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Class Negotiations: Poverty, Welfare Policy, and American Television

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Class Negotiations: Poverty, Welfare Policy, and American Television

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Abstract

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Television impacts the shape of our common culture by depicting our societal fears, myths and hopes in a constantly shifting and negotiated manner. There is a glaring lack of research regarding media representations of children/adolescents in poverty. The study of this intersection is critically important for understanding societal discourse around education, healthcare, government assistance programs and even the opinions and practices of teachers and administrators. Children under 18 years of age represent 24 percent of the population, but they comprise 34 percent of all people in poverty in the United States. Among all children, 45 percent live in low-income families and approximately one in every five (22 percent) live in poor families. In this thesis, I trace discourse in the mainstream news and popular culture regarding children and poverty through welfare debates and policy changes in the U.S. from the 1990s and 2000s through the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations. Subsequently, I analyze the construction of this discourse on narrative television in the shows *My So Called Life* (ABC, 1994-1995) *The O.C.* (FOX, 2003-2007) and *Shameless* (Showtime, 2011-). Through this mapping, I examine how gender, sexuality, race, and age are mobilized in

constructing televisual representations of poverty; as well as how shifting discourses and depictions make transparent society's anxieties regarding poverty.

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Introduction

No one wants to believe that American society is as class-bound as it is. One of the most prevalent myths about our society is that the United States is a democracy where merit, rather than privilege, is the route to success. Discussions of class have long been taboo; innumerable pundits and a litany of books have exclaimed the eclipse of class and the rise of a classless society. Within the academy, class is given its requisite place in discussions of identity politics but is rarely parsed out as the main frame used to examine the nuances of intersecting identity. However, class structures impact lived experience in a variety of significant ways and the politics of class are present in every quotidian interaction from references to childhood experiences, word choices in everyday conversation, to popular styles of dress, and even food preferences.

While only periodically present, the language of poverty is a vocabulary of classification and demarcation of difference. Michael Katz in his book *The Undeserving Poor* writes, "Some ways of classifying people, such as undeserving - or even poor- are so old we use them unreflexively; others such as homeless or underclass, though much more recent, quickly become unexamined parts of discourse."[1] Understandings of poverty have become so naturalized and unexamined that it seems imperative for scholars invested in social justice to shift focus and make the unpacking of class a central part of their study. In this thesis, class and specifically poverty will be the main identity locations examined to interrogate status, citizenship, and social power in relation to intersections of

[1] *The Undeserving Poor*, 5.

race, age, gender and sexuality in popular television. In "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture," Douglas Kellner writes, "The media are a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy. They contribute to educating us about how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear and desire- and what not to."[2] As Kellner notes, the media profoundly impact the shape of our common culture and given the lack of critical engagement with poverty elsewhere in public discourse; I believe that government policy and media representations of poverty are the main ways people are educated on the experiences of poverty, develop their perceptions of poor people, and develop their perceptions of themselves. I have chosen to explore this cultural pedagogy through the dual analysis of U.S. welfare policy from the mid- 1990s through the early 2010s, and in the same years, television representation in the three case study shows *My So Called Life* (ABC, 1994-1995) *The O.C.* (FOX, 2003-2007) and *Shameless* (Showtime, 2011-) because of how visible the rhetoric of poverty is at these sites; also because I believe the discourse created in their negotiation helps to establish our collective obligations toward one another and define the terms of human subjectivity and 'good' citizenship.

My Positionality

As a feminist scholar I have a variety of personal, political, and academic investments in undertaking this project. As a white woman raised in a single parent, working-poor household on the south side of Chicago, my social location is intimately tied to my academic choices. I do not come to the study of poverty discourse and

[2] Kellner, 1.

representation as someone unfamiliar or voyeuristically interested, but as someone whose early development was shaped by media portrayals and the lived negotiations of gender, racial, and working class politics. My personal experience with poverty is shaped by my experience as a cisgendered white girl who now, as a white cisgendered female academic, experiences the trappings of the middle class, and with the knowledge that my cisgendered body and white skin have allowed me to pass as middle class in a variety of situations where people without my social privileges would not have been afforded the same acceptance.[3] My academic work has been influenced by my early development and social location but can also be characterized by continuous fumbling and grappling with the multilayered dynamics of privilege and oppression.

As a white woman and future feminist educator from a working-class background, hegemonic narratives and reproductive knowledge structures are things I am intimately and personally aware of but also must continuously struggle with as I build alliances and understandings with other people. This thesis attempts to investigate modern discourses of poverty and intersections with other identity locations to illuminate poverty discourse and its influence on education, healthcare, government assistance programs, and even the opinions and practices of teachers and administrators.

Literature Review

There is no single definition of poverty; it is measured differently by country, region, time period, and organization. For the purposes of this thesis, when referring to

[3] Cisgender is a term used to denote a person whose self-identity conforms with the gender that corresponds to their biological sex; not transgender.

poverty, I am referring to people whose income level is not sufficient to meet their basic material needs and who are excluded from taking part in activities which are an accepted part of daily life. Within this understanding of poverty, I use labels to differentiate between the severity of circumstances because there is no clearly demarcated and agreed upon standard for poverty. The World Bank says:

> Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not being able to go to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought on by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom.[4]

This World Bank description is a useful starting place for conversation about the language used to describe and the experiences of the poor because it provides a range of possible effects of poverty. However, this range is simultaneously inadequate because of its vastness and lack of concrete definition. This description fails to establish any working understanding of what adequately fed, sheltered or healthy would be and over generalizes the nuances between individual situations.

The U.S. government's current measures of poverty are based on poverty thresholds developed by the Social Security Administration that began with the minimal food plan established by the Department of Agriculture in the mid-1960s.[5] The current U.S. government measures for poverty were developed by taking the minimal cost of a nutritionally adequate diet, standards developed by the Department of Agriculture, and multiplying that cost of food by three to obtain an estimate of the minimum income

[4] Lang, 31.
[5] Lang, 31.

needed to sustain a person or a family. This calculation was then connected to the consumer price index to account for inflation and subsequently was instituted as the poverty threshold for the United States.[6] This measure is incredibly unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons; it does not take into account non-monetary income, regional differences for the cost of living, out of pocket medical expenses, or account for the actual percentage of income spent on food or other necessities. No classification can be easily applied to real people and the classifications that have been institutionalized, like the U.S. poverty threshold, are steeped in moral judgment with the guise of pragmatic reality; As Michael Katz writes in *The Undeserving Poor:*

> Even in the late nineteenth century, countervailing data, not to mention decades of administrative frustration, showed their [categorizations] inadequacy. Since the 1960s, poverty research has provided an arsenal of ammunition for critics of conventional classification. Still, even a casual reading of popular press, occasional attention to political rhetoric or informal conversations about poverty reveal, empirical evidence has had remarkably little effect on what people think.[7]

The classification system to describe poor people and the poverty thresholds that have been developed, are a visible attempt to classify people by merit and emphasize a link between virtuous behavior, work, and success. Given the moral judgments surrounding most conventional poverty categorizations, within this thesis abject poverty and working-class poverty are used to distinguish between levels of severity situated within the understanding that poverty is structural and does not stem from personal life choices or behavior. Abject poverty should be understood throughout this work, as characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs including food, sanitation, health, shelter,

[6] Lang, 37.
[7] Katz, *Undeserving Poor*, 10.

education, and access to information.[8] Abject poverty is not only a measure of income but access to services. Working-class poverty is used to refer to low-wage workers who struggle to meet their basic needs. Working-class poor are characterized by marginal living environments, insecurity, and powerlessness stemming from unsustainable or unstable livelihoods.[9] While there are many theories on the causes of societal inequality including personal or cultural failings in things like age of marriage, family size, or job loss; this work understands both abject and working-class poverty in the United States as a result of structures such as the reproduction of the class system, macroeconomic policies, the structure of the electoral process, and institutionalized gender/ racial discrimination.[10]

How we personally encounter poverty may shape our understanding of it. Given our society's lack of acknowledgement that poverty exists, televisual representations are an incredibly important part of our collective archetype of poverty. Television is a mediated public space used to express and discuss a variety of opinions, many of which are critically important for understanding societal discourse around education, healthcare, and government assistance. Media frames for poverty often focus on the individual causes of poverty based on the traits of individuals, completely divorced from perpetuating structures such as the failings of the criminal justice system, unequal representation under the law and the intractability of class in the United States. Narrative television often depicts poverty as individual or singular family phenomena and we use

[8] Niemietz, 43
[9] Niemietz, 43
[10]Niemietz, 44

the information gained from these depictions to construct a picture of class that we eventually come to accept as reality.

In his books *The Price of Citizenship, In the Shadow of the Poor House,* and *The Undeserving Poor,* Katz builds a framework for understanding welfare in the United States. He begins by historically situating the term welfare, saying, "welfare once signified a broad and progressive program with wide public support; the welfare state embodied a generation's hopes and aspirations for universal economic security and protection from the worst consequences of life's ordinary hazards."[11] *In the Shadow of the Poor House,* is an in depth history of the foundation of the welfare system in the U.S. that clearly denaturalizes current understandings of welfare and the welfare state.

In *The Price of Citizenship* and *The Undeserving Poor,* Katz further denaturalizes understandings of welfare by historically situating discourse as of the 1960s, saying, "No longer understood to protect everyone against risk, "welfare" had become a code word for public assistance given mainly to unmarried mothers, mostly young women of color, under Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC."[12] Katz explains this shift and stigmatization by tracing public policy discussion along two tracks. The first track is social insurance programs which tied benefits to employment and the middle class. These first track programs received public support and did not develop and carry the stigma of welfare. Public assistance is the second track; which was tied increasingly to people out of work, unmarried mothers, and people of color. In this way, welfare exchanged its early

[11] Katz, *Undeserving Poor*, 1.
[12] Katz, *The Price of Citizenship,* 1.

favorable connotation, for an association with the undeserving poor.[13] Central to my work is the framework Katz develops to explain the social construction of notions of the underserving poor. As he noted, "public officials in the early nineteenth century attempted to distinguish between the able-bodied and the impotent poor; a few decades later, officials transmuted these categories into the moral distinction between the worthy and the unworthy, or the deserving and the undeserving poor". [14]

I have focused this thesis on the 1990s and 2000s, in part, because I believe the major welfare reform under the Clinton admiration established a new paradigm in government welfare policy that is still functioning but also because I am interested in the lived negotiations of identity creation for young people in poverty today. While I think that long term historicizing of societal understandings is incredibly important, for this project I decided to focus on the modern moment as influenced by the last decade's representations and policy changes because of its impact on what is happening on the ground right now. Currently, children under 18 years of age represent 24 percent of the population, but they comprise 34 percent of all people in poverty in the United States. Among all children, 45 percent live in low-income families and approximately one in every five (22 percent) live in poor families.[15] The study of existing government welfare policies and media negotiated identity creation for young people in poverty in the U.S. today are urgently important.

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[13] Katz, *The Price of Citizenship, 8.*
[14] Katz, *Undeserving Poor*, 5.
[15] Addy, S., Engelhardt, W., & Skinner, C.

It would be impossible to discuss economic policies and reform in the U.S. over the last three decades without acknowledging the rise in government and social rhetoric regarding neoliberalism. David Harvey in his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* describes neoliberalism as a set of political economic practices that forward the idea that human well-being can be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework. Neoliberalism can be characterized by deregulation, privatization, withdrawal of the state from social life, and maximized free market social interactions.[16] Ultimately, under this philosophy, all human interactions should be under the domain of the free market. The rise of neoliberal philosophy has a number of visible repercussions, one of which is the withdrawal of the state from social life establishing the media as an even stronger social influence. Another repercussion is that self-regulation and social policing become an important mechanism for social control. This increased emphasis on free market interactions, means the poor have few rights if their income falls below the levels necessary to access laws and unbiased sources of information; while the wealthy have the ability to choose which rights they are subject to. According to Harvey, neoliberalism is a philosophy intimately tied to class.

Using the framework that Katz developed, throughout his work on the deserving and undeserving poor, I will discuss the welfare reforms and rhetoric specifically around children under the Clinton administration paying particular attention to the emphasis on class difference which was made hyper-visible in *My So-Called Life*; the stagnation of public interest under the Bush administration and renewed focus on volunteerism

[16] Harvey, 6.

exemplified in *The O.C.*; and renewed welfare debate, vitriolic backlash ,and policy changes during the Obama administration embedded in the narrative of *Shameless*.

I have found the scholarship examining representations of poverty on U.S. television to be disparate and sporadic, so I have pieced and woven together various projects on class and representation for the purposes of this literature review. The few quantitative studies that exist have made visible the previously unexamined class stereotypes that appear in U.S. media. Diana Kendall in her book, *Framing Class: Media representations of wealth and poverty in America,* undertakes an extensive content analysis of major newspapers and news media from the last fifty years and applies the sociological concept of framing, to illustrate how media frames have been developed as shorthand code for the upper, middle, working and poor classes. Kendall finds that journalist and television writers hold the elite and material possessions in awe while the poor are portrayed as in need of pity or doomed by their own shortcomings and choices. She claims that media frames of class often trivialize the problems of the poor, celebrate the virtues of the middle class, and emphasize the glamorous lifestyles of the wealthy. Kendall demonstrates that media frames exist cogently across the last fifty years and begins to outline how those frames are mobilized. Both the articles "Poverty As We Know It: Media Portrayals of the Poor" by Rosalee Clawson and Rakuya Trice and "Envisioning Dependency: Changing Media Depictions of Welfare in the 20th Century" by Joya Misra, Stephanie Moller, and Marina Karides build on Kendall's work by linking media frames of poverty to several prevalent stereotypes of the poor. Clawson and Trice examine photographs that accompany stories on poverty in five U.S. news magazines

between 1993 and 1998 to explore how news magazines displayed images of poor people during the Clinton administration. This study focuses specifically on visual images of the poor saying that visual frames, "provide texture, drama, and detail, and they illustrate the implicit, the latent, the 'taken for granted,' and the 'goes without saying.'"[17] Similarly, television representations provide detail and illustrate our implicit societal ideas of the poor. Clawson and Trice expose the latent and embedded visual frames that designate working class and poor families in print journalism during the Clinton administration by highlighting the persistent use of inaccurate demographic characteristics in news magazines. They concluded that news magazines overrepresented the black, urban and nonworking poor, They note, "Blacks were especially prominent in stories on unpopular poverty topics and black women were portrayed with the most children."[18] The focus of this study exclusively on visual framing with no attention to accompanying stories severely limits the scope of this work, however the relevant text for each picture may contain data that accurately reflect the true demographic characteristics of the poor or complicate the visual framing. By analyzing television representations, this thesis takes into account both the visual framing and accompanying narrative to explore media representations in relation to families and children more fully.

Aside from the repetition of inaccurate and misleading demographic characteristics, Clawson and Trice conclude that the print news media did not overly emphasize other stereotypical characteristics that are often associated with the poor. These characteristics, which fall into Katz's undeserving poor framework, such as

[17] Rosalee Clawson and Rakuya Trice, 55.
[18] Rosalee Clawson and Rakuya Trice, 61.

engaging in criminal behavior, drinking, or scamming the system and living beyond their means, are still present but not overly exaggerated. The continued presence of these frames, even if not overly emphasized, create the myth of the undeserving poor also taken up by Misra, Moller, and Karides. The study examines representations of welfare in popular culture by analyzing randomly sampled magazine articles over eight periods from 1929 through 1996, to look specifically at shifting discourses around welfare within the binary of dependence versus support. Much like Katz's undeserving/deserving poor binary, the authors find that articles about welfare vary drastically from dependency depictions to supportive, depending on the accompanying racial and gendered images of welfare recipients. According to Misra, Moller and Karides, during the twentieth century societal concerns about men's dependency have decreased while concerns about women's dependency have skyrocketed. Additionally, media representations of African Americans have been explicitly linked to narratives of dependence. These studies, in combination, survey the breadth of class framing in U.S. news throughout decades and demonstrate that while there have been variations and exceptions, problematic frames of working-class and poor people have historically persisted as the dominant images.

Moving from media frames of real poor people in the U.S. news to media representation of the poor on U.S. television, Richard Butsch in "Five Decades and Three Hundred Sitcoms about Class and Gender" writes about the consistent patterns and character types that have recurred across series and time. By engaging in a content analysis of representations of class from the beginning of network television in the 1940s through the 2003/2004 season, and focusing on domestic situational comedies with five

or more seasons, he contrasts working and middle-class representations. Butsch traces the prevalence of and identifies trends in working and middle-class television representations, writing that "reaching the vast majority of the population for over half a century and seeping into everyday conversation, sitcoms have made a significant contribution to our culture's attitude toward the man who makes his living with his hands."[19] Butsch goes on to synthesize his extensive content analysis; he discusses production constraints and industry organization to explain the persistence of the working-class male buffoon trope in "Ralph, Fred, Archie, Homer and the King of Queens: Why Television Keeps Re-Creating the Male Working-Class Buffoon". While Kendall's work establishes the persistence of media framing, Butsch documents how these frames are codified through character and narrative development on television sitcoms. Butsch makes incontestably clear that, of the few representations throughout the history of television, working-class men are portrayed as dumb, immature, and lacking common sense, but often with a good heart. I expand on Butsch's understanding of working-class representations of men and the prevalence of the working-class male buffoon trope, by exploring how the deserving/undeserving poor binary is mobilized in working-class male representations and how representations of teenagers diverge from this established norm.

Benjamin DeMott in his 1990 book *Imperial Middle: why Americans can't think straight about class* addresses the American myth of classlessness. He develops the ideas of the Imperial Middle and the Omni Syndrome by dissecting a variety of media forms,

[19] Butsch, 103.

from *The Cosby Show* to The New York Times. DeMott discusses classlessness as being folded into an imperial middle, wherein middle-class norms and prejudices control the way Americans talk and think about their lives, and lower-class Americans are compelled to strive for middle-class lives. DeMott develops this idea about the imperial middle by examining the TV series and movies *The Cosby Show (1984-1992)*, *Pretty in Pink (1986), Cagney and Lacey (1981-1988),* and *60 Minutes (1968-)*, and the print media outlets *Village Voice*, and The New York Times. He establishes the Imperial Middle as functioning in the career, rhetorical, and political realms. Americans, he writes, believe that social distance is unreal and that any gaps that do exist are due to personal reasons, not socioeconomic or institutional reasons. While DeMott's analysis does include shows that have teen characters the book is focused on the vastness of middle class norms and in no way acknowledges or addresses the impact of age. The middle, of the imperial middle, is limitless and all-encompassing with fluid social mobility. I see DeMott's book as a useful analysis of the myth of classlessness and an early manifestation of a neoliberal critique. Instead of contrasting working and middle-class, DeMott focuses more on adolescent roles inside the working-class and poor family unit in entertainment television rather than tropes regarding adolescents in poverty inside the American school system.

Barbara Ehrenreich in her article " The Silenced Majority," discusses another understanding of the Imperial Middle, which she considers the disappearance of the American working class from the media. Ehrenreich writes, "the disappearance of the working class reflects - and reinforces - the long standing cultural insularity of the professional middle class. In the absence of real contact or communication stereotypes

march on unchallenged."[20]As a result of middle class insularity and a lack of critical depictions of poverty in the media, Ehrenreich notes that the insights and struggles of the American majority are being silenced.

Mary Christianakis and Richard Mora in their article "No Free Rides, No Excuses: Urban Working Class Students and the Myth of Meritocracy on Film" directly address representations of working-class teenagers and the culture of poverty myth, both of which are foundational for my work throughout this project. The authors address the ubiquitous white savors in popular narratives of teenage poverty and the prevalence of the deserving/undeserving split inherent in meritocracy. However, Christianakis and Mora only address working-class youth on film in education reform movies like *Freedom Writers.* While this is extremely useful, my analysis of *My So-Called Life*, *The O.C.* and *Shameless* focuses more on adolescent roles inside the working-class and poor family unit and on representations in entertainment television; instead of the tropes regarding adolescents in poverty inside the American school system.

Finally, the article " Allocating Happiness: TV Families and Social Class" by Sari Thomas and Brian Callahan is an analysis of ABC, CBS, NBC primetime programs from 1978, 79, and 80 that attempts to parse whether fictional TV family happiness is related to matters of social class. This study concludes "The data from this study clearly indicates that the 'money doesn't buy happiness' myth is well served in regular prime time network television's portrayal of families".[21] This study outlines yet another

[20] Ehrenreich, 1
[21] Sari Thomas and Brian Callahan, 190.

problematic trope in the representation of working-class families. The over-representation of affluence on television, combined with the celebration of those deserving few who overcome the obstacles of poverty, work together to imply that anyone can make it. However, this work also suggests that if you don't make it, the actual discomfort of poverty is trivial because family bonds are stronger at the bottom of the class system. According to sitcom television representations, the poor are not suffering from the extreme inequality present in the U.S. because poor families are actually happier.

In this thesis, I hope to address gaps in the literature related specifically to current manifestations of poverty myths and regarding children and adolescents in poverty through a nuanced dual analysis of welfare policy and my case study shows, *My So-Called Life*, *The O.C.* and *Shameless*.

Methodology

As a feminist scholar whose academic and community work is centered on socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, this is an academic project that, for me, has very real social justice implications. The shows *My So-Called Life*, *The O.C.*, and *Shameless* present examples of narrative television constructions of youth in poverty with complex intersections around gender, race and sexuality. I am interested in how these narratives manifest on U.S. television in the character representations on the three case study shows. These three shows span the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations and present case studies of poverty discourse throughout the 1990's and 2000's. By focusing on explicitly mapping the connections between welfare discourse and representations on U.S.

television, this thesis will examine how discourse is mobilized, contained, and possibly subverted through centrally framed issues. While also exploring, whether these case study shows provide representations that line up with and/or subvert the dominant discourse of the state around welfare.

My research is heavily informed by critical race, queer and feminist theory. For this project, I will employ a critical discourse analysis framework comprised predominantly of a critical policy analysis, buttressed by discursive textual analysis with a focus on the shows *My So-Called Life*, *The O.C.* and *Shameless* as three case studies. My research begins with a critical policy analysis of welfare policy reform and related popular rhetoric during the Clinton, Bush and Obama admirations. Using Katz's definition of the undeserving poor, I will specifically analyze reforms to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) from 1992- 2012 because these three programs were specifically aimed at providing benefits for children in poverty. By engaging in critical policy analysis, I can examine reforms to these three programs and track some of the trends in government policy from welfare liberal to neoliberal state discourse in this two decade period.

I additionally undertake a discursive textual analysis focused on the narrative structure and character developments in select episodes of the three case study shows *My So-Called Life*, *The O.C.* and *Shameless*. More specifically, I have chosen episodes and select representative textual examples to analyze how each program operates in terms of its narrative, character, and ideological constructions of poverty. I began looking for case

study media texts by outlining the policy initiatives I would cover in the three time periods focused on in this work. Once I established that I was interested in examining the expansion and presentation of the undeserving-deserving poor binary on television, I began to search for media texts that would be theoretically useful cases. My scope was limited to shows with storylines about youth that also targeted a youth audience.

For the 1990s period, I considered the shows *Party of 5, Roseanne, Kenan & Kel, Sister, Sister,* and *Roswell* but decided on *My So-Called Life* for two main reasons. Even though *MSCL* only ran for one season, more briefly than any of the other options, it is still resonant today. *MSCL* is the only one of those options currently available for free on Hulu and has been consistently mentioned in my graduate media classes, social networks and informal conversations. *MSCL* also represents both abject and working-class poverty in its narrative and through its characters; I hoped that this multiplicity of representation would strengthen the conceptual categories I am investigating.

Looking for a show that reflected issues and policies relevant to the Bush administration from 2001-2009, I considered *Everwood, Gilmore Girls,* and *Veronica Mars*. Eventually, I decided on *The O.C.* because it was the show that best represented the policy changes I wanted to focus on in Chapter 2. My textual analysis of *The O.C.* focuses on the pilot episode because it is one of the only episodes that attempts to represent structural inequality in any meaningful way.

Shameless is the case study text for my third chapter because in my initial investigation it seemed to be doing something radically different than the other case study options. I have previously written about working-class queerness in the show and thought

the addition of *Shameless* as a case study text would help foster divergent perspectives and analysis in the project. I also considered the shows *Parenthood, Raising Hope*, and *Skins.* While I strongly considered *Raising Hope* because it is making interesting moves to embrace "white trash" culture, I considered *Shameless* a stronger representation of the undeserving/deserving binary. While all the episodes in this show deal with abject poverty, I chose the episode "The American Dream" for a focused textual analysis because it highlights the structural factors of poverty. "The American Dream" is one of the first narrative storylines I've come across to attempt to depict the intractability of poverty in the US.

How the media portray class in the US is a critical issue because the typical individual spends so much of his or her waking hours with some form of media. According to Kendall, American teens and children spend almost 8 hours a day watching TV, playing video games, and surfing the internet. I have focused on various television texts in this thesis because I believe television plays a key role in how welfare policy is understood to affect everyday life. The case study texts I chose are popular and broadly consumed. They provide images of poverty that greatly affect how we see, or more often fail to see, poverty in the real world. Government policy is contested societal terrain; television both mediates and illuminates the contours of that negotiation. As Kellner writes in *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern,* "Since the forms of culture produced by giant media and entertainment conglomerates are an immediate and pervasive aspect of contemporary life, and since media culture is both constituted by and constitutive of larger social and political

dynamics, it is an excellent optic to illuminate the nature of contemporary society, politics and everyday life".[22] Media illuminates the politics of society and impacts individuals. Bell hooks in her book *Outlaw Culture* reflects on the importance of the politics of representation based on her life experience. She writes, "Witnessing that individuals can be poor and lead meaningful lives, I understand intimately the damage that has been done to the poor by a dehumanizing system of representation."[23]Hooks positions media representations of poverty as a matter of human dignity and a site for the formation of values. Ultimately, the dual methodology that I employ in this study will allow me to qualitatively analyze the ways in which the discourse of poverty is socially constructed through both welfare policy reform and television representations.

Chapter Breakdown

The three chapters of this thesis are arranged chronologically, beginning with the Clinton, moving through the Bush, and finally ending with the first term of the Obama administrations. The first chapter begins with discussion of major welfare reform under the Clinton administration and analysis of the ABC drama *My So-Called Life* which aired from 1994-1995. Entitled "Angels and Aid," Chapter 1 traces some of the racist and classist frames connected to welfare, specifically the Aid for Families with Dependent Children Program (AFDC), and explore how those stereotypical frames are negotiated in the show. *My So-Called Life* mobilizes discourse of lack and the irresponsible raced "other" through the characters Rayanne and Rickie. *My So-Called Life* has multiple episodes in its one season run that deal with the intersections of poverty, race, class, and

[22] Kellner, 4.
[23] hooks, 171.

gender. As I found in my analysis, the show simultaneously subverts these discourses through the narrative, while also complicating understandings of the poor by depicting the teenager characters as a product of their family environment.

The second chapter of this thesis moves from Clinton reforms to consider the abandonment of poverty as a talking point and the increased focus on volunteerism under the Bush administration from 2001-2009. Chapter 2, "Charity, Responsibility, and Poverty," explores the continued neoliberal government shifts coming out of the Clinton administration and the taking up of neoliberal tenets in popular rhetoric under the Bush administration as they appear in *The O.C.*. This show is an American teen drama series that centers on Ryan Atwood, a poor troubled teenager from Chino, California who is adopted by the wealthy Cohen family in Newport Beach. Chapter 2 examines the deserving/undeserving binary as it relates to exceptional children on U.S. television by looking specifically at Ryan Atwood's character development and narrative trajectory. It also focuses on the silence and obfuscation of poverty during Bush's first term and the increased reliance on personal charity and volunteerism to correct systematic wrongs that are mirrored in *The O.C.*'s first episode.

Chapter 3, "Shameless and Undeserving", is an analysis of the American version *Shameless* that discusses the visibility of the deserving/undeserving poor binary within the series. Using this binary, I examine the vitriolic backlash to the Obama administration's expansion of government support programs after the market crash of the early 2000s. *Shameless* folds in public backlash and welfare critiques of the early 2000s, by depicting countless abuses of government programs by the main characters.The show

also subverts these understandings, by showing the intractability of poverty and framing the abuses as necessary for the family's survival. *Shameless* manages to blur the line between the deserving and undeserving by highlighting the importance of generation. Using *Shameless*, Chapter 3 also explores the complicated nuances of race in television representations of class and highlights the racially charged backlash rhetoric prevalent in response to Obama's reforms.

The conclusion of this thesis ties together the arguments built in the three chapters. My hope is to construct a cohesive picture of policy reforms regarding families living in poverty and how they have been reflected and at times challenged in media representations through the last three presidential administrations. Finally, I point to the multitude of directions for future research in the field/on the topic.

Chapter 1: Angels and Aid

"The end of welfare as we know it" – President Bill Clinton

"They're like normal, they're like us. There is this one girl and when you're talking to her it's like you forget, ya know, that there is any difference between you." – Angela Chase, *My So-Called Life*

Welfare debates during the Clinton administration were influenced by racist and classist stereotypes and policy changes that increasingly tied benefits to work, constricted eligibility requirements and helped to create an incomprehensible and unnavigable bureaucratic system. *My So-Called Life,* an American teen drama series which aired on ABC for one season from 1994 to 1995 (at the beginning of Clinton's major welfare reform) positions two supporting characters Enrique "Rickie" Vasquez and Rayanne Graff in poverty. This chapter maps how racist and classist discourses about welfare recipients at the time of the show's creation and airing, helped to construct and reinforce these representations of poverty.

It is not my intention to propose *My So-Called Life* as the only or even dominant representation of poverty constructed during this period but as one case study representation of poverty during this time period that we can use to discuss mobilizations and fortifications of historically contextualized discussions. I chose *My So-Called Life* or *MSCL* as my case study show because it depicts both working-class poverty with the character Rayanne and abject poverty with the character Rickie. Also, although the show only lasted one season, it was and still is much acclaimed by fans and critics as a television drama willing to grapple seriously with issues of teenage life. Michele Byers

writes about the cancellation of *MSCL* in her article "Gender/Sexuality/Desire: Subversion of Difference and Construction of Loss in the Adolescent Drama of 'My So-Called Life,' saying:

> The viewing public did not take the cancellation of *MSCL* lying down. In November 1994, after hearing rumors that the show was to be canceled, writer Steve Ortener began OLS (Operation Life Support), an online campaign to save *MSCL*. [24]

OLS was covered by the mainstream media and raised a considerable amount of funding but *MSCL* was still canceled. The show inspired fan engagement and directly depicted what was considered a 'real' representation of adolescent struggle and class relations in the mid-90s.

In the book *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card against America's Poor,* authors Neubeck and Cazenave write, "The racialization of welfare did not happen overnight. For decades, well-known U.S. politicians like Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, Robert Byrd, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, David Duke, Newt Gingrich, and Bill Clinton forged and exploited the link between "race" and "welfare" to such a degree that the two terms are now politically and culturally inextricable."[25] President Clinton ran his 1992 campaign on the promise that he would "end welfare as we know it" referring to AFDC or the Aid to Families with Dependent Children assistance program originally established in 1935 as part of the New Deal. In his book *The Undeserving Poor,* Michael Katz historically situates welfare discourse and AFDC writing that by the 1960s welfare and the welfare state had changed completely from being understood as something to

[24] Michele Byers, 712.
[25] Kenneth Neubeck, Noel A. Cazenave, 3.

protect everyone against risk, to a code word for public assistance given mainly to unmarried mothers, mostly young women of color, under Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC. Katz explains this shift and stigmatization by tracing public policy discussion along two tracks. The first track of the discussion is social insurance programs with tied benefits to employment and the middle class. These programs traditionally have been publicly supported, did not, and do not carry the stigma of welfare. Public assistance is the second track, which is tied increasingly to people out of work, unmarried mothers, and people of color. In this way, welfare became associated with the undeserving poor. Katz writes that:

> The political left, right, and center all attacked it. In the early 1990s, when President Bill Clinton promised to "end welfare as we know it," everyone knew that he meant AFDC- the most disliked public program in America. Thus it was not surprising that most of the country, eight out of ten Americans applauded when Clinton honored his pledge to "end welfare" by signing the 1996 welfare reform bill. [26]

In fact, when President Clinton kept his 1992 campaign promise by signing legislation that abolished Aid to Families with Dependent Children and instituted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, he solidified his racial message by surrounding himself with African American mothers in press photographs of the White House ceremony in which he signed the welfare reform bill. The Clinton administration covertly mobilized racist rhetoric around welfare cuts to minimize criticism by tapping into America's foundationally racist belief system.

[26] Katz, 4.

Figure 1: Image from "Romney Attacks President on Welfare; Obama Team Alleges Hypocrisy"

Neubeck and Cazenave write about racial stereotypes associated with AFDC in the 1990s, saying, "While the percentage of families receiving welfare in 1996 who were African American was almost identical to that for whites (37 versus 36 percent), survey research in the first half of the 1990s revealed that many European Americans had come to view AFDC as a 'black program'".[27]They go on to say that many Americans believed that African Americans preferred to live off welfare rather than support themselves with work. "Data from the National Opinion Research Center showed that, when asked to directly compare themselves to African Americans, fully three-fourths of white

[27] Neubeck, Cazenave, 5.

respondents rated African Americans as less likely than whites to prefer to be self-supporting."[28]The episodes of *MSCL* analyzed below both reinforce and complicate this link between people of color and public assistance. The character Rickie, who is positioned in abject poverty, is the only character of color on the show. This singular representation of abject poverty embodied by the only person of color works again to link race and assistance in the same way the Clinton signing picture reinforces this message. However, Rayanne who I argue is positioned as working class, is a white girl and so works against the understanding that social inequality runs exclusively along racial lines. Racist ideology in the US combined with institutional influences on welfare and minority communities stigmatized welfare and in particular the AFDC assistance program during the mid 1990s.

President Clinton's welfare reform policy reified both racial and class stereotypes about welfare. Katz writes, about sociologist Viviana A. Zelizer's work on food stamps,

> As in-kind relief, they (food stamps) echo the centuries-old suspicion in welfare history that poor people are incompetent to manage cash. Both public officials and the agents of charity have always preferred to give the poor redeemable orders for groceries, fuel, rent money, clothes, or medical care- but not cash, which is too easily fungible or wasted.[29]

Clinton's welfare reform involved considerable shifts from cash based public assistance to other kinds of relief. This shift worked to establish an imaginary link between public assistance and racist beliefs about people of color and reinforced neoliberal notions that the poor are at fault, through unwise personal choices, for their lack of resources. The classist discourse of incompetence and unwise personal choices running through the

[28] Neubeck, Cazenave, 5.
[29] Katz, 301.

Clinton reforms, is also an explicit narrative plot point in the *MSCL* episode discussed later in this chapter. Clinton's major welfare reform, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), effectively ended AFDC's support to the poorest Americans, put time limits on remaining benefits, tied aid to work, and greatly reduced or eliminated eligibility for legal immigrants and the disabled. This new legislation signaled the victory of the war on dependence that shaped the following decades.

In his formal statement related to signing PRWORA in 1996, Clinton referred to the Act as tough on work and highlighted its focus on poor youth, "Not only does it include firm but fair work requirements, it provides $4 billion more in childcare than the vetoed bills—so that parents can end their dependency on welfare and go to work—and maintains health and safety standards for daycare providers."[30] Several times throughout the statement, Clinton highlighted that PRWORA required recipients to work and provided childcare to facilitate the transition from welfare to work. While these initiatives helped welfare recipients overcome the hurdle of securing adequate childcare, I also think this intense focus on childcare could be read as another coded racist reference to the supposed non-normative procreative habits of African American women.

This shift in policy and institutional move toward neoliberalism should be situated in a larger historical context. When industrial manufacturing in the United States gave way to the digital age, it necessitated a greater adaptability to the demands of consumers, a knowledge economy for skilled workers, a service economy for unskilled workers, and

[30] Clinton, 1.

internationalization of manual labor. Katherine Sender in her article "Queens for a Day: Queer Eye for the Straight Guy and the Neoliberal Project," situates the history of neoliberal policies by discussing the creation of welfare liberalism during the New Deal of the 1930s through the Great Society of the 1960s in the US. Public policy from the 1930s-1960s in the US involved greater government intervention in a range of previously established private industries and an expansion of the social safety net. Sender concisely describes the connection between the history of these policies and neoliberalism writing,

> The dismantling of welfare-oriented provisions in the US that began in the 1980s marks a new version of liberal philosophy: neoliberalism. This involves shifts from authoritarian government to individual responsibility; from injunction to expert advice; and from centralized government to quasi-governmental agencies and media, including television, as source of information, evaluation, and reproach.[31]

The dismantling of AFDC and creation of PRWORA during the Clinton administration is a neoliberal shift away from safety net welfare programs toward individual responsibility and work. In the context of this neoliberal shift, media representations as sites of negotiation for social control become even more important to analyze. *My So-Called Life* is a television show that incorporates storylines of poverty and mobilizes these racist and classist discourses of the time period.

My So-Called Life is an American teen drama series that aired on ABC for one season from 1994 to 1995, during the first years of the Clinton administration. The show is set at the fictional Liberty High School in a suburban town called Three Rivers, outside Philadelphia. Although only airing for one season, My *So-Called Life* was critically

[31] Sender, 7.

lauded for its authenticity and continues to be culturally resonant. *My So-Called Life* positions two supporting characters in poverty, Enrique "Rickie" Vasquez, played by Wilson Cruz, and Rayanne Graff, played by A. J. Langer. The show revolves around a 15- year-old girl, Angel Chase, and the trials of being a teenager dealing with friends, boys, family and school. The narrative drama of each episode revolves around Angela Chase and her close group of friends navigating the perils of adolescence. For this analysis, I will focus on episode ten, entitled "Other People's Mothers" which most directly deals with Rayanne Graff's narrative development, and episode fifteen entitled "So Called Angels", which is one of the episodes that deals with Rickie Vasquez's social location explicitly. Jordan Catalano is a minor character in *My So-Called Life,* who could be seen as another character in poverty in the series. For this chapter, I have chosen not to include an analysis of Jordan specifically and only include his interactions with Rickie because there is no attention in the series to Jordan's family situation.

Episode ten "Other People's Mothers," is centered on the home lives of Angela and Rayanne. I argue that this episode positions Rayanne Graff, and her single mother Amber, as the working-class contrast to the all-American Chase family in a variety of ways. The hegemonic frames of working-class representations analyzed by Kendall and further explored by Butsch appear throughout the episode. This textual analysis supports the argument that one of the ways Amber can be understood as fitting the dominant working-class frames of representation through being presented as overly emotional, overly sexual, making unwise personal choices, being a single female parent, and living with her family in an apartment. This positioning begins with the opening scene in which

all three main characters- Angela, Rickie, Rayanne- are in the Chase kitchen eating. Rayanne says, "Have you ever stopped to think about, like, refrigerators? Refrigerators are like so revealing. I can look in this refrigerator and know like everything about your family. I mean look at this, there is actual labeled leftovers in here."[32] As the scene continues, Rayanne grabs a beer. When Angela reacts she responds, "What! I think Patty has enough of a life that she's not gonna be counting beers." The teenagers make their way upstairs and Patty, Angela's mother, walks in the front door. Patty confiscates the beer, pours it out, and calls Angela into the kitchen to make it clear that teen drinking is unacceptable in the Chase house. This scene, juxtaposed with the later scene at Rayanne's house, clearly positions the Chase household as abundantly middle class and privileged.

The next scene opens with the sound of trilling flutes and wind chimes, an exotic departure from the normal soundtrack of the show. Angela walks into Rayanne's house while her voiceover says, "walking into someone's house for the first time is like entering another country."[33] The camera pans over door frames full of beads, paper umbrellas, and an unmade bed with discarded tights strewn over it. Angela has clearly entered a household unlike her own with a different set of rules and values. Rayanne's apartment is loose and loud. Her mother comes out in a robe and excitedly gives Rayanne a $270 birthday check from her absent father, and greets Rayanne's friends with kisses and hugs. Everyone sits on a pull out bed together in the living room. Amber, Rayanne's mother,

[32] "Other People's Mothers".
[33] "Other People's Mothers".

reads their tarot cards while sipping a margarita and tells Angela, "I finally faced the truth; the only really great foods are appetizers and desserts so why bother eating anything else."[34] I see the representation and treatment of food in the two households is a clear class demarcation. The Chase household has family meals with labeled leftovers, two parents, strongly enforced rules and ideas about appropriate decorum. While the Graff apartment is run by a single parent who is loud and drinks, money is discussed freely and physical contact is shared loosely, the physical space of the apartment is not clearly defined and neither are the rules or boundaries of the family. Throughout the episode, the two families share the focus and their class differences become even more explicit in the narrative.

The episode moves forward with Rayanne reacting to her father's gift by showing up to school drunk and deciding to spend the cash on a blowout party. Simultaneously, Patty gets roped into throwing her parent's 45th wedding anniversary party at the Chase family home. Rayanne manically plans her party in a montage of buying alcohol, buying various kinds of drugs, spinning around the school parking lot uncontrollably, laughing, and inviting strangers to her house. On the day of the party, Angela and Rickie help get Rayanne's apartment ready as she drinks a beer and dances around in the background of the screen. Rayanne's mother comes into the room holding a margarita, saying "okay here are the rules- there is absolutely no eating on my bed, is that clear? And don't let things get out of control. I realize there is going to be some drinking going on and believe

[34] "Other People's Mothers".

me I would rather have it go on under my roof,"[35] Rayanne takes a sip of her mother's drink as she continues speaking, " but don't get too loud because I don't want any lectures from that tight-ass neighborhood watch."[36] Again, Amber Graff is framed as perhaps well-meaning but ultimately an irresponsible parent whose main concern is the neighborhood watch and not the safety of her daughter.

The episode comes to a climax as both parties begin. The Chase family has a very posh family gathering with classical music and polished silver, while Rayanne, without adult supervision, drinks with reckless abandon, takes pills and dances with multiple men she does not know. Angela finds Rayanne stumbling around and incoherent just as Rayanne's mother comes home from work. Amber shuts down the party and throws everyone out, including the man about to sexually assault her almost unconscious daughter. She yells as Rayanne falls off the bed and lies on the floor,

> You were gonna have a few friends over? Look at this place, it's a pigsty. I come home and I've got, ten minutes before I am supposed to meet Rusty and you're destroying the house. Tomorrow we are gonna have a long talk about your behavior. You are too drunk young lady, way too drunk. What did I say about moderation? I trusted you. Now look at you, you look like an old drunk. Pull yourself together Rayanne Marie because I want this whole place cleaned up by the time I get back.[37]

She yells this monologue as she changes from work clothes into date clothes and her daughter lies on the floor. Then she storms out of the apartment, leaving Rickie and Angela to take care of Rayanne. In many ways this episode falls back on traditional societal stereotypes about poor people. Rayanne's decision to spend what little money

[35] "Other People's Mothers".
[36] "Other People's Mothers".
[37] "Other People's Mothers".

she had on drugs and alcohol instead of books, clothes, or transportation buttresses understandings of the poor as unable to manage their own finances and make decisions in their own self-interest. In the resolution of the episode, Rickie and Angela call Patty, Angela's mother, because Rayanne is overdosing. Patty manages the situation, calls an ambulance and takes care of all three teens until Amber finally meets them at the hospital. Amber enters the hospital room very dramatically and a recovering Rayanne comforts her crying mother. Throughout the episode, Patty is the responsible middle-class parent who can be trusted to make adult decisions while Amber is irresponsible, drunk, self-interested and absent. This television representation of the Graff working-class family perpetuates ideas of the poor as both incompetent and responsible for their oppressed socio-economic status. *MSCL* complicates this narrative only slightly in its representation of youth by also placing the blame for poverty on the parents.

Episode fifteen of *My So-Called Life,* "So Called Angels," is centered on Enrique "Rickie" Vasquez, Rayanne and Angela's gay Latino best friend. The episode opens with Rickie crying and spitting up blood in the snow as he staggers into an ally. When Rickie arrives at school with a black eye, he tells a story about trying to catch a bus and falling. He leaves his friends to buy a candy bar before class as Rayanne tells Angela, "See, Rickie has this like tendency to get beat up and he doesn't always love talking about it."[38] It is not clear if this is a reference to Rickie being bullied, which was covered in an earlier episode, or a reference to domestic violence. Later that night, Angela takes the trash out her back door and Rickie is there in the snow. He says, "I was at Brian's so I just thought

[38] "Other People's Mothers".

I would stop by;" he goes on to mention that he was at Rayanne's house earlier in the day.[39]Angela clarifies that Rickie went from school to Rayanne's house, to Brian's house and finally to her house. Made uncomfortable, Rickie begins to leave, but stops, saying, "God, your house smells like amazing…" Angela explains that her dad is teaching a new cooking class and goes to the kitchen to get Rickie food.[40] The next scene opens in the kitchen with Rickie devouring a full plate of food, "thanks, I guess I forgot to eat lunch today. It must've slipped my mind or something." [41]Once again, food or the lack of food in Rickie's case is used to signify his class as even further from Angela's comfortable middle-class status than Rayanne's household. Shortly thereafter, Angela's parents come home from holiday shopping to find Rickie in their kitchen sporting his black eye. Patty asks Angela to step in the living room to see something she purchased and the Chase family precedes to have a conversation within Rickie's hearing "Look it's no big deal, alright" Angela says to her father as she walks into the living room, "Why don't you just tell us what's going on and we will decide if it is a big deal. Was he in a fight? And in any case it is awfully late to be having friends over," Angela's mother responds.[42] Angela looks at her parents and whispers "I don't think he has anywhere to go."[43] "Did he say that?"[44] her father asks, "Well, no, I just have this feeling."[45] The camera cuts to Rickie in the kitchen moving closer to the door to hear the conversation better as her father says

[39] "Other People's Mothers".
[40] "Other People's Mothers".
[41] "Other People's Mothers".
[42] "Other People's Mothers".
[43] "Other People's Mothers".
[44] "Other People's Mothers".
[45] "Other People's Mothers".

"look, sweetie, if he has run away from home or if something is really wrong, maybe I should talk to him."[46]Angela responds, "no, that would just freak him out worse. Can't he just stay here for one night?"[47] Angela paces the living room and the camera cuts back to Rickie's face in shadow, so the audience cannot see his facial expression. The Chase family conversation continues with Angela's mother, saying "No, it's not our place. What if his parents are expecting him home? Having him stay here is not the answer."[48] The camera moves back to Angela in shadow, as she yells, "Then what is the answer?"[49] The back door closes. Rickie is gone.

In the next scene, it is confirmed for the audience that Rickie is currently homeless and the victim of domestic violence by his uncle. Another teenage character, Jordan Catalano, offers to give Rickie a ride to someplace warm to crash and the soundtrack plays, "for the holidays you can't beat home sweet home."[50] The soundtrack emphasizes both teen's lack of a stable and loving home environment.

MSCL was noted and commended as one of the first shows to include a character that is a queer teenager of color. I also think the show is notable for representing different situations of poverty; however, my concern is that almost all the constructions of difference fall on one character, Rickie. As a gay, homeless, Latino character Rickie is in many ways groundbreaking but might also be implicated as reinforcing racist and

[46] "Other People's Mothers".
[47] "Other People's Mothers".
[48] "Other People's Mothers".
[49] "Other People's Mothers".
[50] "Other People's Mothers".

neoliberal understanding of the poor because he embodies all the difference for the show. The show points at this difference in a dialogue between Graham and Patty, Angela's parents. "Were we wrong down there with Rickie? I mean what do we really know about that boy? We've never met his family. I mean how on earth are we supposed to know what the situation is…" Patty asks Graham. He responds, "I know, except I think he does make you kind of uncomfortable." "What do you mean, because he wears makeup?" Graham uncomfortable responds, "No I am just saying what if that was Brian Krakow with that bruise on his face? Well, it'd be a different story wouldn't it?" She shakes her head responding, "Graham, I mean you can't compare them. I've known Brian Krakow since he was 5 years old." He looks up at her and says, "I know, so have I. All I am asking is, should that make a difference? She exhales deeply, "Well, maybe not but it does" Patty ends the scene. [51]

Rickie is a groundbreaking character as a queer teen of color that struggles with homelessness and finding a place to belong. However, as the only queer teenage character, the only character of color and the only homeless character, Rickie's poverty is almost fully explained by his social location and position of difference. Rickie is not poor as a result of institutions that are structured to exclude him because of aspects of his identity according to the narrative depiction in the show. Instead he embodies the single locus for most of the diversity on the show that happens to be poor.

[51] "Other People's Mothers".

Throughout the episode, Angela pushes back against this difference and highlights the fact that homeless teens are just like 'normal kids'. At one point, she tells Brian Krakow, "They're like normal, they're like us. There is this one girl and when you're talking to her it's like you forget, ya know, that there is any difference between you."[52] The climax of the episode is a fight between Angela and her mother, because Angela wants to invite Rickie and another homeless teen to Christmas dinner. Her mother says no, and Angela yells, "This girl, you haven't even talked to her. I've talked to her. This girl…she could be me." Her mother yells back, "oh, don't say that. How could you say that?" Angela walks around the dining room table and calmly says to her mother, "because it's true."[53] Again, Angela's message of universal acceptance paired with her lack of focus on institutional structures that encourage economic inequalities both resists and falls into neoliberal understandings of poverty. She is arguing that the poor are not more irresponsible or incompetent than her: a white, suburban, middle class, cisgendered, and straight girl. The homeless teens are just like Angela, in fact, she is able to forget that any difference at all exists between them. Her message here of universal acceptance pushes against the racist and classist discourse prominent under this administration, that inequality is the fault of those being oppressed. However, Angela's statements also work to obscure institutional factors that contribute to inequality. If the poor are just like Angela Chase, then they could ostensibly make the right choices to better themselves and just have chosen not to. The only truly radical message in the episode comes from the homeless girl addressing Patty, "I had a mom and clean sheets, all that. Another toss of

[52] "Other People's Mothers".
[53] "Other People's Mothers".

the dice and she could be me and I could be her."[54] Although MSCL is still asserting the similarity of poor and middle-class people without acknowledging the role of institutional structures, this line of dialogue does not put the onus of poverty on the poor but instead on luck. Another toss of the dice and Rickie could have been born into a family with institutional and societal support for his success.

Welfare debates during the Clinton administration re- inscribed racist and classist stereotypes of the poor by targeting the AFDC assistance program for reform and falling back on existing oppressive political rhetoric. The reform of AFDC to PRWORA and focus on the Earned Income Tax Credit to move away from welfare safety net programs institutionalized neoliberal ideology in US public policy by tying benefits to work and moving away from a regulated welfare state to self-policing and increasing dependence on charity benefit programs. During this time *My So-Called Life* was a television show that depicted two poor teenagers, while being praised for its cultural resonance and realness. *My So-Called Life,* tackled both working-class and abject poverty. It resisted some of the dominant narratives being touted by government welfare reform and in popular rhetoric at the time by depicting Rayanne and Rickie as sympathetic and fully formed characters, the community of Three Rivers as a diversely classed suburb and placing the responsibility for poverty not fully on the choices of the teens and their families. Ultimately, however, My *So-Called Life* reiterates understandings of poor adults as irresponsible and incapable of making decisions in their best self-interest or the

[54] "Other People's Mothers".

interest of their children and of poverty as either entirely a result of sexual and racial difference, drinking problems, or ineffective life choices and lack of hard work.

Chapter 2: Charity, Responsibility, and Poverty

"In every instance where my administration sees a responsibility to help people, we will look first to faith-based organizations, charities and community groups that have shown their ability to save and change lives." - President George W Bush, July 1999.

"...but we have all this extra room here. We have a pool house, yet, you guys are going to ship him off to a group home? Am I the only one who gets how much that sucks?"- Seth, *The O.C.*

In the early 2000s, the shift away from welfare checks and cash assistance to service-based assistance from nonprofit, for-profit, and faith-based service organizations moved the responsibility of a safety net for the poor off the federal government and onto communities and individual citizens. These policy shifts enforced during the George W Bush presidential administration are echoed in the importance placed on volunteerism and a heteronormative family structure in the media representations of poverty on *The O.C.*.

George W Bush's presidential term is not often associated with significant changes in US welfare policy. No major welfare policy initiatives were passed during Bush's first term, and in comparison to the War on Terror, tax cuts, budget deficits and Medicare, issues directly related to poverty took a back seat in the early 2000s. However, the Bush administration presided over a new era of welfare policy ushered in by the Clinton administration reforms. The Bush administration saw the complete changeover in how states and communities provided welfare assistance through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), with two major characteristics including the shift away from cash based assistance and an extension of charitable organizations. Clinton's reform

policies that shifted the welfare system away from checks to social services based system, were enacted and solidified during the Bush administration. Bush also aggressively promoted the involvement of faith-based organizations in assisting poor families by creating the Healthy Marriage Initiative, which provided healthy marriage skills training to heterosexual couples, and increased federal funding for programs that would support the formation of two-parent families and responsible fatherhood. The rhetoric around the Healthy Marriage Initiative was completely focused on parenting. Healthy marriages, according to this rhetoric, are important to the state because low income children need heteronormative family units to avoid making the same unwise choices their parents made that caused them to be in poverty. *The O.C.* a popular teen drama series running at the same time, aligns with this reading of HMI by depicting Ryan Atwood as a teen from a single- female parent headed household. Many of Ryan's unwise life decisions are a result of his older brothers guidance and his mothers lack of control over her sons' lives. As the series progresses, Ryan is placed in the stable heteronormative Cohen household and under the guidance of a caring male figure, Ryan excels. Responsible fatherhood and heteronormative family structures, as depicted in *The O.C.*, are the Bush administration's solution to the cycle of poverty and encourage a shift away from federal government assistance.

The shift away from welfare checks and cash assistance to service-based assistance from nonprofit, for-profit, and faith-based service organizations moved the onus for help off the federal government and onto communities and local governments. Welfare checks were no longer the main source of assistance. Instead, welfare-to-work

programs and other social services defined as "non-assistance" became the main sources of support for public assistance recipients. These "non-assistance" programs included short-term childcare, job search help, mental health resources, substance-abuse treatment, and domestic violence counseling. Replacing monthly welfare checks with non-cash assistance was and still is viewed by many politicians as a development to improve the self-sufficiency of the poor, by removing negative behavioral incentives and barriers to employment. Others, however, have argued that administering assistance through community-based organizations could make programs more responsive to local conditions and individual needs. Shifting welfare services away from cash to social services is in no way a guarantee that communities will be able to implement these possibilities into realities. In fact, a service oriented welfare system might minimize the structural causes of poverty and instead frame poverty as an individual-level failing that needs to be cured. Not to mention, few communities are able to track welfare clients across the many different agencies, and fragmented service delivery makes it difficult to coordinate activity, assess outcomes, and hold relevant agencies accountable. This move from service orientated welfare to individual focus is framed by media representations in the early 2000s as well.

One of the major themes throughout the first season of *The O.C.* is the culture shock character Ryan Atwood feels as he adjusts to living in Orange County and being taken in by the wealthy Cohen family. The show also briefly depicts the juvenile criminal justice system in the first and second episodes of the series. The rest of the four seasons work to obscure the institutional and structural causes of poverty by framing Ryan's

circumstances as stemming from his mother's alcoholism and poor life choices. The structural to individual focus continues to be a key frame of the early 2000s welfare policies and media representations of the poor.

PRWORA originally contained the charitable choice provision, which required states implementing social service contracts under TANF to treat faith-based organizations the same as secular nonprofit organizations. The charitable choice provision permitted religious organizations receiving government contracts to maintain hiring practices that favor religious guidelines and provide services in facilities with overt religious symbols or elements, as long as public funds did not support worship or proselytization. While this provision was included in the implementation of PRWORA during the Clinton administration, it was heavily emphasized by President Bush upon his taking office. President Bush immediately created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) and established faith-based initiative agency centers in five cabinet-level departments: Justice, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services. He later added centers in the Departments of Agriculture, Homeland Security, and Commerce, as well as in the Agency for International Development.[55] In addition to supporting the involvement of faith-based organizations, the goal of reducing illegitimacy and supporting two-parent households was central to Republican proposals for welfare reform and was of considerable interest to the conservative base of the party. [56]

At the start of his first term, in his initial budget to Congress, Bush argued that,

[55] Allard, 316.
[56] Haskins, 61.

> the presence of two committed, involved parents contributes directly to better school performance, reduced substance abuse, less crime and delinquency, fewer emotional and other behavioral problems, less risk of abuse or neglect, and lower risk of teen suicide... there is simply no substitute for the love, involvement, and commitment of a responsible father.[57]

The creation of the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) within the Department of Health and Human Services was meant to promote research into program models that would effectively support formation of two-parent families. The Healthy Marriage Initiative funded three major marriage evaluation programs. The Building Strong Families Project was meant to evaluate programs intended to help strengthen relationships between unwed couples and support their interest in marriage. The Supporting Healthy Marriages program targeted services at low-income couples, seeking to strengthen existing relationships, and remove barriers to healthier marriages. Finally, the Community Healthy Marriage Initiative, which conducted evaluations of many different community-based programs that were seeking to promote healthy marriage and parental responsibility.[58]

Arguing that state efforts under PRWORA to promote healthy marriages were inadequate and lacked knowledge of the logistics necessary to successfully implement programs, President Bush also proposed replacing the existing TANF performance bonus grant system with a competitive grants process that would provide $200 million per year in funding for programs aimed at strengthening relationships and marriage. One set of grants would offer $100 million to "conduct research and demonstration projects, and

[57] White House, 75.
[58] Allard, 318.

provide technical assistance primarily focusing on family formation and healthy marriage activities."[59] Another $100 million would support a matching grant program funding state programs "to develop innovative approaches to promoting healthy marriage and reducing out-of-wedlock births."[60] The Bush administration's emphasis on faith-based initiatives and volunteerism was another pull toward the neoliberal governing policies established through PRWORA. As Nikolas Rose has put it, "Neoliberalism does not abandon 'the will to govern': it maintains the view that failure of government to achieve its objectives is to be overcome by inventing new strategies of government that will succeed."[61] Volunteerism has come to play a critical role in neoliberal governing strategies. The importance of volunteerism and a focus on heteronormative family structure appear in media representations on *The O.C.* at the time.

The O.C. portrays the fictional lives of a group of teenagers and their families in the affluent community of Newport Beach in Orange County, California. The series centers on and my analysis will focus on Ryan Atwood, a poor troubled teenager from Chino, California who is adopted by the wealthy Cohen family. The series is a mixture of melodrama and comedy and premiered to high ratings. It was considered one of the most popular shows of the 2003-2004 television season. Season one, focuses on Ryan Atwood's arrival in Newport Beach after being taken in by Sandy and Kirsten Cohen. The show's creator, Josh Schwartz has told interviewers that the inspiration for the show came from being a fan of Larry Sanders, Cameron Crowe and other "quirky character-

[59] White House, 19-21
[60] White House, 19-21
[61] Hyatt, 206.

driven shows like *Freaks and Geeks, Undeclared,* and *My So-Called Life*".[62] Peter Gallagher, who plays Sandy Cohen, is quoted as saying,

> In that recently post-9/11 America, I read this script and thought it was astounding. I thought it was exactly the right story to be telling at that point in time. It was about a family living in a not very embracing community, one that doesn't necessarily share all their values. [..] they don't lose their sense of humor or their inclination to help. They still open their arms and embrace this outsider kid.[63]

This outsider kid is the poor kid from Chino, Ryan Atwood. A major theme of the entire first season is the culture shock Ryan feels as he adjusts from a life of poverty to living in an incredibly privileged community. My textual analysis will focus on the pilot episode in which the culture clash between Chino and Newport, California are most evident.

The pilot episode of *The O.C.* opens with Ryan and his brother stealing a car as his brother says, "I'm your big brother; if I don't teach you this who will." Ryan looks reluctant but a police car turns the corner and he jumps in as his brother pulls away. A short police chase begins, where Ryan looks terrified and his brother hoots with joy. The scene ends as the car crashes and the police squad car pulls up, behind them. The next scene opens, with Ryan in juvenile lock-up meeting with his public defender, Sandy Cohen. We learn that Ryan's brother is in an adult jail facility and looking at years in prison because he was found with a gun and drugs in his possession, at the time of his arrest. Sandy reads Ryan file out loud,

> This is your first time at lock-up. I am assuming you are not planning on coming back. Your grades aren't great. You've been suspended twice for fighting and truancy a few times. What about your test scores? You're in the 98th percentile on your SAT. Ryan, 98th percentile, you start going to

[62] " The O.C."
[63] "Peter Gallagher- Random Roles".

> class. Are you thinking about college? Have you given any thought at all to your future? Dude, I am on your side. Come on help me out here. [64]

In the first three minutes of the episode, Ryan's family is set up as law breaking and full of bad influences, but Ryan himself is a member of the deserving poor. He is worthy of saving. He is merely a victim of his circumstance and the negative life choices of his family. This difference is emphasized by the rest of the dialogue in the scene.

> Sandy: Look, I can plead this down to a misdemeanor for a petty fine and probation but know this, stealing a car because your big brother told you to, is stupid and it's weak. Those are two things you cannot afford to be anymore. Do you want to change that? Then you are going to have to get over the fact that life dealt you a bad hand. I get it, we're cut from the same deck, Ryan. I grew up no money; bad part of the Bronx, my father was gone. My mother worked all the time. I was pissed off. I was stupid. Smart kid like you, you gotta have a plan. You got some kind of a dream?"
>
> Ryan: responds sarcastically, "Yeah, right. Let me tell you something alright. Where I grew up having a dream doesn't make you smart; knowing it won't come true, that does."[65]

Ryan is angry and disillusioned because of his upbringing but if he makes the right choices, or if he can be convinced to make the right choices, he could become an upstanding member of the middle class like Sandy Cohen. This dialogue completely obscures all of the institutional barriers that reinforce Ryan's poverty.

The scene cuts to outside the juvenile building, where Sandy and Ryan are standing; an old beat up car speeds down the street and hits the curb before coming to an abrupt stop. The driver side door opens and a very disheveled woman steps out. She yells at Ryan, "what kinda family I got, huh? What the hell did I do to deserve this family?"[66]

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[64] Pilot
[65] "Pilot"
[66] "Pilot"

Sandy responds very calmly, “Mrs. Atwood? I am Sandy Cohen. I am Ryan’s attorney.”[67] She turns to look at Sandy, “You should’ve let him rot in there, just like his dad is doing. Just like his brother is gonna. Let’s go, Ryan. Now Ryan!”[68] She slams the driver’s side door as Sandy hands his card to Ryan, saying, “I am gonna give you my card. My home number, ya know, if you need somebody. If things get to be too much, call me.”[69] When they get home Ryan’s mother is shown drinking as she decides to kick him out of the house, and her boyfriend gets in a physical altercation with Ryan when he refuses to leave. Finally, Ryan has no place to turn so he calls Sandy as the song “California” by Phantom Planets, which later became the title song of the show, plays in the background, “We've been on the run; Driving in the sun; Looking out for number one. California here we come; right back where we started from. Hustlers grab your guns. Your shadow weighs a ton. Driving down the 101. California here we come. Right back where we started from.”[70] Ryan gets in Sandy’s car and they head toward Newport. A montage begins of graffiti lined streets and viaducts but quickly moves to shots of beautiful beaches and huge beachfront mansions as the song continues to play, “On the stereo. Listen as we go. Nothing's gonna stop me now. California here we come. Right back where we started from. Pedal to the floor. Thinkin' of the roar. Gotta get us to the show. California here we come. Right back where we started from”.[71] This scene, in particular, has very little dialogue, so the lyrics which begin by describing California as a self-

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[67] “Pilot”
[68] “Pilot”
[69] “Pilot”
[70] Phantom Planet.
[71] Phantom Planet

involved and sometimes dangerous place but also a place to start from and escape to, set the tone for Ryan's entrance into the gated Newport community.

Ryan's stay in the Cohen house is only supposed to be for the weekend, until the child services office opens or his family situation cools down. While Ryan is at the Cohen's house he is invited to attend the annual charity fashion show. The event is formal, and Ryan is offered a mushroom leek crescent or a crab and filo hor d'oeuvre as soon as he walks into the mansion. There are place settings, cameramen, and all of the girls in the show are wearing designer dresses. Marissa, the host, announces that they hold a charity fashion show every year to raise money for the battered women's shelter, and the show begins. Near the end of the episode, Sandy and Kirsten have a conversation about Ryan and Kristen says, "I can't, I'm sorry. I don't want this kid in my house anymore."[72] Sandy responds, "Where is he supposed to go?"[73] She looks at him and says, "He has a family, Sandy. It is not up to you to decide whether or not they are good enough." [74]

At the conclusion of the episode, Sandy pulls away from Newport Beach to return Ryan to his family. The song "Honey and the Moon" by Joseph Arthur begins to play in the background: "Don't know why I'm still afraid/ If you weren't real I would make you up now/ I wish that I could follow through, I know that your love is true and deep as the sea/ But right now, everything you want is wrong/ And right now, all you dreams are waking up/ And right now, I wish I could follow you to the shores of freedom where no

[72] "Pilot".
[73] "Pilot".
[74]":Pilot".

one lives."[75] There is no montage for the ride back to Chino; instead the camera focuses on Ryan's bruised face through the car window. As the car pulls up to Ryan's house, the chorus kicks in, "Freedom; run away tonight/ Freedom; run away, run away tonight."[76] Sandy promises Ryan he is going to make sure that everything works out and Ryan walks up to house and opens the door alone. He finds the house completely empty and a note on the kitchen counter. His mother is gone. Sandy walks in a minute or two after him. They look at each other and Sandy says, "come on, let's go".[77] Narratively, the dysfunction and eventual abandonment of the Atwood family functions as a foil to the perfect Cohen family. The intense portrayal of dysfunctional poverty in this episode also functions as a placeholder to explain the class culture shock that is emphasized throughout the rest of the series. One or two episodes explicitly deal with Ryan's background and it is occasionally mentioned later in the series but largely abandoned as a plot point in later seasons. I think this abandonment mirrors the way welfare policy functioned during the Bush administration. Clinton policy reforms were underlying almost all of Bush's policies relating to the reduction of poverty but the administration is not noted or remembered for its grappling with and enforcement of welfare reform. In the same way, The O.C.'s plot is largely constructed around Ryan's class conflict but the show is rarely remembered as a show that has a working-poor character at its center.

[75] Joseph Arthur
[76] Joseph Arthur
[77] "Pilot"

Chapter 3: Shameless and Undeserving

"In the past, state bureaucrats have attempted to define activities such as hula dancing, attending Weight Watchers, and bed rest as 'work.' These dodges were blocked by the federal work standards. Now that the Obama administration has abolished those standards, we can expect 'work' in the TANF [welfare] program to mean anything but work."- Heritage Foundation

"When you're poor the only way to make money is to steal it or scam it, like Don King or Joe Kennedy."- Lip Gallagher, "American Dream," *Shameless*

President Barack Obama's first term was characterized by a reemergence of discussions of class on the American political stage. The Great Recession moved political focus from foreign policy to an almost exclusive discussion of economics on the domestic front. This increased focus on poverty in the US led to a number of welfare changes and an uptick in public welfare policy debates and disagreements. *Shameless,* an American drama which premiered in 2011on Showtime, constructs a narrative about a family in abject poverty in the US. The Gallagher family from the Southside of Chicago subverts many of the previously established tropes of poverty in the media by incorporating and giving an empathic voice to the undeserving poor. *Shameless* grapples with the deserving and undeserving poor binary, the myth of the happy poor and the hypervisibility of people of color in welfare dependency and abuse stories.

President Barack Obama came into office during the worst recession in the United States since the Great Depression. In a matter of months, trillions of dollars of household wealth were destroyed, which set off a rapid decline in consumer spending and the collapse of financial institutions. Action by the Federal Reserve and US Treasury in the fall of 2008 helped to avert an all-out public panic. Regardless, throughout the following

winter, stock prices continued to fall and credit standards steadily tightened around the country. The US financial system was in a state of distress and affecting the entire global economy, this period is now referred to as the Great Recession.[78] President Obama, working with Congress, took several major actions within the first few months of his presidency to stave off a financial collapse. The passing of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, was the most drastic and most controversial of his presidential interventions. The Recovery Act included $787 billion of tax cuts and spending which was split into one-third tax cuts, one-third government investments, and one-third aid to the people most directly harmed by the recession and to state and local governments.[79]

The Recovery Act mandated $501 billion in new spending, and a substantial portion of those funds were directed toward programs for the growing number of poorest Americans. This legislation included an additional $20 billion for food assistance under the newly named Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP (formerly known as the Federal Food Stamp Program), lifted harsh time limits on food aid for childless unemployed adults, increased funding for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program, as well as for the Emergency Food Assistance and National School Lunch programs.[80] Perhaps the most controversial provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act directly addressed the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program that had replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in

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[78] Grunwald,46.
[79] Grunwald ,46 .
[80] Piven, 47.

1996. As noted in Chapter 1, a cornerstone of the 1996 welfare reform was the requirement that a large portion of the adults enrolled in the TANF program must work and would only be eligible for assistance for short periods of time; welfare benefits were directly tied to labor. However, section 2102 of the American Recovery Act created a new TANF emergency fund of $5 billion, which the states could use for basic assistance, non-recurrent short-term benefits, or subsidized employment.[81] This section 2102 provision effectively reversed the financial incentives imposed by the 1996 legislation, which encouraged states to cut people from its rolls to pass federal standards. Provision 2102 eliminated this focus by requiring states to demonstrate increased need to be eligible for the TANF emergency fund money.

Responses to these changes in the allocation of funds and TANF changes from both sides of the political aisle were not enthusiastic. To Republicans, the "failed" stimulus was an Obama exercise in big government liberalism, fiscal irresponsibility, and incompetence. To many liberals, the stimulus was not a drastic enough action and exemplified the often stated critique that the presidential administration was desperate to compromise with uncompromising Republicans. Frances Fox Piven encapsulates this liberal critique of Obama's welfare changes in her article "Poor Relief: Does Obama Have a Poverty Policy?" writing, "...laid side-by-side with the far larger governmental policies to bail out financial institutions and auto companies, the Obama initiatives for the poor shrink in significance."[82] The American Recovery Act was a large intervention on

[81] Piven 48
[82] Piven 48

the part of the Obama administration to circumvent an all-out financial collapse, but liberal critics saw the allocation of those funds as a political compromise that left many poor Americans to fend for themselves.

The conservative response to Obama's welfare changes are much more vitriolic and lay bare many of the underlying assumptions built into and stemming from the 1996 welfare reform. While researching this chapter it became clear that conservative responses to the Obama welfare changes dominate this public discussion. Mark Skousen in his news article entitled "Obama Expands Welfare State" writes about the name change from Food Stamps to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program , " …it's now called the politically correct "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program" or SNAP for short, as in "Getting free food is a SNAP!"[83] LBJ who created the food stamp program in 1965 would be pleased." He goes on to write in the following paragraph,

> The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 did wonders to reduce the cost overruns, frauds and excesses of LBJ's great Society welfare programs of 1965. But now the Welfare State is ballooning again, and one wonders whether a poor person is better off working at the new generous minimum wage of $7.25 per hour (plus benefits), or getting on welfare and enjoying the fat benefits of free food and health care at the taxpayers' expense.[84]

Abuse of the welfare system by the freeloading poor was, and continues to be, a pervasive concern for republican political leaders. The 1996 Senate Republican Majority Leader, Trent Lott (Miss.) is credited in an article, written by Representative Dave Camp, for the *Washington Times,* as particularly important in creating the 1996 reform work requirements, which were meant to insulate the legislation from future liberal

[83] Skousen, 9.
[84] Skousen, 9.

administrative abuses. He is quoted as saying, "I don't want anyone going to a truck driver's school that advertises on a matchbook cover and avoiding work,"[85] which is exactly what they claimed Obama's reforms enabled. Camp writes, that Chairman of the House Republican Study Committee, Jim Jordan (Ohio) rightly protested that the action [changing TANF work requirements] is a "blatant violation of the law," and Mitt Romney has attacked it, saying "the linkage of work and welfare is essential to prevent welfare from becoming a way of life."[86] Not only do the republican critics cite work as imperative to minimizing welfare abuses, but they implicate both democrats generally, and Obama specifically, as encouraging welfare abuses. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative research think tank, wrote that "in the past, state bureaucrats have attempted to define activities such as hula dancing, attending Weight Watchers, and bed rest as 'work.' These dodges were blocked by the federal work standards. Now that the Obama administration has abolished those standards, we can expect 'work' in the TANF [welfare] program to mean anything but work."[87] Welfare abuses are a popular myth in our collective understanding of poverty on narrative television.

As noted in the review of literature,Clawson and Trice concluded from their study of print media that the media does not overly emphasize stereotypical negative characteristics of the poor, "of the 357 people coded, only three were shown as engaging in criminal behavior, and another three were shown with drugs. No alcoholics were

[85] Camp.
[86] Camp
[87] Wolf.

present and only one person was smoking a cigarette."[88] Depictions of the poor on narrative television are consistently problematic representations of the deserving poor archetype. Dorothy Allison, a self-described feminist, lesbian, working class storyteller, writes about her lived negotiations of gender and class representations and grapples with the deserving or undeserving binary and its relationship to media representations:

> My family's lives were not on television, not in books, not even in comic books. There was a myth of the poor in this country, but it did not include us, no matter how hard I tried to squeeze us in. There was an idea of the good poor- hard working, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable. I understood that we were the bad poor: men who drank and couldn't keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children; and children with runny noses, watery eyes, and the wrong attitudes. [89]

Television representations of poor people perpetuate ideas of the honorable poor with normative procreative and family lives as the deserving poor. *Shameless*, functions as a subversive representation of class; be it deliberately embraces the non-normative by depicting the undeserving poor as sympathetic and emotionally resonant.

Shameless premiered o Showtime in 2011 and has been renewed for its fourth session in 2014. The series follows the Gallagher family, an alcoholic father and six children: Fiona, Philip or Lip, Ian, Debbie, Carl and Liam. The shows narrative structure throughout the seasons is built around the six Gallagher children and their struggles with being abjectly poor. *Shameless,* pushes against a construction of the docile and deserving poor citizen and complicates conversations about systematic abuse by emphasizing the

[88] Clawson and Trice, 61
[89] Allison, 18.

radical behavior of the Gallagher children as necessary for survival in a society without appropriate safety nets. Every episode of *Shameless* thus far depicts the adolescent Gallaghers struggling to survive in abject poverty. The episode "The American Dream" specifically addresses Fiona Gallagher's failed attempt at social mobility through legal efforts and her brother Philip's illegal actions which save the family.

In the opening of "The American Dream" the audience finds out that Fiona Gallagher, the oldest and most responsible member of the Gallagher family, has put down a very large amount of money on a club night. Fiona believes that paying for the opportunity to promote her own club night could be her family's way out of poverty. By continually depicting structural poverty as inescapable *Shameless* subverts what Thomas and Callahan describe as the dissemination of the myth that "money doesn't buy happiness". In their article, "Allocating Happiness: TV Families and Social Class," the authors parse out if fictional family happiness on primetime television is related to matters of social class. They conclude that, "The publication and dissemination of this myth of the happy poor is central in limiting social mobility (or social change in general) so as to preserve the status quo."[90] This myth of the happy poor can be viewed as a device for mitigating resentment of the wealthy by those lower on the socioeconomic scale because it teaches the poor that being rich does not mean being happy. The myth of the deserving poor as the happy poor is incredibly prevalent and well served in regular primetime network television portrayals of families. The narrative focus and drama of *Shameless* frames poverty as inescapable and clearly depicts many of the structures that

[90] Thomas and Callahan, 190.

keep poor people in poverty. The Gallaghers have a strong family bond out of necessity and are forced to join together to survive. The episode "American Dream" begins with Fiona waking up suddenly thinking of money and she begins to have a panic attack. The property tax is due but the Gallagher children do not have the money because Fiona, the oldest and responsible caretaker, used her final check as a down payment for the opportunity to promote a club night. She hopes that promoting a club night will be a way to start a more stable and lucrative career. Frank, the Gallagher father, stumbles home once again drunk and looking for a bed in the house. He has been gone for months and is covered in alcohol and piss; Debbie offers him her bed after laying a tarp down. This scene is immediately followed by all the kids eating breakfast and getting ready for school. As Lip, the oldest son, adds the last $50 to the money jar he says:

> LIP: Adding the last $50 to the property tax, that should put us right where we need to be.
>
> FIONA: I didn't put in my money for that last toxic waste gig I did…
>
> LIP: That's cool. Hand it over and I will drop it off before I go to community service and pay the tax man.
>
> FIONA: I don't have it.
>
> LIP: Don't have what?
>
> FIONA: The money, I used it to put a deposit on a club promoting night.
>
> LIP: The property tax is already two weeks late!
>
> FIONA: We are always two weeks late. I will put it back after the club night.
>
> LIP: It wasn't yours to spend.
>
> FIONA: Yeah, it was. I earned it.
>
> LIP: Oh! Oh, that's how we are doing this now? Okay, well I will take the money I earned last week and buy an ipad. Ian what are you gonna do with your paycheck? New leather jacket?
>
> FIONA: I have an opportunity here to make some real money.

LIP: It's not that easy.[91]

All six of the kids contribute to the family finances and keep the Gallagher family together. Fiona, as the main breadwinner, is trying to make decisions to help the family as a whole. However, as Lip points out the structural circumstances of their poverty make upward mobility impossible.

The climax of the episode is Fiona's first club night, which is a packed house. In part, because Lip has scammed rich kids into believing that there is a secret concert. He sells tickets and charges for parking. Fiona's first club night goes very well making over ten grand in profit but after she has to pay the club cut, liquor license fee, DJ, and servers her pile continues to shrink and in the final count for the night she lost $100 on her investment. The club owner sees her disappointment and responds, "Surprised you didn't lose more. It took me like eight gigs before I saw a profit. You gotta pay your dues."[92] Fiona returns home defeated and has to face Lip:

> LIP: How'd you do?
>
> FIONA: It's going to take a while till I start making money. Here is almost all of it and I will get the rest soon.
>
> LIP: Keep it.
>
> FIONA: What?
>
> LIP: You gonna gamble our money you should hold on to it.
>
> FIONA: I was trying to better our situation.
>
> LIP: Congratulations, you risked everything and you didn't even break even." FIONA: It was my first time doing this…
>
> LIP: That's not the point. You made a decision, without consulting the rest of us.

[91] "The American Dream" *Shameless (US)*. HBO. 20 Jan. 2013. Television.
[92] "The American Dream"

> FIONA: I'm in charge of this family!
>
> LIP: Really?? That's news to me. You see, Fiona, if this family is gonna be every man for himself we are going under fast.
>
> FIONA: Here. Just take the money and pay the property tax. I will get the rest tomorrow, I swear.
>
> LIP: I don't need it. I took care of the situation myself.
>
> FIONA: How?
>
> LIP: Told a bunch of northside kids that Wilco was playing at your party. It's like I said, the only way to make money when you are poor it to steal it or scam it. But hey, let me know if the rules are changing and you are gonna pull this shit again. Maybe I will take over the family money.[93]

Shameless represents the undeserving poor as problematic but sympathetic characters. The narrative trajectory of this episode shows Fiona struggling to better her and her siblings position through hard work but her lack of resources and support, curtail her opportunities. Lip provides for the family through the only means available to them and serves as a counterpoint to the freeloading undeserving poor image because clearly, "the only way to make money when you are poor is to steal it or scam it."[94]

Hypervisibility and overrepresentation of race are extremely prominent in discussions of welfare and welfare reform. In the *Washington Times* op-ed piece "Barack Obama: The Welfare King; Food Stamp President Motivated by Control" by Dr. Milton R Wolf in the *Washington Times* directly compares President Obama to a heroin dealer who is antithetical to the American ideal and actively trying to sabotage the middle class.

> Mr. Obama, however, prefers dependency and recently gutted the work requirements. More free stuff! The rise of the Obama welfare state is unmistakable. More than 100 million Americans are receiving some form of federal welfare: an astonishing 1 in 3 Americans. An unprecedented 1

[93] "The American Dream"
[94] "The American Dream"

> in 6 Americans - 45 million - are on food stamps. A staggering 23 million are unemployed. This is a train with too many cabooses and not enough engines but that's exactly what the food stamp president wants. After all, cabooses just quietly go wherever they're told.[95]

This article's use of the terms "welfare king" and "food stamp president" and the direct comparison to a heroin dealer are meant to call on historically racist conceptions of black men while simultaneously invoking welfare and the first Black President.

Racist ideologies are also present in media representations of welfare and the poor. Joya Misra, Stephanie Moller, and Marina Karides in the article "Envisioning Dependency: Changing Media Depictions of Welfare in the 20th Century" finds based on content analysis of magazines depicting poverty that people of color are overrepresented in depictions of welfare. Additionally, narratives that frame welfare around dependency are statistically more likely to use African American or Latino/a people in their advertisements. *Shameless* is a narrative about poverty that is set in a neighborhood on the Southside of Chicago and features an almost exclusively white cast. While this pushes back against the overrepresentation and hypervisibility of people of color in narratives about poverty, the almost exclusive erasure of black bodies and voices from the show is highly problematic. The Gallagher family is white with the exception of Liam, the toddler, who is described in the introduction to the show by a voiceover of Frank the father saying, "Now, I am not a scientist but he sure does look like my first sponsor, him and the ex were close."[96] Liam is too young to have verbal skills, so he literally come to stand in for the black bodies on the show and signify an interracial family. The

[95] Misra, Moller and Karides
[96] "American Dream"

neighborhood the Gallagher's live in is entirely white, when in reality the Southside of Chicago is predominantly African American and Mexican. Chicago has a well-documented history of racial segregation and institutionally created racial and ethnic enclaves, and *Shameless* whitewashes both communities and individuals in poverty. Liam and Veronica are the only two permanent characters of color on the show while Kash, Veronica's mother, and a butch black lesbian named Bob make episode appearances throughout season one. Veronica is not a Gallagher, but is depicted as an integral part of the fictive family the Gallagher's have created in order to survive. Veronica's character is very funny and emotionally developed but her job as an internet sex worker and her relationship with her boyfriend Kevin are often shown in ways that easily slide into the jezebel myth.[97] Veronica and her mother, as two of the three black women on the show, are used almost exclusively to represent non-normative heterosexual sex. The show's few characters of color collapse into racial stereotypes.

Shameless is another example of a television series that presents the deserving and undeserving poor binary. It takes into account the incredibly vitriolic backlash to the Obama administration's expansion of government support programs after the market crash of the early 2000s. *Shameless* folds in the backlash and welfare critiques by depicting countless abuses of government programs by the Gallaghers but also subverts these understandings by showing the intractability of poverty and framing the abuses as necessary for the family's survival. The show blurs the deserving and undeserving poor

[97] The jezebel myth is a myth about Black womanhood stemming from slavery. It labels black women as hypersexual, fiery women that invite and entrap white men to their beds.

binary by framing poverty as the result of more than individual failings, highlighting the importance of age in dependence and complicating narrow depictions.

Conclusion

"Class is rarely talked about in the United States; nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class differences than in educational settings." - bell hooks*, Teaching to Transgress*

This thesis isolates and explores a few strands of discourse regarding children and poverty represented on three U.S. narrative television shows. My focus has been to parse out and illuminate how society's dominant ideologies about poverty are depicted in the shows *My So-Called Life*, *The O.C.* and *Shameless*. This is not to say that these shows stand in as the hegemonic representations of poverty of their time, instead; my intention has been to explicate and explore how these shows manifest, contain and/or subvert prominent discourses. Television is a site of negotiations where power relations are both established and destabilized; my analysis of these three shows is intended to begin an important conversation about how narratives of youth in poverty are produced and how that production manages hegemonic ideas of poverty.

The three chapters of this thesis move from the mid-1990s through 2012. The first chapter begins with the major welfare reform changes under the Clinton administration which was described as the 'end of welfare as we know it.' The policy analysis of Chapter 1 focuses on how welfare reforms under Clinton established and reinforced links between communities of color, presumed failing personal choices and the need for welfare support. My intention in my analysis is to firmly establish that racist and classist discourse around welfare policy are obvious features of the Clinton administration. Chapter 1 also undertakes a textual analysis of the ABC drama *My So-Called Life* - specifically, the episode entitled "Angels and Aid". Ultimately, I argue that *My So-Called*

Life mobilizes discourses of the poor through the characters Rayanne and Rickie. By depicting Rayanne as a working-poor girl who continually makes unwise personal choices and Rickie as both the only abjectly poor character and the only gay character of color; the show folds into the racist, classist, and heteronormative policy tropes established for the time. However, *MSCL* simultaneously attempts to undercut these discourses through the show's narrative by asserting universal acceptance and sympathetic depictions. Rickie is the only abjectly poor character of color but to this day he is dearly loved by fans of the show and celebrated as a groundbreaking queer character.

Chapter 2 of this thesis moves to consider the abandonment of poverty as a societal concern under the Bush administration. During the 2000s, welfare policy was replaced in the political limelight by the War on Terror and domestic policy issues like gay marriage and abortion. Textual analysis of *The O.C.* takes these shift into account particularly in one of the few episodes where class is explicitly discussed in the series before it is glossed over for other narrative plot points. The policy analysis in chapter two focuses on the government shifts coming out of the Clinton administration primarily the establishment of the Healthy Marriage Act and increased emphasis on volunteerism as a replacement for government safety nets. In a narrative that parallels some of these policy shifts, *The O.C.* spends a lot of time in the pilot episode establishing Ryan's dysfunctional home life as the reason for his unwise choices. He is shown as an exceptional teen, and once given the heteronormative guidance by upstanding citizens; he is able to straighten his life out and seamlessly fit into wealthy surroundings. *The O.C.,*

like *MSCL*, depicts poverty as an individual circumstance caused by unwise personal choices. While *The O.C.* does not reaffirm a connection between race and inequality, it does highlight sexual deviance in the form of single parenthood as the main factor with which Ryan struggles.

Chapter 3 focuses on how television has reinforced notions of the deserving and undeserving poor binary in a discussion of the incredibly vitriolic backlash to the Obama administration's expansion of government support programs after the market crash of the early 2000s. The policy analysis in this chapter works to illuminate the continuing prevalence of the undeserving poor myth and the renewed focus on race in welfare discussion under the first African American president's administration. Building on the policy analysis, I explored the American version *Shameless* and the visibility of the undeserving poor on US television. *Shameless* folds in the backlash against and critiques of the social policy of this era by depicting countless abuses of government programs by the main characters. However, the show moves to subvert the negative frames established in the policy and common rhetoric of this era by also depicting the intractability of poverty and framing the abuses as necessary for the unsupported children's survival. Although the Gallaghers are predominantly white, racial representations of poverty on the show fall into the very well established and problematic frame of the hypersexual and deviant black woman once again making race disturbingly central to the show's depiction of poor.

While these three chapters explore separate lines of discourse about youth in poverty and their incorporation into separate shows, they work together to create a

multilayered picture of the ways discourse about poverty can be mobilized and subverted through both government policy and popular television.

This thesis is an attempt to focus solely on how poverty has represented and understood in federal social policy while still acknowledging intersectional aspects of identity. It also traces the parallels of various pieces of discourse specific to youth in poverty in their mobilizations on three narrative television shows. I am focused specifically on the negotiation of these discourses in a singular arena but I fully acknowledge the possible polysemy of the messages being decoded by the audience.

Outside the scope of this thesis but relevant for future research are the emergence of reality television and the Obama administration's second term changes to welfare policy. While narrative representations of people in poverty are sparse on US television, reality television has renewed the place of class discourse on television. On narrative television, actors are seen as belonging to the privileged elite, even if they are actors in a show about poverty, but reality television relies on 'ordinary' people who allow their own behaviors and practices to be observed and recorded for entertainment. As a result, reality television has begun to emerge as a particularly fruitful place to examine class discourse. In the anthology *Reality Television and Class,* the editors Helen Wood and Beverley Skeggs write about class dynamics as an explicit character of British and American reality television:

> Many reality programs specifically reference class, many programmes specifically promote and develop formats of class antagonism (*Wife Swap, Holiday Showdown, The Simple Life*). Some develop the Pygmalion story where the working class are exposed as inadequate and in need of training in middle – or upper – class etiquette standards (*Ladette to Lady, My Fair Lady*) or even in commodity culture (*From Asbo Teen to Beauty Queen*),

> or must prove their worth in terms of deserving financial aid or benefit (*Secret Millionaire, How the Other Half Lives, Better Busters*). [98]

Reality TV has forced class onto the popular television agenda and has made class an embodied rather representational experience. For this thesis, I focused specifically on representation of poverty on narrative television but tracing policy discourse and embodiment/representation on reality television is a promising future direction for research.

I also feel it should be noted that, this thesis focuses on the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations but only the first term of the Obama administration. His second term is occurring during the writing of this project. As stated above, the third chapter uses *Shameless* to discuss the backlash against Obama's expanded government aid. However, the second term of Obama's administration has been marked by deep cuts to existing federal welfare programs and food stamps, making a nuanced analysis of poverty discourse from Obama's first and second terms a necessary future project.

Throughout this work I found that particular frames of poverty in public policy align closely with problematic televisual representations. This study focused on two shows from major network broadcasting channels and one from a premium cable channel. As I discuss above, I found a more nuanced and challenging depiction of poverty on *Shameless*, the pay cable channel show. I believe this is, in part, because Showtime as a pay cable channel, which is not reliant on advertisers, has more freedom to depict darker and more complicated material. As a result *Shameless* does not easily fall

[98] Skeggs and Wood.

into the prominent happy poor tropes or attempt to neatly resolve issues of poverty in one episode.

This thesis traces how prevailing narratives of poverty show up in both government policy and in entertainment television. Across these administrations and the three narrative television shows I examine, I find several themes prominently repeated: the hypervisibility/invisibility of race, a focus on individual choices rather than structures as responsible for poverty or working class status, and the importance of sexuality. These recurring frames were used to sort the deserving from the undeserving poor in television depictions and are an important first step in examining how discourse on poverty can and has been mobilized on modern popular television.

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