

Slide One:

'Inferiority' Andrea Dworkin writes 'is not banal or incidental even when it happens to women. It is not a petty affliction like bad skin or circles under the eyes. It is not a superficial flaw in an otherwise perfect picture. It is not a minor irritation, nor is it a trivial inconvenience, an occasional aggravation, or a regrettable but (frankly) harmless lapse in manners. It is not a "point of view" that some people with soft skins find 'offensive'. It 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.'

This quotation opens her chapter *Dirt/Death* in the book *Intercourse*, where Dworkin explores the ways in which women are constituted as *dirty* 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.'

This 'dirty' construction of women, I want to propose in this paper, operates in UK society as a class as well as gender bound discourse. 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, and to suggest that their dirt is toxic: poisonous and contaminating — or as Bev Skeggs writes 'leaky' — liable to seep out and pollute others. As Virginia Wolfe notes in *Mrs Dalloway*, to accuse a woman of sexual looseness is immediately to lower her position in the social order — to suggest a woman is sexually loose is to imply her inferiority.

The image of the sexually promiscuous, working class woman is embodied in the term 'slag', which as I will trace emerges as a classed insult for women and girls in the culture as the working class at large become devalued and reviled during the late 20th Century. The slag operates as what Imogen Tyler calls a 'figurative form' through which 'representational struggles are often played out' Indeed, the figure of the 'slag' occurs again and again in contemporary British performance, particularly social realist dramas: (see for example *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* 1982, *Essex Girls* 1994, *Iphigenia in Splott* 2015). The slag is both a stock character, drawing on pervasive stereotypes of working class women and girls as loose and immoral to comment on the hopeless state of the modern social world, and a figure through which resistance to dominant modes of knowing working class culture is levelled. embraces media depictions of working class women to offer a searing critique of British journalism and its effects on the poorest sections of society.

In the remainder of this paper, I will explore the term slag, taking you through the evolution and early thoughts emerging from my latest research project *Slags on Stage*, which seeks to think about how the term slag operated as a keyword in late twentieth century British culture and the residual impact of the term in our constitution and understanding of the relationship between sex, class and sexuality.

This is very much the first outing for my initial ideas about this project, so I'll be interested in feedback and thoughts after the paper is done.

Slide Two:

The characters Rita and Sue, from Andrea Dunbar's 1982 play *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* and its 1987 screen adaptation epitomise some of the tropes of the promiscuous working class female 'slag', and the tensions that arise when female sexuality — particularly working class female sexuality is staged (or screened) outside of a normative morality in which unapologetic female sexuality is 'wrong'.

Rita, Sue and Bob Too centres on an affair between two teenage girls (Rita and Sue) and a married father (Bob). In the opening scene Bob has sex with the girls in the front seat of his car after driving them home from babysitting his children, while his wife, Michelle, waits at home. As the girls navigate their affair with Bob — each conducting a side-affair with him, alone, unbeknownst to the other — the audience are offered glimpses into their home-lives, characterized by arguments, violence and abusive language. At the end of scene six, after taking Rita and Sue into the countryside for a day, where he rails against the injustices of unemployment and instability visited on his life in the wake of the Thatcher government, Bob fails to get an erection as the trio attempt to have sex. It is difficult to view this moment as anything other than a ribald metaphor for the threat to traditional male roles posed by deindustrialization and the onset of rampant neoliberalism. Despite this, however, the play is notably apolitical in its depiction of poverty and offers no coherent moral stance on the facts of the underage sex, child grooming or extramarital affair it depicts. As Adelle Stripe has noted, Dunbar's work is characterized by an 'uneasy and contradictory' (2016: 6) version of estate life, with the humour, wit and self-possession of the characters sitting against a backdrop of abject poverty and decline that critics have found difficult to reconcile. A review of the 2017 revival noted that the play's lack of 'judgement' over the actions and lifestyles of its characters makes the world depicted in the play 'all the more appalling' (Love 2017). In interviews, Dunbar argued that she was presenting her own experience of the world.

'This is life', Andrea Dunbar told the Yorkshire Post in 1987 defending the film version of her play *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*. 'The facts are there.'

Dunbar was adamant about telling the truth in her work, insisting 'you write what's

said, you don't lie.'

In these circumstances Hillary Mantel's characterization of Rita and Sue as '...a hopeless pair of greasy-faced witches, with no virtue in their shrieking camaraderie.' (Mantel 1987) — becomes an attack on Dunbar and the life she is depicting, as much as an expression of dissatisfaction with the film itself.

But if the play and film indicate anything about the 'truth' of working class female sexual desire and practices, what they reveal is difficulty in coming to terms with one's own sexuality in the wake of ubiquitous cultural discourse in which you are constituted as a sexual and sexualised figure, often before you have had sexual impulses.

Slide Three:

The choice of the word 'slag' as the terminological site around which to focus this study is intensely personal, emerging from my own experiences growing up in a working class environment in the 1990s and later, where I was regularly interpellated as a slag in direct and indirect ways. Three incidents surface in my mind when I think about the way the idea of the slag has shaped my relationship with my own sexuality.

The first, 1995. I'm eleven years old and it's my first term in secondary school at Plumstead Manor, a comprehensive girls' school in the inner London Borough of Greenwich, located in Plumstead, a working class district that borders Kent. At some point after I start the school I hear the phrase 'Slaggy Manor', used to describe it – interchangeable with Plumstead Pram Pushers, the phrase is a shorthand used to describe the student body and the local expectations of us: we are inherently sexual in a disgusting and leaky way, available and almost certainly destined to be teenage mothers in a period during which teenage mothers, particularly working class teenage mothers are demonised. As Imogen Tyler has pointed out, the late 20th and early 21st Century marked a period where 'the fetishisation of the chav mum within popular culture' emerged with a 'contemporary specificity' that 'marked' a new outpouring of sexist class disgust. For the entirety of my school life boys from the local boys schools (both a couple of miles away in nearby Woolwich) circle the school at lunch times, break times and at the end of the day, where they wait outside, sometime calling out sexist insults like 'slag'. Sometimes trying their luck in the hope those rumours about our reputations are true.

The second 1998. I'm 14. I'm visiting a local pub, that has an upstairs nightclub, with a few friends. The bouncer on the door asks how old we are. 'I've seen you in your school uniforms,' he says. Then, as we turn to leave he points at my friend. 'I'll tell you what. You can come in as long as that one gives me a blow job.'

The final incident happens much later. 2011 and I'm in my late 20s, at a party, drunk and kissing a guy I've been flirting with for a few months. At some point in the evening, after we've been kissing for a while and the party is winding down, the guy I'm with excuses himself to go to the bathroom. A friend of his, a man I vaguely recognise as having gone to school with an old boyfriend of mine comes

over and leans close to me. 'You slag' he whispers.

Slide Four:

So the two starting points for my project have been firstly, starting to map the etymology of the word 'Slag' — using dictionaries, websites and other sources. What emerges as particularly interesting here is the way that slag begins to emerge as a term applied to women, right at the point where the deindustrialisation of working class Britain and the rise of neoliberalism are refashioning the British working class as abject, dirty, a wholly draining and polluting influence on society.

Jane Mills cites 1983, the year before the miner's strike as the point at which the term slag becomes a particularly widespread term used to refer to a woman or girl's sexual reputation. What's again interesting here — and I need to look into this with more detail, but what is initially interesting to me is that slag as a byproduct of industrial processes such as smelting, can have value — but in mining terms slag is waste product, most iconically in the 'slag heap': the useless pile of waste left over after the mining process (which is actually not made up of slag), but of 'spoil' (maybe there's something useful to think about here in the relationship between slag and spoiled woman too).

Slide five:

The second strand of the project has been to conduct an initial online survey. So one of the things I've wanted to do is to leverage what I'm thinking of as a 'conversational' methodology, where I find all kinds of ways to access how this idea of 'the slag' circulates in the culture. The initial survey was conducted online and asked for responses from people who have been called a slag. What I wanted to find out here was how the term is experienced by those who it is used upon, and something about the different ways in which it is used and applied. I was also interested in the ways that slag is experienced as a gendered and classed insult....READ RESULTS SLIDES.

Slide POP CULTURE:

The classed aspect of the idea of the slag is particularly present in the cultural examples that are given in the slides....class discourse often operates as what Bev Skeggs calls 'euphemism' — and here we can see numerous working class fictional characters emerging as the archetypal slags my survey respondents associate with the term...as well as television shows and celebrities who might be associated with low culture.

I've also been thinking about the feeling registers which the word slag evokes. W

Final Slides;

So I don't really have much time left but the final thing I have been doing in the initial stages of this project is engaging with 'slags' on stage. So that's both finding examples of representations that work in quite an uncritical way with the

trope of the promiscuous working class woman, as well as with performers and performances that trouble the term. So a couple of these I'll just mention briefly are Kelly Green's SLAG – a project in which this self defined working class woman explores the ways she has been sexualised, and what this has meant for her coming to terms with her identity. So I've shadowed rehearsals with Kelly Green, as well as watching the first scratch of that show. I've also been exploring Cash Carrayway's play refuge woman, which is a show about her time in a refuge that plays with the 'autobiographical' by troubling what is real and what is fictional in her telling. One of the most powerful things about this show was that she confronted the 'chav mum' stereotype by having her daughter present in the theatre – selling merchandise and sitting in the front row of the performance.

So that's the shape and some of the ideas bubbling up in my project at the moment and I'll be happy to talk a bit more about this in questions, or over coffee later...Thank you.