NOBODY'S DARLINGS: READING WHITE TRASH IN SUPERNATURAL

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Hunting things and saving people. This is the plot and purpose of Eric Kripke's ongoing CW series *Supernatural* on the most surface level. Despite the overt fantasy which frames the series, it is better defined as a drama which explores the depths of not only family but also class. Fans and critics both have discussed the ways in which Kripke has constructed family and masculinity. Oddly, though, discussions of class have been surprisingly sparse in both critical and fan circles.

Likewise, there is only a small pool of literature that focuses on the theoretical and lived experience of white trash. White trash, of course, is in and of itself a term that is hotly debated. What does it mean? Who does it include? Is it even real? Who is included within the umbrella of white trash? Who decides who fits within this rubric?

Through out this project, these two discourses will be joined together in order to broaden the scope of conversations within both spheres. Chapters including the genealogy of white trash, the aesthetics and commodification of white trash, and the construction of a specifically homosocial white trash family use *Supernatural* as a case study for the ways in which contemporary meditated American culture views or, more aptly, does not view class.
To my family who taught me that I didn't need to lose my Southern accent.

To Aunt Hazel who helped to open up the tomatoes of my heart and the tobacco fields of my past.
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In peace,

Aaron Burnell, March 2011
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Within American discourse, everyone knows what white trash is. When the phrase is mentioned, a wealth of amorphous images will come to one’s mind such as trailer parks, bar brawls, and country music. Like many other of the cultures that populate the American landscape, the tropes that define white trash arise out of the nebulous ether that is the product of the media industry. These cues are often taken, at least on some level, to be seeds of truth which continues to propel the stereotypes forward. The rhetoric surrounding this line of discourse often boils down to the idea that if these characterizations were not true in some sense, they would not be perpetuated. This mindset is artfully and succinctly noted by John Harritigan Jr. when he notes that “the social contempt embedded in perceptions of white trash is so deeply naturalized” (110) that even when we grow up “in a very liberal household” we may find ourselves saying, as Greil Marcus did, that “there was one group that I somehow got the message that it was okay to be bigoted about, and those were the backward, white Southerners -- white trash. I’m not saying that I got the message from my parents, but I did get it somehow” (Marcus in Hartigan, 109).

However, when one engages with not only the history of white trash images in the media but also the lived, imagined, and constructed narratives of poor whites in America, one can see that there is a specific historical precedence that gave rise to these beliefs, which is what continues to maintain this belief set. It is crucial to bear in mind that even if we see images of white trash in the media, in history, in suburbs or trailer parks, “white trash exists as much in middle-class fears and fantasies as it does in the ‘trashy’ bodies of poor whites and their shared stories and talk” (Hartigan 116). White trash functions as slur, a community, and a figure that falls problematically and productively along the disciplinary divide between anthropology and cultural studies. Rather than providing a unique, locatable ethnographic object (an
authentic culture for anthropologists) or an expressive culture (a category cultural studies
uses to distinguish creative dimensions of ethnic or racial experience), white trash exists
as a rhetorical identity. That is, white trash is a naming practice by which racial and class
identities in the United States are maintained. (Hartigan 135)

One of the major concerns to always keep in mind with this project is the conception and
the imagined definition of white trash. Within the cultural imagination, white trash is easy to spot
and define. This definition is based, more often than not, on images from Jeff Foxworthy’s the
Blue Collar Comedy Tour (black velvet paintings and entertaining bug zappers) or country music
stars who are “reformed” rednecks. While this hyperbolic understanding of white trash has its
place within the discourse, it, like most media representations, is not a mirror for reality.
Likewise, within academics, rarely is time given to white trash. Perhaps the reason for this is
related to the “uncouth” nature of the subject. This seems unlikely. Rather, it would seem that the
subjectivity of white trash is often overlooked because of the historical precedent to remove
autonomy from poor whites (a precedent which will be explored in depth within chapter one).

The CW television show Supernatural (2005 - present) is not a text that immediately
comes to mind when one considers the term “white trash.” The show, though, fits within the
narrative trajectory of the white trash narrative of America. Ostensibly, Supernatural is
concerned with the two Winchester brothers, Dean (Jensen Ackles) and Sam (Jared Padalecki),
appropriately fighting supernatural creatures such as wendigos, poltergeists, and urban legend
characters such as Bloody Mary and the Hookman. Thematically, though, Supernatural plays
into the tradition of white trash by subverting yet ultimately reaffirming the markers of white
trash.

Through an extended inquiry into Supernatural, I show that white trash is not a category
that is purely based upon visual markers of socio-economic class. Rather white trash is positioned within a discourse that is related, but not identical to, that of working class. I have taken a three-tiered approach to define white trash within this project. First, the narrative of white trash in the media must be defined. Likewise, the white trash aesthetic and the ways in which it has been commodified are crucial to understanding the ways in which *Supernatural* fit within this discourse. Finally, I have expanded upon the ways in which the homosocial family unit is used as a means of identity construction.

Through the use of these three major ideas, I have demonstrated that even though *Supernatural* does not invoke traditional markers of white trash, its characters and themes are directly related to the category. I also have begun to explore the reasons that a show that focuses on the lives of two white trash men is so well received by affluent young women. Because of the scope of this project, I was not able to engage directly with the fandom or fans of *Supernatural*. The fandom is too large and intricate to properly address while also focusing on the elements of white trash I have outlined. Instead, I specifically look at the rhetoric of the CW, the network that airs *Supernatural*, in conjunction with the aforementioned larger themes. Therefore, theories of fandom and fan activity will appear throughout this project without constituting a specific chapter.

Throughout this project, I am also concerned with the ways in which *Supernatural* both subverts and supports the tradition of white trash. Seemingly, *Supernatural* functions in opposition to the conventions of white trash subjects as monsters by the mere fact that the Winchester brothers are the protagonists of the series and the fact that they are the ones who are banishing, defeating, or killing the supernatural “monster of the week.” However, I show that through the means by which they are doing this banishing, the Winchesters are actually being
shown as merely the less monstrous kind of monster.

**Methodology**

When dealing with either a large primary text or a seemingly disparate number of themes, it is important to clearly define the ways in which this bulk of information will be navigated. Following are the methods which I have used for this project, including discussions of both primary and secondary sources.

I have focused my discussion of *Supernatural* only on its first five seasons. The reasons are two-fold. Practically, the sixth season is presently being aired on the CW. It would be too difficult to attempt to integrate this current season within the project without knowing its trajectory or the end result of some of the “mysteries” that are being introduced, many of which may be unnecessary red herrings. Likewise, the ability to revisit specific episodes is nearly nonexistent. The episodes currently being aired are available on the CW website but only during the week in which they have been aired. Any other versions of episodes are so consistently taken down from websites that there is no way to guarantee my ability to revisit them. In reference to narrative and theme, however, there is another reason to only engage with the first five seasons. When *Supernatural* was originally conceived by Eric Kripke, he intended the series to run for five seasons. However, because of the financial success of the series, it was renewed for sixth and seventh seasons. It is apparent from watching the fifth season finale that it was meant as the complete end of the narrative. Likewise, Kripke has resigned from his position as series leading creative director. The sixth, and presumably seventh season, function as addenda to the original text, and include abrupt changes to the mythology and narrative. It is for these two primary reasons that I have chosen only to direct my attention to the first five seasons. I have engaged with the first five seasons through the technique of close reading. Instead of focusing on the
commercial or production elements of the series, I have treated these seasons as the primary text by which I have created a specific case study of the representations of white trash within contemporary American media.

There is a surprisingly sparse amount of scholarly literature that speaks specifically to the discourse of white trash. Because of this, I have used a number of different approaches when it comes to secondary texts. One of the major themes that runs through this paper are the ideas of Julia Kristeva and her work on abjection which, when linked to white trash, opens a number of avenues of inquiry. For instance, *Supernatural* does not generally employ traditional “country” music in its extensive soundtrack. However, when one considers the ways that music is used within white trash communities, unifying threads link classic “mullet rock” and country “honky-tonk.” The “classic rock” that plays both diegetically and non- in *Supernatural* is now canonized within certain music circles. When the history of this music is considered, the desire and disgust of abjection can be read into both their lyrics and their context from the viewpoint of both the objects (the musical commodity) and the subjects (those who listen to said music and see themselves reflected in the object). This music, specifically, can be used to illustrate the ambiguous position which white trash occupies within American consciousness. Aaron Fox notes that

solid ‘objects’ become speaking ‘subjects’, and heartbroken ‘subjects’ consume themselves as commodified ‘objects.’ ‘Natural’ ideological meanings and codes are denaturalized, only to be renaturalized and appropriated to other codes and ideologies. Ostensible signs of ‘the true’ and ‘the false’ are inverted and conflated (53, 1992).

Within the discourse of *Supernatural* but also within the larger discourse of white trash, one can see that music exists as commodity and lived object. White trash as Hartigan notes is neither an
“authentic” or an “expressive” culture but rather becomes both an “object” and a “subject.”

Through the rhetoric the surrounds “trashy” people, music, cars, actions, or television, one can see the emergence of a mediated “object.” There is also, though, the lived experience of poor whites in historical contexts as well as those who see themselves reflected in those “objects.” Not only is the “object”/“subject” binary troubled through white trash aesthetics, but one can see how abjection pulls and pushes the “objects” and “subjects” closer together as well as further apart.

Likewise, abjection provides a theoretical connection to the historical trajectory of poor Southern whites moving north and west after the Civil War and the ways in which white trash was used by both Northerners and Southerners to assert their identities. Once again, this is not something with which *Supernatural* directly engages (aside, arguably, from the Winchester brothers’ extremely transient nature) but abjection acts as the thread that connects these pieces together because of the ways in which the Winchesters, when coupled with both the monster and the victim of the week, enact “white trash poetics [which] involves the effort to demarcate Self and Other within a frame of reference drenched in ambiguity by its appearance as a surface of sameness” (Hartigan 136).

While abjection is considered literary theory, the secondary sources I consulted have not all been of that type. I also looked at musicological, sociological, and ethnographic sources. Perhaps the most concise reasoning for such a wide range of sources is the fact that white trash is not an idea that can be easily defined. Just as its divergent pieces come together to form a cohesive discourse, I hope that these various sources and approaches will do the same.

**Literature Review**

In addition to the work of Julia Kristeva, attention is given to the work of musicologist Aaron Fox and scholars Matthew Wray and Annalee Newitz. While Fox primarily focuses on
work done in what he calls “redneck bars,” his findings can easily be applied to the wider conception of white trash. The two largest concepts of his upon which I will be relying are those of “talk”, a social “art form in and of itself” (Fox, 112, 1997), which exists self-reflexively as “trash” yet still embodies “verbal creativity, [and] tightly woven prosodic and topological density” (Fox, 113, 1997), and a “discourse of loss.” While Fox employs heavy theory, Wray and Newitz are concerned with defining white trash as a discourse within both academia and American consciousness. Both, though, are engaged with the different ways in which the white trash aesthetic has been commodified for mass consumption.

Many different groups and identities are able to lay claim to a sense of loss and melancholia which “unlike mourning, is an endless longing for an object that can’t be named. Mourning involves a process of grieving for the identifiable and real loss of a distinct object of affection. Melancholia, on the contrary, is a grief that knows no object” (Bibby, 234). However, Fox frames the white trash sense of loss as specialized economic and cultural loss that, with abjection in mind, is unsurprisingly tied to desire. He begins his discussion with a thematically appropriate analysis of a “talk” from a redneck bar in Texas:

My middle-aged interlocutors, it seemed, valued this phono/graphical medium [33-RPM LP records], with its archaically iconic transduction of sounds into a shaped, grooved materiality, precisely because of its obsolescence. As such, it provided a mnemonic evocation of symbolically loaded working-class social practices on talk and mutuality and a disappearing social order (Fox, 1997).

Exploring this desire/loss tension, one can see how the line between working-class and white trash can be defined. In chapter one, I explain the core difference, the liminality of cultural capital and influence which pervades the lives of white trash subjects. However, it is important to
preemptively introduce the basis of why white trash subjects are liminal. Fox concisely defines this tension by stating that “whereas the meta narrative of Desire makes feelings and people into ‘things’, the meta narrative of Loss turns ‘things’ into speaking, feelingful presences” and that “this inability to forget, which is the potential obverse of any commodified relation, becomes a thematic obsession […]”. This ‘subjectified’ mode of self-consumption is a poetic archaeology of the piled up memories which constitute the subject in the poetics of country music” and likewise white trash narratives as a whole (Fox, 1992, 54). White trash subjects live these texts (such as the subject/object tension of country music and commodity) through their experience and bodies. “The inability to forget” the “piled up memories” relates directly to the way in which white trash subjects constantly hearken back to “the good old days” (another concept that I explore in chapter one) while also being unable to forget the naturalized feeling of shame at being white trash. While white trash subjects long for “the good old days”, we can see that these days were days that never existed. Instead, they are being constructed in the present. The past is melancholic because it is constantly being longed for, searched for, but it never truly existed, and, therefore, it can never be recovered. However, in order to create an identity, white trash constructs its sense of self through these “piled up [self-created and self-reflexive] memories.”

While Fox lays a heavily theoretical framework, Newitz and Wray give insight to the relationship between white trash and objects and the way in which commodities affects not only this discourse of loss but also the relationship between white trash and the equally idealized middle class America. Once again, we can see that white trash must be understood in two ways: the “naming of actually existing white people who occupy the economic and social margins of American life” as well as the “set of myths and stereotypes that justify their continued marginalization” (Newitz and Wray, 1997, 172). This once again underscores the fact that white
trash is defined by its commodity markers just as much as its wealth or income markers as seen
by the fact that “class in the United States has always been a tricky category [that is] often used
metaphorically to designate forms of pathology and taste rather than literally to designate
economic position” (Newitz and Wray, 1997, 175). To further explore the conception of white
trash as relating to taste, Newitz and Wray coin the term “trash drag.” They specifically turn our
attention to the 1990s and grunge. During this time the “poor, vulgar, and proud” identity of
white trash was “packaged as a series of commodities that one could buy at Urban Outfitters, The
Gap, or Tower Records” (Newitz and Wray, 1997, 179). Not only does this discussion highlight
the cultural artifacts that are used to define white trash, but it also “acts out the middle class’s
confusion regarding the origins of class identity” (Newitz and Wray, 1997, 179). While social
class is a complicated matrix of markers and perceptions, trash drag frames class and identity as
simply another commodity that can be bought, returned, or traded in for the newest model. In
chapter two, I explicitly deal with the way in which commodities such as music, fashion, and cars
play into white trash.

It is this sense of loss coupled with the commodified aesthetics which so firmly places
Supernatural within the discourse of white trash. The Winchesters, without a doubt, are
constantly articulating Fox’s “discourse of loss” which defines white trash, as are the majority of
their peers. These characters are enacting a nostalgia for something which never existed. Instead,
it is a memory of an idealized concept. The Winchester brothers specifically are enacting a
familial loss and mourning for a childhood which never existed.

Wray and Newitz engage with the very real melancholia that white trash subjects may
feel. While cultural capital may be melancholic, the commodification of white trash aesthetics is
a very real mourning. Concrete items such as flannel, work boots, and torn jeans as well as
ideological cues such as violence and language, have been removed from their white trash origins and sold as a “look” and “fashion” which can be easily bought and then just as easily removed.

This “trash drag” allows for the surreal readings of class which occur within *Supernatural* fandom. As noted previously, the *Supernatural* fandom is as voracious as it is vocal. To illustrate the ways that the Winchesters are viewed as “working class” rather than white trash, it is worthwhile to examine the meta-essay from the fandom blog *Coffee and Ink* (Mely). The brothers may be rough around the edges, but they are conceptualized outside of the socio-economic system which places them more soundly within the liminal state of white trash. However, it would appear that even *naming* class in *Supernatural* is reserved for “academia” (versus fandom) as fan Cathexys notes in her comment to Mely’s post. Instead, the views of fans seem to align more often with that of Scholarlady who notes in her comment that “I’m not feeling the class aspect of [Mely’s] analysis as much. I thought part of the reason [the Winchesters] don’t talk about payment was that that’s just not what the show is about.”

Even within the academic community, the concept that the Winchesters could possibly be considered white trash is inconceivable. During a 2011 national Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association conference panel on *Supernatural*, I was lucky enough to ask four scholars if they believed the Winchesters could be white trash rather than working class. The answer I received from all four panelists was an overwhelming no. The Winchesters could not be white trash because “they are constantly working”, “they have goals and a work ethic”, and “they don’t sit around drinking beer all day.” White trash are instead “jerks.” While this response was immediately disheartening, upon further reflection I realized that these comments were likewise “just not what the show is about.” When thinking about “trash drag” we can see that the commodification of aesthetics allows viewers, both fans and
critics, to erase the Winchester’s class. However, with Wray and Newitz, we are given the language to view that class and more appropriately name it as white trash.

**Supernatural as Television**

It is important to bear in mind that *Supernatural* is a television series. It may have a narrative like literature, and literary analysis may be used to critique it. It may be visual like a film, and cinematic vocabulary may suit a discussion of it well. Above these two traits, though, is the fact that it is a television series. Because of this fact, an analysis of *Supernatural* comes equipped with theory, vocabulary, and expectations that are specific to television.

Not only does the format of the series hinge upon the technical aspects of television, but the series has been crafted to fit into one of the most dominant forms of public discourse as seen by Brian Ott, television scholar, who notes that “as television became more ubiquitous, it also became more central to daily life, first as a focal point of family leisure and entertainment, and later as the primary outlet for news and information” (7 emphasis added). Ott goes on to address when televisions were one of the fastest growing commodities. The number of Americans who immediately adopted televisions was larger than those who first adopted radios, cars, or air-conditioning (Ott, 7). Nearly overnight, the way in which Americans found, processed, and engaged with information changed. In order for individuals to become both actively and passively enveloped within the capitalistic modes of informational discourse, they need no longer be literate or geographically close -- two qualifiers for the literary dissemination of information.

The constantly interrupted pattern of television changed the form of information, but it also changed the way in which we absorb and process information. I do not intend to privilege one form over another (televisual or literal), but it is crucial to acknowledge the shift. Chesebro and Bertelsea, as quoted in Ott, foreground the fact that “habitual use of specific media systems
privileges certain worldviews, perspectives, orientations, or viewpoints” (8). The shift is rooted in the difference in structure between television and literature, because “unlike the highly sequential character of language, images favor a logic of simultaneity. When viewing an image one processes multiple signs at once as opposed to processing them in a sequential, authorially determined manner” (Ott, 9). Television affects the way in which we as a culture view ourselves and our world. Neil Postman succinctly describes the breadth of television:

There is no audience so young that it is barred from television. There is no poverty so abject that it is must forgo television. There is no education so exalted that it is not modified by television. And most important of all, there is no subject of public interest -- politics, news, education, religion, science, sports -- that does not find its way to television. Which means all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television (78).

The impact of television should not be ignored. Whether this has been a positive, negative, or neutral change is not for me to decide. Instead, I feel obliged to underscore the fact that *Supernatural* is a part of this discourse, and, therefore, functions in specific ways.

This barrage of continual information has affected the way we as a culture process information in a number of interesting ways. Television informs our conceptions of reality. However, the reality reflected to us through television is a reality that never existed. Instead, because of the “implosion of the relation between images (representations) and reality (the material world)” (Ott, 15) television reflects something which, according to Baudrillard is Hyperreal. The line between the simulation and the real are blurred and that line, television, becomes something more real than the Real. Our sense of reality becomes simulacra as “whatever was once real is now replaced by a linguistic or symbolic sign, which points to another
sign, which points in turn to another sign in a potentially endless chain of signs” (Alexander, 160). It is not only television, though, that plunges our culture into the Hyperreal. A number of our daily tasks such as driving and shopping are “performed semi-automatically in a distracted state” which then creates a culture that is “without locus, a partially derealized realm from which new quotidian fiction emanates” (Morse, 196).

This shifting sense of reality can also be seen within television itself. Prior to the 1980s many, if not most, television shows could be classified as either a series or a serial. There was either an overarching plot that moved through the entirety of the text or each episode told a single, concise narrative that did not have real ramifications for the rest of the narrative. However, a number of television shows, including Supernatural, can be considered “flexi-narratives” which are defined as a “hybrid mix of serial and series forms … involving the closure of one story arc within and episode (like a series) but with other, ongoing story arcs involving the regular characters (like a serial)” (Lavery quoting Nelson, 46), which then appeals to “those wanting long-term relationships with television and [those] less faithful, no-appointment-necessary occasional viewers” (Lavery 46).

However, the first thing that places the audience in the realm of the Hyperreal is the introduction, which functions as a Reverse Brechtian device: a liminal moment, and a visible boundary between the real and the fictional, which ushers in the fictional world, leaving real life behind until the closing credits roll. In television in particular, where the flow of content is now almost entirely constant, the opening sequence serves a purpose which is doubly liminal: not only does it set up the distinct fictional universe of a particular series, but is also serves to distinguish the program from the program (or more likely, advert) which immediately preceded it.
(Kapovich, 29).

As is the case with a number of contemporary television shows, though, Supernatural does not have opening credits. However, instead of simply plunging into the world of the series, Supernatural episodes begin with a short segment best described as “Previously on Supernatural”/”The Road Thus Far”, which not only fulfills the roles of the opening credits but also highlights the fact that Supernatural inhabits a universe where one is constantly looking backwards, one is constantly reiterating loss. Loss, of course, is a discourse that heavily permeates white trash.

As television and Hyperreal simulacrum, diegetic and non-diegetic music not only create the aesthetic and reality of a universe, but also manipulate the viewer emotionally and narratively. The music of Supernatural, including the underscore, places the universe within the aesthetic of white trash. Specifically licensed music unobtrusively marks the universe and the characters as some form of white trash. This is able to occur because

Music is meta-symbol of culture and lifestyle choices. It acts as a knowing wink from program makers to the viewer, whether through actual lyrics or the cultural currency associated with the song. Licensed music also [has] usurped many traditional underscoring purposes, either reflecting a character’s interior state, altering the sense of time passing or quickly telling us what the images cannot. This is because, as the licensed music can be perceived as having a legitimate place in the diegesis, it can bypass many of the modern viewer’s sensitivities to emotional manipulation that a similar underscore would trigger. (Kaye, 198)

The licensed music will be the primary focus of this project. However, as previously noted, the way in which this music will be analyzed is through the discourse of country. To understand how
these particular artifacts of white trash aesthetic functions, we must first define and become familiar with the traits and markers of this aesthetic: what meaning and rhetoric is imbued within these symbols, what is this aesthetic imagined to be and to represent. Also, it is worthwhile to explore the ways in which this aesthetic has been co-opted and commodified both for those from whom this aesthetic is the Real and for those for whom this aesthetic is the Hyperreal.

Chapter Summary

As previously stated, I have taken a three-pronged approach to my analysis of *Supernatural*. Each of these approaches has been dealt with in one of the three chapters of this thesis. While the themes with which I have dealt with are interconnected, I focus my discussions primarily on their respected chapters.

Within chapter one, “Playing Cowboys and Monsters: A Narrative History of White Trash”, I laid out what I see to be the genealogy of contemporary white trash. In order to create a context for this discussion, I explored early conceptions of the American frontier. Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land: The American West as Myth and Symbol* offers the first ancestor of white trash through critiques of Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking, a figure which was seen as taking civilization to the frontier. Then Patrick McGee, in *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking the Western*, is able to show us how the boundaries of civility and savagery become muddled within the form of the cowboy and lawman. Moving through time, James N. Gregory, in *Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migration of Black and White Southerners Changed America*, illustrates how white Southerners moving to the North and West were seen as bringing savagery to civilization. Close reading of John Boorman’s *Deliverance* (1972) and Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) will then be used to illustrate the shift to white trash as monsters. Even though it would appear that these films function as primary texts, I will be using
them as secondary texts by reading them as commentary on the ways in which white trash is portrayed within mediated American culture. Just as the other secondary texts comment upon and explain the ways in which American view white trash, these films reinforce the mediated conception of white trash that is being tracked. With this genealogy completed, I show how *Supernatural* appears to subvert the status quo of white trash bodies being monsters by being the bodies that exorcise the demons of suburbia. However, this chapter will end with the conclusion that the Winchesters are merely the horrific tool which is used to cleanse suburbia.

Chapter two, “Sounds Better in a Song: The Commodification of the White Trash Aesthetic”, serves as an extended discussion on the use of music within the series and the ways in which various forms of media portray white trash. Aaron Fox’s texts “Split Subjectivity in County Music and Honkey-Tonk Discourse” and “White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime: Country as ‘Bad’ Music”, as well as Barbra Ching’s “The Possum, the Hag and the Rhinestone Cowboy: Hard Country and the Burlesque Abjection of the White Man” and John Hartigan Jr.’s *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People* will function as a critical and theoretical backbone to the claims that I make in reference to both the diegetic and non-diegetic music which is used with *Supernatural*. Despite the fact that most of the music used is not considered “country,” through the use of abjection, the reasons why this music can be considered “bad” will link the two types.

Chapter three, “The Homosocial Family in *Supernatural* or Why Dad’s on a Hunting Trip”, is concerned with the Winchester family specifically. While there are a number of women who can claim Winchester lineage, within the narrative of *Supernatural* the family unit is defined as Sam, Dean, and their father John (Jeffery Dean Morgan). I examine this family unit by referring to a number of ethnographic pieces that describe the performance of masculinity within
working class families and communities (working class because there is little to no ethnographic literature that is concerned with white trash). It is important to note that while this literature will be focused on the idea of the working class, information about and practices of white trash can be gleaned from these pieces when one remembers that the key difference between these two groups is the sense of loss, melancholia, and liminality. After establishing the norms of white trash masculinity, I will specifically examine the Winchester family through the lens of trauma studies to see how this homosocial family defines one’s sense of identity and self.

**Preliminary Conclusions**

It has been my goal to use this project to participate within the small but expanding field that is concerned with the subjectivity of white trash. I have a personal investment in this project because of my own troubled relationship with white trash and the collective rhetoric which surrounds it. Growing up in the Southeast, I was fully indoctrinated with the concept of what it meant to be white trash. The message that came from the media as well as from those within my own community was loud and clear: take pride in where you come from but don’t ever be “trash.” This sentiment directly mirrors that which James Gregory explores when he quotes a former Southerner who moved to Chicago after the Civil War who said, “there’s a big difference between a ‘hillbilly’ and a ‘southerner.’ I’m a southerner, but I’m not a hillbilly. You know what hillbillies are -- they’re the lowest class of white people” (157). By internalizing this mindset, I spent a great deal of my childhood and adolescent years fantasizing about leaving the “backwards South” and making sure that I spoke without a hint of accent. I would not dare be lumped in with that “lowest class of white people.”

Contemporary comedy and the generalized popular definition of white trash play off the tropes which were solidified with *The Beverly Hillbillies*. However, when one considers white
trash as being formed by a definition of aesthetics and loss, what can be read as white trash explodes with possibility just as the lived experience of white trash does.

It is always important to keep in mind the fact that while white trash and working class mentalities are linked, they are not entirely equal. The working class has been granted a place within the dominant constructions of culture whereas white trash do not have that privilege. White trash exists within the liminal space of being acknowledged but not being defined by its own terms. While shame exists within white trash subjectivity, pride does as well. Most importantly, though, these two emotions exist side by side.

*Supernatural* may not have been originally conceived as a series about white trash. However, through the aural, visual, and ideological cues which have been placed upon the Winchesters and their peers, white trash heroes have been created. Perhaps most interesting, though, is the fact that these heroes are not devoid of the monstrosity and savagery that is so historically linked to white trash. This project in particular, I hope, explores the different ways in which contemporary American media addresses white trash subjectivity even if it does so only obliquely or unintentionally and the fact that even when creating a “positive” portrayal of white trash, the tropes of monstrosity and horror are still constantly being invoked and reinforced.
The Winchester brothers have a large and devoted fan base that is made up primarily of relatively young women. The CW, the channel which airs *Supernatural*, openly states that it targets the demographic of women from eighteen to thirty-four (Boggs, ii). If the commercials that air alongside CW programming and the advertising plugs that pepper The CW’s website can be used as an indicator, the targeted audience is also rather affluent as seen by tie-ins to clothiers such as H&M and Forever21, as well as “Top Picks” for fashion that include $125 jackets, $218 jeans, and $250 clutches (“CW”). Bearing this demographic in mind, we might wonder why these women are so invested in two non-middle class men. When viewing *Supernatural* fandom as a whole, it would appear that the Winchesters are perceived as classless hunters.3 Despite aural, visual, and ideological cues such as their dress, their violence, and their car, the Winchester family and the hunting culture in which they are entrenched are rarely considered by fans to be white trash. Rather, the reading of hunting culture is more often one wherein they are considered to be “working class,” an identity that exists within dominant American culture construction of class rather than outside of it, and which is often romanticized as being “authentic.”

After the death of his wife, John Winchester (Jeffery Dean Morgan), the father character in the CW’s show *Supernatural*, deserts any form of traditional community. He enters into a space that exists outside of standard American paradigms of class. He uses violence, misdirection, and arcane knowledge in attempts to avenge his wife’s death which inadvertently positions him as a hero within the suburbs where these supernatural terrors often reside. Likewise, he teaches his sons, Dean and Sam (Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki), how to
survive through these means and then how to inhabit these roles. In this new form of identity
construction, we can see remnants of the Hollywood westerns’ “class struggle […] that] is
primarily a struggle over the identification of the social individual with either the power of the
capitalist class or the struggles of the multitude” (McGee 236). By being confidence grifters (and
supernatural hunters), the Winchesters, like the cowboy, cannot fully align themselves against
either the capitalistic work force or the imagined community of suburbia. They can exist neither
as complete monsters nor as total heroes. Instead, they are something in between and liminal;
they are white trash.

From the gruff frontiersmen of manifest destiny as independent trailblazers to the Beverly
Hillbillies as laughable yokels, poor whites exist and have existed on the periphery of middle
class American culture as imagined and conceptualized objects. The ways in which these lower
class bodies are articulated is often through monstrous imagery. Genres such as horror have
illustrated how the men and women who exist on the fringe of dominant culture function as
outlets for the fears, anxiety, and abjection that exist within the collective middle class
imagination when confronted with whites who do not fit within the assumed norms of social
class. Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection* theorizes abjection as a kind of
push-and-pull dance of desire and disgust that is linked to the pleasure and terror of *jouissance*
(Kristeva, 54). While the middle class is appalled by those who have yet to “pull themselves up
by their bootstraps,” as all individuals in the middle class are imagined to have done in some
form or another, the middle class is also filled with a curious desire to witness the seemingly
surreal and “authentic” world of “white trash.”

White trash, like many forms of identity, is difficult to define as a specific rubric of traits.
Any time a list of qualities is deemed to be the definitive demarcation of something, be it an
identity or a genre, examples will emerge that do not fit within it. Therefore, it seems much more applicable to consider white trash not as a schema of things one is or is not but rather as a specific part of the discourse of American class dynamics. Despite the use of designations such as “upper-,” “middle-,” and “lower-class,” the American class system is ambiguous and without concrete markers. For this reason that the line between what is white trash and what is working class is often blurred. If we are to imagine American class as a gradient, then these two identities would be very close to one another. However, they would not be synonyms despite the fact that they are often used as such. The designation of working class fits within the culturally approved narrative of class. While working class persons have less cultural capital than members of the middle-class, they have a place within the discussion of American class. White trash persons, though, are removed from the American conception of class. Their cultural capital within the dominant American class system is non-existent, which places them in a liminal position of existence. With this idea of liminality in mind, we can see how hunters as a culture and, more specifically, Sam and Dean Winchester, exist as white trash.

Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray explain that white trash creates the white Other (“What is ‘White Trash’?” 168, 1997). Othering, or the process of intellectually and culturally marking a group as non-dominant or abnormal, is critical to white identity. Dominant whiteness, the whiteness that brings to mind privilege, defines itself not as something it is but rather as something it is not. Whites are not slaves. Whites are not savage. Whites are not poor. White trash functions as an Other to dominant whiteness, because white trash shows what whiteness should never be. Through the use of Eric Kripke’s *Supernatural*, I explore the different ways in which this white Other, white trash hunters, function within American culture. Seemingly, *Supernatural* functions in opposition to the convention of white trash subjects as monsters by the
mere fact that the Winchester brothers are the protagonists of the series and the fact that they are
the ones who are banishing, defeating, or killing the supernatural “monster of the week.”
However, because they are doing this banishing, the Winchesters are actually shown as merely
the less monstrous kind of monster.

**Monsters Hunting Monsters: The Winchesters as “White Trash”**

Aaron A. Fox identifies an “unmistakably rural aura, a working class *ethos*” (111, 1997) in his study of music and “talk” in redneck bars. It seems possible that this *ethos*, when enacted in the liminal space of white trash (be it either hunting bars like the Roadhouse or redneck bars in Texas, as Fox observed), acts as a form of identity construction. While he focuses on the use of music, Fox also identifies how this *ethos* is marked by a number of mediated and “commodified cultural orientations” (113, 1997) such as violence, clothing, vehicles, and politics. Fox as well as Newitz and Wray remark upon the way in which white trash aesthetics such as clothing or music have become a product-based identity that can be bought and sold. The authentic working class *ethos* is one which is “constructed in a discourse of desire, with nostalgia for the old, […] constructed in a discourse of loss” (Fox 111, 1997), while the purchasable “trash drag” allows for middle class consumers to view class as a fashion choice, “and real impoverished people can be understood as happily hip or even secretly members of the middle class in trash drag” (Newitz and Wray, “What is ‘White Trash’?” 180, 1997). This type of attitude, of course, fits well into a post-Reagan America wherein the myth of the American Dream, pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, allows for the middle class to understand “that the poor want to be poor and could recover if they really tried” (Newitz and Wray, “What is ‘White Trash’?” 180, 1997).

The concept of “trash drag” may help to explain why the same audience that is targeted with $218 jeans is so enamored of the Winchester brothers. Surely, one may think, Sam and
Dean *choose* to exude this “ethos.” However, when one takes into account the Winchesters’ family history, one can see that their life(style) is one that has been constructed out of loss and necessity. Sam and Dean do not wear torn jeans, faded flannel and heavy boots day in and day out because they want to look hip. Instead, they wear these things because the entirety of their possessions need to fit in the trunk of their car -- a trunk which is already full of weapons, relics, and rock salt. During the season three episode “A Very Supernatural Christmas,” it is not clothing that indicates class and trash status, but rather it is the iconic gift-giving. Despite attempts for the perfect (and presumably last) Christmas between them, Sam and Dean exchange gas station kitsch such as “skin mags and shaving cream” for Sam and motor oil and a candy bar for Dean. It is only through what Fox defines as the redneck coping mechanism of bracing “against the material world *as it is* in order to articulate a vision of the moral world *as it could be,* […] an idiom that] means a world in image of life *as it was*” (114) that gives these trinkets meaning. Despite the fact that their Christmas tree is decorated with car air-fresheners and red and white fishing bobbers, Sam and Dean are able to able to recapture with a sense of nostalgia the connection and solidarity that existed during their youth.

Through the episode’s use of flashback, the audience becomes privy to the dual layered sense of loss that permeates the Winchester brothers’ experiences. While Sam is characterized as longing for the traditional innocence of childhood, Dean longs for the childhood and family which he once had -- the life that the death of his mother has denied him. Dean, like Fox’s rednecks, longs for life *as it was*. Sam, though, can be understood as even more disconnected from middle class society because his coping mechanism can only go so far as what *could be.* When young Dean is confronted with young Sam’s near constant barrage of questions concerning their father, Dean inadvertently illustrates the different ways in which the boys view their father
and, in him, the different ways that they articulate their loss:

    Dean: First thing you have to know is we have the coolest dad in the world. He’s a superhero.
    Sam: He is?
    Dean: Yeah. Monsters are real. Dad fights them. He’s fighting them right now.
    […]
    Sam: But Dad said the monsters under my bed weren’t real.
    Dean: That’s cause he’d already checked under there. But yeah, they’re real. Almost everything is real.
    Sam: Is Santa real?
    Dean: No (“A Very Supernatural Christmas”, 3.8)

This brief sequence helps to illustrate the ways in which Mark Gerzon believes sons will socially and emotionally gravitate to one parent or another. Dean would be his “father’s son,” and Sam would be his “mommy’s boy” (Gerzon 157). Dean was allowed the luxury of having a father who was able to comfort, play with, and love him. However, Sam had a father that “was unavailable to him” (Gerzon 157). John Winchester did not have Gerzon’s twenty-mile commute and frequent trips abroad, but “when [he] was home [he] was often only half there. [He] did what [he] could, but [his] energy was divided. And [Sam] knew it” (Gerzon 157). Gerzon believes that this absent father figure would cause children to attach themselves to their mothers. However, Sam’s mother was not in the picture. She was dead. Her death characterizes Sam’s loss in two ways; not only did he lack the specialized parental connection that Gerzon explores, but he also lacks a memory of time wherein those connections existed. Not every hunter has a dead mother, but nearly every hunter that Sam and Dean meet throughout their travels has experienced a
similar loss that has propelled her or him towards hunting. Ellen and Jo Harvelle (Samantha Ferris and Alona Hal) parallel the Winchesters with their losses of husband and father. Gordon Walker (Sterling K. Brown) hunts vampires with such fanaticism because of the loss of his sister. Even the normally level-headed Bobby Singer (Jim Beaver) is shown to have begun hunting because of the death of his wife. Not only are these characters marked by Fox’s ethos and the material commodities of white trash, but they prove not to be in any sort of “trash drag”; their characterization and their culture is based on loss and the means of coping with that loss. This coping is strongly linked to the disenfranchised liminality of white trash and the inability to fit within the constructs and constraints of conventional American culture.

Can’t Spell “White Trash” Without Whiteness: Racializing White Trash

With the brief run-through of hunters, one can see that this group is not homogenous in terms of gender or race. Hunting, though illustrated through the Winchesters appears to be the domain of white men, includes women and people of color. Hunters such as Ellen and Gordon, as well as black hunter Rufus (Steven Williams), are regarded as legendary hunters. Not only are they considered to be “equals,” they are also coded as wiser than, superior to, and more competent than Sam and Dean. This can be seen specifically within the interactions between the brothers and Ellen or Rufus and the ways in which both characters shamelessly point out the brothers’ shortcomings while also possessing the specialized knowledge needed to complete the tasks the brothers have failed. Despite this, though, they have all also functioned as sources of conflict for the Winchesters.

Through the contrast between these traditionally marginal characters and the Winchesters, audiences will begin to see that white trash “is not just a classist slur -- it’s also a racial epithet that marks out certain whites as a breed apart, a dysgenic race unto themselves” (Newitz and
Wray, “Introduction” 2, 1997). *Supernatural* appears to be much more concerned with the visual classing of the Winchesters than with addressing their race or the racial identity of any character. On the one hand, *Supernatural* is attempting to create a colorblind universe of cultural pluralism and meritocracy. However, it is more likely that the hunters of *Supernatural* exist within a world of marginal subjects. In her essay “White Savagery and Humiliation, or a New Racial Consciousness in the Media,” Annalee Newitz frames her discussion of the racial aspects of white trash within the discourse of horror films, which allows for a particularly smooth synthesis with *Supernatural* not only because of its position generically but also, as will be discussed later, the series’ position genealogically. Newitz argues that “whiteness emerges as a distinct and visible racial identity when it can be identified as somehow primitive or inhuman” which can be seen in “the hillbilly figure [which] designates a white who is racially visible not just because he is poor, but also because he is sometimes monstrously so” (134). While one can see that a connection can be drawn between white trash and groups which are traditionally cast as racial others, it would be inappropriate to equate these groups to one another without addendum.

The white guilt which Newitz invokes is linked to the dichotomy between primitivism and civilization, wherein “the West […] assumes] that non-Western (usually non-white) cultures are under-civilized” and these racialized identities are “linked to a primitive past, which the West has left behind” (134). While both white trash and, more traditionally, racialized others can be understood through this lens, it is worthwhile to address the differences that exist between these two groups. Within the universe of *Supernatural*, as previously noted, the main characters move through a world populated by marginal subjects. Characters such as Gordon and Rufus are not developed to or even seen as self-identifying with their racial backgrounds or histories. Instead, they are coded as “economic” Others. Their primary form of self-identification is as hunters, who
inhabit a world of loss, necessity, and liminality. While the *Supernatural* universe may allow for individuals to exist without addressing their racial histories, when one attempts to situate that universe within our own, we must be careful not to forget the racial undercurrents that *Supernatural* writers and producers had the luxury to downplay or even completely table.

While this project does not have the scope to fully explore the status of white trash as a racial signifier, it is imperative to bear in mind that even the ways in which white trash functions as a classed identity with regard to dominant whiteness and guilt is related to the ways in which traditional racial Others are used as a means of definition. This fact can be seen by the fact that both white trash and racial Others are used to define whiteness. These groups, “by occupying the position of ‘bad’ Other, offer a perspective from which ‘good’ whites can see themselves as a racial and classed group,” despite the fact that they cannot exist without the separate species of racial Others and financial Others that are “both repulsive and yet somehow fascinating” (Newitz 136). There is, however, a difference between how these Others are used to define whiteness. White trash is used to define whiteness through self-reflection whereas traditional racial Others are used to define through negation, either whites defining themselves negatively against them or by the negation of the mistreatment that these Others have endured from whites. It is because of this latter technique that certain narratives (such as the horror film and even the cowboy mythos) “demonstrate the extent to which whites want to imagine their repentance for this mistreatment solely as an intra-racial affair” (Newitz 140). We must always remember, though, that white trash will always have the advantage and privilege of being “white,” regardless of how Othered white trash may be because of their economic status.

**Playing Cowboys and Monsters: What to Do with Rogue Whites**

White trash, as a slur and as it resides in American cultural memory, is not concerned
with the lived experience of poor, disenfranchised, or liminal whites. Instead, white trash is a concept that exists and is most fully actualized through mediated images. Matt Wray has deftly charted the historical and political trajectory of white trash in his book *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*. This approach is valuable, but *Supernatural* fits not within the “lived” history of white trash but rather in the realm of mediate images and constructed narratives. While poor, disenfranchised, and liminal “white trash” exist, it is not their lived experience which is used by mainstream America to understand white trash. Instead, it is popular culture where white trash thrives. It was here that the concepts of the frontier, the frontiersman, and the cowboy entered the communal memory. These figures, just like white trash, exist. However, the ways in which they are represented are through the media as myths and symbols.

In order to see how the Winchesters as heroes challenge the trope of white trash monsters, we must first explore the history which created and fostered this kind of cultural understanding. The roots of white trash can be traced back to the myth of the rugged individual that permeated American culture during the Westward push of manifest destiny, the desire to eat up that which is unknown. In *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith explores the ways in which the image of the frontiersman was formed through the work of Fenimore Cooper. This archetype was created through popular culture and the role of national imagination. The character of Leatherstocking was one of the first images of the Westward hero. He was not only important in defining this kind of hero, but his tales also explored the land in which he lived. For Leatherstocking, the frontier was described as “a new Eden of unsophisticated life” (Smith 75). This description of Leatherstocking’s landscape tellingly illustrates the ways in which the frontier was envisioned. This land was full of savagery, both in the peoples that
populated it and in its environment. However, this Eden also implied untapped possibilities that could allow for inexhaustible creativity and resources. This success, though, could only occur if this Western Eden was not corrupted. However, it was the individuals like Leatherstocking who blazed these trails that ran the risk of becoming “more and more fully assimilated to the mores of the Indian,” (Smith 83) which was, of course, cultural short-hand for becoming indoctrinated to that very savagery which one was meant to be civilizing.

America’s popular memory easily links Westward expansion to the imagined “Wild West.” If Leatherstocking’s frontier was so brutal, one could only assume that it would take an unrestrained lawman to control the wilderness. These cowboy heroes must reinvent law in order to uphold it. In his study of American Western films, Patrick McGee classes heroes of this transitional state as “men on the verge of a nervous breakdown” (109). McGee exemplifies this neurosis with “Wyatt Earp,” who remains the first and most uncritical articulation of the type, [who] has to ride off in the end […] because he can’t be integrated into the community he has devastated” (109) in his attempts to civilize it. Popular memory shifted as the traditional frontier became more and more subdued; the cowboy was then replaced by the gunslinger who nearly always was “a man in search of a relation to the larger community, though in some cases the community [would] not accept him and in others he must leave or reject community in order to assert his relation to it” (McGee 111). In the gunslinger we can see the emerging connection between monstrosity and transient, often poor, whites. As the frontier is being populated with towns rather than existing simply as the untouched Eden, the gunslinger becomes “the isolated loner who occupies a marginal relation to a community which he is, in some sense, the defender” (McGee 94) despite the fact that there is no way for him to exist within the now civilized frontier. Instead, his victories over the frontier become horrible as he is forced to return to that
wilderness, stake a claim to it, and leave civilization behind (McGee 79). While he has not been subsumed by the “mores of the Indian,” he is no longer the force which keeps the anxieties which have been dumped into the wilderness at bay.

This aforementioned tension between refinement and violence is what links the frontiersmen like Leatherstocking to the monsters of contemporary horror. The link in this great chain of being is the “hillbilly” who emerged when the frontier shifted from Westward expansion to the unspoiled North after the American Civil War. While Leatherstocking was seen as leaving civilization in the honorable attempt to get closer to an Edenic nature despite the possibility of being contaminated by savagery, the “hillbilly” was seen as bringing this natural savagery to civilization. James N. Gregory quotes a former Southerner who moved to Chicago after the war as saying “there’s a big difference between a ‘hillbilly’ and a ‘southerner.’ I’m a southerner, but I’m not a hillbilly. You know what hillbillies are -- they’re the lowest class of white people” (157). We can see with this comment that as soon as there is no longer an untamed wilderness that needs to be confronted, the Edenic savage is no longer needed within the national narrative, and these trailblazers, frontiersmen, and cowboys are now only white trash, the lowest class of white people.

We can easily see a connection between the “lowest class of white people” and monsters. However, we first must define what we mean by “monster.” Judith Halberstam seems to get to the core of every monster by saying that monstrosity will in some way include a sexual outsider, a racial pariah, a national outcast, or a class outlaw (20) while also showing “clearly the markings of deviant sexualities and gendering but [also] the signs of class and race” (4). This set of broad parameters allows us not only to see how humans can be monsters, but also to see the major points of anxiety for middle class sensibilities. If we look to the 1970s, we can see that with the
release of *Deliverance* (1972) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), American horror films defined white trash families in no uncertain terms. *Deliverance* introduced a cinema-based repertory of popular references and cues that defined the white trash villains as savage, bestial, and cruel bodies that should be feared. Anthony Harkins succinctly notes the contemporary cultural footprint that *Deliverance* has left on poor whites by noting that the:

film’s infamous scenes of sodomy at gunpoint and of a retarded albino boy lustily playing his banjo became such instantly recognizable shorthand for demeaning references to rural poor whites that comedians only needed to say “squeal like a pig” (the command of one of the rapists to his suburbanite victim) or hum the opening notes of the film’s guitar-banjo duet to gain an immediate visceral reaction. (Harkins 206)

*Deliverance* coded poor whites as villains. On screen, these individuals were characterized as cruel, but they did not become “monsters” until *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. The poor whites of *Texas Chain Saw* are not people. Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen) neither speaks nor does he have a traditional face. There is no apparent way for audience members to identify or sympathize with him. In order to do so, the audience would have to first acknowledge that this Texan family had been legitimate workers, which is an act that directly engages with class bias; after all, what middle class suburbanite would want to empathize with people who “just shoot a bolt in [a cow’s] head, and then retract it” or simply kill cows “with a sledge” (Hooper)? After this identification, audiences would have to agree with the fact that, yes, a sledgehammer is a better way of killing cows, because people get to keep their jobs. The only way, perhaps, to form a bond between audiences and Leatherface’s family would be to embrace their fear followed by outrage concerning the encroaching middle class and the loss of financial autonomy, to embrace that “working class ethos” that is defined by loss. If the audience were to think that, though,
they would be no different than the monsters. Monsters who will, as commentator Jim Goad remarks with his tongue firmly placed in his cheek, “rape you and then murder you. Or murder you and then rape you. And then drive around for months with your body stuffed in [their] trunk,” because these monsters are “just bred for violence“ (98). Since these two films created such a lasting impact on American culture, the lower class body has been consistently read as a source of horror for middle class suburban America. At best, these “people” should be pitied, and at worse, they should be feared.

**White Pickett Fences Are a Poor Defense: The Suburban Gothic**

Despite the progression of what white trash identifies in popular imagination, *Supernatural* does not code its white trash as villains. Rather, in the mythology of the series, these lower class bodies are the heroes. Likewise, horror does not originate from the backwoods. Rather, it is the middle and upper classes from whom horror is spawned which seems to embody the post-war criticism that suburbs “encouraged insularity, materialism, and narcissism” (Murphy 190). Despite these concerns, though, suburbs have steadily crawled across the nation, leaving white picket fences and abandoned soccer balls in their wake.

In the season five episode “The Song Remains the Same,” audience members become privy to exactly the kind of class dynamics into which Dean and Sam were born. Young John Winchester (Matt Cohen) is a car mechanic who hopes one day to own his own shop. Sharon Bird explains the ways in which small business ownership plays a key part in the formation of masculinity within rural working class communities “by carving out gendered business niches […] which embrace] good husbands, fathers, and community troopers” (Bird 67). This cultural background places the Winchesters outside of the suburban understanding of community, which is not the prescribed togetherness that was promised during the 1950s, but rather “a culture of
atomized isolation, self restraint, and ‘moral minimalism.’ Far from seeking small-town connectedness, suburbanites kept themselves to themselves, asking little of their neighbor and expecting little in return” (Murphy 188).

Bernice Murphy explores American media set in the suburbs and shows that the zeitgeist of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century is concerned with the fears and anxieties that arise out of suburban living. She examines the popular *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* series and notes that Sunnydale “is a place only ever a few moments away from violent disorder, and death and disruption are embedded in the very fabric of the community” (168). This analysis of a suburban-set horror series marketed towards young women seems to correspond neatly with *Supernatural*. However, a key difference separates the series from one another. The leading characters in *Buffy* are sub/urbanites in a suburban setting. The leads in *Supernatural* are not. After Mary’s death, John Winchester does not bestow upon his sons the “business niche” of a small town. He is no longer connected to the privilege of the working class to be included within the conception of American community. He instead retreats from this conventional form of identity. He leaves both the community and dominant conceptions of work to become a grifter who makes his money through cons and various forms of fraud. He and, later, his sons exist outside of suburbs as well as working class small towns. Instead, he is characterized and defined as a transient drifter. The Winchesters and white trash hunters more generally exist at crossroads; they travel between towns while belonging to none. Their loss, in this case, is a loss of locality and community.

Sam and Dean are exorcised against their will from their working class roots, propelled through childhood as boundary pushing cowboys, and as adults end up staring down the historical role of white trash villain. However, Sam and Dean become heroes within this
suburban wasteland. This transformation is not for a lack of monsters but rather the way in which these monsters are created. In suburban gothic, the suburbs are “a placid and privileged locale beneath which terrible secrets and irrational forces lurk, waiting for their chance to erupt violently into the open” (Murphy 166). To highlight the internally born and internally manifested horrors that fill the plot of Supernatural from week to week, we may look at one of the episodes from season one. As we can see, Supernatural wastes no time establishing that suburbia is the new American frontier which must be tamed.

Within the episode “Skins” (1.6), domestic violence is explored as a middle class terror that the Winchester brothers must banish. When we consider the insular nature of the suburbs, it is easy for us to see how domestic violence is one of the many suburban terrors that may lead to a “family attempting to cover up a hidden secret from the past” (Murphy 188). In this episode, domestic violence takes the form of skin-walkers, fantastic beings that are able to take the form of others and, therefore, create literal doppelgangers. By the end of the episode, Dean must die. His physical form has been mimicked by the skin-walker, and he threatens the dominant middle class way of life -- quite literally. In terms of the narrative, Dean-the-skin-walker does this by torturing the upwardly mobile Becky (Amy Grabow), while theoretically, the “real” Dean does this by fulfilling the role of abjection’s phobic object. As phobic object, Dean acts as a repository for middle class anxieties. Considering the fact that white trash bodies are outside of class hierarchy, they exist as unknowns and those unknowns are filled with suburban terror. By placing terror and anxiety on that phobic object, individuals in the middle class not only expel these feelings from themselves but also create identities that can be defeated and, therefore, cleanse the community of these horrors. Dean must die because within suburban ideology, domestic violence is not an issue with which their community struggles. His death banishes these fears from
suburbia while placing them firmly on the shoulders of white trash. Within American understanding, domestic violence is a problem for white trash. This exceptional understanding of domestic bliss is in part related to the fact that:

With respect to income and education, agency data are probably not a very good source of information, because middle- and upper-class couples experiencing intimate terrorism are more likely than working-class couples to have the resources that make it possible for them to avoid dealing with public agencies. (Johnson 35)

Because of this feigned ignorance, which is part and parcel of suburban gothic as seen by the fact that “both local residents and the authorities fail to act upon the fact that something is obviously very wrong in their neighborhood” (Murphy 176), domestic violence is an issue that must be banished to low class bodies, the phobic object. It is for this reason that Dean must die. His “death” allows for a cleansing of suburbia and a resetting of the status quo, an expelling of the anxiety. Most importantly, however, is the fact that this trauma of domestic violence and the fears that are so closely linked to it are banished through the same liminal body that houses them. When Dean kills the skin-walker, it is wearing his face. In this final conflict, the same body that houses these anxieties is that which eliminates them. At the crux of the relation between suburbanites and their phobic object of white trash is the fact that the former cannot exist without the latter. It is only through this push-pull relationship of abjection that suburbia (and with it dominant American culture as a whole) can be cleansed -- a cleansing which occurs notably through violence that is perpetuated on and by white trash. While this specific instance of “killing” the white trash subject is specific to this episode, the trend is representative of the series’ themes. The Winchesters function as phobic objects through the reoccurring motif of constantly being on the run from the law, an overriding symbol of middle-class culture.
It is important for us to realize that it is through violence that the Winchesters are able to prevail over the horrors of suburbia. They may have the means to secure the intellectual basis for this violence, but at the end of the day and in the middle of the night, the Winchesters do not talk a horror away. They destroy it. They salt the bones and burn the body. As white trash, even as heroes, they are not entirely devoid of their savagery, bestiality, or cruelty. Therefore, they are not entirely devoid of their monstrosity.

**Horror or Hero?: The Function of “White Trash”**

In exploring abjection when one comes “face to face with the Other,” Kelly Oliver notes how Julia Kristeva defines abjection as

above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so (103-104).

White trash is the abject Other which allows for “good” middle class whites to define themselves in negation. Middle class whites are able to define who they are by looking at white trash and saying, “We are not that”. Perhaps most importantly, though, is the fact that without the existence of white trash, the middle class suburbanite could never exist. There is the desire to “become autonomous” but the “impossibility of doing so” comes from the fact that definition of self only exists when there is the ability to define one’s self against another, against the Other.

In suburban gothic, “it is one’s fellow suburbanites, family members, and personal decisions which pose the most danger” (Murphy 2). Yet, within the framework of *Supernatural*, the abject Others are the ones who save the day. However, we have also seen how white trash subjects are maligned and rejected. How is it that these white trash hunters can be both feared
and lauded for banishing suburban horror?

The Winchesters and their family in arms, all of hunting culture, are in a precarious position. On the one hand, they exist in the progressive state wherein they are white trash heroes rather than white trash villains or monsters. However, on the other hand, it is their white trash monstrosity that banishes the actual horrors of suburbia. We then may find ourselves wondering, especially in light of “trash drag” and the commodification of white trash aesthetics, if the Winchesters truly are white trash heroes, or if they are merely the most attractive and alluring kind of monster.
According to Jeff Foxworthy, you might be white trash if “Jack Daniels makes your list of most admired people”, “you bought a VCR because wrestling comes on when you’re at work”, “you consider a six pack and a bug-zapper high quality entertainment”, “you have a picture of Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, or Elvis over your fireplace”, or “your favorite Christmas present was a painting on black velvet” (“Country Humor Comedy”). Regardless of how amusing we may find these snippets, they offer useful insight into what is understood to be the aesthetics of white trash. Just as these jokes would imply, aesthetics is rarely the word that comes to mind when one thinks of the style of white trash. Instead, just as the majority of white trash quantifiers are defined, aesthetics is understood as negation; it is the lack of taste, class, and style. It isn’t even so much bad or poor taste, but rather it is that white trash don’t know any better. They do not respond to the assumed shame of black velvet, wrestling, Jack Daniels, bug zappers, or Johnny Cash.

It is important, though, that white trash aesthetics is addressed and considered through its own merits rather than simply in opposition to dominant tastes. To understand white trash aesthetics, we must look at it through the lens of dialectics. Neither of the forthcoming poles creates a fully formed conception of white trash aesthetics. Instead, a synthesis of these concepts must be found to properly give voice to a legitimate form of taste and experience. Just as aesthetics are linked to commodity, the line between subject and object, lived and mediated, and participant and observer is ambiguous at best.

While the previous chapter placed Supernatural within the mediated history of white trash, this chapter will chart and define what has been dubbed the white trash aesthetic, but it will
also relate the ways in which *Supernatural* plays directly into the commodification and objectification of this aesthetic as well as those who live this aesthetic rather than simply purchase it. The key difference between a lived and a commodified aesthetic is the relationship that exists between the commercial “object” and the consuming “subject.” *Supernatural* fits within the discourse of white trash aesthetics in two major ways. Not only does it fit within the thematic rubric of white trash aesthetics, but it also does so through the series’ use of visual and (surprisingly) aural cues and style. However, just as chapter one showed that *Supernatural*’s seemingly progressive treatment of white trash is actually only a less horrific and monstrous treatment, this chapter proves that *Supernatural*’s aesthetic is not “authentic” but is rather “chic.” It is crucial, though, to bear in mind that even conventions of authenticity and chicness are mediated and defined through the commodification of aesthetics -- both white trash and other.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of the music within *Supernatural*, both diegetic and non-diegetic, is considered “classic rock,” a substantial amount of critical analysis will be spent on “hard” country music. The reason is two-fold. Not only does “hard” country fit thematically with white trash, but it is also linked directly to the modes of white trash self-identification that have been laid out in the introduction “The Company I Keep: Introducing White Trash and *Supernatural.*” Also, country music, hard or soft, is linked to rednecks and trash. However, the other reason that country is the critical focus of this chapter is the surprising lack of literature that critiques classic rock. I have found a wealth of glossy table-top books recording the biography of Led Zeppelin and Metallica, just as I have come across a number of texts engaging directly with the fans of punk and metal. Despite the fact that Led Zeppelin and Metallica can both be classed as metal, within the confines of *Supernatural*, these bands are framed non-diegetically as classic rock and diegetically as “the greatest hits of mullet rock” (“Pilot”). Perhaps the reason there is
little critical work on classic rock is the same reason that whiteness is only recently being examined. Classic rock, after all, is the whiteness studies of the music industry. It can very easily become invisible because of the fact that the majority of its fan base are white male straight middle class teenagers. It is worth noting, though, that through the tenure of *Supernatural* classic rock, at least through venues such as YouTube, the demographic for specific songs may be changing. Despite my focus on seasons one through five, the first episode of the currently airing season six highlights very clearly the ways in which *Supernatural* is aiding in the chic-ing of classic rock and/or mullet rock.

“Exile on Main St.”, episode 6.01 and a reference in and of itself, opened with a montage of Dean set to the non-diegetic song “Beautiful Loser” by Bob Seger. When one searches for this song on YouTube, the first search result is flooded with comments pertaining to *Supernatural*. The first comment with thirty-two thumbs up comes from user Marianesgomes, stating:

supernatural has a great soundtrack, that's one of the first reasons that made me a fan of it [Seger’s song] so please don't get mad just because some of us didn't know this songs before : ) (“Beautiful Loser Bob Seger”)

Marianesgomes, speaking on behalf of the user who littered the page with comments ranging from “thumbs up if Sam? and Dean are the best :)?” from 4everEPIC with 266 thumbs up and “thumbs up if ya get here from supernatural ^^” from Jakubgale23 with 143 thumbs up (“Beautiful Loser Bob Seger”). Marianesgomes seems to be well aware that (an assumed) she is encroaching into a space that isn’t, at least originally, intended for her. However, she, and her fellows, are greeted with a number of responses that echo the articulate and welcoming words of user Kperko14, the individual who originally uploaded the song, who states that

We aren't mad. We are GLAD young people are finding out what millions of us have
known for a long time. There never has been or never will be another decade like the ’70s when it comes to the overwhelming number of great songs and performers in their prime. A lot of us took it for granted at the time but looking back we now know how incredible it was. Don't stop with this one song. You haven't even scratched the surface of that decade. Welcome to the 70s! (“Beautiful Stranger Bob Seger”)

What is interesting to note from these exchanges is that classic rock is not being framed as anyone’s music. It does not belong to any specific identity or group despite the fact that within the universe of Supernatural classic rock is considered “mullet rock” and, judging from the reactions of Lisa Braedan (Cindy Sampson) in the season three episode “The Kids are Alright,” at worst unsavory and at best rebellious and “bad.” Classic rock simply is, an assumed part of a national narrative. Until that understanding is changed, it seems unlikely that a wealth of critical analysis will appear. Just like whiteness, classic rock can be both marginal and central. The challenge is to view it in such a way that all of its impacts are seen.

It is worth noting, though, that as soon as classic rock can be linked to country, such as Lynyrd Skynyrd, criticism is opened up. Country music, with is steel guitars and twang and more importantly its loss, anxiety, and performance of gender and authenticity, is named as a form of identity and often linked to an identity that is, or is at least next to, trash.

**Dead, Drunk, and , aked: Defining White Trash Aesthetics**

As previously mentioned, to understand the lived experience of white trash aesthetic, we must look at commodities such as music not simply as objects that can be bought but also as speaking subjects. Likewise, the speaking white trash subjects see themselves reflected back to themselves through the commodified object. Aaron Fox names this experience as one of “split subjectivity” that constantly exists within white trash culture. Despite this fact, though, once split
subjectivity is acknowledged, sociability is threatened (Fox, 1993, 136). White trash subjects are aware, on some level, that this cognitive dissonance exists. After all, that’s the “bitch of country music” (Fox, 1993, 131). The songs highlight, for instance, crying in one’s beer. No one, though, actually wants to do that. But in country music and as white trash subjects, we do – often with shame, but told with pride. That is the “bitch of country music.” This duality of experience and expression is best exemplified by the split subject who is

At once immersed and distanced, silent and talkative, inarticulate and artful [it is this trope that] is central to the poetics of country music and to “ordinary” discourse in the cultural context of the rural working-class beer joint. The “split subject”, in other words, articulately speaks its inarticulate silence in both the country song and in “real life” (Fox, 1993, 132).

The role of music, examined through the critiques of country, will be explored later in this chapter. This definition of the split subject, though, concisely highlights two of the major identifying factors of white trash aesthetics. First, the split subject occurs equally in commodified objects and in living subjects: in the bar and on record, in songs singing about bars, in bars singing songs. This highlights the second, but primary, factor, which is that objects are constantly being given voice and autonomy by subjects when the subjects embrace their “inarticulate silence” and become figures, or objects, from the song and from the larger discourse of white trash aesthetics.

The discourse of loss that surrounds white trash culture is a complicated one. The core element, especially in regard to aesthetics, can be seen in the loss of cultural capital as poor whites. Poor whites are rejected from whiteness because of the assumption that theirs is a “contaminated culture” and that middle class whites, through “mere proximity [to it] entail
ideological danger” (Fox, 2004, 44). White trash subjects and their lived aesthetics are once again liminal because of their exclusion from the accepted rubric of culture. White trash aesthetics are “understood to signify an explicit claim to whiteness, not as an unmarked, neutral condition of lacking (or trying to shed) race, but as a marked foregrounded claim of cultural identity – a bad whiteness” (Fox, 2004, 44). This bad whiteness is so bad that it is completely rejected from dominant conceptions of culture. Because white trash depicts “certain behaviors or thoughts, words or actions, as outside the realm of social acceptance” (Hartigan, 161), it, as a culture, is classed as a contaminant. It is literally trash that must be exorcised from “real,” “good” culture and thrown away. Since poor whites cannot simply be thrown out, they are marked as white trash – a term that actively restricts “a segment of whites, their interest, and concerns, from being regarded seriously in public forums” (Hartigan, 160).

It is crucial, though, to realize that white trash aesthetics are also split. They exist within the living texts of poor, disenfranchised whites and in the mediated commodities of dominant middle-class culture. Because of this additional split, the embodied aesthetic is enacted in perhaps a surprising manner. Barbara Ching identifies this form of action, a possible resistance, as burlesque, which is a comic mode that can be used to undermine any cultural ideal. Most examples of burlesque involve intentional and spectacular violations of the standards of good taste and good behavior. These violations can be disgusting or hilarious depending on your attachment to the ideals in question. If your good taste justifies your social status, you may not like to see the standards of sophistication torn down too often, but if you are down so low that your only hope is some new ideal, applauding the burlesque makes good sense and good fun (2001, 27).
The burlesque further situates white trash aesthetics in duality. Laughter is born out of disenfranchisement, or as Ching names it “white trash tragedy; broken homes, decrepit houses, black out drinking, dead-end jobs, and life sentences” (1997, 120). This white trash tragedy, of course, is the “low other” of American culture (Ching, 1997, 120).

One can easily see the elements of white trash tragedy in *Supernatural*. The Winchester home is broken by Mary’s death and John’s absent fathering. Middle-class values could easily consider Bobby’s home and junkyard, the closest thing Sam and Dean have to a home base, decrepit. Drinking is rarely a pleasure and more often a chore, as seen by the tense closing scene of “Croatoan” and the equally tense opening scene of “Hunted.” While “Folsom Prison Blues” glibly deals with life sentences, the conversation between Sam and Dean during “Croatoan” and “Hunted” better underscores this tragedy.

Sam: So. Last night. You want to tell me what the hell you were talking about?

Dean: What do you mean?

Sam: What do I mean? I mean you said you were tired of the job. And that it wasn't just because of Dad. […]

Dean: I don't know, man. I just think maybe we ought to . . . go to the Grand Canyon. […] Yeah, you know, all this driving back and forth across country, you know I've never been to the Grand Canyon? Or we could go to T.J. Or Hollywood, see if we can bang Lindsey Lohan. […] I just think we should take a break from all this. Why do we gotta get stuck with all the responsibility, you know? Why can't we live life a little bit?

(“Croatoan” 2.9)

[conversation continues directly from the end of “Croatoan,” above, to the beginning of “Hunted,” below]
Dean: Before Dad died he, he told me something — something about you.

Sam: What? Dean, what did he tell you?

Dean: He said that he wanted me to watch out for you, to take care of you.

Sam: He told you that a million times.

Dean: No, this time was different. He said that I had to save you. [...] He just said that I had to save you, that nothing else mattered; and that if I couldn't, I'd . . .

Sam: You'd what, Dean?

Dean: That I'd have to kill you. He said that I might have to kill you, Sammy.

Sam: [...] How could you not have told me this?

Dean: Because it was Dad, and he begged me not to.

Sam: Who cares?! Take some responsibility for yourself, Dean! You had no right to keep this from me!

Dean: You think I wanted this? Huh? I wish to God he'd never opened his mouth. Then I wouldn't have to walk around with this screaming in my head all day. (“Hunted”, 2.10)

Even with small portions of dialogue removed, one can see the ways in which even the small articles and pieces of talk and sociability actively create the environment and the mood – specifically the tragedy that Ching underscores. Hunting is barely acknowledged within these scenes, but Dean, while diligently nursing his beer, articulates that this path, like many jobs of white trash, is a dead end. This job is also a life sentence. However, the most poignant life sentence that *Supernatural* is constantly reiterating is that of family and the guilt and shame that go hand in hand with those ties. It is not by coincidence, then, that two powerfully charged scenes are framed by drinking.

While I have been able to explore the logic and paradox behind white trash aesthetics,
rarely is this depth used when dominant culture engages with this aesthetic. Instead, it is understood simply as objects and the lack of culture and taste. It is defined by country music, hard liquor, black velvet paintings and bug zappers. *Supernatural* appropriately inhabits an ambiguous position. While, at once, it exhibits the qualities and markers of white trash aesthetics, neither the series nor its characters are named as white trash. Dominant culture names *Supernatural* working class and markets it as such (as an object), but white trash can see itself reflected within the series (which has now become a speaking object). To help explain why this is, we only need to turn our attention to America’s obsession with commodification and consumption. Once both commodity and aesthetics have been defined and explored, white trash’s split subjectivity comes into sharp focus.

**Bankrupt on Selling: The Commodification of Aesthetics**

Now that we have established the ideology that permeates white trash aesthetics, it is important to explore the reasons dominant forms of media do not present these aesthetics as actual complicated and legitimate modes of expression. Instead of being viewed as a discourse of subjectivity and power, white trash aesthetics are overly simplified into a series of commodities and the apparent lack of style. Returning to the concept of trash drag that was touched upon earlier in this thesis, we can see that white trash aesthetics are not unique in the way in which they have been co-opted by capitalism.

To understand why non-dominant aesthetics are often appropriated, one must first understand the immense power that has been imbued within the consumptive capitalism of American society. In the reader *Consuming Environments: Television and Commercial Culture*, authors Mike Budd, Steve Craig, and Clay Steinman succinctly explain the living power that has been placed on the process of buying and consuming:
The social aspects of buying things are so important to most people in modern America that many described ours as a “consumer culture.” Raymond Williams has explained infatuation with consumption by comparing the appeal of consumer items to the allure of magic charms in other cultures. While in some societies people chant incantations, wear charms, or burn incense to bring them happiness or success, many Americans buy products. For us, the magic is in what we believe the clothing, shampoo, beer, or cake mix will do for us (35).

Budd, Craig, and Steinman, through their critique of Raymond Williams, align the kind of power of spiritual faith with that of goods. In some ways, we can see that faith and goods are not as removed from one another as many Americans may like to believe. Consumer goods are used not only as status symbols, but, like charms, are meant to do more than clothe, wash, or fill us. They are also meant to bless us with happiness, success, and American Cool; all of these concepts, of course, hang precariously on what items individuals use to define themselves.

“Cool,” Americans like to say, is difficult to define and to judge. Someone either has cool or they don’t. We know cool when we see it, but we can’t just name it. Barbara Ching, though, defines cool. In defining one of the primary tropes of dominant culture, it is only appropriate that Ching begins her discussion with what cool is not. After all, hegemonic American culture prefers to view itself as invisible. It can only be given form when in contrast to what it is not; it can only exist and be named when there is an alterity standing against it. Cool is not Uncool.

For Ching, hard country (music, culture, and identity) is most definitely not cool, because “as everyone who winces at the sound of the steel guitar and twangy nasal voice” (2001, 30) knows the moans of white trash tragedy, country, its music, its rurality, and its fans are inclusively dismissed as uncool because its “heartaches and hangovers don’t fit the mode at all”
Culturally, the reasons for why it is uncool remain amorphous. However, when one considers the framework for this tragedy, Uncool and Cool begin to take shape. After all, “from the moment [hard country icons] enter our consciousness, these singers strike a lowly pose, and their sad songs, whining steel guitars, and wailing fiddles set that pose to music” (Ching, 1997, 117); likewise, “hard country stars rise and shine because of the unexpected darkness of the background they create” (Ching, 1997, 120). Because of the traditional American tale of constantly striving for success and of (specifically) masculine braggadocio, these kinds of actions, this “bitch of country music,” can never be cool. Instead, “‘cool’, then, is an almost purely economic success with no emotional intensity allowed” (Ching, 2001, 30).

Dominant and mainstream Uncool can be named: steel guitars, nasal voices, Jack Daniels, VCRs and wrestling; American Cool, though, does not have such firm markers. Instead, it is the ability to coyly purchase what *isn’t* cool. It becomes as, Newitz and Wray eloquently state, “a consumer choice rather than an economic condition of scarcity and depravation” (1997, 179-80). It is Uncool when one is forced by economic status to be “poor, vulgar, and proud” (Newitz and Wray, 1997, 179), but when one can put on this trash drag, can co-opt pride and vulgarity at Urban Outfitters, The Gap, Tower Records or through the brands connected with the CW store, the charms of commodity and consumption imbue the wearer with Cool *and* the ability to assume that the Uncool have likewise chosen to appear this way and don trash drag as a fashion choice. Through trash drag and commodification, the middle class are able to believe that white trash chose their charms and totems the same way in which they have done.

While trash drag highlights this cycle of appropriation and consumption in regards to class, this appropriative relationship between dominant culture and commodity is applied to nearly every minority or subordinate culture that exists within the broader American culture.
Rosemary J. Coombe summarizes the now constant struggle between these groups and marketed capitalism as:

How social difference was appropriated by manufacturers as market distinction through commercial adoption of widely recognized indicators of social otherness. These privately held signifiers were publicly circulated to interpellate an American consumer and were then domesticated and consumed by individual Americans who corporeally embodied these same signs of alterity that the national body politic was simultaneously incorporating [as in creating a new corporation with attendant commodities]. In the later twentieth century, we see renewed struggles by formerly (and continually) subjugated groups […] as they attempt legally (and illegally) to reclaim the insignia of their former alterity and end the continuing commodification of their names, images, and motifs in mass markets (33).

While white trash is in no way unique in how it has changed from other to ideological tool, it is important that attention be given to the specific ways in which trash drag and chicness partially erase the alterity that not only helps to define white trash but also dominant middle class America.

White trash aesthetics, though, do offer a unique point of view with regard to the cycle of commodification and potential reclamation. The reason is that white trash is, in fact, trash and not working class. The liminality of white trash “demarcates the end of the class spectrum where extremes are heightened, thus allowing for bizarre transpositions to occur. White trash becomes chic” (Hartigan, 159). John Hartigan Jr. remarks on the chicness of white trash by highlighting a number of boutiques that market themselves as “white trash,” yet sell objects for exorbitant prices. Likewise, he notes the Dolce and Gabbana advertising set which played heavily on the
tropes of white trash tragedy (159-60). While the CW store, with its clutches and jeans, may not be marketing itself as white trash, there is an assumed connection between viewers and viewed (in this case, the Winchester brothers). Why, then, is this tragedy being sold to another section of society through saturated color palettes, twin cherries, and skulls (notwithstanding that these markers are closer to rockabilly than to white trash)? While reflecting upon this question, Hartigan poses that it is “perhaps because the term’s [white trash] boundary maintenance work allows little room for valorized self-identification. As well, maybe with white trash, we reach a terrain where the depravities facing poor whites are so stark or severe that representational struggles are simply not a priority” (160). It is not uncommon for individuals, especially the youth or the bohemian, to want to identify with sadness, loss, and depravity. However, white trash subjects seem to articulate their loss as such a core part of their identity that it is integrated and highlighted through all of their actions. White trash, unlike privileged young people, do not share an ambivalence about their own class status.

White trash chic also serves another function with regard to commodification, in that it invokes “an aesthetic representational approach that purports to merge high and low culture” (Hartigan, 160). Arguments could be, and invariably have been, made to say that integration between these cultural poles would be positive. To debunk this, though, one must keep in mind that the idea of a binary of high and low culture ineffectually explains the many gradients and vectors that create American culture writ large. Likewise, even if white trash chic reflects small portions of a larger aesthetic, it does so only by erasing the subtleties of that which it claims to reflect. Instead, white trash, chic or not, is still branded with the “inscription of social contempt and distance” (Hartigan, 165).

Even with the concepts of trash drag and white trash chic, cultural commentators still
don’t know how to frame even the possibility of poor whites in the media. It is interesting to note
that within literary criticism circles yet another discourse has been cramped into a masquerading
binary: hick chic and hick shock. The assumed difference between these two categories is the
degree of authenticity. It is curious, then, to note that neither of these terms embodies a true
“hickness”, but rather they are both defined by how the word hick is modified. Likewise,
authenticity is here equated with rurality. Robert Rebien begins his exploration of hick
chic/shock by reiterating the question that was posed by Jonathon Yardley in 1985:

Would you please work on an essay explaining why in a nation full of yuppies,
conservatives, and materialists, with college campuses full of business students and future
lawyers, rural poverty is all the rage? (67)

The answer which Rebien gives is that “hick chic was just a slick repackaging of a worn pastoral
myth” (67) and, therefore, not a new trend. Hick shock, on the other hand, this “dark literary
other” of hick chic, “was more about the realism of the country side, ‘where discontent and
disorientation have long been as common as dirt’” (68). However, just as trash drag is a
performance of commodity and requires an audience that is able to read the markers of the
assumed class, hick shock functions when the “well’to’do believe that by affecting trash poses
they are tapping into authentic despair and alienation” (Friend and Sacharow in Rebien, 73).

Through the use of drag, chic, and shock, white trash aesthetics have been molded into
different formats by capitalism’s interpellation. Even when white trash is attempting to be
privileged, it is being done so in such a way that is reifies the dominant modes of aesthetics and
taste. The appropriation of this aesthetic can very well strengthen the “perceptions of social
devaluation or stigma” (Coombe, 32). This social devaluation, and perhaps even this entire
section, may be best exemplified by Rieban’s quoting of Dorothy Allison: “The form of trash is
attractive, but the content is not. Americans are into form without content” (73). It is only when
this form (object) is combined with content (subject) that authentic white trash aesthetics can be
understood.

**Old Sad Songs: Aestheticized Commodity and Commodified Aesthetics**

Only by bringing objects and subjects, commodity and aesthetics together can we see
what white trash aesthetics are. They are both lived and bought. The line between object and
subject, record and singer, loss and desire is blurred beyond recognition. When one considers the
complex relationship between white trash aesthetics and commercial commodification,
*Supernatural* becomes ambiguous in regard to where it fits within this discourse. Is it authentic,
chic, shock, or something else? As chapter one explored, *Supernatural* appears to offer a
progressive point of view regarding the positioning of white trash in the media, but because of
the ways the Winchesters and hunters are valorized, the tradition of white trash and monstrosity
is reified rather than dismantled. While it would be easiest to place *Supernatural* either along
lived authenticity or manufactured commodity, through the discussion of subjects and objects, we
can see that, like any binary, this distinction is false. Instead, it is more useful to consider this
question in a two-fold manner. First, does *Supernatural* fit within the visual and thematic modes
of white trash aesthetics? Second, does the intended audience view *Supernatural* as trash, chic,
or shock?

Chapter three explores in details the ways that the Winchesters, Dean specifically, fit
thematically within white trash aesthetics. This chapter, then, is more concerned with the ways in
which *Supernatural*, both as a universe and as a text, reflects traditional aesthetics. The strongest
connection is not visuals, nor is it solely aural. Instead, *Supernatural* employs the chimera of
country music to position itself within a cultural narrative. In some ways, as in Ellen’s roadhouse,
the homage is obvious. The underscore and the themes of much of the licensed music, however, more subtly reinforce typical understandings of what is country and what is trash.

As discussed in the introduction, *Supernatural* is television rather than film, but television, as different as it is, uses a number of the same tropes as cinema. Since 1957, country music, as underscore or licensed music, has been used to “portray lonely American crowds, violence, fraud, and political corruption” (Ching, 203, 2001, “Sounding”) as well as decay. Likewise, country music can be used to condemn a nation that affects purity but is steeped in provincial materialism (Ching, 204, 2001, “Sounding”).

The underscore of *Supernatural* uses aural cues to invoke country music, but it is also interesting to note that the format of the series aligns itself with country. One of the primary roles of country music is to use intertextuality to weave together a cohesive history and narrative for both performers and fans. With this narrative, performers and fans are able to place themselves into a larger social narrative than that of a single subject. This history, though, is one that is highly self-referential as seen by the fact that:

So eagerly do hard country singers display their dependence on their forbearers and peers that the compulsion to repeat the sins and songs of musical relatives has become essential to the hard country performance (Ching, 2001, 27).

*Supernatural* plays into this tradition not only by the licensed music of the soundtrack and the near endless barrage of pop culture references that pepper character dialogue but also through the use of episode titles. Within the twenty-two episodes of season two, eleven episode titles are directly lifted from other popular culture texts, including classic rock songs and albums (2.1 “In My Time of Dying”, 2.13 “Houses of the Holy”, 2.14 “Born Under a Bad Sign”), neo-noir films (2.7 “The Usual Suspects”), avant-garde fiction (2.18 “Hollywood Babylon”), classic blues (2.8
“Crossroad Blues”), and even existential theater (2.6 “No Exit”).

Country plays a large role in Supernatural. Country music and country music tropes are worked into the text through subtle nods and overt homage. However, country, as in “out in the country,” and rurality also plays an important role in creating the series’ atmosphere. Despite the fact that the Winchesters are constantly on the road to reach the suburbs or the city, they are, in fact, on the road. They are not, though, on the highway or the interstate. The transition shots of the Impala that appear in nearly every episode show the car speeding down empty back roads that are flanked by trees or fields. At once, the shots invoke anywhere, but the anywhere is a specifically non-urban anywhere.

In discussing this project, a number of my friends and readers have remarked upon region because of the automatic cultural link between The South and white trash. Questions come to mind such as: are the Winchesters Southern? Does Kansas even count as the South? Would that even matter considering the amount of time that is not spent in Kansas? Focusing on region, therefore, seems to be the incorrect way to address Supernatural. Chapter one has shown that white trash is not confined by region either historically or contemporarily. This begs the question, then, should country? Despite the fact that poor whites and the (semi-)rurality they inhabit (remember that “out in the country,” according to Aaron Fox, is just as much a state of mind and understanding as it is a physical place) is not confined to any region, Rebein explains that through American cultural understanding the two concepts are used to define each other: “‘locale’ is often read to mean ‘local’, and ‘local’ to mean ‘marginal’ or ‘unimportant’” (67), and despite where the audience may be situated, local means Southern and Southern means trash.

However, as stated above and previously, it would be inappropriate to focus on the South as a real place. The way in which the South functions is as Theresa Goddu explained it: the South
exists in the imagination of America. What the South is or has been is inconsequential. Instead, what it could be, what it is imagined to be, a place of monsters and white trash, is equated with locale. What then about the road? Is it also rural?

The road functions as the country in two primary ways. First, the open road recalls the way in which rurality was understood during the infancy of our nation’s cultural memory. The road echoes not Reiban’s country but the country of the frontiersman – it is the unknown that is filled with untapped potential and limitless creativity. It is both savage and unmarked, but it is also an environment that allows for the individuals who enter it to enter into a continuous adventure or “the modern automotive equivalent of what [Joseph] Campbell calls the bliss of the deep abode” (Primeau, 127). The road has also existed, specifically within film, as a “no place” of transition, movement, non-fixity, and perhaps of identity. Since roads have opened up and Bonnie and Clyde pushed their cars to the limits of 50 MPH:

Americans have treated the highway as sacred space. Roads and cars have long gone beyond simple transportation to become places of exhilarating motion, speed, and solitude. Getting away is a chance at a new start, a special time to discover self […], glide through vast empty space (Primeau, 1).

However, just as the frontier corrupted those who had hoped to tame it, the road changes those who dwell within it. Supernatural alludes often to Jack Kerouac’s On the Road. Two men live a “life on the road” (Kerouac, 1) searching for something that constantly seems elusive. Despite the fact that Dean Winchester’s name is explained in universe as being a familial nod to his grandmother, it seems far more likely that Dean was named with Kerouac’s work in mind.

Before that I’d often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off. Dean is the perfect guy for the road, because he actually was born
on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake City in 1926, in a jalopy, on their way to Los Angeles (Kerouac, 1). After all, just as Dean Moriarty was born on the road, Dean Winchester was formed and came to exist on the road. It is through this connection that Primeau artfully brings the road full circle to the frontier and, with it, underscores the fact that much of the mediated genealogy of white trash has existed on the road:

In *On the Road*, a return route is never an issue since neither Dean nor Sal after him express any desire to return anywhere. Instead of heading home with the wisdom of the journey, Sal is what Joseph Allen Boone calls the prototypical “social outcast whose true self can only exist outside parameters of his culture, in the ‘wild zone’” (128).

The ambiguity of the road should come as no surprise. Already, we have seen that the frontier, be it the West (in any of its iterations) or suburbia, can only exist when there is something to define itself against. However, the road, like those who complicate these borders, runs between both the civilized and the wild.

*Supernatural* acknowledges this specifically during season two and the overarching plot of crossroads demons. Perhaps it is worthwhile to consider the relationship between white trash hunters and the tricksters that are both hunting and being hunted by them. After all, just as white trash is liminal by standing outside of the class schemas of America, the trickster stands outside the schemas of simple morality (yet another false binary). After all, tricksters and white trash are both constantly “on the road.” A white trash trickster then is a “lord of the inbetween” and:

Is the spirit of the road at dusk, the one that runs from one town to another and belongs to neither. […] He] is a boundary-crosser. Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, t the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure there
is commerce. He also attends the internal boundaries by which groups articulate their social life. We constantly distinguish – right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead – and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction (Hyde, 6-7).

This connection, I believe, is not incidental when one remembers how deeply season two is entrenched within the mythology of Southern blues, Robert Johnson, and crossroads. However, because of the depth of that arc and the racial implications, a deeper analysis calls for more attention than this project can provide.

To further explore this role of both the white trash trickster and rurality, we find ourselves facing Barbara Ching’s white trash tragedy yet again. To find where this white trash trickster may hang his hat or, more aptly, fall off his barstool, we need only look to Ellen Harvell’s Roadhouse.

The Roadhouse is the only space in the series that has ever appeared to be a place devoted to hunter sociability. Hunters are shown to gather there for work and sharing information concerning hunts, but it also functions as a place for hunters to relax among their own. Its décor and even location is an obvious piece of intertextuality that invokes feelings of Hank Williams’ “Honky Tonk Blues.” Just as the speaker in Williams’ song sees the honky tonk as existing between the rural and the urban, the roadhouse is a private venue despite the fact that it is close enough to the highway that is can be seen by tourists (“No Exit”). Aaron Fox describes a Texan honky tonk, but he very well could be describing the Harvelle Roadhouse:

Ice-cold beer, a verbally authoritative bartender, dense cigarette smoke, loud, cold air conditioners, invisibility to passersby on the road outside, a visually riotous display of amusing and sentimental memorabilia, and a good balance of male and female patrons, each with the ability to “take a joke,” […] Worn wood furnishings are always
appreciated, and pool tables, game machines, beer posters of semi-nude women, and a
back door are desirable optional elements. […] They are (at times) “family-centered”
institutions. A successful honky-tonk must also be a comfortable place in which to
conduct a wide range of deal-making activities in the domains of business, politics,
kinship, and sexuality. The tavern plays a significant role in the economic life of the
community, especially as an institution for the socialization of wealth and maintenance of
networks of reciprocity (23).

The Roadhouse should act as this institution for socialization and maintenance. It doesn’t,
though, considering that it is burnt to the ground in the season two episode “All Hell Breaks
Loose Pt. 1.” It seems odd that the one consistently aesthetic piece of white trash (both visually
and thematically) is destroyed. When asked about this decision and the incumbent death of
visually obvious white trash character Ash, Eric Kripke answered decisively:

I love that we had a mullet on The CW! But Ash had to do with how much I hated the
actual Roadhouse itself rather than anyone in it. It just didn’t work in a road show…
(sarcastically) It’s a road show! But we have a home. No, that’s the point, it’s a road show
so you don’t have a home. So, burn it!! (Bekakos)

This, then, would make it seem that the aesthetics used in Supernatural are created for laughs. A
mullet on The CW is unheard of, but the character wearing it was laughable in his presentation
and, in the end, dispensable. The point of the Roadhouse was not to be an aesthetic marker.
Rather, Kripke views it as a mistake that must be remedied. The road comes the focus and, as
established, the road taps into the thematic aesthetics of white trash (tricksters). If the set is being
literally dressed in trash drag, perhaps it will be these motivating factors which place
Supernatural in the realm of “authentic” white trash aesthetics, especially considering that
traditional aesthetics have proven to be little more than chic drag.
THE HOMOSOCIAL FAMILY IN SUPERNATURAL OR WHY DAD’S ON A HUNTING TRIP

Dean Winchester is a hero. He represents the personification of an entire group of people. The people whom he represents rarely have heroes who look like them. Rather, this group is more often than not reflected through mass media as monsters. They are meant to see themselves in the inbred hill folk of *Wrong Turn* (2003), the insane butchers of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974 and 2003), and the banjo-lovin’ rapists of *Deliverance* (1972). The group of people to whom Dean is a hero can be called a number of things. Each of these names was once attached to a geo-political history. However, in contemporary American culture, a “redneck” is the same as a “hillbilly” is the same as an “oakie” is the same as a “hick,” and all these monikers can comfortably fit within the umbrella term “white trash.” Dean Winchester is white trash, and he is a hero. Even though his heroics are mediated through monstrosity, he is “one of the good guys.”

However, more often than not, one of those categories of identity overrides the others. He is either a hero, or he is a misogynistic piece of white trash. He is rarely considered to be both at the same time. One can see this tension clearly within *Supernatural* fandom debates. With regard to active participants in *Supernatural* fandom, one can assume that these individuals embrace the heroism that the protagonists of the narrative represent. Fans accept that Sam and Dean are heroes. However, that heroism breaks down when class, specifically an assumed class-based misogyny, enters the discussion. On a Livejournal fan blog, users Vee_fic and Gnatkip both remark upon the frequency of Dean’s misogyny being aligned with his class status by stating respectively that apologists and critics both see an “automatic classification of Dean Winchester as working-class and attribut[e] his recently bad behavior [toward women] to his social position”
and that this correlation is of a “particularly high concentration.”

In order to evaluate the way in which Dean, or anyone, could be a white trash hero instead of simply a hero who is also white trash, I would like to borrow a caveat from John Hartigan Jr. and agree that

before addressing the transgressive uses of white trash, a few cautionary considerations are warranted. First, its negative connotations are an irreducible remainder, active and proximate even when the name is used as a means of positive self-identification. Merely formulating questions about white trash participates to some extent in reifying “it” as a real object, thus naturalizing the forms of class loathing that animate the term […] This latter point speaks directly to the earlier suggestion that references to white trash should be discarded in favor of some neutral reference for *those people.* […] It is exactly this confidence in some neutral space where disparaging social judgments can be rendered more politely that gives white trash part of its enduring momentum. We cannot begin to understand white trash by trying to transcend its contaminating markings; rather, these must be forefront of any such inquiry (112-4).

Despite the fact that these elements of heroism and trashiness are viewed as diametrically opposed, it is important to note that while Dean occupies both of these positions simultaneously, the ways in which these pieces of his character are formed can, and should, be traced to the masculine-centric family unit which he inhabits. Dean’s class and his hero status are both wrapped up in the ways in which he identifies himself with and against his brother and father. Only by exploring these homosocial roles can one truly understand Dean’s heroics, class, and masculinity.

*Mama Bake a Pie, Daddy Kill a Chicken: Assumed Parental Roles*
Within contemporary American narrative, one of the key issues that we as a culture both laud and feel the need to protect is family. If one only were to turn her attention to some of the recent pieces of this well-televised political discourse, she will surely find a number of deliberations, discussions, and flat out verbal brawls concerning the sanctity of marriage and with that the sanctity of The Family which is so often defined by *children*. Individuals such as Rick Santorum are quick to collapse marriage with family. A marriage is a family and a family only exists with children. It is those children that we as a culture must protect and cultivate. Santorum pulls no punches and uses emotional rhetoric when he states how important the marriage/family/child bond is:

> Marriage matters because children matter. Without marriage, children suffer. There is simply no better investment parents can make in their children’s future than a healthy marriage. For my wife Karen and me, marriage is a sacred vocation. We give ourselves to each other: mind, body, and soul. Nothing in this world is more important to me than the happiness and well-being of my wife and children. It is my most important job (89).

Queer theorist Lee Edelman, however, does not agree that parenting is “the most important job.” Rather, Edelman believes that the most important job that one can undertake is to be done with the child -- to very nearly literally throw the baby out with the bathwater. Edelman links the child and the concept that we as a culture should be continually “fighting for the children” with the affirmation and authentication of dominant, hegemonic, and oppressive social order (Edelman 3). When groups or individuals are viewed by others as not “fighting for the children,” they are positioned along side “the social order’s death drive” and are seen to inhabit a place “of abjection [which is] expressed [through] the stigma” that society voices via the rhetoric that if one does not care for the children, one does not care for the future (Edelman 3).
With these conflicting conceptions of the child, one attached to more mainstream discourse and one deeply entrenched within critical theory, how are we as a culture meant to think about family and the children within them? What are we to think of the parental units who are or are not fighting for these children? Perhaps most importantly in reference to *Supernatural*, what happens when the child himself, in the case of Dean, is not fighting for the child?

Psychologist Samuel Osherson asserts that in order to understand a man’s motivations in nearly every aspect of his life, including his work, identity, and interpersonal relationships, “we need to understand [his] unfinished business with [his father]” (Osherson 4). This statement seems to ring clear and true for Dean. Throughout the entire series, Dean is characterized against and in comparison to his father. It is important to note that Dean fills both sides of the father-son relationship. While he is so often portrayed as John Winchester’s son, Dean is also expected to fill the role of father to Sam. Rather than simply being an older brother, Dean is shown to have the responsibility of fatherhood placed on his shoulders. For the majority of Dean’s childhood, his father was busy attempting to hunt down and kill the monster which murdered Mary Winchester (Samantha Smith), mother and wife. It was Dean’s responsibility to protect and, in a sense, raise Sam. It is no wonder then that Dean exhibits the “shroud of silence and shame that often surrounds men’s discussion of their common struggles with identity and intimacy” (Osherson 5) that is so closely linked to their fathers.

According to Mark Gerzon, the ways in which children gravitate toward and identify with their parents is directly related to the parents’ involvement with the children’s raising. An attentive and present father will coax young boys towards becoming their “father’s sons,” while an absent father precipitates “mommy’s boys” (157). During the series pilot, both John and Mary are seen actively participating in the bedtime routines for Dean, four years old, and Sam, one year
old. It can be assumed that this night is not an outlier and that John and Mary were both conscientious parents. This kind of environment would have allowed both boys to model themselves after their father who integrated both traditionally masculine traits (power and the ability to provide) with traditionally feminine traits (love and the ability to nurture) (Gerzon 158). However, just as quickly as this image of blissful domesticity is created, it is dashed with Mary’s death. With her death, John abandons his role as not only the nurturer but also as the provider. His energy and attention is constantly divided between the hunt and his children - most specifically Dean, whom he appoints de facto parent.

**The Long Con of White Masculinity**

One of the primary themes of *Supernatural* is the creation of families (both of origin and choice) and a nostalgia for those families. The Winchesters, not only as protagonists but also the children of the most fully formed familial unit, exemplify the melancholic loss that Aaron Fox sees as permeating white trash culture. The family that so defines the brothers never existed. It is melancholic because that family, John and Mary lovingly doting over both children, was never lived and, therefore, can never be mourned. While the tender bedtime scene described above did exist, an interactive family with which both boys were able to engage never did. It is this family, the brothers, a mother, and a father, for which Sam and Dean are constantly longing. Instead, the metanarratives of loss and longing coalesce with desire and weave themselves through the construction of Dean’s and Sam’s identities.

Dean, though only four years old, became the analog for Sam’s lacking parental figure. When Dean is faced with the death of his brother, he vocalizes exactly what kind of responsibilities were placed on him regarding his role within the family:

> When you were little, couldn't have been more than five, you just started asking
questions. How come we didn't have a mom? Why did we always have to move around?

Where'd Dad go? He'd disappear for days at a time. I remember beggin' you, “Quit asking, Sammy. Man, you don't want to know.” I just wanted you to be a kid. Just for a little while longer. Always tried to protect you. Keep you safe. Dad didn't even have to tell me.

It's just always my responsibility, you know? It's like I had one job. I had one job, and I screwed it up. I blew it, and for that, I'm sorry. I guess that’s what I do. I let down the people I love. Y’know, I let Dad down, and now I guess I’m just supposed to let you down, too. How can I? How am I supposed to live with that? What am I supposed to do? Sammy? What am I supposed to do? *What am I supposed to do?* (Kripke, “All Hell Breaks Loose, Part II”)

It is only when no one can respond that Dean is able to articulate the responsibilities and the sense of shame that were forced upon him by his absent father. The events surrounding Sam’s death had nothing to do with Dean, but as Dean’s monologue shows, he sees the death as having everything to do with him.

Despite the number of comments within *Supernatural* fandom that remark upon Dean’s position as an “authentic” and “real” man (Gnatkip), at the same time, one can easily read his familial devotion as being coded as feminine. Even so, Dean himself is not read as feminine. Instead, fan attraction seems to increase in direct relation to his care-giving. As Mely notes in her analysis of class and white masculinity:

> So many people seem to appreciate care-giving only when it’s done by men and to find it invisible when it’s done by women. In terms of the show itself, I find it extremely problematic that gender role mutability essentially belongs only to men -- Dean’s “feminine” virtues are enabled by the death of women in his family (Mely “Class and
White Masculinity in *Supernatural*).

Gerzon would argue that because Dean has learned “to integrate the masculine and feminine more fully than [his] parents ever will” (158), he will have the opportunity to thrive in all spheres of his life. One can see, though, that Dean has little in the way of synthesis. Instead, he is characterized as conflicted and compartmentalized with regard to his role within the family.

White masculinity is a fragile thing for a number of reasons. First is the fact that as a gendered set of roles and expectations it is inherently delicate. With no biological imperative for men to act a certain way and for women to act in a diametrically opposed and opposite way, cultures must put forth a great deal of effort in order to have the members of the culture respond to, react to, and embrace the cues of gender. If the members of a culture did not agree to indulge these gendered expectations power structures would wobble in the best case scenarios and in the worst they would topple. However, as many critical theorists including Judith Butler notes, the downfall of a single power structure would only lead to another which would shift and morph in order to support the momentary lack. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza names this cycle kyriarchy which can be understood as "a systemic analysis of interlocking structures of oppression" that names "the sociopolitical and religious multiplicative structures of systemic oppression and dehumanization" (173).

Also, this form of masculinity is especially unstable because of the fact that it was not until recently that “scholars [began] to recognize that ’white is a color’, that whites are worthy of study as whites” (Fine and Weis 39). When one considers the historical precedent of “whiteness” and the amount of energy which was placed on defining who “got to be white,” it is not surprising that those individuals who were deemed to be white were not under the kind of scrutiny which inspects culture and the assumptions upon which that culture is based. Also, there
is a kind of invisibility that goes along with whiteness. Or at least a certain kind of whiteness.

The whiteness that is seen as invisible is the upwardly mobile yet classless whiteness that populates the newly created suburbs as a means of pursuing the elusive American Dream. The whiteness that is invisible is not the whiteness that is sunburned red, to allude to the most common origin for the term “redneck.” Poor whites, though, are hyper-visible in their whiteness and in their class. Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray, editors of *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, give two reasons for this. One relates directly to the American narrative of personal success as seen by the fact that:

white trash, since it is racialized (i.e., different from “black trash” or “Indian trash”) and classed (trash is social waste and detritus), allows us to understand how tightly intertwined racial and class identities actually are in the United States. White trash speaks to the hybrid and multiple nature of identities, the ways in which our selves are formed and shaped by often contradictory and conflicting relations of social power. White trash is “good to think with” when it comes to issues of race and class in the U.S. because the term foregrounds whiteness and working-class or underclass poverty, two social attributes that usually stand far apart in the minds of many Americans (Newitz and Wray, “Introduction,” 4).

The creation of white trash allows for an easy vessel for two of the major anxieties of American culture: class and race. White trash are able to help define the proper type of America by negation. The America that sits soundly within the culture’s imagined self is able to point at white trash and as, Teresa A. Goddu explains, use it to serve “as the nation’s safety valve: as a repository for everything the nation is not” (76).

Through this analysis of the cultural importance of white trash and its social alienation, it
is not hard to believe that individuals who are being used in such a way need to find some way to identify themselves. As they are being used to help the dominant Americans define themselves as *not*, who is it that the white trash identify *as*? It seems that family dynamics would lend themselves to this question. The reason that this might be is muddied through the mediated images that are so prevalent in contemporary American culture. If one is to turn attention to non-monstrous images of white trash within mainstream culture, a trend is easily found that comedic clans create a basis for these images. Perhaps one of the strongest examples of this would be the long-running series *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971). Family is defined as extended beyond the nuclear model with a distinctive sense of isolation.

Bearing all this in mind, one can see parallels between white trash and the Winchester family. As discussed in chapter one, the Winchester brothers were the sons of a man who dreamed to own his own mechanic’s shop. However, after Mary has been killed, John retreats from this conventional form of identity construction. He leaves both the community and dominant conceptions of work. Instead, he becomes a grifter who makes his money through cons and various forms of fraud. Likewise, he teaches his sons how to survive through these means.

In the collaborative work *Road Hustler: The Career Contingencies of Professional Card and Dice Hustlers*, sociologist Robert C. Prus and C.R.D. Sharper (pseudonym), a university graduate and career card and dice hustler, define the confidence game as “a social, nonviolent hustle”, the profits of which “are obtained directly from the intended targets through deception and skill rather than through force and intimidation” (2). During the course of *Supernatural*, Dean and Sam are never seen accepting money for their hunting. Therefore, one can assume they only subsist through fraud and cons. Without the additional time spent on the road hunting, Dean and Sam as “on-the-road” hustlers “can expect to spend three to six days a week on the road”
(Prus and Sharper, 127). Within the comments of Vee_fic’s essay “Masculinity and Class,” user Cryptoxin remarks directly on the function of Dean and Sam’s status as grifters: “and ‘about working, but possibly not about being working class’ sounds exactly right. It feels like a kind of liminal position viz. (traditional) class that’s different than upward or downward mobility […] street-level hustlers [are] people discarded by the U.S. class system” (Cryptoxin, “Definitely”). Cryptoxin also explicitly draws the connection that runs through this project -- viewers cannot simply equate the Winchesters or hunters with the working class because this assumption “misses the ways that these other figures and archetypes inflect and trouble any simple reading of Dean’s class” (“This is a really great”). The possibility of remaining working class is entirely removed when John relocates his family to the road and sustains them through cons such as insurance fraud during “In My Time of Dying” and Sam’s remark in “Bugs” that wanting to go to school rather than learn to hustle pool made him the family outcast.

Like the “archetypes of the man on the margins of culture who becomes adept at seeing through the pretenses and corruptions of society and traversing class distinctions as they [sic] navigate urban and suburban landscapes” (Cryptoxin, “This is a really great”), the Winchesters remove themselves from the traditional class system of America. Karl Marx would deem them and hunters more generally the lumpenproletariat -- “swindlers, confidence tricksters, brothel-keepers, rag-and-bone merchants, beggars, and other flotsam of society” (Marx in Boon, 52). These individuals, despite their need to revolt, are too far removed from culture to participate in its revolution. Despite the fact that the Winchesters articulate a kind of power through their cons and through their hunting, their lack of cultural standing situates them firmly within the discourse of white trash.

As Prus and Sharper note, career hustlers “have relatively little time for side activities
when on the road. They generally travel by day and spend most of the remaining time resting and checking out the event” (127). These men are constantly working together or simply with one another, be it in a car, a hotel room, or on a job. We can see that this is two-fold for the Winchester brothers. Not only do they travel together, but more often than not when they work on a hunt, they work side by side rather than splitting up for various legs of a con. In their discussion of friendship between men, Robert Strikwerda and Larry May draw a distinction between men who are comrades and men who are intimate friends. It is the camaraderie that is often illustrated between soldiers, they believe, rather than intimate friendship that is underscored and privileged within Western cultures (Strikwerda and May, 95):

Soldiers not only fight shoulder to shoulder, but *they sit for long hours in cramped quarters wondering if their lives will end* [emphasis added Burnell] in the next barrage of gunfire. Such occasions can bring men to talk about deeply personal matters in their lives and hence to form bonds with one another that may last long after the common experiences have ended (Strikwerda and May, 97-8).

Despite the romantic notions concerning the connections between brothers, this description of camaraderie introduces the question of whether Dean and Sam are comrades or intimate friends. An intimate friendship is considered to be one of mutual reciprocity wherein “the most significant step […] is the achievement of a mutual trust based on some form of shared experience […] Over time, that common experience leads to self-disclosure as a sign of trust” despite the fact that “self-disclosure by itself often makes sympathy and respect more difficult”(Strikwerda and May, 101). Dean and Sam are characterized as caring deeply for one another -- loving each other and willing to sacrifice for each other. They are not, though, consistently characterized as friends. This raises the question of whether friends need *always* like
one another and perform the intimacy of friendship. According to Strikwerda and May, it would appear that yes, truly intimate friends illustrate mutual disclosure and reciprocity even when tensions arise between them. Dean and Sam, then, appear to be more easily classed as comrades through “sharing a certain kind of experience […] are provided with] the occasion for mutual self-disclosure” (Strikwerda and May, 97). By sharing a past and living together, it is possible for Dean and Sam to gradually disclose their feelings and intimacies through action rather than words (Strikwerda and May, 101-2). This possibility, though, hinges on the assumption that Dean and Sam are self-aware enough to read disclosure through each other’s actions.

**The Weight of Guilt: Fraternal Trauma and Familial Sacrifice**

Without the sense of community that small business fosters and the implicit isolation of grifts and confidence games run on the road, one can see how identity building would be based strictly on familial relations, be they that of comrades or intimate friends. In Dean’s speech during “All Hell Breaks Loose, Part II,” audience members can see just how heavily family has shaped his conception of self. However, this conception of self is not merely “brother” or “son.” Rather, it is an identity that is defined through work and protection. It is an unspoken job (though the audience sees on a number of occasions throughout the series in rather explicit terms that Dean was, in fact, told to protect his little brother) that had fully consumed Dean’s sense of self. Dean Winchester does not so much exist as does Sam’s Older Brother and Protector. The audience learns just how far this identity runs and just how strongly it overpowers the individual Dean Winchester when Dean resolves to bring his brother back from the dead. He does so by literally selling his soul. The repercussions of this deal are that Dean will have one year to live before hell hounds, the invisible canines of The Pit, rend him limb from limb in the first act of torture he will endure for eternity -- or at least long enough to cause him to lose his humanity and
become a demonic torturer.

This devotion between brothers is voiced by author and memoirist John Edgar Wideman as he explains the desires that he feels when meeting his brother in jail for a visit.

Our eyes meet. What won’t be said, can’t be said no matter how long we talk, how much I write, hovers in his eyes and mine. We know where we are, what’s happening, how soon this tiny opening allowing us to touch will be slammed shut. All that in our eyes, and I can’t take seeing it any longer than he can. The glance we exchange is swift, is full of fire, of unsayable rage and pain. Neither of us can hold it more than a split second. He sees in me what I see in him. The knowledge that this place is bad, worse than bad.[…] what we have to do, ought to do, is make our stand here, together. Just a flash. The simplest, purest solution asserting itself. […] I force myself to pretend that eye conversation never took place, […] We’d lost that moment. (Wideman 85).

Wideman is able to articulate these desires without acting them out to their deadly conclusion. However, Dean is unable to draw a line between emotion and action if only because his actions have been defined by similar emotions for so long. However, just as Wideman buries the recognition that he feels within the conversation of glances, Dean also rejects articulation. Sam asks him point blank:

Sam: Did you sell your soul for me, like Dad did for you?

Dean: Oh, come on, no! (Kripke, “All Hell Breaks Loose, Part II”)

Dean does not answer the question of whether he sacrificed himself for his brother, but he does articulate the results of the deal stating, “One year. I got one year” (Kripke, “All Hell Breaks Loose, Part II”). It is important to make note of the way in which Sam confronts his brother. “Did you sell your soul for me, like Dad did for you?” (emphasis added by author). We can see that
even in this act, Dean is not acting as an autonomous agent. Rather, he is substituting himself for his father.

Earlier in the series, the Winchesters endured a collision between their Chevrolet Impala and a semi-trailer truck. Unsurprisingly, the men did not fare well. Dean, though, was the most severely injured of the men. Because of his injuries, Dean is dying. However, he “gets better.” Miraculously, at least in the eyes of his caregivers, he makes a full recovery. This recovery, though, is not through the wonders of modern medicine. John makes a deal with the demon he has been hunting for the duration of his sons’ lives. He gives his life for Dean’s. The conversation that John and Dean have before he dies is a precursor for what Dean will later say, or perhaps more aptly not say, to the man for whom he sold his soul.

  John: You know... when you were a kid, I'd come home from a hunt. And after what I'd seen I'd be...I'd be wrecked. And you... you'd come up to me and put your hand on my shoulder and you'd look me in they eye and, you'd say “It’s okay, dad.” Dean, I'm sorry.

  Dean: Why?

  John: You shouldn't have had to say that to me. I should've been saying that to you. I put-I put too much on your shoulders. I made you grow up too fast. You took care of Sammy, you took care of me. You did that. And you didn't complain, not once. I just want you to know that I am so proud of you. [...] I want you to watch out for Sammy, okay?

  Dean: Yeah dad, you know I will. You're scaring me.

  John: Don't be scared, Dean (Kripke, “In My Time of Dying”).

The year in which John sells his soul for Dean and Dean sells his for Sam, Dean is making headway to his thirties, a time which is characterized as “the second journey” to adulthood (Osherson 20) and includes the “‘naming [of] your father’ -- coming to terms with who he really
is, stripped of the distortions of childhood -- [which] is a key to every man’s ability to allow a richer identity to emerge as he ages” (Osherson 20). Dean is not able to “name” his father. Despite the fact that this process of knowing and naming does not require a present or even living father, the process does require an ability to move past the tension of desiring and rejecting a father’s love (Osherson 21). Dean is characterized as constantly embodying this tension. He is unable to move past the “distortions of childhood” and see John Winchester as a man rather than a father.

It is important, though, to realize that the childhood distortions against which Dean reads his father shift between his own and his brother’s. Dean and Sam embody opposing conceptions of father-son relations for the majority of Supernatural. During the early years, Dean is characterized as having a strong deference to his father, a submission that ran so strong that he would defer his own sense of self to that of his father. He was the “perfect solider,” an epithet given by Sam on a number of occasions. As John said during his final soliloquy, Dean was never given a childhood but was rather the family protector. When John is having his last words with his son, he seems regretful, even wistful in looking backwards. However, in the flashback from the season one episode “Something Wicked,” the audience sees the ways in which Dean’s child/adulthood was enacted in real time, as well as how it affects Dean as an adult.

Dean and John Winchester rehearse the instructions for staying safe alone. The conversation is on one level quite mundane: how many rings indicate that John is calling, who to phone if there is a problem, and so forth. But as they discuss phone security John readies a shotgun and props it up against the wall, and later asks Dean what he is supposed to do it ‘something tries to bust it’: ‘shoot first,’ the child answers, ‘ask questions later’ (Wright, “Latchkey Hero”).
On the one hand, Dean exhibits the characteristics of a “latchkey kid,” “a near-euphemism in post-WWII popular culture for lower-class children at risk” (Wright, “Latchkey Hero”). It is important to note that the reason these children are “at risk” is because they do not have a parental figure with them at all times -- often because of work -- and an unstable, often read as unsafe, home environment. However, the reason that Dean could be classified as “at risk” has much more sinister undertones than an absent father. Or does it?

The flashback to Dean and Sam’s childhood bleeds into the present as Dean recounts the fact that he did not “shoot first” when he saw something (revealed to be a demon known as a Shtriga, a creature known for feeding on children). The reason that he did not shoot first was that he had taken a break from the constant vigilance of his brother to play arcade games. When he returned to see his brother in danger, he hesitates. If John had not burst in at that exact moment, it is very possible there would not be the story of Supernatural that fans know and love if only because there would be only one brother. Dean, as an adult, finishes telling his memory to Sam:

Dean: Dad grabbed us and booked, dropped us off at Pastor Jim’s about three hours away. By the time he got back to Fort Douglas, the Shtriga had disappeared -- just gone. Never resurfaced until now. You know, Dad never spoke about it again. I didn’t ask. But he, uh, he looked at me different, you know, which was worse. Not that I blame him. He gave me an order, and I didn’t listen, and I almost got you killed.

Sam: You were just a kid.

Dean: Don’t. Don’t … (Kripke, “Something Wicked”)

Dean’s plea of “don’t” shows he doesn’t and didn’t view himself as “just a kid.” The tension of Dean being at once both child and protector can be viewed as a kind of strong trauma in contrast to weak trauma. Weak trauma “could be easily supplanted by terms ‘shock’ or ‘disturbance’”
(Mitchell 157). Strong trauma, on the other hand:

- does not change or develop [as weak trauma can be seen to do], it is absolute for all time;
- it cannot be repressed or defended against. Time heals simply because the space the trauma occupies gets smaller and smaller as life’s other experiences crowd in around it […] the ‘strong’ trauma is always there and will, for example, emerge again and be ‘reused’ if there is another trauma in later life (Mitchell 158).

The trauma which characterizes Dean’s childhood is constantly “reused” throughout his adult life. The trauma of not being able to protect Sam from the Shtriga is relived during Sam’s death. However, in the latter, John does not come bursting through the door to save the day. Dean “didn’t listen,” and he did get Sam killed.

Therefore, Dean’s trauma does not “get smaller and smaller” as his life progresses, if only for the fact that he relives this trauma constantly. Every moment of his life that the audience sees is characterized by the attempts to keep Sam safe, and it is that struggle which Eric Kripke sees as the propelling force behind the series:

- It's never been a show about Sam. It's always been a show about family, much more than it is about anything else. The mythology is only an engine to raise issues about family. A big brother watching out for a little brother, wondering if you have to kill the person you love most, family loyalty versus the greater good, family obligation versus personal happiness…. These are all issues that Dean faces, and in my opinion, they are just as rich, if not richer, than psychic children and demonic plans (“Eric Kripke Fields Your Questions”)

Because of the focus on family and the intrinsically traumatic nature of the Winchester family, Dean’s trauma can never be reassured away by human kindness that teaches him that he is loved
and his life matters (Mitchell 158). However, the ways in which his trauma manifests are allowed to change.

Juliet Mitchell explores sibling trauma and cites the 1928 American Psychiatric Association to explain what seems to be the core reason for the kind of response which Dean demonstrates when faced with highly structured yet ambiguous family roles. It is as if:

[the] very presence of the second sibling, irrespective of age or sex, creates an entirely different and determining environment and one finds it not infrequent that the one sibling so centers his interest upon the other that his relationship almost literally represents all the world to him…In the very early years of child life, the sibling relations may quite overshadow anything else in the environment (Mitchell 155).

Dean’s speech demonstrates just what kind of extremes the relationship which he has with Sam “overshadows everything else in his environment.” While there is something to be said for the bonds of siblings in any context, it seems correct to assume that the relationship between two “trashy” brothers creates a bond that is even stronger and more totalizing. When discussing his introduction to white trash in Appalachia, Hartigan notes that “white trash named a strange collective order, one that manifested only locally in detached isolation. There were no white trash neighborhoods or groups, just particular, solitary families and individuals” (Hartigan 111). Just as “traditional” white trash exist in isolated pockets, hunters enact this same kind of marginalized topography. Aside from occasionally meeting at the same roadhouse, hunters travel alone. Because of this fact, the relationships that hunters form are directly related to those with whom they travel, which is more often than not their family.

Sam’s relationship with John is characterized by anger for the absent nature of the child-parent relationship. Sam places the blame squarely on the shoulders of his father as opposed to
Dean’s self-flagellating blame. However, after John dies, Dean’s characterization of his father begins to shift. Rather than showcasing anger at himself, Dean places anger on his father. This anger, though, is not best represented in concerns to John. Rather, Dean enacts the kind of anger which is characteristic of his childhood distortions against God -- perhaps the most absentee father of all.

This rage is actualized as atheism within the earlier seasons of Supernatural. “House of the Holy” in season two allows Dean to explicitly link his anger and consequent disbelief in God and angels with the trauma of his childhood. His confession of atheism begins with telling Sam the memory he had of their mother: “She used to tell me when she tucked me in that angels were watching over us” (Kripke, “House of the Holy”). Sam is surprised to hear this memory so late in life. Dean retorts, “What’s to tell? She was wrong. There was nothing protecting her. There’s no higher power. There’s no God. I mean, there’s just chaos and violence and random unpredictable evil that comes out of nowhere and rips you to shreds” (Kripke, “House of the Holy”). Dean’s oppositional view of religion is shaken when he is literally faced with the existence of angels, Heaven, and God. However, the revelation that these things are real does not change his opinions but rather strengthen them. Rather than articulating the rage, loss, and shame with which Osherson characterizes the relationships between sons and fathers towards his earthly father, Dean places these emotions on God, who just happens to be totally absent from the world of Supernatural. God is literally missing; he has abandoned his angels as well as humans during the biblical apocalypse.

Dean’s rage toward yet another absent father places him in opposition to yet another aspect of American middle-class values. As seen by Rick Santorum’s commentary on family, it is a sacred vocation. In a way, the family is mirror for the relationship which many Americans see
themselves as having with Christian divinity. As Dean rejects God the Father, he is continuing to reject the traditional role of fatherhood. When one considers the role which Dean has and continues to play for Sam, the role of father, it is not surprising that “self-abjction gradually emerges as the keynote of Dean’s characterization” (Wright, “Latchkey Hero”). As much as he struggles with the relationship he has, or has not had, with his father and with the Judeo-Christian God, Dean struggles more with himself.

The audience sees this self-loathing come to fruition with Dean’s sacrifice for Sam in “All Hell Breaks Loose, Part II.” While this action can be seen as mirroring John’s, Dean’s sacrifice, as explicitly stated by both Bobby Singer (Jim Beaver), surrogate father to both Sam and Dean, and the demon Azazel (Fred Lehne), is a result of his self-abjction:

Bobby: [in response to Dean’s explanation that his sacrifice gives his life meaning] What? And it didn’t before? Have you got that low of an opinion of yourself? Are you that screwed in the head? (Kripke, “All Hell Breaks Loose, Part II”)

and

Azazel: [on opening the gate to Hell] I couldn’t have done it without your pathetic self-loathing, self-destructive desire to sacrifice yourself for your family (Kripke, “All Hell Breaks Loose, Part II”).

The trauma that motivates Dean through the series can be seen as directly linked to his lack of father and the lack of childhood that resulted from his having to enact fatherhood for his younger brother. Likewise, Dean is staunchly characterized as white trash, a tradition in dominant American media that is characterized by monstrosity and villains. How then, with these cues against heroism, is it that Dean can be hero not only within the confines of the series but also, within the mythology and universe of the series, the entire world? The answer may relate back to
Osherson’s primary thesis concerning sons and fathers: unfinished business with one’s father figure will constantly propel and shape a man’s conception of self as well as his relations to others. When one takes this thesis out of the framework of fathers and sons and places it within a larger postmodern context, one can see that Dean is struggling through the basic tensions of everyday life. He does not fit within the American narrative as seen by his class status nor does he have a father figure to whom he can turn.

Throughout this chapter, I have primarily focused on Dean as my point of entry. I have done this for the benefit of space. It would, after all, take just as many pages to discuss the specifics of Sam’s relationship to his father and brother as it has taken to express those specifics for Dean. However, through this discussion, Dean has been able to function as an archetype for the lone white trash figure. Be this figure a cowboy, a con man, or a hunter, he is imagined to exist on his own. However, we can see through this analysis of Dean, that if this figure is viewed without the context of those around him, his motivations become obscured. While the previous chapter has analyzed the ways in which cultural artifacts can be used to define white trash, this chapter explored the familial ties which not only define the sociality of white trash but also define the self.
AFTER THE SCENE DIES: WHITE TRASH ON THE SILVER SCREEN AND BEYOND

During the process of writing this thesis I was lucky enough to sit in on a session of the *Supernatural* themed table-top role playing game aptly titled *Supernatural Role Playing Game*. In a strange way, it would seem like the sociability and talk that Aaron Fox is so concerned with was being performed for me on two stages. Six young people sat around a table and transformed a quaint farm house into the setting for demon hunting and artifact rescuing that was peppered with a healthy dose of explosions. While I did not ask any of the players explicitly, I would guess that none of them would self identify as white trash. Even so, their chatting between scenes and in-character dialogue showed the kind of clever and lyrical word play that Fox identified as white trash “talk.” Keeping in mind the rationale behind this kind of talk and the liminality of the subjects, it seems possible that his theory could be applied to table-top gamers, geeks in cultural parlance, but that is a paper for another day and another scholar.

The experience of sitting in on this close-knit group of friends rang true for what Ellen Harvell's Roadhouse should have been. Unlike the Winchesters, this group of hunters did not have the luxury of jump cuts. They had to navigate every diner scene from entrance to exit and every trip on the highway from on-ramp to off-ramp. I was able to watch them laugh while convincing the newest hunter to tell a demon “Christo” and see their confusion when I told them what my notebook was for. How in the world, they wondered, was I writing nearly a hundred pages on *Supernatural*? It was fun, after all. No one said “it's just tv,” but it seemed clear that *Supernatural* was, for them and for most fans, simply entertainment.

While it is true that television is entertainment, it is also true that television shapes the ways in which we as a culture view ourselves and others. The reason I end this project with this story is not to simply end on a positive note. Yes, it is positive to see that television, as mediated
and commercialized as it is, can bring individuals together for community building and empowerment. I would, indeed, argue that this kind of play leads to empowerment. After all, fantasy or not, who would not feel empowered after shooting down a demon with a bullet of holy light? However, my time with this group also acts as a concise way to show just how strongly the liminalinity of white trash has permeated our culture.

I did not tell the players the exact nature of my thesis. I mentioned nothing about rednecks, white trash or class. However, the issues were brought up through regular game play. The hunters in this game were facing a demon that far overpowered their regular team. Through sundry connections, they called upon the help of Sam and Dean Winchester. After the player hunters and the non-player Winchesters met up to face the demon, all the characters popped their respective trunks to pull out their arsenals. The player hunters had body armor and grenades, hollow-tipped bullets and building schematics. The Winchesters had salt and shotguns. One of the players then said, “And now they [the Winchesters] look like rednecks.” Everyone laughed. The game moved on.

Even in a setting as casual as a gaming session, one can see how deeply white trash has entered our cultural understanding. Redneck, in this case, was not used to signify class, social or economic, or the specific geo-political history that Matt Wray tackles so well in *Not Quite White*. Instead, redneck was meant to mean under prepared and, in this case, the losers. As has been mentioned throughout this project, white trash, rednecks, whatever we call them, exist as both real living subjects and as constructed figures. Jim Goad claims that anyone can call out white trash without any sense of shame. John Hartigan notes that white trash, as an insult and as a marker, exists at only one pole. There is nothing in typical middle class vernacular as damming to call rich whites. There is nothing as concise or as well known. Even yuppie does not measure up
to white trash.

Because of this and my own experiences struggling with the tension of feeling “trashy,” I entered this project. *Supernatural*, as seen by Eric Kripke's comment about mullets on The CW, positions itself as a positive text regarding class. However, through examining the mediated genealogy, the aesthetics and commodities, and the interpersonal relationships of white trash in the series, we can see that *Supernatural* is, pun intended, only superficially progressive. It uses the tropes of white trash and instead of moving against them, it situates itself firmly amongst them. They might be funny, they might be charming, they might be attractive, but they are still monsters and, as seen by the players mentioned above, they are still losers.

While I might not have been able to explain exactly why we as a culture cling to this understanding of poor whites, I believe I have tied together a number of previously discrete threads. Not only does white trash address class, a subject few Americans engage with, but it also foregrounds race. White trash, by its mere existence, underscores whiteness. While one might hope that any way in which engaging with whiteness would prove positive, we have seen that the marked whiteness of white trash is used simply to normalize and reify the blankness and invisibility of dominant whiteness. White trash is rejected from dominant American constructions of class and taste. As trash it must be thrown out. By attaching racism, domestic violence, political upheaval, boundary crossing, and that god-awfully-bad country music, America can also throw these fears away.

Those who are white trash, the living subjects, both bar patrons and hard country music, defend themselves by isolating themselves from dominant constructions of taste and community. White trash culture is then defined by melancholic loss. It is constantly looking back, longing for something that never existed. “Out in the country” is the short hand for a time and place where
these subjects were acknowledged, or at least in control of their situations, rather than constricted by economic and cultural realities.

Country music has become the constant aural connection to white trash. It is curious, then, to note that the musical genre that seems apt to self-referentially name itself as white trash is hip-hop. Of course the most obvious example of this is Eminem. If one were to place him, or his real life identity Marshall Mathers, within the superficial rubric of what is white trash, he would fit well. However, unlike hard country artists who simply refer to themselves as ugly losers, like the Hag and the Possum, Eminem names himself as white trash. In the video for “Beautiful,” his class is removed from a single identity when he bemoans the white trash tragedy of Detroit, the formerly greatest manufacturing city in the world. The video and the song become artistic as he tells Barbara Ching's white trash tragedy:

In my shoes, just to see / What it's like, to be me / I'll be you, let's trade shoes / Just to see what it'd be like to / Feel your pain, you feel mine / Go inside each other's mind / Just to see what we find / Look at shit through each other's eyes / But don't let 'em say you ain't beautiful, oh / They can all get fucked. / Just stay true to you / So don't let 'em say you ain't beautiful / Oh, they can all get fucked. / Just stay true to you / [...] “Ah, Marshall, you're so funny man, you should be a comedian, god damn” / Unfortunately I am, but I just hide behind the tears of a clown / So why don't you all sit down? / Listen to the tale I'm about to tell / Hell, we don't gotta trade our shoes / And you ain't gotta walk no thousand miles (Mathers, “Beautiful”).

It is not a tale of a singular individual, as seen by the video's use of solemn shots of construction workers and sweeping yet elegantly personal shots of a decaying Detroit. The song is described as just “as much a lighters-in-the-air, arena rock power ballad as it is a lyrical showcase”
Serwer). It is considered touching, and I doubt anyone would call it white trash.

In contrast, Eminem name checks himself as white trash in Nicki Minaj's diss track “Roman's Revenge.” One may argue that comparing the songs is inappropriate. “Beautiful” is sung by Eminem while “Roman's Revenge” is “Shady and Nicki Minaj” (Maraj “Roman's Revenge”). While both Eminem and Minaj pepper their performances with alter-egos, such as Slim Shady, the lines between each performance is blurry at best. After all, “Roman's Revenge” is sung not by Nicki Minaj but by her persona Roman Zolanski. Why then is it “Hey Nicki”?

Debating the merits of which persona is speaking is irrelevant. Just as hard country stars told stories and created personas, so do these hip-hop artists. So how, then, do we reconcile the commentary of “Beautiful” with the lyrics of “Roman's Revenge”?

It’s Shady and Nicki Minaj, you might find the sight quite odd / but don’t ask why, bitch / ask why not / […] Slim Shady and Nicki’s World’s clashing / It’s high class meets white trash (Maraj, “Roman's Revenge”).

John Hartigan notes that Eminem performs a curious form of white trash. Despite the fact that Eminem is performing in a traditionally black form, both he and his style are marked as white by his appropriately hard country “nasal vocal style and the content of his lyrics” (161). Why then, is he remembered as a white rapper instead of a white trash rapper?

I believe the answers lies in the fact that not only does he constantly place himself in Detroit but also that hip-hop is primarily marked as an urban art form. Chapter two attempted to gloss the larger conversation of poor whites and the dichotomy of urbanity and rurality. Even though we have seen, very literally within Eminem's “Beautiful” video, that poor whites exist in urban landscapes, as a culture we associate white trash with rurality. Despite this difference, though, there very well may be a reason why so many middle-class Americans claim that they
like all music “except for rap and country.” This assumption also begs the question as to why Eminem is white trash while equally tragic and urban Bruce Springsteen is solidly working-class. However, just like the Supernatural players, that is a project for another day.

Throughout this project, I hope that the concept of white trash has been exploded to allow for a more nuanced understanding of not only the term itself but also the subjects who live the slur day in and day out, as well as the way in which contemporary American culture regards and defines it. Supernatural proved to be a surprisingly productive case study. Over the two years I worked on this project, I found my assumptions of the series shifting. At first, I had hoped to put a light on one of the few positive white trash texts. However, even when simply charting a mediated genealogy, I began to realize that Supernatural was cleverly putting on a veneer of progress while actually staying stagnant. Perhaps, though, that find is the most important one that could have been made considering the fact that a veneer of progress can be very ideologically dangerous because of the way in which it subtly reinforces cultural norms.

This project also allowed me space to face my own prejudices concerning poor whites. When describing this project to strangers, I framed it as “working class.” Why did I feel ashamed to name my own research? Was I afraid that people would assume that only white trash would study white trash? Even if that were true, wasn't it my goal to prove that an assumption like that wouldn't even be that bad? I don't have an answer, so, instead, I will close with this:

That's entertainment, but it's also essential to the meaning of hard country. When the Possum, or the Hag, or the Mysterious Rhinetone Cowboy deliberately sink in our estimation, they tempt us either to take up the mostly white banner of oppressive confidence or to laughingly and tearfully wave the white flag with these winners of losers’ contests. They seem willing to repeat themselves until you get their point. But
when joking is laid aside, they also remind us that white men [and women] can and do lose that struggle and it gets harder and harder to call it by its name (Ching, 46, 2001).
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The term “white trash” can inspire great pride as well as great shame depending how it is being used and by whom. Throughout this paper, my aim is not to offend. However, I also do not wish to sterilize the history and emotions linked to this phrase.


There is, however, a shift in fandom, both Supernatural and fandom as a whole, wherein “social justice” is being highlighted and discussed. However, as of this writing, these conversations of “social issues” and “white knighting”, as this shift in the critical lens is often referred to in fandom, is relatively new in formation and rather peripheral.

The frontier is being understood here as the literal embodiment of the American Dream. The frontier is the place to where poor whites would be able to migrate and make their fortune and success be it California, Chicago, or the suburbs.

We can see the ways in which this tension between lawfulness and lawlessness is still collapsed within our conceptions of “cowboy” as seen by the ways in which politicians who manipulate law to accomplish their goals are considered to be using “cowboy diplomacy” (George W. Bush. Ronald Reagan).

While McGee is concerned with the cinematic Earp, the distinction is unnecessary. Earp existed, like white trash, as a lived figure, but he existed much more strongly as a creation of popular memory.

Note, of course, the connection between Leatherstocking, the pride, and Leatherface, the shame. Both have received their name out of the creation of clothing out of the skins of their hunt.

One notable exception, of course, is the season one episode “The Benders” which appears to be a direct homage to The Texas Chain Saw Massacre.

This idea is explored in depth within chapter one, “Playing Cowboys and Monsters: A Genealogical History of White Trash.”