

## **Sex, Lies and Difficult Truth in Cash Carraway's *Skint Estate***

This paper is the formulation of new thoughts I'm having towards a new project called *Slags on Stage*, which thinks through the intersections between working class culture, sex, politics and feminism as it manifests in UK theatre and popular culture. In this project I grapple with ideas of difficulty. Difficulty here is a slippery term – always slightly out of reach, weaving in and out of view; crossing over and back on itself. It has something to do with the presentation, of working class women, our representation in the wider culture and its reception— but also the affects of such representations and receptions on working class culture and on working class women's being in the world, which is often also difficult. It's related to other difficult words – toxicity, endurance, leakiness, which might also work literally and metaphorically to encapsulate classed experiences of womanhood as well as their representations. For me what is always important, beyond the semantic and aesthetic connotations of a given term are the real-world consequences that it describes. In this case the real-world difficulties that difficulty as an aesthetic and representational strategy produces. As the sociologist Lisa McKenzie argues, 'Our lives in popular culture are portrayed as overtly sexual and overtly stupid, resulting in irresponsible reproduction. After all, we are blamed for every generation of moral panic around working-class youth because it is out of our bodies that the hoodies, yobs and rioters emerge' (2020: NP). These conditions create barriers to fulfilment, happiness and equity.

In the UK, white working-class women have often been figured as 'difficult'. This difficult reputation casts a long shadow, and is repeated in a variety of ways in

political discourse and in cultural representational forms such as news media, soap opera and film. The difficulty is usually includes representations that figure, to use Imogen Tyler's powerful term, white working-class women as lacking: in manners, civility, intelligence, tolerance and taste. This 'lack' can be seen in fictional examples, such as the popular soap opera *Eastenders*' character Bianca Jackson, famously depicted as mouthy and sexually promiscuous, costumed in a silver puffa jacket, shouting her catchphrase 'Rickaaay' across the square. But is also evident in 'real life' examples, such as the pop star Cheryl Cole – whose media figurings include her depiction as aggressive, racist and tasteless (more of which in my book). As Tyler argues, tracking figures (she uses the 'chav' as a example of a working class figure whose existence can be tracked across media forms) allows us to see how 'classed figures serve as shorthand for classed discourses which have real consequences in the social world' (Gidley and Rooke 2010 : 103). In this short paper I want to think briefly about the difficult woman as a working-class figuring.

Variouly portrayed across a variety of recognisable and overlapping types including bolshie, financially irresponsible, dishonest, sexually excessive, racist, criminally deviant, unfaithful and crass, the white working-class woman arrives in our imaginations, and therefore in the public domain, shrouded in a 'burden of representation' (Shohat and Stam 1994: 83). The burden of representation makes it difficult for working class women to evade our difficult reputations and has real consequences for working-class womens lives.

To give a recent example of the real-world consequences of difficult figurings, the sexual abuses against white working class teenage girls by grooming gangs in

Rotherham and elsewhere (the subject of the BBC mini-series *Three Girls*), went on for so long partly because the police dismissed the victims – still children — as difficult women. Sexually available, up for it, unwilling to conform to middle-class expectations of good behaviour and often suspicious of authority. These assumptions meant they were groomed in the open, and blamed for their own abuse. Such systemic profiling can be mapped back onto popular culture, illustrating how cultural forms operate not only to hold a mirror up to reality but also to produce it. This is compounded by the propensity for cultural forms that depict the working class to operate from a register of the ‘the real’ – realist forms that give way to slippages between representation and reality. In other words, representations of working class people are often presented and received as unquestionably ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ – with the real lives of working class creators used as a further means of authenticating their output.

The writer and performer Cash Carraway offers a compelling case study for reading and thinking through registers of difficulty and white working-class womanhood – her writing works deliberately with what I am calling working-class difficulty. That is, in her ostensibly autobiographical work, Carraway presents herself as a difficult woman, who refuses to conform to expected and often middle-class sanctioned ways of being and mothering (she makes money as a peep-show sex worker while heavily pregnant with her daughter) and uses her writing to challenge the prevailing political order — her circumstances (a young, impoverished single mother estranged from her family, fleeing domestic violence and with few close friends) are difficult. Much of the memoir deals with the dialectical ways in which this tension between difficult woman and difficult circumstances produces and sustains difficult conditions for

working class women more generally. The book opens with her finding out she is pregnant in the shit smeared toilet cubicle of a moving train, travelling to London where she has no secure accommodation in order to escape domestic violence from the child's father. Her decision to keep the baby in such difficult circumstances, and to strip at a Soho peep show while pregnant in order to afford a flat for herself and her daughter point to the difficulty she must navigate in order to have the family life others take for granted.

Compounding the difficulty of the work's content is the contested nature of truth in Carraway's writing and public persona. In an earlier work, *Refuge Woman: Live Poverty Porn* (2018), she describes herself as unable to recognise the difference between truth and lies. Many of her short stories have also deliberately straddled the blurred space between truth and fiction. In one example she describes the great gaping hole in her vagina left by childbirth, meaning tampons fall out, sex is impossible – she gives graphic and unsettling descriptions. Writing later about the work Carraway is scathing of perceptions that the writing might have been her authentic truth. She is a writer, she argues, she should be allowed to invent, embellish and fictionalise as much as middle class artists are. Why do working class women have to tell the gritty, grotty truth, she asks.

As a result, speculation over the authenticity of Carraway's memoir has characterised online analyses of the book. Complicating the situation further, Carraway was the victim of an online stalker, a middle class 'mummy blogger', famous in the online sphere — who has publicly spammed message boards such as mums net and tattle life with the claims that Carraway is not working class at all. Her

whole life is a lie, and demanded that her publishing contracts are rescinded. This campaign led to a national newspaper investigating Carraway for literary forgery. In response Carraway has defended the veracity of her memoir writing — but the word ‘memoir’ has been removed from the subtitle of the paperback (changed to *Notes from the Poverty Line*). Her play, *Refuge Woman*: as been retitled as *refuge*

***Woman: A- fucking- fictional- play & other poverty porn stories***

Meanwhile, she has announced development of a new play ‘Cash Carraway is a Liar’. Complicating the difficult situation further Carraway has appeared in national magazines and newspapers discussing her struggles with a multiple personality disorder that makes keeping track of the truth difficult.

Carraway’s work reveal difficulty as a generative conceptual site for thinking about the relationship between working-class experience and the wider cultural and political landscape, in which authenticity becomes a mechanism for legitimising working-class people. If we might understand how difficulty operates as an aesthetic strategy in Carrway’s work, then it is as a site of confrontation with the prevailing status quo of working class representation. A big fuck you to those who are uncomfortable in difficulty, who use our difficulty circumstances to understand, control and limit our potentials in the world. In doing so she creates some of the difficult feelings that Skeggs, Tyler, McKenzie Reay and other working-class women academics have pointed out characterise the experience of working-class womanhood.

Emphasising this feeling site at the end of her memoir, and pointing to her own strategy of resistance through difficulty, Carrway 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).

If popular culture paints white working class women via a burden of representation as already figured and therefore easy to understand, Carrway revels in the difficulty. Decipher this, she seems to say. You can't. It's too difficult.