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☞ In This Issue

☞ *Random Family*, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's page-turner, and *Flat Broke with Children*, Sharon Hays' research study, have one thing in common, says Angela Ards—both meet the right wing on its own turf, looking at the cultural consequences

Welfare family values

by Angela Ards

Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc. New York: Scribner, 2003, 416 pp., \$25.00 hardcover.

Flat Broke With Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform by Sharon Hays. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 290 pp., \$30.00 hardcover.

For far too long, fear that breaking ranks with liberal orthodoxy may fuel conservative agendas has stalled public policy debates on the left. Two new books, Adrian LeBlanc's *Random Family* and Sharon Hays' *Flat Broke With Children*, seek to push beyond traditional lefty thinking while reining in the ever rightward shift of social policy.

A former reporter with *The Village Voice*, LeBlanc spent 11 years chronicling an extended family's haphazard romances, dead-end moves, and Sisyphian struggles to escape poverty's encroaching despair in the South Bronx. Hays, a sociologist at the University of Virginia, spent three years researching how the stated principles of the 1996 welfare reform law actually played out on the ground in welfare offices: one in a small town in the Southeast, the other in a urban area out West. Stylistically, these works couldn't be more different. LeBlanc's descriptive powers render the novelistic *Random Family* a compulsive page-turner as she follows this family's migrations from slum to slum, from welfare office to prison and back, with ever-increasing broods in tow. Hays' careful analysis of reform's inconsistent logic and dire consequences for poor women and their children begins with the scholar's heady hypotheses and builds to impassioned polemic.

But they are also complementary books, and not simply because *Flat Broke With Children* provides the context for the individual lives described in *Random Family*. Rather, both works shed conventional trappings of ideological positions to galvanize a centrist political bloc, mainstream America, as it were, to see these social issues with new eyes and heart. LeBlanc rejects the cold analysis and statistics crunching of policy briefs, ostensibly allowing the lives of the poor to emerge on their own human terms. Hays attempts to take the rhetoric of reform at face value, assuming that, despite its inconsistencies, there were no diabolical motives to put women back in their place or create neo-slavery among black and brown people. By suspending value judgments on the lives of the poor and assuming some goodwill on the part of policy-makers, these authors attempt to create a space for a dialogue that's been too long stifled.

Jessica, a Bronx beauty who uses her looks as a ticket out of poverty, and Coco, whose "self-defeating generosity" derails her progress, are the poor Latina women at the heart of *Random Family*. For both, Escape Plan A coincides perfectly with the thinking of the congressional framers of welfare reform: Find and marry an enterprising man. Jessica has her dreams pegged on Boy George, who, when they met in 1988, was the youngest major-league drug dealer in the South Bronx. Coco has her eyes on Jessica's brother, Cesar, a gangster wanna-be aspiring to the thug life. As *Random Family* unfolds, the dream of "being

married, being committed to one man, living in a little house with a fence and, you know...a lotta kids," as Jessica says, is revealed at its core to be a grim fairy tale.

Through ironic narrative juxtaposition, LeBlanc reveals the inadequacy of current policy to address the convergence of circumstance and character that undergirds most social problems. Reform and its work requirements without dependable childcare options destabilize Coco's fragile family to a breaking point (although LeBlanc implies that Coco might be able to cope if she were just a bit more organized about time management or birth control). At the same time, having a job improves her self-esteem and sense of independence, which in turn inspires her latest partner, Frankie, to get a job other than drug dealing; he wants to keep up. Present criminal justice policy proves no deterrent. Boy George receives a life sentence at 23 for his short-lived drug empire, but the legend of his riches, women, and power survives, inspiring wanna-bes like Cesar. It's easy to conclude, however, that it's the only policy that's working. Repeatedly, LeBlanc notes that "prison looked more inviting than the streets." When readers first meet Cesar, he's a teenaged dropout "biding his time" sitting on stoops. By book's end, he's still biding time—on a 9-year-to-life sentence that, when compared to Jessica's and Coco's struggles on welfare, looks like a multi-year scholarship. While living in a temporary shelter awaiting Section 8 housing, Coco laments, "I should go to jail.... Oh, they come outta there smart. Cesar learned so much in there."

Random Family's descriptive style creates the illusion of the disinterested reporter, just quoting the facts. Journalistic integrity requires at least the illusion of objectivity, for it presupposes that the reporter is outside the story. But similar to anthropologist Carol Stack's groundbreaking work *All Our Kin*, about family formation among poor, rural African Americans, *Random Family* is an ethnographic study of urban family life among poor Latinos whose author is both participant and observer. The narrative, therefore, needs more conscious reflection and disclosure about LeBlanc's presence and involvement than she gives. True, she notes coyly that "strangers stood out on Coco's block: religious missionaries, immigrants hawking clothes, the occasional reporter scribbling about recent disasters and the stymieing toll of chronic injustice and bad luck." And yet, she never tells us how she came to be admitted into the confidence of this extended family whose matriarchs she thanks for having "raised [her] up" over those 11 years. Or how her position as a middle-class white woman affected the questions she asked, what her subjects might have chosen to reveal or conceal, and how she ultimately presented that to readers.

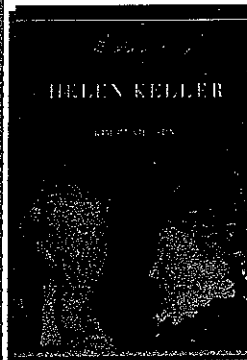
LeBlanc also omits consideration of any larger context, inviting readers to look at personal failure to explain social problems

and, perhaps unwittingly, reinscribing the culture of poverty thesis fueling present-day social policy. Almost everyone in this book is a welfare cheat, with the checks of children going to fix cars, throw birthday parties, or support drug habits. And Jessica and Coco, despite their mitigating circumstances and winning personalities, come off as promiscuous, with ten kids between them by seven different fathers. To cash in on the allure of celebrity, perhaps, LeBlanc hypes Boy George's thin acquaintance with troubled boxer and convicted rapist Mike Tyson, adding one more strand in this web of pathology. But, oddly, she doesn't mine the infamous socio-history of the South Bronx—which once epitomized urban blight the way Bull Connor's Birmingham epitomized America's virulent racism—as a backdrop for the larger forces shaping the lives of her subjects. There is only one stray sentence about astronomical attrition rates in public schools, a hint that there may be reasons beyond personal failure for why students drop out. Oblique references to welfare reform never detail the law's history or substance, depending upon readers' knowledge and assumptions, often erroneous and stereotypical, to flush out the particulars.

For example, polls indicate that the majority of Americans believe welfare recipients are as dependent on drugs as they are public assistance, even though, according to Hays, physical disabilities and mental health issues affect this population more. *Random Family's* emphasis on the drug culture as neighborhood boss and bane, while fascinating and dishy, is almost irresponsible, as it obscures the mental health issues present. LeBlanc describes but doesn't do much with the fact that Coco's addicted mother, Foxy, is apparently medicating a mental health issue for which a middle-class woman with health insurance might be prescribed Prozac. Jessica's erratic mood swings, unstable romances, and addictive courting of Boy George's sadistic beatings begin to sound like a mental health disorder for which she needs treatment, not prison.

American audiences seem eager to hear the stories of the poor as presented by the privileged. Through grants, residencies, and plum writing assignments, left-leaning institutions from *The Village Voice* to the MacDowell writers' retreat and a plethora of foundations funded LeBlanc's research to give the mainstream a voyeuristic peak

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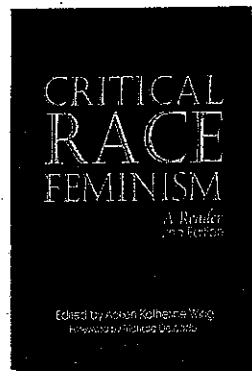
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behind what W. E. B. Du Bois called the veil of American life. But what compels her subjects to offer up, for free, such intimate information, a precious commodity in this confessional age of Oprah and reality TV? Without forums to tell their stories in their own voices and on their own behalf, the poor often must depend on well-intentioned advocates to champion their cause for first-class citizenship. In *Flat Broke With Children*, Hays knows her subjects share their stories to achieve social visibility and inclusion. "They had heard more than once the stereotypes labeling them as lazy, dependent, ignorant, promiscuous, and manipulative cheats. They told their stories, therefore, with the hope that they would be recognized not simply as a composite of clichés, but as whole persons." If, as I suspect, the same is true for LeBlanc's subjects, then she betrays them.

While her tightly woven, insular narrative—its focus on one extended family, its lack of social context—mirrors brilliantly the circumscribed world in which America's poor live, poverty and its attendant ills become an island of societal dysfunction that the mainstream can experience from a distance. If not daunted by book's end, middle-class readers may feel let off the hook, as if the problems of the so-called ghetto are just that, in the ghetto.

In *Flat Broke With Children*, Hays argues that the pressures that constrict the lives of the poor have a stranglehold on us all. Over the last 30 years, she notes, the economic strain of advanced capitalism downsized manufacturing jobs, depressed wages, and destabilized families. Women entering the labor force in the 1970s depressed salaries even further as employers, succumbing to sexism and economic exigencies, no longer felt the need to pay a "breadwinning wage" that would sustain a family. People began to marry later, for shorter periods, even while continuing to welcome children into their lives. The result for many was an increase in divorce and single parenting, "the feminization of poverty," and a rise in welfare usage.

Juggling work and family amid such flux is tough with a two-income household. For the most vulnerable among us, poor women with children, it's almost impossible. This classic argument of structural inequality Hays complicates by examining the cultural, rather than political, significance of reform. As she says, she "join[s] the conservative critics of welfare reform in focusing squarely on the question of values" to indict, not the poor, but the system and policies that make them so. Her analysis focuses on the inherent conflict between two quintessential American values: independence and the common good. Until the 1970s, Hays argues, this tension was resolved through stark gender roles of breadwinning husbands and stay-at-home moms. The massive changes in work and family life dashed this dubious bargain, and policy-makers, reeling from upheaval, looked for scapegoats rather than solutions. Welfare reform, consequently, bought into assumptions like those of Charles Murray in *Losing Ground* and Lawrence, Mead in *Beyond Entitlement* that old policies encouraged "bad behavior"—namely, lazy freeloaders cynically choosing single parenthood over marriage to get a handout.

Of course, this scapegoating logic obscures the law's contradictions. The Pavlovian rewards and sanctions it uses to coerce women into the narrow and untenable "vision of independent, working motherhood" (that is, if the plan of finding a breadwinning husband fails) subvert the very principles the law claims to champion. The low-wage jobs and exploitative work assignments won't support inde-

pendence for one, much less a family. And, as Hays notes, "by no stretch of the imagination" could one argue the new rules—such as unconscionable "family caps," or the refusal of aid to children born to mothers already on welfare—promote "family values." The ineffectual pursuit of deadbeat dads often alienates good men who don't have money but do spend time with their kids and antagonizes violent ones whose abuse caused many of the women on welfare to seek public assistance in the first place. Phantom childcare subsidies never materialize or practically require the sacrifice of one's first born to obtain.

Perhaps the greatest fallacy about reform is that women on welfare hold deviant values. In fact, Hays argues, "[p]oor mothers' support for welfare reform is the single most striking indication that welfare mothers are not the social 'outsiders' portrayed in the Personal Responsibility Act." Over the three years she researched the way the new rules played out on the ground, Hays encountered clients and caseworkers who endured an increasingly unwieldy bureaucracy and pointless hassles for the sake of the common good that reform supposedly represented, even as it became clear that the policies would never lead to independence or family stability. Hays' finding correlates with LeBlanc's description of Coco's experience at a shelter for women on welfare: "Coco... was eager to devise a plan for her future and was open to the help [the shelter] offered, even though it was often unclear how it applied to her life." Hays breaks with liberal tradition when she concedes that her research reveals that a very small percentage of mothers on welfare do hold "values that are distinct from the 'mainstream,'" but even the least sympathetic of welfare recipients reflect larger cultural patterns, she argues. They are no worse than the tax evaders, insurance frauds, and corporate criminals among us.

Despite these blatant failures and contradictions, polls indicate that the majority of Americans consider welfare reform a triumph, as they've watched the rolls decrease from 12.2 million in 1996 to 5.3 million in 2001. Hays argues that what people are celebrating is a symbolic end of poverty and so-called moral decline that ostensibly saves taxpayers more of the money that we have less and less of. But welfare reform placates anxieties without addressing the systemic reasons we are increasingly a nation of superwomen who can't do it all, men floundering for purpose, and no one minding the children.

Though nothing about the rhetoric of reform supports its outcomes or social reality, Hays insists that there were "good intentions" behind it ("or at least a mix of good intentions, harsh realities, and incomplete moral reasoning"). For instance, the ten to 15 percent of former clients who gained permanent jobs with a living wage because of the legislation can't be dismissed, she believes. This tactic of emphasizing values over politics to speak to a wider audience causes Hays to short-change her analysis of controversial points like race, even as she dutifully notes its role in keeping poor women at the bottom. And sometimes, her polemical tone belies this generous, let's-take-the-law-at-face-value stance. But for once, an advocate for the poor is not preaching to the choir. In creating a cultural space in which to talk about the traditionally conservative turf of values, Hays encourages the mainstream to consider these social problems not only with more empathy but with self-interest. Reform ultimately will fail us all, she says, and not simply because continued suffering will cost taxpayers in the long run. The ethos (and illogic) of personal responsibility denies our mutual interdependence. 8