Slaggy Mums: Class, Single Motherhood, and Performing Endurance

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Abstract

This article considers how single mothers are created as abject and objectified in British culture through ideas of sexual excess and relational disgust embodied in the figure of the 'slaggy mum'. I focus on the working-class single mother to demonstrate how motherhood becomes ideologically positioned as abject through figurative forms that serve to justify policies that overwhelmingly harm working-class women. I propose that the figure of the single mother is classed, sexualised, and raced in ways that compound her abjection and demand endurance. I examine performances and writing by single mothers Cash Carraway and Kelly Green with attention to ideas of endurance and objectification, arguing that it is through aesthetic endurance that abject objectification can be worked through from the inside by abject subjects.

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Dedicated to Mary Savin – my nan, a single mother, who died while I was writing this article. Your love and ability to endure with joy inspire and nourish me, even as I struggle to contemplate a world without you alive in it.

Introduction

As I entered the lobby of Camden People's Theatre on a mild evening in July 2018, a child unexpectedly greeted me. She was seven years old or thereabouts, cheerfully selling scripts for the production I had arrived to see, Cash Carraway's *Refuge Woman* (2017). 'Would you like one of these?', she asked, grinning as she held out the script, printed in a homemade zine, with drawings and handwriting on the photocopied cover. 'They're five pounds.'

Billed as 'Live Poverty Porn', *Refuge Woman* is a one-woman show with some autobiographical and some fictional elements, written and performed by Carraway as a monologue interspersed with spoken word. It narrates her experiences living in women's refuges after the male benefactor who housed her and her daughter became violent (the line between truth and fiction is deliberately blurred here, as in much of Carraway's work, although stories

from the show are repeated in her memoir *Skint Estate* (2019) and refer to real-life incidents documented on her since-deleted social media accounts). I recognised the child as Carraway's daughter, Annie,[1] from the photographs and videos the performer had posted on Instagram in the lead-up to the show; posts that often gave ostensibly candid insights into her family life and the struggles of a single mother in austerity-era England.

Carraway performed *Refuge Woman* with Annie sitting in the front row, conspicuous: a live, living embodiment of the child in the life played out on stage. At one point during the show, the performer described how the children at the refuge became terrified they might die 'next', following the horrific Grenfell Tower fire, where at least seventy-two people living in a tower block in West London were killed as a result of poor building practices after a fire broke out and spread rapidly. According to Carraway, she and Annie were living in a refuge close to the social housing estate where Grenfell Tower was located, and witnessed the fire and its aftermath. Sitting a few rows back, I watched as the child's bobbed hair moved from side to side while her mother told the gathered audience this story of their trauma.

Annie's presence at the theatre was most likely a practical decision (in that there was nobody Carraway could have asked to care for her child on that evening); however, Carraway did not opt to keep the child out of view as she might have done – hidden in the green room adjacent to the stage, occupied with a book, tablet, or smartphone. Her daughter's presence in the lobby and studio was deliberate. Making her child highly visible before and during the performance, and involving her in the labour of the show, then, can be understood as a choice; it is one that served not only to solidify the horror and human impact of the stories Carraway shared on stage (including the need to ensure her child's safety in the wake of their experience of domestic violence), but that also acted as a means of rendering visible the labours of motherhood in general, and single motherhood in particular, which often remain concealed from public view, relegated to the private, domestic realm. Yet, as the sociologist Ann Oakley points out, 'what is private, the life of the home and of children and women, is also a matter of great public importance'.[2]

The cultural critic Jacqueline Rose also emphasises the public importance of motherhood's labours. In her book, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*, Rose describes how she once encouraged a junior colleague and new mother to take her child into work in order to demonstrate the demands of mothering alongside full-time employment.[3] This call to render the labour of motherhood visible is especially necessary in a cultural context in which, as Rose describes, mothers are 'so often held accountable for the ills of the world'.[4] By placing her daughter in the lobby, and then in the front row of her performance, Carraway demonstrated both that the work of childcare is a twenty-four-hour

job, and that the ability to delegate such work is not always possible, especially for people existing in financially precarious circumstances. The chaotic and degrading experiences foisted on those living in emergency accommodation, as *Refuge Woman* revealed, are exacerbated in an economic climate of austerity under which support for mothers has been systematically rolled back to the point where many single mothers living in poverty are unable to afford food and secure shelter for their children,[5] let alone a baby-sitter who might pick up the labour of childcare so the mother is able to perform a show at a fringe theatre. Combined with the content of *Refuge Woman*, the presence of a real child in the theatre space – apparently happy, polite, and well-cared for – ruptured narratives of social and moral failure that circulate in relation to working-class single mothers in political rhetoric and media representations.

In this article, I think about the ways that mothers have been constituted as abject, focusing on the working-class single mother to demonstrate how motherhood becomes ideologically positioned. I first turn to existing scholarship to consider ideological constructions of single mothers. I propose that in England, the figure of the single mother is classed, sexualised, and raced in ways that compound her abjection and demand endurance. I argue that the ideological category 'single mother' or 'chav mum' is often bound up with the classed and raced concept of the 'slag'. Developing the focus on performances by single mothers that I opened with, I return to Carraway's work by paying attention to ideas of endurance, before turning to the performer Kelly Green, offering an analysis of how her work also makes sense of her abject objectification as a working-class 'slaggy' mother through displays of endurance. In both cases I draw on Lara Shalson's definition of that term, where endurance becomes a formal means through which to explore 'fundamental concerns about embodiment and relationality'.[6] Although the term endurance suggests the ways in which single motherhood requires strength, resilience, survival and staying-power, Shalson's scholarship also positions endurance as an ethical and aesthetic structure, which 'involves a plan and a following through of that plan' to often uncertain ends. Endurance in this definition is not about duration, or even strength, but a commitment to staying with the consequences of our actions, which cannot be knowable in advance.[7]

Single motherhood, of course, is not always 'planned' – in the sense that pregnancies frequently occur accidentally, and relationships end unexpectedly – nonetheless, becoming a mother almost always involves an element of decision-making (in choosing to have sex or get pregnant by other means, in choosing to adopt, select a surrogate or to keep the baby in the case of accidental pregnancy), and of following through with unpredictable results. Thus, Shalson's notion of endurance emerges as a useful concept through which to think through performances about and by single mothers. Single motherhood

also raises complex concerns around embodiment and relationality. As I will explore below, single mothers' abjection is often constituted relationally – from the assumptions made about the relations between the mother and her sexual partner (starting with the assumption there is one, and that the relationship is consensual), between the mother and her child, as well as the mother and the society at large. Carraway's *Refuge Woman* and her memoir *Skint Estate* and Kelly Green's *CHAV* (2018) and *SLAG* (2019), point to how endurance as a formal, aesthetic, and ethical structure has the potential to reveal and interrupt unjust power dynamics, and serve as a critique that might provide a means through which injustice can be borne.

By emphasising endurance, I attempt to highlight how working-class women have drawn attention to and made sense of their objectification in performed ways. In these works, abject subjecthood emerges through the process of objectification in ways that complicate Julia Kristeva's model, where the abject is cast off from the sense of self.[8] Shalson's notion of endurance serves as a means of complicating understandings of abject objecthood; endurance, as I apply it here, is a theoretical frame that allows us to see how working-class single mothers have used performance forms to engage with the complex sensual and sometimes joyful aspects of their objectification. In both Carraway's and Green's work, women made abject and objectified *because* of their motherhood have made the abject a site of endurance in order to leverage single motherhood as a means of survival in a hostile and 'viciously unjust' world.

In *Skint Estate: A Memoir of Poverty, Motherhood and Survival*, published following *Refuge Woman*, Carraway ends with a rousing section acknowledging the great endurance women like her have shown in the face of a decade of austerity policy (although she is also careful to point out that she can speak only for herself; her own experience is not intended as reflective of working-class single mothers at large).[9] Emphasising their potential to harness her capacity to endure as a strategy for social change, Carraway writes:

> [B]eing able to survive in the conditions in which women like us are forced to live, means that we are resourceful and powerful in a way they'll never be able to fathom. We fight to find a sense of worthwhile living in the most undignified of situations. When life collapses down on us we'll go to any lengths to keep our children safe, we'll sink to our knees to feed them and steal the glue required to stick back together their severed self-esteem. We are formidable creatures and, when we nurture our individual power for collective use, then it will be channelled positively to create change. I'm certain of that (339).

Coming at the end of memoir that details the ways austerity policies have forced Carraway into poverty that compelled her into dangerous living situations, domestic abuse, and sex work, this section is inflected with a particular sense of endurance. One that we might understand as a 'preparation for mustering strength': rallying and uplifting despite the circumstances it describes.[10] Carraway's instruction at the start of the book – that the words in its pages are designed to be read aloud – indicates that she thinks of her writing in terms of performance, even when it is not presented on stage. This emphasis on the performance action (the speaking out loud of words) in *Skint Estate* suggests something about the importance of performing one's circumstances as a means of survival, while the content of the book serves as a documentation of the ways abjection forces abject objects to endure.

Public Identity: Objectification, Endurance, and Abjection

The demonisation of the mother is a phenomenon that is classed as well as gendered and raced; it is constitutive of the wider structures through which injustices relating to class, race, and sex play out in particular cultures. Shalson describes such processes as objectification, and objectification must be understood as having material and political effects on the lives and the bodies of those who are demonised. Shalson details how endurance can be leveraged as an aesthetic strategy for navigating objectification. Indeed, writing about being raised by a working-class mother (whose complicated relationship with Steedman's father renders her a 'single mother' for at least some of the time) historian Carolyn Steedman returns to the theme of endurance time and again to account for her working-class mother's, and her own, experiences of class.[11] For Steedman, endurance is both a result of working-class life as well as a quality that can be 'passed on': an intergenerational classed affect. Endurance also endures then, manifesting through motherhood and mothering as an affective register through which class is felt. As Steedman writes:

> What was given to her, passed on to all of us, was a powerful and terrible endurance, the self-destructive defiance of those doing the best they can with what life hands out to them.[12]

Steedman, as Raymond Williams noted in a review of her work in the *London Review of Books*, is critical of cultural materialist understandings of working-class experiences via 'the realm of production', as they reduce the possibilities for understanding the lives of women and children in their complexity and richness.[13] For Steedman, class, as it is revealed in her mother's experience, is

inherently affective, creating difficult emotions, in particular envy and longing that must be born through an endurance that is often intimately relational. This is articulated through her mother's enduring desire for love and legitimacy in her relationship with Steedman's father (the relationship begins as an affair and they are never married) as well as for material objects that will symbolise her safety and elevation from abjection. Nonetheless, despite its undeniable affective character, Steedman's mother's position can be understood within a framework of cultural production; that is, like other working-class mothers, her circumstances are produced via social systems that operate to legitimise unjust policies that harm those with the least power. In this sense, the single mother is a 'public identity'.

Ange-Marie Hancock uses the term 'public identity' in an essay exploring the function of the ideology underpinning the emergence of the welfare queen, a US iteration of the demonised mother. The concept of the 'welfare queen' has long circulated in order to portray welfare recipients – particularly working-class mothers in general, and black working-class single mothers in particular – as 'lazy', work-shy, and pathologically dependent. Hancock describes how public identities function as a crystallisation of intersecting identity formations 'generally based upon non-group members' perceptions specifically for the advancement of facially neutral public policy', secured through media, academic and policy discourse. Hancock argues that public identities differ from mere stereotypes in the way they are used as 'ideological justifications for public policy'.[14] In this way, Hancock's concept of 'public identity' illuminates the significance of the welfare queen to wider structures of inequality.

Hancock's work bears similarities to Imogen Tyler's concept of 'figuring'. According to Tyler, figuring is the process by which abjection is attached to specific groups of people through repeated semiotic representations across media and political forms, which come to influence and even shape public perceptions and shore up punishing neoliberal policies. Drawing on Kristeva, who introduces abjection as 'a concept through which to understand the powerful role that feelings of disgust and revulsion play in shaping individual and collective understandings of what does and does not belong to our social and political worlds',[15] Tyler posits abjection as means of social consensus by which elements of the population are (con)figured as 'waste'.[16]

Abjection, then, 'is more than that which is merely grotesque or disgusting […] it is generative of something deeper and more profoundly political than a simple emotional reaction of horror';[17] it is a means of securing exclusion via a disgust affect 'articulated by *negation* and its modalities, *transgression, denial*, and *repudiation*'.[18] Although in Kristeva's conception, abjection negates objecthood, in the case of the single mother, I propose, following Shalson, that abjection

always results in objectification. That is, it always reduces the individual mother to the status of a knowable object: an abstracted figure that is understood as necessarily abject in a system of political structures that depends upon 'wasted' figures to reproduce itself. These structures, Shalson points out, are precisely the frameworks through which performances of endurance often operate, where endurance becomes contingent on objectification, which is the ethical site where artists reckon with notions of their own objecthood, which are always also political.[19] In this instance, abjection is not a process of rejection or negation, but must be taken on from the inside. That is, one's own abjection must be endured as one exists on the border between a subject of one's own experience and an object whose life is already interpreted as fixed by the prevailing political order.

Chavvy Mums: Race and Relationality

Tyler describes how the concept of the 'chav mum' emerges in the early twenty-first century to secure the working-class single mother as an abject figure. The term 'chav' is a derogatory word persistently applied to (particularly young) working-class people; the chav figure has come to operate as a 'national abject',[20] suggesting the laziness, criminality, stupidity, and bad taste connected to the working-class populace. Like the welfare queen, the 'chav mum' serves as an archetypal example of mother as social failure: she is feckless, emotionally volatile, sexually available, and reliant on welfare benefits; her children are often fatherless (indeed she may have several children by different fathers). Unlike the welfare queen however, the chav mum is usually white. White working-class, as I have argued elsewhere,[21] is a racialised category through which white working-class people are depicted as 'dirty white'; it is related to, though distinct from, the US conception of 'white trash'.[22]

In the British context, it has become common to separate issues of class and race, on the basis that Britain's highly stratified social system is distinct from issues of racism. However, this approach to understanding class fails to acknowledge the ways that class and race intersect, and the potential for better understanding and addressing structural inequality through attention to these intersections.[23] Hancock's work then, although US based, begins to illuminate the intersections between class and race that can also be considered in analyses of the UK, even where the whiteness of single mothers might appear to render race irrelevant. As Stephanie Lawler has shown, in England, 'white-working class people have become cast as the bearers of a problematic and unreflexive whiteness that has come to be located in the past'.[24] In this context white working-class identities are racialised and sustained through

stories that depict 'the white working-class as racist, bewildered, threatened and unhappy, at the sharp end of multiculturalism'.[25] The figure of the 'chav mum' contributes to this powerful imaginary. However, what I argue here is that the racialisation of the 'chav mum' occurs through positioning the working-class mother as a 'slag'. That is, through inferring her 'dirty whiteness' as *relational* – this relationality often emerges as a moral euphemism in which working-class women's proximity to other abjects, particularly black men or chav men (degraded working-class white men), secures their abjection and comes to imply total moral inferiority.

In the figuring of the single mother, the presumed sexual availability or sexual excess of the working-class woman always exists as a condition of the objectification. Tyler points to the fictional character Vicky Pollard in the comedy television series *Little Britain* as a particularly persuasive example of the abject working-class single mother. A fifteen-year-old from Bristol, Vicky Pollard has more than twelve children fathered by numerous men. Her children are a variety of races, and in one memorable incident she sells a child for a CD by the popular boy band Westlife. Tyler notes how Vicky Pollard (despite being fictional and a parody) became a cultural touchstone in the first decade of the twenty-first century: a means by which to rationalise economic and social policies that punish working-class women. Although the single mother had been a target of national abjection since at least the 1980s,[26] such policies intensified in the second decade of the century, as international austerity measures levelled in the wake of the 2008 recession resulted in cuts to welfare benefits and public expenditure which 'disproportionately affect women'.[27] In the lead-up to these polices, the chav mum, Tyler tells us, 'moved relentlessly through the public culture on a wave of mockery, contempt, and disgust',[28] semiotically justifying such measures that exacerbated inequality.

Vicky Pollard's abjection operates to speak 'about' single mothers in general. In other words, she becomes an objectifying figure. Part of this objectification happens through 'moral euphemisms' that operate through semiotic relations, such as the race of her children. Vicky Pollard has clearly had sex with numerous men, some of whom are not white. Her abjection is therefore relational, because her sexual proximity to disreputable men means she also absorbs racist disgust. As the sociologist Lisa McKenzie has argued in her study of working-class mothers to mixed race children, the abjection of these women relies both on 'the association of black men' with 'sexual monsters', and 'an overt feminised version of white women', which is 'not freely available' to the working class because femininity as a means of respectability 'is a cultural resource belonging to the middle class'.[29] Moreover, the stereotype of the absent black father (which is related to US conceptions of the 'welfare queen' as a lone matriarch) serves to further underpin cultural

understandings of mothers of mixed-race children, so that they become associated with single motherhood, regardless of the actual race of the child. Additionally, in mediatised examples of fictional single mothers such as Vicky Pollard, the promiscuity of the mother is implied by the fact she has white as well as mixed race children. As the audience for such stereotypes, we (a we that includes single mothers themselves) easily come to infer that the archetypal single mother has multiple sexual partners. Such an implication is one way in which the private lives of working-class single mothers are placed under public scrutiny.[30] Who working-class women are sexually intimate with becomes a cause for public concern and ridicule. This classed, racialised, and sexualised process is one way in which the single mother is constituted as sexualised 'dirty white', as *slag*.

Slags

'Slag' is an insult, widely used in Britain since at least the mid-twentieth century, which began to be applied as a means of signalling the abject sexual reputation of women sometime in the late twentieth century. As I expand below, slag has a particular association with notions of waste, exclusion, and excess, making ideas of abjection especially appropriate to understanding the operation of the term.

In her compendium of words associated with women, *Womanwords*, Jane Mills cites 1983 as the point at which the term slag secures itself as a specifically gendered insult – although ethnographic scholarship suggests it had been fairly widely applied in this way since at least the late 1970s.[31] This timeline is particularly telling in the way that it maps a trajectory of both gendered and class-based abjection under neoliberalism. For, while 'slag' is not a simply a class-based insult (in that it is applied to women of all classes – indeed it can also be applied to men, albeit usually in a jocular context), it is, nonetheless *classed* – that is it serves to classify; to suggest the social (and sexual) inferiority of the woman it is applied to in a way that is euphemistically bound up with stereotypical conceptions of white working-class women as loose, immoral, and dirty. Indeed, Andrea Dworkin points to how sexism is itself a classed system – using literal and metaphorical conceptions of women as dirt in order to maintain their second-class position in patriarchal society. 'The filth of woman', she argues, is a 'central conceit in culture: taken to be fact'.[32]

In an online survey I conducted as part of a wider project exploring the use, circulation, and representation of the word 'slag' in UK culture, completed by 168 respondents, the euphemistic way in which the word has become associated with the abjection of working-class women was evident in the

responses to a question about cultural representations of 'slags'. Many of the answers pointed to celebrities and fictional characters associated with white working-class culture. These included the *EastEnders* character Kat Slater, and the glamour model Katie Price, as well as the 'fat slags' characters from the magazine *Viz* – the latter of these highlighting how the insult slag becomes secured within wider conceptions of the bodily abject and the repulsive. Slags are not sexually desirable, only sexually available: excessive and wanting, unable to contain or satisfy their desire. They are desperate and gross; used but never respected; ridiculous and cartoonish if not outright vile.

What is compelling in terms of making the case for slag as an insult bound up with class as well as gender abjection, is that this term becomes secured in the colloquial British lexicon at a point during which, as Phil O'Brien points out, the neoliberal project begins both to erase class analysis and blame working-class people 'for what are structural problems (unemployment, for example)'.[33] In other words, 'slag', as a term for a sexually worthless woman, becomes widespread precisely at the point at which industrial processes and those associated with them are being made abject through political discourse. The Miners' Strike of 1984/85 is a cultural flashpoint in the neoliberal project to disempower the working class in the UK, and the class-based struggle against this disempowerment. As McKenzie points out, the closure of the pits in mining towns across the UK had a disastrous impact on local communities, not only in economic terms but also on the way that those who inhabited and sustained former prosperous towns through industrial labour came to see themselves and be seen by others:

> Over the many years of the devaluing of the white working-class, they have been seen as lacking the necessary attributes to become successful in a modern and forward thinking Britain. Their collectivist politics are seen as outdated and belong to the unfashionable 1970s. They have been represented, and consequently ridiculed, as longing for the great industries of the past to return to their dismal and desolate northern towns. It was during the Thatcher years in the UK that this notion of the stupid, un-modern working-class community unable to move on from their industrial roots was first developed.[34]

Slag, as a by-product of industrial processes such as smelting, can have economic value – but in mining terms slag is broadly understood as waste product, most iconically slag is associated with the 'slag heap': the useless pile of waste left over after the mining process.[35] The way that an industrial term comes to signify worthlessness at precisely this point in history, when the social role of industrial labourers and their families is being systematically

undermined, demonstrates the way language is contextually constituted and reflects the prevailing ideological values of the period. Language, as bell hooks points out, is shaped to 'become a territory that limits and defines', 'a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize'.[36] Indeed, language is a means of rendering inferiority. And inferiority becomes a powerful tool in the process of objectifying women and creating particular categories of women as abject. Inferiority in this way operates as a tool of suppression.

'Inferiority', Andrea Dworkin writes, emphasising the severity of the state for inferior subjects,

> is the deep and destructive devaluing of a person in life, a shredding of dignity and self-respect, an imposed exile from human worth and human recognition, the forced alienation of a person from even the possibility of wholeness or internal integrity (213).

Thus the 'dirty' construction of inferior women through the figure of the slag operates in UK society as a class- and gender-bound discourse with profound impacts. It operates not only in the sense that Dworkin suggests – to produce women as 'second-class' citizens – but to position working-class women and girls as particularly dirty; it suggests that their dirt is toxic: poisonous and contaminating (or as Beverley Skeggs writes 'leaky'), liable to seep out and pollute others.

Cash Carraway and Enduring Slaggyness

I return here to Carraway's work to suggest that the themes and ideas I have mapped around the figure of the 'slaggy mum' structure her writing and performance, where endurance emerges as a broad aesthetic strategy through which the ambivalent effects of living and mothering under abject objecthood are worked through. Indeed, the sense of being seen as an object frames much of Carraway's writing which, in turn, acknowledges how classism incorporates racism and misogyny to create the working-class woman as utterly abject. In *Skint Estate*, for example, Carraway describes a date that ends in her being called a 'little slag'. Reflecting on the ways single mothers are objectified as a homogenous category, she calls on notorious 'bad' single mothers as she writes:

> *Let's never forget who we really are; collectively responsible for the deaths of Baby P, the births of Robert Thompson and the disappearance of Shannon Matthews. We launched*

> *World War II, creators of fascism – after all Hitler was dragged up by a slag of a single mum. So was Stalin and look at all the trouble he caused* (68–9).[37]

Carraway works through objectification as a confrontation with abjection, as she revels in the bodily and the revolting. The abject can be understood as 'a concept which describes all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies and in particular those aspects of bodily experience which unsettle bodily integrity: death, decay, fluids, orifices, sex, defecation, vomiting, illness, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth'.[38] If so, then Carraway's persistent reference to the bodily can be understood as a means of calling on her objecthood, not only to reveal the conditions working-class women are forced to endure, but also to take a political and ethical stance on the conditions that produce the abject.

At the start of the first section of her memoir, titled 'Survival', Carraway describes discovering her pregnancy in a shit-smeared train toilet cubicle, homeless, wearing sunglasses in an attempt to cover bruises left by a recent ex-boyfriend:

> I'm covered in piss and blood and most likely some stranger's shit, but this is all I've ever wanted – all I've ever wanted is a family. Of course, I thought it would be different, didn't think I'd be doing it alone. No one plans to run away with the clothes on her back and a bag containing 40 stolen pregnancy tests (8).

The aesthetic work of endurance here, as Carraway chooses to survive in the face of poverty, does not serve to refute abject objecthood (indeed, the prose revels in the 'leaky'), but rather, as Shalson suggests, to 'take up an ethical relation' in order to 'accommodate' objecthood's ambivalence.[39] For Carraway, the ethical work is in a political reckoning with the system that produces her abjection. She embraces the ambivalence of her position as she upholds her love for her child while berating the struggle produced by the political system in which they live. She calls directly on the Conservative government, describing the prevailing system as 'economic gang rape that makes the poor and vulnerable the scapegoat for society's decline' (xvii). This is a slaggy mother who is fully aware of her public identity, and its political function.

In *Refuge Woman*, the political production of abjection is performed through endurance as a formal strategy of repetition, as each section begins with her returning to the refuge; she tells us that she has sought shelter in women's refuges thirteen times in sixteen years; in the latest episode, which the play dwells upon, she is with her daughter. Seeking refuge becomes an iterative cycle from which there is no escape, as even once she has left, Carraway is compelled to relive the experience through telling. 'Whenever I tell people

the story of the refuge' she says, 'which I inevitably do, I *always* do'.[40] The traumatic nature of this recounting is also ambivalent, with humour and sarcasm used to illustrate the ways her survival and, ultimately, the survival of her child, is dependent on the ability to bear the pains of objecthood. At one point, for example, Carraway describes how she is forced to endure repeated performances of the feminist performance *The Vagina Monologues* starring the British television actress Linda Robson:

> Little tip from a refuge connoisseur: When you live in a women's refuge you *will* be invited to a production of the Vagina Monologues at least once.
>
> And it will star Linda Robson.
>
> Good old Linda. The amount of times she's appeared before me in regional theatres, I officially consider her to be the patron saint of domestic violence.
>
> 16 years. 13 refuges. 12 productions of the Vagina Monologues. Only 12. Linda refused to bring her vag to Retford. And rightly so, it's a shithole.[41]

Enduring in the face of objectification also requires reckoning with the co-option of her stories by others. Throughout *Refuge Woman*, Carraway insists on the importance of working-class women telling their own stories. She describes how her refuge experiences were patronisingly co-opted by journalists in ways that further objectified her and those she lived with. Again, this claim to her own story is political, grounded in the ethics of voicing. Carraway tells us that, as a refuge resident, she is unable to vote, despite her growing anger at the prevailing political system. But the ethics of voicing too are presented as ambivalent as Carraway narrates a story about a friend she met in the refuge, who acts as her birthing partner, and who dies by suicide after the results of the 2010 UK election (in which the Conservative party form a majority in a coalition government, which eventually ushers in austerity).

Carraway delivers this story (whose veracity is never clear) in a matter-of-fact style, where her viewing of her friend's corpse recalls Kristeva's description of the abject, in which the cadaver is 'death infecting life'.[42] Carraway writes: 'Badra was hanging there like a pig in China Town. She can't have been there that long because she still looked alive, like she was in an ugly sleep. She was dribbling'.[43] Yet Carraway rejects the objectification of her friend, telling us that 'her story isn't mine to tell'.[44] Throughout this, Annie sits in the audience, reminding us of the enduring role of motherhood, and the fact that there are other stories unfolding alongside Carraway's own.

Kelly Green's *CHAV* and *SLAG*: Objectification as Endurance

Like Carraway, Kelly Green's works insist on the ability of working-class people to tell their own stories and can be understood as aesthetically grounded in endurance. Green is a working-class single mother, artist, and academic whose work to date is focused on coming to terms with how she has been rendered as an abject 'other' by virtue of the intersections between her class and sex identities.

Green's two shows, *CHAV* (2018) and *SLAG* (2019), are both one-woman autobiographical works, first performed at the Camden People's Theatre. Both focus on the ways that stereotypical figurings of working-class mothers as 'chavs' and 'slags' have been experienced by Green in embodied ways. Her status as a single mother here is central to the performances, even though they are not directly about mothering. This is because Green is objectified through her motherhood; indeed, as she describes in *CHAV*, it is only once she has become a single mother that she is directly labelled a 'chav'. 'I used to think you were a nice girl,' an old colleague tells her, on her first night out after having her baby, as she worries about her altered body and how it is perceived by her friends 'but now you're just a chav'.[45] As the capitalised titles suggest, Green's performances are raw and confrontational, in that they deal head-on with the subject matter in a personal capacity, rather than attempting to layer their critique as a narrative story. The performances frame the experience of working-class single motherhood and its attendant objectification as feats of endurance – as 'sustained embodied engagement by a particular individual in a particular context'.[46] They present the physical, emotional, and relational labours of mothering, of living as working-class, and as existing as a woman with sexual desires in this context as processes of enduring: laying bare the ways in which the body of a working-class single mother is made to endure in specific and relentless ways. It is endurance that manifests in exhaustion. This is achieved in both the form and the content of the performances, which are constructed as a series of scenes or sketches during which Green performs physical feats that offer access to the endurance required to perform the physical and emotional demands of working-class single motherhood.

In one early scene during *CHAV*, a performance devised as part of her practice-as-research PhD into class and identity, Green skips, jumping through a hula hoop as she lists the roles and tasks she is required to manage in order to maintain a sense of respectability and attempt social mobility in a culture that devalues working-class women. 'It's really quite hard to manage,' she says, 'being a working-class single mother, academic, and of course an artist, to manage all of the expectations and things you need to do'.[47] As the monologue progresses Green's breathing becomes more laboured, and her skipping slows

down as she describes the process of completing a PhD ('Never. Fucking. Ending'), cultivating an art career, and raising a daughter ('packed lunches […] homework […] projects […] who's got fucking time?'). At the end of the sketch Green is visibly exhausted. She trips over the hula hoop and eventually discards it, leaning forward to catch her breath, unable to continue speaking, before regaining her composure and continuing the show.

In her writing on the 1960 Greensboro sit-ins, in which African American citizens protested the 'whites only' racial segregation policy in lunch counters at Woolworth department stores in North Carolina, USA, Shalson describes the act of sitting in one place as resistance against the demands on the objectified, 'embodied self' to exist as perpetually 'animated by turbulent movements'.[48] Green's use of the hula hoop becomes a means of rendering clearly the requirement for working-class mothers to move turbulently; it is a tactic repeated in *SLAG*, where the demand on the objectified subject to keep moving is exemplified by Green's telling of the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale, *The Red Shoes* (1845). In the fairy tale, a working-class girl who grows vain and spoiled becomes unable to remove the red shoes she was once so fond of once she is cursed by a solider; moreover, the curse is strengthened on the death of her mother, meaning that the shoes compel her to dance perpetually, until she is so overcome that she begs an executioner to amputate her feet, which keep dancing even after they are detached from her body. In the context of *SLAG*, a performance during which Green explores the sexual abjection of working-class women, with reference to her own experiences as a single mother, the story also hints at the ways in which sites of female pleasure (the shoes, sexual intimacy) become contorted into sites of shame and suffering. Early on in the performance, Green makes reference to the always classed perception of her sex life by measuring the 'length of cock' she has 'had' in cans of the lager Stella Artois (a brand known colloquially as 'wife beater' and associated with violent, working-class men), using the 'average' length of British men's penises multiplied by the number of her sexual partners to reach an accurate approximation. In this context, Green's agitated movement of her feet throughout the retelling of *The Red Shoes* fairy tale, brings the uncomfortable physicality of the story into her body, and suggests it parallels with her own experience. In this way, shame operates, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, through identity, as the shameful body emerges as the very 'place where the *question* of identity arises most originarily and most relationally'.[49]

The concept of perpetual movement through dance – and the echo of *The Red Shoes* – also emerges in *CHAV*, where, dressed in a tutu and the large, gold hooped earrings stereotypically associated with 'chav' women, Green tells how fabricated rumours surrounding her relationship with a boyfriend ended in her

becoming labelled as a 'slag' in her local community. At a point during which her abject class identity was already secured in the wider public imagination through her young, single motherhood, this labelling was particularly painful. She parodies this pain, distancing herself from it and finding ways to cope through a rendition of the song 'There are Worse Things I Could Do' from the musical *Grease*.[50] Illuminated by a spotlight, performing in front of a screen with the word 'slag' and its synonyms projected on to it (*slut*, *sket*, *hoe*, *town bike*, *whore*, etc.), this sketch displays the relentless nature of objectification, and points to its emotional affects. As Shalson argues, objectification itself is a feat of endurance because, 'the lesson of objecthood, first discovered in the mirror, is never learned only once; it must be repeated, again and again'.[51] Working-class women and girls, as both Green's own life story and the story of *The Red Shoes* remind us, cannot detach themselves from the circumstances of their class without enduring pain; social mobility is experienced as a relentless and repetitious process.[52] However, despite its illumination of discomfort, as an aesthetic strategy endurance works in Green's performances to nuance the representations of shame and abjection beyond only misery. For as Shalson and other scholars have proposed, endurance is 'a deliberate practice that cannot be defined by hardship'.[53] Although undoubtedly hardship plays a role in her performed representation of her lived experience, it is one nuanced with pleasure, excess, and love. That is, while the relentless nature of Green's physical feats are evident, so too are the moments of humour, irony, and joy in her performance of them. This ambivalent experience of motherhood is one that is often cited in sociological studies of working-class mothers, wherein motherhood itself brings feelings of value, self-worth, and pleasure, while the wider structural demonisation and punitive public policy cause shame and hardship.[54]

The paradoxical affects of managing class identity is a theme that Green emphasises with a focus on her own experience of the education system. Both *CHAV* and *SLAG* are framed as 'performance lectures', with Green, neatly dressed in the persona of a middle-class educator, introducing her audience to the concepts of the 'chav' and the 'slag' and discussing how these terms circulate in the culture. In *CHAV* this device works to articulate modes of endurance under which working-class mothers survive. Here, the lecture framing serves two purposes. The first is to situate the work within the context of Green's PhD: *CHAV* is a practice as research output through which Green explores and critiques concepts of class and the ways they have played out in her life. In doing so, she exposes the process of studying as a feat of endurance: positioning academic study as labour that places a particularly great burden on working-class mothers, who must manage the demands of study alongside employment, childcare, other family responsibilities and

under the all-encompassing weight of other people's judgement. As Skeggs has shown, care has specific value for working-class women, who cannot delegate caring responsibilities in the same way that middle-class women often can.[55] This is not only because of financial limitations, but because caring has been deliberately positioned by successive education and policy initiatives, as well as through economic opportunities, as a means through which working-class women can accrue value. Here, Green (explicitly referring to Skegg's work at points), demonstrates the way such sociological insights relate to the real lives of working-class women. Her performed account thus adds an affective texture and offers specificity to academic critiques of working-class stereotypes, showing how insights from decades of research into working-class abjection have not managed to ease the burden for working-class women in practice.

The lecture-framing of *CHAV* also works as a means for Green to explore social mobility. Kelly the educator, speaking in a 'posh' Received Pronunciation (RP) accent, and dressed smartly in black shirt and trousers, is revealed as a constructed persona that slowly crumbles as the performance develops. Green exposes and discusses the difficulties of managing her class identity in the context of the university institution, where she is either perceived as 'not working class' at all, or as excessively working class. The crumbling of her identity occurs not only through her change of clothes (her smart black suit is replaced with novelty head wear and an 'L' plate in reference to the 'hen parties' that Skeggs identifies as an example of the 'immoral repellent woman'),[56] but through her voice, which moves in and out of a heightened RP to Green's natural North London accent. As both Lynne McCarthy and Maggie Inchley have pointed out, voice, as both 'the material that produces sound and language',[57] and a metaphor encompassing the 'civic right and symbolic freedom' to participate in political discourses,[58] emerged as an important facet of New Labour policy, ostensibly offering a participation in democracy to working-class people that subsequent coalition and conservative governments have 'erased'.[59] Green's vocal performance in *CHAV* and *SLAG* then makes aurally material the ways that working-class people must performatively navigate acceptable practices of citizenship in order to be understood as 'respectable' in educational and other institutional settings (including the theatre), which are governed by middle-class norms.[60]

Conclusion

In her book on performance art and endurance, Shalson proposes a series of questions:

> How might we learn to reside with such vulnerability and opacity? How might we learn to live with the incommensurable alienation that simultaneously opens us up to one another and marks us as inexorably separate? How, finally, might we stop trying to defeat objecthood – our own and others – and start learning to endure objecthood instead?[61]

In an article about the 'slaggy' single mother, these questions produce particular resonances. Perhaps they even appear defeatist – the call to endure abjection and accept stigmatisation surely cannot be understood as resistance. Nonetheless, the importance of survival should not be overlooked. Carraway and Green's practice suggest that the ability to make sense of one's objectification through creative practice is one means through which abjection might be survived. Moreover, staging endurance requires audiences to participate in a critical understanding of the structures of abjection that produce objecthood, and consider our own role in creating and sustaining the objectification of 'others'. The Camden People's Theatre, which champions marginal voices, emerges here as a site where such reckoning is possible. Finally, as my analysis of Carraway and Green's work shows, endurance itself emerges as an aesthetic strategy and mode of critical engagement with objecthood that does not conceal the difficulty and pain of existing as a working-class single mother in a culture that casts such women as slags, but which also makes space for the sensual and emotional complexity of such objecthood.

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Notes

1 Annie is the pseudonym Carraway uses for her daughter in *Refuge Woman*. In the interests of the child's privacy I am also using this pseudonym here.

2 Anne Oakley, *Father and Daughter: Patriarchy, Gender and Social Science* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2014), 18.

3 See Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber and Faber 2018).

4 Rose, *Mothers*, 6.

5 Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Hal Pawson, Glen Bramley, Steve Wilcox, Beth Watts, and Jenny Woods, *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2018*, Crisis, www.crisis.org.uk/media/238700/homelessness_monitor_england_2018.pdf (accessed 22 May 2020); Rachel Loopstra, Hannah Lambie-Mumford, and Ruth Patrick, *Family Hunger in Times of Austerity: Families Using Food Banks Across Britain*, Sheffield Political Economy Reserch Institute, http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/SPERI-Brief-32-Family-hunger-in-times-of-austerity.pdf (accessed 22 May 2020).

6 Laura Shalson, *Performing Endurance: Art and Politics since 1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 5.

7 Shalson, *Performing Endurance*, 9.
8 See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
9 See Cash Carraway, *Skint Estate: A Memoir of Motherhood, Poverty and Survival* (London: Ebury, 2019).
10 Raegan Truax, 'Lara Shalson. Performing Endurance: Art and Politics since 1960,' *Modern Drama* 62, no. 4 (2019): 578.
11 Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Women* (London: Virago, 1986), 31.
12 Steedman, *Landscape*, 31.
13 Raymond Williams, 'Desire', *London Review of Books* 8, no. 7 (1986): 8–9.
14 Ange-Marie Hancock, 'Contemporary Welfare Reform and the Public Identity of the "Welfare Queen"', *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 1 (2003): 33.
15 Veronica Baxter and Mbongeni N. Mtshali, '"This Shit is Political; Shit is Real." The Politics of Sanitation, Protest, and the Neoliberal, Post-apartheid City', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 40, no. 1 (2020): 71.
16 See Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013).
17 Baxter and Mtshali, '"This Shit is Political"', 77.
18 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 6. Original emphasis.
19 Shalson, *Performing Endurance*, 27–8.
20 Imogen Tyler, '"Chav Mum, Chav Scum": Class Disgust in Contemporary Britain', *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 1 (2008): 17–34.
21 Katie Beswick, *Social Housing in Performance: The English Council Estate on and off Stage* (London: Methuen Drama: 2019).
22 See Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
23 Dhelia Snoussi and Laurie Mompelate, *'We are Ghosts': Race, Class and Institutional Prejudice*, Runnymede Trust, 2019, www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/We%20Are%20Ghosts.pdf (accessed 28 June 2020).
24 Stephanie Lawler, 'White Like Them: Whiteness and Anachronistic Space in Representations of English White Working Class', *Ethnicities* 12, no. 4 (2012): 409–26.
25 Lawler, 'White Like Them', 422.
26 Beverley Skeggs, 'The Making of Class and Gender through Visualising Moral Subject Formation', *Sociology* 39, no. 5 (2005): 965.
27 Sue Durbin, Margaret Page, and Sylvia Walby, 'Gender, Equality and "Austerity": Vulnerabilities, Resistance and Change', *Gender Work and Organisation* 24, no. 1 (2017): 2.
28 Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 165
29 Lisa McKenzie, *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 69.
30 Gillian Sharpe, 'Precarious Identities: "Young" Motherhood, Desistance and Stigma', *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 15, no. 4 (2015): 1–6.
31 Jane Mills, *Womanwords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Patriarchal Society* (London: Longman, 1989); Celia Cawie and Sue Lees, 'Slags or Drags', *Feminist Review* 9 (1981): 17–31.
32 Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (London: Basic Books, 1987).
33 Phil O'Brien, *The Working Class and Twenty-First-Century British Fiction: Deindustrialisation, Demonisation, Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2020), 9.
34 Lisa McKenzie, 'On the Frontline: Left Out. The Other "Other"', *Discover Society*, https://discoversociety.org/2014/03/04/on-the-frontline-left-out-the-other-other/ (accessed 7 February 2020).

35 A slag heap is not made up of slag, but of waste-products often known as 'spoil'; perhaps there is something here in the way the term becomes applied to signify women 'spoiled' by their sexuality.
36 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 168.
37 Original emphasis.
38 Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 27.
39 Shalson, *Performing Endurance*, 26–7.
40 Cash Carraway, *Refuge Woman* (2017), unpublished manuscript.
41 Carraway, *Refuge Woman*.
42 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
43 Carraway, *Refuge Woman*.
44 Carraway, *Refuge Woman*.
45 Green, *CHAV* (2018).
46 Shalson, *Performing Endurance*, 163.
47 Green, *CHAV*.
48 Shalson, *Performing Endurance*, 94.
49 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 37. Original emphasis.
50 In the musical, the number is sung by the character Rizzo, a teenager who fears for her sexual reputation after a pregnancy scare.
51 Shalson, *Performing Endurance*, 92.
52 Carolyn Steedman similarly draws on fairy tale – the little mermaid dancing on knives, ice shard in the heart of the boy in *The Snow Queen* – to parallel and explore her class discomfort in *Landscape for a Good Woman*.
53 Truax, 'Lara Shalson. Performing Endurance', 577.
54 Imogen Tyler, 'Pramface Girls: The Class Politics of "Maternal TV"', in *Reality Television and Class*, ed. Helen Wood and Beverley Skeggs (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 210–24; and McKenzie, *Getting By*.
55 Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: SAGE, 1997).
56 Beverley Skeggs, 'The Making of Class and Gender', 966.
57 Lynne McCarthy, 'Focus E15: Performing Nuisance as a Feminist Narrative of Property', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 40, no. 1 (2020): 114.
58 Maggie Inchley, *Voice and New Writing, 1997–2007* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.
59 McCarthy, 'Focus E15', 114.
60 See Lynsey Hanley, *Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide* (London: Penguin, 2016).
61 Shalson, *Performing Endurance*, 76.