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“Maybe We Poor Welfare Women Will Really Liberate Women in this Country:” Tracing an Intellectual History of Mrs. Johnnie Tillmon-Blackston

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“Maybe We Poor Welfare Women Will Really Liberate Women in this Country:”

Tracing an Intellectual History of Mrs. Johnnie Tillmon-Blackston

Gwendolyn Fowler

Women’s History

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May 2, 2017

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ABBREVIATIONS

AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
ANC	Aid to Needy Children
CPUSA	Communist Party USA
FAP	Family Assistance Plan
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
NAACP	National Association of Colored People
NACW	National Association of Colored Women
NCNW	National Council of Negro Women
NWRO	National Welfare Rights Organization
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Council
VISTA	Volunteers in Service to America
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

FOREWORD

I love Google. Once upon a time, when people still used VCRs, mine stopped working; it was locked. I googled directions on how to unlock my VCR and Google gave me instructions to do so. Since that day, I have been a loyal patron. My love for Google is important because it led me to this thesis about Johnnie Tillmon. After I read, “Welfare is a Women’s Issue,” Tillmon’s article for *Ms. Magazine*, I googled her and found out that she was a part of the Welfare Rights movement. And then I learned that there *was* a Welfare Rights movement. Where was this information in my high school history books? Why had I not heard of Tillmon and welfare rights when I was in college? She was never mentioned in my history classes on the 1960s and 1970s. She was not a part of the women’s history course I took, nor was she ever mentioned in the history of Black women in the US course that I took. Who was Johnnie Tillmon? Where was the recognition for her work and the work of people in the Welfare Rights movement? I need to clarify that my fascination with Tillmon predates my time at Sarah Lawrence, so this thesis is more than a paper topic; it is more personal and deeper than that. It is one step towards my goal of uncovering the work of Black women in social movements in the United States. Specifically, it is a way to make Tillmon, and by extension, welfare rights more Googleable. If I can show that Tillmon thought like other activists that are remembered as intellectuals, then maybe (one day) there will be no hesitation to include her in course syllabi or conversations about the Civil Rights movement, Women’s Liberation and Black Power. Or even better, there will one day be a course about poor people’s movements with an entire week’s worth of reading solely on Johnnie Tillmon.

INTRODUCTION

One night in Los Angeles, California in 1966, Johnnie Tillmon gathered the women of the welfare rights group she created, ANC Mothers Anonymous (Aid to Needy Children Mothers Anonymous), and attended what was to be the first meeting of a statewide welfare rights organization. The meeting was organized by Timothy Sampson,¹ an organizer, social worker and an outsider. He was a white, middle class man in an organization whose membership was predominantly poor black women. Tillmon was invited to the meeting by Sampson to discuss the constitution that he had written. However, Tillmon's plan was show up to the meeting, "go up and look at this thing and if we don't like it, we'll dispose of it."² And that is exactly what she did. She walked into the meeting, saw Sampson and another white man speaking to a room full of black women, read the constitution and then demanded to know who had written it. When Sampson responded that he was the author, she walked up to him with the constitution and tore it up in his face. She then turned to the group assembled and said, "Ladies, write your own constitution!" She wanted "to show Sampson's men that you just don't come into somebody's neighborhood and run it. You come in and inspire them."³ What Tillmon wanted from organizers like Sampson was support, not control.

This story described Johnnie Tillmon's personality, (opinionated, and unapologetic), but even more than that, it described her ideology; an ideology based on self-determination. Defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "the process by which

¹ (1935-2002) Timothy Sampson was an organizer from Chicago, but received a Master's in social work from USC. He was a welfare rights organizer in Northern California when he met Tillmon in 1966.

² Johnnie Tillmon, "Taped Interview with Guida West" 1974, quoted in Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981), 83-84.

³ Ibid.

someone controls their life,”⁴ self-determination, when applied to a social movement, it means the process by which a group of people asserts their right to live their lives free from the influence or control of a system that they are controlled by. When Tillmon walked into that meeting and saw a white, middle class man speaking to a room full of poor black women, she really saw a movement for poor people on welfare being commandeered by white people not on welfare. She saw the control of the movement being taken away and given to outsiders. Tillmon believed that poor people should lead the Welfare Rights movement because they were the ones affected by welfare policies in the United States. There was nothing wrong with accepting help from Sampson, but his leadership was not wanted.

Tillmon’s determination to keep the Welfare Rights movement in the control of welfare recipients also connected her to leaders in the Black Power movement. Independence from white authority as well as economic and political independence were core concepts of Black Power. Taking the control of the California Welfare Rights Organization away from Sampson was a way for poor black women to advocate for themselves, name themselves and liberate themselves.

The determination of Tillmon and other welfare women to speak for themselves and lead their own movement also classified these women as organic intellectuals. Organic intellectuals are intellectuals created by the working class, as opposed to traditional intellectuals produced by the academy, that combat dominant ideologies produced by the hegemonic class. The term was coined by Antonio Gramsci during his

⁴ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s. v. “Self-determination.”

imprisonment in the 1920s under the rule of Benito Mussolini.⁵ For Black women on welfare, defending themselves against terms like “brood mares,”⁶ was a way to subvert widespread stereotypes about single mothers on welfare. Gramsci’s definition of organic intellectual is limiting, he was not referring to black women on welfare when he coined it. This definition from Premilla Nadasen effectively applies Gramsci’s definition to welfare women:

Most welfare recipients, even those who became activists, cannot be called intellectuals, in the traditional sense of the word. Their analysis was forged not from a theoretical understanding of women’s place but from a world view constructed out of their day-to-day lives. The material reality of their circumstances and the culture that surrounded them shaped a distinctive notion of gender politics and identity. These women thus became organic intellectuals, theorizing the interconnections among race, class, and gender on the basis of their daily experiences. In the context of other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, they produced a counterhegemonic discourse that challenged the social position to which they, as poor women on welfare, were relegated.⁷

Specifically, they worked in part to dispel notions that Black women went on welfare to have babies, were undeserving of welfare and to show the uncertainty of survival that accompanied women that relied on welfare to take care of their families. The larger part of their activism focused on guaranteeing an income floor for families on welfare based on the amount that a family of four would make each month in the United States.

Method

⁵ Gramsci, Antonio, and Joseph A. Buttigieg. *Prison Notebooks*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

⁶ Deborah G. White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (NY, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 235.

⁷ Premilla Nadasen, "Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002):273, doi:10.2307/3178742.

Sherna Berger Gluck interviewed Johnnie Tillmon beginning in 1984 and ended these interviews around 1991. (By this time Tillmon's health had started failing.) I found these interviews through Google and I am still in the process of listening to them. They are not transcribed, and the sound quality is terrible, but I get to hear Tillmon's voice. Since I cannot find anything on her on YouTube, I am an eager listener despite the audio difficulties. The interviews have helped me construct a life history of Tillmon, and have helped me understand how she developed her ideas and activism. Listening to her has also helped me locate patterns. Between her interviews, Premilla Nadasen's work, and Tillmon's article "Welfare is A Women's Issue" from *Ms. Magazine*,⁸ I have been able to single out what was important to Tillmon and why she worked on welfare reform. One example of a pattern I located is her reference to dignity. Tillmon felt robbed of her dignity when she was on welfare. In the article, she discussed how the state controlled a woman's sex life and in her interviews with Gluck she talked about the raids that welfare recipients were subjected to. Because of this, part of her work as a welfare reformer was centered on changing the jobs that women on welfare were allowed to work so that they could become self-sufficient. The only problem with the Gluck interviews is that in order to use them for my thesis, I need permission from the university that owns the interviews, and as of now I have not received an answer to my repeated inquiries. I emailed Sherna Gluck personally to gain permission, she did answer my inquiry, but due to unforeseen personal circumstances with Gluck's family I was unable to acquire the necessary materials in enough time to use the audio from the interviews. I also reached out to Smith College and the Sophia Smith Collection that houses the Guida West papers. West wrote

⁸ Johnnie Tillmon, "Welfare is A Women's Issue," *Ms. Magazine*, Spring 1972.

the first book that detailed Johnnie Tillmon's activism, and her interviews with Tillmon have been extremely important for me in finding Tillmon's voice. I also interviewed the ghostwriter of "Welfare is a Woman's Issue," Nancy Steffen-Fluhr so that I could try and distinguish what in the article is from Tillmon, from what was later added by George Wiley and Gloria Steinem during the editing process.⁹

One large piece missing from my research is the wealth of information I would have gained by visiting the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. Every book that I have mentions Moorland-Spingarn because the NWRO papers are located there. I originally planned a trip for summer 2016, but Howard University's financial problems have prevented me from accessing their NWRO collection. The storage unit where the collection is being kept has a past due balance which prevents anyone from accessing it until Howard pays what they owe. This challenge has formed a section of my thesis. Specifically in Chapter Three I focus on how the financial state of HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) has affected my research.

Much more of my research has been focused on books about black women like *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves* by Deborah Gray-White¹⁰ and *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* by Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson¹¹ in order to find any mention of Johnnie Tillmon and the National Welfare Rights Organization. The former was extremely helpful; the latter had no information at all. In addition to White's work, there is *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*

⁹ Biographies detailed in Chapters 1 and 2, respectively.

¹⁰ Deborah G. White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (NY, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999)

¹¹ Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope the History of Black Women in America*, (New York: Broadway Books, 1999.)

by Erik S. McDuffie.¹² This book is about black communist women during the 1920s through the 1950s, but it helped me place Tillmon historically into a legacy of black women intellectuals.

Historiography

To know and understand more about welfare and welfare rights Guida West's *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* was essential.¹³ This book is not the first book to analyze facets of the Welfare Rights movement; that honor belongs to Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. Their books, *Regulating the Poor; the Functions of Public Welfare*¹⁴ and *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*¹⁵ were published in 1971 and 1979, respectively. However, West's book is the first complete history of the Welfare Rights Movement, Cloward and Piven studied poor people's movements in general. Cloward and Piven discussed the NWRO (National Welfare Rights Organization) in *Poor People's Movement* as one of four movements led by the poor in the US. They focused on commonalities between these movements, where West completely focused on welfare rights and the NWRO. She analyzed the emergence of state and local welfare rights groups, the creation of the national organization, the well-documented conflicts within the NWRO and the collapse of the movement. A large portion the primary sources used by the author come from interviews that she conducted herself. Her retelling of some of Johnnie Tillmon's actions

¹² Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.)

¹³ Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981)

¹⁴ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. *Regulating the Poor; the Functions of Public Welfare*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971.)

¹⁵ Frances Fox Piven, and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*, (New York: Vintage books, 1979.)

during the peak of the movement paint Tillmon as larger than life and much more brazen than how Tillmon portrays herself in her interviews with Gluck. Ultimately, West's work is useful because it discussed the link between women's organizations and black organizations. However, the connection between black feminist groups and welfare rights is not thoroughly explored. Mainly, this book contributed to my knowledge of welfare and welfare rights while also helping me to learn more about Tillmon.

West's book along with Premilla Nadasen's books on welfare, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*¹⁶ and *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement*¹⁷, paint a complete history of the movement but do not explicitly tell the story of any one welfare woman. Instead there are a lot of anecdotes, mostly from Tillmon, that appear in several places throughout their books. Nadasen has written two other articles on welfare rights that provide a deeper focus on individuals. "We Do Whatever Becomes Necessary: Johnnie Tillmon, Welfare Rights, and Black Power"¹⁸ and "Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights," both place Tillmon at the center and make the case that her activism linked her to Black feminism and Black Power. The one thing that Nadasen's work does not do is answer the questions I had about Tillmon and her legacy.

None of the previously mentioned books or articles fully examine Tillmon's life to uncover why she became an activist. Why did this sharecropper's daughter from

¹⁶ Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2005

¹⁷ Premilla Nadasen, *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement*, (New York: Routledge, 2012.)

¹⁸ Premilla Nadasen, "We Do Whatever Becomes Necessary: Johnnie Tillmon, Welfare Rights, and Black Power." Edited by Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard. In *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Arkansas, a woman that grew up picking cotton, choose to fight the system that had controlled her for most of her life? What causes someone to go from anger to action? And more specifically, what propelled Johnnie Tillmon into the leader that she became?

Vital to understanding the ways that black women have been treated by the welfare system is developing an understanding of the long history of stereotypes about black people in general and black women in particular. By exploring the origin of these stereotypes, I hope to connect them to the formation of welfare policy in the United States. In *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, Stephanie M. H. Camp analyzes how the enslavement of black people, and specifically black women, was justified through the descriptions of Africans by Europeans in the 16th and 17th centuries. In my reading of Camp's work, it is clear that these stereotypes were very similar to the stereotypes black women in the early 20th century. In summary, Camp explains that African women's bodies were seen as "naturally fit" for work as opposed to white women's "idealized idle" bodies and that black women's bodies were also viewed as inherently sexual.¹⁹ Europeans went to Africa and observed Africans, what they saw was that Africans behaved differently than them. Because they saw women doing agricultural work topless, and also living in polygamous families, Europeans labeled the appearance and lifestyle of Africans as "savage" and "animalistic", and concluded Africans were not human and "made" for hard labor. In conjunction with this, they also commented on the way African women gave birth (with no pain medication) and concluded that they were physically stronger than white women. With these ideas formed in the minds of Englishmen, they changed the law to reflect the

¹⁹ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006.) 63.

same ideas. In England's colony of Virginia 1643 "African women were declared tithables (their labor could be taxed), along with all free white men and male heads of household." Two years later in 1645, the labor of African men was also declared taxable "and thus fell within the legal construction of African bodies as inherently laboring ones."²⁰ The reason I chose to include Camp's analysis is because of the similarity of terminology concerning the labor of black women during slavery later during the Progressive Era.²¹ During that time period, roughly 1890 to 1920, with the emergence of the welfare system, black women were again thought about in terms of the labor they provided the economy. Instead of being called "naturally fit", they were labeled "employable." The difference in this regard is that one term justified their enslavement and the other justified the denial of welfare. In both cases however, the law was blatantly used to reflect and cement racist ideas about black women. Despite the fact that slavery ended in 1865, the ideas that justified the enslavement of black people did not end with it. These ideas were manipulated to fit the current economy, and they did not go anywhere following emancipation. When welfare policy started to form, the same labels were attached to black women to justify their subjugation.

The previously mentioned books focused mostly on the history of the Welfare Rights movement. This is not a bad thing because not enough has been written about this movement. However, I think that my research on Johnnie Tillmon is part of a larger intellectual legacy of black women activists who can change the way we think about

²⁰ Camp, 63.

²¹ The Progressive Era (1890-1920) is characterized by sweeping amounts of social activism to fix the problems of industrialization and corruption. It is also the era that where welfare was first discussed in the form of mother's pensions.

Steven J. Diner, "Linking Politics and People: The Historiography of the Progressive Era," *OAH Magazine of History* 13, no. 3 (1999): 5-9. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163285>.

social movements and hopefully influence the way historians write about them. I believe that a great disservice has been done in the historiography of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s because members of these different movements were aware of one another, however their analyses are separated in the scholarship. This leads to the invisibility of the Welfare Rights Movement and the erasure of Johnnie Tillmon. There are arguments I can make about Tillmon's absence from historiographies of Second Wave Feminism Movement²² and the Civil Rights Movement²³ because she is not a white woman or a black man, and because she was also poor, and fat and on welfare. Because she was ignored by society and rendered a statistic, she was also ignored in the historical record of the time period. But for now I only want to point out the injustice of that erasure and the role I intend to play in trying to redress this. I believe there is a grave injustice in this fact and intend to eventually address this by writing a biography of Tillmon. To me, that is "what's at stake." I am hoping that my work will contribute to how conversations about poverty, race, gender, sex, age, and ability intersect and determine how an individual experiences it. By the end of this thesis, I hope to have proven that Johnnie Tillmon belongs among the leaders of the many social movements of

²² This movement began in the early 1960s and ended in the 1980s. Where the "First Wave" focused on suffrage, this wave focused on sexuality, families, reproductive rights, and the Equal Rights Amendment. It is often criticized for being a movement of middle class white women that ignored the problems facing black women, queer women, and women of color.

Rita Alfonso, and Jo Trigilio, "Surfing the Third Wave: A Dialogue between Two Third Wave Feminists." *Hypatia* 12, no. 3 (1997): 7-16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810219>.

²³ Or the Modern Civil Rights Movement began in the late 1950s with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. It is marked by legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It ended around 1968 with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and riots in major Northern cities.

Leigh Raiford and Renee Christine Romano, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2008.

the 1960s and 1970s. Not only was she active at the same time chronologically, but ideologically, her activism connected her to Anna Julia Cooper and Claudia Jones.

CHAPTER ONE

From Personae non Gratae to “Brood Mares”

“These debates (welfare policy) and the resulting legislation have been at root about maintaining white privilege, supporting the patriarchal family, and sustaining corporate interests.”¹

–Mary E. Triece in, *Tell it Like it is: Women in the National Welfare Rights Movement*

Three things characterize public assistance: relief is “expanded or contracted” based on the needs of the labor market,² racism has been imbedded in the welfare system since the beginning, and debates and policies about welfare are not only targeted at the ones in need (the poor), but also at the non-poor by labeling who is deserving and undeserving. By constantly telling the public that black women welfare recipients are undeserving, the public is then willing to also demonize these women effectively building resentment and divisiveness. This then garners public support for policies that limit access to welfare or defund welfare programs. Johnnie Tillmon felt that her position as a poor woman on welfare carried a stigma that ostracized her from people not on welfare. This is clear when she describes an incident that occurred in front of her housing project, which I detail later on in this thesis. In order to fully grasp the relationship between welfare recipients and the state, I will first go back to the time period known as the Progressive Era and analyze its historical connection to welfare policy.

ADC (Aid to Dependent Children) is the welfare program that Johnnie Tillmon and other welfare activists worked to reform through their local welfare rights organizations and the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). Its beginnings

¹ Mary Eleanor Triece, *Tell it Like it Is: Women in the National Welfare Rights Movement*, (Columbia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 2013,) 5.

² *Ibid*, 5.

sprang from white middle class reformers of the Progressive Era (1890-1920) that advocated for mother's pensions intended to help single women in need. However, not all single women were included in this description, the women in need had to be single because they were widowed. If they were divorced or never married, they were labeled "undeserving". In addition, assistance primarily targeted white widows, and white immigrant women from Northern and Southern Europe. Because reformers connected the uplift of mothers' living conditions with the uplift of their moral character, suitable home policies were enacted. These guidelines meant that aid to single mothers was contingent on the upkeep of their home and the condition of their children. They also insisted that recipients adhere to "moral codes" characterized by "celibacy, temperance, (speaking) English, and citizenship training, 'American' cooking and maternal domesticity."³ Added were supervision and investigative practices that enforced these policies and lasted until well into the 1960s.

Johnnie Tillmon spoke at length about these "investigative practices," frequently in the form of midnight raids by caseworkers, and how these raids left her feeling undignified. Because welfare promoted stay at home mothers (reinforcing the Cult of True Womanhood)⁴ and because this was intended for white women, black women were considered undeserving as they were classified as "employable." As Dorothy Roberts aptly describes in her book *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, "While Victorian roles required white women to be nurturing mothers, dutiful

³ Triece, 6.

⁴ The Cult of True Womanhood was a term that defined the 19th century ideology behind gender roles for white women. It identified four characteristics that were supposed to be central to white women's identity: piety, submissiveness, purity and domesticity. See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-74. doi:10.2307/2711179.

housekeepers, and gentle companions to their husbands, slave women's role required backbreaking work in the fields.”⁵ This role for black women continued after Emancipation. By this logic, black women could always find agricultural or domestic work thus they were not welcome on welfare.

The New Deal (1933-1938) absorbed the mother's pension program into a federal welfare system.⁶ According to Gwendolyn Mink, black women were actively stereotyped as “employable” and “ill suited to domestic motherhood by a long toil of work outside of the home,”⁷ but were also seen as “lazy, immoral and promiscuous.”⁸ The contradictory nature of these descriptions served to justify the rejection of black women on welfare rolls, while also ensuring that black women were available for agricultural and domestic work. In 1935 Mother's pensions were assigned to a program separate from Social Insurance, social security and employment insurance for men. White male workers and their wives were entitled to Social Insurance, but ADC was given to poor single mothers. The stratification of welfare along racial and gender categories effectively created a hierarchy with Social Insurance recipients at the top, and ADC recipients at the bottom. ADC was formed with the stereotypes of black women as lazy and immoral in mind. These stereotypes were repeated and believed by state officials and lawmakers. For example, in 1939 a welfare program supervisor said, “The number of Negro cases is few due to the unanimous feeling of the staff and board that there were more work opportunities for Negro women and to their intense desire not to interfere with local labor

⁵ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1997,) 15.

⁶ Ibid, 205.

⁷ Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006,) 51.

⁸ Triece, 7.

conditions. The attitude that ‘they have always gotten along,’ and that ‘all they’ll do is have more children’ is definite.”⁹ In 1939 Congress changed the legislation in order for widows and children to be covered by Old Age Insurance (OAI)¹⁰ and people on ADC became further stigmatized because now all of the “deserving” women were off of ADC and covered by OAI. In addition, because black men were not eligible for Social Security benefits, their widows and children were left on ADC as well.

The modern Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) helped to open up the welfare system to more black recipients. Before that welfare rolls were around 86% white, but with the implementation of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty program (1964) in addition to the elimination of racist policies in the New Deal, the amount of non-white recipients rose to about 46%.¹¹ Therefore, the point is not that there were no black citizens receiving benefits before the Civil Rights Movement, rather the amount of black people rose significantly during the 1960s. Because more black women received welfare in this time period, these recipients were now viewed as a problem. This change in policy and subsequent attitudes associated with it highlights the links between race and welfare, and provides an example of the extent to which inequity was written into welfare laws. According to the guidelines of ADC, black widows and children should have been considered “deserving” of relief. However, black women being labeled as employable meant that even if they fell into the “deserving” category, they still were not eligible to receive aid. By allowing white widows and children to receive aid under OAI, the government ensured that when black women applied for benefit, they would be primarily concentrated within ADC. By the 1960s with 46% of ADC recipients now being non-

⁹ Triece, 7.

¹⁰ Now known as known as Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance.

¹¹ Roberts, 207.

white women, welfare policy makers, lawmakers and even the media could effectively label welfare as a problem because it fulfilled the stereotypes about black women that they already believed.

Another hindrance to black women receiving welfare came from the fact that states were and are still in control of benefits. In a context where many states were already hostile to the needs of black people, the fact that federal welfare benefits were controlled by state authorities set up a situation in which states could deny aid to black applicants, thereby limiting the number of black recipients on their welfare rolls. Southern states could and did deny aid to black women so that they would work during harvest season. In states like Arkansas, Georgia and Louisiana black women were kept off of welfare rolls during harvesting season through the use of farm policies, where states limited ADC payments to ensure that black women were available for fieldwork. Although there is no proof (yet) that Johnnie Tillmon applied for welfare in Arkansas, if she had she would have been affected by this. As part of the New Deal, northern lawmakers made a deal with southern lawmakers that allowed the systematic denial of black people from social insurance benefits.¹² Federal programs let states define eligibility requirements, and as a result southern states excluded black fieldworkers and domestic workers from welfare programs. “Whites feared that Social Security would make both recipients and those freed from the burden of supporting dependents less willing to accept low wages.”¹³ The exclusion also ensured that the south would maintain a “Black menial labor caste.”¹⁴

¹² Triece, 8.

¹³ Roberts, 206.

¹⁴ Ibid.

As previously mentioned, in 1939 widows were added to OAI. Because of this ADC now had a significant number of non-white welfare recipients. Although the majority of recipients were still white women, the stigma attached to ADC seemingly targeted black women and other women of color receiving aid from the program. Therefore, the conversation around race and welfare changed from black women not being eligible because they were “employable,” to black women receiving welfare and being viewed as “chiselers,” being labeled as a problem. In *Tell it Like it is*, Mary E. Triece traces the combined efforts of the media and government officials to label welfare recipients as “chiselers.” The slander against women on welfare also included a series of articles that appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1949 that chronicled the many things that welfare women supposedly spent their money on. These articles commandeered the conversations around welfare to effectively label black women on welfare as “leeches” that used their state benefits to purchase “maids, radios, TV sets, cars and jewelry.”¹⁵ State and local welfare agencies investigated these claims and turned up nothing. To this day, the image of welfare “chiseler” or the extremely popular and prevalent term “welfare queen” gets attached to welfare recipients, particularly black women.¹⁶ Not only do these descriptions of ADC recipients create a stigma around

¹⁵ Triece, 8.

¹⁶ “Welfare queen” was used by Ronald Reagan during a campaign rally for the 1976 presidential election to describe a black woman that used different names, addresses and social security numbers to essentially rob the welfare system. His description was based on the case of Linda Taylor, a woman listed in the census as white, who in 1977 was convicted of welfare fraud in Chicago. It was actually the Chicago Tribune that labeled Taylor, “welfare queen,” but Reagan’s use of the term solidified the image of women on welfare as black.

See “Looking Back: Ronald Reagan, a Master of Racial Polarization.” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 58 (2007): 33-36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25073820> and Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, “The Crime of Survival”: Fraud Prosecutions, Community Surveillance, and the Original “Welfare Queen” *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 2 (2007): 329-54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25096482>.

welfare, but it also allows the state and federal governments to implement strict policies that limit access to ADC. These policies include compulsory work rules, (thus reinforcing a requirement for black women to be employable,) and residency requirements. The active participation of the media in the labeling of black women on welfare as “chiselers” persisted at least until 1963, the year that Johnnie Tillmon had to apply for ANC (Aid to Needy Children), which was the name for ADC in California. When she found herself in need of government aid, she had to combat a stereotype decades in the making. In conjunction with this, Tillmon along with other women on welfare found themselves battling a brand new label courtesy of US Senator Russell Long, that of “brood mares.”

“Brood Mare” Stampede

The term “brood mares” came from Senator Russell Long, a senator from Louisiana, in 1968 when he was the leader of the Senate Finance Committee. He called Johnnie Tillmon and the women that accompanied her to the Senate meeting “brood mares” when he had them removed from a hearing, despite the fact that they had been invited to speak on the 1967 amendments to the Social Security Act. The act was amended in order to limit the amount of women applying to welfare by requiring welfare recipients to attend work-training programs. Congress also froze federal money keeping states from accepting new recipients. To be clear, a brood mare is literally a horse used for breeding. He angrily called them “brood mares” after they began to testify and then went on to say,

If they can find the time to march in the streets, picket, and sit all day in committee hearing rooms, they can find the time to do some useful work. They could be picking up litter in front of their houses or killing rats instead of impeding the work of Congress.¹⁷

¹⁷ Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005,) 200.

He also interrupted Tillmon while she was speaking to complain that because of welfare he no longer had someone to iron his shirts.¹⁸ Thus proving that the US relied on the labor of black women and that black women receiving welfare benefits was viewed as an end to that. The women were threatened with six months of jail time if they did not leave peacefully. In response to Senator Long's slur and also in response to the 1967 amendments, welfare women, led by Johnnie Tillmon, organized a series of protests that Tillmon called a "brood mare stampede."¹⁹ The protests began on Mother's Day in 1968 and lasted through the summer. Welfare women, sometimes with their children, camped outside of congressmen's homes, welfare centers and seats of government. They demanded their right to have children and condemned the assumption that they had too many. They viewed the series of amendments as the government's way of controlling their children. "The welfare officials want to break up our families. We refuse to be separated from our children one by one like puppies [sic.] being separated from their mothers."²⁰

There are two aspects of welfare women's response to "brood mares" that need to be explored. The first is in the previous statement about how the amendments to the Social Security Act made them feel. The statement very obviously conjures up images of slavery, specifically of the forced separation of mothers from their children and the breakup of families. For welfare women to liken welfare officials to slave masters separating them from their children, highlighted the legacy of slavery in how black women were viewed by the power structure consisting of white leaders and lawmakers. It

¹⁸ Orleck, 200.

¹⁹ Deborah G. White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (NY, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 236.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 236.

also demonstrated that these women were aware of how welfare was another system of control akin to slavery and how both systems were intent on controlling their bodies and their sexuality. The “brood mare stampede” also shows the willingness of welfare women to almost embrace the term rather distance themselves from it, and then organize around it. The reason for this could be because they linked the term “brood mare” to slavery and wanted to somehow take back the control of their bodies from the system by refusing “to internalize negative perceptions.”²¹ Whatever the reason, their reaction to the label set them apart from middle class black women whom when confronted with stereotypes of black women as inherently sexual chose to completely rebuke the label by adhering to a strict set of rules that included limiting the number of children they had.²²

The Moynihan Report & Welfare

The Negro Family: The Case for National Action commonly known as “The Moynihan Report” was written in 1965 by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. A New York senator from 1977 until 2001, he had a Bachelors of Arts in sociology from Tufts University and eventually completed a doctorate in history, also from Tufts. He also worked at Syracuse University the same time as George Wiley, where the two men clashed politically and ideologically. Wiley was a chemistry professor at Syracuse University and had been a leader in a chapter of CORE (Congress for Racial Equality.) He wanted to create a national organization for the poor after witnessing the momentum of local welfare rights groups around the country. He came from a black middle class family and felt organizing poor people would lead to the end of poverty, not only for Black Americans, but for everyone. He would later on become the president of the

²¹ White, 236.

²² Ibid, 237.

National Welfare Rights Organization in 1967 and its chief fundraiser. In 1965 Moynihan was the Assistant Secretary of Labor, a position that allowed him to formulate policy for President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty.²³ The report argued that the single most pressing obstacle facing Black Americans was the destruction of the "Negro Family." He said that slavery was responsible for "emasculating" black men, and that slavery forced black families into a "matriarchal structure."²⁴ He suggested that the high rate of single parent homes among black families, led by women, was responsible for the reliance of black women on welfare, and that black families were trapped in a "tangle of pathology."²⁵ The solution to this problem was to solve black male unemployment which would encourage black families to adopt a two-parent family structure, and for young black men to join the military. The military, according to Moynihan, "is an utterly masculine world,"²⁶ where young black men can escape their matriarchal upbringings, and grow into men that will "re-establish patriarchy"²⁷ in black families.

The pertinent issue raised in this report was Moynihan's thoughts about the welfare system, which I will discuss later on in this section. The Moynihan report did not take into account years of discrimination against black people that kept them out of schools, jobs and housing. Nor did he place any blame on the systemic practices of the

²³ Nickname for legislation proposed by President Johnson in order to expand the federal government's role in health, education and poverty. This program established the OEO (Office of Economic Opportunity,) Job Corps, and VISTA programs.

²⁴ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, Office of Policy, Planning, and Research, United States Department of Labor*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965,) 29.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 29.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 42.

²⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, "A Comparison of Two Works on Black Family Life." *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 880. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174688>.

federal government, like the Homestead Act²⁸, for essentially allowing white families the opportunity to create their own wealth while excluding black families. The report offered a brief explanation of how slavery affected black families, but no critique of how the failure of Reconstruction basically guaranteed that poor black families would remain poor and uneducated. He did say that the end of Reconstruction and the emergence of Jim Crow had more of an affect on “the male personality” rather than the “female personality.” According to Moynihan because Jim Crow dictated a submissive role for black people, the effect on black men rendered them unable to be the heads of their families. He believed that Jim Crow had no effect on black women because “the female was not a threat to anyone.”²⁹ Implied in this belief is that black men are the only ones that are affected by racism and because of this, any policies or movements that focus on ending racism, should solely concentrate on black men. This statement is both also a lie and a contradiction.

From my previous discussion on welfare policy, and Senator Long’s remarks about women on welfare, it is obvious that black women, in particular black women on welfare were viewed as a threat. In addition, there is extensive scholarship on Jim Crow and its particular effect on black women. For example, in *Living with Jim Crow: African-American Women and Memories of the Segregated South* black women explicitly talk about their experiences living in the south during Jim Crow and the effect it had on them

²⁸ A series of acts that were implemented starting in 1862 that gave away land to any US citizen that had fought for the country in the military. It is estimated that 270 million acres was converted to, mostly white, private ownership.

See Jason E. Pierce, "THE POLITICS OF WHITENESS AND WESTERN EXPANSION, 1848-80." In *Making the White Man's West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West*, 123-50. Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19jcg63.11>.

²⁹ Moynihan, 16.

emotionally and mentally.³⁰ It also tears apart the misguided assumption that black men are the only ones that suffer because of racism. The rising numbers of black women on welfare rolls in the South raised the concern that their former employers had no one to plow their fields or watch their children. According to Senator Long, their protesting kept them from doing “useful work,” such as ironing his shirts. In addition, their sexuality had always been deemed threatening and in need of control, whether through the slavery system or through the welfare system.³¹ Moynihan blamed black women for the destruction of the “Negro family” while simultaneously dismissing the effects that Reconstruction and Jim Crow had on black women. He rendered them invisible, but also labeled them source of the problem.

The Moynihan Report was deeply flawed and concluded that the object of the federal government “should be to strengthen the Negro Family,” and that in doing this, black families should be able to support themselves. “After that, how this group of Americans chooses to run its affairs, take advantage of its opportunities, or fail to do so, is none of the nation’s business.”³² This justified the removal of any type of social support; if black families did not adhere to the patriarchal model of a family, then they did not deserve help. Through his report Moynihan made the ideal black family, a nuclear, male-headed black family, something that has rarely been a reality in US history.

Surprisingly, regarding welfare, the report actually says very little. Moynihan gave welfare about one full page of his thoughts combined with a bar graph of data

³⁰ Anne M. Valk and Leslie Brown, *Living with Jim Crow: African American Women and Memories of the Segregated South*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.)

³¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, (New York: Routledge, 2006,) 120 and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 1991,) 189, 194-95. Roberts, 209-235.

³² Moynihan, 48.

detailing the rise of unemployment among non-white men and the rising number of AFDC (Aid to Families of Dependent Children) non-white applicants. According to Moynihan this graph proved that unemployment among non-white males was directly responsible for the number of single women on welfare. However, there was a glaring inconsistency in his logic. Unemployment rates among black men do not completely explain why there were so many black women applying for welfare, in this case correlation does not equal causation. Among black families, poor, working class and middle class, there is a long history of both men and women needing to work in order to support their families. This means that if Moynihan really wanted to look at unemployment and its effects on welfare rolls, he should have also analyzed black women's unemployment rates.³³ His graph was a lazy way to justify the "male as breadwinner" role for white men, but it had no place in this discussion. For black families, it placed the individual at fault for the rise in AFDC recipients when the fault should have been on an economic system that did not pay workers enough money to sustain themselves and their families.

There was a connection between Moynihan's report and the NWRO. Moynihan focused on solving the problem of black male unemployment and in NWRO some men felt the same way. White organizers in NWRO suggested that the organization support the AFDC-UP³⁴ (Aid to Families with Dependent Children-Unemployed Parents) program, rather than reforming the AFDC program.³⁵ Underlining the support of AFDC-

³³ Or even look solely at single black women's unemployment rates. They are the ones that applied for aid and if they were married or had a live in boyfriend, they would be denied.

³⁴ AFDC-UP program was part of 1961 amendments to the Social Security Act. It allowed AFDC to give aid to two-parent families where one or both parents were unemployed.

³⁵ Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981), 86.

UP by organizers in NWRO was the idea that two-parent families were successful, and families headed by single mothers were not. These supporters believed that the AFDC program promoted single motherhood. Even within NWRO, there was a push for poor families to emulate the white patriarchal family model. The organizers were not able to convince members to support AFDC-UP because the membership of the organization primarily consisted of single mothers that were fighting for changes in AFDC that would allow them to work and raise their children, without a man, or stay home and raise their children with money from a guaranteed income. According to West, “Their top priority was getting government support for families headed by women, both through adequate welfare benefits and through jobs at decent wages.”³⁶ In “Welfare is a Women’s Issue” Johnnie Tillmon wrote, “You trade in *a* man for *the* man. But you can’t divorce him if he treats you bad. He can divorce *you*, cut you off anytime he wants. But in that case, *he* keeps the kids.”³⁷ Moynihan believed the opposite of Tillmon’s statement. His report implied that black women would rely less on welfare if black men were employed and supporting their families, what he did not address was the low wages that would keep poor families in poverty even if both parents were wage earners.³⁸ The Moynihan Report highlighted the lack of understanding on the part of Moynihan, the white organizers in NWRO, and American society at large when it came to ending poverty. It also reinforced the need for poor women on welfare to speak for themselves.

Introducing Mrs. Johnnie Tillmon

³⁶ West, 86.

³⁷ Johnnie Tillmon. "Welfare." *Ms*, 07, 1995. 50, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/204297988?accountid=13701>

³⁸ A problem that has only gotten worse in the 21st century, hence the term “working poor.”

I wrote a brief biography of Johnnie Tillmon in the introduction, but this section seeks to fully describe Tillmon's trajectory from laundress and shop steward to first chairperson and eventual president of the National Welfare Rights Movement.

Tillmon moved from Little Rock, Arkansas in 1959 or 1960. She moved to Watts, California to be with her brothers because her father passed away, whom she was caring for, or she left "because most of her other family members had died."³⁹ In California she worked at a laundry ironing shirts and subsequently became shop steward of the laundry and dye workers union she belonged to. Simultaneously she began working with the Nickerson Gardens Planning Organization. Nickerson Gardens is the largest housing project in California and was also where Tillmon lived with five of her six children. As part of their work, members of the organization helped people living in the housing project if they lost their job and were applying for welfare, or if a tenant was in danger of being evicted. In 1963, Tillmon became ill and was hospitalized. Because she could no longer work, the organization stepped in to help her apply for welfare. In fact, the president of the Nickerson Gardens Planning Organization helped her apply, "made the necessary phone calls, they made the initial contacts, they got in touch with some political representatives."⁴⁰

Tillmon did not want to apply for welfare. "Before I was a welfare recipient I used to hear wild stories told by women on welfare about the problems with the social workers, with the midnight raids, with the checks not coming on time...lots of time people had such a hard time getting on welfare when they really needed it, so I did not

³⁹ Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2005, 19.

⁴⁰ Johnnie Tillmon, Interview by Guida West July 30, 1974, transcript, Sophia Smith Collection and Smith College Archives Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, MA, 1.

want to become a welfare recipient.”⁴¹ However, Tillmon did not really have a choice, she was sick and had recently found out that her oldest daughter was skipping school ⁴²so she acquiesced and became a welfare recipient. If she was not a part of the Nickerson Gardens Planning Organization, Tillmon probably would not have ever applied for welfare. Her application process was seemingly expedited because of her relationship with the head of the planning organization.

Almost as soon as Tillmon started receiving welfare, she noticed how poorly she was treated. For example, “her welfare budget outlines how to spend her money.”⁴³ Her caseworkers actually inventoried her refrigerator and monitored any purchases she made. Her housing project was located behind one of the largest churches in Los Angeles and “the people that attended that church were mostly what we call middle class black who dress up on Sundays and go to serve the Lord.” The church did not have enough parking for the congregation so some members would park in the parking lot of the housing project without permission. According to Tillmon, there was a woman that was not on welfare, but worked twelve-hour days and lived in the housing project. The building supervisors would come and check the grass in front of the tenant’s homes and if the grass needed to be watered, they would turn on the sprinklers and fine the tenant. In order to avoid this, this one woman would leave her sprinklers on all weekend to keep her grass wet. One Sunday, a patron of the church, a black woman, parked her 1959 Ford in front of the aforementioned woman’s apartment. While this woman was in church, the sprinklers were on and her car was wet when she came out that afternoon. “...She saw this water on her car and performed something terrible and she talked about people who

⁴¹ Tillmon, West Interview, 1974, 1.

⁴² Nadasen, 19. Tillmon, West Interview, 1974, 1.

⁴³ Nadasen, 19.

lived in the housing project and she made one statement that stuck with us that was ‘a bunch of lazy folks all on welfare living off of my money.’ And that stuck in my mind.”⁴⁴

Tillmon was so affected by this one incident that by Tuesday she was in the office of the president of the planning organization, a man known as Mr. Griggs, asking about starting an organization that “emphasized not only services, but also jobs and training for women.”⁴⁵ Tillmon was rightfully upset, probably even angered by the situation and decided, “to do something about it.” The fact that a middle class black woman was the agitator in this case is a harbinger of the future divide between poor women that were members of the National Welfare Rights Organization and women that made up the membership of a group like the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW.) I will be addressing this division later on in this thesis, but I do not think that it is a coincidence that when the NWRO was founded and running, there was almost no interaction between the two groups of women. While trying to figure out why Tillmon aligned herself with mainstream feminist groups I think it is crucial not to ignore this incident and the effect it had on Tillmon’s activism.

Many of the women that Tillmon knew that were on welfare were not ashamed to be, but wanted something better. A lot of the women also knew that they would be able to work if they could afford daycare. This is extremely important because one of the victories for the organization Tillmon started, ANC Mothers Anonymous, was the daycare they opened in 1974 named after Johnnie Tillmon. She approached the president of the planning organization, Mr. Griggs to figure out if he could somehow help her find other women on welfare in the housing project so that they could begin to organize. He

⁴⁴ Tillmon, West Interview 1974, 1.

⁴⁵ West, 92.

was adamant that he could not give her tenants address information, so when he left the office Tillmon along with a couple of women she knew that were also on welfare, began to snoop. They found several folders that were marked with “ANC” for the welfare program Aid to Needy Children, and got nine or ten names and addresses of recipients from these folders. For awhile they went door to door asking women if they wanted to come to the first meeting of this yet unnamed organization. This resulted in a lot of slammed doors with a few acceptances. Tillmon gives a few reasons why their door-to-door campaign was ineffective, “we realized that we were frightening...it was really strange, and social workers, and they didn’t know who we were – whether we were spies or what. It was understandable.”⁴⁶ Tillmon and her cohort lasted one day knocking on doors looking for potential members. Everyone left except for Adelpia Hickey.⁴⁷

Tillmon, at home in her apartment, began to fry chicken and, with Hickey taking notes, came up with a rough draft for a letter that could be sent to women on welfare in Nickerson Gardens. This letter essentially let the recipient know that there was going to be a meeting to “discuss your warrant and your lease—your warrant meaning your welfare check, and your lease, your housing,” and their attendance was requested.⁴⁸ After Hickey was finished writing the letter, they decided to bring it to Mr. Griggs and see if he would sign it. Griggs agreed to sign it, but again let the women know that they could not have access to the roster because it would be a breach of confidentiality. If the women could get the letter printed and copied, he suggested his secretary would address the letters and then give them to the women to mail. Once it was established that Griggs

⁴⁶ Tillmon, West Interview 1974, 3.

⁴⁷ I cannot find any information about Hickey except for what is in West’s interview with Tillmon. All I know is that in 1974 she was in charge of the “Half a Chance Campaign” fundraiser for the NWRO. And that Tillmon knew her from the housing project they both lived in.

⁴⁸ Tillmon, West Interview, 1974, 3.

would sign the letter, the women figured out a way to get the letter printed and copied. They were able to enlist the help of a man that was the head of the night school at a local high school. He used his own paper to make the copies, the women gathered envelopes and stamps and got ready to mail out the letters. Before they did this however, Tillmon said, “We will not mail these—not right now--because we have to copy every name and address of every family to build up our own roster. And by law he (Griggs) did not give us the roster because we did not see these folks files. So we developed our own roster.”⁴⁹

Tillmon’s next step was to develop a questionnaire. It asked basic things from how many children were in the home to the academic backgrounds of the women. The most important question was, “If you had an opportunity to go back to school and be retrained for a job, what would you do?” The women responded with what they would like to be trained in. Tillmon and her group of welfare women were able to contact and question six hundred welfare recipients. Out of the six hundred women that were surveyed, only one said she would rather stay on welfare than receive training and employment. One woman wanted to be a mortician so the women figured out how much it would cost for the training, and found a mortician in the neighborhood that was willing to train the woman and give her employment for a year. The cost was \$1000, but when they approached the welfare department for the money, they were denied. In 1973 the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act⁵⁰ adopted a similar program, but in 1963

⁴⁹ Tillmon, West Interview, 1974, 3.

⁵⁰ The Comprehensive Education and Training Act, was enacted under President Richard Nixon’s administration. It offered work to people with low incomes. It also offered full time work for 12 to 24 months in not for profit companies.

when Tillmon came up the idea, “they would not go along with this job program initiated by welfare mothers.”⁵¹

In addition to this one instance, another situation occurred a few years later in which Tillmon confronted welfare authorities to provide jobs for women on welfare. They had “1000 applications already filled out for jobs.” They didn’t care where the jobs came from; “but if they couldn’t come up with jobs, then they should leave them alone and put some money in the checks.”⁵² Because Tillmon knew that most women on welfare did not want to be on welfare, she was adamant about finding job training and employment for these women. This was the main goal of the ANC Mothers, along with free or affordable childcare. If the welfare department found out what they were doing, they could have been punished by being taken off of welfare or having their funds decreased. They dropped the ‘anonymous’ eventually, but I am not sure when. Tillmon told West that they worked together essentially underground for about eighteen months without officially calling themselves an organization.⁵³ I am unclear if this when they used the ‘anonymous’, but I am making an educated guess that this is the case. The work the ANC Mothers were doing was definitely getting noticed because Tillmon mentioned that they would receive phone calls from social workers claiming, “that we were trying to do their business and trying to start trouble...and the department got kind of shook up because they didn’t know who we were.”⁵⁴ All of this culminated in an invitation to attend the first meeting of what would eventually become a national welfare rights group.

⁵¹ West, 92.

⁵² West, 92.

⁵³ Tillmon, West Interview 1974, 4.

⁵⁴ Tillmon, West Interview 1974, 4.

While Tillmon had been organizing in Southern California, Timothy Sampson, a white organizer, had been active in welfare rights in Northern California. Sampson invited Tillmon and other members of ANC Mothers to the first meeting of a statewide welfare rights organization. At the meeting, the constitution of the organization was to be read. Tillmon had no intention of listening to what Sampson had written and in fact she questioned what right he had to go into a predominantly black community and organize welfare mothers. She thought he was only looking for control.⁵⁵ She ended up ripping up Sampson's constitution that night and Sampson immediately resigned as leader of the group. It seems that Sampson and Tillmon agreed about the problems facing welfare recipients, but not did not agree on who should be organizing them. Tillmon felt that women on welfare should organize themselves and organizers like Sampson should support them. Across the United States, welfare organizations were springing up; in New York, a group was led by Beulah Sanders⁵⁶ and Jeanette Washington⁵⁷, Boston had its own organization as well led by a white organizer from Massachusetts, Bill Pastreich.⁵⁸ These various organizations and leaders would all eventually end up in D.C. in 1967 as part of the National Welfare Rights Organization, and I am mentioning them here to show that Tillmon's work did not happen in a vacuum. There was a welfare rights movement occurring and Tillmon would ultimately become, for many people, the face of that movement.

⁵⁵ West, 85.

⁵⁶ Leader of the New York Welfare Rights Organization; anti-war activist. She became the vice chair of NWRO in 1971, but was on the board of directors since 1967.

⁵⁷ Also from New York; Washington and Sanders jointly helped organize the West Side Welfare Recipients League a local welfare rights group that originally started in Brooklyn.

⁵⁸ Bill Pastreich was a welfare activist in Massachusetts. He is responsible for creating the "Boston model" of organizing. He is still alive and organizing in Boston.

In February 1966 Tillmon was still organizing in Watts, California when a man named Norman Coads came looking for her in Los Angeles. At the time she was in Oakland, California at a meeting for the Federation of the Poor. When Coads finally met her, he invited her to a meeting that was being held in Washington D.C. in April of 1966 that was to be the first meeting where local welfare rights groups would come together in order to form a national movement. As it turns out this was an annual meeting known as “The Citizens Crusade Against Poverty.” The CCAP was a “liberal establishment group which sought to ensure that the government’s War on Poverty programs lived up to their promises.”⁵⁹ Tillmon was nominated by a man she had been organizing with, Dr. Al Canon, to be one of three individuals that would represent California at the meeting. The “crusade” was organized by the United Automobile Workers (UAW) and Walter Reuther.⁶⁰ Other speakers at the event were Roy Wilkins⁶¹ from the NAACP and Sargent Shriver⁶² who was the head of the Office of Economic Opportunity at the time. It seems that Shriver had an idea about how this meeting was supposed to go, but when he started speaking, he was immediately met with boos from the crowd of people in attendance. He was speaking to an audience full of poor people that did not believe a word he said. His speech was “sprinkled with success stories from the War on Poverty,”⁶³ but the audience knew that Lyndon Johnson’s poverty program had not impacted them positively. When

⁵⁹ West, 26.

⁶⁰ Comrade turned enemy, Reuther worked with Communists in the early 1930s and then in the 1940s was instrumental in removing them from the UAW. In the 1960s he was a strong supporter of the Civil Rights Movement and was responsible for the UAW becoming influential in the Democratic Party. For more information see, Nelson Lichtenstein, "Reuther the Red?" *Labour / Le Travail* 51 (2003): 165-69, doi:10.2307/25149336.

⁶¹ Roy Wilkins, b. 1901, d. 2011. Wilkins was leader of the NAACP from 1955-1977.

⁶² (1915-2011) Shriver was an integral part of Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty program. He founded the Job Corps, Vista, and Head Start programs.

⁶³ Nick Kotz & Mary Lynn Kotz. *A Passion for Equality: George A. Wiley and the Movement*. New York: Norton, 1979, 185.

Tillmon spoke at the meeting she, “called the Poverty Program ‘a lie’, -- a big lie.”⁶⁴

Furthermore she said, “When all the money is spent, the rich will get richer and I will still be receiving a welfare check.”⁶⁵ She was terrified to speak in front of so many people for the first time, but her ten-minute speech propelled her into the national spotlight, and got the attention of George Wiley.

The meeting in Chicago and Chairwoman Johnnie Tillmon

In between the meeting in Washington D.C. of April 1966 and the first meeting of the National Welfare Rights Organization in Chicago in August of the same year, Tillmon continued working in California. She found a job as a campaign office manager.⁶⁶ While working here, she was visited by Edwin Day⁶⁷ who told her that Wiley had heard her speak and said, “that’s the kind of people that we want to get involved with us.”⁶⁸ He extended an invitation to her for the first meeting of the NWRO, but she did not really expect to see him ever again. She was more concerned with getting the man she worked for elected, and securing a job with him if he won.⁶⁹

Very soon after Tillmon was introduced to Day, Timothy Sampson met with her. This occurred before the incident where Tillmon tore up Sampson’s constitution. She described Sampson as “a loudmouth who had come out of UCLA,” and “likes to think of himself as an organizer.”⁷⁰ Sampson had heard of Tillmon and the ANC Mothers and

⁶⁴ Tillmon, West Interview, 1974, 5.

⁶⁵ Kotz & Kotz, 185.

⁶⁶ I cannot figure out who Tillmon was working for in 1966. It was definitely a Democrat because in the 1966 elections, the Republicans won all of their elections, and she mentions that whomever she was working for did not win. My inability to find more details on Tillmon and the NWRO will be further explained in chapter 3.

⁶⁷ Edwin Day was a colleague of George Wiley. They worked together in the Syracuse chapter of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality, he agreed to work with Wiley in DC.; I cannot find a year.

⁶⁸ Tillmon, West Interview, 1974, 5.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 6.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 6.

wanted her to join him in creating a statewide welfare organization. She was not interested; plainly put: she did not trust Sampson, or any white organizers. “I do feel that they were organizing in some way so that they could have the control. And our ANC Mothers, we wouldn’t have any kind of control because I wasn’t going to let them do that.”⁷¹ Sampson organized a meeting where he was going to present a proposal and constitution for a California welfare rights group. Although Tillmon had previously feigned indifference towards Sampson’s suggestion, she was very interested in attending this meeting. Her plan was to go to the meeting, read the constitution, and if she liked it, “we’ll just take it over.”⁷² She arranged carpools for herself and the other women of ANC Mothers, about eleven cars full (around 44 to 55 women,) and went to the meeting. After having his constitution ripped up in his face, Sampson told “the ladies”, a name he had given them, that he would no longer interfere with the meeting, but suggested that they pick someone to represent California at the national meeting in Chicago. Tillmon was nominated by one of the women she came with, there was another woman also nominated, but she declined the nomination and gave her vote to Tillmon. Johnnie Tillmon did not really make the connection between the meeting Edwin Day had invited her to, and the meeting she had just been voted to attend. Her intention in attending Sampson’s function was to show him that he could not come into a neighborhood and control the people. If he wanted to help women on welfare and poor people, he should support them, not control them.⁷³ Sometime after this meeting, in December, the California Welfare Rights Organization was formed and Tillmon was elected its first

⁷¹ Tillmon, West Interview, 1974, 6.

⁷² Ibid, 6.

⁷³ Tillmon, West Interview, 1974, 7.

president. In August of 1967 she went to Chicago for the first nationwide meeting of welfare organizations.

Johnnie Tillmon became the chairman of the NWRO during the first day of the convention in Chicago. Representatives held a night meeting where all of the organizers from nineteen states spoke about their welfare organizations. Tillmon, tired from the long day, was ready to leave and get away from the 150 people that had shown up for the meeting. George Wiley suggested appointing a chairman for the rest of the convention, and then started asking people to make nominations. Tillmon, along with a woman name Etta Horn was selected. She says, “Etta declined before I could decline and I dropped with the chairmanship.”⁷⁴ This meeting seems to have lasted the entire night. There was no real agenda; instead it functioned as a consciousness raising session for welfare recipients: an opportunity for them to speak about their problems applying for and receiving welfare, incidents with social workers, and complaints about the new food stamp system. Tillmon’s chairmanship was temporary, only in place for a year while the organization developed a nominating committee and became an official group.

At the August convention of 1967, she officially became chairman. Tillmon was essentially putting out fires left and right at the convention of 1967. There had been trouble with some of the welfare delegates from different states. Members were upset because their states were not being represented on the nominating committee. Nineteen delegates from the nineteen states with welfare organizations had sent representatives, but there were only eleven people chosen, by Tillmon, for the committee. The noisiest complainants were from New York, Beulah Sanders was the delegate from the group, but

⁷⁴ Tillmon, West Interview, 1974, 10.

even she could not control her colleagues. Tillmon took them outside of where one of the meetings was being held so she would not disturb the speaker, and tried to iron out their problems. While she was outside, there were elections deciding the national officers for the NWRO and someone ran out and told Tillmon she had been chosen as the official chairman. Apparently someone had nominated her and when the voting commenced she was declared the winner, despite the fact that she had no idea what was happening.

In this section I have tried to create a timeline for Tillmon's early activism. As Tillmon started to become a recognized leader in the movement, the similarities between her activism and the activism of black women before her became clearly defined. The next chapter explores how Johnnie Tillmon is intellectually connected to black women activists starting with the Black Women's Club Movement of the late 19th and early 20th century.

CHAPTER TWO

**“Maybe we poor welfare women will really liberate women in this country:”
Definitions of Liberation from Anna Julia Cooper to Johnnie Tillmon
--Quotation from Johnnie Tillmon in “Welfare is a Women’s Issue,” *Ms.
Magazine*, (Spring, 1972)**

This quote spoken by Tillmon in 1972 fully encapsulates the mission of Johnnie Tillmon and other black women on welfare: to liberate all women regardless of race or economic background. This is important because it demonstrates her larger commitment to women, which was not necessarily a “race first” paradigm. Inherent in this statement is Tillmon’s goal, but also her connection to previous movements led by black women in the United States. This chapter explores the ways in which Tillmon’s words echo the belief held by black women from Sojourner Truth¹ to Frances Beale²; that the liberation of black women would ensure the liberation of all oppressed and marginalized people. Using this quote and similar statements from Anna Julia Cooper, and Claudia Jones³, I will link Tillmon to the Black Women’s Club Movement, and early left Black Feminism. My goal is to show that Tillmon’s philosophy was not new and was, in fact, part of a long history of black women’s activism. I will also demonstrate that Tillmon’s activism differed because she centered her movement around class where the other movements, with the exception of black communist women, did not. Through the exploration of Tillmon’s words and her connection to these other women, I will show that this part of

¹ Sojourner Truth is often considered the foremother of black feminist theory because she is the first person to articulate the dual nature of black women’s oppression. Her thoughts were solidified in the writing of Anna Julia Cooper.

² Beale is most known for her article, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” where she analyzes the double exploitation of black women face in the US. She also founded the black feminist group, TWWA (Third World Women’s Alliance.) See Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1970.

³ I will discuss both of these women later on in this chapter.

her activism successfully makes the case for her as an organic intellectual. It will prove that Tillmon did not come to the ideology through traditional means, as in theoretical and academic work, but that it was organic in origin, gained through lived experience, and that even though it is organic, it is still relevant and appropriate in traditionally intellectual settings.

I entitled this chapter “Definitions of Liberation” because it is clear to me that from Sojourner Truth to Johnnie Tillmon, black women have defined liberation not in terms of equality, but in terms of justice. In this regard liberation movements in this country like the modern Civil Rights movement or Women’s Liberation Movement have worked on gaining access to the freedoms that white men have; they want a seat at the table. Instead black women have said that the table is made poorly and from bad wood, and we need a new one. I will first explore the constitution of the NWRO and the “Tillmon model” of organizing and compare it to another mode of organization called the “Boston model”. With this exploration, I will define liberation for poor black women on welfare. Next, I will analyze the work of Anna Julia Cooper, her words written in “A Voice from the South”⁴ would be echoed continuously throughout the history of black women’s activism. After Cooper, I will discuss Claudia Jones and her activism during the early 20th century as a member of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA.)

**“We never had to make any major demonstrations to be heard.”
–Johnnie Tillmon, Interview with Guida West, June 17, 1983**

⁴Anna Julia Cooper, *Voice From the South: By a Black Woman of the South*. Place of publication not identified: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

This section will be about Tillmon as an activist. It is different from the section in the first chapter because it focuses primarily on her ideology and how it was showcased in her activism. Although this chapter aims to trace Tillmon's philosophy historically, I also intend to focus on how her activism set her apart from the women I am comparing her to. The "Tillmon model" of organizing is the method that Tillmon used to organize the ANC Mothers in California. This model emphasized independence and reliance on indigenous (Tillmon's word) leadership. In this instance, "indigenous" meant welfare women and not white organizers paid through the VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program.⁵ Leadership was exclusively made up of AFDC/ANC recipients and the non-poor/organizers were considered outsiders; they were there to support the women, not lead them. Tillmon described it as "organizing of all women on welfare to try and do something for ourselves and by ourselves to the extent that we could."⁶ The women made all of the decisions with one woman, usually, in charge of the whole group. The result was that the power rested in the hands of women on welfare instead of white organizers. Also, because the Tillmon model emphasized service strategies rather than political strategies, they did not need people with political experience to work with them. Groups that employed this model remained grassroots organizations, operated by the people in the community and not dependent on outsiders to remain active. According to

⁵ VISTA is a program thought of by John F. Kennedy, but implemented in 1965 in an effort to end poverty. It was absorbed into the AmeriCorps in 1993. See <https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameriCorps/ameriCorpsvista>

⁶ Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981), 101.

Tillmon, the groups that she helped to organize were still running after the NWRO folded in 1972 and the groups organized using the “Boston model” were no longer operating.⁷

The Boston model was an organizing model created by Bill Pastereichs, a white organizer from Massachusetts. It was based off the Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization where it was staffed by paid and volunteer organizers recruited through the Office of Economic Opportunity VISTA programs. The objective “was to create, as rapidly as possible, many WROs across the nation, with numbers of members and groups becoming the measure of the Boston model’s success.”⁸ Their strategy was to identify the poor in urban areas, listen to and categorize their grievances, and invite them to meetings promising to help them with their problems. Once welfare recipients were registered with the organization and paid their dues, the group would then collectively confront welfare agencies to get their benefits “under the law”.⁹ However, organizing the poor was easier said than done and that was because of the fear of and distrust of authorities directed towards white organizers.

Tillmon had a strong disdain for organizers and their methods. She felt that they only wanted to come into poor neighborhoods and “make a big splash” without ever really helping poor people. Furthermore, she felt that in local groups it was best to stick with service strategies that dealt with welfare women’s day-to-day problems, whereas she felt organizers liked to have big protests that garnered attention. “We never had to make any major demonstrations to be heard, she stated in an interview in 1983.”¹⁰Tillmon and

7. Johnnie Tillmon, Interview by Guida West July 30, 1974, transcript, Sophia Smith Collection and Smith College Archives Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

⁸ West, 97.

⁹ Ibid, 98.

¹⁰Johnnie Tillmon, Interview by Guida West June 17, 1983, transcript, Sophia Smith Collection and Smith College Archives Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

The ANC Mothers employed a direct action approach. When asked by West how they demanded to be heard, Tillmon responded,

By the telephone, and tell them we were coming. We want a meeting with the director of the welfare department – he never turned us down. It is the same way we do it now. We get ready to go to the board of supervisors – we go on down to the board of supervisors. We are supposed to call and get on their agenda and we don't want to ask them to be on their agenda – we just go down... We pretend that we didn't know we could get on their agenda. We had no problems so we didn't need to demonstrate to be heard.¹¹

Tillmon's activism was grassroots at its core, but the attention that she received because of her work ushered her into circles with groups that relied on a "top down" approach when it came to activism. As part of the NWRO, Tillmon and other women on welfare were able build relationships, superficial at best, with organizations like NOW (National Organization for Women)¹² and NWPC (National Women's Political Caucus.)¹³ The relationship between NWRO and these organizations was surface, meaning that with the NWPC, for example, high profile members like Gloria Steinem¹⁴ and Florynce Kennedy¹⁵ would attend and speak at NWRO conventions, but these women did not meet personally with members.¹⁶ The relationships were strictly between individual leaders and only the national level and were really "more symbolic than substantive," according to Guida

¹¹ Johnnie Tillmon, West Interview, 1983, 4.

¹² NOW is a feminist organization in the US. Founded in 1966 by Betty Friedan and 49 others, NOW's main concern was the Equal Rights Amendment.

¹³ NWPC was founded in 1971 in order to increase the number women entering politics.

¹⁴ Gloria Steinem is a feminist that became famous in the 1960s and 1970s as a leader of the women's movement in the US.

¹⁵ Florynce Kennedy (1916-2000) was a lawyer, feminist, and colleague of Steinem's. She co-founded the National Black Feminist Organization in 1973.

¹⁶ West, 254.

West.¹⁷ Tillmon, however, through her relationship with George Wiley, at least gained the attention of Steinem and was asked to publish an article for *Ms. Magazine*.¹⁸

Before analyzing Tillmon's article, I will discuss George Wiley's resignation from NWRO and how Tillmon became president.

"Welfare is a Women's Issue" appeared in the second issue of *Ms.* in the Spring of 1972. In this article Tillmon laid out her mission as a welfare rights activist, and articulated the struggles of welfare women in the US. She also correctly pointed out the double standards that arose when lawmakers publicly demeaned women on welfare for not having a good "work ethic."

But the work ethic is a double standard. It applies to men, and to women on welfare. It doesn't apply to all women. If you're a society lady from Scarsdale and you spend all your time sitting on your prosperity paring your nails, that's O.K. Women aren't supposed to work. They're supposed to be married.¹⁹

The article completely explains Tillmon's ideology, but must be read both closely and against the grain since I have learned through my research that it was ghostwritten (I will discuss this further in chapter three.) Tillmon's voice comes across clearly in this article, but I was very aware that someone else constructed it. Because of this, I will focus on the parts of her article that completely line up with black women activists. Specifically, I will focus on her quote "Maybe it is poor welfare women who will really liberate women in this country," showing that her position as a poor black women on welfare allowed her to

¹⁷ West, 254.

¹⁸ *Ms. Magazine* was started in 1972 by Gloria Steinem. Tillmon's article was published in the second issue in 1972.

¹⁹ Johnnie Tillmon. "Welfare." *Ms.*, 07, 1995. 50, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/204297988?accountid=13701>.

The cited article is a reprint from July, 1995 that appeared in *Ms.* The reason I chose this article is because other published versions of Tillmon's article appear to have missing parts. This is the only version I have read that has everything.

advocate for all women. Tillmon clearly believed that her liberation would facilitate the liberation of all women.²⁰ After Tillmon said this, she explained the plan that she and NWRO developed in order to “eliminate sexism from welfare.”²¹ This plan included GAI (Guaranteed Adequate Income.) It would eliminate the separate categories under the welfare system; poor people would get paid according to the size of the family and need only. The plan that then President Nixon countered with was called the FAP (Family Assistance Plan.) In listing the many problems with this plan, Tillmon focused on how FAP’s guaranteed income would guarantee a family of four \$2400 a year, despite the fact some women on welfare received more than that at the present time, and she emphasized that the plan maxed out at \$3600 a year without regard to family size.

There were also problems with Nixon’s plan in relation to how it limited the amount of money for welfare recipients under AFDC, but not other welfare programs.

That \$2400 applies only to AFDC – to women and children. They’ve got a whole *different* schedule for the “deserving poor” – the aged, blind, and disabled. A better schedule. For instance, an aged couple – just two people – will get almost exactly the same as an AFDC family of *four*.²²

According to Tillmon, the biggest problem with FAP was forced work. With this plan, a woman on welfare had to take any job that the welfare department gave her. Most of these jobs still did not pay a living wage, but if a woman refused, her money was cut off. Unfortunately, this remains a part of welfare policy to this day. Additionally, FAP would pay partial costs for childcare or none at all. This means that the woman on welfare would have to pay for daycare out of their earnings, “even though they only need child

²⁰ Tillmon, 50

²¹ Ibid, 54.

²² Ibid.

care because of the forced-work law.”²³ She then issued a warning to women pushing for universal childcare, imploring them to be careful that their tenacity in fighting for it did not simultaneously “create a reservoir of cheap labor,”²⁴ because poor women could end up with the jobs caring for their children. “If we don’t watch it, an AFDC mother can end up paying fees to a child care center, which in turn will pay her less than the minimum wage to watch her children – and your children, too. Institutionalized, partially self-employed Mammies—that’s what can happen to us.”²⁵

The other important point for further analysis is that although she (or her ghostwriter) does not mention race, it is clear that Tillmon is worried about white middle class women relying on cheap the labor of black and brown women, if their plan had come into fruition. She was cognizant of the long history of black women’s servitude towards white women (she did some domestic work in Arkansas,) and she did not want universal childcare to be another area where this was perpetuated, unintentionally or not. For Tillmon to hint at the ramifications of this for poor welfare women, shows that she was aware of how the intersection of race and class complicated how nationalized childcare would affect poor women. Tillmon cemented her connection to black clubwomen, and black Communist women when she stated, “No woman in the U.S. can feel dignified, no woman can be liberated, until all women get off their knees.”²⁶ This statement is so similar to what other black women activists have said, and clearly signifies that there is a connection between Tillmon and those women, and perhaps between all black women, when it comes to what their freedom means.

²³ Tillmon, 54.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 55.

“Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*”

—Anna Julia Cooper, “Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race” (1886)

The Black Women’s Club Movement lasted roughly from 1880 to 1920, a time period also known as the Progressive Era. Historian Rayford Logan labeled it, the “nadir of American race relations” in reference to the high number of lynchings of black people in the post-Reconstruction south.²⁷ For middle class Black women, this time period sparked the beginning of a political consciousness centered on their role in “racial uplift,” a concept coined by W. E. B. Dubois. Dubois saw Black women as the perpetuators of values in the Black community, and he placed on them the burden of the entire race. He wrote, “As I look about me today in this veiled world of mine, despite the noisier and more spectacular advance of my brothers, I instinctively feel and know that it is the five million women of my race who really count.”²⁸ Dubois’s opinion of Black women ran concurrent with his idea of the “talented tenth”²⁹ and Black women, specifically middle

²⁷ Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901*. New York, 1954. See Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Collected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett: Southern Horrors, Mob Rule in New Orleans and The Red Record*. Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2009.

²⁸ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993),1. This opens the first chapter of Higginbotham’s book. There is no mention of when and where he said this.

²⁹ W.E.B. Dubois’s philosophy about the leadership capabilities of one in ten black men. He believed that black people should be educated in liberal arts in order to lead the race, and that the success of one-tenth of the black population would eventually pull up the rest of the black population.

class black women, already viewed themselves as such.³⁰ Racial uplift had to be undertaken by black women as the progenitors of the race.

Although Anna Julia Cooper was not really associated with two of the most well known clubs of this time period, NACW (National Association of Colored Women) and NCNW (National Council of Negro Women,) her work in the first decade of this era solidified her influence on future generations of black women. Cooper worked with her local YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) in the D.C. area, and although she lived and worked in very close proximity to Mary Church Terrell³¹ (they both attended Oberlin and taught at the same school in Washington D.C.), they had no personal relationship. Some scholarship³² explores Cooper's position as a foremother to black feminist thought, but according to Charles Lemert, "the most serious scholarly works on the emergence of black feminist thought and fiction at the turn of the century tend to leave readers somewhat in the dark with respect to Cooper's specific contributions to black feminist theory."³³ In this section I seek not to examine Cooper's contribution to black feminist thought, however I do want to firmly establish Cooper and Tillmon's connection to each other to ultimately show that Johnnie Tillmon's words, actions, and thoughts are part of a legacy of black women activism.

³⁰ ³⁰ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves: 1894-1994*. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.) 54.

³¹ Terrell was an activist for civil rights and suffrage. She was one of the founding members of the NAACP, and a leader of the NACW. Terrell and Cooper fell on opposite sides of the battle between Dubois and Booker T. Washington, it is possibly the reason the two women had little to no personal interaction. Terrell's husband was a friend of Washington and so she was linked to his ideology through him. Cooper had a Ph. D. from the University of Paris-Sorbonne in 1924; she sided with Dubois.

³² Vivian M. May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 2012.

³³ Charles Lemert, "The Colored Woman's Office, in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, edited by Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan, (Lanham,MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1998,) 17.

Anna Julia Cooper was born enslaved in Raleigh, North Carolina around 1858.³⁴ She received a scholarship around nine or ten years old to the Saint Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute.³⁵ She stayed there for fourteen years, when she left she entered Oberlin College. She was as prolific a writer as Ida B. Wells³⁶ and as active in "uplifting the race" as Mary Church Terrell, but somehow her accomplishments have been eclipsed by these two women. Nevertheless, her speeches and essays relay her message of freedom for black women and the entire race. Both of the essays that I look at, "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race,"³⁷ and "The Status of Women in America,"³⁸ speak to how the unique position of black women in American society gave them the responsibility and the right to critique and challenge the system that oppressed them.

With all the wrongs and neglects of her past, with all the weakness, the debasement, the moral thralldom³⁹ of her present, the black woman of to-day stands mute and wondering at the Herculean task devolving upon her. But the cycles wait for her. No other hand can move the lever. She must be loosed from her hands and set to work.⁴⁰

Cooper believed that black women were morally superior to white or western civilization, and also to black men. Because of this, black women, in her opinion had an obligation to do the work necessary to facilitate not only the freedom of themselves, but also an entire

³⁴ Lemert, 4.

³⁵ This school was started by the Episcopal church in order to train teachers to teach newly freed black people.

³⁶ Ida B. Wells was an anti-lynching activist, an investigative journalist and a suffragist. She is most known for her anti-lynching work. For more information see Ida B. Wells, and Alfreda M. Duster. *Crusade For Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992.

³⁷ Anna Julia Cooper, "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, edited by Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan, (Lanham,MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998,)

³⁸ Anna Julia Cooper, "The Status of Woman in America," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, edited by Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan, (Lanham,MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1998.)

³⁹ Bondage, enslavement, servitude, state of subjugation.

⁴⁰ Cooper, 62.

race. Her audience during this speech was black clergymen, and so they must have felt discomfort at the level of “moral force”⁴¹ with which she delivered her message, especially since she repeatedly reminded them that men alone cannot “elevate the Negro” without taking into account the status of black women.⁴² In addition to this she told them that black men needed to change their relationship to black women, extending their “interest and gallantry” outside “the circle of their aesthetic appropriation.”⁴³ And how telling is her admonishment of black men’s self interest disguised as uplift when her complaints mirrored the sentiments and feelings of not only other black clubwomen, but also black feminists almost one hundred years later?⁴⁴

In “The Status of Woman in America,” Cooper began her essay by extolling the accomplishments of famous women that have stood up against tyranny and hypocrisy in the United States. She was especially enamored with the women of the WCTU (Women’s Christian Temperance Union.) Very quickly, however, she switched her focus to black women.

The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both.⁴⁵

This entire speech was Cooper’s proof that black women were the only ones that could truly liberate black people, but these words in particular define an ideology that lived on

⁴¹ Lemert and Bhan, 7.

⁴² Cooper, 62.

⁴³ Ibid, 64.

⁴⁴ See Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*, (London: Zed Books, 2014) and Frances Beale, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Cade, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970.)

⁴⁵ Cooper, 112-13.

in future social movements led by black women and culminated in what we now call black feminist thought or theory. I could write an entire essay about Anna Julia Cooper (maybe I will one day) regarding how she was the first to articulate into theory what Sojourner Truth knew to be true about black women. However, that is not my mission in this chapter. My focus is Johnnie Tillmon, but Cooper and Tillmon have more in common than I ever would have thought. It is not just that they lived and worked in different time periods, but they also had different trajectories. Even though Cooper was born enslaved, she was educated at Oberlin, and had a successful career as a teacher. Not only was Johnnie Tillmon not college educated, she was a welfare recipient. Had Tillmon lived during Cooper's era, it is my opinion that Cooper would have viewed Tillmon as one of the "neglected" that she felt called to teach. In spite of their differences their ideologies were similar in that both understood what their positions at the bottom of the American racial caste system meant in freeing themselves. By doing this, they would also be freeing everyone, and they understood the implications of their power. Additionally, Tillmon's distrust of white organizers that came into poor neighborhoods to "rescue" poor people mirrored Cooper's statement about the black woman being the only person qualified to ensure the progress of black people. Both women were adamant in speaking for themselves in order to liberate themselves. They were speaking to different audiences, but the message of self-reliance with the support, not control, of black men and white organizers were clear.

The bourgeoisie is fearful of the militancy of the Negro woman, and for good reason. The capitalists know, far better than many progressives seem to know, that once Negro women undertake action, the militancy of the whole Negro people, and thus of the anti-imperialist coalition, is greatly enhanced.

—Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!”

Claudia Jones understood the “unique position” of black women just as Anna Julia Cooper and Johnnie Tillmon, but something else that comes across in the essay previously quoted and “We Seek Full Equality for Women” is the power that black women were able to harness. In my opinion, Claudia Jones and other black Communist women represent an escalation in activism started with black clubwomen. Although these women mostly rejected the respectability politics⁴⁶ of middle class black clubwomen, they absorbed the ideology of these women into their movement with their focus on the double oppression of black women in the US.⁴⁷ Their activism was based specifically on an end to class oppression and the eradication of capitalism as it is the root of all oppression. These women were black left feminists, “a path-breaking brand of feminist politics that centers working-class women by combining black nationalist and American Communist Party (CPUSA) positions on race, gender, and class with black women radicals’ own lived experiences.”⁴⁸ They were most active from the 1920s through the 1950s, so they appeared just as the Progressive Era was ending. However, Claudia Jones was aware of the work of black clubwomen and continuously referenced their activism in

⁴⁶ Or “the politics of respectability” was coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham to describe the way black women rejected the negative stereotypes of black women created during slavery. It was believed that if black women emulated middle class gender roles, that this would be seen as racial progress.

⁴⁷ Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.) 4.

⁴⁸ McDuffie, 3.

her essay, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!”⁴⁹ The organizations that were created by clubwomen were intact during Jones’s era (and still are.) I chose to analyze Jones for several reasons, the most important being that a direct link can be traced from Jones to Black feminist women from the 1960s and 1970s. Specifically, early black left feminists were the first to coin the term “triple exploitation,” to describe the oppression of poor black women, this was written about by Angela Davis⁵⁰ in her book *Women, Race, and Class*⁵¹ in 1981 where Davis acknowledged black left feminists as forbearers.

Claudia Jones was born Claudia Vera Cumberbatch, in 1915. She was born in Trinidad, and immigrated with her family to New York City in 1924. She changed her name in 1936 when she joined the CPUSA. There are two possible why reasons Jones changed her name, the first is that it was a political act. Similarly to Sojourner Truth, and Assata Shakur⁵², Jones’s name change could have been a deliberate step on a path towards liberation.⁵³ According to Carole Boyce Davies, her new surname may have been a way to hide from the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation.) Being known as Jones allowed her birth name and place to remain unknown by the FBI until they were a few years into their investigation.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” (New York, NY: National Women’s Commission, C.P.U.S.A., 1949.) 4.
<http://ucf.catalog.fcla.edu/permalink.jsp?29CF000189785>

⁵⁰ Angela Davis is a very famous activist, writer and Communist. She was a leader in the CPUSA in the 1960s.

⁵¹ Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, (London: Women's Press, 1981.)

⁵² Assata Shakur was born JoAnn Byron. She was a member of the Black Panthers in NYC, in 1977 she was convicted of the murder of a New Jersey State Trooper. She escaped from prison and fled to Cuba.

⁵³ McDuffie, 99.

⁵⁴ Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx the Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*. (London: Duke University Press, 2008,) 242.

“Negro women as workers, as Negroes, and as women—are the most oppressed stratum of the whole population,”⁵⁵ wrote Jones in “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” Again, there is a direct connection to Anna Julia Cooper and Johnnie Tillmon in terms of how black women’s position left them at the bottom of American society. Additionally, black left feminists were the first to use the term, “triple exploitation” to describe this position, and unlike black clubwomen, they viewed class as the most stringent of these oppressions. Similarly to Cooper, Jones gave black men the responsibility of “rooting out attitudes of male supremacy.”⁵⁶ But added to that was her response to racism from white women within the CPUSA. She berated them for their role in the exploitation of black women, mainly in their hiring of black women as domestic workers. When she criticized white Communists that opposed interracial marriage, she used the term “white chauvinism,” and white women’s response was to call her a reverse chauvinist.⁵⁷ This entire essay was partly a response to an article written by Betty Millard in 1948. “Woman against Myth” by Millard portrayed women as white and oppressed.⁵⁸ Jones article successfully challenged that image by locating black women at the intersections of race, class and gender, and she was able to explain their history of militancy, from Sojourner Truth through to herself and her colleagues.

I would not classify Johnnie Tillmon as a Communist, nor would I call her a black left feminist (I think she viewed herself as a feminist,) but it seems that Tillmon’s entire activist career was radical simply because she dared to speak for herself, as a result she is part of the legacy of black women’s militancy that Jones writes about and should be

⁵⁵ Jones, 4.

⁵⁶ Jones, 9.

⁵⁷McDuffie, 168.

⁵⁸ Betty Millard, *Woman Against Myth*, (International Publishers: New York, 1948.)

studied as such. Tillmon and Jones both worked in interracial organizations. NWRO tried really hard to include representatives from every race on their board of directors, and were successful in doing so.⁵⁹ They wanted everyone to be represented even though the membership of NWRO was predominately black women. Tillmon consciously chose not to have the organization labeled as “black only.” One reason for this could have been the rise of black nationalism during the late 1960s and a fear of scaring off donors. Tillmon embodied self-determination,⁶⁰ one tenet of black nationalist groups, however Tillmon and the NWRO did not reject the support of white donors. Rather than focus on nationalism, Tillmon believed that poverty was an equalizer in terms of how it could happen to anyone regardless of race or sex. Her last words in “Welfare is a Woman’s Issue” are a testament to this idea. She wrote, “Stop for a minute and think what would happen to you and your kids if you suddenly found yourself with no husband and no savings? Do you know your own rights to welfare? Find out. You may have to live on it sooner or later.”⁶¹

Anna Julia Cooper, Claudia Jones, and Johnnie Tillmon were three women from distinctly different time periods and yet they worked to dismantle the same issues: racism, sexism and poverty. Their methods were different, and Jones and Tillmon engaged with a class analysis more than Cooper, but nevertheless they all reached the same conclusion. Because black women, especially poor black women, live their lives at the intersection of race, class, and gender, any movement whose goal is liberation, must include the liberation of these women as well. Since black men and white women in the

⁵⁹ West, 255.

⁶⁰ Refer to page 3 of this thesis.

⁶¹ Johnnie Tillmon. "Welfare." *Ms*, 07, 1995. 55,
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/204297988?accountid=13701>.

Progressive Era, black men and white women in the CPUSA and black men and white women in the 1960s and 1970s liberation movements failed to do so, black women did it for themselves. Johnnie Tillmon is the least known of this group of women; there are no books written about her, yet, and the books that do mention her only talk about her activism instead of her full life story. There is no analysis of the relationship between her activism and it's roots in the history of black women's "militancy", as Jones would say. If Cooper and Jones can be written about as both activists and intellectuals, then Tillmon can be also. Her ideas and her words place her in the same league as these women. Is she not considered an intellectual because she was not educated? Is it because she was not as prolific a writer? Is it because she advocated not only for poor women, but specifically for women on welfare? Is our ignorance of Johnnie Tillmon a reflection of how we as a society view welfare and women on welfare? My guess is that it is a combination of all of these things and in my last chapter I will examine Tillmon's legacy and why it has mostly been forgotten.

CHAPTER THREE

Silences

“...the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.”
-Michel-Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*

I had many questions when I first decided that I wanted to write about Johnnie Tillmon. I wondered why I had never come across her name or her activism in any of the undergraduate courses I took at Rutgers? I wondered why I had never heard of a welfare rights movement, and I wondered if I would be able to find enough information about Tillmon and welfare rights should I definitely choose her as my thesis topic. In writing this last chapter, I have realized that I do not really have a concrete answer for the first two questions, and my answer for the last question is ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ In this chapter I attempt to answer all of my questions to the best of my ability, but I am still left unsatisfied. Unfortunately, that feeling will probably remain; at least until Johnnie Tillmon and the Welfare Rights Movement is a part of every class about Women’s History in the United States, and added to courses that trace American history in the 1960s and 1970s. Part of the reason I chose to trace the intellectual history of Johnnie Tillmon using the article, “Welfare is a Women’s Issue” is because I could not get access to the NWRO archive held in the Moorland-Spingarn collection at Howard University, as mentioned in the introduction. I had initially envisioned my thesis as a mini biography of Johnnie Tillmon and I still intend to eventually write her biography. With limited primary sources however, I did not know how that would be possible. I needed to find a way to write about Tillmon without relying solely on primary sources. My decision was to focus

on how she was part of a legacy of black women activists that shared the same ideology and definition of freedom. This allowed me to use her article, along with the primary sources I did find, to make that legacy the focal point of this thesis. Had I been able to go to Howard, this thesis would have been different. The first section in this chapter is about my experience trying to “research around” Howard.¹ The second section will be where I revisit “Welfare is a Women’s Issue” and discuss how finding out the article was ghostwritten affected my readings of the article. I will also briefly discuss my conversations with the ghostwriter Nancy Steffen-Fluhr. My last section will be about the implications of the silence around the welfare rights movement and Johnnie Tillmon. Specifically, I will explore what it means for this black woman to be forgotten and attempt to reconcile that “forgetting” with the indifference towards black women and black girls that seemingly permeates American society.

What’s Going on at Howard University?

When I began researching, I realized I needed to visit the Moorland-Spingarn Collection at Howard University where the files of the NWRO have been donated.² Through reading numerous books about welfare rights, I knew that the authors had gotten a lot of material from there. I reached out to Howard almost exactly a year ago, in April 2016, in order to find out what I needed to do before scheduling and planning a visit. I was told by an archivist at Moorland-Spingarn that most of what I needed was stored off campus in a storage facility and there was an outstanding bill that Howard had not been

¹ Nupur Chaudhuri. *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources*. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2010.) xv.

² Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2005

Triece, Mary Eleanor. *Tell It like It Is: Women in the National Welfare Rights Movement*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2013.

able to pay. Therefore, I would not be able to visit the archive. This affects not only me, but also anyone who needs to conduct research there.³ In the case of NWRO this is particularly serious because there are two places in the entire country that researchers can look to find primary sources about the black experience not only in the United States, but globally. One of those places is the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem in New York City, the other place is the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. These two facilities are the premier research institutions for information, if large collections stored at this center are inaccessible this means there is a huge gap in knowledge that could be produced by researchers, like myself. I do not know how long Howard's bill has been delinquent, but what does this mean for future researchers? What kind of scholarship cannot and will not be written because the research cannot be done? What am I missing in my thesis because I could not explore the NWRO collection? As Michel-Ralph Trouillot says in his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*,

Most Europeans and North Americans learn their first history lessons through the media that have not been subjected to the standards set by peer reviews, university presses, or doctoral committees. Long before average citizens read the historians who set standards of the day for colleges and students, they access history through celebrations, site and museum visits, movies, national holidays, and primary school books.⁴

This means that because of Moorland-Spingarn's financial problems, the history of Johnnie Tillmon and NWRO is effectively silenced. There are no national holidays, or

³ Thankfully, Premilla Nadasen was gracious enough to meet with me and get me access to primary sources. She lent me a tape with a speech from Johnnie Tillmon; this was my first time hearing speak in front of an audience. I am grateful to her for her help and enthusiasm regarding my thesis topic.

⁴ Michel-Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1995,) 20.

primary school books that highlight the work of Tillmon, the NWRO, and the numerous women that contributed to the Welfare Rights Movement. Howard University is the only place to access the NWRO papers, and with that information locked away the knowledge of that history has nowhere to go. If things stay as there are, the Welfare Rights Movement may be completely forgotten. One positive aspect is that I might not have discovered the link between Tillmon and Anna Julia Cooper and Claudia Jones had I been able to go to Howard.

One of the main reasons for the problems at Howard is money. The budget for Moorland-Spingarn was \$3.5 million in 1994, and in 2012 that number was decreased to roughly \$800,000. Combined with the budget cuts, “the staff shrank to about one-fifth of its 1994 size in the same period.”⁵ In addition, Moorland-Spingarn is a member of the Association of Research Libraries, but there is a large difference between the funding of the Ivy League members of the association in comparison to Moorland-Spingarn. According to a 2012 article in the *New York Times*, “The median investment in members libraries was \$22 million in 2009-10; Howard’s investment was \$8.3 million.”⁶ Former Schomburg library director Howard Dodson Jr. was named head of the Moorland-Spingarn center in 2012, and won a \$300,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation “to ship the card catalogue out to be digitized and to hire grad students to process more of the collection.”⁷ In 2012 when Dodson was asked to be director, not only was the Moorland-Spingarn center in trouble, but the undergraduate and graduate library

⁵ Felicia R. Lee, "A Plan for Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Center," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2012, 2, Accessed February 6, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/arts/a-plan-for-howard-universitys-moorland-spingarn-center.html>.

⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

⁷Krissah Thompson, "Howard Dodson Jr. Has Returned to Work, Trying to Make Howard Research Center Great Again," *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2013, 2, Accessed February 6, 2017. http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-34700493.html?refid=easy_hf.

were as well. He also received a commitment from the university of \$15 million to renovate the undergraduate library and combined with an increase to the investment in the library system, the budget rose to about \$20 million at the most.⁸ I have not been able to find any new articles detailing the status of Howard's library, but the fact that there are now files being held in a storage facility that Howard has not paid suggests that the library's financial problems are the worst it has ever been.

Another problem that affects researchers is an escalating problem with the defunding of HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities.) A 2014 report by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges detailed the problems facing HBCUs then and into the future. The main issues that these colleges deal with are centered on declining enrollment. Most HBCUs are tuition driven and PWIs (predominantly white institutions) present a threat to the school's enrollments numbers. PWIs are increasingly recruiting black students to their schools and offering them larger financial aid packages than HBCUs.⁹ Combined with modifications to the Parent PLUS loans in 2011 that have made it harder to approve parents that apply, enrollment in HBCUs has dropped at some institutions by at least 20 percent.¹⁰ While I was not able to find any specific research on how enrollment at HBCUs directly affects what has happened at the Moorland-Spincarn center, I think it is safe to say that plummeting enrollment at a tuition driven school would be detrimental to all departments.

My primary source research has not been completely fruitless; I was able to obtain transcripts of Guida West's interviews with Johnnie Tillmon from the Sophia

⁸ Thompson, 2.

⁹ *Top Strategic Issues Facing HBCUs, Now and Into the Future, Report*, 2014, 1, Accessed February 12, 2017, <http://agb.org/sites/default/files/legacy/2014TopStrategicIssuesFacingHBCUs.pdf>.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

Smith Collection at Smith College. Premilla Nadasen was very eager to talk to me about my research and lent me a cassette tape with a speech from Johnnie Tillmon. In addition, the George Wiley papers at the Wisconsin Historical society had audio from the first convention of the NWRO where Johnnie Tillmon spoke. While I did not use all of these sources in my thesis, I am holding onto them knowing that I am not through writing about Tillmon. In a few years when I am ready to write her biography, hopefully Howard University will have paid their storage fee and I will be able to go right to the source. I remain curious to learn how my analysis might change after gaining access to more documentation.

“Welfare is a Women’s Issue” (Revisited)

When I first read this article, I had no idea that it was ghostwritten. Priscilla Murolo, former director the Women’s History program at Sarah Lawrence, dropped that nugget when I told her I was interested in Johnnie Tillmon. I believe it was kismet that the ghostwriter, Nancy Steffen-Fluhr teaches right across the street from Rutgers University-Newark, where I completed undergrad, at NJIT (New Jersey Institute of Technology.) It certainly made her office easy to find since I was familiar with the campus. I met with Steffen-Fluhr twice, in October 2016 and then in February 2017, and we discussed at length her role in NWRO, her relationship with George Wiley, and her experience with Johnnie Tillmon. Unfortunately, Steffen-Fluhr does not remember everything about her interview with Tillmon (she only spoke to her once,) but she told me enough to make me comfortable in believing that at least 90% of what was printed in the *Ms.* article was Tillmon’s voice (maybe 85%.) However, I still am not sure of the reason Tillmon did not write the article herself. According to Steffen-Fluhr, she was approached

by George Wiley in either 1970 or 1971 to “get Tillmon down on paper.”¹¹ She had one very long phone conversation with Tillmon and then wrote the article. It was then given to Wiley and Gloria Steinem, the editor of *Ms.* at the time, and they added statistical and historical data about welfare. Steffen-Fluhr does not really remember why Tillmon did not write the article, but she has a strong inkling that she did not want to, most likely because of the time it would have taken to do so. In the same year the article was published, Tillmon became the president of NWRO, and thus would have had a very busy schedule after Wiley left. Because Wiley was the chief fundraiser, the board started scrambling trying to figure out how to raise money. For this reason, she would not have had the time to sit down and write an article. When I went to read “Welfare is a Women’s Issue” again for my analysis in chapter two I had this context in mind.

My main question regarding Tillmon’s voice in the article was the use of the term “super sexist marriage” to describe welfare women’s relationship to welfare and Steffen-Fluhr agreed that Tillmon probably did not use the word sexist. I was also very aware re-reading the article that Tillmon was eagerly trying to convince middle class white women of their right to adequate welfare benefits. She was actively trying to get them to see the commonalities between poor women on welfare and middle class white women that were not on welfare. I was very skeptical about that portion of the article because I could not believe that she would do that; for what purpose? Guida West’s wrote that the NWRO was somewhat friendly with mainstream feminist organizations like NOW and NWPC, and that there was virtually no relationship between NCNW and NWRO. West argued that this was because NCNW being a black women’s club was only focused on race

¹¹ Nancy Steffen-Fluhr, interview by Gwendolyn Fowler, Newark, NJ, October 06, 2016.

issues and advocating for any other issue would be divisive. “It’s major thrust was fighting racism...Dorothy Height, its president, insisted however, that she could not support any struggle that pitted the black woman against the black man.”¹² NWRO did not necessarily pit black men against black women, however they did advocate for the right to be single mothers and perhaps their willingness to remain single served in distancing their activism from the work of the NCNW.

After reading Guida West’s transcripts and actually hearing Tillmon’s voice in her speeches, it was easier to find Tillmon’s voice in the *Ms.* article. I was able to figure out what sounded like her and what did not. Listening to Tillmon showed me that her education level had no bearing on her comprehension level, especially when it came to how much she understood welfare. Because of this, I was comfortable in believing that Steffen-Fluhr was successful in capturing Tillmon’s voice. I am also happy that I sharpened my own comprehension skills and was able to locate Tillmon in such an important primary document.

Black Women: Operating From the Margins

I once read a quote by a black feminist saying that black feminists organize their “politics from the cracks.”¹³ This meant that if you were walking on a sidewalk, the crack in between each slab of concrete would be where black feminists are found. And the slabs of concrete would be black men and white women. To compare yourself and your work to cracks in a sidewalk seems bleak and self-disparaging, but I think it is also liberating. I think that operating from the margins of American society allows a person to think

¹² Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981), 238.

¹³ Linda Burnham, Interview with Kimberley Springer, in *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005,) 2.

deeply about the meaning of “liberty and justice for all.” This position allows you to question a country that promises liberty and justice to all of its citizens but falls through on that promise. It is the reason that black women were the first ones to understand and push for, what we now call, “intersectionality.” This term was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 in her article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.”¹⁴ Intersectionality describes the experiences of black women living under multiple systems of oppressions at once. Black women utilize their space in the margins to create radical political thought that then gets appropriated or coopted by the dominant society without acknowledging the creators.¹⁵ The margins can be liberating, but it also renders black women invisible; it is a “catch 22.” For example, last year I presented a PowerPoint on Johnnie Tillmon for one of my professors, Lyde Sizer. On one of my slides, I talk about how Tillmon could be viewed as an intersectional feminist. When I asked the students in the class to define intersectionality, they could not. That did not particularly surprise me, but I was shocked when Lyde admonished them for not knowing what intersectionality is when they constantly use the term in their papers. Something clicked in my head; I realized that intersectionality had been absorbed by the academy, but black women as the creators of the term and the ideology had not. I was angry, I am still angry that the work that black women have done has been appropriated so that middle class white students can use it in a paper in order to express their multiple

¹⁴ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989, Issue 1, Article 8.

<http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=ucf>

¹⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007,) 223.

identities. Despite the fact that they do not know what the word means, they do not know the history of the ideology and they are completely unaware of that erasure, they have no problem appropriating the language.

I suspect that one reason that the NWRO failed to accomplish many of the goals that were set is because it was an organization that was built to help one of the most marginalized groups of people in this country. As Americans we are indoctrinated since birth with the belief that if you work hard and get an education, you will be successful. Conversely, if you are poor, it is because you did not work hard; it is your fault. Johnnie Tillmon and the NWRO fought to dispel this belief in order to show that poverty was not the result of a poor work ethic, but the result of an economic system that pays low wages for jobs that are certainly necessary, but not viewed as such. A Guaranteed Annual Income (GAI) would enable every American family access to the ever-elusive “American Dream,” but if that happened, too many people would have access to wealth, which would upset the power balance, and then who would do the low paying jobs that keep people impoverished? That is one reason why the NWRO was unsuccessful; it challenged American ideology and dictated that even poor women on welfare had the right to pursue the promise of the “American Dream.”

Another reason is funding. When George Wiley was the head of NWRO, he was also in charge of fundraising. Wiley grew up middle class and black, he was also educated and therefore was able to get money to fund the organization. When he left in 1973, the NWRO had to scramble to figure out a way sustain itself. Wiley resigned as president of the NWRO in December 1972 after a huge disagreement between him and the women in the organization. At the monthly executive board meeting, members argued

with Wiley about who should lead the organization. Wiley wanted the staff to be himself and two other people. He also tried to move the organization in a different direction politically by not just focusing on welfare, but on poverty in general. His argument was that there were only 3 million women on welfare in the country, but the number of poor people was around 50 million in 1972. His logic was that if the 50 million poor people could be organized, they would have a greater affect.¹⁶ Wiley left one month after this disastrous meeting and Tillmon was voted executive director.

NWRO was unable to get their \$200,000 budget funded in 1973, a fundraising dinner in tribute to Wiley was not successful, and the appeal for donations after Wiley passed away was also fruitless.¹⁷ In 1974, Johnnie Tillmon developed the “Half-A-Chance Campaign.” Tillmon’s plan was to appeal to the 12 million poor people in the country and ask for them to send 50 cents to the NWRO. “Tillmon was aware that economic dependency had always been a major weakness of the national movement organization,”¹⁸ and was determined that they would no longer look to outsiders for help. The campaign officially started in October 1974, but it failed. They were only able to collect “a few thousand dollars.”¹⁹ Funnily enough, this campaign was the only time I came across any kind of communication between NCNW and NWRO, they donated \$500. There was also a \$100,000 debt that the group had to contend with. They were able to get the amount down to \$20,000 by 1975, but by that point, there was no money coming in from the churches and middle class supporters that had funded NWRO when Wiley was in charge. In 1975, NWRO had to declare bankruptcy and close their national

¹⁶ Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981,) 121.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 35.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

office in D.C. When the NWRO closed its doors, the movement ended without any major legislative changes to welfare. The modern Civil Rights Movement, and Women's Liberation are remembered by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and Roe v. Wade of 1973, respectively. There is no comparable legislation for the National Welfare Rights Movement, and in my opinion this fact contributes to the continued erasure of the movement from history books.

It is also my belief that NWRO did not have enough support from other civil rights or social justice groups. Earlier I discussed the relationship between NWRO and NOW and NWPC and how those relationships were at best superficial. However, the relationship between NWRO and SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) and NCNW was also problematic. George Wiley reached out to SCLC in a letter in 1966. He did not receive a response until 1968 when Martin Luther King, Jr. started advocating on behalf of poor people with the Poor Peoples Campaign.²⁰ There are two possible reasons why King was reluctant to align his group with NWRO. The first reason comes from Andrew Young, right hand man to King, and executive director of SCLC. He said that the organization feared directly dealing with economic issues as it might be considered Communist.²¹ This was a tangible fear, King had been wire tapped by the FBI under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover, but this reasoning changed with the inception of the Poor People's Campaign. The campaign was a turn for King and the SCLC towards economics, but "it focused on hunger, and on improving government food-aid programs rather than on welfare."²² The reluctance on the part of SCLC to talk about welfare was

²⁰ West, 100.

²¹ Deborah G. White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (NY, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 233.

²² White, 233.

symptomatic of the stigma surrounding welfare in the country, but also among middle class blacks.

The other reason is that King was a chauvinist who would not work with a group that consisted of and was lead by women.²³ This is demonstrated by the work of Ella Baker. Baker had helped to found SCLC and was the director from 1958 until 1960. She left in 1960 when she realized that the organization, and King, wanted a man as the leader. Deborah Gray-White describes an incident between Johnnie Tillmon and King that occurred in 1968 in Chicago where Tillmon and other welfare activists met with King, Young and members of SCLC in order to “grill the civil rights leaders”²⁴ as to why welfare was not a part of their Poor People’s Campaign. Tillmon sat right next to King, who was “visibly uncomfortable,” while people berated King about welfare legislation. He could not answer the questions and Tillmon said to him, “You know, Dr. King, if you don’t know about these questions, you should say you don’t know, and then we could go on with the meeting.”²⁵ In one way this anecdote serves as another instance of Tillmon criticizing an outsider, similar to her interaction with Timothy Sampson. However, what I took away from this story is the ignorance of civil rights leaders on welfare. It also highlighted the stigma surrounding welfare and the reluctance of SCLC to properly interact with women on welfare.²⁶

Black middle class women in NCNW also had little contact with NWRO. I mentioned that they gave \$500 to Tillmon’s “Half-A-Chance Campaign,” but prior to that there seems to have been no communication between the two groups. According to

²³ Whit, 233.

²⁴ Ibid, 214.

²⁵ Ibid, 214-15.

²⁶ West, 231.

Deborah Gray-White and Guida West, NCNW's records do not mention welfare.²⁷ This could be because black women's clubs focused on helping the poor through educational programs that emphasized helping poor people manage their lives without seeking welfare. They did not consider welfare a right, and while they did support the NWRO ideologically in seeking support for children's aid, they did not agree with the NWRO and its fight for adequate aid for single parent households.²⁸

NWRO activists were also very public about their right to control their sexuality. This was evident in their support of a protest to end the forced sterilization of welfare recipients. In 1973, along with the Center for Law and Social Policy and the Association for Voluntary Sterilization, welfare activists campaigned against the use of Depo-Provera, which they believed was approved by the FDA specifically for welfare recipients and women in mental institutions.²⁹ Tillmon and NWRO also took the term "brood mares" and subverted it for their mission with the "brood mare stampede." Women in NCNW were silent on the term because of the meaning it implied with regards to black women's sexuality. Black women's clubs began right after Reconstruction ended around the 1880s, and part of their mission was to disprove the stereotypes slavery had created with "extensive programs to enhance the black women's respectability."³⁰ This meant emulating white middle class gender roles and not referring to themselves as "brood mares." Black women had to fight daily for respect from the larger society. Unfortunately, this created a certain kind of class politics, which undermined their ability to work together. Because of this, they never saw eye-to-eye with NWRO.

²⁷ West, 238, 250.

²⁸ White, 235.

²⁹ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1997,) 208.

³⁰ White, 236.

The support of SCLC was also too late. They met with King the year he was assassinated, and the Poor Peoples Campaign never really accomplished what it set out to do. As for NOW and NWPC, they also arrived at the poverty issue too late. Women's organizations did not see poverty as sexist until the early 1970s, actually around the same time as Tillmon's article.³¹ By the time these organizations started to work on issues surrounding poor people, the NWRO was already in financial trouble and primed to implode because of tensions between organizers and members. I do not know if earlier support would have made a huge difference because it seems that mainstream organizations still did not fully support what welfare women wanted, but some camaraderie in the earlier days of the Welfare Rights Movement could have made all the difference in sponsorship, fundraising and visibility.

When the NWRO folded in 1975, Johnnie Tillmon was taking classes at MIT as a Community Fellow.³² The two classes she took were Urban Cities and Suburban Politics. She told this to her Guida West in 1983, but she did not go into detail about how she came to be a part of the program. This bit of information also makes me extremely curious about the lives of women like Jeanette Washington and Beulah Sanders who are less well known than Tillmon. Tillmon returned to Los Angeles in February of 1975 and resumed her work as a welfare activist. However, she no longer had to keep her work a secret as she did when she first started the ANC Mothers. She ended up working in the

³¹ West, 240.

³² Johnnie Tillmon, Interview by Guida West June 17, 1983, transcript, Sophia Smith Collection and Smith College Archives Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, MA, 1. MIT's website describes the Community Fellows as a program "in which community activists, scholars and practitioners are engaged in fellowship opportunities on campus. The fellows participate in projects and other scholarly work that promote democratic engagement, shared wealth generation, and urban stability."
<https://giving.mit.edu/community-fellows-program>

office of Councilman Robert Farrell.³³ When she first met Farrell he was a newspaper journalist, but when Tillmon went home to California for Christmas in 1974 Farrell approached her while she was at her hotel and told her that he would be running for city councilman. She told him that she would make sure that the ANC Mothers supported him for the election.³⁴ When she went back to Los Angeles for good in 1975, she went to his office and he offered her a job. She asked him what her duties were and he told her, “Do what you want to do.”³⁵ Tillmon told West, “I’m still doing what I know to do—organizing, taking care of his clients that (are) in the districts. Right now I am what is called one of his field officers and it is really the ANC Mothers’ Office.”³⁶ The major accomplishment of Tillmon and the ANC Mothers was the opening of the Johnnie Tillmon Child Development Center in Los Angeles in 1974, eleven years after ANC Mothers was founded. It was funded through the state department Office of Child Development and affiliated with the postgraduate program at Los Angeles City Hospital.³⁷ This is significant because while Tillmon was a part of the NWRO, she advocated for daycares as a necessity in aiding women to eventually get off of welfare. She was largely ignored on this issue, as were the rest of the women in the organization, by the white organizers. The fact that the group that she organized was able to start a daycare in Los Angeles, where Tillmon had a huge amount of influence, shows that she

³³ Robert Farrell (1936-) Farrell was a writer for *Jet Magazine* and the *California Eagle* newspaper before he ran for LA County Councilman in 1974. He won, and served until 1991.

³⁴ Tillmon, West Interview, 1983, 1.

³⁵ Ibid, 1.

³⁶ Ibid, 3.

³⁷ Ibid.

I cannot actually find a “Los Angeles City Hospital,” I am assuming it has since closed or had a name change. I also looked up the daycare center and found an address and a phone number. No one answered the phone, and according to Google Maps there is a middle school where the daycare should be. Sadly, I do not know the status of the daycare.

succeeded where the NWRO could not. In addition, it shows the power of grassroots organizing, and the power of Johnnie Tillmon.

CONCLUSION

The silence surrounding Johnnie Tillmon and the NWRO exists in part because the NWRO failed, but also because it operated from the margins. Like I previously stated, the margins are a space where great and transformative ideas grow, but the margins are still in the margins, and people tend to overlook that space. I feel that it is my duty to write about the people and ideas that occupy margins and I do not take my job lightly, but it needs to be a collective effort. The fact that I had to dig so deeply to discover Tillmon's voice means that I would have to dig even deeper to write about Jeanette Washington and Beulah Sanders. These black women were welfare organizers just like Tillmon, perhaps they were not as charismatic or interesting as Tillmon and so they only appear briefly in West's book about the movement. But their work was not less important, so what happened to their stories? I need access to the NWRO papers at Howard University!

Imagine what else I could have found had I been able to go through that collection. I think that my idea to link Tillmon to other black women activists was a good start, but I have to do more work. One of my classmates, Velvet Ross, keeps asking me where are the voices of women on welfare in my work? And I have to tell her that I cannot find them. Are their voices locked in a storage container somewhere in D.C. collecting dust and mold? I hope they are; that would mean that I might be able to hear them one day. The National Welfare Rights Organization was the only group of poor people that operated at a national level using grassroots activism. Their failure needs to be studied so that it will not happen again.

Journalist John Mitchell wrote a profile on Johnnie Tillmon-Blackston,¹ in the *Los Angeles Times* in July 1995 on the eve of welfare cuts initiated by Former President Bill Clinton.² The article is a brief sketch of Tillmon's life and work that tries to capture the hope that Tillmon had for the reformation of the welfare system. When the article was written Tillmon was confined to a wheelchair because of the amputation of her left foot, due to complications from diabetes and was receiving dialysis three times a week. She felt that welfare reform was "going backward, not forward."³ Curiously, the *Los Angeles Times* article coincided with the reprint of "Welfare is a Women's Issue" in *Ms. Magazine* in July, 1995, and both of these were published five months before Tillmon passed away. I do not know what sparked the sudden interest in Tillmon literally months before she died, I suspect it may have something to do with the political climate and talks of cuts to AFDC. Whatever the reason, there was a brief moment where Tillmon's charisma, personality and unique voice was heard and illuminated again. There was no one else like her, and her story needs to be told because she expands the definition of what we consider an effective leader. By placing Tillmon among the pantheon of black women activists like Anna Julia Cooper and Claudia Jones, I have shown that she deserves more recognition and credit for not only advocating on the behalf of herself, a poor black woman on welfare, but also for the millions of women just like her. I agree that the liberation of the most marginalized people in this country will free all of us.

¹ Tillmon married Harvey "Harmonica Fats" Blackston in California in October 1979. Blackston was a famous blues musician.

² John L. Mitchell, "The Sunday Profile: A Dreamer and her Dream Lose Ground." *Los Angeles Times*, July 09, 1995. Accessed April 28, 2017. http://articles.latimes.com/1995-07-09/news/ls-21958_1_welfare-rights.

In 1996, Clinton cut AFDC through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. One of the changes was the AFDC was limited to five years. AFDC was essentially replaced with TANF (Temporary Aid for Needy Families.)

³ Mitchell, 1,3.

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