

Denver Law Review

Volume 78

Issue 4 *Latcrit V Symposium - Class in LatCrit:
Theory and Praxis in a World of Economic
Inequality*

Article 28

January 2001

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Recommended Citation

Julie Nice, Introduction: Partiality, 78 Denv. U. L. Rev. 1137 (2001).

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Introduction: Partiality

PARTIALITY

JULIE NICE

If knowledge is only and always partial, how can we develop social movements based on theories and praxes for seeking justice? Consistent with LatCrit tradition, the articles in this cluster raise this question about partiality. Specifically, the authors apply various critical tools to examine both our study of poverty and our policy discourse regarding anti-poverty programs. They especially criticize one primary analysis of poverty – “the feminization of poverty” – for leaving out other perspectives. As Kendal Broad succinctly states it, “our understandings of poverty and its ‘feminization’ are only partial knowledges.”¹ Athena Mutua concurs that feminization of poverty is “only partially accurate” as a construct, “capturing the dynamics of poverty in some communities but not others.”² To remedy the partiality within poverty discourse, each of these authors seeks to bring previously under-appreciated perspectives to the fore. Kendal Broad highlights queer and transgender people; Lisa Sun-Hee Park focuses on pregnant immigrant women; Athena Mutua emphasizes poor people of color; and Laura Padilla concentrates on Mexican American women. Taken together, these article provoke thought about four aspects of partiality: disintegration, exclusion, predilection, and bias. In general, I suggest that while naming ongoing harms of disintegration and exclusion, the authors also recognize their own predilections and attempt to advance the elimination of bias.

The authors rightly criticize the practice of isolating gender from experiences of race, orientation, immigration status, parental status, age, ability, class or other aspects of life. More specifically, the authors criticize the exclusion of particular groups from our understanding of poverty. Kendal Broad asks why we have not included queer and transgender perspectives in our exploration of poverty. Broad urges us to “create new knowledges that do not essentialize gender and presume heteronormativity.”³ Lisa Sun-Hee Park suggests that we must consider how welfare and immigration reforms have “essentially criminalized motherhood for low-income immigrant women.”⁴ Park points to how the vagueness of the prohibition on an immigrant becoming a public charge has been applied

1. K.L. Broad, *Critical Borderlands & Interdisciplinary, Intersectional Coalitions*, 78 DENV. U. L. REV. 1151, 1159 (2001).

2. Athena Mutua, *Why Retire the Feminization of Poverty Construct*, 78 DENV. U. L. REV. 1171, 1172 (2001).

3. Broad, *supra* note 1, at 1160.

4. Lisa Sun-Hee Park, *Perpetuation of Poverty Through “Public Charge,”* 78 DENV. U. L. REV. 1205 (2001).

to chill immigrant women's use of the public Medicaid system in California.⁵ Similarly, Athena Mutua argues that poor men of color and others are excluded from poverty discourses revolving around women.⁶ Mutua comments on the work of Broad and Park, as well as that of Elvia Arriola,⁷ and argues that a multidimensional analysis of poverty will illuminate its full dimensions.⁸ Finally, while Laura Padilla does not address poverty as a separate topic in her article, she addresses the exclusion of Mexican American women from public leadership, exploring examples of how they overcame their exclusion to spear social change in East Los Angeles and Argentina and urging more participation in both grassroots activism and dominant culture.⁹

The articles are less persuasive in supporting their claims that the perspectives they raise have been excluded from poverty discourse. The feminization of poverty construct itself emerged as a critique of how gender had been ignored in the study of poverty.¹⁰ Thus, those who urged a focus on gender laid much of the foundation for critical analysis of poverty discourse on which these authors build. Also, many poverty scholars have explored how various racial minority groups and immigrant populations experience poverty.¹¹ Nonetheless, the focus on white heterosexual mothers undoubtedly has obscured the experiences of many other poor people, including communities of color, immigrants, and sexual minorities.

If this were all to them, then these articles simply would fall within a powerful trajectory of scholarship making the case against discrimination and exclusion. But there is more. What's more is the self-consciousness contemplated and encouraged by LatCrit and other critical scholarship to reflect on our complicity with the very forces of discrimination we condemn. This self-consciousness calls us to awareness and

5. *Id.*

6. Mutua, *supra* note 2, at 1172.

7. Mutua, *supra* note 2, at 1187-1191 (discussing Elvia R. Arriola, *Voices from the Barbed Wires of Despair: Women in the Maquiladoras, Latina Critical Theory at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, 50 DEPAUL L. REV. 2 (2000)).

8. Mutua, *supra* note 2, at 1175 ("Therefore, an approach that seeks to understand the multidimensional nature of poverty and promotes anti-essentialist, anti-subordination principles and practices might better unravel the ties that bind people in poverty and be more inclusive, permitting shared agendas for building coalitions.").

9. Laura M. Padilla, *Re/Forming and Influencing Public Policy, Law and Religion: Missing From the Table*, 78 DENV. U. L. REV. 1223 (2001).

10. See, e.g., MINI ABRAMOVITZ, UNDER ATTACK, FIGHTING BACK: WOMEN AND WELFARE IN THE UNITED STATES 86 (2000) ("for years the academic community remained strikingly silent on the gender issues that welfare raises").

11. See, e.g., KENNETH J. NEUBECK & NOEL A. CAZENAVE, WELFARE RACISM: PLAYING THE RACE CARD AGAINST AMERICA'S POOR 17-38 (2001) (conceptualizing a race-centered perspective on welfare that builds upon the critical race theory of scholars such as Dorothy Roberts and Patricia Hill Collins and upon previous class-centered, gender-centered, and state-centered perspectives on welfare).

caution about the tools we use to engage and criticize dominant discourse.

The authors below demonstrate the self-consciousness by acknowledging various levels of discomfort with their own isolation of groups defined by particular traits, even though they do so in order to make their case against the exclusion of such groups within dominant poverty discourse. This self-consciousness about our participation in perpetuating systems of subordination brings awareness of our own predilections and biases. For example, Broad openly identifies her own situated standpoint as part of her effort to understand what it means to participate "as an activist scholar in a 'politics of difference.'"¹² Padilla acknowledges the dangers of essentialism even as she frames her analysis on commonalities shared by Mexican American women.¹³

As a group, these articles underscore the importance of a multidimensional perspective on understanding poverty. Of equal importance is their contribution of centering the study of poverty within LatCrit discourse. They also invite reflection about how we use our own partiality to criticize the partiality of other.

12. Broad, *supra* note 1, at 1153, 1156-57 (describing herself as a "non-Latino/a white academic feminist gender bending dyke" and as a "white feminist sociologist").

13. Padilla, *supra* note 9, at 1225 ("I acknowledge the complexity and risks of group description but nonetheless assert that Mexican American women's common history of colonization and shared cultural background influences their inclination to participate (or not) in the formation and implementation of public policy, law and religion.").

