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Abstract

In the last three years a new vocabulary of social class has emerged in Britain. The word "chav", alongside its various synonyms and regional variations, has become a ubiquitous term of abuse for white working class subjects. This article explores the emergence of the grotesque and comic figure of the chav within a range of contemporary British media: primarily television comedy, Internet fora and newspapers, focusing on the role played by disgust reactions in the generation and circulation of the chav figure through popular media. Concentrating on the figure of the female chav, and the vilification of young white working class mothers, I argue that the "chav mum" is produced through disgust reactions as an intensely affective figure that embodies historically familiar and contemporary anxieties about female sexuality, reproduction and fertility and "racial mixing".

"Chav Mum Chav Scum": class disgust in contemporary Britain

> The reason Vicky Pollard caught the public imagination is that she embodies with such fearful accuracy several of the great scourges of contemporary Britain: aggressive all-female gangs of embittered, hormonal, drunken teenagers; gym slip mums who choose to get pregnant as a career option; pasty-faced, lard-gutted slappers who'll drop their knickers in the blink of an eye […] these people do exist and are every bit as ripe and just a target for social satire as were, say, the raddled working-class drunks sent up by Hogarth in Gin Lane (James Delingpole, The Times, April 13, 2006: 25).

> Disgust and contempt motivate and sustain the low ranking of things, people, and actions deemed disgusting and contemptible (William Miller, 1997, xiv).

In the last three years a new vocabulary of social class has emerged in Britain. The word "chav", alongside its various synonyms and regional variations, has become a ubiquitous term of abuse for white working class subjects. This article explores the emergence of the grotesque and comic figure of the chav within a range of contemporary British media: primarily television comedy, Internet fora and newspapers. Engaging with the work of sociologists Beverly Skeggs (2004, 2005) and Stephanie Lawler (2005) and recent feminist theoretical writing on emotions by Sara Ahmed (2004) and Sianne Ngai (2005), I consider how social class is emotionally mediated. I focus on the role played by disgust reactions in the generation and circulation of the chav figure through popular media concentrating on the figure of the female chav, and the vilification of young white working class mothers. I argue that the chav mum is produced through disgust reactions as an intensely affective figure that embodies historically familiar and contemporary anxieties about female sexuality, reproduction and fertility and "racial mixing". The article begins with a short account of the figurative methodology I employ in my analysis of the chav figure, before considering class disgust and some specific instances of the chav figure within Internet fora, news media and television comedy. In the conclusion, I

will argue that the level of disgust directed at the chav is suggestive of a heightened class antagonism that marks a new episode in the dirty ontology of class struggle in Britain.

Figurative methodology

Social classifications are complex political formations that are generated and characterized by representational struggles. Indeed, all processes of social classification - including gender, race and sexuality - are mediated. It is my contention that these representational struggles are often played out within highly condensed figurative forms. In this article I use the term "figure" to describe the ways in which at different historical and cultural moments, specific bodies become over determined and are publicly imagined and represented (are figured) in excessive, distorted and/or caricatured ways that are expressive of an underlying crisis or anxiety. These figures - and we could think contemporaneously here of the figure of the immigrant, the terrorist and the pedophile as parallel examples - are then mobilized in ways that enable the individual and group identities they are explicitly or implicitly differentiated from. I want to develop a methodological approach to media analysis that centers on tracking the repetition of specific figures within and across different media. This figurative approach, adapted primarily from Ahmed's account of stranger fetishism (2000) and the work of feminist science studies scholar Claudia Castañeda (2002) links the etymological (a focus on meaning) with the ontological (ways of being in the world). As Castañeda writes:

> A figure, from this point of view, is the simultaneously material and semiotic effect of specific practices. Understood as figures […] particular categories of existence can also be considered in terms of their uses—what they "body forth" in turn. Figuration is thus understood here to incorporate a double force: constitutive effect and generative circulation (2002: 3).

This approach refuses any binary distinction between the material and the semiotic, signs and signifying practices are understood as having material effects -shaping the appearance of, and our experience of, others. As Castañeda notes, this concept of figuration "makes it possible to describe in detail the process by which a concept or entity

is given particular form - how it is figured - in ways that speak to the making of worlds" (2002: 3). When applied within a media studies context, this suggests that we should understand media forms not only as representational (in a more structuralist sense), but as constitutive and generative. A figurative methodology makes it possible to describe - zoom in on - appearances of a figure within specific media and contexts, whilst also insisting that it is only though the repetition of figures across different media that specific figures acquire accreted form and accrue affective value in ways that have significant social power and impact. Tracking specific cultural figures across different media sites, makes it possible to consider how different media forms and practices work together to produce social, cultural and political effects and affects. I began to develop this figurative approach to media analysis in previous work on the production and circulation of the figure of the asylum seeker within news media, humanitarian literature and theoretical texts (see xxxxx, 2006). I will further develop this figurative methodology here through a focus on the emotional and affective value of the chav figure, in order to analyze the ways in which class identities are mediated and made. I am interested in the ways in which negative affects become harnessed to the figure of the chav, and subsequently how the affective and emotional qualities attributed to this figure slide into corporeal qualities, so the figure of the chav becomes animated and takes on the appearance of having a life of its own (see Ahmed 2000: 5 and Ngai, 2002: 573).

Class Disgust

In The Anatomy of Disgust, William Miller argues that:

> Emotions are feelings linked to ways of talking about these feelings […] Emotions, even the most visceral, are richly social, cultural, and linguistic phenomena. […] Emotions are feelings connected to ideas, perceptions and cognitions and to the social and cultural contexts in which it makes sense to have these feelings and ideas. […] They give our world its peculiarly animated quality; they make it a source of fear, joy, outrage, disgust, and delight (1997: 8).

For Miller, emotions are feelings mediated, affects animated. The term animation is particularly provoking here - to animate something is to breathe life into an inanimate figure so that it takes on a figurative life of its own (see Ahmed, 2000:5). The idea that emotions are animating is, I think, a useful way of analyzing how figures are brought to life and endowed with affect through mediation (see Ngai: 2002). This is particularly revealing in the case of social class, for social class is often represented through caricatured figures—the toff, the yuppie, the flat-capped working man, the gypsy, the chav—figures that are often communicated in highly emotive ways. One of the ways in which social class is emotionally mediated is through repeated expressions of disgust for those deemed to be of a lower social class. I will suggest that in the case of the chav figure, disgust works to 'sustain the low ranking of things, people, and actions deemed disgusting and contemptible" (Miller, 1997 xiv).

An everyday definition of disgust would be: an emotion experienced and expressed as a sickening feeling of revulsion, loathing, or nausea. The physicality of disgust reactions means that the communication of disgust draws heavily on metaphors of sensation. As Miller notes, disgust "needs images of bad taste, foul smells, creepy touchings, ugly sights, bodily secretions and excretions to articulate the judgments it asserts" (1997: 218). Disgust is always "a response to something" (Miller, 1997: 8), we do not "feel disgusted in the abstract" (Ahmed, 2004: 85) and our disgust reactions are often revealing of wider social power relations. As Ahmed notes:

> When thinking about how bodies become objects of disgust, we can see that disgust is crucial to power relations. […] disgust at "that which is below" functions to maintain the power relations between above and below, <u>through which "aboveness" and "belowness" become properties of particular bodies, objects and spaces</u> (2004: 89).

Ahmed's account of the connections between disgust and power relations echoes Skeggs' influential account of "class making". As Skeggs suggests, class, both as concept and process of classification and social positioning, is not pre-given but is always in

production and is continually re-figured (2005: 3). Both Lawler and Skeggs have analyzed the role of middle-class disgust (for the working-classes) in the formation of social class in Britain. However their accounts of class disgust are unusual, for whilst disgust has often been central to <u>descriptive</u> depictions of social class in Britain, less attention has been paid to the role of emotions in the <u>formation</u> of class identities (see Lawler 2005). There has been a considerable amount of scholarship, influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, on taste and class, but emotions have been marginalized within class research. Whilst there is now a growing call for work on social class to take the role of emotions in the formation of class more seriously, the relative absence of research on class disgust is interesting because social class has become something of a disgusting subject (see Lawler 2005, Adkins and Skeggs 2005 and Sayer 2002).

Social class virtually disappeared as a central site of analysis within cultural and media studies in the late 1980s, a disappearance that was mirrored by a similar retreat from class within wider social and political discourse (Skeggs, 2005: 45). This is not to say that class distinctions, however we measure them, have been eroded or are in decline. On the contrary, class disappeared as a central site of analysis at precisely the same time as "economic polarization" reached "unparalleled depths" in Britain (Skeggs 2005: 45). As Skeggs suggests, we need to understand that the disappearance of class as an analytic category occurs alongside the rise of political and academic rhetoric of inclusion, classlessness[1] and social mobility. Terms such as "social exclusion" and "the underclass" have been cynically promoted and utilized by successive British Governments and policy makers, and have rapidly taken the place of terms such as "working class" (Skeggs, 2005: 47). Class is displaced and effaced within these discourses in ways that have enabled an "abdication from acknowledging class relations" (Skeggs, 2005: 54). As the acknowledgement of class inequalities has been suppressed within contemporary Britain, class identities have been increasingly repudiated. The obscuring of class differences has made academic research on class seem "out of place" and archaic. In particular, as the term "working class" has been incrementally emptied of meaning, teaching and research into issues of class inequality is now often seen as "paranoid" and felt to be embarrassing

and shameful (see Sayer, 2002). In the last two decades academics from working class backgrounds and, perhaps most perversely, those who work within disciplines <u>that were founded upon research on class</u>, such as media and cultural studies and sociology, experience their own class origins as a "dirty secret".

If social class "directly articulated" and as "the object of analysis, has largely disappeared" (Skeggs, 2005: 46) from the academy and from wider social and political discourses, portrayals of class differences have nevertheless persisted within popular media. According to Skeggs and Wood (2004), popular representations of the working class have also been recoded or "re-routed" in ways that avoid explicit reference to social class. Lawler notes that, "What has changed in recent years is less the sentiments than the explicit naming of class as such" (2005: 437). Whilst I agree that explicit naming of social class was to some extent repressed from the 1980s onwards, I want to argue that this situation has shifted. In particular, the emergence of the figure of the chav has made class differences and antagonisms <u>explicitly</u> visible in contemporary Britain. Indeed, the apparent level of disgust provoked by the (imaginary/imagined) figure of the chav is suggestive not only of a return of social class but a deeper shift in the meaning of and making of class norms.

<u>The figure of Chav</u>
Chav, and its various synonyms and regional variations (including Pikey, Townie, Charver, Chavette, Chavster, Dumbo, Gazza, Hatchy, Hood Rat, Kev, Knacker, Ned[i], Ratboy, Scally, Scumbag, Shazza, Skanger), have become ubiquitous terms of abuse within contemporary British culture. Since 2003 we have seen the emergence of an entire slang vocabulary around chav, which includes terms such chavellers cheques (giro and benefit payments), chavtastic, chaving a laugh (laughter at chavs), chavbaiting, chavalanche (large group of chavs), chavalier (chav car), chavspeak, chavspotting. Acronyms, such as "Council Housed And Violent", "Council Housed And Vile", "Council House Associated Vermin" and folk etymologies have sprung up to explain the term. More scholarly sources suggest that the term chav might derive from a distortion of a Romany word for a child, (chavo or chavi), or that the term may have originated in the

Medway town of Chatham. Some argue that chav is an historical East End of London term for child, while others suggests it emerges from the term charver, long used in the North East of England to describe the disenfranchised white poor (see Anoop Nayak 2003). As criminologists Keith Haywood and Majid Yar argue, all these etymological accounts suggest that the term chav "has always been connected with communities who have experienced social deprivation in one form or another" (2006: 16). In current parlance, the term chav is aligned "with stereotypical notions of lower-class" and is, above all, "a term of intense class-based abhorrence" (Haywood and Yar, 2006: 16).

News media fascination with the chav

One of the prime means through which the chav figure has been constituted and reproduced are the news media. Writing in The Edinburgh Evening News in 2004, the year in which disgust and fascination with chavs peaked in the British press, journalist Gina Davidson pronounces:

> And we will know them by their dress . . . and trail of fag ends, sparkling white trainers, baggy tracksuit trousers, branded sports top, gold-hooped earrings, 'sovvy" rings and the ubiquitous Burberry baseball cap. Throw them together, along with a pack of Regal, and you have the uniform of what is being described as the UK's new underclass - the chav. Call them what you will, identifying them is easy. They are the sullen youths in hooded tops and spanking-new trainers who loiter listlessly on street corners and shopping malls, displaying an apparent lack of education and an all too obvious taste for fighting; the slack-jawed girls with enough gold or gold-plated jewellery to put H Samuel out of business. They are the dole-scroungers, petty criminals, football hooligans and teenage pram-pushers (Davidson, 2004: 14).

Davidson's invocation of "dole-scroungers, petty criminals, football hooligans and teenage pram-pushers" illustrates how the chav figure comes to embody in a condensed form a series of older stereotypes of the white working classes. In particular, the use of phrases such as "petty criminal" and "dole-scroungers", conjures up debates from the

1980s and 90s about the rise of a socially excluded "underclass". However, one of the things that distinguishes the figure of the chav from previous accounts of the underclass within these journalistic accounts is the emphasis on the excessive consumption of consumer and branded goods. Indeed, within news media accounts of the chav, this figure is primarily identified by means of his or her "bad", "vulgar" and excessive consumer choices - cheap brands of cigarettes, cheap jewellery, branded sports tops, gold-hooped earrings, sovereign-rings, Burberry baseball caps. Hayward and Yar argue that "the 'chav' phenomenon recapitulates the discursive creation of the underclass, while simultaneously reconfiguring it within the space of commodity consumption" (16). Certainly, it is arguable that changes in the configuration of social class in Britain and shifts in traditional markers of social class (such as accent or education) have made it more difficult to ascertain class difference. In the context of shifting class definitions, the vilification of the chav is a symptom of a middle-class desire to demarcate class boundaries within the context of contemporary consumer culture. However, the attempt to demarcate class difference through practices of consumption is not a new phenomenon. Moreover, it is important to note that depictions of the white working class have always pivoted on appearance and, in particular, on a perceived excess of (bodily) materiality. Indeed, newspaper accounts of chavs vividly recall Victorian and Edwardian accounts of the dangerous, immoral, and libidinal lower classes. As Haywood and Yar note:

> just as was the case in the 19th century, when terms such as "moral wretch", "degenerate poor", "depraved nomad", and 'savage outcast" all ultimately came to be incorporated under the umbrella term "dangerous class", the word "chav" is increasingly acting as a ubiquitous structural category – a soft semantic target for those keen to rebadge the underprivileged and socially excluded among us as a new form of feckless underclass (2006: 17).

Within news media accounts of chavs, older iconographies of the excess and horror of the lower classes are reanimated within a rush of descriptions of sullen, hooded, loitering, unemployed, pram-pushing, intoxicated youths. Through the figure of chav a new,

publicly sanctioned wave of middle-class contempt for the lower classes is bodied forth. Consider for instance, the following extract from a <u>Sunday Telegraph</u> article titled "In Defence of Snobbery" (2004).

> It's official: the classless society is finished. After decades in remission, the most infamous of British vices - snobbery - is making a comeback. […] They are the non-respectable working classes: the dole-scroungers, petty criminals, football hooligans and teenage pram-pushers. They are also the kind of people one would not dare mock face-to-face […] Snobbery didn't disappear after the 1960s: it just changed direction. The people whom society once revered - toffs, intellectuals, the respectable middle-classes - suddenly found themselves the objects of derision, while working-class culture was venerated above all else.
>
> Both varieties of snobbery - traditional or inverted - have their perils, but on balance, I prefer the former. This is partly because I am middle class and would prefer not to be mocked for it. But it is also because traditional snobbery at least aspires towards some worthy goals: education, ambition, courtesy. The problem with inverted snobbery is that it tends to celebrate the wrong kind of working-class culture: the non-working kind, in fact. It coos and swoons over street culture, with its edginess and lawlessness.
>
> Chavs are often poor, but they are not weak: on the contrary, they are in the cultural ascendant. They are tough enough to take a little ribbing. And for the rest of us - too frightened to take them on in person - there is a delicious release to be had from laughing at them (Lewis, 2004: 23).

Journalist Jemima Lewis here explicitly positions herself as middle class, and identifies the chav as "the non-respectable working classes". Contrary to claims that "directly articulated" class distinctions have disappeared, this overt class-naming demonstrates that the emergence of the figure of the chav marks a resurgence of the explicit naming of social class within British media. Lewis' article is indicative of the many thousands of descriptions of chav's published within British newspapers since 2003, accounts in which

class differences are not seen as irrelevant, shameful or outmoded but are openly and aggressively explored through virulent unapologetic stereotyping. (Note that Davidson clearly borrowed from Lewis, reproducing the phrase, "dole-scroungers, petty criminals, football hooligans and teenage pram-pushers". This is suggestive of the ways in which a particular kind of "cut and paste" approach encourages a repetition that intensives the focus on fetishised social figures).

Broadsheet newspaper articles on chavs tend to fall into two groups: articles by journalists such as Julie Burchill that are highly critical of the new vilification of the working classes and articles by journalists such as Lewis that overtly celebrate the "new snobbery" and offer vivid descriptions of the "delicious release" and pleasures afforded by class disgust. From 2003 onwards, these two opposing broadsheet positions on chavs have been played out in an ever growing series of articles which-- through responses and counter-responses--- contest the meaning of the figure of the chav. In a 2006 The Times article titled, "A conspiracy against chavs? Count me in" James Delingpole mocks the "hand-wringing prose" of "humourless, Polly Toynbee-style Lefties" who defend chavs. Delingpole describes chavs as "disgusting, selfish, violent underclass specimen[s]" and articulates his class disgust in terms of "a socially necessary" snobbery. As he writes:

> As a member of probably the most discriminated-against subsection in the whole of British society - the white, middle-aged, public-school-and-Oxbridge educated middle-class male - I see no reason why […] the Vicky Pollards and the Waynes and Waynettas of our world have got it coming to them. If they weren't quite so repellent, we wouldn't need to make jokes about them, would we? The function of satire is not only to make us laugh, but also, with luck, to draw our attention to the things that are wrong with the world and help mock them into extinction (2006:25).

In a perverse appropriation of identity politics, Delingpole and Lewis claim middleclass identity as a site of injury and oppression (subject to fear and terrorizing by violent

chavs), and actively defend (and reproduce) middle class entitlement[2]. As Lewis notes "traditional snobbery […] aspires towards some worthy goals: education, ambition, courtesy". These accounts use humour to authorize their enjoyment of class disgust: for Delingpole, the function of class disgust is to "mock them into extermination". Economic inequality, class-based discrimination and open snobbery is made socially acceptable through claims that this vicious name calling has a `satirical` function.

Winfried Menninghaus argues that laughing at something is "an act of expulsion" that closely resembles the rejecting movement of disgust reactions. Disgust and laughter are, he notes "complementary ways of admitting an alterity" (2003: 11). Like disgust, laughter is community-forming, it is often contagious and it generates proximity. Laughter is always shared with a real or imagined community. Laughter is often at the expense of an other, and when we laugh we effectively "fix" the other, as the object of comedy. Laughter moves us both literally and figuratively — we are averted, moved away from the thing, the object or figure, we laugh at. In the case of laughter at those of a lower class, laughter is boundary-forming. It creates a distance between "them" and "us", asserting moral judgments and a superior class position. As Miller notes, "Laughing habits turn out to be one of the crucial clues we use to get a fix on a person's moral and social competence", revealing an individual's "social place" and their aspirations, where they would like to be placed (1997: 83). Laughing at chavs is a way of managing and authorizing class disgust, contempt, and anxiety. These negative newspaper accounts of chavs employ a "combination of parody and serious intent" (Billig, 2001: 277) to produce a disgust which is not simply reactive but is constitutive of social class. The expression of class disgust within newspaper articles on chavs is deliberate and self-conscious, it is a feigned disgust performed both for our entertainment and as a means of asserting middle class identity claims. In the online vocabulary of chav-hate, we can further discern the ways in which class disgust is performed in ways that are community-forming.

Chav online

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[2] These account of middle class injury recall Wendy Brown's claim that access to political power is increasingly defined by an ability to define yourself as injured (1995).

The web site, urban dictionary is an online slang dictionary that functions as an unofficial online authority on English language slang. Urban dictionary was created and is owned by a former computer science student Aaron Peckham, who launched the site in 1999 to compare slang used by students in California. Urban dictionary is modeled on an internet forum in which (unregistered) users post definitions of new or existing slang terms, which are then reviewed by volunteer editors before being published[3]. Visitors to the site vote on definitions (which can include images and sounds) by clicking a thumb-up or thumb-down icon and these postings are then ranked according to the votes they have accrued. The tag line of urban dictionary is "Define your World". The website currently hosts 300 000 definitions of slang terms and is ranked as one of the 2000 highest web traffic sites in the world. The site profile states that 65% of the users are under 25. There were 368 definitions of the term chav posted on the site at the time of writing this article, and I have listed below a small number of indicative phrases taken from some of the most highly ranked posts.

chavs …. the cancer of the United Kingdom

They live in estates, feeding off our taxes through benefits, which they spend on countless rings, thick gold chains, cigarettes and alcohol.

Chav: a type of person who lacks the intelligence to be able to speak or write proper english, uses words, if they are proper words such as "blingin", "mingin" etc

Favourite jobs of chavs: drug dealer, McDonalds worker, prostitute, page 3 "model".

disgusting, dirty, loud, ugly, stupid arseholes that threaten, fight, cause trouble,

impregnate 14 year olds, ask for money, ask for fags, ….steal your phones, wear crap sports wear, drink cheap cider and generally spread their hate.

all chavs are scum

A social underclass par excellence. The absolute dregs of modern civilization, each one a near clone in IQ (the lowest possible whilst still exhibiting brain stem function), attitude, diet, dress sense, uselessness, abusiveness and complete lack of any sense of decorum.

The only good chav is dead one. The only thing better than that is a mass grave full of dead chavs and a 24 hour work crew making way for more...

As Ahmed notes, "to name something as disgusting is performative" in that "it generates the object that it names" (2005: 93). We can see how disgust is both performative and performed in the internet forum urban dictionary. This disgust speech generates a set of effects, which adhere to, produce, and embellish the disgusting figure of the chav: chavs are white, live on council estates, eat junk food, steal your phones, wear crap sports wear, drink cheap cider, they are the absolute dregs of modern civilization; a social underclass par excellence, chavs are disgusting. The dictionary format is significant here because - like the accompanying veneer of irony - it grants a strange authority to the dehumanising bigotry of the posts. Urban dictionary illustrates how class disgust is not simply felt but actively generated through repetition. Through the repetition of this disgusted response, the negative properties attributed to chavs make this figure materialize as representative of a group that embodies those disgusting qualities, a group that is "lower than human or civil life" (Ahmed, 2005: 97). As users add to and build a comprehensive definition of "the chav" within the urban dictionary site, they interact with one another and a conversational environment emerges. The voting system works on this site as a form of peer authorization that encourages users to invoke more and more intense and affective disgust reactions. As Ngai suggests, disgust involves an expectation of concurrence, and disgust reactions seek "to include or draw others into its exclusion of its object, enabling

a strange kind of sociability" (2005: 336). This sociability has a particular specificity within online communities in which anonymity gives community members license to express their disgust in extreme and virulent ways. The interactivity of these internet fora, and the real and illusory immediacy they transmit, makes online fora intensely affective communal spaces/places within which disgust reactions can be rapidly shared and accrued.

Computer linguist Scott Golder notes that "More and more, web users are moving from simply consuming content on the web to creating it [….] in the form of discussion boards, weblogs, wikis, and other collaborative and conversational media" (2003:2). Golder argues that as the web becomes more "writable", through for example the development and dissemination of shared annotation software, web users become increasingly "empowered" by the ability "to engage more deeply with web content by actively participating in its production" (2003:2). Within new media spaces such as urban dictionary, we are not only viewers but active users who can enter and affect representational spaces and places. In the case of chavs, visitors to the site can not only read about them, but have the power to produce the chav as a knowable figure. The chav thread on urban dictionary and similar chav-hate fora work to materially constitute the exaggerated corporeality of the chav figure. These are sites in which class disgust is actively generated---class live. With each new post, there is an accruement of disgust. Each post breathes life into the squalid and thrillingly affective imaginary body of chav. Class-making within these fora can be understood as a process of corporealization as the chav figure becomes animated in an increasingly condensed and material form.

Dirty Whites

Class disgust is intimately tied to issues of racial difference and chav-disgust is racializing: "[chavs] are almost always white", "the chavettes have … a large 3 seater second hand pushchair, with 3 different coloured children in it". These figures constitute an unclean "sullied urban "underclass", "forever placed at the borders of whiteness as the socially excluded, the economically redundant" (Nayak, 2003: 82, 102-3). Whilst the term chav is a term of abuse directed almost exclusively towards the white poor, chavs

are not invisible normative whites, but rather hypervisible "filthy whites". In a way that bears striking similarities to US white trash figure, and the Australian figure of the Bogan, the chav foregrounds a dirty whiteness – a whiteness contaminated with poverty. This borderline whiteness is evidenced through claims that chavs appropriate black American popular culture through their clothing, music, and forms of speech, and have geographical, familial and sexual intimacy with working-class blacks and Asians. This intimacy is represented by the areas in which chavs allegedly live and their illegitimate mixed-race children as well as, more complexly, by their filthy white racism. Metaphors of disease, invasion and excessive breeding that are often invoked in white racist responses to immigrants and ethnic minorities are mobilized by the white middle-class in order to differentiate their "respectable whiteness" from the whiteness of the lower class chavs (see Nayak 2003: 84). The process of making lower class white identity filthy is an attempt to differentiate between respectable and non-respectable forms of whiteness (and an attempt to abject the white poor from spheres of white privilege). However, the figurative function of the chav as a marker of class difference, is made most explicit through the excessive reproductive body of the chavette.

Chav Mum

There is a repeated emphasis within news media and internet fora on the sluttish behaviour and multiple pregnancies of the female chav. Many of the urban dictionary posts obsessively focus on the spectacle of her excessive reproductive body.

> Human equivalent of vermin. …..Most reproduce by the age of 14, sometimes younger.

> [chavs] are almost always white, and very skinny, where the chavettes are usually overweight, with large stretchmarks on their stomachs from excessive baby having. a chavette will have one baby every year from the age of 13,

> the chavettes have … a large 3 seater second hand pushchair, with 3 different coloured children in, all at different stages in the chav development, with caps already fitted and ears pierced.

The gossip website popbitch famously determined celebrity chav mothers as "pramface". Now a popular term of abuse, urban dictionary defines pramface as, "a woman who looks so young she ought to be pushing a pram around a council estate in the shittiest part of town". Pramface, with her hoop earrings, sports clothes, pony tail (or Croydon facelift) and gaggle of children, is the quintessential sexually excessive, single mother: an immoral, filthy, ignorant, vulgar, tasteless, working-class whore. Whilst young unwed working class mothers have always been a target of social stigma, hatred and anxiety, the fetishization of the chav mum within popular culture has a contemporary specificity and marks a new outpouring of class disgust which is worthy of critical attention. The figure of chav mum circulates within a wide range of media, celebrity media, reality television, comedy programming on British television, consumer culture, print media, literature, news media, films, and "chav hate" websites. I want to consider two instances of the chav mum figure: Vicky Pollard, the fictional comedic television character from the phenomenally successful BBC comedy series Little Britain (2003-2006) and the appearance of the chav mum within the internet forum "chavscum".

The creation of Matt Lucas and David Walliams, and writer Andy Riley, the television show Little Britain grew out of an award-winning BBC Radio 4 series. The programme has had three series -21 episodes - to date and has been a huge commercial success for the BBC. In 2004, 1.3m DVD copies of series 1 were sold, making it the best-selling DVD title in Britain that year. Although clearly directed at adult audiences, research conducted by Radio Times magazine showed Little Britain is second only to The Simpsons in a poll of British children's favorite comedies. Little Britain has been nominated for and has won a series of awards, including two BAFTA Awards in 2005 for Best Comedy Performance and Best Comedy Programme. It has garnered a worldwide audience and is currently aired in most of continental Europe, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Scandinavia, India, Pakistan, Malaysia and Singapore. The format of

Little Britain is a compilation of character-led short sketches. These sketches are linked by a voice-over (spoken by the actor Tom Baker) which details absurd "facts" about Britain. The sketches are set in a series of real and fictional locations in Britain including the Scottish highlands, Wales, the English countryside and inner city council estates. The Vicky Pollard sketches are set in the fictional town of Darkley Noone and her character is played by Lucas, an upper middle-class comedy actor in his mid-thirties (who was educated at the exclusive Haberdasher's Aske's Boys' School in London and Bristol University). Pollard is an over-weight moody teenage girl who is usually dressed in a pink Kappa™ tracksuit, wearing make-up and with some of her long, bleached blonde hair pulled back into a 'scrunchy" that perches on top of her head. She speaks in an incomprehensibly fast regional (midlands) accent. The sketches are often set in public institutions, such as schools, municipal swimming pools, Young Offenders Institutions, court rooms, and involve her producing nonsensical responses to the questions she is asked by various authority figures, such as teachers, policemen, doctors and social workers. In this extract from series one, episode six, Vicky is at the Doctor's surgery, where she is told she is pregnant.

> Doctor: OK Vicky, you can put your clothes back on. Well, after having a good look at you it's pretty obvious to me what the diagnosis is.

> Vicky: I got the lurgy. Yeah I know because there was this whole fing "cause I was down the arcade and Kelly flobbed on Destiny and a bit of it landed in my hair because Kelly hates Destiny because Destiny told Warren that Kelly pads her bra. It's true - Nathan reckons he put his hand down there and pulled out a bag of Jelly Tots.

The following episode features a now infamous sketch between Vicky and a Social Worker in which Vicky admits she has exchanged her baby for a Westlife CD. By episode three, series 3, it is revealed that Vicky has had "at least 13 children". This publicity still (figure 1.) depicts Vicky posing with a multiple pushchair with mixed race children and a council estate backdrop. [insert figure 1 publicity still]. Vicky Pollard incoherent, "loud, white, excessive, drunk, fat, vulgar, disgusting", embodies all the

moral obsessions historically associated with the working class" in one iconic comic body (Skeggs, 2006: 965)

The term "Vicky Pollard" has taken on an extraordinary resonance, populating newspaper and internet forum accounts of chavs, teenage mothers, childhood obesity. "Vicky Pollard" is increasingly used as a short hand within "serious" debates about the decline of social and educational standards.[4] According to Delingpole in The Times:

> The reason Vicky Pollard caught the public imagination is that she embodies with such fearful accuracy several of the great scourges of contemporary Britain: aggressive all-female gangs of embittered, hormonal, drunken teenagers; gym slip mums who choose to get pregnant as a career option; pasty-faced, lard-gutted slappers who"ll drop their knickers in the blink of an eye […] these people do exist and are every bit as ripe and just a target for social satire as were, say, the raddled working-class drunks sent up by Hogarth in Gin Lane (2006: 25).

Delingpole's extraordinary condemnation of young working class teenage mothers is here authorized by the figure Vicky Pollard. The popularity of this fictional character is repeatedly used as "evidence" for the truth of the existence of this disgusting social type. As journalist Dominik Diamond similarly writes in tabloid The Daily Star, "Britain's teenage girls have become a generation of rowdy Vicky Pollards who binge drink, do drugs and have under-age sex.[…] Just like Little Britain's bad girl Vicky" (Diamond, 2006: 29). Walliams and Lucas support this reading of Vicky as representative of a genuine social type. Interviewed in another Daily Star feature, they "admit they play 'spot the Vicky Pollard' when they're out and about".

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[4] See for instance comments made in a speech by Deborah Lawson, chair of the Professional Association of Teachers, who warned teachers at their annual conference in 2006, that nursery nurses with few qualifications and poor social skills risked creating a generation of "Vicky Pollards": "I don't want to trivialise this in any way at all, but we don't want a future generation of Vicky Pollards." (Lawson in The Guardian, 2006)

they say they've found hundreds right across the nation. [..] David, 34, and Matt, 31, who plays the character, say you can find her type lurking on every street corner. [..] "People always say they know a Vicky Pollard. `There are even Vicky Pollards on the road where I live and we always point to them when we see them'. (Mark Jefferies, 2005: 3)

The movement of this fictional figure from scripted television comedy into news media, political rhetoric and onto the streets, foregrounds the disturbing ease which the chav figure shapes social perception. Disgust reactions work not only to give meaning too the figure of the chav, but more complexly to constitute a category of being- chav being. Within media outpourings of class disgust, disgust is attributed to and becomes a property of the figure being produced: "aggressive", "embittered, hormonal, drunken teenagers", "gym slip mums", "pasty-faced, lard-gutted slappers". So whilst the figures of the chav and chavette have a virtual existence within Internet forums and television shows, the chav nevertheless takes symbolic shape as a form of being in ways that has felt material and physical effects upon those interpellated as "chav". We can think here of the way in which" signs of chavness", such as the wearing of chav identified clothes or labels have been increasingly used to police access to public spaces, such as nightclubs and shopping centres since 2003. The figure of the chav mum, Vicky Pollard, Pramface, Slummy Mummy, becomes a body imbued with negative affect, this affect then travels, it circulates and leaks out into public space and shapes everyday perceptual practices foregrounding the disturbing ease with which imagined "emotional qualities slide into corporeal qualities" (Ngai, 2005: 573). Chav disgust is felt and lived.

The figure of the chav mum appears repeatedly on the cult website chavscum, This website was launched in 2003, and at its peak was registering 80,000 hits a day. The websites tagline reads "Chav Scum: Britain's peasant underclass that is taking over our towns and cities". The chavscum website, is organized around bulletin boards with titles such as Chav of the month, in which a member send in photographs and newspaper clippings about chavs, that other members then post comments about. In December 2005,

one of 154 uploaded `chav of the month` images was a scanned copy of a sensationalist newspaper article (reproduced from <u>The Daily Mail</u>) about a young teenager mother who has become pregnant for the second time aged 15. Here are some extracts from the thread of posts commenting on this newspaper article:

"Yuck Disgusting", "It is extremely sad that this "youff" seems to be getting away with this, shouldn"t he be in a detention centre or something, or better yet, the Gambia. We have enough home grown trash here without the need for imports. What a sad excuse for a country we have.

eeek!!, I feel sick".

Good God…The should sew her fanny up, and then hit her in the face with a pick axe.

once again, This is the true scum we hate. The mother should have been charged with child neglect, and the baby factory brat taken into care

"F**king scum.. ..Stupid little sluts like this make my blood boil, you've only got to read the article things like "I didn't have any ambitions" "I might go back to school but not for 5 years". Disgusting, ugly, stupid, benefit scrounging slag!!!,

She left school at 12 to have some scumbag fella's baby, and will probably have babies every year for the rest of her life. And what work do you expect she will do? Absolutely bugger all that's what. Well, if YOU think that's an acceptable life and ambition for a young girl in this day and age of supposed equality, you might as well just lie in the gutter and open your legs right now you daft bint. Have a nice life being a baby machine.

This slut practically represents Britain today and shows just how sh!t this once great nation has become……. sad, really sad that that new born baby is going to get gonorrhoea all over its thick retard face when its born.......

Teenage Scrounging Chav Mothers

God help us, They are breeding, Filth, Scuzzers, Slappers, and more Filth.

The mass vilification and mockery of the chav mum can be understood in relation to what Helen Wilson and Annette Huntington have argued is the emergence of a new set of norms about femininity, in which the ideal life trajectory of middle-class women conforms to the current governmental objectives of economic growth through higher education and increased female workforce participation (2005: 59). We can see how chav figures middle class values through disgust for the sexuality and reproduction of the lower classes within these bulletins, take this comment. "If YOU think that's an acceptable life and ambition for a young girl in this day and age of supposed equality, you might as well just lie in the gutter and open your legs right now." The chav mum represents a thoroughly dirty and disgusting ontology that operates as the constitutive limit for the clean white middle class feminine respectability. The comic and disgusting chav mum is figurative other of the infertile white middle class middle aged woman, the disgust for and fascinated obsession with her "easy fertility" is bound up with a wider set of social anxieties about fertility and maternity amongst middle-class women. The chav mum represents the unacceptable reproductive body, this figure both contrasts with but also illustrates the larger explosion of anxiety within the British new media, medical and political establishments, about dropping fertility rates amongst the white middle classes.

The Thrills of Slumming It

In this article, I have argued that the affective body of chav materializes and moves through popular culture on a wave of continually repeated disgust reactions. The disgust

and mockery of chavs, is intimately bound up with, and authorized by comedy and I would like to finish this article by reflecting on chav disgust as a highly simulated form of "class slumming". In April, 2006 the front page of The Sun featured Prince William dressed up as a chav with the headline, "Future Bling of England", The story details how the future king: "joined in the fun as his platoon donned chav-themed fancy dress to mark the completion of their first term" at Sandhurst military academy. William, we were told, "went to a lot of trouble thinking up what to wear" (white baseball cap, sweatshirt, two gold chains), and was challenged to "put on a chavvy accent and stop speaking like a royal" (Larcombe, 2006). Across Britain middle class students hold "chav nites", in which they dress up as chavs and chavettes, female students push cushions under tight tops to feign pregnant chav bellies, they carry plastic bags from the cut price food superstores Asda and Aldi, drink cider, and enjoy the affect of being an imaginary chav. Photographs of these chav student nights populate internet sites and often it is these images of 'students playing chav" that are reproduced on chav hate web sites such as chavscum, where of course they are vilified as "authentic chavs". In contemporary the University, once a place of assumed upper and middle-class privilege, now has a more uneasy status as a marker of class difference. It is notable then that the "the student" has emerged as the most clearly defined "opposite" of the chav. Students at Leeds University have gone to the lengths of making a comedic feature film, titled Chav! (dir: Sam Shepherd 2005): the story line involves the university being invaded by tracksuit clad chav zombies, who threaten to "infect" the middle class student protagonists. Pictured clawing at the doors of the university, the chavs pursue the students through lecture theatres and seminar rooms before finally being defeated by the playing of the dance music associated with chav culture. This film can be read as an allegory of wider social anxiety about the feared social mobility of the lower classes and also as an attempt, authorized through comedy, to keep those imagined "class others" outside of middle-class social spheres.

These examples of ironic class–passing represent a new era of "slumming it": virtual slumming, slumming on-line, slumming nights out. This slumming recalls the 19th century Victorian slummers, who descended on the East End of London in their many

thousands, in pursuit of abject encounters - touristic tastes of the illicit pleasures associated with the immoral, urban poor. However unlike Victorian slumming, these contemporary forms of slumming it make no pretence at any moral imperative. "Chav slumming" doesn't pretend to be sociological, there is no ethnography, no gathering of knowledge about the poor, no charity, no reaching out to touch, and no liberal guilt, there is nothing but disgust and pleasure. Through disgust and laughter the upper and middle classes attempts to secure themselves, mark their difference and enjoy a fix of affect.

The cumulative effect of disgust at chavs is the blocking of the disenfranchised white poor from view; they are rendered invisible and, like Vicky Pollard, incomprehensible. Nevertheless, chav has become an increasingly complex identity category and some of those interpellated as filthy chavs have now reclaimed the term as an affirmative sub-cultural identity. This trans-coding of chav is visible within popular music acts, such as white teenage rapper Lady Sovereign and the acclaimed pop icon and urban poet Mike Skinner (who releases records as The Streets). Journalist Julie Burchill has repeatedly attempted both to defend, and claim for herself, a chav identity (see 2005). In 2005, the tabloid newspaper The Sun, a propagator of chav hate, ran a `Proud to be Chav` campaign. Nevertheless, this 'chav pride' is deceptive, for like the US term 'white trash' --now widely adopted within celebrity culture—this 'pride' works as an enabling identity category only for those who have acquired enough cultural capital and social mobility to `rise above the filth`. As Miller notes, `Disgust does not so much solve the dilemma of social powerlessness as diagnose it powerfully` (1997: 353).

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See also:

www.chavscum.co.uk

`Proud to be Chav`, The Sun archive at www.thesun.co.uk

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[i] See Alex Law (2006) on the Scottish specificites of the term Ned in Law, A. (2006) "Respect and Hatred: the Class Shame of "Ned" Humour",
Variant 25(Spring): 28–30 [http://www.variant.randomstate.org/pdfs/ issue25/nedhumour.pdf].
 , **"We"ve never had it so good": The "problem" of the working class in devolved Scotland" Critical Social Policy 26 (3)**
This tendency toward white trash nostalgia
may be understood in terms of the cultural use-value of "obsolescence"

narratives. As Watkins notes:

There's every reason dominant ideological productions work very hard to endlessly construct itineraries of the obsolete as survival narratives, to flood so<alled mass culture with nostalgic reproductions of a fading past because obsolescence when reproduced as nostalgic object is no longer dangerous. All ofwhich on the one hand then functionally obscures how an obsolete working class is continually being produced now... to sustain corporate restructuring, and on the other recontains the threat posed to positional dominance by the necessity of presendy produced obsolescence, (p. 39)

Such [white trash] performances express a desire to distance oneself from the lived lives of today's working poor, both black and white, through a parody of whiteness.

Writers, high and low, have made "white trash" into a sleazy, pornloving, peanut-butter-chewing, consumable idendty, one attracdve to a middle-class desiring such fatty substances.

Narradves of techno-ideological change destabilize once-rigid class posidons that stradfy the social field, acdng as the means by which late capitalism reproduces an obsolete, trasby poor. The producdon of new trash populadons is then part of the social and cultural logic of an ever-shifdng capitalism, which today is devoted to rapid mobility and obsolescence. In today's service-oriented economy, class alignments tend to be produced in correspondence with lifestyle choices. In other words, the marker of class privilege is no longer how much you consume (Higb-Fordist model) but ratber "how many" consuming idenddes you can perform. Paradoxically, the producdon of new "white trash" idenddes reflexively reasserts and marks the cultural studies cridc's own privileged class posidon.