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***Poor White trash, bad taste and social misbehavior  
from Huck Finn to Eminem***

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**Introduction**

What do American people see when they hear the label “white trash”? Although its social irrelevance is not ignored and the violence of such concept is sometimes guilt inducing (for most educated people at least) the “white trash” stereotype immediately sparks images of trailer parks, piles of empty beer cans, tacky outfits mixing dirty overalls with worn-out confederate flag tee-shirts, used Ford, lousy country-music and yelled profanities by “*overweight men and women stuffed into velour jogging suits with cigarettes glued between their index and middle fingers*” (Snider, 2007).

Such trite caricature of poor white people could be dismissed as “mere pop trivia” (Wray, 2007) or hastily simplified as a sartorial case-study for a Bourdieusian reading of American social hierarchies. Indeed, the rise of the middle-class in the mid-19th century was conversant with the nationalization of the “white trash” stereotype (Jacobson, 1997). Not only did the middle-class sought to appropriate the signifiers of high culture, understanding the social utilitarian aspect of refinement (Levine, 1990) but it simultaneously expressed its anxieties toward its virtual pollution through the ridiculing and abjection of the under-class ways. As John Hartigan sustains:

White trash highlights dynamics critical to reproducing class identities... The perception and ascription of white trash hinges on body sensibilities; it involves a reaction to bodily conditions and behaviors that offend certain class decorum. (2005, 24)

Fearing what it perceived as a coarse, uncouth and vulgar lack of culture, which interestingly enough would become a subculture in the 1970's, a middlebrow mainstream therefore legitimizes and rationalizes poor white people's defects in arguing that more than behavioral, "white trash" backwardness was genetic or racial (Rafter, 1988).

Linking racism with class-hatred through a discourse on taste and culture is a specific American pattern which is indicative of its national mythologies. A classless nation ought to be oblivious to social etiquette. Yet, some Whites, for they are unworthily destitute, fail to follow the implicit social rules of a nation in which it had been imperative for the sake of its ideology that Whites *behave*. The trespassers' naming and blaming – "You, white trash!" – deflects how, not taste but the idea of poor white trash's ontological *untasteful-ness*, is rooted in class inequality and racism. American literature and popular culture have been fertile grounds for the entertainment of this stereotypical buffoonish scarecrow. But over the past decades, rhetorical and artistic strategies have succeeded in converting the *clichés* into a means of political subversion.

This article aims at underscoring how the "white trash" character has been the embodiment of the distasteful before overturning the stigma and making the infamy almost fashionable.

### **I. Shaming and blaming: white trash's distasteful *ethos***

From the very first years of the American nation, the existence lawless and tribalized Whites has been denounced as an undermining element of the tacit social compact. From William Byrd in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century eugenicists, the moral features and inappropriate behaviors of a fraction of these poor whites had

been a major concern. Rather than facing the root of such a sense of embarrassment - the repressed debates on class and race and the myth of the white man's manifest destiny - discourses on white indigence has shifted from the social lexicon to a moral and, surreptitiously, an aesthetic issue. The "poor white trash" are those who make their poverty shockingly visible and do not even care. The middle-class' abhorrence for their indecent ways is rooted into the idea that their savagery binds them to Natives and Blacks. Like the latest, they are imagined as being on the Nature's side, not on the Culture's one (understood here as cultivation, refinement and standard of excellence). Worse than being uneducated, they consistently refuse to be "civilized". Indeed, they would not even deign to spell the word properly: Mark Twain's Huckelberry Finn refused to be "sivilized" (6):

Miss Watson would say, 'Don't put your feet up there, Huckleberry... Don't scrunch like that, Huckleberry - set up straight... and pretty soon she would say, 'Don't gap and stretch like that, Huckleberry - why don't you try to behave?' (2007, 8)

In resisting formal education and southern codes of behaviors, Huck Finn runs the risk to end up like Pop, a rather trashy embodiment of moral infamy. Although the satirical undertone of Twain's novel makes it uneasy to call Huck Finn a "white trash" character, his dismissal of his racial allegiance, his brash ignorance and his keenness for transvestite performances are relevant patterns of the "white trash poetics" (Hartigan, 2008). In this regard, his running away with a black man who becomes his partner in crime on equal footage is from a middle class standpoint, an obvious symptom of his social and racial degeneracy.

In the old South indeed, where the caste system has long been prone to ostracize those who were perceived as mere Plebeians, manners were reflective of one's gentility and of one's whiteness. The inability to fulfill the white-ruled society's expectations suggests an asocial attitude and impresses upon "respectable people" a sense of one's unworthiness. White decay stands as an aberration in a society which equates white skin with noble "breed of men" and respectability. The "white trash"

character is thus fashioned as physically grotesque, laughable and dreadful. Similar to the “naturalistic brutes” one, degenerated white’s grotesque is crucial to understanding how its lack of refinement fuels class-consciousness and prejudice. As Meyer points out: “This socially created brute is not simply an animal. It is a human become animal, a conflation of two categories and a luminal creation midway between them” (118).

The way poor whites conduct themselves at the dinner table is indeed particularly indicative of their social status. In Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the young farmer Walter Cunningham’s spontaneous, excessive pouring of syrup on his food at the lawyer’s dinner table utterly disqualifies him as worthy of the narrator’s “company”:

While Walter piled food on his plate, he and Atticus talked together, like two men, to the wonderment of Jem and me. Atticus was expounding upon farm problems when Walter interrupted to ask if there was any molasses in the house. Atticus summoned Calpurnia, who returned bearing the syrup pitcher. She stood waiting for Walter to help himself. Walter poured syrup on his vegetables and meat with a generous hand. He would probably have poured it into his milk glass had I not asked what the same hill he was doing. The silver saucer clattered when he replaced the pitcher, and he quickly put his hand in his lap. Then he ducked his head. Atticus shook his head at me again. ‘But he’s gone and drowned his dinner in syrup,’ I protested. ‘He’s poured it all over.’ (24)

Walter does not know how to handle with befitting delicacy the pitcher of syrup. He serves himself in excess, knowing neither the appropriate extent nor the restraint. The girl’s outcry may be understood as a genuine surprise for a girl used to the Finch’s urban and urbane etiquette, but she knows good and well Walter’s social background since she previously requested her teacher to not mention the cooties in his hair or the fact that he cannot bring packed lunch over, which was “shamin” him (21).

But in the domestic sphere, Scout, the narrator, seems to be parroting the would-be southern gentle women who, like her own aunt, despise “these kind of folks” [...]. Her petty reaction is indicative of the narrowness of the Southern girl’s mindset, despite her very liberal upbringing. She is concerned that her own father tolerate such an undeserving guest although she has been taught to comport herself like a “lady”. Interestingly enough, part of this moral code of conduct was to banish any form of snobbery towards hard working farmers. If she can empathize with the idea of their poverty, Scout cannot help but verbalize her outrage when Walter’s unrefined move dramatizes his social status. Scout reads his odd gesture as a garish signifier of his cultural indignity. Molasses stands as metaphor of the boy’s rusticity since it is the crudest form of sugar, what remains of the cane when the most refined product is extracted. But molasses makes dull food more palatable and is therefore particularly appealing to poor whites and Blacks in the South whose daily meals are frugal.

Race is, as often, concealed beneath the narrator’s classist arrogance. Albeit Southerners, Whites are not supposed to overindulge in “ornamental” food. Temperance is said to be a white puritan value shared by the aristocrats of the South (Sweeney, 255). Some of them might enjoy Bourbon whisky a bit more than they should but syrup is seen as a coarse, low-people’s mouths delicacy. It is also, as every Southerners know, one of the many condiments Black people relish and use for more than one type of food. Through his unconventional taste and unmannerly appetite, Walter reveals how beyond the pale he really is.

This might explain why Scout is scolded by Calpurnia, the black maid. The character of Calpurnia evokes both the Southern stereotype of the black "nanny", but her status as an employee of a liberal household, educated by Finch, gives her some authority. In the absence of their mother, she is in charge of the children’s upbringing. Her vehemence is nonetheless unexpected:

‘There’s some folks who don’t eat like us’, she whispered fiercely, but you ain’t called on to contradict ‘em at the table when they don’t. That

boy's yo' comp'ny and if he wants to eat the table cloth you let him, you hear?'

'[...] Yo' folks might be better'n the Cunningham but it don't count for nothin' the way you're disgracin' em -if you can't act fit to eat at the table you can just set here and eat in the kitchen!' (25)

Calpurnia here is an agent of racial and social mediation. She is educated and her manners are urban but its language and the color of her skin are not those of the dominant group. When she demands that Scout grant Walter a right to cultural difference, a right to the grotesque ("let him eat the napkins if he feels like it") she parallels the boy's out-of-place-ness with the "Jim Crow" laws in force Maycomb. The county praises itself for being truly southern thus not "settin' at the table with' em'" (234). Dialectically, the nanny contrasts the "shamin'" with the "disgracin'" in order to lecture the girl on what makes the Southern gentry's *raison d'être*: their "quality" (a term used by Huck Finn to characterize the Grangerfords but mostly used by Blacks). Calpurnia opposes and resents Walter Cunningham's humiliation partly because she herself patronizes the boy but also because of her empathy for social outcasts and cultural pariahs.

Harper Lee's novel illustrates in this passage how the "idle-tasteless-habits" of the poor "white trash" allows to naturalize his social decay. As suggested by Snider: "this failure to achieve the tasteful norms only confirms... that one is born into the class and that his tackiness, rudeness, and immorality is as much a part of his genetic makeup as his eye color."

## II. From a rural-based white under-class ways to (sub)culture?

John Waters has earned a name for himself with his provocative representation of wasted people and trash culture, which are for him the matrix of a new reflection on taste. Yet, when he argues that "'real exploitation and real trash never uses irony, because the audience it's made for knows you're laughing at them - and you are [...]' Satire or irony is elitist' (2), he seems to be ignoring the transgressiveness of one's own trashiness when performed as such. For Gael Sweeney, it is exactly the opposite.

If Camp Aesthetics is different from White Trash aesthetics it is precisely because if “Camp and White trash may buy the same portrait of Elvis and hang it proudly in the living-room... Camp displays it as a parody, to outrage the dominant taste, while White Trash displays it because it is so beautiful” (in Wray & Newitz 251). If such a dichotomy is interesting, I argue that the boundaries are sometimes instrumental. The whole evolution of self-proclaimed “white trash” artists is exemplifying the porosity of self-reflexivity.

Since the late 80’s, a group of writers has engaged themselves into the voicing of the so-called “poor white trash” from the inside, being themselves of white degraded and shameful descent. Although writers like Dorothy Allison have sought to overcome their self-contempt, they were cautious not to trade it for a “self-mythologizing fantasy” (39): if there is nothing to be ashamed of, being “white-trash” is definitively not a bad of honor or a stigma to display.

Yet, writers and other artists used the infamous label as a “subculture” somewhat like the white working-class did in England: they convey a social struggle through their provoking cultural position. Their work “offends the ‘silent majority’, which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus” (Hebdige 18). Musicians have been since the 1980’s at the forefront of the challenge of a mainstream culture which has mocked poor white’s likings and has consistently patronized their ways (fist-fight, Nascar race, hunting...). Southern rockers, like Lynyrd Skynyrd for instance, reclaim this identity, offering a counter-mythology: As W.J. Cash, Al Capp and many others (Laurent, 2007), they have bent the label toward a more positive signification: rural poverty, drinking habits, hyper-manhood become synonyms of plain folksiness, authenticity and rusticity. They embrace the stereotype in a literal fashion, they really *are* “white trash” (Eastman & Schrock 209).

Eminem, the white rapper, deploys another discursive strategy. His *persona* has been constructed on the premises that “white trash” is a naming practice that thrives on picturesque racial and social stereotypes. Thereupon, he has dramatized his “tainted blood” and “racial unworthiness” in a parodic self-portraiture. I then take

issue with Water's dismissal of irony and double-voice. Eminem's self representation corresponds to the literary use of satire which, according to Charles Knight, is meant as subversion:

many of the qualities revealed by satiric representations – ugliness, clumsiness, foolishness, bad state or stupidity – could be reasonably be thought of as immoral, designed to violate a moral code it regards as restricted or wrong-headed. (5)

Eminem lyrics and performances are purposely immoral, outraging and aesthetically embarrassing. Beyond the very subversive nature of hip hop as a genre in which he evolves (Laurent, 2007) and whose canons and practices cannot be analyzed here for the sake of brevity, Eminem's politicizing of his social inappropriateness is at play.

### **III. Eminem's outrageousness: self-consciousness and common indecency**

The definition of outrage is particularly fit to the rapper: It means being well beyond the bounds of good taste; having no regard for morality and being violent or unrestrained in temperament or behavior.

Hip hop has long been dismissed, to put it in Winston Marsalis words, as mere "ghetto minstrelsy", an hyperbolic dramatization and acting out of black poverty which is morally "ugly" and aesthetically "ugly" (Dyson, XV). Regardless of their own personal taste, scholars have contested the cultural void that such ugliness would reveal, underscoring how it is forever linked with labor, sexuality and racism. Like Elvis Presley before him, Eminem applies hip hop's offensiveness to intra-white demonization. He has captured white youth's imagination with his mixing of hip hop with other parodic musical forms (heavy rock, grunge, Satanist music...) in order to incarnate the mythological monster of a white America: the poor debilitated "white trash", human waste, inbreed, unable to behave.

He therefore spits, vomits, dribbles, farts, treats women and gays with gross insensitivity and contemptuous rudeness, insults people and ornaments is lyrics with the more effective examples of profanities (dealing with scatology, fornication...).



One of his main performing patterns is the act of “mooning” (exhibiting one’s buttocks) which is rather unusual among rappers. Closer to Iggy Pop in that matter, he refuses to be civilized in a society which he had been a victim of. As for farting, he refuses to conform to the behavioural expectations of the middle-class order. “. His repudiation of formal etiquette is a castigation of a prejudiced society. Mooning is indeed a carnivalesque act and a symbol of the grotesque as analyzed by Michael Bakhtin. But although Eminem appropriates the Rabelaisian carnival’s ludic undermining of all norms, he does not suggest a pleasure-seeking body (Stam, 86). His lower-back exposure is, precisely because it is the utmost distasteful gesture an expression of dissent. Interestingly enough, he was recently mooned at in a burlesque duo with actor/comedian Bruno:

The power of these farts is inversionary: the animal, or at least alimentary, giving the lie to the learned formalities of social convention, and the pretensions of those who make them; the lower body speaking in contempt of the head, the conventional lowering of the whole body in the presence of a superior transformed into an affront [...] and this inversionary rejection of authority also took more striking forms such as mooning [...]. (Braddick, 2009)

In Brief, not only does he aim at offending people but also to make them uncomfortable in front of the aggrandizement of trashy “pathologies.

Of course, albeit performed, they are not fabricated: his pathetic drug addiction (a mirroring of the poor whites alleged drunkenness and insanity) is “real” but, for instance, his narrating of his mother stuffing his meals with pills when he was a boy which explains his inherited degeneracy is “recreated”. In doing so, he pinpoints with great gusto the very nature of bad taste, a feeling of disgust and rejection which does not stem from the figuring of poor white’s ordeal, not to mention its actuality but in the direct, quasi-pornographic representation of it. The explicit depiction of one’s fantasy (in this case a social fantasy) is more than distasteful, it is obscene. What is particularly unpleasant about him, even among people who enjoy his music,

is the shameless crudeness of his own identity. As a clown, he displays a “white trash” identity that pulls white poverty out of its invisibility. Accused of co-mingling with Blacks, Eminem’s “white trash” *persona* is rooted in his inner blackness, geographical, social and discursive (Laurent, 2008). Suspected of being alienated and threatening to the social order, a trashy Eminem morphs into a blood-thirsty killer. Cacogenic, he was decently kept out of sight, cacophonous, the “poor white trash” is inconvenient.

But, as opposed to bands and singers, from the southern rock band the “White trash Messiah” to singers Kid Rock or Johnny Cash<sup>1</sup> who seek to deconstruct the idea of poor white’s cultural unworthiness, Eminem’s work is clearly intended as self-parody. In one of his most recent video, “We Made You”, which is also quite outrageous with its share of filthy innuendos, he impersonates many celebrities whom he mocks (among whom Sarah Palin depicted as a porn star). But he is the most buffoonish of all, self-deprecating him as a pitiful Elvis (the cultural thief he has often compared himself to), a loser wearing a pink AFL tee-shirt (which echoes his troubled past) or transforming himself in Dr. Spock, the half Vulcan half human character of the “Star Trek” movie.

This controversial usage of bad taste, bad behavior and bad thinking (homophobia and machismo to mention a few) is, I would argue, a combination of a satiric re-definition of deviant behavior and a sharp understanding of the middle-class conflicted repulsion and desire toward social obscenity. Blurring the moral codes and the normative discourse on what is aesthetically and socially acceptable, he performs “white trash outrageousness” as gays and queers have done with fabulousness. In a Dave Chapel pictorial trilogy, the coincidence between the two endeavors is striking: naked, he holds his artifact of penis with both hands. The stick of dynamite incrementally consumes itself and Eminem ends up being blown away by the explosion. The poor white feeble body of southern degenerates is turned into a queer, totally indecent presence. Such a ridiculous subversion of white masculinity conjures up the stereotype of lascivious yet miserable, pitiful poor white people. Oddly enough, the white rapper whose homophobic lyrics are notorious has him

portrayed in pictures infused with queer aesthetics. He then rejoins Waters' work with such a "gay sensibility that allows [him] to define himself in terms of masquerade, to celebrate the artifice of artifice" which, according to Sweeney, defines Camp culture, as opposed as the "sincerity" of the "white trash" aesthetics (in Wray & Newitz, 251).

Eminem is beyond the dichotomy, which makes him hardly representative of a backward bigot, racist, conservative poor white culture, that some improperly call "redneck" or "white trash" and imagine being actually relevant.

## **Conclusion**

"White trash" had become a code-word for a few artists who seek to talk on behalf of uneducated white working-class discriminated against because of their unappropriated-ness. Whereas some of them, Eminem being the front runner of this *avant-garde* appropriate the label and create a powerful subculture, one might be concerned with its commodification by the establishment and media and its assimilation into the larger mainstream culture (Hebdige 94). Eminem plays out his own fantasies and is too tortured a man to be accountable. Yet, pop culture has indeed glamorized and marketed the term for commercial purpose and books named "White trash cooking" or "White trash etiquette" candidly compromise with class hatred. This "trailer trash chic" fashionable moment flourishes as quests for authenticity drive "well-off consumers [to] mimic the culture of the lower class". Youngsters as well as designers draw their inspiration from white trash imagery, a shabby rural folksy style. But, behind the mask of folklore and southern kitsch, these books or TV shows still deride "feckless" and "undeserving" white poor. "White trash" narratives remain first and foremost a dark comedy of manners.

## **Southern Culture On The Skids; "White Trash" Lyrics**

white trash don't call me that  
white trash you don't call me that baby

you know i love you baby  
don't you think just maybe  
the way you talking to me  
would send a chill right through me  
white trash don't call me that  
...  
white trash don't call me that  
white trash don't call me that  
i can still smell the sh\*t in your hair  
i don't matter what kind of  
perfume that you wear  
you have been living in the  
backwoods hamburger shack  
you can take a bad p\*ss  
cause your'e leaking trash

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In his 2000 album, *American III*, Johnny Cash sings "I got a crib full of corn, and a turnin' plow/ But the ground's too wet for the hopper now/ Got a cultivator and a double tree/ A leather line for the hull and gee/ Let the thunder roll and the lightning flash/ I'm doing alright for Country Trash".