

**'White Trash' Celebrity: Shame and Display**  
**Hannah Yelin (2016)**

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**in *Women's Magazine in Print and New Media*,**  
**(Routledge Research in Gender and Society)**  
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Open Access Research

CRIS: Current Research Information System

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This chapter interrogates the construction of the figure of the 'white trash' celebrity. Examining the 'star images'<sup>1</sup> of American reality TV star Paris Hilton and British reality star Jade Goody, as constructed through their print memoirs and digital fan (and anti-fan) sites, this chapter argues that the nature of contemporary celebrity media exposure, with its subjects' lives on display, provides a basis for the gendered classing of its female stars as 'white trash' regardless of their socioeconomic background. I will argue that these women transgress (and in so doing highlight the existence of) celebrity's codes of idealised white femininity: a whiteness which retains the privilege of an unmarked category until such celebrities fall short of its ideals of purity and restraint and are thus deemed to be, and denigrated as, 'White Trash'.

This chapter contrasts celebrity memoirs, as supposedly 'official' narratives about a celebrity, with the reception each celebrity receives from tabloid news, cultural commentators and fan (and anti-fan) user generated websites. Celebrities engage with and react to their media environment, always in interaction with the multiplicity of coverage, judgments and readings they receive from various directions. From those sources, celebrities (and their ghostwriters) construct and then offer a single reading of their life stories. However, theirs is just one story among many that contribute to the plethora of shifting, individual strands that weave their overall public image. The non-hierarchical, rhizomatic structures<sup>2</sup> of celebrity gossip media, digital and otherwise, provide a forum for (anti)fans to offer their own alternative discourses about a celebrity that can compete with, if not supplant, the "official story." Whilst participation in the production of a memoir provides celebrities the opportunity to take some control over the construction of their public persona, it can be seen to be in negotiation with the "alternative readings" generated by (anti)fans. As online forums show (anti)fans judging

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dyer, Richard, *Stars*, (London : BFI, 1982)

<sup>2</sup> See Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix, *EPZ Thousand Plateaus*, (1988) for a reading of how the Rhizome offers a model of thought that accounts for non-hierarchical multiplicity, off-shoot and overlap.

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celebrities according to how successfully they perform certain norms, celebrity memoirs can be seen to be attempting to align the celebrity subject with dominant ideas of femininity, which, in the examples examined here, include restraint, cleanliness, motherliness.

Wealthy, American heiress and socialite, Paris Hilton, and British, working-class mum, Jade Goody, appear, at first glance, to have little in common despite both producing best-selling memoirs and arriving in mainstream culture through reality TV. Occupying opposite ends of the celebrity class spectrum, their reality TV debuts offered a precise reversal of one another. Hilton's 2003 show, *The Simple Life* saw her travel America substituting the glamour of LA for poorly-paid, rural work, demonstrating the void between her extraordinary privilege and the 'ordinary' world within which she fails to integrate, whilst Goody became famous through the 2002 series of the UK's *Big Brother*, where a cast of 'ordinary' members of the public contend with extraordinary circumstances. After her appearance there, she embarked upon a career as 'celebrity' reality show contestant which led to an infamous return as a *Celebrity Big Brother* contestant in 2007 when she was evicted for the racist bullying of Indian co-star Shilpa Shetty. In an effort to rebuild her public reputation she then entered *Bigg Boss*, the show's Indian franchise. However, it was during filming she was diagnosed with cervical cancer and in 2009, the illness claimed her life.

Despite the clear differences between these celebrities and their career trajectories, when looking at the reception that Hilton and Goody receive, and despite the polar opposite class origins they represent, they receive similar readings from digital (anti)fan sites where they are subject to the class (and racial) slur 'white trash.' First I shall analyse the star image of Jade Goody to establish the centrality of the concepts of the undeserving, the lack of self-control, femininity and the failure to 'pass', are to the construction of the 'white trash' celebrity. Then I shall contrast the ways in which the memoirs of Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian discuss their respective racial

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identities to show how whiteness is upheld as an unmarked category (in official narratives). Lastly I shall bring Hilton's star image into dialogue with that of Jade Goody to demonstrate the gendered sexual morality at the heart of it all. This chapter argues that the nature of 'reality' TV, with its subjects' lives on display, provides a basis for the gendered classing of its female stars as 'trash', a status deriving from the failure to demonstrate acceptably feminine restraint rather than relating to socioeconomic status. Whilst celebrity culture and its supporting gossip media have been viewed as a 'low' field with tabloid sensibilities, its value system is punitively middle-class, policing the appropriateness of its players and shaming those who fall short.

### **Talentless 'White Trash' Celebrity: Undeserving rich or poor**

Richard Dyer argues, in relation to classical Hollywood film stars, that 'off-screen' identities have an equal if not greater influence than the characters played on screen because their existence in the world makes them 'more real,' which in turn makes the values that they embody harder to reject.<sup>3</sup> However, the off-screen personality is 'itself a construction known and expressed only through films, stories, publicity etc'.<sup>4</sup> What differs between the Hollywood actors who formed the sample for Dyer's study and Hilton or Goody is that by appearing in 'reality' programmes, rather than in films with fictional stories they, purportedly, are famous for playing themselves. If we are to believe the claims of the 'reality' TV shows that follow the details of their day-to-day lives, there is no separation between on and off-screen. Dyer warns not to 'elide the star-as-person with the star-as-text and assume that the former is the author of the latter' taking as evidence the fact that stars appear in texts 'the construction of which s/he was only a collaborator or even a mere vehicle'.<sup>5</sup> For Dyer this text may be a star image, character or performance; however his caution applies well to the example of ghostwritten memoir which combines

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<sup>3</sup>Richard Dyer, Richard, *Stars*, (London : BFI, 1982) 22

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.* 23

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.* 175

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the explicit promise of access to a 'true' off-screen identity with an environment where the degree of authorship a star has had over a text can only be inferred. Whilst their TV careers construct them as openly sharing their total selves, their memoirs contradict the claims of the TV shows, constructing them as having kept their true selves back to be shared in their memoirs. Each is a coexisting rhizomatic strand, simultaneously combining and competing. Thus the already unstable concept of on and off-screen identity is further problematised as different formats compete to reveal the more wholly exposed woman.

Goody is held to epitomise what Holmes calls the 'celebritisation' of the 'ordinary' person,<sup>6</sup> described by Rojeck thus: 'Brash, vulgar, overweight, physically plain and self-opinionated, Jade featured in media coverage as, not to mince words, a representative of white, working-class trash.'<sup>7</sup> Goody embodies the type of stardom bemoaned by Daniel Boorstin for a lack of 'greatness, worthy endeavors or talent.'<sup>8</sup> This conservative appraisal remains central to much of the (highly gendered) popular critique of celebrity culture fifty years after it was first published. The assumption here is that only certain talents are of worth and that there is a consensus on what counts as worthy. A talent for placing oneself at the center of a media furor, for example, the endeavor to provide an audience with opportunities to laugh at one's expense, or earn a net worth of millions of pounds, are deemed to be inauthentic talents and thus denied cultural value. This, however, poses no problem for Goody's celebrity. Indeed an apparent absence of talent both defines and authenticates her stardom. Her own publicist, Max Clifford, whom Goody described as a 'father figure,'<sup>9</sup> and might be expected to emphasise her talent to legitimate her claim to the spotlight, said after her death 'Jade would be the first to tell you she had no talent.

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<sup>6</sup> Su Holmes, "All you've got to worry about is the task, having a cup of tea, and doing a bit of sunbathing': approaching celebrity in *Big Brother*," 114

<sup>7</sup> Chris Rojeck, *Fame Attack: the inflation of fame and its consequences*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) 29

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Boorstin, *The Image* (London : Penguin, 1963) 11

<sup>9</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, (London : John Blake, 2009) 22

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She was just herself.'<sup>10</sup>

Reality TV celebrity is often constructed as antithetical to 'traditional' stardom (however vaguely this is defined). Dyer identifies four elements at play in the classical Hollywood star's embodiment of the myth of success: the star's ordinariness, the lucky breaks and hard work that constitute their path to fame, and an industry or system that rewards talent and specialness.<sup>11</sup> 'Reality' TV shows like *Big Brother* complicate traditional understandings of the hard work, talent and specialness that underpin fame. Even the lucky break element is reframed through the visibility and openness of the application process for participation. Holmes argues that in the absence of a discernible talent, Dyer's success myth is 'replaced by an ever more fervent negotiation of the 'real' self.'<sup>12</sup> Max Clifford's description of his ward as talentless but 'just herself', therefore perfectly fits this model of fame. Goody's autobiography goes so far as to claim that she is not even capable of dissembling: 'I've never been 'briefed' for an interview, and I'd be rubbish if I was. If someone told me what I should and shouldn't say I'd cock it up anyway and you'd be able to tell instantly that I wasn't being myself.'<sup>13</sup> Goody claims that she is never told what she should and should not say, through the medium of a **ghostwriter, whose** job is precisely to guide and edit Goody's utterances. This suggests an audience anxiety surrounding the question of whether she is putting on an act and works from the assumption that her 'true' identity is fixed and stable, and that 'being herself' is important to her fame. Just as her apparent talentlessness functions to cast her as authentically being herself, her aggressively, pre-emptively asserted 'stupidity' is used to reassure her audience that a contrived performance would be an impossibility. Hence, conflicting narratives coexist as Goody is at once famous for her visible mediation, **openly**

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<sup>10</sup> 'Jade Goody 'had no talent - and she knew it' says Max Clifford' *The Mirror*, 6 May 2009, retrieved on 2 July 2013 from <http://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/jade-goody-had-no-talent-392393>

<sup>11</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London : BFI, 1982) 42

<sup>12</sup> Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn, "Introduction," in *Understanding 'reality' Television*, ed. Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (London: Routledge, 2004) 22

<sup>13</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, 100

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ghostwritten, and yet apparently incapable of staging a performance. Even fifty years after Boorstin, to be famous for talentlessness is to be famously unworthy, or famous for not deserving one's fame.

In the opening pages of her memoir, Goody explicitly and self-consciously deals with questions of class, stating: 'I was actually a chav before they were given a name.'<sup>14</sup> Chav, a term of contempt used to depict the British white, working-class as tasteless, excessive, dangerous and immoral, grew in popular usage in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to the point that the right-wing, British newspaper, the *Daily Mail* reported 2004 to be 'The Year of the Chav'<sup>15</sup> due to its inclusion in an annual of newly popular idioms.<sup>16</sup> The *Daily Mail's* description of 'a word coined to describe the spread of the ill-mannered underclass - a rival to the American trailer trash - which loves shellsuits, bling-bling jewellery and designer wear'<sup>17</sup> highlights the confluence of fear, blame and judgment that surround the word along with anxieties about the poor having access to more than they deserve. Whilst Goody's classing (of herself) as a 'chav' derives in part from aesthetic and cultural markers of taste and class, the conception of her as talentlessly famous speaks directly to the anxieties of undeserved rewards that the word 'chav' represents.

Tyler and Bennett argue that British celebrity is a class pantomime in which the (usually female) celebrity chav is the butt of the joke; a Foucaultian theatre of punishment that polices the threats posed by social mobility.<sup>18</sup> Rather than inspiring aspiration or identification, the celebrity chav offers her audience the pleasure of collective censure. She defines what the audience are glad *not* to be and gives them the opportunity to affirm their comparative superiority through 'community-forming attachment to a "bad

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<sup>14</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, 2

<sup>15</sup> 'The year of the Chav' *The Daily Mail*, 19 October 2004, retrieved on 4 July 2013 from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-322501/The-year-Chav.html>

<sup>16</sup> Dent, Susie, *Larpers and shroomers : the language report*, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2004)

<sup>17</sup> 'The year of the Chav' *The Daily Mail*, 19 October 2004, retrieved on 4 July 2013 from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-322501/The-year-Chav.html>

<sup>18</sup> Imogen Tyler and Bruce Bennett, "Celebrity Chav': Fame, Femininity and Social Class." 380

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object.”<sup>19</sup> Whilst it is perfectly possible that readers may read memoirs from a knowing, ironic distance,<sup>20</sup> these texts are predominantly published as fan merchandise and as such can expect to receive a more admiring, sympathetic audience than the wider celebrity gossip media. However, despite this, Tyler and Bennett’s analysis is borne out in Goody’s autobiography. Whilst it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the subject’s *self*-awareness in a text produced through a ghostwriter, Goody’s memoir suggests that she knows she is a ‘bad object’. Of dining at Claridges, a place she describes as ‘soooo posh!’, Goody suspects that upon recognising her, other diners ‘must secretly have thought, Bloody hell, we come in here to get away from the likes of her!’<sup>21</sup> This suggests an awareness of the fact that her bad object status is based upon her class origins and the opportunities her fame and subsequent wealth afford her to exceed the boundaries that her British audience are taught ought to circumscribed.

### Celebritisation as class drag

Contradictorily, Goody is presented as proudly, unchangingly working class *and* as having progressed beyond shameful origins. Writing about Goody, Tyler and Bennett claim that what is ‘both comic and poignant is [her] conviction that it is possible to escape rigid class origins through highly visible careers in entertainment.’<sup>22</sup> Goody’s autobiography invokes this concept directly, in an example which highlights the regulatory workings of class and femininity. Describing her mother Jackie’s participation on the TV programme *Extreme Makeover*, she states:

She had a nose job, a neck lift an eyelift, a boob job, her teeth done, her tattoos removed...waving like royalty... I’ve never seen my mum behaving in such a

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<sup>19</sup> Imogen Tyler and Bruce Bennett, “‘Celebrity Chav’: Fame, Femininity and Social Class.” 377

<sup>20</sup> Joshua Gamson, ‘The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth Century America,’ *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, ed. by Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, (London : Sage, 2007) 151

<sup>21</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, 36

<sup>22</sup> Imogen Tyler and Bruce Bennett, “‘Celebrity Chav’: Fame, Femininity and Social Class.” 389

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ladylike manner...She kept saying, 'This is fabulous!' It was all, 'Oh, thanks for the drink, it's fabulous. My teeth are fabulous, my boobs are fabulous! I said, 'Fabulous'? Piss off! Just because you've had your face tweaked doesn't mean you have to change the way you talk... It felt so wonderful that she could put her past behind her and be a new person. <sup>23</sup>

Here Goody undermines her mother's attempts at what Bev Skeggs identifies as 'doing femininity,'<sup>24</sup> casting it as 'an unconvincing and inadvertently parodic attempt to pass'<sup>25</sup> in a class drag act in which 'she had never been allowed to' succeed.<sup>26</sup> At the same time Goody endorses the postfeminist belief in what Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra describe as 'consumption as a strategy...for the production of the self.'<sup>27</sup> Goody reveals, however, that this is ultimately a temporary and therefore failed process of self-making: 'Of course this wasn't to last. Mum was soon back to her old loudmouth, lairy ways and couldn't have appeared less of a lady if she tried.'<sup>28</sup> Loudness is coded as a particularly unfeminine form of unrestraint, preserving a valorised image of quiet femininity. Goody's desire that, in Skeggs' terms, 'working-classness can be overcome and eradicated'<sup>29</sup> and disappointment in her mother's failure to 'pass' is repeated when Goody sees her mother in the *Celebrity Big Brother* house: 'Her behaviour, her language, her manners were appalling. But she was my mum.'<sup>30</sup> Goody speaks from the point of view of someone who has undertaken the same process through which she is now watching her mother flounder: 'I knew how people would view her on the outside, because they'd viewed me in the same way when I'd first gone in there in 2002. And I'd behaved like a right ignorant

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<sup>23</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, 65-6

<sup>24</sup> Bev Skeggs, 'The Toilet Paper: Femininity, Class and Misrecognition', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24 (2-4) 2001: 297

<sup>25</sup> Imogen Tyler and Bruce Bennett, "'Celebrity Chav': Fame, Femininity and Social Class." 381

<sup>26</sup> Su Holmes, 'Jade's back and this time she's famous: Narratives of Celebrity in the Celebrity Big Brother 'race' row'. *Entertainment and Sports Law Journal*, 7(1) 2009 (22)

<sup>27</sup> Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra, 'Introduction', 2

<sup>28</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, 66

<sup>29</sup> Bev Skeggs, 'The Toilet Paper: Femininity, Class and Misrecognition', 298

<sup>30</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, 81

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idiot.'<sup>31</sup> Repenting for her previous behaviour, Goody speaks as if occupying a comparative position of safety: as if, having successfully made the transition to acceptable, middle-class femininity, she can view her working-classness retrospectively, its markers having, but for her mother's humiliations, been shed, permitting her to 'pass'.

### 'White trash' celebrity as lack of self-control

In 2007, whilst appearing on *Celebrity Big Brother*, Goody was at the centre of widespread controversy when she was accused of the racist bullying of fellow contestant and Bollywood film star, Shilpa Shetty. Media uproar ensued, with Goody ejected from the public's affections and branded as ignorant, repugnant 'white trash'. This particular incident, and the reactions to Goody that followed, have been a cultural reference point for many celebrity studies scholars. For Radha S. Hegde, responses to Goody's conduct were illustrative of the way in which discomfort around issues of race leads to strategies of misrecognition as moments of racial hatred are reinterpreted as, for example, a clash of socioeconomic class, rather than as incidents that make racism in the U.K. visible.<sup>32</sup> For Su Holmes, this pivotal moment in Goody's career trajectory reveals the way in which discourses of fame and celebrity are mobilized as disciplinary forces in accordance with existing hierarchies of class and gender (as well as race).<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, for Biressi and Nunn (2010) the apologetic media tour which followed the Goody/Shetty 'race row' offers an exemplary case of celebrity as the performance of emotional labour in a 'contract of on-going public intimacy'.<sup>34</sup> Whilst the 3 articles diverge on precisely what was at stake, they all agree that, beyond its powerful

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 82

<sup>32</sup> Radha S. Hegde, (2007) 'Of Race, Classy Victims and National Mythologies: Distracting reality on *Celebrity Big Brother*', *Feminist Media Studies*, 7 (4)

<sup>33</sup> Su Holmes, 'Jade's back and this time she's famous: Narratives of Celebrity in the *Celebrity Big Brother* 'race' row'. *Entertainment and Sports Law Journal*, 7(1).2009.

<sup>34</sup> Heather Nunn & Anita Biressi, 'A trust betrayed': celebrity and the work of emotion, *Celebrity Studies*, 1(1), 49-64, 2010 (49)

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illustration the complex intersections of class, race and gender, this incident somehow exemplified the cultural moment, whether in terms of race relations, emergent modes of fame or the public's relationship with celebrities. For the purposes of this article the construction of the white trash celebrity and its relationship with the concept of self-control (or lack thereof).

By contrast to Goody, Shilpa was praised for dealing with Goody's insults with grace, decorum and civility – words which are all themselves inherently classed. Bourdieu describes 'the refusal to surrender to nature, which is the mark of dominant groups – who start with *self*-control – [as] the basis of the aesthetic disposition.'<sup>35</sup> The division between imperturbable Shetty and intemperate Goody falls along these lines of classed self-control. In a highly-charged spectacle, the dichotomy of the hateful, home-grown 'white trash' and the genteel, noble visitor created overlapping narratives where race and class interacted with and concealed one-another. As polar identities were constructed for Goody and Shetty by the media, reference was made to each woman's physical attractiveness. For example, Stuart Jeffries' article in the *Guardian* titled, "Beauty and the beastliness" describes the *Big Brother* house as 'divided between ugly, thick white Britain and one imperturbably dignified Indian woman.'<sup>36</sup> In the contrasting of an ugly woman's crass vulgarity against a beautiful woman's elegant propriety, narratives of 'proper' femininity become enmeshed with those of race and class. Shetty conducts herself with comparative ease, which Bourdieu argues, 'represents the visible assertion of freedom from the constraints which dominate ordinary people, the most indisputable affirmation of capital as the capacity to satisfy the demands of biological nature or of the authority which entitles one to ignore them.'<sup>37</sup> Goody's autobiography explains the

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<sup>35</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (London: Routledge, 1984)40

<sup>36</sup>Stuart Jeffries, 'Beauty and the beastliness: a tale of declining British values', *The Guardian*, 19 January 2007, retrieved on 3 July 2013 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/jan/19/broadcasting.comment>

<sup>37</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 255

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argument that was at the centre of the allegations in terms of class, rather than race:

We were fighting because we were from different classes and different values in life...I have a chip on my shoulder about that. I don't want anyone to think that they're better than me, just because they have more money or a more educated upbringing. I felt like, to her, I was common. And, to me, she was a posh, up-herself princess.<sup>38</sup>

Goody claims that what she objects to in Shetty, is not her race, but her privilege, arrogance and condescension. Any appearance of racism is explained away as an accidental, if unfortunate, product of her working-class background. 'It's not in me to be racial about anyone,' Goody explains. As Radha S. Hegde has argued, this disconnects the exchange from the realities of racism as a systemic problem with far-reaching consequences, misrecognising structural inequalities as depoliticised individual pathologies.<sup>39</sup> Stuart Jeffries responds to Goody's media apologies with a personal attack on her poor grasp of grammar and her undeserved wealth: 'the word you want, Jade, is not racial, but racist: do spend some of that estimated £8m you have earned on a remedial education rather than boob jobs and liposuction.' Goody's racist bullying provided the commentariat with their own opportunity for self-righteous bullying of her on the grounds of class and femininity, suggesting that class hate and sexism remained a socially acceptable form of bigotry.

When Goody steers the conversation away from the politics of race to those of class, she uses her autobiography to justify the actions that made her a national hate figure, or, as Lieve Gies suggests, 'Jade's own media savvy has been to convert the humiliations which she suffered ... into a highly bankable asset.'<sup>40</sup> Goody's memoir

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<sup>38</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, 91

<sup>39</sup>Radha S. Hegde, 'Of Race, Classy Victims and National Mythologies: Distracting reality on Celebrity Big Brother', *Feminist Media Studies*, 7:4, 2007, 455 – 469 (457-460)

<sup>40</sup> Nandana Bose, 'Big Brother's Frankenstein1: The media construction of Jade Goody as an "abject-other"', *Feminist Media Studies*, 7:4, 2007, 455 – 469 (462)

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reframes the debate in terms of class, rather than, or as well as, race, and suggests that, in the classed, racialised hierarchy, to be a privileged woman of colour is a preferable, more acceptably feminine, position to occupy than to be white, working-class.

During this time fellow *Celebrity Big Brother* contestant Jermaine Jackson received little criticism for allegedly calling Goody 'white trash.'<sup>41</sup> As John Hartigan notes, 'in a political moment when derogatory labels and innuendoes for ethnic groups are being rigorously policed in social and institutional exchanges, 'white trash' still flies with little self-conscious hesitancy.'<sup>42</sup> 'White trash' itself a slur in which race and class combine. Whilst used interchangeably with the aforementioned term 'chav' in reference to Goody, the term has specific historical resonances. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz trace the concept back to the U.S. Eugenics Research Office who, between 1880 and 1920, attempted to demonstrate scientifically that rural poor whites were 'genetically defective' by 'locating relatives who were either incarcerated or institutionalised and then tracing their genealogy back to a 'defective' source.'<sup>43</sup> Thus the rural poor entered the public imagination as 'poor, dirty, drunken, criminally minded, and sexually perverse people.'<sup>44</sup> This was used to call an end to welfare and other forms of giving to the poor and introduce involuntary sterilisation and incarceration. Eugenics may have been discredited as a scientific practice, but, as Wray and Newitz argue, 'the stereotypes of rural poor whites as incestuous and sexually promiscuous, violent, alcoholic, lazy, and stupid remain with us to this day.'<sup>45</sup> 'White' is racialised, serving as an invisible norm: white bodies are 'unmarked, normative bodies and social selves, the standard against which all others are judged (and found wanting)'.<sup>46</sup> 'Trash' is classed as the dregs, dirt or

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<sup>41</sup> 'Jermaine in frame: new big bro race row' *The Daily Star*, 3rd February 2007, retrieved on 3 July 2013 from <http://www.dailystar.co.uk/posts/view/12423>

<sup>42</sup> John Hartigan 'Unpopular culture: The case of 'white trash'', *Cultural Studies* 11(2) 1997:316-343 (317)

<sup>43</sup> Annalee Newitz, Matt Wray 'Introduction' in ed. Annalee Newitz, Matt Wray, *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, (London and New York : Routledge, 1997) 2

<sup>44</sup> Annalee Newitz, Matt Wray 'Introduction' 2

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 2

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 3

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refuse of society. Wray and Newitz observe that 'the white trash stereotype serves as a useful way of blaming the poor for being poor.'<sup>47</sup> In this respect the American term functions in the same way as the British 'chav', as an explanation for cultural and class differences that blames the poor not only for their own situation, but for a nation's ills.

### **Whiteness as an unmarked category: Comparing Hilton and the Kardashians**

When Hilton and Goody transgress (and in so doing highlight the existence of) celebrity's codes of idealised white femininity, they reveal a whiteness which retains the privilege of an unmarked category until such celebrities fall short of its ideals of purity and restraint and are thus deemed 'White Trash'. The unmarked status of whiteness is seen most clearly through comparison with non-white celebrities who are understood primarily through their ethnic or racial identity. Consider Hilton in relation to her celebrity peer Kim Kardashian, whose memoir constantly references, explains and even apologises for, her ethnic identity. Hilton's memoir never once mentions her white racial identity.

In terms of socioeconomic background, Kim Kardashian and Paris Hilton have extremely similar profiles. Both attended prestigious, independent school The Buckley School in California and live in Beverly Hills as the offspring of wealthy, high profile parents. Indeed Kardashian describes Hilton as a friend and mentor in cultivating and coping with fame: 'she said "whatever you do, just smile. And don't say anything under your breath because now they have video cameras too."'<sup>48</sup>

As Sean Redmond observes, 'The symbolism of whiteness is also found in the everyday world, in the wedding dress, the doctor's uniform and in the 'signs' of health and hygiene, for example, establishing whiteness as indexical, or rather iconic, of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 1

<sup>48</sup> Kardashian, Kourtney, Kardashian, Kim, and Kardashian, Khloe, *Kardashian Confidential*, (St Martin's Press 2011) p.100

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purity.<sup>49</sup> In the collective memoir, *Kardashian Confidential*, we see the three Kardashian sisters negotiating their public identity in relation to ethnicity, hygiene and purity, in a way that Hilton is not at any point required to do. They describe a beauty regime that must deal with the perceived 'problems' associated with their Armenian heritage. Hilton's memoir similarly makes frequent references to her beauty regimen. Not one of them is presented as a necessity because of her race. *Kardashian Confidential* contains a chapter titled 'So Armenian', expressing pride in their Armenian heritage. However, paradoxically, the women simultaneously demonstrate shame in their Armenianness, presenting it as the source of undesirable physical attributes which need to be erased. The book reads: '[We] are all dark, and we're hairy, like most Armenians.'<sup>50</sup> The reference to hairiness, which in this context is delineated as a negative attribute, incompatible with acceptable femininity, renders the statement an apology for their ethnic make up and explains away what they consider to be unsightly flaws.

In their analysis of the Reality TV series *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, Maria Pramaggiore and Diane Negra observe that 'the women overtly signal aspirations toward a convincing whiteness through, for example, multiple series mentions of the importance of hair removal.'<sup>51</sup> This emphasis extends, in their memoir, to an entire chapter entitled 'Wax Work', a phrase highlighting the labour behind what is presented as important and necessary maintenance: 'waxing leaves everything cleaner', 'at the age of eleven, we were getting waxed', 'your bikini, I believe, should always be waxed.'<sup>52</sup> These statements accompany large colour photographs of the women in their bikinis as evidence that they are good postfeminist subjects with abundant, curly, brown Armenian hair visible only in acceptably feminine places. Hair is equated with

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<sup>49</sup> Sean Redmond, 'The Whiteness of stars: Looking at Kate Winslet's Unruly White Body,' *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, ed. by Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (London : SAGE 2006) p 266

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 21

<sup>51</sup> Negra, Diane and Pramaggiore, Maria, 'Keeping Up with the Aspirations: Commercial Family Values and the Kardashian Brand,' in *Reality Gendervision : sexuality & gender on transatlantic reality television*, ed. by Brenda R. Weber (London : Duke University Press 2014) 86

<sup>52</sup> *Kardashian Confidential*, 36-7

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Armenianness, but it is also equated with dirt. Their ethnic identity is thus expressed through contradictory displays of both pride and shame.

Racial markers are embodied, and this bodily emphasis is a source of sexualisation. Pramaggiore and Negra identify that 'the desire for and disparagement of Kim's ass continues a long tradition of racial and ethnic fetishization that spans Sarah Baartman, known as the Hottentot Venus, and Jennifer Lopez.'<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Kim Kardashian's ass is an asset so heavily capitalised upon that her entire family's fame and fortune is attributed to its extraordinary plenitude. Kim's sisters open the memoir with 'people say it all started with Kim's bootylicious butt.'<sup>54</sup> Kim Kardashian's star image exhibits ambivalence between pride and shame toward an ethnic identity that draws attention to, is written upon, and purportedly capitalises upon her sexualised physicality as defined in contrast to what Richard Dyer has identified as the 'non-physical, spiritual, indeed ethereal qualities' of the 'white woman as angel'.<sup>55</sup> Hilton's memoir, by contrast, never accounts for, explains, apologises for or even acknowledges the fact that she is white. According to her memoir, Hilton has no racial identity: her hegemonic whiteness is not held to be a racial signifier.

### **'White trash' celebrity as failure of femininity**

However, in contrast to her memoir, the anti-fan characterisation of Hilton as 'white trash' shows that she, like Goody, disrupts 'the social decorums that have supported the hegemonic, unmarked status of whiteness as a normative identity'<sup>56</sup> and thereby undermine the privileges that their whiteness, as well as their wealth, ought to confer. Transgressions of cultural appropriateness appear to be most harshly chastised when the

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<sup>53</sup> Negra, Diane and Pramaggiore, Maria, 'Keeping Up' 86

<sup>54</sup> *Kardashian Confidential*, 4

<sup>55</sup> Dyer 1997 127

<sup>56</sup> John Hartigan 'Unpopular culture: The case of 'white trash',' 317

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boundaries crossed are those set by middle-class ideals of femininity. As Tasker and Negra argue, 'postfeminism is white and middle class by default'<sup>57</sup> and presents women's lives as defined by 'choice' whilst simultaneously privileging traditional, passive gender roles as the choice above all others. Building upon the work of Bourdieu, Skeggs charts the association of femininity with the habitus of the upper classes: 'ease, restraint, calm, and luxurious decoration. It was a category of pure, white, heterosexuality, later translated into the ideal for middleclass women.'<sup>58</sup> Femininity is inherently classed and defined in opposition to black and working class women who are 'coded as the sexual and deviant other.'<sup>59</sup>

We have seen in the previous examples how Goody's 'brash', 'ugly', 'ignorant' persona, not only finds her condemned to the lowest of class and racial categories, but also presents a failure of femininity. Having been coded as the shameful, debased other - deficient in femininity and class - her memoir attempts to offer readers a *mea culpa*, not only for her racism, but for who she is. Ultimately her memoir is an act of repentance, expressing shame at her origins, her past behaviour and the woman she was when she entered the limelight. Society's judgement of her as unacceptable 'white trash' create the framing conditions within which she must write her life story and shape it accordingly.

Despite having been born on the opposite end of the class spectrum from Goody, Hilton receives the same class slur. Where Rojek considers Goody to be 'representative of...white, working-class trash', the website *Urban Dictionary* claims that Paris Hilton personifies the term. Under the entry for 'white trash' comes the definition: 'anyone who goes by the name Paris Hilton, wants to be Paris Hilton, knows Paris Hilton, or has spent one night in Paris'<sup>60</sup> Regardless of the difference in their socio-economic backgrounds,

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<sup>57</sup> Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra, 'Introduction', 2

<sup>58</sup> Bev Skeggs, 'The Toilet Paper: Femininity, Class and Misrecognition', 297

<sup>59</sup> Bev Skeggs, 'The Toilet Paper: Femininity, Class and Misrecognition', 297

<sup>60</sup> 'white trash,' posted by 'your mom', *Urban Dictionary*, retrieved on 3 July 2013 from <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=white%20trash> (on 3 July 2013 this definition had received 7744 likes)

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both Goody and Hilton are subject to the class and racial discourses that combine to judge them to be what Shelley Cobb describes as 'women who do not display the cultural tastes appropriate to the privileges of whiteness.'<sup>61</sup> Coming from the world of old money, Hilton represents the most exclusive enclave of white privilege. Her inherited wealth affords her the means to acquire the accoutrements, habits and cultural knowledge of the elite and yet she epitomises 'white trash' celebrity. Whether born rich or poor, neither woman has the 'symbolic' or 'cultural capital'<sup>62</sup> to save them from ridicule and degradation once they are in the public eye. On the online forum *Listology*, under the heading 'Paris Hilton: Rich White Trash,' poster [mellador@ho](mailto:mellador@ho) describes her as a 'no-talent-daddy's-money-what's-a-Walmart-bottle-blonde... Dumb. As. Dirt.' and asks 'What's she famous for again? I can think of very few examples of people making a career out of their mind-numbing stupidity.'<sup>63</sup> The poster's vitriol comes from the view that Hilton lacks the right type of talent to deserve fame and that her inherited wealth renders her out of touch with 'normal' people. To be dumb and famous is an insult to the audience. To be dumb and rewarded with riches is even more so. Their careers in 'reality' television leave both Hilton and Goody vulnerable to the charge of talentless stupidity without the shield of a trade to hide behind. The bottle blonde reference is a charge of inauthenticity, as if the injustice of Hilton's fame and riches would be mitigated were it springing from a natural beauty.

### 'White trash' as wilful self-display

Skeggs builds upon the work of Bourdieu to argue that appearance classes femininity through its function as a marker of respectability. Naturalness, and with it associations of ease, are rewarded with a greater cultural value than constructed beauty,

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<sup>61</sup>Shelley, Cobb, 'Mother of the Year Kathy Hilton, Lynne Spears, Dina Lohan and Bad Celebrity Motherhood', *Genders*, (48) 2008, retrieved on 3 July 2013 from

[http://www.genders.org/g48/g48\\_cobb.html](http://www.genders.org/g48/g48_cobb.html)

<sup>62</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*

<sup>63</sup> [mellador@ho](mailto:mellador@ho), 'Paris Hilton: Rich White Trash', *Listology*, retrieved on 3 July 2013 from

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which is 'de-valued for being made visible' thereby revealing the necessity for effort.<sup>64</sup> As well as both receiving the slur 'white trash', Goody and Hilton share conventions of appearance, actively embracing an ostentatiously 'fake' look. Nails, hair extensions, breasts or manifold other 'enhancements' are mentioned in their memoirs, with the fake tan the symbol above all others of the trashy girl's beauty regime. Hilton advises, 'always have a tan. It looks like you've been in an exotic (i.e. expensive) place,'<sup>65</sup> whilst Goody describes that one of the first things she did to recover from a miscarriage was spend 'twenty minutes on a sunbed'.<sup>66</sup> Star of 'reality' show *The Only Way is Essex*, Sam Faiers, dedicates a chapter of her autobiography to the topic of fake tanning and explains why 'being tanned is like a religion'<sup>67</sup>: 'We like a glamorous, big, full-on look that catches people's attention, and we are not afraid to look like we have made a lot of effort.'<sup>68</sup> These augmentations are presented as the consumerist trappings of a wealthy celebrity lifestyle. However, this fake aesthetic is another means by which both women are judged to be 'trashy'. Whilst it may be an expensive look to produce, with its over-the-top excess, it is a look interpreted by society as 'cheap': a term which, when applied to a woman, has derogative overtones of sexual availability. Hilton herself attempts to police the line between 'classy' and 'trashy' for her readers: 'There's a big difference between being fun and provocative and being totally over-the-top and gross.'<sup>69</sup> With the 'white trash' slur, however, Hilton has been judged to have transgressed her own standards. Both women describe their revealing outfits, heteronormatively placing the authority to approve, and right to judge, with their male partners. Goody states of a birthday outfit, 'I thought I looked great, Jack [her partner] thought I looked like a slut.'<sup>70</sup> Hilton advises readers to, 'show off your navel and belly', wear jeans 'really, really low-waisted', and 'dress

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<sup>64</sup> Bev Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*. (London: Routledge, 2003) 101

<sup>65</sup> Paris Hilton, *Confessions of an Heiress*, (London : Simon & Schuster, 2004) 13

<sup>66</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, 186

<sup>67</sup> Sam Faiers, *Living Life the Essex Way*, (London : Simon and Schuster, 2012) 23

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 21

<sup>69</sup> Paris Hilton, *Confessions of an Heiress*, 8

<sup>70</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, 46

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supersexy when you don't have a boyfriend, or if you want to make your boyfriend jealous.<sup>71</sup> As their sexuality is conflated with the visibility of their bodies, the accusation of aesthetic trashiness is born of these women's specularly, having made a display of themselves.

'Making a spectacle out of oneself' argues Mary J. Russo in her book on the female grotesque, was seen to be 'a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure. Men, I learned later in life, "exposed themselves," but that operation was quite deliberate and circumscribed. For a woman, making a spectacle of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries.'<sup>72</sup> The charge of trashiness, and the invocation of the grotesque in the discourses of inadvertency and inappropriateness that surround these women, is in part founded upon the failure of boundaries represented in Hilton and Goody's exposure. Further, Goody's sentimental discourse is also grotesque in these terms: her memoir describes 'the floodgates opening'<sup>73</sup> in her seemingly unrestrained outpourings of personal secrets, representing an 'over sharing' of physical and emotional detail suggesting that she doesn't respect the boundaries of decorous speech. However, unlike the inadvertency Russo describes, Faiers relates the 'efforts' made to 'catch people's attention,' suggesting that what further provokes censure in the 'big, full-on look' epitomised by fake tan is the deliberate willingness it suggests to be looked at. Or even, a willingness to be seen to make an effort to encourage others to look. Acceptable middle class femininity has always been decorative and specular. The supposedly unseemly difference in this instance is the invitation to an admiring audience which one ought to be able to attract effortlessly. Despite their antithetical socioeconomic origins, both women's star identities share many characteristics: they are classed as 'white trash', criticised for occupying our screens without the necessary talent to deserve the attention,

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<sup>71</sup> Paris Hilton, *Confessions of an Heiress*, 52-3

<sup>72</sup> Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque : risk, excess and modernity* (London and New York : Routledge 1994) 53

<sup>73</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, xxxv

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and characterised by a supposedly 'trashy' aesthetic. The common ground here is the gendered charge of failing to conduct themselves with the modesty and humility that befit their being female. If an upper-class habitus and restrained femininity are inextricable, these women are classed together as trashy for their lack of feminine restraint.

Both women use their memoirs to present themselves as more acceptably feminine than their public reception has classed them. Goody's memoir casts her as a homemaking, ideal mother writing 'a precious record for her two beloved sons'<sup>74</sup> and emphasises the importance she puts on manners and cleanliness. Hilton distances herself from women who 'need to talk about every tight T-shirt they buy, every carbohydrate they eat, every insecurity they have, every single thing a guy says to them'<sup>75</sup> or 'go around spilling [their] guts.'<sup>76</sup> However their careers as the subjects of 'reality' products, including these very memoirs, require them to live in public. They are characterised by a kind of performative excess, an inability to stay demurely out of the spotlight as a 'classy' woman should. Where Tyler and Bennett describe the vilification of Goody as a 'grotesque representation of the undeserving poor,'<sup>77</sup> Hilton is conversely represented as the undeserving rich, lacking what Cobb describes as 'the supposedly innate cultural tastes and decorum that wealthy white people should have.'<sup>78</sup> Therefore, the white trash slur derives less from either woman's class status than from their 'inhabiting a transgressive femininity' that renders them vulgar and grotesque. They stimulate what Cobb describes as 'cultural anxiety over the availability of individual success within capitalism to "inappropriate" members' of society.'<sup>79</sup> The female 'reality' star is impelled to share all and thus cannot simultaneously occupy both the restrained feminine and a life of display. Whether it is aesthetic trashiness or an undeserved spotlight, the

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<sup>74</sup> Jade Goody, *Jade Fighting to the End*, vii

<sup>75</sup> Paris Hilton, *Confessions of an Heiress*, 9

<sup>76</sup> Paris Hilton, *Confessions of an Heiress*, 7

<sup>77</sup> Imogen Tyler and Bruce Bennett, "'Celebrity Chav': Fame, Femininity and Social Class," 380

<sup>78</sup> Shelley Cobb, 'Mother of the Year' (6)

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* (25)

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diametrically opposed class backgrounds of these two women show that the charge of trashiness is, above all else, about the sullied virtue of a woman who lives in public and the hegemony of middle class ideals.

### **Conclusion**

As the 'official' narratives produced in celebrity memoir react to their media environment, they can be seen to be always in interaction with the multiplicity of coverage, judgments and readings that circulate around the celebrity. The non-hierarchical digital structures of celebrity gossip media provide a forum for fans (and anti-fans) to offer their own alternative discourses about a celebrity that can compete with, if not supplant, the "official story." As fans judge celebrities according to how successfully they perform certain norms, celebrity memoirs can be seen to be attempting to align the celebrity subject with dominant ideas of middle class femininity. A particular brand of celebrity femininity is thus constructed through the negotiation between the subject and her audience as 'official' memoir and 'alternative' (anti)fan discourses overlap with, react to, and incorporate one another. In their reception, Jade Goody and Paris Hilton are always already defined in relation to their status as emblems of either the undeserving rich or the undeserving poor. Publically derided as not having proven their worth according to socially sanctioned ideas of what constitutes talent or worthy fame, these women's star images are constructed in relation to their past humiliation such that they are always partially defined by it. These celebrities do not solely seek to disavow their public humiliations. Indeed, its recirculation can work in their commercial interests. However, whilst they may at points embrace and celebrate their unruly femininities, their online fan and anti-fan reception as 'white trash' shows that society does not. A sexualised inflexion writes trashiness upon the overexposed female celebrity body and exposes the limits and parameters of this negotiated agency.

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