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Take Home Assignment: Welfare Queen

Black women are powerhouses within and outside of their homes and communities. However, throughout history they have been given labels that have ridiculed them for the way that they deal with their intersections of oppression. Patricia Hill Collins outlines many of these labels in chapter four of her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Collins, who calls these labels “controlling images,” believes that they shape the way Black women are treated because they uphold the views that the oppressor has embedded into the system. One of the controlling images talked about in chapter four is the “welfare queen.” This Black woman is a part of the working class and is taking advantage of the social welfare benefits that she is entitled to while simultaneously enjoying a highly materialistic lifestyle (Collins 86,88). The image reappears in a text by Dorothy Roberts entitled *Killing the Black Body*. However Roberts utilizes the term to talk about Black women’s reproductive health. She showcases how women who fall under this category have been treated historically and denied autonomy over their lives because they have been deemed unfit by the law. The welfare queen is a stereotypical portrayal of Black women created by the government as a way for them to maintain their hegemonic power.

The welfare queen sits at the intersection of many levels of oppression: class, race, and gender. She is deemed unfit because of her social class, which ignores the systemic oppression

that often interferes with her being able to obtain a job or maintain a job. It assumes that she has poor work ethic instead of realizing that in most cases she is the only breadwinner for her home. Nonetheless, by enlisting into the welfare practices that she is entitled to due to her social class, she has unknowingly consented to her own oppression. The government realizing their hegemonic power have used this to their advantage by making her reliance on them seem natural while still blaming her for “deterioration of the state” (Collins 88). They know that the Black mother will do anything to provide for her children because, despite being poor, she is still a mother with inherent nurturing instincts. So, they allow her to go through the process of accessing funds that will allow her and her children to have access to food and in some cases shelter. It is not for her benefit or the benefit of her children, but for the government because her reliance upon them gives them control. Karl Marx would add to this by saying that this is a form of ideology and the government wants to make the welfare queen conform to the status quo that they themselves cannot even clearly define, but they know she is not a part of. They know that regardless as to how hard she works, it will still not likely be enough, and if she works too hard they can strip her of the benefits. So the circle never ends. The welfare queen’s label cannot be eliminated and its function within the United States of keeping the Black woman in her place and deal with the internalized self hatred is accomplished by forcing her to become dependent.

In the introduction of *Killing the Black Body*, Roberts dedicates a section to talking about how the welfare queen’s very existence can be used as justification for her reproductive infringement. Roberts emphasizes the stigma around the welfare queen that she enjoys living off of the government and does not have a desire to secure her own income. (This stigma follows the lazy stereotype talked about in the previous paragraph that ignores systematic oppression.) She is

considered to be irresponsible for “having children that she can’t take care of,” which is why several government officials felt and still feel that they must intervene before things get out of hand. Instead of educating the welfare queen on her options, they pass judgement on her and assume that she is incapable of deciding what is best for her and her children. This is yet another demonstration of the governments hegemonic power. However, instead of trying to make her believe it is natural, this time they coerce her by threatening to take her kids into state custody. The media pushes welfare queen label by showcasing a few people who do misuse the system, as in the example outlined on pages 18 and 19 of the book, all over the news. Instead of investigating more deeply, the government needed to appear in control and consequently pushed for welfare reform and control.

The welfare queen was also a primary target, alongside teens, during the birth control surge of the 1990s. Since the government was adamant about the welfare queen’s inability to take care of her current children, they wanted to ensure that she was unable to produce more by giving her the birth control implant. The implant must be surgically removed and has varying side effects depending on the preexisting conditions within the mother. So misuse of the implant can be costly to the welfare queen, but this is the least of the government’s worries. According to Roberts, “contemporary welfare rhetoric blames Black single mothers for transmitting a deviant lifestyle to their children, a lifestyle marked not only by persistent welfare dependency but also by moral degeneracy and criminality” (Roberts 112). In other words, the government believed that there was something natural about welfare inheritance, so they wanted to use their hegemonic power to prevent it. People around the nation saw this as one less dependant that they would have to support later on in life as a result of the welfare queen’s “poor judgement.” Since

the government needed to both keep the welfare queen dependant upon them and keep the public's eyes on these women, they advertised these implants in areas of high poverty. Consequently, the welfare queen cannot escape the judgement placed upon her because the government makes it appear that all of the resources to make the best decision for her life are right at her disposal. She has to decide whether or not to take yet another handout that will once again make her consent to her own oppression.

Overall, both Collins and Roberts explore how the government's hegemonic power impact black mothers, especially the welfare queen. The authors acknowledge that it is not the mother's or the child's well being that is the ultimate concern of the government despite their attempt to market it in that way within the media. The government wants to attack the black mother at every intersection they are given access to, even if that means her children must suffer in the process. By ensuring that the label stays relevant, in spite of facts being able to refute it, those in power keep their position and those at the bottom, including the welfare queen, remain dependant upon them. The welfare queen is a concept that many Americans need to reevaluate, so they can begin to unhinge some of the oppressive concepts that impact the people who are targeted by its mere existence.