

# Thinking with 'White Dee': The Gender Politics of 'Austerity Porn'

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## Abstract

Focusing on Benefits Street, and specifically the figure of White Dee, this rapid response article offers a feminist analysis of the relationship between media portrayals of people living with poverty and the gender politics of austerity. To do this we locate and unpick the paradoxical desires coalescing in the making and remaking of the figure of 'White Dee' in the public sphere. We detail how Benefits Street operates through forms of classed and gendered shaming to generate public consent for the government's welfare reform. However, we also examine how White Dee functions as a potential object of desire and figure of feminist resistance to the transformations in self and communities engendered by neoliberal social and economic policies. In this way, we argue that these public struggles over White Dee open up spaces for urgent feminist sociological enquiries into the gender politics of care, labour and social reproduction.

**Keywords:** *Austerity, Media, Gender, Welfare, Care, Social Class*

## Introduction

[Ev]ery time people look at White Dee ... it will serve as a reminder to people of the mess the benefits system is in and how badly Iain Duncan Smith's reforms are needed. White Dee is bone idle and doesn't want to work another day in her life and has no intention of finding a job. She expects the taxpayer to fund her life on benefits – Conservative MP Philip Davies, 2014.

I think a lot of people have seen that I'm exactly like them. I'm just an ordinary, everyday person – Deirdre Kelly, *The Guardian* 2014

## Meeting 'White Dee'

- 1.1 The first episode of *Benefits Street* (Channel Four, Love Productions, 2014) begins with a 36-second segment titled 'Meet White Dee' that establishes Deirdre Kelly (named in the programme as 'White Dee' from the outset) as the central protagonist of the drama to follow. 'At the heart of James Turner', explains the voice-over (spoken by former *Coronation Street* actor Tony Hirst), 'is the single mum, "White Dee"'. Throughout this sequence, we see White Dee - a large, middle-aged woman, dressed in a black vest top that reveals tattoos on her back and chest – dancing in the paved front yard outside a house with her teenage daughter. A high-tempo dance track ('Hello' by the Polish pop singer Candy Girl), is belting out of a car that has pulled up by the side of the road. White Dee's daughter moves to the pavement and dances in a style derived from Jamaican dance-hall which involves sexually exaggerated hip movements and a low, squatting stance.<sup>[1]</sup> The voice-over continues, 'she is bringing up two kids on benefits [pause] but can also find time to look out for the neighbours'. When we hear White Dee's voice: 'the street feels like a family, because that's how we treat it, like a family. I am the Mam of the street'. As she speaks this line, the film cuts to a shot of a young family - a man, woman and two very young children - who are incongruously sitting together on a dilapidated sofa on a pavement outside a house, with rubbish bags piled and waste around them. The segment draws to a close with a close-up of White Dee talking on the phone, cigarette in mouth, sat on a sofa strewn with the detritus of everyday family life: papers; a

girl's hair-slide; a can of pop; a newspaper; a child's school tie. A final extreme close-up shows a dirty ash-tray filled with cigarette butts.

1.2 Despite the many 'judgement shots' (Skeggs et al. 2008) in this opening segment, which are arguably designed to invoke disgust reactions (the ash-tray, the young family sat on the rubbish strewn street, and the shameless 'sexualised' dancing), White Dee is represented from the outset in conflicting and contradictory ways. She is certainly not a victim, nor is she straightforwardly represented as an abject 'benefits scrounging' single mother. Rather, she is an extrovert matriarchal figure, who is depicted as happy, witty, compassionate and perhaps most interestingly, as 'free' from the complaints and constraints of 'time-poor' middle-class working mothers. Indeed, White Dee is depicted as unbounded from the strictures of idealised forms of neoliberal femininity, and specifically the pressures of 'having it all'.

1.3 This rapid response article offers an analysis of the relationship between media portrayals of people living with poverty and political agendas with respect to welfare and social security. Specifically, we examine the making and remaking of White Dee in the public sphere - as abject, heroic and caring - to think afresh about the gender politics of economic austerity measures unleashed by neoliberalism. Rather than seek to resolve the disparate meanings configured through White Dee, or uncover some 'authentic' subject amidst them, our intention is to ask: why has White Dee emerged as a paradoxical figure of revulsion, fascination, nostalgia and hope in the context of the current dramatic reconfiguration of the welfare state?

1.4 In the rest of this article we briefly introduce *Benefits Street* as a genre of programming distinct to austerity, before fleshing out the complex and contradictory meanings and affects attached to White Dee. We argue that these public struggles over White Dee open up spaces for urgent feminist sociological enquiries into the gender politics of austerity.

## Austerity porn?

2.1 Channel Four and Love Productions describe *Benefits Street* as a 'documentary series' which 'reveals the reality of life on benefits, as the residents of one of Britain's most benefit-dependent streets invite cameras into their tight-knit community' (see Channel 4 2014). However, rather than having the political impetus of documentary realism, *Benefits Street* follows the conventions of reality television which emerged in the 1980s when US and European broadcasters developed low-cost alternatives to conventional programme formulas. As Imogen Tyler (2011) has previously argued, programmes such as *Benefits Street* draw on many of the formal techniques of socially committed television documentary; the use of hand-held cameras, 'fly-on the wall' camera angles, the employment of non-actors and an improvised, unscripted, low-budget 'authenticity', in order to justify exploitation (of unpaid participants) and voyeurism through an implied association with 'documentary realism'. As she argues, 'these kinds of reality TV programmes have none of the aspirations of longer standing socially critical and politicized traditions of British documentary film and television' (Tyler 2013: 145; and Biressi and Nunn 2005). *Benefits Street* is not motivated by a desire 'to change social policy, uncover invisible lives and challenge an inequitable social system' (Biressi and Nunn 2005:10). As White Dee herself states, when reflecting on her participation in the show, 'it's like *Big Brother*, except no one is evicted. Or paid' (Kelly 2014).<sup>[2]</sup>

2.2 A central feature of reality TV is its focus on 'class others' which has continued and intensified under current austerity regimes in pernicious ways. As a growing body of (largely feminist) class analysis has illuminated, these forms of programming operate as mechanisms of 'class making' within the cultural realm. They are characterised by the shaming of classed others through inviting audiences to read class stigma onto participants through evaluations of their conduct, bodies and dress as lacking and in need of transformation (see Allen and Mendick 2012; Biressi and Nunn 2005; Jensen 2013a; Skeggs and Wood 2012; Tyler 2011; Tyler and Gill 2013; Woods 2014).

2.3 In many ways *Benefits Street* is archetypal of what Tracey Jensen calls 'poverty porn' (2013b), a subgenre of British reality television programmes that emerged in the summer of 2013<sup>[3]</sup>. Focusing on *We All Pay Your Benefits* (BBC 2013), Jensen argues that, instrumental to the introduction of financial austerity measures ostensibly designed to reduce welfare spending, these kinds of reality programmes individualise poverty, blaming and shaming the poor for their circumstances (Jensen 2013b).

2.4 Yet, there is also something about *Benefits Street*'s sensibilities, framing devices and emotional power – manifesting in its central protagonist White Dee – that troubles and exceeds such a critical reading. *Benefits Street* is not just about displays of 'poverty' that repulse and intrigue viewers. It also invites voyeuristic

opportunities to see people 'making do' and 'being thrifty' (Jensen 2013b; 2013c). It activates the kind of nostalgic longing for 'tight-knit neighbourhood communities' central to fictionalised depictions of working class lives in other long running British television dramas and soaps such as *EastEnders* (BBC 1985-current), *Coronation Street*, (ITV 1960-current) and popular period dramas such as *Call the Midwife* (BBC 2012-current). While *Benefits Street* is harsher in its moral judgements than these fictional programmes, the relationships between the residents nevertheless generates similar desires for a 'time past', characterised by working class solidarity, care and more communal forms of living.

- 2.5 As we will argue, public responses to *Benefits Street* and specifically White Dee, also emphasise the ways in which media representations generate divergent, resistant and multifarious meanings and affects. Attending to this complexity is an important intervention into debates about the media, welfare and inequality. It allows us to think outside of common-sense Left/Right political frameworks dominating debates about austerity and foreclosing attention to the gendered effects of a shrinking welfare state.

## Abject White Dee

- 2.6 In the wake *Benefits Street* the figure of White Dee was struggled over more than any other of the show's participants. In public and political commentary, she was positioned in starkly oppositional ways and drawn upon as a key figure upon which competing agendas about welfare, austerity and the state were mobilised.
- 2.7 One of the dominant meanings given to White Dee, both within *Benefits Street* and in audience responses to it, is as abject Other of the 'good', 'hard working' future-orientated, individualistic and entrepreneurial neoliberal citizen (Allen and Taylor 2012; De Benedictis 2013; Jensen and Tyler 2012). Through this framing, she is positioned as feckless, lazy and undeserving; the product of a bloated welfare system. White Dee has been mobilised by right-wing journalists and politicians as evidence of 'Broken Britain':

White Dee is the woman who many think sums up everything that is wrong with this country today. With her two children by two different but absent fathers, her fags and her telly, her long-term unemployment (she last worked in 2007) and indolent ways, some see her as the ultimate poster girl for Benefits Britain. (Moir 2014)

Here White Dee represents the figure of 'the skiver' par-excellence. Her reproductive capacity and caring labour is framed as idleness and a drain on national resources.

- 2.8 In January 2014, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, invoked *Benefits Street* as 'evidence' to justify punitive austerity driven benefits cuts and workfare reforms. *Benefits Street* he argued, revealed 'the hidden reality' of the lives of people 'trapped' on state-benefits (Duncan Smith 2014). 'Dole Queen White Dee', as the right-wing press named her, is defined through her inadequacies and failings in relation to her abject maternity (the mother of fatherless children), 'work' and time. White Dee is 'out of step' both in terms of her non-participation in paid work within the labour market, and subsequent 'dependency' on the state, and in her deficit relationship to time and space; stagnant, immobile and 'bone idle', unwilling and unable to move socially or spatially. We return to White Dee's imagined relationship to time in the penultimate section of this article.

## Heroic White Dee

- 3.1 The dominant counter-framing to this abject figuration was 'White Dee as hero': a community worker and campaigner for working class communities. White Dee was figured in these heroic depictions as both a victim (of mental health problems, and of the underhand and exploitative tactics of TV producers) and as an agent of authenticity and 'common-sense'. After appearing on the Channel 5 'debate show', *The Big Benefits Row* White Dee was praised by political and media commentators as articulate, charismatic and a potential future politician. Feminist journalist Decca Aitkenhead writing in *The Guardian* describes her in the following terms:

White Dee is enormously likable. Unaffected yet knowing, she is very direct and can be extremely funny, with a natural gift for comic timing. She is also one of the most tolerant, least judgmental people I've ever met, and remarkably pragmatic about the hand she has been dealt. (Aitkenhead 2014)

At the same time, the right-wing publication, *Spectator*, co-opted White Dee as a campaigner for benefits cuts for the unemployed and more 'in-work' benefits for the low-paid, and heralded her a future right-leaning independent MP (see Kelly 2014).

- 3.2 Both the abject and heroic framings of White Dee pivot on common-sense notions of work, time and value. In doing so, both elide considerations of what is at stake – materially, symbolically and psychologically - in the current reformation of the state, and the disproportionate effect of the cuts on mothers and children (The Fawcett Society 2012; The Women's Budget Group 2012).

3.3 As Skeggs argues: "reality" television points to solutions, ways to resolve this inadequate personhood through future person-production – a projected investment in self-transformation – in which participants resolve to work on themselves' (Skeggs 2010: 80). White Dee must become a campaigning MP, a celebrity, come off benefits and enter paid work in order to become intelligible and valuable. Seeking to disrupt the claiming of White Dee as either abject or heroic, we now turn to a third reading of White Dee as a figure of nostalgia and desire. In doing, we attempt to *think with* White Dee as a figure and as *forms of practice* which speak to alternative values concerned with relations of care.

### Caring White Dee

4.1 As indicated at the start of this article, throughout the show White Dee is framed (albeit precariously) as the resilient and caring 'mother' of James Turner Street. This is made evident throughout the series as her family and local residents turn to her for guidance. White Dee's relationship with neighbour, Fungi - who seeks advice from her subsequent to a cancer scare and who she accompanies to the hospital - exemplifies this role. Likewise, media commentary repeatedly emphasise the community spirit that she embodies.

4.2 It is this figuration of White Dee as caring matriarch, and the feelings this generates, which we argue provide a way into thinking differently about austerity. Specifically, we are interested in White Dee's framing as a nostalgic figure. Heroism on the Left is often imagined in forms of a nostalgic desire to return to working class masculinities. As Stephanie Lawler writes (Lawler under review), dominant motifs in Left representations of its revolutionary potential and solidarity are intrinsically masculine: the 'angry young man' and the 'heroic worker'. Such romanticized figures exclude and elide women and their labour (see also Steedman 1986; Skeggs 1997).

4.3 Public modes of collectivist class solidarity and consciousness have not only historically been 'less available or desirable to working-class women' (Hey 2003: 332). Working-class women – in their feminised labour of reproduction and care and location within the space of the domestic – have troubled the Left's emblematic motifs of 'Working Class Changes of the World' (Lawler under review: 18), past and present. White Dee represents an alternative nostalgic figure; one produced of a different set of desires - for slower and caring forms of community relations and inter-reliance – which brings into view the gendered politics of austerity.

4.4 Neoliberalism shapes a particular relationship to time: there is never enough time; we must always maximize time; we must not stand still (Davies and Bansel 2005). White Dee is mediated within *Benefits Street* as a figure from another time. While this engenders forms of symbolic and material violence such as demands that she get a job and accusations that she is a lazy benefits cheat - this 'out of sync-ness' provokes something that exceeds this. Rather, White Dee's 'different' relationship to 'public time', and specifically her insistence on 'maternal time' (see Baraitser 2012: 236) becomes something that 'we', the middle-class viewer framed by the programme, envy. As White Dee states on invitations to capitalise on her celebrity through participation in reality TV programmes:

I could do those shows. But I'm not going to sacrifice my kids. I've never been without my kids. I'm a parent first". If it weren't for her responsibilities as a mother, would the reality circuit appeal to her? "Course it would!" she laughs. "People offering to throw money at me for this, that and the other? But it's not all about the money. I'm not the type of person who would give up being a proper mum just for money. (Kelly, in Aitkenhead 2014)

4.5 The nostalgic longing figured through White Dee provides an insight into the kinds of fantasies and 'psychic damage' current neoliberal regimes engender (Layton et al 2014). In other words, if the competitive neoliberal market economy demands particular kinds of entrepreneurial, future-oriented, self-sufficient and individualistic selves, then White Dee figures a desire for modes of caring and common forms of social and economic relations which are an anathema to the logic of financial capitalism. In this respect, White Dee is a resistant figure and struggles over her within the public sphere are revealing of (middle-class) fantasies and desire for solace and escape from the surveillance of the cruel and penal neoliberal state, and the individualising and competitive qualities of everyday life.

### The Gender Politics of Austerity

We can see caring as a crisis of value – the value of women's work. [...] Caring offers us a different way of being in the world, relating to others as if they matter, with attentiveness and compassion (Skeggs 2013)

5.1 In the present moment, it is women like White Dee who are filling the gap left by the British government's decimation of state-supported services such as childcare and care for the elderly (Jensen and Tyler 2012; Levitas

2012). They are carrying out the unpaid domestic and caring work within communities that goes unrecognised within policy rhetoric about 'worklessness' which saturates the political register of austerity. In the context of a war of austerity waged against women and children, we urgently need to think – again – about questions of care, labour and social reproduction.

5.2 Important challenges to the gendered impacts of austerity are manifesting in organised, collective spaces such as Women's Budget Group and The Fawcett Society. Indeed, a recent statement by an anonymous collective, publishing under the name 'The Feminist Fightback Collective', reanimates long-standing feminist debates about the central role of social reproduction in sustaining the fabric of society. The collective states:

Exploring the focus, distribution and likely effects of this austerity programme through the lens of social reproduction allows us to better understand not only the uneven impacts it will have on different sectors of society, but also the ways in which it supports the production and accumulation of wealth, and its concentration into the hands of the few. And it may also point to sites of resistance and transformation (2011: 74)

5.3 Thinking through 'austerity' with White Dee, as a figure that is representative of unvalued forms of social reproduction, is instructive as a way of considering resistance to the punishing demands of the neoliberal post-welfare society. As Kathi Weeks similarly argues, if what is considered to hold value was broadened and shifted so that social reproduction (in its myriad of forms), rather than production (defined primarily as paid work) underpinned the driving mechanism of sociality, then this would signal a shift away from the logic of capital to 'demanding not income for the production that is necessary to sustain social worlds, but income to sustain the social worlds necessary for, among other things, production' (Weeks 2010: 230).

5.4 Perhaps surprisingly, struggles over figures such as White Dee in the public sphere, open up spaces for discussion of the gendered impacts of austerity, and the ways in which 'cutbacks in social provision are privatising work that is crucial to the sustenance of life' (The Feminist Fightback Collective 2011: 73). In this short article, we have argued that counter-readings that resist the dominant figuration of White Dee as an abject and/or heroic working class figure, allow us to ask bigger questions about *What counts as labour? What counts as work? Who and what has value and is value?* under the present social and political conditions. Popular culture is in this regard one site through which we should attend to the gender politics of austerity.

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## Notes

- 1 This dance-style became notorious in 2013, when white US pop star Miley Cyrus incorporated this style into a sexually explicit 'twerking' performance at the MTV Video Music Awards.
- 2 Predictably enough, a second series is in production, with Love Productions currently scoping locations – and 'characters' (unpaid participants) – for the next 'Benefits Street' (see [Fernalls 2014](#)).
- 3 Writer and campaigner Owen Jones also used this term in his lecture for the Royal Television Society in November 2013. See: <http://www.rts.org.uk/rts-huw-wheldon-memorial-lecture>, accessed 13 March 2014.

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