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Re-claiming resilience and re-imagining welfare: a response to McRobbie

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Abstract: Across popular media and political discourse, subjects are increasingly addressed through the language of resilience – called upon to be positive, to show 'grit, and to 'bounceback' from adversity. In her latest book, *Feminism and The Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare* (2020), Angela McRobbie offers an incisive analysis of the gendered address that this call to resilience takes; teasing out its complex relation to the logics of post-feminism and locating its traction against a backdrop of neoliberal austerity which has disproportionately punished women – and poor, black and brown women especially. In this short piece, I reflect upon the book's contributions and consider whether the language of resilience, rather than be abandoned, might be reclaimed and repoliticised as part of radical feminist re-imaginings of welfare.

In the space of just 124 pages, Angela McRobbie's *Feminism and The Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare* (2020) makes a number of original and urgent contributions - to theorizations of the ever-shifting permutations of post-feminism and neoliberalism, to feminist scholarship on the welfare state and its exclusions, and to recent work on the cultural politics of austerity. As its title suggests, the book also speaks directly to a body of critical scholarship on the language of resilience as it is increasingly found across popular media and political discourse (Bull and Allen 2018; Donoghue and Edmiston 2018; Gill and Orgad 2018). Across these domains, the cultivation of personal dispositions of character, positivity, grit and 'bouncebackability' are increasingly posited as solutions to problems as wide-ranging as educational inequality, unemployment, poverty, the gender pay gap, and low social mobility. Feminist cultural studies scholars have theorised these as part of the 'affective life of neoliberalism' (Gill and Kanai 2018; Scharff 2016), where modes of governance work through affective and psychic registers and different forms of 'self-work'. As many others have documented (for example Rose and Lentzos 2017), the language of resilience (and responsibility) has a long history. However, it is no coincidence that its promotion has gained traction over the past decade, against a backdrop of worsening social inequality and an evisceration of forms of social protection as a result of neoliberal austerity policies.

McRobbie elucidates the distinctly gendered address that resilience takes, teasing out its complex relation to the logics of neoliberalism and post-feminism. In conversation both with her earlier work on post-feminism and recent scholarship on neoliberal and popular feminism (e.g.

Banet-Weiser et al 2020) McRobbie explores how capitalism has responded to, and sought to contain, the new visibility of feminist activism as feminism - once vehemently repudiated - has become 'a ubiquitous force in everyday life' (p69). Here we are offered the generative concept of 'perfect imperfect resilience' (*p-i-r*) (chapter 2), elements of this *dispositif* can be found across feminine popular culture addressed at women; from Sheryl Sandberg's 'Lean In' feminism, to women's magazines, and the American self-help author and speaker Brené Brown. McRobbie positions resilience as a 'pro-capitalist, therapeutic device' (p63) which sanitizes feminist critique; it blocks collective action and demands for structural change through redirecting female discontent into privatized strategies of self-beratement, self-management and self-care. Crucially, McRobbie demonstrates how resilience operates as a boundary-marking activity, hardening divisions *between* women, as poor women – including women of colour - are castigated for their 'dependency', 'bad' choices and 'irresponsibility'.

Useful here is another of the book's key concepts, 'visual media governmentality': this refers to the role of visual media as a regulatory space where 'the benchmarks and boundaries of female success are established and… new norms of failure symbolized in the abject body of the "single mother" and in the bodies of her untidy children or "brood" are to be found' (p17). This regime is explored across the book, but is perhaps most powerfully illustrated in its second half where McRobbie attends to recent shifts in the mediation of welfare. Adding to important work by Tracey Jensen and Imogen Tyler (2015) on the cultural mechanisms of stigma and antiwelfare commonsense, McRobbie demonstrates how the media operates as an agent of welfare reform, working in chorus with government rhetoric about the moral failing of so-called 'welfare scroungers' and 'skivers'. As McRobbie shows, these processes get enacted upon and through the bodies of poor, single mothers who are subjected to virulent forms of demonization within the media. One example examined in the book is the British reality TV programme *Benefits Street* (Channel 4, 2014) and its central protagonist, Dee Kelly (referred to as 'White Dee'). An unemployed single mother, Dee was frequently cited by journalists, audiences and politicians as evidence of the 'problem' of welfare dependency (Allen et al 2014). As McRobbie contends, the denigration of working-class women like Dee has 'been a key element, indeed a weapon, in the ideological justification of an anti-welfare agenda' (p95).

It is important to note that, in the UK at least, *Benefits Street* and other programmes of this ilk have retreated from their spectacular and cacophonous climax of the mid-2010s. How do we make sense of this? One may be tempted to interpret it as the sign of a more ethical and 'woke' broadcasting sector; one responsive to the criticisms made of the genre's depiction of working-class communities, including a government inquiry into reality TV in 2019[i], and wider charges of a lack of

diversity in the sector. Yet, as others have warned (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012; Sobande 2020), we must be wary of corporate 'wokeness', as commitments to diversity and social justice often become a means of further capital accumulation rather than any meaningful challenge to inequality. Indeed, in a post-pandemic landscape, it is likely that the welfare scrounger narrative will become increasingly profitable for media and political elites. As national governments seek to reduce unprecedented levels of national debt, we will no doubt see mediated poverty shaming resurface, even if this takes on a somewhat different texture.

The language of resilience, by contrast, shows a greater and more steady durability. Throughout the pandemic we have seen frequent calls for, and celebrations of, resilient workers, institutions, families and communities. The British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has been praised for his optimism, resilience and masculinist 'grit', visually embodied in photographs of Johnson, dressed in shirt and tie, doing press-ups on the floor of Number 10 Downing Street following his recovery from the virus[ii]. Johnson was not the only world leader venerated in this way during through the pandemic. Former US president Donald Trump and Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, engaged in similar displays of macho resilience; whether in their 'risk-taking' (the refusal to wear masks and insistence on hand-shaking), minimising of the seriousness of the virus, or in political (in)actions that resulted in soaring national death rates. Indeed, these embodiments of rugged (hetero-)masculinist resilience were starkly different to those demanded of, and accessible to, less privileged groups.

Young people have been especially implicated in these calls for resilience. Globally, young people have suffered disproportionately from economic fallout of the pandemic, with already-disadvantaged groups of young people - including black and brown youth, non-graduates and young mothers – being worst effected and predicted to experience the greatest scarring effect on future wages (Henehan 2020). Yet young people have been instructed to see tough times as an opportunity for personal growth, to cultivate an upbeat positivity and zen-like patience as they wait for the storm to pass. The suggestion that one can simply 'bounce back' through grit and optimism is not only disingenuous, it represents an epistemic and ontological negation of the uncertainty, loss and anger felt by many young people during the pandemic.

Is the language of resilience beyond saving? Hannah King and colleagues (2021) have argued that instead of rejecting the language of resilience and responsibility, we should instead redefine these terms away from neoliberalism and towards the pursuit of social justice. This requires first emphasising *relational and collective* forms of responsibility and resilience, and second, shifting the focus of resilience discourse in other directions: namely, training our analytical lens upwards to

question the irresponsibility and inaction of powerful individuals and institutions, such as corrupt and mismanaged governments and corporations whose (in)actions cause social harms and even death. To conclude, I want to consider whether the pandemic might provide such opportunities to reclaim – indeed *re-politicise* - resilience as part of the radical, intersectional feminist practices and imaginings that McRobbie calls for. That is, feminisms that expose and challenge neoliberal assaults on welfare that cause harm not just to women in general, but marginalised women in particular.

In the UK, and globally, women have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic as they shoulder the burden of unpaid caring responsibilities including home-schooling (Allen et al 2020; Mooi-Reci and Risman 2021)**.** Moreover, it is minority and migrant women, as well as disabled women and single-mothers who have been most adversely affected (Women's Budget Group 2020). These women are more likely to have been furloughed or lost hours because of unpaid caring responsibilities, a lack of affordable childcare, and inflexible working arrangements (Lyonette and Warren 2021). Indeed, these women are more likely to be engaged in the 'dirty work' of social reproduction (Glenn 1992; Duffy, 2007) within low-wage areas of the labour market: carers, nannies, nurses, hospital caterers, cleaners. These jobs, chronically low paid and insecure, are disproportionately performed by poor, black, brown and migrant women (Farris 2017; Gunaratnam 2013), yet are essential for managing the growing global demand for care as welfare provision contracts under neoliberal restructuring. Moreover, it is the cheap labour of these women that has allowed more privileged women to enter or return to the labour market. Indeed, if some women have achieved 'work-life balance' and been able to – as Sheryl Sandberg exhorts – 'lean in' to their careers, we must ask, what, or rather who, has enabled this? Or, to put it another way, upon whose backs do white professional women attain balance (Seals Allers 2018)?

Historically ignored and underpaid, the pandemic saw many of these workers newly declared 'essential' and – in the UK - worthy of a weekly national 'clap for heroes'. And yet, as Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs have argued (2020), these demonstrations of affection for carers stand in sharp contrast to the state's historic and continued neglect of the health and social care sector and the worsening working conditions and pay of its workers. Many such workers were slow to be given adequate PPE in the early months of the pandemic, resulting in higher rates of infection and death from the virus, especially among black and minority ethnic workers. Sentimental declarations of national gratitude thus soon rang hollow.

As the pandemic has laid bare neoliberal capitalism's crisis of care and social reproduction, so too has it reanimated urgent discussions and activism around it, from *The Care Collective's* (2020) manifesto on the politics of interdependence to the activism of global movements like the Women's

Strike Assembly. In the UK, the activist collective *Sisters Uncut*[iii] have played a leading role in opposing austerity and forms of state and gender violence that punish working-class women, women of colour and migrant women in particular. Their direct action against state cuts to domestic violence services, the UK government's hostile environment policy, and the prison industrial complex enact the very forms of collectivity, critique and progressive action necessary for reclaiming resilience. We must build on these examples to foster feminist interventions that not only expose the devastating impacts of the state's withdrawal of social protection on the most marginalised groups of women, but that also radically *re-imagine* welfare and centre an ethos of care. As McRobbie argues, such reimagining necessitates foregoing nostalgic, rose-tinted yearnings for the 'golden age' of welfare, and reckoning with the racial logics through which certain populations have been – and still are – excluded from the 'welfare state'.

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[i] The UK government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee launched their inquiry into reality TV in April 2019 to investigating the duty of care shown to participants following the suicides of several participants from shows including the Jeremey Kyle Show and Love Island. See: https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/378/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/news/103566/committee-announces-inquiry-into-reality-tv/

[ii] Johnson was photographed for an interview in the *Mail on Sunday* newspaper in June 2020, following his stint in hospital with COVID-19, insisting he was 'fit as a butcher's dog'. See https://metro.co.uk/2020/06/28/boris-johnson-press-ups-prove-fit-butchers-dog-12914389/

[iii] See https://www.sistersuncut.org/feministo/