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Branded with Infamy

Inscriptions of Poverty and Class in the United States

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According to philosopher Michel Foucault, premodern societies convinced their members to obey the laws of state and church by branding, cutting, burning, or otherwise gruesomely and publicly marking the bodies of any who broke those laws. These marked bodies thus became “texts” that could be read as one would read a book. In contrast, Foucault argued, modern societies instead instill obedience through socializing their members to internalize society’s rules and to discipline themselves, making harsh punishments unnecessary. Several articles in this volume, beginning with Sandra Bartky’s, have similarly highlighted how contemporary society teaches women to internalize social norms regarding proper feminine appearance.

In this article, Vivyan Adair analyzes how poor women’s lives and bodies are controlled through both modern and premodern strategies. The effects of poverty (and resultant lack of health care) physically mark the bodies of poor women and their children, in a very “premodern” way. Simultaneously, however, public portrayals of poor women, combined with assumptions about poor women embedded in public policy, socialize all of us to assume that poverty among women—especially if they are nonwhite—results from their own moral and physical failings. As a result, poor women may internalize a sense of shame and to accept their fate and discipline their bodies—a very “modern” type of social control. Meanwhile, those of us who are not poor may “read” poor women’s bodies as markers of their failings. Nevertheless, Adair argues, poor women still find ways to engage in resistance.


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.

Welfare Recipient and Activist, Olympia, WA, 1998

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 detexualizing them, working to put an end to these bodily experiences of pain, humiliation, and suffering...

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] 1984) 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.... 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....

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] 1984, 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 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' " (1984, 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.¹ Yet—as is so often the case—these images and narratives tell us more about the culture that spawned and embraced them than they 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 unpalatable 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 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....

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 sis-
ter 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 fore-
head 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 school-
mates laughed at our "ugly shoes," our crooked and ill-serviced teeth, and 
the way we "stank," as teachers excoriated us for our inability to concen-
trate in school, our "refusal" to come to class prepared with proper school 
supplies, and our unethic behavior when we tried to take more than our 
allocated share of "free lunch." 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 uncooper-
ative 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 con-
ducted in 1998, tell similar stories of the branding they received at the hands 
of teachers, administrators, and peers. 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).

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.

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 inti-
mately 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 
see 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."
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.4

This bruised and lifeless body, hauling sniffing 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 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. (2003, 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 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....

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. 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 Rasperry 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, falling schools are a direct result of the degradation of parenthood by emotionally immature recipients” (1995, A19). Rasperry 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 unwed mothers to bear children,” as we “cast single motherhood as a selfish and immature act” (1995, A19).

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 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 proper 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 poor women as a powerful contagion capable of infecting, perhaps even lying in wait to infect, their own children as racial, gendered, andclassed 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.

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, “Welfare” 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. “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 invisible 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... As Lois McNay points out, [Foucault shows us how] “repression produces its own resistance: 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” (1993, 39, 3...)

Yet here we also recognize what McNay refers to as the “critical limitations” of Foucault and of post-structuralism 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...

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 conterminous 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.

Notes

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. 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).


3. Adolescent psychologist Maria Root claims that a beautiful or “fit” body becomes equated with “purity, discipline—basically with goodness” (DeC laire 1993, 36).


5. 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).

References


