Taking Out the Trash: Using Critical Autoethnography to Challenge Representations of White Working-Class People in Popular Culture

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“We live in the Taj Mahal of the trailer park.”

Mom feeds this lie to her new friend, Laura, who is visiting our home for the first time. I cringe and run to my room, my sanctuary from embarrassment and the strains of adolescence. Seventeen has not been easy. As I slide the flimsy, faux wood accordion door open, I breathe a sigh of relief. At least in here I don’t have to witness mom trying to polish a turd.

We own one of the few double-wide trailers[1] in our white working-class neighborhood, but Laura isn’t blind. Our ceilings are leaking. The walls, made of a material no thicker than cardboard, are lined with gaping holes—the remnants of conflict. Half of our windows are missing blinds. The carpets are so stained and faded it’s hard to tell whether they are blue or brown. And a vice grip is needed to operate the broken shower faucet.

My door is closed, but I can hear Mom’s laughter echo through the house. I wonder if Laura is buying her bullshit. Laura befriended my mom during a community theatre production this past summer, and she is

[1] A double-wide trailer is made of two modular units that have been connected together side by side lengthwise making the width *double* that of a typical *mobile home*.

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everything I hope to be one day—hip, beautiful, college educated, happily married, and gainfully employed as a leader for a reputable company. Her new three-story brick home is a candidate for the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens*. From the outside, her life seems like a dream. I can't believe Mom has exposed her to our nightmare. Frustrated, I grab the remote to turn on my 13-inch TV hoping to drown out their conversation. I mindlessly flip through channels until I stumble across *Trailer Park Boys*, a satire about the misadventures of white ex-convicts who live in Sunnyvale Trailer Park, located in Nova Scotia. Great, I think, another show featuring a trailer park full of white people who are filthy, criminal, and riddled with addiction. I wonder if Laura thinks the same of my family and me.

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My essay, as the above suggests, focuses on the tension between mediated representations and lived experiences of white working-class people. At the root of this tension is the recognition that mediated representations of white working-class people do not adequately capture the complexities of their lived experiences. Calling attention to this issue is important because, although social stigma is a growing reality for those who struggle to survive economically, the white working-class is one of the few targets left in our cultural shooting gallery (Sweeney). Many other targets have been deemed off limits due to written and unwritten laws of cultural sensitivity. In other words, white working-class people are open game for ridicule, which occurs repeatedly. Whether clad in overalls and no shirt or shoes with bucked teeth and eight "illegitimate" kids in tow or running around high off of crack, holding a bottle of moonshine and a stack of lottery tickets, farcical depictions of white working-class people permeate mainstream U.S. popular culture. These depictions fuel widely held impressions that white working-class people are stupid, criminal, racist, dirty, lazy, and addicted to alcohol, drugs, and sex among other things (Cooke-Jackson and Hansen; Newitz and Wray; Sweeney).

In short, white working-class people are made to appear in popular culture as if they are unable to abide by middle and upper class standards associated with their race. For this reason, they are considered "white Others" (Newitz and Wray; Sweeney). Another common term used for this population in is "white trash." Associating "trash" with white people who are clinging to the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder "pollutes whiteness" (DiAngelo 53) because it exceeds the class and racial etiquette required of white people to preserve their power and privilege. Those who rupture the etiquette of whiteness, who fail to perform a normative, white, middle to upper class act, are figuratively thrown to the curb—the only place where they cannot pose a threat to the symbolic social order (Bettie; Gibbons; Wray). This type of marginalization can be found in the vast array of films and television shows centered on white working-class people, which are steadily on the rise, especially within the genre of reality television (e.g., *Moonshiners, Swamp People, Trailer Park: Welcome to Myrtle Manor,* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*). Given my background, every time I am exposed to portrayals of white working-class people in popular culture, I have a visceral reaction.

* * *

I am 29 years old, seated on the bright red couch in my living room, my eyes glued to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*—a reality TV show that follows the adventures of a child beauty pageant participant, Alana "Honey Boo Boo" Thompson, and her white working-class family from rural Georgia. Clad in a ruffled pink gown plastered with sequins, Alana prances across a brightly-lit stage, and I see myself in her routine. According to Giroux, a majority of contestants who enter local pageants are from working-class families driven by the desire for social mobility and the lure of a small cash prize (39). Alana is no exception; her family's dreams of mobility are couched in pageant performances. Where pageantry is their potential source of mobility, academia is mine. I exist in a liminal space between the "white trash" and "educated elite." I twist and

turn in a ruffled pink gown through the halls of the ivory tower and no one knows what I look like without my costume. My identity, for the past fifteen years, has hinged on presenting a middle-class persona—one driven in part by problematic media images of white working-class people, fostering in me a yearning to pass and disassociate myself from the class of my youth and family.

As I watch Alana and her family, I am repulsed. I can tell producers have amplified the family's bodily functions and chosen to feature clips highlighting various grotesque-seeming flaws such as stained, ill-fitting clothing, mispronounced words, and unhealthy foods. To me, this is poverty porn—a common occurrence in the media, driven by the likelihood of increased ratings, where viewers are invited to voyeuristically gaze upon the supposed failings of those who are less fortunate. This invitation places viewers in a superior position separate from the failings they see (Wasserman). In short, poverty porn is a voyeuristic trope that exploits the poor and their surrounding conditions to reinforce class stratification. This exploitation angers me because it makes a mockery of white working-class people, robbing us of our dignity by encouraging people to laugh at, rather than sympathize with us and the adversity we face because of systemic failings. For this reason, I have chosen to write alternative stories that are rarely, if ever, found in popular media—stories that talk to, talk with, and talk back to mediated representations and canonical ideas about white working-class people; stories that take the "trash" out of "white trash." To write these stories, I rely on critical autoethnography, a method that entails providing cultural analyses through personal narratives using a critical lens. With this lens, the critical autoethnographer not only focuses on how lived experiences are affected by the dominant social order, but also seeks to defy and deconstruct this order (Boylorn and Orbe 17). Griffin and Boylorn, for example, write critical autoethnographic accounts to confront controlling images of Black women in the media. My goal is similar, though I focus

on images of white working-class people because it is the population to which I relate.

Digging in the "Trash"

I have felt the weight of the media on my shoulders for as long as I can remember. By age 12, I developed a habit of sitting in front of the TV to compare images of white working-class people on the screen with my experiences growing up in a white working-class family and neighborhood. I would watch blockbusters like *Drop Dead Gorgeous* and see characters living in a trailer park, usually holding a cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other. When I pulled my eyes away from the screen, I would turn to see my parents holding the same things in their hands. I remember inhaling second-hand smoke while counting the bottles of Bud Light consumed every night. It was as if the movie had never ended.

I would constantly make these comparisons, finding people in films and television shows who were and were not like me. I embodied our similarities (e.g., I was white, poor, from a broken family, had experienced violence and the aftermath of substance abuse, and lived in a trailer), but felt disembodied by our differences. I was not stupid. I was not promiscuous. I was not dirty. I was not a criminal. Yet, because most of the white working-class people on screen were stupid, sexual, and dirty criminals, people assumed I was too. The "white trash" stereotype, which permeates popular culture, impacted the way I felt others saw me, and how I saw myself.

* * *

The wind rushes through my long, blonde, sun-kissed hair as I race up the street on my rusty mountain bike to the neighborhood pool. Today marks the first day of summer. Having survived seventh grade, I'm eager to celebrate with a swim. I approach the black metal gate surrounding the pool and see a tall boy, about my age, wearing khaki shorts, a 311 band t-

shirt, and a baseball cap. I wonder if he's new to the neighborhood or visiting. He looks at me with piercing green eyes and smiles, revealing a straight set of white teeth—my weakness. A wave of excitement rushes over me, and I can't help but smile back.

"Hey, are you Tasha?" he asks in a surprisingly deep voice for a boy my age.

"Yea, I am," I say cautiously. "Who are you?"

"Sean. I go to Delano. You go to Rockford, right?"

"Yea."

"I know some people from your school. I live on the other side of town but I was hanging out here in the trailer park last week with a couple of guys, Nate Jones and Scott Brown. You know them?"

"Yea. We don't hang out or anything, but I see them around."

"They told me who you were. I asked about you after I saw you last week biking around the neighborhood." He smiles with half of his mouth. "I thought you were cute."

"Oh!" My face turns red.

"Yea." He clears his throat. "Glad I ran into you. I was meaning to ask if you wanted to hang out some time."

I hesitate, trying to look as casual as possible. I don't want it to be obvious I haven't dated anyone yet. "Sure," I manage to say, "that would be cool."

"Yea, I normally don't hang with girls in the trailer park, you know, but," he shrugs his shoulders, "you seem cool."

"What? What do you mean by that?"

"Well, my mom doesn't like me coming here. She's worried about the whole—." His eyes meet mine. "Never mind. It's not a big deal."

My curiosity is piqued. "What's your mom worried about?"

"The whole trailer trash thing," he says, rolling his eyes.

I stare at him, bewildered.

Sensing my discomfort, he continues. "Well, have you seen that show *Trailer Park Boys*? My mom watches a lot of that stuff. She thinks every trailer park is full of drugs and crime and pregnant teens and shit. She worries about me knocking up some girl who lives here. But I don't care what she says."

"Haha that's good," I say, laughing to cover the embarrassment coursing through my veins. It bothers me that the media has fed him and his mother such negative ideas. But I can't blame him. I've also seen films and TV shows depicting neighborhoods like mine in terrible ways and that have encouraged many people to assume the worst of my family, my neighbors, and me.

"So yea, want to hang out?" Sean asks, interrupting my stream of consciousness.

Lured by his looks and determined to prove not all trailer park residents are like what people see in the media, I say, "Yes."

* * *

One week after meeting Sean, we went on our first date. After that, we were inseparable. In the eight months we dated, I started to spend time with some of Sean's friends, like Nate and Scott, who lived in my neighborhood. Many of these guys engaged in rebellious behaviors that fit the "white trash" stereotype portrayed in film and television, though this was not the case for most of the people who lived near me—a point I address later. Instead of judging Sean's friends and fighting against the stereotype, I gave in. I spent the summer smoking cigarettes and weed, wearing low cut shirts, swearing like a sailor, and sneaking out at night to explore local forbidden property. By the start of eighth grade, I was a new person. I was convinced I had found "my people" until my classmates began to ridicule me incessantly—a common occurrence for mobile home youth (Kusenbach 402). Friends I made in seventh grade stopped hanging out with me, and some of the popular girls I admired called me "trailer trash" and "white trash" under their breath. I continued on the same path

for a few more months until I almost got arrested for smoking weed with some friends. We were standing behind a small storage shed near school when a cop spotted and began to pursue us, his sirens wailing. I ran as fast as I could into a densely wooded area where I hid for more than thirty minutes, long after the sirens had stopped and until I knew the cop had left. In that moment of solitude, I knew something had to change.

Over the next few months, I broke up with Sean, dressed more modestly, stopped smoking, cleaned up my language, and disassociated from the trailer park. I slept there, but did little else in that context. My performance shifted to one that appeared middle-class, driven in part by befriending the girls in my grade who were popular, pretty, fashionable, lived in respectable homes, and sought success. I tried hard to imitate their lifestyle of social and material privilege because it resembled what I saw in popular magazines such as *Seventeen* and TV shows such as *Saved By The Bell*. I used the money from my part-time job at a grocery store to purchase clothes at Abercrombie and Fitch because that's the brand my new friends were wearing, and it was the focus of many advertisements to which I was exposed. During one shopping trip, I spent $40 on a single t-shirt at that store. Though expensive, the shirt enabled me to blend in. When I wore it, I no longer felt like I was on the margins. I felt like one of the privileged girls I admired, the girls I saw in my school and in the media.

Bettie describes similar experiences in her ethnographic study of white and Mexican American girls as they navigated through their senior year of high school in California's central valley. She concludes that an abundance of girls who came from working-class families tried to pass as middle-class in order to fit in with their privileged peers. Like me, these girls purchased and used certain products to make them appear middle-class. Whether it was clothes, shoes, lipstick or makeup, these products literally became the girls' "transitional objects" (43) to privilege. Although the girls might not have been middle-class, many of them passed as such

which, at times, involved a great deal of sacrifice. It is one thing to perform middle-class if one has the means to do so but quite another to be working-class and try to acquire the means to pass as middle-class. For me, this disparity meant working one or two part time jobs. The girls in Bettie's study reported similar sacrifices. Our desire for mobility came at a cost.

In addition to purchasing the "transitional objects" I needed to appear middle-class, I boosted my grades and became actively involved in several school activities where I was able to succeed: drama, choir, band, speech, softball, volleyball, and more. My "white trash" past eventually became a distant memory, and a point of denial. But films and television shows featuring trailers in negative ways (e.g., *Vegas Vacation, Joe Dirt, The Waterboy, Trailer Park Boys,* etc.) frequently reminded me that this memory was not as distant as I desired, and perhaps not a memory at all. Like it or not, the trailer park was a part of my life—a place I returned to every day that carried with it a set of judgments, at least according to numerous popular culture texts.

* * *

It is the summer before my first year of college, which means that graduation parties have become something of a ritual. Despite limited funds, Mom has decided to throw me a party, too. I am simultaneously thankful for and mortified by the gesture. She's hosting the party at our house and has made the invitation open, which means that some of my new and popular friends, who have no idea where I live, may show up. During the first hour, family members and neighbors flood the house bearing gifts and inquiring about my future plans for college. Close friends from childhood, who have been to my house before, show up, too. Everything is smooth until I see Amber and Laura, two of the most popular girls in my grade, enter through the front door. My heart palpitates and eyes open wide. I've always been envious of them, both head cheerleaders who welcome attention with their long blonde hair, blue eyes,

tiny waists, budding chests, and keen sense of fashion. They also happen to be smart and incredibly kind.

I walk towards them with a large smile, trying to hide my nerves.

"Hi, how are you?" I say, giving each of them a brief hug with open eyes, which fixate on the surrounding deterioration. My home is a wreck, but there's nothing I can do. My cover is blown. "I didn't expect you to come to my party, but," I lie, "I'm glad you did."

"We wouldn't miss it," Laura says.

Both girls then smile, their gesture followed by a long and palpable pause.

"I didn't know you lived in the trailer park," Amber says, breaking the awkward silence. "I would have never imagined that."

"Oh really?" I ask, with an uncomfortable laugh.

Amber shrugs her shoulders. "Yea, you don't seem like the type who would live here. You've got so much going for yourself."

"I pictured you in a normal neighborhood," Laura adds, rendering me speechless.

* * *

I was not able to adequately respond to Laura or Amber in that moment, but I wish I would have. I wish I could have told them that among the people in my neighborhood with whom I grew up, many of us had a lot going for ourselves despite the adversity we faced. We were successful in school and shared dreams about making the world a better place. The "type" of people who Amber, Laura, and many of my peers had envisioned living in trailer parks, thanks to the media, were not the type of people who lived around me. Although there were some who did fit the "white trash" stereotype more than others (e.g., Nate and Scott), most did not, which leads me to wonder why popular culture often only features the trash. Where are stories like mine, stories about white working-class people who live in mobile home communities whose experiences

challenge the one-dimensional trashy caricatures that flood popular culture?

My story, however, is not the only one missing—a point that became increasingly clear when completing the fieldwork for my dissertation (Rennels). Part of this work involved interviewing families who live in mobile home communities and who identify as white and working-class. While listening to their stories, I was viscerally reminded that mediated representations of white working-class people are far too essentializing. For example, though many films and television shows portray white working-class people comfortably living in rundown mobile homes, my family and the families I interviewed all complained about being stuck in their living situations due to increasing lot rent.

As a child, I can remember the beginning of each month when Mom would begrudgingly write a check for at least $400 to Rockford Riverview Estates—an amount that only covered the small lot for our trailer. The mortgage payment was separate. Because money was always so tight, lot rent increases were the worst. But our experience is not exceptional. More than ten million people live in mobile home parks throughout the United States (Manufactured Housing in the United States) and most of them are at the mercy of the parks' owners who are free to raise lot rents as they please, often beyond residents' means (Salamon and MacTavish 51). Although it would seem logical for residents to pursue better housing options, they often cannot build the capital to do so (Hart, Rhodes, and Morgan). Additionally, residents are more prone to deal with increased rent than pay the large fee required to move their home to another place, which can range from $5,000 to $10,000 (Sullivan 478). If this immobility is so prevalent, why is it not accounted for? I know my family would have moved if we could, but we were stuck. The same could be said for my participants who not only battled access to affordable housing, but also access to affordable healthcare, education, and childcare. This inaccessibility warrants more attention in popular culture.

* * *

Taking Out the Trash

As I reflect on my stories and the stories of my participants and other white working-class people I know, I am convinced we are not the "trash" the media has portrayed us to be. Many of us are stuck in a liminal space, seeking mobility but finding immobility due to increased cultural ridicule as well as a lack of adequate and affordable resources. Collectively, our stories resemble "counterstories" (Delgado 2414) because they "talk back" (hooks 1) to dominant cultural narratives about the white working-class, which saturate popular culture and paint our struggles as if they stem from individual problems. We have failed the system, the system has failed us; this is what our stories reveal, which is why they are important to tell. As Delgado argues, stories are an essential tool for the survival and liberation of oppressed groups (2437).

The stories I have written thus far, however, do not stop here as autoethnography is intended to provoke other stories (Ellis 366). There is a depth in using autoethnographic approaches to engage and analyze popular culture that I hope to have revealed. It is one thing to say that white working-class people (or any people, for that matter) are marginalized but to use vivid stories derived from lived experiences to show how such marginalization can look is quite another. What emerges is a more comprehensive mode of inquiry, one that evocatively challenges the essentialism and ridicule that permeates the media sites in which white working-class people are featured as well as highlights the complexity and immobility that pervades our everyday lives. By using autoethnography, scholars can dig deeper into and remove the "trash" of "white trash" and other pop culture phenomena.

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