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When Dissident Citizens Are Militant Mamas: Intersectional Gender and Agonistic Struggle in Welfare Rights Activism

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Recent theories of agonistic democracy have inaugurated exciting conversations about the importance of conflict and struggle in contemporary democratic societies. Agonistic theorists such as Bonnie Honig (1993, 2013), William Connolly (1995, 2005), Chantal Mouffe (2007, 2013), and Jacques Rancière (1999) have argued that deliberative democrats and other theorists who value political stability and consensus above all else and seek "to get politics right, over, and done with" are ill advised (Honig 1993, 2).[1] By casting the inevitable conflicts of politics as hazards, such viewpoints ignore how political disruptions can contest oppressive practices or reconstitute political institutions, spaces, and narratives in critical, potentially more democratic ways. Agonistic democracy theorists argue that rather than minimizing or taming political clashes, democracies should instead cultivate spaces for conflicts that can generate change and usefully offset, in Honig's (1993, 14) words, the "human yearning" for settlement and harmony.

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1. For overviews of this literature, see Wingenbach 2011 and Wenman 2013.

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While this agonistic account of democracy offers provocative resources for theorizing both historical and contemporary forms of democratic protest, the role of gender in agonistic disruptions remains critically undertheorized. Some agonistic theorists offer examples of disruptions by women but do not interrogate the deployment of gender in either men's or women's disruptive acts (Rancière 1999). Some list gendered and sexual practices as potential focal points of conflict but do not delve into how the contention itself is gendered (Connolly 2005). Explicitly feminist treatments so far have focused mainly on individual figures of disruption, such as Honig's (1993, 2001) discussions of the virago and the biblical Ruth, or on struggles among feminists or women, including Simona Goi's (2005) analysis of women struggling over abortion and Honig's (1995, 2013) accounts of "agonistic feminism" and "agonistic sorority." Still missing, however, are detailed and *intersectional* examinations of how gender shapes agonistic struggles of all sorts, especially in the midst of disruptive social and political movements that do not involve just feminists, women, or "women's issues."

In this article, I argue that theories of agonistic democracy require a more robust account of intersectional gender to adequately theorize the challenges of disruptive democratic activism.[2] To this end, I propose an agonistic and feminist account of "dissident citizenship" (Boykoff 2007; Sparks 1997): the democratic practices of disruption that dissidents use to problematize and disturb the status quo when formal channels of

2. I employ "intersectional gender," a term increasingly used by European women's, gender, and sexuality studies scholars (e.g., La Barbera 2012), to textually mark gender as a necessarily relational category (cf. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Hancock 2012; Wilson 2013; Yuval-Davis 2011). Unlike La Barbera, however, I also use this term and the related notion of "intersectional gendering" to signal an explicitly postfoundational approach to intersectional analysis. Poststructuralist feminist and queer critics have offered compelling critiques of the identitarian frameworks, standpoint epistemologies, and other foundationalist commitments of many types of intersectional work (Carbin and Edenheim 2013; Huffer 2013; Nash 2013; Wiegman 2012; cf. Puar 2012), but I am not convinced that the antifoundationalism preferred by many of these scholars is the best available solution. Postfoundationalism, a perspective developed in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), among others, offers an important alternative because it foregrounds the necessary contingency and plurality of foundational claims, attends to their emergence and construction, and "interrogate[s] what the theoretical move that establishes foundations *authorizes*, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses" (Butler 1992, 7; Laclau 1994, 2; Marchart 2007). A postfoundational account of intersectionality thus demands increased attention to (1) the historicity, contingency, and relationality of practices of gendering, racialization, and other processes of differentiation in ways advanced by antiracist and decolonial feminist scholars (Carby 1987; Lawrence and Dua 2005; Smith 1998; Willett 1995); (2) the exclusions and fractures created through contingent practices and claimings of gender, sexuality, race, nation, and so on; and (3) the different registers in which those practices and processes can and often do work (Brown 1995; Dhamoon 2011). A postfoundational intersectionality also provides a politically salient alternative to antifoundationalist perspectives that preclude sustained advocacy for contemporary political projects such as democracy or egalitarianism.

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democratic change are inadequate. My account foregrounds how intersectional gender formations saturate agonistic dissident practices, including public performances of disruption (such as vigils, marches, civil disobedience, or street theater) and public sphere interpretive struggles over the discourses, symbols, and identifications deployed in political disputes (such as "patriot," "taxpayer," or "welfare queen").[3] By analyzing how intersectionally gendered norms, performances, and identities make only certain forms of disruption possible for dissidents and/or intelligible to their critics, I seek to highlight critical gendered dynamics within the democratic struggles that agonistic democrats valorize.

To illustrate these theoretical claims, I examine a case study of dissident citizenship drawn from U.S. politics: the national welfare rights movement. Between 1966 and 1975, this multiracial movement of welfare mothers and their allies pushed for higher welfare grant levels, fought punitive and paternalistic welfare regulations, and disputed the view that ending poverty meant simply "fixing" poor people's flawed attitudes, work habits, and family arrangements (Kornbluh 2007; Nadasen 2004). Although all but forgotten now, the movement's disruptive tactics and controversial proposals for a federally funded guaranteed adequate income and public recognition of the important caretaking work that welfare mothers performed for their children generated some of the most vitriolic backlash politics of the era.

The dissident citizenship framework I advance in this article illuminates how intersectional gender simultaneously enabled and foreclosed democratic struggle in this movement in ways not readily visible through either an agonistic framework or feminist scholarship on the movement alone. Welfare rights activists, I argue, were caught on the horns of a common dissident dilemma: they needed both to defend their political standing as equal participants in democratic debates *and* to provocatively disrupt the status quo, something often quite at odds with claiming democratic standing. Intersectional gender formations played a critical role in their ongoing efforts to navigate this dilemma, as shown by their political identifications as loving mothers, suffering citizens, and diligent workers, on the one hand, and their cultivation of dissident subject positions as militant activists, on the other. Intersectional gender simultaneously shaped their critics' efforts to reject their claims as the unwarranted greediness of "breeders" and "chiselers" and to dismiss their

3. My primary focus on intersectional gender in this article is not intended to detract from the importance of other intersectional dimensions of disruptive activism (several of which I address later).

democratic disruptions as offensive, outrageous, and violence-causing disorders. In that place and time, in other words, it was exceedingly difficult for the visibly poor, usually minority "militant mamas" of the welfare rights movement to become intelligible as full citizens and equal participants in democratic politics. A dissident citizenship framework attentive to the agonistic and gendered politics of these standing and disturbance struggles thus enhances understandings of the complex intersectional dynamics of dis/order at work in antipoverty activism during this period, and it suggests additional dimensions of democratic contestation that agonistic theories must address.

In what follows, I first construct a more detailed theoretical account of agonistic practices of dissident citizenship and draw on poststructuralist feminist theories to develop my argument about the intersectionally gendered character of agonistic standing and disturbance struggles. In the next sections, I combine this account with feminist scholarship on race and welfare and my archival research on the movement to demonstrate the centrality of intersectional gender in constituting welfare activists' democratic disruptions. I conclude by discussing the benefits of deepening agonistic democratic theory's engagement with feminist work on intersectional gender.

THEORIZING AGONISTIC AND GENDERED PRACTICES OF DISSIDENT CITIZENSHIP

Agonistic democratic theorists conceptualize political *agon*, or struggle, as the life-sustaining oxygen that powers democratic politics. If political contestation is suffocated, these scholars argue, the generative disorders of democratic politics at best will subside into an unreflective "consensus" that does nothing to challenge undemocratic practices and powers and at worst will allow forms of authoritarianism and even totalitarianism to flourish. Whether advocating for practices of "unsettlement" (Honig 1993), "disturbance" (Connolly 1995), "disagreement" (Rancière 1999), or "dissent" (Mouffe 2005), agonistic theorists argue that disruption is a necessary counter to the forces in political life that seek to establish stability, permanence, and control.

These theorists show that there are many possible modes of agonistic disruption, but I wish to use this body of work to focus on one especially vital agonistic practice: political dissent. Although contemporary scholars sometimes use "dissent" as a catchall term for nearly *any* disruptive

action, including violent revolutions, vigilantism, and covert forms of resistance (Coleman and Tucker 2012; cf. Kirkpatrick 2008), in my view such all-encompassing conceptions mask some of dissent's crucially distinctive features. The word itself comes from the Latin *dissentire*, meaning to differ in sentiment (*dis-*, "apart," and *sentire*, "to feel, think"), but calling a position or an act "dissent" typically connotes something more intense than a minor difference of opinion or a short-term disagreement. Dissent instead marks a form of "feeling apart" that is more sustained or deeply held. It is also not a secretly held belief but a public refusal to acquiesce or concede, a disruptive holding of one's position in the face of strong, possibly even overwhelming, opposition. Dissent, finally, also involves a refusal to abandon or destroy the institution, community, or polity from which one dissents. To put this in perhaps more familiar language, dissent is a public, disruptive practice that nonetheless enacts a form of allegiance or loyal opposition.[4]

Acts of political dissent can appear as the work of a single individual, like the hunger strikes of Cesar Chavez, or as the placards and chants of a million people in London opposed to going to war against Iraq. Dissent can include the highway blockades of Black Lives Matter activists, the disturbing video trucks of animal rights advocates, the angry speeches of Tea Party activists at the U.S. Capitol, or a candlelit vigil in favor of immigration reform. As these examples suggest, dissidents publicly contest current beliefs, practices, laws, and policies through embodied and discursive practices of disruption ranging from the silent to the spectacular. They are acting, in other words, as dissident *citizens* with a part to play in democratic governance and decision making, regardless of whether they are de facto citizens and regardless of whether traditional channels of democratic participation are open to them.[5]

There are two conjoined facets of dissident citizenship that agonistic democratic theory helps illuminate. Dissident citizens both "expose" or "declare a wrong," to adopt Rancière's (1999, 39) provocative language,

4. See especially Shapiro 1999 on dissent and loyal opposition in institutionalized politics.

5. I recognize, as feminist, critical race, postcolonial, and queer scholars have pointed out, that citizenship as a concept brings with it a variety of ambiguities and hazards (e.g., Pandey 2010; Yuval-Davis 2011). While for some theorists the entire notion of citizenship might be too irredeemably bound up with imperialist, capitalist, racist, patriarchal, and sexualized forms of domination and violence (Brandzel 2016), I remain convinced that adopting the troubling language of citizenship in this context is worth this risk. Citizenship, for good or ill, retains its role in most public and theoretical discourses as a "word of the greatest approbation" (Bosniak 2006, 17). In other words, conceptualizing dissent as dissident *citizenship* usefully, if also controversially, places dissident disruptions in the same register as voting, political deliberation, military service, and other practices that are more readily legible as citizenship in contemporary public discourses.

and performatively disrupt the status quo. For Rancière the declaration of a wrong does more than simply name a grievance; it performatively and disruptively constitutes the object of dispute *and* the parties to the quarrel by redrawing the categories that currently assign people to particular roles, places, and statuses. In declaring the wrong of racism, for instance, U.S. civil rights activists constituted a collision between their claims of equality and practices of racial hierarchy and, simultaneously, constituted civil rights supporters and opponents as the parties to the dispute. Their boycotts, protests, marches, voter registration drives, and strikes were performative tactics of democratic disruption that continuously restaged that quarrel.

Political identities play a critical part in dissident efforts to declare the wrong and unsettle the status quo. For agonistic theorists, identities are not pre-given or pre-established formations that must be adequately "recognized" by others, but rather they are contingent, performative political articulations that take shape only in relation to other identities and thus are always in process and incomplete (Connolly 1993; Markell 2003). Identities, or what some of these theorists, following Stuart Hall (1996), more helpfully conceptualize as identifications, are also never simply positive or benign achievements; they are always subjectivating in a Foucauldian sense. Any identity or subject position that is assigned, claimed, or occupied brings with it both agentic capacities as well as forms of subjection to power that can be contested and politicized (Chambers 2013, 98; Cruikshank 1999).

Agonistic theorists also usefully emphasize the importance of social and political *movements* in articulating the identities and subject positions through which political disruptions are constituted. Mouffe's (2005) hope, for instance, is that progressive movements can articulate radical democratic citizen identities that will unsettle the current neoliberal regime. Connolly sees a vital role for movements in placing new identities onto the "register of justice" so that "hidden injuries in established norms, laws, and practices are exposed, contested, and sometimes changed" (2008, 314). Rancière (1999), in turn, argues that movements disrupt the current order when activists *dis*identify with their assigned place (see also Chambers 2013).

Movements and identity struggles, in sum, are crucial facets of the irruptive dynamics these theorists argue are so democratically significant. Yet agonistic theorists frequently gloss over the difficult, sustained, and repeated struggles that movements in general and dissident citizens in particular find necessary to constitute themselves as parties to the quarrel

and to enact (and *defend*) their public disruptions. Declaring a wrong or disrupting the status quo is rarely a quick, one-shot effort; such struggles are far more likely to be difficult, iterated, and long-lasting. Agonistic democrats sometimes acknowledge these prolonged, purposeful struggles, as when Connolly (1995) notes the importance of a "politics of disturbance" in disordering settled political arrangements, ideas, and identities. Without drilling down into *how* those collective struggles are cultivated and sustained, however, agonistic theories of politics fail to account for important political dilemmas that dissidents regularly confront and miss the fundamental importance of gender formations in constituting dissident disruptions.

Closer examination of political movements shows that dissident citizens and their critics deploy and contest gender in two distinct fields of dissident struggle. The first field I call *agonistic standing struggles*. Because nondissidents so rarely welcome disruption, when dissident citizens declare a wrong, they are not only performatively articulating claims for justice, dignity, redistribution, rights (Zivi 2012), or another political goal. They are also declaring their position as dissidents with political standing, with an equal stake in the decisions and practices of their polity. The claims-making identifications and disidentifications that disrupt the current order and support the declaration of a wrong, moreover, are not usually the singular, overarching identities often cited by agonistic theorists — for instance, Rancière's (1999) examples of "women" or "the poor" — but are far more typically plural and intersectionally gendered.

Sometimes the gendered claims are quite explicit, as when the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina disruptively asserted their standing as mothers and wives to demand government action on the problem of their "disappeared" relatives (Ackelsberg 2010), or when the striking sanitation workers in Memphis whom Martin Luther King, Jr., supported in his final days proclaimed "I Am a Man!" (Estes 2005). Sometimes the gendering is more subtle, as when Tea Party activists invoke Revolutionary War heroes and the founding fathers to claim standing as patriots eager to "take back" their country (Sparks 2015a). Dissidents' critics, in turn, contest gendered standing claims to undercut a declaration of the wrong. Rush Limbaugh's infamous charge that Georgetown University law student Sandra Fluke was a "slut," for instance, was designed to disrupt her standing as an advocate for equal access to birth control through Obamacare (Sparks 2015a). Because successfully disrupting a dissident's *standing* claim provides one way to

disrupt an articulation of a wrong, this is regularly a contentious site of dissident struggle. Agonistic theory, in short, must attend more carefully to the intersectional politics of agonistic standing struggles, or the ongoing, repeated efforts of dissident citizens to become acknowledged parties to the dispute and their critics' labors to undo or refuse those positions.[6]

A second field of dissident action where dissidents and their critics deploy intersectional gender is what I call *agonistic disturbance struggles*, or the continuous efforts of dissident citizens to enact, cultivate, and defend their provocative but democratic acts of dissent. In situations in which the ethical norms of "receptive generosity," "agonistic respect," and "critical responsiveness" promoted by agonistic scholars are often sorely lacking (Coles 1997; Connolly 1995), cultivating and enacting disruptive practices can be enormously challenging. Dissident citizens are regularly disavowed by their critics as lawbreakers; they are also sometimes harassed, threatened, fired, arrested, jailed, deported, injured, or even killed. Intersectional gender formations can be vital as dissidents work to disidentify with violence on the one hand, or with apathy, fear, and passivity on the other, while instead cultivating subject positions that enable disruptive yet democratic action.

Activist identifications as proud black *men*, for instance, provided important support to young students confronting threats and arrests during the Freedom Summer (Estes 2005). *Dis*identifications with militaristic men and identifications as nurturers and caretakers have been critical for mobilizing dissent against nuclear power and war (Managhan 2007). Gendered activist identifications are also crucial for defending dissident disruptions from critics, as when contemporary gun control activists have defended their "stroller jams" and boycotts in the wake of Sandy Hook and other recent mass shootings as the actions of grieving and protective moms and dads for "gun sense" (Sparks 2015b).

Intersectionally gendered identifications and practices thus regularly suffuse standing and disturbance struggles in ways that agonistic scholars have not fully theorized. Attending closely to gender instead generates more nuanced accounts of agonistic disruption that highlight the critical dilemmas dissident citizens confront, as well as the force exerted by

6. By emphasizing the *politics* of standing, I am rejecting conceptions of standing either as a status that, once possessed, is nearly irrevocable (e.g., the standing granted by courts to bring a lawsuit) or as an exclusionary bundle of citizen rights and privileges (Shklar 1991). Such accounts do not effectively highlight how political standing is constantly being reconstituted and contested through performative struggles.

intersectional gender norms when both dissidents and their critics engage in disruptive politics. Advancing this gendered account of agonistic struggle still further, however, requires turning to poststructuralist accounts of identity, performativity, and resignification offered by feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race theorists. This literature not only has critical resonances with the account of identifications and subject positions that agonistic scholars adopt but also offers at least three additional contributions to a robust theorization of intersectional gender in agonistic struggle.

First, the account of gender articulated by many of these theorists offers deeper insights into the way gender operates as part of the unquestioned background norms and conventions we cite knowingly or unknowingly during political disputes. Dissident practices and the gendered identifications that help constitute them are citational, in that they acquire meaning and become intelligible through the repetition of previously articulated identities and performances (Butler 1999). Moreover, the identities and performances available for citation are shaped by "orders and structures of power" (Brown 1995, 119) organized by hegemonic discourses of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nation, empire, class, caste, and ability (Hall 1996; Spivak 1988). Such discourses construct a "horizon of intelligibility" that delineates "what is possible, what can be said and done, what positions may legitimately be taken, [and] what actions may be engaged in" (Norval 1996, 4). The very contingency and provisionality of those political articulations, however, means that a subject position or practice can be contested and possibly even re-formed or resignified (Butler 1999; Smith 1998). Agonistic standing and disturbance struggles, as I have suggested, often involve precisely these sorts of contestations and resignification struggles over the intelligibility of intersectionally gendered political positions and claims.

Second, these theorists invite attention to the way that disruptive practices, including dissent, are embodied and must be cultivated and are often embodied and cultivated in distinctly *gendered* ways (Mahmood 2005; Zerilli 2005). Kotef and Amir's (2007) analysis of feminist dissent by the Israeli group Checkpoint Watch, for instance, highlights how gendered embodiment complexly shapes how the activists are able to disrupt violence and cruelty at the checkpoints. Older activists sometimes attempt to position the Israeli soldiers as their sons, and younger activists sometimes flirt with soldiers and commanders (Kotef and Amir 2007). Arguments like these draw critical attention not just to the disruptive impact of particular intersectionally gendered bodies in particular spaces

but also to the ongoing activist work required to cultivate the gendered dissident subjectivities necessary for those bodies to dissent.

Third, in contrast to many mainstream feminist and queer explorations of dissident movements, scholars such as Mahmood (2005) and Schreiber (2008) highlight the importance of nonradical gender performances and identifications. Much, if not most, dissident citizenship does not involve "gender trouble," nor is it often feminist, antiracist, anticapitalist, or progressive in any way. Dissident citizenship nonetheless entails an agonistic and performative "politics of troubling" (Chambers and Carver 2007), even if that troubling consolidates gender normativity, heteronormativity, nationalism, racial hierarchies, neoliberal capitalism, and so on. Often, dissidents inhabit normative positions on one front in order to trouble another, as when civil rights activists dressed and acted "respectably" to mitigate the racial "trouble" they were enacting (Sparks n.d.). The frequency of such normative claims and performances suggests that even the dissent we judge most commendable, most necessary, and even heroic nonetheless participates in practices of power that demand sustained critical scrutiny.

I turn next, then, to a critical analysis of the dissident citizenship of welfare rights activists, focusing on how intersectionally gendered practices of power shaped agonistic struggle during this vibrant period of democratic activism. I begin with background on the movement and an exploration of the standing struggles these activists instigated.

CHEATS, SUFFERERS, AND CITIZENS: THE INTERSECTIONAL POLITICS OF DEMOCRATIC STANDING IN THE U.S. WELFARE RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The U.S. welfare rights movement has been nearly erased from popular accounts of the 1960s and 1970s, eclipsed by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Poor People's Campaign," the federal "War on Poverty," and its more successful and long-lasting fellow travelers, the civil rights, Black Power, antiwar, feminist, and gay and lesbian movements. Few people now recognize the names of Johnnie Tillmon, the longtime national chairwoman of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), or George Wiley, the primary national architect of the movement (and one of the six or seven most important black leaders in the country at the time).[7] From 1966 to 1975, however, Tillmon and the other welfare

7. Political scientists are most likely to know about this movement through the work of Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1978, 1993), who directly influenced and advised Wiley.

recipient members of the NWRO, backed by Wiley and an array of organizers, staff, volunteers, financial contributors, and political allies, successfully organized and linked together welfare recipient groups to become a national force in antipoverty activism.[8] At its height, the NWRO claimed to represent 75,000 poor people from more than 40 states, from both rural and urban settings and from a wide range of ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. The mostly middle-aged welfare mothers at the heart of the movement deployed a range of disruptive practices (including marches, sit-ins, guerilla theater, and bureaucracy jamming) and initiated political quarrels about the meanings of democratic citizenship, the American dream, the definition of work, and whose children and whose futures count. Categorized by the left as an insurgency that went down in dismal and heartbreaking defeat and by its right-wing critics as an audacious revolt of the undeserving poor beaten back just in time, the movement offers a rich resource for theorizing the intersectional and agonistic politics of dissident citizenship.[9]

The movement's initial declaration of a wrong emerged shortly after the coordinated nationwide protests that inaugurated the national phase of their movement in 1966. Welfare rights activists articulated four demands — adequate income, dignity, justice, and democratic participation — that became known as the movement's "Bill of Rights" (Wiley Papers, box 7, folder 7). This declaration problematized the poverty-producing inequities of American-style capitalism and welfare programs, the catch-22s and paternalistic rules that made dignified survival nearly impossible, and the rights violations allowed by law and exacerbated by illegal welfare department practices.

Perhaps most striking, however, is that NWRO activists also problematized their exclusion from political debates about the programs and laws that most affected the poor. One arresting example of this demand to participate occurred in September 1967, when the Senate Committee on Finance convened hearings on a welfare bill that welfare activists found appalling. The proposed bill would force single mothers on welfare with very young children to work full-time jobs (with little to no childcare support), would cap the number of children receiving AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) benefits nationally, and would exclude "illegitimate" children from benefits altogether.

8. This case study draws on my research on unpublished welfare rights archival documents, especially the National Welfare Rights Organization, George A. Wiley, and William Whitaker papers.

9. Glenn Mackin (2013, chaps. 4 and 5) also reads NWRO activists as engaging in agonistic politics in his important book about the "politicality of neediness" in the United States.

Wiley, as executive director of the NWRO, had been given just 10 minutes to testify at the hearing, but he brought more than 75 NWRO members with him and won permission for seven of those women to testify in his place (Senate Committee on Finance 1967, 1463).

For 40 minutes, the women analyzed the effects the new bill would have on AFDC recipients across the country. Rather than respecting the usual testimony-giving structure of such hearings, the activists insisted on asking the senators questions (and expecting them to answer), and several times suggested that they and the senators should "go off in another room" together to write a new, more adequate welfare bill (Senate Committee on Finance 1967, 1470–74). But one by one, the six senators present left the room until just one remained. When the NWRO members objected by asserting that they were citizens and voters who deserved a hearing, especially because they had "suffered so hard and begged and borrowed money and gas and drivers and whatnot to get here" (1470–71), the last senator informed them their time before the committee was up. He recessed the hearings over the women's objections.

Angered they had been cut off, the women staged an impromptu sit-in. When the chair of the committee, Senator Russell Long (D-LA), returned to the room, he furiously adjourned the hearings for the day by slamming his gavel so hard it broke. Instead of acknowledging the NWRO women as voters and citizens, he blasted them as "brood mares" (Kotz and Kotz 1977, 250–51) who should be "picking up litter in front of their houses or killing rats instead of impeding the work of Congress" (*NOW!*, September 22, 1967).

As this episode makes clear, even in a time when the War on Poverty notion of the "maximum feasible participation of the poor" still enjoyed a currency unimaginable today, poor dissident citizens in the 1960s and 1970s confronted a deeply hostile environment. To the politicians and nonpoor members of the American public who believed that welfare was charity and not a right, welfare activists' demands to participate were outrageous. Many found the idea of welfare recipients as full participants in joint democratic governance completely unintelligible and argued that welfare mothers who agitated for rights and more resources instead of trying to find paying jobs, husbands, and birth control were greedy troublemakers.

Views like these meant that welfare activists engaged in pitched, nearly constant battles with critics over their democratic standing. As feminist scholars have persuasively argued, in the 1960s and 1970s, hegemonic discourses about welfare recipients positioned them as drunks and drug

addicts, "chiselers" and "welfare cheats" (i.e., lazy, able-bodied people out to defraud taxpayers of their hard-earned cash) and, especially in the case of women of color, as hyperfertile, immoral, "bad mothers" who produced illegitimate children they then expected taxpayers to support.[10] These discourses made welfare mothers, particularly welfare mothers of color, intelligible only as the "undeserving poor" — as "deviants" who required paternalistic, invasive, and disciplinary correction (Cohen 1997; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Smith 2007; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Activists' efforts to disidentify with these negative positions and to constitute more positive identifications to support their democratic standing were thus vitally important.

Intersectional gender norms helped structure two possible modes of disidentification. First, welfare activists sometimes sought simply to identify as the "deserving poor." When accused of being "prostitutes" and of "producing litters of illegitimate children," activists instead attempted to set the record straight on typical AFDC family sizes (only 2.7 children in 1972) and actual "illegitimacy" rates (Wiley Papers, box 2, folder 6). When cast as bad mothers who perpetually made irresponsible choices, activists stressed that poor mothers were just as caring, devoted to their children, and self-sacrificing as middle-class mothers. As Ohio activist Marian Hall argued, "though we want to be clean, we can buy no soap. We want our children to learn, but can afford no school supplies. We love our children, but can never give them even the small things they need" (Wiley Papers, box 14, folder 9). And when welfare recipients were charged with being lazy cheats intent on draining the public coffers, they argued that they were former workers who had lost good jobs or become disabled; wives who had been widowed, divorced, or deserted; or mothers who were otherwise down on their luck (Whitaker Papers, box 3, folder 11).[11]

By identifying as loving, self-sacrificing mothers and vulnerable sufferers who needed help, particularly from male politicians, welfare recipients sought to inhabit feminized positions as "citizen-mothers" deserving support and protection, not disdain. These positions, legacies of post–Civil War and Depression-era welfare programs supporting "worthy widows" (Goldberg 2007; Gordon 1994), were still intelligible in the 1960s but were fading as welfare populations diversified racially and

10. By the mid-1970s, the "welfare cheat" and "bad mother" figures had merged into the "welfare queen," in no small part thanks to then-governor Ronald Reagan (Hancock 2004).

11. See also Mackin (2013, chap. 4) on "damage imagery" during the welfare rights era.

white women's employment patterns changed. As Rebecca Wanzo (2009) has convincingly argued, moreover, the history of U.S. racism has always made women of color's public occupation of such vulnerable and suffering positions nearly impossible. Indeed, evidence from the welfare rights archive suggests that suffering mother claims were far more likely to be made by and on behalf of white women welfare recipients.[12]

Given the difficulty of making their own suffering politically legible, most welfare activists instead identified poor children as the primary victims of inadequate welfare. For example, an NWRO funding plea featured two appealing babies in diapers, captioned "A Couple of Shiftless, Cheatin', Good for Nuthin' Welfare Recipients." The text discussed how children would be the ones harmed by welfare cuts and in effect framed advocates of welfare cuts as willing to sacrifice innocent children's lives and health (Wiley Papers, box 15, folder 5). Welfare rights activists sought to reposition antiwelfare politicians as heartless and cruel men who "refuse[d] to feed babies" and refused to "go to bat for" American children (Senate Committee on Finance 1967, 1465), thus figuring their opponents as failing to adequately occupy *their* proper role as "masculinist protectors" (Young 2003). The ongoing struggles over these dis/identifications, in other words, depended on the legibility of intersectional gender formations.

The activists' second mode of disidentifying with negative figurations of welfare recipients to support their democratic standing was far more ambitious: welfare activists claimed standing as full citizens — as voters, taxpayers, and workers with power and rights. These positions challenged the historical legacies of "poor laws" that demanded the poor relinquish their positions as rights-bearing citizens in exchange for economic support (Goldberg 2007). Although not explicitly gendered on their face, these identifications nonetheless were constituted by intersectional gender norms that made it difficult for poor welfare mothers to occupy them convincingly.[13]

Welfare recipients sometimes carried picket signs at rallies proclaiming "I am a registered voter" (Wiley Papers, box 14, folder 9). But much more frequently, they asserted standing claims based on their positions as *American* citizens. In their "bill of rights" document, for instance, NWRO activists made this claim forcefully: "*We are not willing to*

12. See the Ohio Steering Committee for Adequate Welfare documents in the William Whitaker Papers.

13. See also the important feminist analyses of how welfare recipients have challenged heteronormativity, especially Cohen 1997 and Smith 2007.

exchange our rights as American citizens . . . *In order to obtain the physical necessities for our families* (Wiley Papers, box 7, folder 7; emphasis in original). Activists also criticized the response to their standing claims as undemocratic and unbefitting treatment of full American citizens. At one hearing, for instance, Dorothy DiMascio compared the senators' treatment of the welfare mothers to the experiences of people living under "dictatorships" (Senate Committee on Finance 1967, 1468).

Activists also claimed democratic standing by contesting the opposition their critics constructed between welfare recipients and the "taxpayers" who supported them. As activist Diane Wilkins argued, "I have worked and paid taxes since I was 14 years old. . .. Don't talk about 'charity' to me" (Whitaker Papers, box 3, folder 11). Activists further asserted that the "taxpayers" who begrudged welfare recipients their small grants received far more in subsidies from the government than welfare recipients could even imagine. As Tillmon argued, "Farmers get welfare. Middle-class homeowners get welfare. Airlines get welfare. Oil millionaires get welfare. Almost everyone in this country gets some kind of government handout. We get the crumbs!" (*NOW!*, June 28, 1968). NWRO activists thus foreshadowed important contemporary scholarship on how tax breaks and other indirect expenditures produce a "hidden welfare state" for the *non*poor that is far less stigmatized (Abramovitz 2001; Gordon 1994; Howard 1997).

Perhaps the most controversial political identifications that NWRO activists forwarded, however, involved their assertions that they were workers who deserved respect and a place at the democratic table. In the face of discourses, laws, and programs that constructed welfare recipients as idle, lazy "takers" who should be forced to work in exchange for support, welfare activists insisted that they already had difficult and important jobs as mothers. As NWRO activists argued, "the belief that welfare mothers can work [full time outside the home] assumes that they are not working now. . .. Scrubbing floors, preparing meals, changing bed linens, sewing, caring for the sick, budgeting, and helping to educate and discipline children — all this is very hard work, as every woman knows" (Milwaukee County Welfare Rights Organization 1972, 77). "Why, then," these activists asked, "do welfare mothers get paid less for their job than anyone else? If a child is brought up in a public institution in Wisconsin, his guardian gets $9,600 a year. . . . But if the child's own mother brings him up in his own home, she gets only $660 a year" (77).

Welfare activists' identifications as hard working mothers also supported their specific criticisms of mandatory work programs, or what they called "workfare," "illfare," and, most explosively, a return to "slavery" (*The Welfare Fighter*, October 1971). Activists argued that programs that forced recipients to work for less than the minimum wage or for no wage at all reinstated the "involuntary servitude" of chattel slavery rather than treating poor Americans as full citizens and human beings with rights. NWRO activists particularly criticized programs that forced mothers with small children to work outside the home, even in areas where unemployment was triple the national rate.

The political argument that mothering work and care work are valuable and deserve generous public support has been extremely hard to forward in the United States since World War II, even for white or otherwise privileged women (Fineman 1995; Mink 1998; Tronto 2013). For *poor* women to assert democratic standing as workers while simultaneously advocating for increased government support to become *stay-at-home* mothers also ignored, as historian Marisa Chappell (2010) has argued, the collapse of the family wage system that had enabled many white women to stay home with their children. The resulting pushback against dissident claims by welfare mothers of color for more money and the right to be full-time mothers, in turn, frequently involved disputing their standing to participate in politics at all. One "middle-class wife," for instance, wrote to Congress to blast the fact that NWRO activists were lobbying Congress instead of going to work like her. Her solution was to sterilize "the lazy, shiftless men and women" on welfare because she was "fed up with having to work, taking my child to a baby-sitter's so some other mother can sit home and not do a blankety blank thing!" (House Committee on Ways and Means 1969, 1042).

In a political context in which the mothering of women of color was so profoundly devalued, the NWRO activists' claims of political standing based on mothering work were clearly audacious, unsettling, and provocative.[14] Yet, as critical feminist scholars have also argued, by making claims through such a conventionally gendered position, the NWRO activists simultaneously participated in solidifying well-established norms that "pitted wage earning against motherhood" and continued to codify "women's secondary status as economic citizens" (Mink 1994, 171). In other words, their identifications as mothers

14. See Carby's (1987, chap. 4) important work on how African American women have navigated and redeployed racialized ideologies of good mothering.

provided both agentic, dissident possibilities *and* forms of subjection to power.

Welfare activists, in sum, sought to disidentify with their assigned place as necessarily bad citizens, bad workers, and bad mothers who had no business participating in democratic politics and instead declared wrongs and claimed positions as full citizens, hard workers, and good mothers with the right to take part in public debates about welfare. The ongoing agonistic struggles with their critics over these wrongs and their democratic standing clearly cited gendered, racialized, and other intersectional norms and practices in ways that shaped not just the activists' but also their critics' democratic participation (see also Mackin 2013, chap. 4). An intersectional analysis of agonistic struggles thus provides critical insights into whether and how dissident citizens can appear as speaking subjects in the democratic public sphere.

MILITANT MAMAS AND THE "BROOD MARE STAMPEDE": AGONISTIC DISTURBANCE STRUGGLES IN THE U.S. WELFARE RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Intersectional gender formations were equally central in welfare activists' efforts to performatively disrupt the status quo. In the face of the backlash that accompanied their declarations of the wrong and their claims of democratic standing, NWRO activists cultivated subject positions that sustained and supported acts of disruptive dissident citizenship, or what they often called "hell-raising." Welfare rights hell-raising included sit-ins, vigils, marches, pickets, disruptive heckling, public shaming of welfare officials, and bureaucratic jamming that deliberately flooded welfare centers with people and paperwork. Infuriated by the public scapegoating of poor people, NWRO activists drew on intersectionally gendered identifications as protective and militant mothers to encourage welfare recipients to refuse their "proper" place as compliant, fearful, despised objects of the welfare system and to instead identify as courageous, uncompromising, powerful welfare activists. Many of these women adopted the movement's exemplary subject position of "mad, militant welfare mother" with pride and delight.

Appreciating the full significance of this militant, angry subject position requires understanding just how much welfare activists had to fear. Social workers, welfare administrators, politicians, and the police controlled welfare mothers' livelihoods, their access to many political and legal institutions, and the means of force, and they did not hesitate to use

these powers to encourage fear and undermine dissent. NWRO activists, for instance, regularly faced financial and other forms of coercion that could be directed against economically vulnerable welfare recipients. Tillmon's check was stopped by the welfare department in California when she began organizing other recipients (Kotz and Kotz 1977, 221), and NWRO activists across the country faced similar forms of economic harassment.

Welfare administrators also knew that activists feared arrest and jail because most of them were single parents with sole responsibility for their children. Jan Linfield, a Chicago welfare organizer, described a sit-in during which welfare officials "threatened the mothers with having their children taken away from them. To these mothers, with an aggregate of 44 children, such a threat was terrifying." During the protest, moreover, welfare officials "sent investigators to the homes of all the mothers in the hope of being able to accuse them of neglect for having left their children alone" (Piven and Cloward 1993, 298–300).

Activists also regularly confronted the possibility of police brutality. Welfare rights protestors in Roxbury, Massachusetts were beaten by police when they refused to end a sit-in, an event that led to the 1967 Roxbury riot (Whitaker Papers, box 3, folder 3). Welfare mothers in Madison, Wisconsin, ended up facing off with police and National Guard troops armed with guns during a protest in 1967 (*The Welfare Fighter*, April 1970). Protesters in Washington, D.C., found the doors locked and snipers on the roof when they attempted to meet with the secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1967 (Kotz and Kotz 1977, 250). And in New York City in 1969, mounted police broke up a march of welfare activists and their allies by pushing crowds onto sidewalks and into buildings. Several people were trampled by horses, and others were beaten while being arrested (Wiley Papers, box 24, folder 10).

To combat the paralysis such fears could generate, activists sought ways to disidentify with the hopeless and fearful subject positions that welfare programs and administrators promoted. The most important alternative identifications drew from the recipients' experiences as mothers. Welfare activists often talked about defending their families, "woman power," and the "mother power" of welfare recipients acting together to change the system. In a speech made during the Poor People's Campaign, for instance, Tillmon told the crowd, "We have built our own nationwide organization. We are black and white, Mexican, Puerto Rican and Indian. We are together and we have our own special kind of power.

That power is MOTHER POWER. . . . We will fight for the welfare of our children" (*NOW!*, June 28, 1968). Recruitment campaigns also cited recipients' self-understandings as protective, loving mothers to encourage activism. One flyer for a school clothing action said, "Mother, Is your child going to be warm this year???? What [are] you as a mother doing about it? Something, or nothing?. . . Come fight!" (George A. Wiley Papers, box 24, folder 10). By defining activist dissent as part of a mother's duties to her children, in other words, welfare activists used familiar, legible identifications to encourage disruptive action.

The same discourse helped Tillmon reframe Senator Long's scornful slur against welfare mothers into a new activist identification: "Last Fall, Senator Long called us brood mares. At welfare departments across the country, we will show Senator Long a brood mare stampede!" (*NOW!*, June 28, 1968). The idea of a "stampede" suggested an irresistible, furious surge of activism that would overwhelm any resistance to dissidents' demands for justice, dignity, and participation. In reconstructing "brood mare" as an activist identification, then, welfare activists not only sought to resignify a racist and sexist stereotype but also further laid claim to anger and militancy as vital approaches to welfare activism.

NWRO activists' performances of anger and militancy, however, and their failure to adhere to expected norms of political civility during their political protests more generally, meant they were constantly defending their dissent from critics. Senator Long was not alone in objecting to the dissident tactics welfare activists had used to demand his attention. But NWRO activists argued that if Congress and their other critics continued to be unresponsive to *dissent*, they would invite more violent forms of unrest. As Etta Horn admonished the senators, "The only time you listen to us is when the cities are burning and the people are dying. The time to listen is now" (Senate Committee on Finance 1967, 1469).

To many of their critics, however, welfare mothers' militant, disruptive activism justified their exclusion from democratic debates. To be sure, given the local autonomy of welfare rights groups, not all welfare activism was nonviolent. Some protests involved vandalism at welfare offices, harassment of social workers, and shoving and pushing (Wiley Papers, box 14, folder 6). Yet even activists who remained nonviolent were still cast as dangerous and violence-spawning because their militancy and incivility was not legible as the properly sedate democratic participation expected of full citizens. NWRO activists regularly contested this perspective, but even their allies asserted this view. During a House committee hearing on welfare, for example, Beulah Sanders

argued, "I think it is about time that you all realize either you include us in decisionmaking that is going to govern our lives, or I am going to tell you right now, we are going to disrupt this State, this country, this capital and everything that goes on" (House Committee on Ways and Means 1969, 1034). Yet Congressman James A. Burke (D-MA), a liberal supporter of welfare activists, heard her threats of disruption as a threat of violence:

> MR. BURKE: . . . I deplore the fact that anyone would come before this committee and threaten this country with violence as their way of seeking a solution to the problems. . . . I have seen the result of that type of violence in Roxbury, Mass., where . . . they burned down the entire neighborhood and now the poor people there have no place to shop. . . .
>
> MRS. SANDERS: We have not burned anything down, Mr. Burke.
>
> MR. BURKE: There is no solution when somebody threatens us with violence.
>
> MRS. SANDERS: But you can't say we burned anything down. We have disrupted, yes; but we have not burned anything down. You can't say that. We are saying that we want to participate, not just sit here and [have you] talk to us. (1035)

Burke's charge that welfare activists "hurt their own cause" with anger and threats was one the NWRO activists confronted repeatedly.

The illegibility of angry, militant welfare mothers as full citizens with standing was also evident in the Washington, D.C., welfare director's advice regarding what she considered a more appropriate approach for welfare activists. As the *Washington Post* reported in 1968, Director Winifred Thompson found "the 'bombastic' tactics of welfare rights militants" to be "no longer effective." Instead, she advised them to "go to the Hill and 'tell their own stories in a calm but very factual way'. . . They should relate how much money they get, how their children live and the indignities they suffer, and the effect on the youngsters' behavior and attitudes." The parents of "retarded children" had used this tactic successfully, she argued. "Everybody is sympathetic to children, and most people are sympathetic to mothers who point out in a very passionate but objective way what happens to their children."[15]

Beyond the fact that welfare activists had tried *for years* to tell Congress about the effects of inadequate welfare on children, Thompson's

15. Carol Honsa, "New Approaches Urged in Welfare Appeals," *Washington Post*, August 18, 1968.

suggestions reflect the view that to be heard, welfare activists had to engage in democratic politics as suffering victims and charity cases rather than as angry activists and competent democratic citizens. Militant poor mothers of color who strongly criticized racist and sexist welfare programs and the suffering produced by capitalism, in other words, were intelligible not as equal citizens or as equal quarrelling partners, but only as threats — as democratically disloyal, ungovernable troublemakers.

CONCLUSION

As the welfare rights movement clearly shows, intersectional gender formations can profoundly shape agonistic practices of dissident citizenship by affecting the types of claims and disruptions that activists can legibly forward. In this case, intersectional gender formations assisted welfare activists in claiming democratic standing as loving, hardworking mothers and in becoming bold activists. It was nonetheless exceptionally hard for poor "militant mamas" to remain intelligible as equals and full citizens when critics rejected their claims through other all-too-legible intersectional gender formations — as "breeders," "cheaters," or violent rioters.

Welfare activists' refusal to adopt a suffering victim stance in front of Congress and in other public forums and to instead retain their angry, "tell-it-like-it-is" hell-raising approach certainly cost them allies and support in legislative and public opinion arenas. But in unsettling the norm that the poor could only participate in politics as beggars or supplicants, welfare activists also cultivated other political openings. Indeed, as feminist historians have documented, welfare mothers were enormously creative community and political activists on the local level long before and long after the national movement's salience (see, e.g., Orleck 2005). This broader view of political struggle, then, suggests that even "failed" movements can be rich sites of democratic practice that continue to unsettle the political status quo, even if that unsettling is not as progressive or as sweeping as some observers might wish.

An agonistic and feminist account of dissident citizenship, in sum, challenges agonistic democratic theorists to deepen their engagement with theories of intersectional gender. Agonistic theorists have rightly drawn attention to the iterated, continual, and *productive* character of struggles and tensions in democratic polities. But understanding how those struggles and tensions are negotiated is impossible without close

scrutiny of gender, race, class and the other formations through which and around which those struggles are actually fought.

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