I am an African American woman who grew up in the 1950s with friends and relatives who received “aid”—the colloquial term for the Aid to Dependent Children program. It was later also commonly called “welfare.” Many of the families of children who attended my elementary school received this assistance, and my aunt and cousins were recipients of the “commodity food” distributed to the poor each month under this program. As a college student during the 1970s, I read descriptions of welfare-dependent families in the popular press, but I did not recognize the individuals described in this material. My aunt and friends’ mothers were not lazy, promiscuous women who had different values from the rest of society. They were respectable, churchgoing women who instructed their children to get a good education so they could get good jobs and not become dependent on welfare. When they were able to find jobs, these women worked as private maids in the households of white families, or as beauticians working out of their own kitchens, often being paid very little for their work. They scrimped and saved so their children could go to college, and they found ingenious ways to feed and clothe their families.

As a social worker during the 1980s, I visited the homes of many mothers who received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and generally found these women to be similar to the mothers I had known in childhood. They struggled to keep homes that were orderly and clean. They also wanted the best for their children and hoped (and prayed) that they would escape from poverty and dependence on welfare. During the years when I was a protective services social worker, I also saw my share of welfare-dependent mothers who were drug addicted, neglectful, and abusive to their children. But they were the exception, not the rule. So, why weren’t these hard-working women who were struggling...
against the odds presented in the popular media?

The voices and experiences of African American mothers were not found in this material nor were they the subject of academic discourse because of their marginalization within mainstream American culture. Marginalization is not a new phenomenon for African Americans. Our lives have been marginalized for over 200 years. During the era of slavery, African American women were considered “breeders” by slave masters, and their mothering was restricted to conception and birth (Greene, 1994). Infants could be, and often were, removed within a few months of birth, and even those who were allowed to remain with their mothers were generally taken care of by others during the long hours that their mothers worked in the fields. The end of slavery, however, did not bring about a corresponding end to the marginalization of African American mothers. Throughout our history in this country, African American women have had to confront such negative stereotypes as “Mammy,” who is a sexual maternal figure caring for her white charges with self-sacrificial nurturance and devotion, and “Jezebel,” who is an unfit mother because of her sexual promiscuity (Collins, 1990; Gilkes, 1994; Greene, 1994; Sparks, 1996).

The most recent stereotype, that of the “welfare mother,” characterizes African American mothers on welfare as lazy, promiscuous women who are unable to socialize their children adequately. They are portrayed as “bad” mothers who do not provide an appropriate role model for their children because of their unemployment. They are blamed for their own poverty and are thought to need motivation to work, either through incentives or punishments (Fraser & Gordon, 1991). This characterization of low-income African American women serves to render their ideas, feelings, and mothering practices invisible and silent. They are forced out to the margins of society. Why are there such negative images of African American welfare mothers in the majority culture? This paper represents my efforts to find an answer.

I have incorporated into the paper the voices of four African American women who have received welfare at some point in their lives. Carla was a 34-year-old single woman who was attending a state university. She had two children (ages 7 and 12) and was hoping to enter a career where she could make an income that would allow her to care adequately for herself and her children in the future. Carla had both worked and received welfare in the past; she was a recipient while she completed her college education. Brenda was a 27-year-old single mother with three children (ages 1, 2, and 6). She entered the welfare system when she left an abusive situation and was living in a shelter. Brenda received benefits while attending college. Monica was a 35-year-old single mother with two children (ages 4 and 10). At times, she worked two jobs to provide for her family. Monica applied for welfare after suffering a series of injuries and life difficulties that made it impossible for her to work; she received AFDC for about 3 years. Joann was 41 years old and had two children (ages 13 and 20). She was a battered wife and entered the welfare system after leaving her husband. Joann had an extensive employment history and was able to resume working. At the time of the interview, however, she had been laid off and was receiving unemployment compensation.

The selection of these women’s voices is deliberate in order to highlight the heterogeneity that is inherent within the population of African American welfare recipients. There is little discussion of this diversity in the popular media. Social scientists, however, have described this heterogeneity using the metaphor of an onion, where the layers represent different subgroups of welfare recipients (Corbett, 1995). The outer layer of the onion represents the women who are at risk of requiring welfare, and short-term (less than 2 years) welfare recipients who are thought to enter the program as a result of some discrete and observable adverse circumstance (e.g., divorce or loss of a job). These women have the skills, motivation, and necessary supports to acquire economic self-sufficiency in a short period of time and generally are able to take advantage of the earnings supplements and transitional supports (such as medical coverage and assured childcare) provided by welfare. The middle layer contains women who have limited options for employment and have very low earnings capacity. They tend to remain within the welfare system from 2 to 8 years, but are eventually able to exit from it. The inner core of this metaphorical onion represents women who are system dependent, including those with both low earnings capacity and other barriers that impede the way to self-sufficiency (i.e., chemical dependency, clinical depression, and/or abusive personal relations). Also at this layer are those who lack basic skills and who may be isolated from most mainstream institutions. Impoverished neighborhood environments, lack of role models, and inadequate institutional resources contribute to the problems experienced by this core group.

I have chosen to incorporate the voices of women who are more characteristic of those in the upper and middle layers of the metaphorical onion because their voices are often lost and/or silenced in the public