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Dropped From the Rolls: Mexican Immigrants, Race, and Rights in the Era of Welfare Reform¹

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Welfare reform transferred considerable discretion over eligibility standards and benefits to individual caseworkers, contributing to a highly diffuse, yet system-wide, practice of discrimination against nonwhite and foreign-born families within the new TANF program. Based on a two-year ethnographic study of welfare reform's impact on Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles County, this article documents a pattern of heightened anti-immigrant sentiment and disenfranchisement within L.A. County's welfare system following the passage of PRWORA. The vast majority of eligible immigrant families in our study lost some or all of their cash and food stamp benefits, and were systematically denied access to the work and social supports promised under welfare reform, including childcare, training and education, and transportation. Our research illuminates how race, gender, and immigrant status intersect to block Latinas' access to welfare entitlements, and to maintain their position in low-wage and unstable employment. We describe the racial effects of three tactics used by welfare officials in L.A.: unlawful reductions or termination of immigrant benefits; harassment and humiliation through Job Club; and the tracking of immigrants away from education and into low-wage jobs. Placing the current welfare debate in the context of post-civil rights politics, we also question the refusal of mainstream policymakers and welfare researchers to engage issues of racial discrimination and inequality in their evaluation of PRWORA.

Key words: *Immigrants, Latinas, TANF, welfare reform, race, discrimination, caseworker discretion, anti-poverty policy, poverty research*

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Since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) researchers have sought to evaluate the effects of this historic overhaul of U.S. welfare policy. Declaring PRWORA an immediate success, political leaders and the mainstream press circulated reports that over six million people had fallen from the rolls, and touted uplifting stories of individual recipients who moved from welfare to "self-sufficiency." Countering this rosy portrait of welfare reform, a number of public policy groups, scholars, and community activists have responded with studies that show that a significant percentage of those who left welfare have not found work, that poor mothers are being forced into low-wage and temporary jobs, and that the majority of former recipients continue to live in poverty without adequate shelter, food, medical care, and social services. Most evaluations of PRWORA, however, have fallen under a "common frame of reference," as political scientists Sanford Schram and Joe Soss observe, one that reifies policymakers' concerns with "dependency" by focusing exclusively on dropping caseloads and welfare leavers as the standard for judging the efficacy of welfare policy (Schram & Soss, 2003, p. 18). By concentrating on the outcomes of people who have left welfare, both supporters and critics of PRWORA have diverted public attention away from the experiences of poor people *inside* the welfare state. Little attention has been paid to research that exposes the diversionary tactics that have been used to prevent eligible people from applying for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), and the racially discriminatory application of eligibility criteria, sanctions, work supports, and welfare-to-work rules at the hands of local welfare officials.

Drawing on a two-year ethnographic study of welfare reform's impact on Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles County, this article shifts the evaluation of PRWORA away from a focus on welfare leaving, and towards an analysis of structural discrimination, civil rights, and compromised access to public benefits. Our research documented a pattern of heightened anti-immigrant sentiment and disempowerment within L.A. County's welfare system following the passage of PRWORA. Confusion and misinformation among welfare officials about the new federal eligibility standards for non-citizens, combined with

tremendous pressure on caseworkers to reduce their caseloads by any means possible, led to the widespread purging of immigrants from the system. While all of the immigrant families in our study remained eligible for aid under federal and state guidelines, the vast majority were wrongly informed by caseworkers that only citizens were eligible for TANF, and many faced significant reductions—and, in several cases, termination—of their cash aid and food stamps. Committed to the “social uplift” philosophy trumpeted by PRWORA, the Latina mothers in our study actively sought out—but were turned away from—opportunities for job training and education, transportation subsidies, and quality, affordable childcare. Promised a “hand-up” in place of a handout, these immigrant women were instead channeled into poverty-wage, part-time, and unstable jobs that fuel Southern California’s post-Fordist economy.

Our data was collected as part of the Urban Change Project (UCP), a nationwide study of the effects of welfare reform commissioned by MDRC (formerly known as Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation), a leading voice in the field of welfare policy.² This study documented the experiences of fourteen Mexican immigrant welfare recipients and their families from 1998 to 2000, during the initial implementation of welfare reform in Los Angeles. Our ethnographic sample reflects the diversity of the Mexican population in the United States. Ranging in age from twenty-four to forty-eight, these *mexicanas* had migrated from urban capitals and rural pueblos in Guerrero, Yucatan, Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, and Michoacán. Many had traveled north to reunite with husbands who had been laboring in the U.S., while others were single mothers who crossed the border in search of work, and still others were young children when their families migrated to the Los Angeles region. At the time that they were interviewed for this study, all were legal permanent residents of the United States, although most had spent some time as undocumented immigrants. All resided in Long Beach, a diverse coastal city in southwestern L.A. County which in the 1990s served as a point of entry for new immigrants from Central America and Southeast Asia and boasted some of the highest poverty rates in the region. Living with husbands and boyfriends, parents

and siblings, these Latinas cared for newborns, toddlers, teenagers, and some even grandchildren. And all relied, in part, on public assistance to feed and shelter their families.

If the measure of PRWORA's success is getting people off of welfare (if only temporarily), then our ethnographic research uncovered a positive account of welfare reform in L.A. County. By the end of our study, all but two of the fourteen Latina women we interviewed were off of welfare and working—the “success story” of welfare reform that has been celebrated nationwide. However, *not one* woman had found a job that lifted her family above the poverty line, and the majority of women were working in part-time or temporary jobs with little possibility for full-time employment. Most had also been terminated from Medi-Cal and were surviving without health insurance. Thus, as anti-poverty policy, our research revealed welfare reform to be a decisive failure.

A closer look at these immigrant women's paths off of welfare reveals that DPSS had accomplished these outcomes through three tactics: First, through purging and sanctioning in which people either lost portions of their benefits or were cut off entirely; second, through harassment, where the indignity and hassle of the welfare bureaucracy led people to take themselves off of welfare; and, third, through Job Club programs that surveilled people and pushed them take any job at any wage.

Key to all of these tactics was race. As throughout the nation, the devolution of welfare policy to the state and local level has transferred decision-making power and discretion to individual caseworkers in California, thus increasing the potential for racially disparate and discriminatory treatment. In L.A. County, caseworker perceptions of Latina immigrants as undeserving of the same benefits as U.S. citizens and as ideally suited for low-paying and “dirty” jobs—perceptions that are mirrored in public images of immigrants alternately as “public charges” and a willing labor underclass—have resulted in patterns of systemic disempowerment, ranging from cuts in benefits to increases in sanctions for immigrants to a hardened work-first approach that directs immigrant recipients, especially those with limited English-language proficiency, away from education and directly into the labor market. Our research

thus illustrates the ways that race, gender and nationality have intersected to block Latinas' access to the social entitlements and work supports promised under welfare reform. Who they are—low-income Mexican immigrant women—profoundly shaped how they were understood and treated within the welfare bureaucracy as well as in the labor market.

Since the 1980s, a burgeoning scholarly literature has employed the concept of intersectionality to illuminate the interlocking systems of race, class, gender, and sexuality that work together to produce and maintain social inequality in U.S. society (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1994; Chrenshaw, 1991; Hill, Collins & Anderson, 1992; McCall, 2007; Moraga, 1981). Intersectionality is an especially relevant framework for research on the welfare state, as race and gender ideology have fundamentally shaped American views of poverty, as well as the social policies developed to address economic need and inequality. Particularly after 1996, as access to public assistance moved from being an entitlement to a matter of caseworker discretion, such an intersectional framework is necessary for any substantive evaluation of how welfare reform played out. Welfare scholarship has thus emphasized the intersection of race and gender in the origins of the welfare state (Katz, 1986; Mink, 1996; Quadagno, 1996; Roberts, 1998), in the backlash against AFDC in the second half of the twentieth century (Gilens, 2000; Hancock, 2004; Reese, 2005), and in current welfare reform politics and policies (Davis, 2006; Hays, 2004; Marchevsky & Theoharis, 2006; Schram, 2003). Whereas most research has framed welfare through a black-white paradigm and focused on the experiences of white and African American recipients, a small group of scholars has begun to document the experiences of other people of color and immigrants in the welfare state, specifically Latinos and Asians (Hagan et al., 2003; Kretsedemas & Aparicio, 2004; Ng, 2004; Fujiwara, 2008). Our ethnographic study of Mexican immigrants in L.A. County contributes to this emergent literature on immigrants and the welfare state, in particular highlighting the symbiotic interaction between race and immigrant status in contemporary welfare politics and policy. For the Mexican immigrant women in our study, their nonwhite racial status was conflated with their identity as "foreigners" to construct them

simultaneously as undeserving outsiders within the welfare state and other arenas of civil society (like schools and public health facilities), yet as naturally available and compliant low-wage workers within the U.S. economy.

Racial Inequality and Caseworker Discretion Under Welfare Reform

Data collected by other researchers across the nation has similarly documented that welfare reform has been enacted in racially differential ways and had racially disparate effects for African Americans and Latinos than for whites, and for immigrants compared to native-born citizens. Research has shown, for example, that states with large populations of African Americans and Latinos have adopted stricter welfare policies and have higher sanction rates than states where the welfare caseload is predominantly white. (Schram & Soss, 2003) Moreover, there is a certain irony in public celebrations of dropping welfare rolls when people were *being dropped* from the rolls. A study by the Center for Law and Social Policy found that the immigrant caseload decline accounted for over half of the welfare savings accrued in the first year of reform (Greenberg et al., 2000).

Recent studies have also shown that caseworker discretion in deciding grants and providing ancillary services has led to unequal benefits for nonwhites and non-English speakers. Indeed, the hand-up—or post-employment services, as they were termed in California—was not a guaranteed entitlement, but was available only through caseworker discretion and referral. And in a troubling pattern being documented by researchers across the nation, white recipients were receiving much greater access than their non-white counterparts. Susan Tinsley Gooden's study of welfare recipients in Virginia found that African Americans were much less likely than whites to receive information about job prospects, assistance with transportation, and opportunities for education (Gooden, 1998). Research in Illinois similarly found that fewer than 18% of African American recipients were referred to educational programs, compared to about half of white recipients (Armato et al., 1998). In New York City, researchers found that blacks

and Latinos were receiving less in food stamp benefits than prior to welfare reform (Mulings et al., 2000). Research has documented that Haitian-Americans in Wisconsin tend to receive slower service than other groups and very limited translation services, while in Idaho there were no translation services or translated materials available for Latino immigrants (Bonds, 2002). Doris Ng's study of Vietnamese and Mexican immigrant recipients in Northern California found that only 38% of these women received any welfare-to-work services, including childcare, transportation, and translation services, and that while the vast majority had requested to enroll in job training programs, they had been required to accept low-paying, part-time jobs (Ng, 2004).

Scholars have also highlighted the tremendous disadvantages and vulnerabilities that women of color face when they enter the job market, including lower wages, less desirable job tasks and work schedules, and higher rates of sexual harassment. Gooden found that African Americans who had left welfare were more likely than whites to work in low-paying jobs, and had lower job retention rates than whites; half of blacks were offered different jobs than what they had applied for, compared to less than one-third of whites, and 55% of blacks were offered evening employment, compared to 35% of whites (Gooden, 1999). Ng reports that immigrant women face a triple stigma within the labor market: as welfare recipients, they stand to earn between 40 and 88 percent of what non-recipients would earn in the same job category; as women of color, they will earn 64 cents for every dollar earned by a white male; and as immigrant women heads of households, they have a lower median income than both native-born families (headed by women or men) and those headed by immigrant men (Ng, 2004). The majority of the immigrant women in Ng's study were earning below the minimum wage, with one respondent, who had been trained as a dressmaker in Vietnam, working 12 hours per week for \$2.25 per hour as a cook's assistant. Indeed, neither the Asian and Latina immigrant women surveyed by Ng in Northern California, nor the African American women interviewed by Gooden in Virginia, nor the Mexican immigrant women we studied in L.A. County were enjoying what President Bush has described as "the hope and dignity

that comes with having a job" (Goldstein & Eilperin, 2003).

Accumulating evidence of the racial discrimination and disparate effects of welfare reform promoted the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights to declare in 2002 that "civil rights considerations are of paramount" concern, calling for a "new paradigm" in the evaluation of PRWORA, and issuing a detailed set of recommendations for racial protections in the reauthorized program (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002). Yet, as we discuss later in this essay, race was conspicuously absent in mainstream evaluations of welfare reform as well as in the public debate over reauthorization—except when pundits celebrated PRWORA as America's first "color-blind" social policy. And, the reauthorization plan approved by Congress in 2005 failed to redress racial discrimination and inequality within TANF, while increased work requirements and more funding for marriage promotion promise to intensify the detrimental effects of welfare reform on women of color and their families.

The New Welfare Regime: California's GAIN Program

When PRWORA became law in August 1996, Los Angeles had one of the largest AFDC caseloads in the nation—larger than *the entire state* of New York. The county's welfare agency, DPSS, was charged with moving over 100,000 people off of welfare and into work. Yet, research showed that the regional economy was producing only one-fifth the number of jobs needed to absorb the influx of welfare recipients into the labor market. Moreover, DPSS' own data showed that most entry-level jobs paid far below the hourly wage of \$7.82 that is necessary for a family of three to become ineligible for public assistance (Quint et al., 1999). In other words, even if DPSS managed the enormous feat of moving 100,000 people into work, there was little guarantee that employment alone would produce the caseload declines demanded by the federal government. Most people who found work would still qualify for welfare, and would need public assistance to make ends meet on their low wages.

Rather than design a welfare-to-work strategy that addressed the structural problems in L.A.'s labor market, DPSS

instead embarked on a massive expansion of its welfare-to-work program Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN). In 1998, it made GAIN mandatory for nearly all welfare recipients, and poured over \$147 million dollars into welfare-to-work operations. Meanwhile, the total budget for benefits administration was only \$120 million. This meant that L.A. County was spending tens of millions more in welfare-to-work administration than in direct benefits to poor people. Given the numbers and types of jobs available, GAIN could not succeed in actually moving the vast majority of people into jobs, let alone jobs that would pay enough to render them above the assistance threshold. The only way the County could make welfare reform work, then, was through an ideological program that valorized work and demonized welfare to a point where more and more people would drop out of the welfare system—even if they had to return again or could not adequately survive without assistance.

Today, a person who wants to apply for public assistance in L. A. County must visit an Eligibility Office. In these prison-like structures, visitors pass through metal detectors and past armed security guards on their way to the clerk who is cloistered behind a Plexiglas window. There they must wait for hours in a crowded waiting room before being seen by an Eligibility Worker. From an administrative standpoint, these offices have been redesigned away from social work to run like a well-oiled assembly line. No longer assigned to individual clients, eligibility workers are grouped into units of six, who are together responsible for managing between 2,500-3,000 cases at a time which makes it next to impossible for caseworkers to know and advocate for their clients.

If the Latina immigrants interviewed for this study described the eligibility office as “nasty and rude,” they spoke of the other face of welfare, the GAIN program, as “*bien* pretty, but all lies.” GAIN’s modern facilities resemble a cross between a temporary employment agency and a therapist’s office, with inspirational posters like “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.” In GAIN, poor people are called “participants” (not clients or recipients) and they are assigned to an individual Service Worker (or GSW) who meets with them to design a personalized “Welfare-to-Work Plan.”

GSW's are trained to be welcoming, professional, and courteous with program participants, all part of the County's vision of motivating welfare recipients to regain "the same human dignity every working person enjoys."

However, GSW's have their own strategies for disciplining welfare recipients, which include chastising them for their low motivation and self-esteem, and reporting them to their eligibility worker who has the power to impose sanctions or cut them off of welfare altogether. And while GAIN's slogan promises its participants "A Job. A Better Job. A Career," this contradicts the program's explicit work-first philosophy, which teaches welfare mothers that "any job is a good job," directs them away from professional careers or skilled trades that require additional education, and requires them to take the first job offered or face sanctioning.

Initially, the women we interviewed were excited about the job opportunities promised by welfare reform. Contrary to the myth that welfare recipients do not want to work, these Latinas had vast employment experience. The majority had worked since adolescence as sewing machine operators, domestics, hotel maids, waitresses, electronics assemblers, inventory packers, and fast food workers. Yet, despite decades of labor in a wide array of jobs, not one woman in the study had ever held a job that lifted her family above the poverty line. The highest wage any woman had earned was \$7.25 per hour, and only two had ever held jobs that provided health insurance.

These Latinas were tired of shuttling between part-time, temporary jobs, and hoped that GAIN would connect them to stable work that could lift their families out of poverty. Most were attracted to the program by the promise of subsidized childcare; they could not afford a babysitter on their low wages, and worried about their children's welfare while they were at work. All understood the importance of education as an economic stepping stone, and they enrolled in GAIN with the expectation that the government would finally help them to attain a G.E.D., study English, go to college or learn a skilled trade.

Instead, these women discovered in GAIN yet another welfare program that presumed their deficiency in most arenas of life, and told them how to dress, speak, take care of

their children, use their time and spend their money. Instead of professional careers, white-collar jobs, or skilled trades, they were tracked into the same manual labor they had been doing for years. Instead of academic schooling, they received "soft skills" training in resume writing, interviewing techniques, and workplace attire. In lieu of access to quality and affordable childcare, they found themselves having to compromise their choice of childcare providers, and to maneuver another bureaucratic maze of applications, contradictory eligibility rules, and lost paperwork.

Purging and Sanctioning: Immigrant Disentitlement and the Dropping Rolls

Norma: They just want you off welfare. That's the whole point.

Although all of the Latinas in our study were legal permanent residents, many had been wrongly informed by caseworkers that they were not eligible for welfare because they were not U.S. citizens. They were accused of possessing fake immigration documents, told to go back to Mexico, and threatened that they would have to repay the government for any benefits they received. Once approved, they constantly battled to stay on assistance in the face of a welfare department that chronically lost their paperwork, arbitrarily cut their checks and food stamps, and in several instances, canceled a family's AFDC case or Medi-Cal coverage without notice or justification. In the late 1990s, Latino leaders and community activists in L.A. County sounded the alarm that nativism had sharply intensified under welfare reform, and many immigrant families had been cut from public assistance even though they were still eligible. These community reports were later corroborated by large-scale studies which showed alarming disparities between immigrant and citizen access to public assistance.

An Urban Institute study of welfare records in Los Angeles County reported that the number of *approved* applications of noncitizen families for Medi-Cal and TANF dropped by 71 percent between January of 1996 and January of 1998, compared to no significant change among citizen applications (Zimmerman & Fix, 1998). Another nationwide study found

that the use of public benefits (including TANF, SSI, General Assistance, Medicaid, and food stamps) among noncitizen households declined by 35 percent between 1994 and 1997, compared to only 14 percent among citizen households, and that neither naturalization nor rising incomes accounted for this drop (Zimmerman & Fix, 1999). Most analysts have explained these figures in terms of the "chilling effects" of welfare reform, arguing that immigrants have become increasingly frightened and reluctant to apply for aid. Yet, there has been a notable silence in public policy circles about the systematic denial of applications from eligible immigrants, and the outright purging of immigrant recipients from the welfare rolls.

Indeed, nearly two-thirds of the immigrant families in our study lost some or all of their benefits. Many were incorrectly told by caseworkers that only U.S. citizens are now eligible for TANF and Food Stamps. For example, Leticia received a letter from DPSS wrongly stating that she, her husband, and their oldest daughter (all legal permanent residents) no longer qualified for aid. Although the letter implied that Leticia's four U.S. born children were still eligible, the entire family's cash aid and food stamps totaling \$900 were cut off the following month. Three months later, however, Leticia received another letter ordering her to report to GAIN. When she called DPSS to question why she had to attend GAIN if no one in her household was receiving aid, the eligibility worker reinstated cash and food stamp benefits, but only for Leticia's U.S.-born children. Where Leticia's family of seven had once received \$900 in monthly benefits, they now had to survive on \$400.

While Leticia received a direct, but erroneous, explanation for why their family's benefits had been terminated, most of these immigrant women lost welfare income for reasons they did not understand and could not get an explanation for from their caseworkers. After discovering that her family's food stamps had been terminated, Delia called the welfare office several times until she finally spoke to a caseworker who offered to reinstate a monthly food stamp allotment of \$68. Insisting that her family needed to eat, Delia asked the caseworker why her food stamps had been cut from \$240 to a mere \$68. The caseworker responded, "You people always are asking for help when you don't need it. You should be happy

with what you have or go back to Mexico." Delia backed off, fearful that the caseworker would take away even the \$68 in food stamps she had first offered. In many cases where immigrant parents continued to receive benefits for their U.S.-born children, they were made to feel like cheats in the welfare office and were continually reminded by caseworkers that they did not deserve the help they were getting.

Harassment and Humiliation

The centerpiece of GAIN is Job Club. This job readiness course seeks to inculcate welfare recipients into the life skills and workplace rules deemed essential to finding and keeping a job. Despite the fact that most recipients have ample experience in the work place, they are taught how to read the want ads in the newspaper and how to approach employers when asking for work, and they are lectured on the importance of honesty, enthusiasm, and obedience in the workplace.

A strict dress code is enforced in Job Club and breaking the code can get you kicked off of welfare. Latina immigrants described this dress code as one of the most humiliating aspects of GAIN. They protested that they were treated like low-class uneducated people who had no common sense concerning basic rules of etiquette. For many, the dress code also showed how out of touch GAIN was with their real opportunities in the labor market. Required to attend GAIN and go job hunting in business suits, they were sent to apply for jobs in factories, fast food restaurants, and janitorial services. Women like Leticia Ramirez spoke of the shame they felt when showing up "dressed up all elegant" to apply for a hotel housekeeping job. Moreover, because most could not afford the office attire required by GAIN, they were forced to stretch their budgets to purchase clothing they would have no use for once they started working.

Although GAIN is intended to offer recipients vouchers to buy this required clothing, only one Latina in this study had been informed of this benefit. Norma received a \$50 voucher for J.C. Penney's, a list of articles she was required to buy, and was told her to return the next day with her shopping receipt. However, as Norma explained:

I got a skirt. It was forty-something, and I went back to GAIN and said, "I can only afford a skirt." The worker said, "You can. You can. I know it's hard, but you can't look at the classy stuff." I said, "Well, you know what? There isn't much you can get with \$50." They want you to be presentable. They want you to be dressy, but then they want you to get the cheap stuff.

The dress code sets welfare recipients up as profoundly alien from the work and class culture they must aspire to and then puts them in their place once they attain it. In L.A. County's extremely closed and racially segmented job market, these Latinas will not find jobs as executive secretaries or paralegals and they cannot wear suits to be janitors or home health care providers. "Dressing for success" becomes at once an empty exercise and a form of ritual humiliation because these women already know that the clothes they are being told to wear are not appropriate for the jobs that are available.

The humiliation of Job Club is further compounded by the fact that participants are offered limited practical assistance in finding a job. Participants must report every morning to GAIN—for the women in our study, the closest GAIN office was a half-hour bus ride from their homes. From there, they are sent out to look for work, and required to return at the end of the day with five job applications. Instead of filling them out at the place of employment, they were required to return the applications to the GAIN office as proof that they had been out looking for work. This system was tremendously inefficient as women often traveled 25 miles to a potential workplace, once to pick up the application and later making another trip to drop off the application. All of the Latinas in this study endured months in Job Search without ever finding a job. The vast majority grew so frustrated with the program that they took themselves off of welfare as soon as they got even a part-time job, and for some, without getting a job at all.

Any Job at Any Wage: Tracking and Lack of Access to Educational Programs

Lupe: Man, I wanna get some real training so I can get a good-paying job!

According to these Latinas' own accounts, GAIN turns asking for a job into a public spectacle, where they are monitored not just by the welfare state, but also by potential employers. Employers would encounter a crowd of people dressed in business attire asking for applications, and know immediately that they had been sent by the welfare department. Not only did this system set welfare recipients apart from other job seekers, it further compounded the pressure these women were experiencing from their GSW's to take any job they were offered, even if it was part-time or temporary. As one woman explained,

You have to have like a good, good reason not to take [a job] because they know. Like a lot of interviews that you go to, they know that you're going through this program that's called GAIN and everything, and if GAIN finds out that you didn't take a certain job, then you're in trouble because they want to know exactly why you didn't take that job. So, you're like being forced to take any job you can get.

This observation that employers know when an applicant is from GAIN and know the rules of the program illustrates the ways that the surveillance of the welfare state radiates beyond the walls of the GAIN office, reminding recipients that they are being monitored at all times. It also raises the possibility that employers are lowering their entry-level wages since they know that welfare recipients are legally required to take any job they are offered.

A recipient who does not find work is supposed to be referred by DPSS to a "vocational assessment" that will be used to determine whether she will be enrolled in a 6-8 month training program. Margarita was sent through Job Club twice, applied for over 200 jobs, had a month where she was left alone, and then was ordered to undergo an English proficiency

assessment that would determine if she qualified for computer classes. But as she recalled,

When I went, I think that since my name sounds very Mexican...I got there at 7:45 and my appointment was at 8:10 and when I got there all of the people...I was the first on the list and on the bottom there were other people and all of the ones that were there were called but they did not call me.

After waiting all day, Margarita was rescheduled for an appointment two weeks later. But in the interim she was offered and forced to take a minimum wage housekeeping job at the downtown Hilton Hotel. Fed up with the harassment of the new welfare system, Margarita immediately took herself and her children off of public assistance—even though she was working only 15 hours per week and even though the new job did not provide health benefits. During an interview conducted soon after she started working at the hotel, Margarita explained that she would have preferred to take ESL and computer classes so as to improve her opportunities in the labor market. But, as she concluded, “those of us who speak only Spanish, they are just sending us directly to work.”

Margarita was not the only one in the study to note a pattern of discriminatory tracking between English and Spanish speakers in the GAIN program. Many women worried that GAIN was denying vocational and basic education to Latina immigrants, especially those who need it the most. Nearly all of the women in this study desired further education—ESL and GED classes, real job training programs, and access to college. They understood that it was through additional education that they might transform their position in the labor market. Delia explained,

Well, I think that you can get a lot of jobs like in places where they don't pay you well. Like in sewing factories, in places where they exploit people...And what's more, with the new changes in welfare...they're forcing people to take jobs where they don't pay them well and where they are being exploited.

The only two immigrant women in this study who were referred to any sort of educational or vocational training program were both younger bilingual Latinas who had completed a few years of high school in the United States. The older immigrant women—those with very limited literacy and English-language skills—were sent through Job Club over and over again until they found a job or dropped out of the system in frustration.

Welfare Research: What's Race Got to Do with It?

Herminia: I don't understand why the United States can't stand Latinos. It's Latinos that are sustaining the United States.

Many of the Mexican immigrant women who participated in this study did so because it provided them with a forum to publicly testify about the systematic disentanglement that structures the welfare system and the American polity. These women framed their own experiences with welfare reform through a language of race and rights, protesting the racist ideologies, policies and practices that pervade both the welfare system and the labor market, and that jointly contribute to their marginalization in U.S. society. The prevailing discourse of dependency made little sense to this group of immigrant women who had to fight to gain access to their legal entitlements, and once inside the system endured verbal abuse from caseworkers and frequent, arbitrary cuts in their family's benefits. Welfare was essential to their economic survival, but was ultimately a temporary and undependable measure of protection against the vagaries of poverty and racism. Yet, although Mexican immigrant women critiqued the particular failings of the welfare system, they nevertheless held fast to the *ideal* of welfare as a safeguard against economic exploitation and inequality. Linking their need for and right to public assistance programs with the widespread racial discrimination, abuse, and blocked opportunities they confront in U.S. society, these Latinas reframed the problem of welfare reform as one of civil rights and social justice.

Two years of ethnographic research in L.A. County documented that Mexican immigrant families were being illegally

kicked off the welfare rolls; that racial inequities structured the job opportunities and social services available to these women; that Latinas said they needed real educational opportunities to get ahead but were constricted to short-term and dead-end soft skills and vocational training. Yet, when this ethnographic data was reported to MDRC, it was treated as anecdotal stories from the field, rather than valuable evidence of the ways that policy was being implemented. And because this information could not be confirmed by welfare administrators in L.A. County (who, when asked about it by MDRC, denied any wrongdoing), the issue of racial discrimination was left out of the Urban Change research agenda.³

In this regard, MDRC is emblematic of problems pervasive throughout the poverty knowledge industry, where the welfare state figures prominently as a trusted source of data and often a partner in research (O'Connor, 2002; Schram, 1995). Because researchers are dependent on welfare offices for information on the welfare population, there is often an accompanying pressure on them not to be too critical of the welfare administration for fear of losing access. MDRC relied upon administrative records and interviews with federal and local welfare authorities to construct its account of the implementation and effects of PRWORA. Because they did not regard former and ongoing recipients as a trusted source for evaluating welfare bureaucratic practices and because they constructed no other independent way to analyze the effectiveness of welfare administration, they could only rely on welfare staff to evaluate themselves, littering their reports with quotes from caseworkers and administrators as to how the programs were working. As a result, most reports issued by MDRC have painted an overwhelmingly positive portrait of PRWORA, with criticism limited to technical recommendations for how to make welfare reform run more smoothly and provide services more effectively. Ignoring ethnographic evidence from L.A. County and other Urban Change research sites of the racially disparate applications and effects of welfare reform policy, the issue of racial discrimination was left out of MDRC's evaluation of PRWORA. Instead, race was reduced to an ascriptive label to differentiate between the "neighborhoods" and "populations" studied in Urban Change, and to lend legitimacy to the project

by suggesting that MDRC was inclusive and thorough in its research on big cities and welfare reform.

The refusal to systematically investigate problems of entitlement and equity inside the welfare state stems from an ideology of “political realism” prevalent in the poverty research industry more generally, and MDRC specifically, which accepts the prevailing wisdom that institutions operate in fair and open ways and that public assistance is no longer a tenable or realistic solution to poverty in U.S. society (Schram, 1995). Within the technicist framework of poverty knowledge, evidence of people being systematically purged from the welfare rolls is interpreted as bureaucratic mishap and abuses of power by individual caseworkers. Most large-scale evaluations of the PRWORA, including the Urban Change study, have not been concerned with whether poor people have been accessing the rights and services they need, but instead whether TANF was moving them off of welfare in an efficient and timely way. Accordingly, they have reported the number of respondents who have left welfare but largely do not describe the process by which they got off of welfare. Such a research agenda takes its cues from the larger political landscape. In post civil rights American politics, there is a popular consensus that state-sponsored racial discrimination was eradicated in the 1960s. Consequently, there is a strict distinction drawn between the ways the state discriminated in the past and the outlying individuals who might discriminate in the present—ignoring the historical record that bureaucracy and caseworker discretion were the keys to welfare discrimination fifty years ago, even in the Jim Crow South.

In contrast to our analysis presented here, MDRC’s study—and the reports derived from this data—have focused on individual paths off of welfare, and particularly on welfare-to-work policies and their impact on recipients’ income, employment, and family life. This near-universal emphasis on welfare leaving in public discourse has diverted public attention from a critical interrogation of the myriad factors that lead poor people to apply for welfare and of their experiences inside the welfare state. The Mexican immigrant women who participated in this study challenged the focus on welfare leaving by refocusing their interviews on their struggles to access public assistance

and to hold on to the benefits that they and their children are entitled to under law. As they insisted on talking over and over again about how hard it is to get on and stay on welfare, the women in this study redefined the problem of welfare, shifting the focus from individual pathology and dependency, to issues of civil rights, entitlement, and social justice.

Post-Civil Rights Politics and Racialized Disentitlement: Back to the Future

Zoraida: Many caseworkers do not treat you right.... I had one social worker who would say that the help that I received was only for my two daughters, and not for the rest of us. She would always say that the food stamps were for them and not for us. She was very racist because why did it matter to her? Even if we weren't citizens, [my daughters] were and they deserved it.

You control our lives and so far you've treated us like slaves. You're responsible for the health and welfare of our children but you're not interested in how we live. You sit up here on the Hill and talk about building subways and bridges and parking lots for the tourists and the people from suburbia. ...It's time to talk about the people who live here. It's time to treat us like human beings. Etta Horn, of the Washington D.C. Citywide Welfare Alliance, 1969

When we listen to women like Zoraida Jimenez talk about welfare as a social right, we are reminded of the efforts of welfare rights activists who fifty years ago fought to create a universal system of social welfare that would ensure a dignified standard of living, and equal access and protection for all poor families. These "welfare warriors" in the 1960s and 1970s, as historian Premilla Nadasen has termed them in her study of the National Welfare Rights Organization, understood that racial inequality was the rule, not the exception, in the nation's welfare system (Nadasen, 2005). Although women of color were never unilaterally barred from receiving public assistance, 'state's rights' and local control over welfare policy ensured that welfare remained an almost exclusively white entitlement during the first half of the twentieth century.

Because states had control over most Progressive Era and later New Deal programs, because “suitable homes” provisions written into the 1935 law gave caseworkers discretion in whose applications would be approved, and because white politicians and capitalists feared losing black women’s agricultural and domestic labor, black women were largely deemed ineligible for public aid, barred during the cotton harvesting season, and intimidated from even applying (Katz, 1986; Mink, 1996; Nadasen, 2005; Quadagno, 1996; Reese, 2005). In California and the Southwest, local relief agencies shut their doors to Mexican applicants (both U.S. and foreign-born), using federal welfare funds instead to repatriate over one million ethnic Mexicans during the 1930s (Guerin-Gonzales, 1994). By the 1950s, as northern migration fueled the growth of low-income African-American, Puerto Rican, and Mexican-American populations in U.S. urban centers, public distaste for welfare rose sharply and took on an increasingly racial tone. Once again, the economic interests behind welfare policy became abundantly clear, as calls for welfare mothers to go to work in the late 1950s emerged at the same time that local employers stood to profit from the availability of a feminized and racialized labor force (Reese, 2005). Part of the systematic exclusion of both African Americans and Latinos from welfare programs thus rested on the discretion of caseworkers, who held the power to give or deny assistance and determine the amount, a much greater discretion than the state had to determine access to or levels of unemployment insurance or social security.

Fueled by age-old stereotypes of black and Latina women as overly-sexual, irresponsible and lazy, welfare reform has transported the nation back to the future, creating a system where state’s rights (today called “devolution” and “flexibility”), local control in setting benefit levels and sanction rules, and tremendous caseworker discretion all work to mask systematic discrimination and disempowerment. In this regard, PRWORA must be understood as an *explicitly anti-civil rights policy*. It has eroded most of the protections hard-won by the welfare rights movement, including greater transparency and fairness in the application process, a universal system of eligibility standards and benefit levels, increased accountability on the part of caseworkers along with an expanded

set of rights for welfare clients to grieve unfair actions, and a disentangling of welfare policy from local economic interests and politics. Indeed, the current welfare system bears a close resemblance to that challenged by welfare activists fifty years ago: As early as 1964, activists in New York City and Milwaukee called on the welfare department to equally distribute "special grants" for school clothing and winter coats that were closely guarded by caseworkers and doled out only to "deserving" clients; today, as real cash and food stamp benefits have declined across the nation, most public assistance comes in the form of "auxiliary services" (childcare vouchers, bus passes, free clothing) under tight caseworker control and discretion. Similarly, in the late 1960s, hundreds of Mexican American welfare clients and social workers throughout L.A. County took to the streets protesting the lack of Spanish speaking caseworkers and a welfare environment that was culturally hostile to Latinos; today immigrants across the nation are being turned away from benefits for which they are legally entitled, and must navigate complicated welfare bureaucracies and procedures in a language that many cannot read or speak, though they are legally entitled to materials in their own languages. In 1967, rank-and-file activists across the nation organized to protest new federal work requirements, arguing that the WIN program would force them to "accept the same old inferior training or jobs that have always been left to poor people." By the turn of the twenty-first century, the majority of welfare leavers who were employed were earning poverty wages in non-union, dead-end jobs with no health benefits. And most of the Latina immigrants we interviewed were in the same types of jobs—cleaning hotel rooms and business offices, caring for other people's children, sewing garments, soldering parts for electronic appliances and re-stocking supermarket shelves—that they had performed prior to welfare reform, and that have historically been left to poor people.

However, whereas attention to racial discrimination was seen as common-sense and vital to the welfare debate in the 1960s and 1970s, today any talk of race is cast as dangerously naïve. Welfare reform was sold as a post-racial policy that would extend opportunity to people on the margins by a white Southern Democrat hailed as the nation's 'first black president.'

To mention race, to be concerned about discrimination, was thus cast as an anachronistic relic of the failed liberal thinking of the Sixties. Thus, despite ample evidence from the field, most mega-studies have shied away from such investigation. As MDRC President Gordon Berlin explained, “We didn’t set out to do a study of discrimination. We set out to do a study of welfare reform.” Unwilling to grant that researchers studying the impacts of welfare reform might find it incumbent to look at disparate and discriminatory impacts, Berlin alleged that those who report discrimination in the welfare system “must have set out to study discrimination in the welfare system.”⁴ By casting concern with discrimination as standing in the way of the pragmatics of opportunity, supporters of welfare reform have enabled a return to the past. By calling up a figment of what discrimination looked like in the past—and by framing an interest in race and discrimination as being mired in outdated ways of thinking—these research organizations and public figures have inoculated many of the very same techniques that enabled discrimination fifty years ago under the guise of a hand-up for the future. Fundamentally, this post-racial frame was key to the ideological success of welfare reform. For when the women in this study and many others across the nation do not make it out of poverty, when they cannot even access the meager hand-up that welfare reform promised, they become responsible for their own situations.

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(Endnotes)

- 1) Portions of this article are taken from our book *Not Working: Latina Immigrants, Low-Wage Jobs, and the Failure of Welfare Reform* (New York University Press, 2006).
- 2) The Mexican immigrant women who appear in this article participated in one large-scale study of welfare reform: The "Project on Devolution and Urban Change" (Urban Change Project or UCP). Undertaken by MDRC, a Manhattan-based nonprofit research organization, the Urban Change Project proposed to track the effects of welfare reform in four urban counties—Los

Angeles, Miami-Dade, Philadelphia, and Cleveland-Cuyahoga County—across a period of five years, beginning in 1998. Financed with over \$26 million in research grants from private foundations and some government funds, the UCP employed a virtual army of demographers, economists, planners, and ethnographers across the country in an effort to understand the multiple levels of welfare reform, from local policy and administration to urban neighborhoods and institutions to individual recipients and their families. A multi-method study, the Urban Change Project was organized into five interrelated but methodologically distinct components: the Implementation Study; the Individual-Level Impact Study; the Neighborhood Indicators Study; the Institutional Study; and finally, the Ethnographic Study, which proposed to “illuminate the effects of changes, in depth and over time, in how approximately 40 welfare-reliant families in each site (L.A., Miami, Philadelphia, and Cleveland) cope with the new rules and policies.” Alejandra Marchevsky conducted the ethnographic research that serves as the basis of the article. That ethnographic data also served as the Mexican immigrant ethnographic sample of the MDRC Los Angeles study whose findings were subsequently written up and published by MDRC.

3) The design and execution of the MDRC study was premised on the assumption that the new welfare rules were being applied fairly and consistently—this despite complaints from civil rights and welfare rights groups across the nation, a mounting roster of successful legal suits against welfare agencies, and reports from welfare recipients in the UCP itself that welfare reform had produced a sharp increase in disenfranchisement and discrimination inside the system.

4) These quotes are taken from a meeting between Jeanne Theoharis and Gordon Berlin on November 17, 2004 at MDRC’s offices, in order to clarify the philosophy, scope, and findings of the UCP.