addition, while some parents may not be required to work, they are often (in more than half of states) required to complete other forms of program compliance such as the vague 'limited work activities', job-skills training, or 'parenting classes'. This is further evidence of a lack of support provided for low income parents as they attempt to balance care labor with financial stability. The subject role valued and demanded from welfare is one of a worker-citizen, with the logic that once recipients find a job the market will be able to take care of their other needs such as childcare. Not allowing certain individuals (such as younger parents and those with less education) to be exempt from work to care for their children is a blatant example of the regulatory project of welfare in attempting to discipline, supervise and punish those cast as 'poor others'.

The men that I interviewed described a very gendered and 'emasculating' experience while applying for public assistance. Although it is very difficult for non-single fathers to get on TANF, I did interview a handful of men applying for General Assistance, SNAP or forms of disability insurance. One interviewee had applied to GA after being shot in the stomach during

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<sup>6</sup> The other states not mentioned had complex rules for work-related exemptions that could not be easily summed up.

an attempted robbery at an establishment he and his wife were eating. He went three months before they accepted him and when they did, the expectation was that he'd look for a job as soon as possible. During our interview he laughed at what he considered the absurdity of finding a job when he was still having surgeries and in a precarious condition. He said, "They (the caseworker) made me feel like if I didn't get a job I wasn't helping out my family and wouldn't that make me feel bad?". Other men said that as soon as you walked into the meeting with a caseworker they automatically think you are trying to get "something for nothing". As one man who had applied for full disability argued, "It's worse if you are a man. It doesn't matter if you don't even have kids. Why aren't you working? Why can't you work? We are supposed to just take it". For men applying for and on public assistance, the regulatory project manipulates their identity as 'masculine men' who are independent by making them feel weak and shameful for needing help. This prods men into seeking out work even when they have significant physical and mental health barriers.

### *Creating new spaces of political agency*

Neoliberal subject formation and the identities that it influences create a specific path toward 'empowerment' for impoverished parents. In short, it involves getting a job and getting off public assistance in order to attain self-sufficiency. This, according to the discourse, is how people take control of their lives and move up the economic ladder. My research, however, found that the current welfare system seems to do the opposite, leaving people feeling powerless and little better off without assistance than they were on it. In this final section I will theorize how people resist the dichotomous neoliberal subject formations of the worker-citizen and the 'poor other'. I analyze the complexity of rejecting assistance and how people interpret their

decision to avoid the rolls. Finally, I highlight the possibility of alternative interpretations of what it means to be poor in a land of plenty.

Welfare recipients face tough choices as they negotiate the rules and regulations of program compliance. While many do share feelings that can be associated with the self-policing of neoliberal governmentality, they also simultaneously resist these ideas. For example, another aspect of applying for TANF involves identifying paternity and seeking out child support. If women were unmarried women, they were required to name the father of the child in order for their application to be processed. This information would allow the state to garnish wages from the father to repay the TANF loan. Very little, if any, income went directly to the children. Some women admitted to being elusive about the father of their children in order to circumvent this policy. They would not name the father (saying they did not know who he was) so that they could establish informal types of child support that went directly to their kids. This was a common practice. While there would be serious repercussions if they were caught, this form of strategically navigating the welfare rules allowed for them to secure extra money and other necessities for raising their children. In this way, the dynamics of the welfare office makes criminals out of people who are trying to find the best ways to care for their children and feeds into the idea of the ‘promiscuous’ welfare mother. It also, however, illustrates one way in which recipients express agency over their lives.

As stated throughout this dissertation, one of the most surprising findings of my research was that people are not relying on welfare as a major part of assistance. While initially I sought out interview subjects who were currently on TANF, I found that *most* of my research sample had experience with TANF in the past but refused to go back on the rolls. As cited in earlier chapters, today the TANF to poverty ratio or the amount of families who take on TANF that are

eligible is only 27/100 compared to 68/100 in 1996. Today, low income parents parcel together public and private resources to create a patchwork safety net that is geographically and temporally unstable. Federal and state cuts to safety net programs over the past 30 years and the fact that benefits are not tied to inflation or local geographic factors means that the real value of TANF is lower than almost any other time in the history of assistance. The experience in the welfare office and the regulation and management required to be on the rolls has led to a number of families choosing to forgo assistance and make ends meet in other often precarious ways. For example, Renee, a 39 year old mother of two had recently applied for TANF after the birth of her second child. She described the experience thus:

From the moment I applied it was just awful. Humiliating. You aren't treated like a person. And I'm just talking about the caseworkers. They don't believe you. Then they want you to work and they don't care if you're depressed or if you kid is sick. It's do it or leave and we won't chase after you. I applied and I ignored when they called. Unless something really messed up happens, I'll never go back  
(Personal Interview, 2010)

This sentiment was expressed over and over again. But how can we analyze this choice and its broader effects on safety net policy and poverty management? One of the goals of welfare policy was to discourage low income families from ever applying in what is called a “close the front door” strategy. According to the TANF Leavers Study this strategy is very effective and that today's data “show a significant increase in the percentage reporting they left welfare because they do not want or need benefits or benefit receipt involves ‘too much hassle,’ potentially reflecting increased requirements for recipients over time” (2010). In addition, “the marked decline in welfare caseloads over the past decade has been accompanied by declines in the share of eligible families that take up benefits” (2010). The study suggests that future research should study not only TANF recipients but also those who do not take up benefits.

But, given that diverting people from assistance is a stated goal and that this diversion often just means a more direct route to the low wage job market, can this be considered a form of resistance? My conclusion would be yes and no. While rejecting assistance may play into neoliberal governance by lessening the claims on the state, it also gives politically marginalized populations a say in their own lives. Rejecting assistance for many people was an act of defiance and an assertion of their rights and dignity. While at this particular moment it may not lead to more inclusive and kind poverty policies, the idea of “we deserve better” can gain momentum to the point of a cross-class alliance. This gives hope to the future.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter I examine the ways in which poverty knowledge, the political economy, place and social processes together create particular subject positions for those in need of public assistance. While the previous chapters focused on relatively tangible ideas, the history of welfare policy and the discursive and material role of work, this chapter takes up something less concrete but extremely important: identity. In chapters three and four, I argued that throughout history, safety net policies, and in particular welfare, have always regulated and excluded certain populations, particularly women of color and non-citizens (England, 2008; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2003). Today, those who receive welfare are still often subjected to surveillance and monitoring, from providing the social security number and name of a child’s father to reporting work activities at regular intervals. Others are excluded through *de jure* and *de facto* rules such as family cap policies and the informal deferment of aid seekers. These historical and current regulations and exclusions emerge from capitalist processes working in tandem with racist and sexist assumptions about work ethic, dependency, and motherhood (England, 2008; Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Kittay, 1999; Morgan, Acker and Weigt, 2010).

Neoliberal poverty management frames the problem of welfare not in terms of poverty, but in terms of dependency on government benefits. Certain identity positions, specifically that of the neoliberal worker, are legitimated while others, such as the mother or caregiver are ignored and marginalized. Welfare and the idea of an entitled welfare mother is used as a political and discursive tool to construct separations between deserving and undeserving populations of the American public. The promotion of the neoliberal subject and its juxtaposition with the undisciplined, dependent ‘other’ sends a strong message about who belongs and who is excluded from participation and membership in communities and in America as a whole. The debate around the safety net narrowly focuses the reasons for poverty around either the behaviors of the poor or the inability of the poor to access ‘good’ social capital such as education and employment (Lawson, 2012; O’Connor, 2001). The assumptions about what constitutes contributing to society, who is deserving and who is ‘other’ reinforces the power of neoliberal discourse as people seek out employment and reject assistance in order to feel more deserving and dignified. While work and rejecting assistance may improve people’s lives in some respects, these tactics can still be seen as part of a discourse and knowledge regime that legitimates a particular imaginary of who is poor and why while “ignoring social relations of difference and structural inequality that socially produce poverty” (Lawson, 2012, 4). In other words, it does not address the larger issues of poverty and the inequalities and power relations inherent in its management.

Finally, this chapter highlighted the differential power positions of those in poverty with those inhabiting spatial, social and economic privilege. Welfare recipients and those in poverty generally do not have a lot of control over the policies that affect them. Their input is not valued and their experiences not legitimated. The policy makers “do not know what it’s like” but have

the authority to make the rules while the voices of those in poverty are silenced (Morgen, Acker, and Weigt, 2010). The media and politicians speak of those in need as an object, not as a racially, ethnically, geographically and otherwise diverse group who struggle to make ends meet and express their agency with less political voice and economic clout than nearly all other Americans. Unlike the more sympathetic stories about the middle class, those who utilize public assistance are represented in very narrow ways, often as either lacking the skills or the values to succeed in American society. By simply needing help the impoverished are already presumed suspect of a number of personal flaws that need reforming. Responsibility is placed on the shoulders of the impoverished mother or father, while other social, political and economic factors are largely ignored. This greatly influences the identities of those on welfare as they strive to prove they are part of the ambiguous middle class while also screaming that their experiences deserve recognition. Particular spaces construct power relations and constitute identities in the office, in the labor market, at the job site and in each of my case studies. These are each forces of subjectification and influence how recipients take up meaning in the world. They also shape where recipients live, the jobs in which they work, and the political forces they engage with. the media have debated drug testing since the 1980s, it has gained greater momentum in state legislatures over the past five years. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act provided a lifetime ban for all drug related felons, barring them from

## **Chapter VI. Conclusion: Walking the tight rope without a net**

### ***Temporary Aid to Needy Families Today***

In the past twenty years, the state of the American economy has dramatically changed. In the late 1990s, the economy boomed. Many attributed the economic prosperity of this time to a broad neoliberal capitalist agenda of free trade, flexible labor, and market triumphalism. As part of neoliberal economic and political restructuring, the goal of national poverty policy was to end welfare dependency and help the poor become self-sufficient through formal employment. The logic of this approach was that jobs existed but the poor needed an incentive to get them. It was in this economic climate that the United States Congress replaced the welfare program known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). This bipartisan welfare reform bill altered the previous welfare system in two important ways: First, it replaced the cash entitlement program of Aid to Families with Dependent Children with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The new TANF included 60-month lifetime limits for welfare receipt and shifted the language from welfare entitlements to welfare assistance. Second, it further shifted responsibility for administering welfare from the national government to the states. Although federally mandated, through block grants and other conditions, welfare reform gave the states more control over the amount of assistance they provided and the amount of work they required for recipients.

In the four years following the passage of TANF, employment among single mothers increased and the child poverty rate decreased (Teller-Elsberg, Folbre, and Heintz, 2006). At the same time, pressure from national and state governments caused TANF caseloads to decline by two-thirds (Teller-Elsberg, Folbre, and Heintz, 2006). In 2007, however, the United States faced an economic crisis unlike any other in its history. As the recession continued, the national

unemployment level rose from 4% in 2000 to 9.3% in 2010<sup>7</sup>. Unemployment among both single and married women increased and child poverty rates jumped to 21% from 2000<sup>8</sup>. During those same years, the federal food stamp program (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP) doubled to about 40 million recipients in 2010. Medicaid grew 17% since 2007 and now covers a record 50 million Americans (USDA, 2010). Despite the surge in demand for safety net programs, the welfare rolls are at or near their lowest in more than 40 years and recently Congress moved forward on legislation to curb spending on SNAP in the upcoming years (ibid). In addition, although children are the intended recipients of TANF benefits, today only a quarter of children in poverty receive these benefits (“Topics-Welfare” NCCP.org). Policy makers and scholars currently know very little about whether those who leave welfare or are unable to enroll in safety net programs have access to employment or other resources, or the ways in which and why this varies across location. The fact that welfare rolls are so low amidst such high poverty rates raises questions about where and how poor people are surviving.

Further, because over one-third of states set their TANF income limits below the federal poverty level, questions arise as to how those *on the rolls* or on other forms of assistance are able to make ends meet<sup>9</sup>. Under the guidelines of TANF, the federal government allotted money to the states in the form of block grants in order to give the states more flexibility in how they spent their welfare dollars. This structure, however, lends itself to restrictiveness because states can keep the money they do not provide to recipients and use the funds for tax relief or other programs (Piven, 2004). Similarly with other safety net programs such as SNAP and disability insurance, the ways in which states, counties, and public assistance offices decide who gets these

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<sup>7</sup> From the Bureau of Labor Statistics January for both years.

<sup>8</sup> From National Center for Children in Poverty January 2010

<sup>9</sup> What is meant here is that if a recipient is making the most money allowed while on the rolls (which includes benefits and assets) they will still be below the federal poverty limit.

limited funds varies according to local views on need and deservingness. Given these concerns, this research will analyze the implications of the changing economic and political landscape for those who are utilizing public assistance. It will examine the ways in which local political economies and constructions of 'the poor' influence the opportunities, resources, and responses of those who have been on the rolls.

Using the safety net as a framework through which to study these dynamics, this research contributes to geographic and critical poverty studies in a number of ways. This research focuses more broadly on the political economic restructuring beginning with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s and its influence in constructing particular subject positions and material conditions for those in poverty. First, I argue that who is poor and the conditions of poverty are profoundly spatial processes. Economic restructuring, localized discourses on deservingness, and the political mobilization of the poor create uneven geographies of privilege and need in the United States (Lawson, Jarosz, and Bonds, 2010). Further, space is a very social dimension in that space is where people engage with each other and their environment (Massey 2005). Understanding space and place as ongoing political and economic constructions creates an opportunity for more voices to contribute to poverty analyses (*ibid*). By utilizing a comparative approach across two places, we can better theorize what changes to the safety net mean to those experiencing it 'on the ground' (Piven, 2001; McDowell, 2001; 2004; Peck, 2001; Schram, 2000).

Second, my research focuses on neoliberal discourses on welfare to better understand the ways in which the poor are positioned in American society and how this relates to the neoliberal regulatory project. I argue that under the terms of neoliberal capitalism (market triumphalism, self-sufficiency, state retrenchment), the problem of welfare dependency has eclipsed alternative

analyses of what drives and shapes poverty. The poor are not necessarily invisible in late capitalism, but rather, through neoliberal discourses, are made visible only in particular ways as an “other” outside middle class values (Goode and Maskovsky 2001). Popular and political rhetoric overwhelming defines poverty as a crisis of dependency on welfare and other safety net programs. However, through this limited lens, the solutions for poverty are seen in the adoption of the worker-citizen subject position. This framing of the reasons for and solutions to poverty reinvigorate the neoliberal project and reinforce racialized and gendered inequalities. This dissertation argues for a critical analysis of welfare that examines poverty as a political, economic, and cultural effect of race, gender, place and neoliberal capitalism.

Third, through in-depth interviews in King County, WA and Jackson County, MO, this research examines the role of the capitalism race, gender, and place in shaping the identities and political mobilization of those on public assistance. While many mainstream analyses of poverty have heavily focused on the behaviors of the poor, this research challenges views of the poor that are pathologizing, victimizing or universalizing. Popular discourses on the poor have positioned them as deviant, over-sexed and greedy (also argued in Goode and Maskovsky, 2001). Racist representations of the poor in particular have led the American public to view them unsympathetically (Piven 2004; Gilens 1999) leaving the poor without strong political representation (Goode and Maskovsky, 2001). Other discourses on poverty have constructed the poor as child-like victims lacking political mobilization. This research challenges each view and seeks to highlight the complicated and sometimes contradictory ways in which low-income parents collectively and individually respond to the discursive and material conditions of poverty (Goode and Maskovsky 2001).

### *Final Thoughts*

Recently on primetime television, a segment on MSNBC's The Melissa Harris-Perry Show focused on "welfare, race and class mobility". The discussion ended in a heated exchange between the host and one of her guests. While, the segment was ostensibly to debate the points brought up in Martin Gilens book, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, the conversation turned toward why in a country as wealthy as the U.S., we still have persistent poverty. One guest argued that the poor did not illustrate the 'risky' behavior of the affluent. Although 'the poor' have been accused of risky behavior before, rarely was such behavior discussed in such a positive light. This risky behavior included the 'entrepreneurial spirit' of being job creators as espoused by republican political candidates. This commentator said that in order to move out of poverty, the poor needed to take more risks and to take control of their advancement. Perry, known for her cool demeanor, offered an impassioned response:

What is riskier than being poor in America? Seriously? What in the world is riskier than being a poor person in America?... I am sick of the idea that being wealthy is risky. No. There is a huge safety net that when you fail will catch you and catch you and catch you. Being poor is what is risky. We have to create a safety net for poor people. And when we won't because they happen to look different than us, it is a pervasive ugliness. (September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012)

This response, on a major news network and during a campaign season in which the poor were all but invisible, offered hope that the hegemonic discourse of poverty was being challenged. It also framed those in poverty in a different and potentially exciting way. Melissa Harris-Perry did not describe the impoverished as deviant, or lazy or losers in the capitalist market place. They were citizens, parents and community members who against great risks were able to piece together a semblance of dignity and well-being in a hostile social, economic, and political environment.

In all the interviews conducted and the 18 months of fieldwork, one basic theme became clear: to live in poverty is to live precariously, to not feel in control, and to not know what the future holds. In other words, being poor *is* risky. Being poor in America, however, has never been easy. We live in a country that prides itself on progress, on working hard toward the attainable goal of the American dream, of each generation doing better than the one before. We live in a political and economic moment where even as these narratives are proven to be false, the pressure of this discourse still holds incredible power over our identities. Keynesian economic policies and the social justice movements of the 1960s sought to redistribute rights and economic resources in ways that addressed the differential positions of Americans based on race, class and gender and to mitigate the role of the market in reproducing inequality. The neoliberal project can be seen as a reaction to this, a sharp and powerful return to the ideology that the market will correct economic injustice. In this moment, the race, class and gender inequalities that create the need for assistance are eschewed and we have returned to focusing on changing the behaviors of those in poverty rather than addressing the underlying processes that create it. This renewed form of spatialized social control, however, is also being challenged. My hope is that through more engagements across class lines we can change the discourse and policy to create more socially justice and inclusive spaces and politics.

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