Branded with Infamy: Inscriptions of Poverty and Class in the United States

My kids and I been chopped up and spit out just like when I was a kid. My rotten teeth, my kids’ twisted feet. My son’s dull skin and blank stare. My oldest girl’s stooped posture and the way she can’t look no one in the eye no more. This all says we got nothing and we deserve what we got. On the street good families look at us and see right away what they’d be if they don’t follow the rules. They’re scared too, real scared.


I begin with the words of a poor, white, single mother of three. Although officially she has only a tenth-grade education, she expertly reads and articulates a complex theory of power, bodily inscription, and socialization that arose directly from the material conditions of her own life. She sees what many far more “educated” scholars and citizens fail to recognize: that the bodies of poor women and children are produced and positioned as texts that facilitate the mandates of a didactic, profoundly brutal and mean-spirited political regime. The clarity and power of this woman’s vision challenges feminists to consider and critique our commitment both to textualizing displays of heavy-handed social inscription and to detextualizing them, working to put an end to these bodily experiences of pain, humiliation, and suffering.

Traditionally, Marxist and Weberian perspectives have been employed as lenses through which to examine and understand the material and bodily “injuries of class.” Yet feminists have clearly critiqued these theories for

This essay is dedicated to poor women around the world who struggle together against oppression and injustice. With thanks to Margaret Gentry, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, Sandra Dahlberg, and the reviewers and editors at Signs. And as always, for my mother and my daughter.

1 Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb realized that thinking of class in terms of systems obscured the human costs of being constructed within a hierarchical class system. In The Hidden Injuries of Class—exploring themes found only among their “working-men”—they began to consider the degree to which “social legitimacy in Americans has its origins in public calculations of social value” (1972, 296). Yet Sennett and Cobb failed to examine directly the processes through which class is produced on the gendered and raced bodies of its subjects.
their failure to address the processes through which class is produced on the gendered and raced bodies of its subjects in ways that assure for the perpetuation of systems of stratification and domination. Over the past decade or so, a host of inspired feminist welfare scholars and activists has addressed and examined the relationship between state power and the lives of poor women and children. As important and insightful as these exposés are, with few exceptions, they do not get at the closed circuit that fuses together systems of power, the material conditions of poverty, and the bodily experiences that allow for the perpetuation—and indeed for the justification—of these systems. They fail to consider what the speaker of my opening passage recognized so astutely: that systems of power produce and patrol poverty through the reproduction of both social and bodily markers.

What is inadequate, then, even in many feminist theories of class production, is an analysis of this nexus of the textual and the corporeal. Here Michel Foucault's ([1977] 1984a) argument about the inscriptions of bodies is a powerful mechanism for understanding the material and physical conditions and bodily costs of poverty across racial difference and for interrogating the connection between power's expression as text, as body, and as site of resistance.

In Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender, and the Self, Lois McNay reminds us that "to a greater extent than any other post-structuralist thinker, feminists have drawn on Foucault's work" even though "[they] are also acutely aware of its critical limitations" (1993, 2–3). Particularly useful for feminists has been Foucault's theory that the body is written on and through discourse as the product of historically specific power relations.

For a more complete analysis of the limits of Marxian and Weberian theory for feminists attempting to understand the workings of class, see Crompton and Mann 1986.


Racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism collide in the rhetoric of welfare bashing. Clearly, poor women and children of color are multiply marked in this discourse and punished in their lived lives. Their bodies are also positioned to represent the alleged pathology of an entire culture of poor women and children. Yet it is also true, as my survey results illustrate, that across racial difference the bodies of poor unmarried women and their children are marked and made to bear meaning as signs of danger and pathology, as they are publicly both punished and disciplined.
Feminists have used this notion of social inscription to explain a range of bodily operations from cosmetic surgery (Morgan 1991; Brush 1998), prostitution (Bell 1994), and anorexia nervosa (Bordo 1993; Hopwood 1995) to motherhood (Smart 1992; Chandler 1999), race (Stoler 1995; Ford-Smith 1996), and cultural imperialism (Desmond 1991). As these analyses illustrate, Foucault allows us to consider and critique the body as it is invested with meaning and inserted into regimes of truth via the operations of power and knowledge. On the other hand, feminist scholars have neglected to consider the ways in which other dimensions of social difference, such as class, are inscribed upon the body in manners as fundamental as those of sexuality, gender, and race.5

Foucault clarifies and expands on this process of bodily/social inscription in his early work. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," he positions the physical body as virtual text, accounting for the fact that "the body is the inscribed surface of events that are traced by language and dissolved by ideas" ([1977] 1984b, 83). Foucault's powerful scholarship points toward a body that is given form through semiotic systems and written on by discourse. For Foucault, the body and text are inseparable. In his logic, power constructs and holds bodies, which Foucault variously describes as "foundations where language leaves its traces" ([1977] 1984b, 176) and "the writing pad[s] of the sovereign and the law" ([1977] 1984b, 177).

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault sets out to depict the genealogy of torture and discipline as it reflects a public display of power on the body of subjects in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In graphic detail Foucault begins his book with the description of a criminal being tortured and then drawn and quartered in a public square. The crowds of good parents and their growing children watch and learn. The public spectacle works as a patrolling image, socializing and controlling bodies within the body politic. Eighteenth-century torture "must mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy. It traces around or rather on the very body of the condemned man signs that can not be effaced" ([1977] 1984a, 179). For Foucault, public exhibitions of punishment served as a socializing process, writing culture's codes and values on the minds and bodies of its subjects. In the process punishment discursively deconstructed and rearranged bodies.

But Foucault's point in Discipline and Punish is precisely that public

5 Notably, Donna Langston has recognized that class markers determine "the way we talk, think, act, move," look, and are valued or devalued in our culture (1998, 127). Langston adds, "we experience class at every level of our lives," so that even if our status changes, our class marking "does not float out in the rinse water" (128).
exhibition and inscription have been replaced in contemporary society by a much more effective process of socialization and self-inscription. According to Foucault, today discipline has replaced torture as the privileged punishment, but the body continues to be written on. Discipline produces "subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile bodies'" (1984a, 182). We become subjects not of the sovereign but of ideology, disciplining and inscribing our own bodies/minds in the process of becoming stable and singular subjects. Power's hold on bodies is in both cases maintained through language systems. The body continues to be the site and operation of ideology, as subject and representation, body and text.

Indeed, while we are all marked discursively by ideology in Foucault's paradigm, in the United States today poor women and children of all races are multiply marked with signs of both discipline and punishment that cannot be erased or effaced. They are systematically produced through both twentieth-century forces of socialization and discipline and eighteenth-century exhibitions of public mutilation. In addition to coming into being as disciplined and docile bodies, poor single welfare mothers and their children are physically inscribed, punished, and displayed as the dangerous and pathological other. It is important to note, when considering the contemporary inscription of poverty as moral pathology etched onto the bodies of profoundly poor women and children, that these are more than metaphoric and self-patrolling marks of discipline. Rather, on myriad levels—sexual, social, material, and physical—poor women and their children, like the "deviants" publicly punished in Foucault's scenes of torture, are marked, mutilated, and made to bear and transmit signs in a public spectacle that brands the victim with infamy.

Text of the body, body of the text: The (not so) hidden injuries of class

Recycled images of poor, welfare women permeate and shape our national consciousness. Yet—as is so often the case—these images and narratives tell us more about the culture that spawned and embraced them than they

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6 bell hooks has said that in the language of welfare "poor whites have been erased, while poor blacks have been demonized" (1999). This is surely true at the level of discourse and at the systemic level, and yet I would argue that at the level of the body poor white women and children—like poor women and children of color—are both erased and demonized, as the scripts of those devaluations are written on their very bodies.

7 Throughout this essay I use the terms welfare recipient and poor working women interchangeably because as the recent Urban Institute study made clear, today these populations are, in fact, one and the same (Loprest 1999).
do about the object of the culture's obsession. Simple, stable, and often widely skewed cover stories tell us what is "wrong" with some people, what is normative, and what is pathological; by telling us who "bad" poor women are, we reaffirm and reevaluate who we, as a nation and as a people—of allegedly good, middle-class, white, able-bodied, independent, male citizens—are. At their foundations, stories of the welfare mother intersect with, draw from, reify, and reproduce myriad mythic American narratives associated with a constellation of beliefs about capitalism, male authority, the "nature" of humans, and the sphere of individual freedom, opportunity, and responsibility. These narratives purport to write the story of poor women in an arena in which only their bodies have been positioned to "speak." They promise to tell the story of who poor women are in ways that allow Americans to maintain a belief in both an economic system based on exploitation and an ideology that claims that we are all beyond exploitation.

These productions orchestrate the story of poverty as one of moral and intellectual lack and of chaos, pathology, promiscuity, illogic, and sloth, juxtaposed always against the order, progress, and decency of "deserving" citizens. Trying to stabilize and make sense of unpalatably complex issues of poverty and oppression and attempting to obscure hegemonic stakes in representation, these narratives reduce and collapse the lives and experiences of poor women to deceptively simplistic dramas, which are then offered for public consumption. The terms of these dramas are palatable because they are presented as simple oppositions of good and bad, right and wrong, independent and dependent, deserving and undeserving. Yet as a generationally poor woman I know that poverty is neither this simple nor this singular. Poverty is rather the product of complex systems of power that at many levels are indelibly written on poor women and children in feedback loops that compound and complicate politically expedient readings and writings of our bodies.

I am, and will probably always be, marked as a poor woman. I was raised by a poor, single, white mother who had to struggle to keep her four children fed, sheltered, and clothed by working at what seemed like

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8 In recent years an increasingly lucrative industry has sprung up around making meaning of the presence of the poor in America. Politicians, welfare historians, social scientists, policy analysts, and all stripe of academician produce and jealously guard their newfound turf as they vie for a larger market share of this meaning-making economy. In the shadow of this frenzied and profitable proliferation of representation exists a profound crisis in the lives of poor women and children whose bodies continue to be the site and operation of ideology, as they are written and read as dangerous and then erased and rendered mute in venues of authority and power.
an endless stream of minimum-wage, exhausting, and demeaning jobs. As a child poverty was written onto and into my being at the level of private and public thought and body. At an early age my body bore witness to and emitted signs of the painful devaluation carved into my flesh; that same devaluation became integral to my being in the world. I came into being as a disciplined body/mind while at the same time I was taught to read my abject body as the site of my own punishment and erasure. In this excess of meaning the space between private body and public sign was collapsed.

For many poor children this double exposure results in debilitating—albeit politically useful—shame and lack. As Carolyn Kay Steedman reminds us in *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1987), the mental life of poor children flows from material deprivation. Steedman speaks of the “relentless laying down of guilt” she experienced as a poor child living in a world where identity was shaped through envy and unfulfilled desire and where her own body “told me stories of the terrible unfairness of things, of the subterranean culture of longing for that which one can never have” (1987, 8). For Steedman, public devaluation and punishment “demonstrated to us all the hierarchies of our illegality, the impropriety of our existence, our marginality within the social system” (9). Even as an adult she recalls, “The baggage will never lighten for me or my sister. We were born, and had no choice in the matter; but we were social burdens, expensive, unworthy, never grateful enough. There was nothing we could do to pay back the debt of our existence” (19).

Indeed, poor children are often marked with bodily signs that cannot be forgotten or erased. Their bodies are physically inscribed as “other” and then read as pathological, dangerous, and undeserving. What I recall most vividly about being a child in a profoundly poor family was that we were constantly hurt and ill, and, because we could not afford medical care, small illnesses and accidents spiraled into more dangerous illnesses and complications that became both a part of who we were and written proof that we were of no value in the world.

In spite of my mother’s heroic efforts, at an early age my brothers and sister and I were stooped, bore scars that never healed properly, and limped with feet mangled by ill-fitting, used Salvation Army shoes. When my sister’s forehead was split open by a door slammed in frustration, my mother “pasted” the angry wound together on her own, leaving a mark of our inability to afford medical attention, of our lack, on her very forehead. When I suffered from a concussion, my mother simply put borrowed ice on my head and tried to keep me awake for a night. And when throughout elementary school we were sent to the office for mandatory and very public
yearly checkups, the school nurse sucked air through her teeth as she donned surgical gloves to check only the hair of poor children for lice.

We were read as unworthy, laughable, and often dangerous. Our schoolmates laughed at our “ugly shoes,” our crooked and ill-serviced teeth, and the way we “stank,” as teachers excoriated us for our inability to concentrate in school, our “refusal” to come to class prepared with proper school supplies, and our unethical behavior when we tried to take more than our allocated share of “free lunch.”9 Whenever backpacks or library books came up missing, we were publicly interrogated and sent home to “think about” our offenses, often accompanied by notes that reminded my mother that as a poor single parent she should be working twice as hard to make up for the discipline that allegedly walked out the door with my father. When we sat glued to our seats, afraid to stand in front of the class in ragged and ill-fitting hand-me-downs, we were held up as examples of unprepared and uncooperative children. And when our grades reflected our otherness, they were used to justify even more elaborate punishment that exacerbated the effects of our growing anomie.

Friends who were poor as children, and respondents to a survey I conducted in 1998, tell similar stories of the branding they received at the hands of teachers, administrators, and peers.10 An African-American woman raised in Yesler Terrace, a public housing complex in Seattle, Washington, writes:

Poor was all over our faces. My glasses were taped and too weak. My big brother had missing teeth. My mom was dull and ashy. It was like a story of how poor we were that anyone could see. My sister Evie’s lip was bit by a dog and we just had dime store stuff to put on it. Her lip was a big scar. Then she never smiled and no one smiled at her cause she never smiled. Kids call[ed] her “Scarface.” Teachers never smiled at her. The principal put her in detention all the time because she was mean and bad (they said).11

9 As recently as 1993, in my daughter’s public elementary school cafeteria, “free lunchers” (poor children who could not otherwise afford to eat lunch, including my daughter) were reminded with a large and colorful sign to “line up last.”

10 The goal of my survey was to measure the impact of the 1996 welfare reform legislation on the lives of profoundly poor women and children in the United States. Early in 1998 I sent fifty questionnaires and narrative surveys to four groups of poor women on the West and the East coasts; thirty-nine were returned to me. I followed these surveys with forty-five-minute interviews with twenty of the surveyed women.

And a white woman in the Utica, New York, area remembers:

We lived in dilapidated and unsafe housing that had fleas no matter how clean my mom tried to be. We had bites all over us. Living in our car between evictions was even worse—then we didn’t have a bathroom so I got kidney problems that I never had doctor’s help for. When my teachers wouldn’t let me go to the bathroom every hour or so I would wet my pants in class. You can imagine what the kids did to me about that. And the teachers would refuse to let me go to the bathroom because they said I was willful.12

Material deprivation is publicly written on the bodies of poor children in the world. In the United States poor families experience violent crime, hunger, lack of medical and dental care, utility shut-offs, the effects of living in unsafe housing and/or of being homeless, chronic illness, and insufficient winter clothing (Edin and Lein 1997, 224–31). According to Jody Raphael of the Taylor Institute, poor women and their children are also at five times the risk of experiencing domestic violence (2000).

As children, our disheveled and broken bodies were produced and read as signs of our inferiority and undeservedness. As adults our mutilated bodies are read as signs of inner chaos, immaturity, and indecency as we are punished and then read as proof of the need for further discipline and punishment. When my already bad teeth started to rot and I was out of my head with pain, my choices as an adult welfare recipient were either to let my teeth fall out or to have them pulled out. In either case the culture would then read me as a “toothless illiterate,” as a fearful joke. In order to pay my rent and to put shoes on my daughter’s feet I sold blood at two or three different clinics on a monthly basis until I became so anemic that they refused to buy it from me. A neighbor of mine went back to the man who continued to beat her and her scarred children after being denied welfare benefits when she realized that she could not adequately feed, clothe, and house her family on her own minimum-wage income. My good friend sold her ovum to a fertility clinic in a painful and potentially damaging process. Other friends exposed themselves to all manner of danger and disease by selling their bodies for sex in order to feed and clothe their babies.

Poverty becomes a vicious cycle that is written on our bodies and intimately connected with our value in the world. Our children need healthy food so that we can continue working; yet working at minimum-wage jobs, we have no money for wholesome food and very little time to care

for our families. So our children get sick, we lose our jobs to take care of them, we fall deeper and deeper into debt before our next unbearable job, and then we really cannot afford medical care. Starting that next minimum-wage job with unpaid bills and ill children puts us further and further behind so that we are even less able to afford good food, adequate child care, health care, or emotional healing. The food banks we gratefully drag our exhausted children to on the weekends hand out bags of rancid candy bars, hot dogs that have passed their expiration dates, stale broken pasta, and occasionally a bag of wrinkled apples. We are either fat or skinny, and we seem always irreparably ill. Our emaciated or bloated bodies are then read as a sign of lack of discipline and as proof that we have failed to care as we should.13

Exhaustion also marks the bodies of poor women in indelible script. Rest becomes a privilege we simply cannot afford. After working full shifts each day, poor mothers trying to support themselves at minimum-wage jobs continue to work to a point of exhaustion that is inscribed on their faces, their bodies, their posture, and their diminishing sense of self and value in the world. My former neighbor recently recalled:

I had to take connecting buses to bring and pick up my daughters at childcare after working on my feet all day. As soon as we arrived at home, we would head out again by bus to do laundry. Pick up groceries. Try to get to the food bank. Beg the electric company to not turn off our lights and heat again. Find free winter clothing. Sell my blood. I would be home at nine or ten o’clock at night. I was loaded down with one baby asleep and one crying. Carrying lots of heavy bags and ready to drop on my feet. I had bags under my eyes and no shampoo to wash my hair so I used soap. Anyway I had to stay up to wash diapers in the sink. Otherwise they wouldn’t be dry when I left the house in the dark with my girls. In the morning I start all over again.14

This bruised and lifeless body, hauling sniffling babies and bags of dirty laundry on the bus, was then read as a sign that she was a bad mother and a threat that needed to be disciplined and made to work even harder for her own good. Those who need the respite less go away for weekends, take drives in the woods, take their kids to the beach. Poor women without education are pushed into minimum-wage jobs and have no money, no

13 Adolescent psychologist Maria Root claims that a beautiful or “fit” body becomes equated with “purity, discipline—basically with goodness” (DeClaire 1993, 36).
car, no time, no energy, and little support, as their bodies are made to display marks of their material deprivation as a socializing and patrolling force.

Ultimately, we come to recognize that our bodies are not our own, that they are rather public property. State-mandated blood tests, interrogation of the most private aspects of our lives, the public humiliation of having to beg officials for food and medicine, and the loss of all right to privacy, teach us that our bodies are only useful as lessons, warnings, and signs of degradation that everyone loves to hate. In “From Welfare to Academe: Welfare Reform as College-Educated Welfare Mothers Know It,” Sandy Smith-Madsen describes the erosion of her privacy as a poor welfare mother:

I was investigated. I was spied upon. A welfare investigator came into my home and after thoughtful deliberation granted me permission to keep my belongings. Like the witch hunts of old, if a neighbor reports you as a welfare queen, the guardians of the state’s compelling interest come into your home and interrogate you. While they do not have the right to set your body ablaze on the public square, they can forever devastate heart and soul by snatching away children. Just like a police officer, they may use whatever they happen to see against you, including sexual orientation. Full-fledged citizens have the right to deny an officer entry into their home unless they possess a search warrant; welfare mothers fork over citizenship rights for the price of a welfare check. In Tennessee, constitutional rights go for a cash value of $185 per month for a family of three. (in press, 185)

Welfare reform policy is designed to publicly expose, humiliate, punish, and display “deviant” welfare mothers. “Workfare” and “Learnfare”—two alleged successes of welfare reform—require that landlords, teachers, and employers be made explicitly aware of the second-class status of these very public bodies. In Ohio, the Department of Human Services uses tax dollars to pay for advertisements on the side of Cleveland’s RTA buses that show a “Welfare Queen” behind bars with a logo that proclaims “Crime does not pay. Welfare fraud is a crime” (Robinson 1999). In Michigan a pilot program mandating drug tests for all welfare recipients began on October 1, 1999. Recipients who refuse the test will lose their benefits immediately (Simon 1999). In Buffalo, New York, a county executive proudly announced that his county would begin intensive investigation of all parents who refuse minimum-wage jobs that are offered to them by the state. He warned: “We have many ways of investigating and exposing these errant parents who choose to exploit their children in this way” (Anderson 1999).
In Eugene, recipients who cannot afford to feed their children adequately on their food stamp allocations are advised through fliers issued by a contractor for Oregon's welfare agency to "check the dump and the residential and business dumpsters" in order to save money (Women's Enews, 2001b). In April 2001, Jason Turner, New York City's welfare commissioner, told a congressional subcommittee that "workplace safety and the Fair Labor Standards Act should not apply to welfare recipients who, in fact, should face tougher sanctions in order to make them work" (Women's Enews, 2001a). And welfare reform legislation enacted in 1996 as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) requires that poor mothers work full-time, earning minimum-wage salaries with which they cannot support their children. Since these women are often denied medical, dental, and child-care benefits and are unable to provide their families with adequate food, heat, or clothing, through this legislation the state mandates child neglect and abuse. The crowds of good parents and their growing children watch and learn.

Reading and rewriting the body of the text

The bodies of poor women and children, scarred and mutilated by state-mandated material deprivation and public exhibition, work as spectacles, as patrolling images socializing and controlling bodies within the body politic. That "body politic" is represented in Foucault's work as the other half of the discipline and punishment circuit of socialization. It is here that material elements and techniques "serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them, turning them into objects of knowledge" ([1977] 1984a, 28). Again Foucault writes of the body and the text: text is in and of the body, body is in and of the text, in ways in which signifier and signified, metaphor and referent never replace each other but simply trace and chase each other. In this cycle of power a template of meaning is produced through which only specific, politically viable readings of the bodies of poor welfare recipients and their children are possible.

Spectacular cover stories of the "Welfare Queen" play and replay in the national mind's eye, becoming a prescriptive lens through which the American public as a whole reads the individual dramas of the bodies of poor women and their place and value in the world. These dramas produce "normative" citizens as independent, stable, rational, ordered, and free. In this dichotomous, hierarchical frame the poor welfare mother is juxtaposed against a logic of "normative" subjectivity as the embodiment of
dependency, disorder, disarray, and otherness. Her broken and scarred body becomes proof of her inner pathology and chaos, suggesting the need for further punishment and discipline.

In contemporary narratives welfare women are imagined to be dangerous because they refuse to sacrifice their desires and fail to participate in legally sanctioned heterosexual relationships; theirs is read, as a result, as a selfish, "unnatural," and immature sexuality. In this script, the bodies of poor women are viewed as being dangerously beyond the control of men and are as a result construed as the bearers of perverse desire. In this androcentric equation fathers become the sole bearers of order and of law, defending poor women and children against their own unchecked sexuality and lawlessness.

For Republican Senator John Ashcroft writing in the St. Louis Dispatch, the inner city is the site of "rampant illegitimacy" and a "space devoid of discipline" where all values are askew. For Ashcroft, what is insidious is not material poverty but an entitlement system that has allowed "out-of-control" poor women to rupture traditional patriarchal authority, valuation, and boundaries (1995, A23). Impoverished communities then become a site of chaos because without fathers they allegedly lack any organizing or patrolling principle. George Gilder agrees with Ashcroft when he writes in the conservative American Spectator that "the key problem of the welfare culture is not unemployed women and poor children. It is the women's skewed and traumatic relationships with men. In a reversal of the pattern of civilized societies, the women have the income and the ties to government authority and support. This balance of power virtually prohibits marriage, which is everywhere based on the provider role of men, counterbalancing the sexual and domestic superiority of women" (1995, B6). For Gilder, the imprimatur of welfare women's sordid bodies unacceptably shifts the focus of the narrative from a male presence to a feminized absence.

When welfare mothers are positioned as sexually chaotic, irrational, and unstable, their figures are temporarily immobilized and made to yield meaning as a space that must be brought under control and transformed through public displays of punishment. Poor single mothers and children who have been abandoned, have fled physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse, or have in general refused to capitulate to male control within the home are mythologized as dangerous, pathological, out of control, and selfishly unable—or unwilling—to sacrifice their "naturally" unnatural desires. They are understood and punished as a danger to a culture resting on a foundation of inviolate male authority and absolute privilege in both public and private spheres.
William Raspberry frames poor women as selfish and immature, when in "Ms. Smith Goes after Washington," he claims, "Unfortunately AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] is paid to an unaccountable, accidental and unprepared parent who has chosen her head of household status as a personal form of satisfaction, while lacking the simple life skills and maturity to achieve love and job fulfillment from any other source. I submit that all of our other social ills—crime, drugs, violence, failing schools are a direct result of the degradation of parenthood by emotionally immature recipients" (1995, A19). Raspberry goes on to assert that, like poor children, poor mothers must be made visible reminders to the rest of the culture of the "poor choices" they have made. He claims that rather than "coddling" her, we have a responsibility to "shame her" and to use her failure to teach other young women that it is "morally wrong for unmarried women to bear children," as we "cast single motherhood as a selfish and immature act" (1995, A19).

Continuous, multiple, and often seamless, public inscription, punishing policy, and lives of unbearable material lack leave poor women and their children scarred, exhausted, and confused. As a result their bodies are imagined as an embodiment of decay and cultural dis-ease that threatens the health and progress of our nation. Readings that position poor women's bodies and presences in the world as illegal posit an inherent connection between control, autonomy, progress, and social value. In valuing science, history, and allegedly masculine logic, progress is imagined as linear and teleological. This narrative of movement celebrates an active move from a feminized—stagnant, chaotic, abject, and dark—world to a state of masculinist autonomy, progress, discipline, and order. What the protagonist leaves behind in this foundational American myth is stasis and putrefaction. As a result the narrative sets up a series of dichotomous images juxtaposing our national obsession with movement and progress against our abhorrence for, and fear of, poor women who are constructed as static and stagnant.

In a 1995 USA Today article entitled "America at Risk: Can We Survive without Moral Values?" for example, the inner city is portrayed as a "dark" realm of "decay rooted in the loss of values, the death of work ethics, and the deterioration of families and communities." Allegedly, here "all morality

15 In "Rhetoric of (Female) Savagery: Welfare Reform in the United States and Aotearoa/New Zealand" (2000), Catherine Kingfisher notes that "the discourse of welfare reform in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the United States is pervaded by a symbolic association of the 'undeserving' poor, most notably poor single mothers, with savagery. The savage is commonly constructed as wild, uncivilized, uncontrollable, and living in a 'natural' state that lies outside, or historically occurred prior to, civilization" (2).
has rotted due to a breakdown in discipline.” This space of disorder and disease is marked with tropes of race and gender. It is also associated with the imagery of “communities of women without male leadership, cultural values and initiative” (1995, C3; emphasis added). In George Will’s Newsweek editorial he proclaims that “illogical feminist and racial anger coupled with misplaced American emotion may be a part or a cause of the irresponsible behavior rampant in poor neighborhoods.” Will continues, proclaiming that here “mothers lack control over their children and have selfishly taught them to embrace a pathological ethos that values self-need and self-expression over self-control” (1995, 88; emphasis added).

Poor women and children’s bodies, publicly scarred and mutilated by material deprivation, are read as expressions of an essential lack of discipline and order. In response to this perception, journalist Ronald Brownstein of the Los Angeles Times proposed that the “Republican Contract with America” will “restore America to its path, enforcing social order and common standards of behavior, and replacing stagnation and decay with movement and forward thinking energy” (1995, A1; emphasis added). In these rhetorical fields poverty is metonymically linked to a lack of progress that would allegedly otherwise order, stabilize, and restore the culture. What emerges from these diatribes is the positioning of patriarchal, racist, capitalist, hierarchical, and heterosexist “order” and movement against the alleged stagnation and decay of the body of the “Welfare Queen.”

Race is clearly written on the body of the poor single mother. The welfare mother, imagined as young, never married, and black (contrary to statistical evidence) is positioned as dangerous and in need of punishment because she “naturally” emasculates her own men, refuses to service white men, and passes on—rather than appropriate codes of subservience and submission—a disruptive culture of resistance, survival, and “misplaced” pride to her children (Collins 2000). In stark contrast, widowed women with social security and divorced women with child support and alimony are imagined as white, legal and propertied mothers whose value rests on their abilities to stay in their homes, care for their own children, and impart traditional cultural mores to their offspring, all for the betterment of the dominant culture. In this narrative welfare mothers have only an “outlaw” culture to impart. Here the welfare mother is read as both the product and the producer of a culture of disease and disorder. These narratives imagine

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16 In the two years directly preceding the passage of the PRWORA, as a part of sweeping welfare reform, in the United States the largest percentage of people on welfare were white (39 percent), and fewer than 10 percent were teen mothers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1994).
poor women as a powerful contagion capable of infecting, perhaps even lying in wait to infect, their own children as raced, gendered, and classed agents of their “diseased” nature. In contemporary discourses of poverty racial tropes position poor women’s bodies as dangerous sites of “naturalized chaos” and as potentially valuable economic commodities who refuse their “proper” roles.

Gary MacDougal in “The Missing Half of the Welfare Debate” furthers this image by referring to the “crab effect of poverty” through which mothers and friends of individuals striving to break free of economic dependency allegedly “pull them back down.” MacDougal affirms — again despite statistical evidence to the contrary — that the mothers of welfare recipients are most often themselves “generational welfare freeloaders lacking traditional values and family ties who can not, and will not, teach their children right from wrong.” “These women,” he asserts, “would be better off doing any kind of labor regardless of how little it pays, just to get them out of the house, to break their cycles of degeneracy” (1995, A16).

In this plenitude of images of evil mothers, the poor welfare mother threatens not just her own children but all children. The Welfare Queen is made to signify moral aberration and economic drain; her figure becomes even more impacted once responsibility for the destruction of the “American Way of Life” is attributed to her. Ronald Brownstein reads her “spider web of dependency” as a “crisis of character development that leads to a morally bankrupt American ideology” (1995, A6).

These representations position welfare mothers’ bodies as sites of destruction and as catalysts for a culture of depravity and disobedience; in the process they produce a reading of the writing on the body of the poor woman that calls for further punishment and discipline. In New York City, “Workfare” programs force lazy poor women to take a job — “any job” — including working for the city wearing orange surplus prison uniforms picking up garbage on the highway and in parks for about $1.10 per hour (Dreier 1999). “Bridefare” programs in Wisconsin give added benefits to licentious welfare women who marry a man — “any man” — and publish a celebration of their “reform” in local newspapers (Dresang 1996). “Tidyfare” programs across the nation allow state workers to enter and inspect the homes of poor slovenly women so that they can monetarily sanction families whose homes are not deemed to be appropriately tidied.17

17 “Tidyfare” programs additionally required that caseworkers inventory the belongings of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC; welfare) recipients so that they could require them to “sell-down” their assets. In my own case, in 1994 a section eight inspector from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development came into my home, counted my daughter’s books, checked them against his list to see that as a nine-year-old she
“Learnfare” programs in many states publicly expose and fine undisciplined mothers who for any reason have children who do not (or cannot) attend school on a regular basis (Muir 1993). All of these welfare reform programs are designed to expose and publicly punish the misfits whose bodies are read as proof of their refusal or inability to capitulate to androcentric, capitalist, racist, and heterosexist values and mores.

Resisting the text: On the limits of discursive critique and the power of poor women’s communal resistance

Despite the rhetoric and policy that mark and mutilate our bodies, poor women survive. Hundreds of thousands of us are somehow good parents despite the systems that are designed to prohibit us from being so. We live on the unlivable and teach our children love, strength, and grace. We network, solve irresolvable dilemmas, and support each other and our families. If we somehow manage to find a decent pair of shoes, or save our food stamps to buy our children a birthday cake, we are accused of being cheats or living too high. If our children suffer, it is read as proof of our inferiority and bad mothering; if they succeed, we are suspect for being too pushy, for taking more than our share of free services, or for having too much free time to devote to them. Yet, as former welfare recipient Janet Diamond says in the introduction to For Crying Out Loud: “In spite of public censure, welfare mothers graduate from school, get decent jobs, watch their children achieve, make good lives for themselves. Welfare mothers continue to be my inspiration, not because they survive, but because they dare to dream. Because when you are a welfare recipient, laughter is an act of rebellion” (Dujon and Withorn 1996, 1).

Foucault’s later work acknowledges this potential for rebellion inherent in the operation of power. Indeed, in Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings (1980), he positions discourse as an amalgam of material power and nonmaterial knowledge that fosters just such resistance. As Lois McNay points out, for Foucault power is a productive and positive force rather than a purely negative, repressive entity. McNay notes that, for Foucault, “in relation to the body power does not simply repress its unruly forces, rather it incites, instills and produces effects in the body” (1993, 38). She adds: “Resistance arises at the points where power relations are at their most rigid and intense. For Foucault, repression and resistance are not ontologically distinct, rather repression produces its own resistance:

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was entitled to have only twelve books, calculated what he perceived to be the value of the excess books, and then had my welfare check reduced by that amount in the following month.
‘there are no relations of power without resistance; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised’” (39).

Because power is diffuse, heterogeneous, and contradictory, poor women struggle against the marks of their degradation. Resistance swells in the gaps and interstices of productions of the self. For Foucault, “dis-course transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (1978, 101). Yet here we also recognize what McNay refers to as the “critical limitations” of Foucault and of poststructuralism in general. For although bodily inscriptions of poverty are clearly textual, they are also quite physical, immediate, and pressing, devastating the lives of poor women and children in the United States today. Discursive critique is at its most powerful only when it allows us to understand and challenges us to fight together to change the material conditions and bodily humiliations that scar poor women and children in order to keep us all in check.

Poor women rebel by organizing for physical and emotional respite and eventually for political power. My own resistance was born in the space between self-loathing and my love of and respect for poor women who were fighting together against oppression. In the throes of political activism (at first I was dragged blindly into such actions, ironically, in a protest that required, according to the organizer, just so many poor women’s bodies) I became caught up in the contradiction between my body’s meaning as a despised public sign and our shared sense of communal power, knowledge, authority, and beauty. Learning about labor movements, fighting for rent control, demanding fair treatment at the welfare office, sharing the costs, burdens, and joys of raising children, forming food cooperatives, working with other poor women to go to college, and organizing for political change became addictive and life-affirming acts of resistance. Through shared activism we became increasingly aware of our individual bodies as sites of contestation and of our collective body as a site of resistance and as a source of power.18

18 Communal affiliation among poor women is discouraged, indeed in many cases prohibited, by those with power over our lives. Welfare offices, for example, are designed to prevent poor women from talking together; uncomfortable plastic chairs are secured to the ground in arrangements that make it difficult to communicate, silence is maintained in waiting rooms, case workers are rotated so that they do not become too “attached” to their clients, and, reinforced by “Welfare Fraud” signs covering industrially painted walls, we are daily reminded not to trust anyone with the details of our lives for fear of further exposure and punishment. And so, like most poor women, I had remained isolated, ashamed, and convinced that I was alone in, and responsible for, my suffering.
Noemy Vides, in “Together We Are Getting Freedom,” reminds us that “by talking and writing about learned shame together, [poor women] pursue their own liberation” (Vides and Steinitz 1996, 305). Vides adds that it is through this process that she learned to challenge the dominant explanations that decreed her value in the world, “provoking an awareness that the labels—ignorant peasant, abandoned woman, broken-English speaker, welfare cheat—have nothing to do with who one really is, but serve to keep women subjugated and divided. [This communal process] gives women tools to understand the uses of power; it emboldens us to move beyond the imposed shame that silences, to speak out and join together in a common liberatory struggle” (1996, 305).

In struggling together we contest the marks of our bodily inscription, disrupt the use of our bodies as public sign, change the conditions of our lives, and survive. In the process we come to understand that the shaping of our bodies is not coterminous with our beings or abilities as a whole. Contestation and the deployment of new truths cannot erase the marks of our poverty, but the process does transform the ways in which we are able to interrogate and critique our bodies and the systems that have branded them with infamy. As a result these signs are rendered fragile, unstable, and ultimately malleable.

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References

19 In the process poor and working poor women begin to see clearly that when we are divided we lose and that when we capitulate to the pressure to engage in the blaming game—where the “have-nots” are pitted against the “have-nothings”—power is allowed to replicate itself, and we remain fragmented, broken, and silenced.

20 Many questions remain to be addressed. As feminist scholars, it is crucial to consider at what point public punishment forecloses the possibility of resistance, to explore the histories and epistemologies of power and resistance, to appreciate and work to improve the material lives of poor women and children, to make real the connections between our understanding of poor women as subjects and our commitment to them as sisters, and to critique our own exclusionary politics that have allowed us to neglect and to silence this population of women, both in and out of the academy.


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