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1. Introduction

The choice of the CW series *Supernatural* (2005–) for *Transformative Works and Cultures*’ first fandom-specific issue could not be more timely. Over the past five seasons, the series has grown from a struggling show on a tiny network to a solid cult hit. The show's mixture of horror movie tropes, American folk beliefs, popular religious imagery, and an unusually intense sibling relationship attracted legions of fans eager to explore the world of the brothers Winchester. In September 2009, *Entertainment Weekly* listed the series as number 11 on its list of the "25 Greatest Cult TV Shows Ever" ([http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20302134_20304619_15,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20302134_20304619_15,00.html)), sharing space with powerhouses like *Doctor Who* (1969–1989, 1996, 2005–), *The X-Files* (1993–2002), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003). Notably, despite the presence of so many shows with large, famous fandoms, *Supernatural* was the only show whose inclusion on the list was predicated not on the content of the series itself, but by the creative productions of its fandom. *EW* remarked on the intense devotion of the fans and singled out the fan fictional genre of Wincest as proof of the series' status as one of the "greatest cult shows." Normally, mention of a specific, and potentially controversial, subgenre of fan fiction in a mainstream media outlet would be cause for much chatter, discussion, and possible alarm among fans, but in this case, *EW*’s snickering about Wincest raised few eyebrows. First, they had already done it, back in April ([http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20270843,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20270843,00.html)). Second, and more importantly, *Supernatural* had already drawn attention to its fandom, and its fic, within the show itself.
In seasons 4 and 5, riding a wave of increased ratings and visibility, *Supernatural* started depicting, within the diegesis of the show, the activities of its fandom. Episode 4.18 "The Monster at the End of this Book" presented reclusive drunk Chuck Shurley, an unwitting prophet of the Lord whose works will eventually become known as the "Winchester gospel." He has written a series of novels that accurately record Sam and Dean's entire lives; this series, also titled Supernatural, has acquired a devoted fan base that critiques, analyzes, and responds to it in much the same way fans of the television show do—up to and including the writing of Wincest. Episode 5.01 "Sympathy for the Devil" introduced Becky Rosen, the Wincest-writing fangirl who is first seen at her computer, in the process of writing an especially turgid Wincest fic. In 5.09 "The Real Ghostbusters," Becky and Chuck returned in the context of a Supernatural fan convention.

"Monster" sent a shock wave through the fan community: not only did it acknowledge the show's fandom and poke fun at the level of devotion and emotional investment in the series, but it also outing those fans who write Sam/Dean slash. Many of the essays in this issue, in both the Praxis and Symposium sections, address the mixed responses of the fandom to this episode, and to its follow-up, 5.01 "Sympathy for the Devil." Laura E. Felschow, in "'Hey, check it out, there's actually fans': (Dis)empowerment and (Mis)representation of Cult Fandom in *Supernatural,"" argues that the fandom episodes are Kripke and company's attempt to assert interpretive control over the series:

The cult fan is reminded that s/he cannot decide what is to be included and excluded, who can be complimented or insulted. Fandom may feel a certain way in response to the episode, but they cannot change it. They can post about their anger or their delight, but they cannot create an official episode of their own wherein the cult fan is depicted in a manner of their choosing.

The third fandom episode thus far, 5.09 "The Real Ghostbusters," aired too late for essay writers to include it in their discussions, but I can address it here. In some ways, this episode is by far the most maddening of the three. Not only does it depict fandom (in far more detail than some fans are comfortable with), but it also reiterates the show's ongoing problems with representations of women. Becky has lured Sam and Dean to a Supernatural convention at which Chuck is the guest of honor. The convention is filled with die-hard fans, many of whom are in costume, and features a live-action role-playing game. The hotel in which the convention is being held turns out to be haunted, and two of the role-players, Demian and Barnes, step up to help Sam and Dean defeat the evil ghosts. Chuck offers some minor help as well, which causes Becky to transfer her crush on Sam to Chuck himself, to the delight of both
men. Demian and Barnes deliver a sweet articulation of the joys of fandom and reveal themselves to be a couple; Sam and Dean ride off to continue their quest, presumably wiser in the ways of those freaky fans.

[1.6] As several essays in this issue address, *Supernatural* often exhibits misogynistic overtones, which were especially egregious in "Ghostbusters." Many fans found it telling that in the episode where fans get to be heroes, it is only the male fans who do so—in utter defiance of the fact that the majority of fans who attend *Supernatural* conventions are women. Becky, the Wincest-writing fangirl, is still presented as deviant and excessive—and, unlike the male fans, Becky is never allowed to be heroic. She is rewarded not with humanization and valorization of her fannishness, but instead with Chuck's sexual attentions. Her access to heroism is confined to sex with a heroic man. The message of "Ghostbusters" appears to be: fanboys, keep on keeping on—you are dorky but lovable. Female fans, you are creepy, but you might be willing to fuck us real writers, so you aren't *totally* unacceptable. Or, as fan Gianduja Kiss put it, "So, now we know what kind of fans Kripke wishes he had" (LiveJournal blog post, November 13, 2009). It appears that to the *Supernatural* producers, the only good fan is a male fan, specifically one who avoids those fannish paths usually gendered female—there be Wincest.

[1.7] The fandom episodes are, by design, overtly metatextual and self-referential; while Becky is a parody of *Supernatural* fans, Chuck, who writes under the pen name Carver Edlund (a portmanteau of writers Jeremy Carver and Ben Edlund), pokes fun at the writers themselves. Given this, Becky's "reward" of sex with Chuck starts to look like a masturbatory fantasy about the fandom as a horde of horny, available women who just *love* the work of the male creator and the mostly male writing team. Gianduja Kiss' vid "Blister in the Sun," set to Violent Femmes' ode to onanism, is a scathing commentary on the wankiness (in the masturbatory sense) of the show, as well as a sly nod to the wank (in the fannish kerfuffle sense) that the "fandom" episodes generated.
2. Praxis

[2.1] Because every article in this issue is concerned with the specific text and fandom of *Supernatural*, all of the academic essays falls under Praxis. The essays in this section analyze both the series and fannish responses to the series; a common theme is how both the show and the fan productions respond to a variety of popular discourses concerning gender, religion, folklore, and transformative work, among others. Lisa Schmidt, in "Monstrous Melodrama: Expanding the Scope of Melodramatic Identification to Interpret Negative Fan Responses to *Supernatural,*" discusses the fandom episodes and the reactions they spawned through the lens of Ien Ang's theory of melodramatic identification. Melissa N. Bruce also draws on the discursive genre of melodrama to articulate the role Dean's beloved Chevy Impala plays in the series, in "The Impala as Negotiator of Melodrama and Masculinity in *Supernatural.*" Monica Flegel and Jenny Roth, as well as Berit Åström, turn their attention to understudied genres of fan fiction. Flegel and Roth, in "Annihilating Love and Heterosexuality Without Women: Romance, Generic Difference, and Queer Politics in *Supernatural* Fan Fiction," discuss darker Wincest fic, which became more prevalent as the series took a turn for the apocalyptic in seasons 4 and 5, in relation to real person slash (RPS) about *Supernatural* actors Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, which often follows the generic tropes of heteronormative romantic comedy. (Warning: this essay contains Chad Michael Murray.) Further exploration of heteronormative tropes can be found in Åström's "'Let's get those Winchesters pregnant': Male Pregnancy in *Supernatural* Fan Fiction," which discusses the understudied subgenre of mpreg. Male pregnancy narratives are occasionally derided in fandom, but Åström demonstrates the complex
negotiations such stories have with discourses of domesticity and pregnancy in popular culture. In my own essay, "'Kinda like the folklore of its day': Supernatural, Fairy Tales, and Ostension," I examine the use of fairy tales in episode 3.05 "Bedtime Stories" and in fan fiction. In the essay that is most focused upon the canon of the series itself, Line Nybro Petersen, in "Renegotiating Religious Imaginations Through Transformations of 'Banal Religion' in Supernatural," examines the mediatization of religion and religious imagery in popular culture to analyze Supernatural's depiction of the Christian narrative of the apocalypse.

3. Symposium, Interview, and Review

[3.1] Drawing on the strong tradition of meta within the Supernatural fandom, the Symposium pieces in this issue combine fannish and academic perspectives. Melissa Gray provides a brief overview of the development of the Supernatural fandom, while Deepa Sivarajan and Jules Wilkinson revisit the issue of creator/actor fandom overlap. Louisa Ellen Stein, Katharina Freund, and Babak Zarin discuss several important fan vids, including Counteragent's "Still Alive," Luminosity's "The Fifth Circle," and Obsessive24's "Fall of Man." Suzette Chan reads the series and fan works through the lens of Foucauldian theory, and Kristin Noone discusses the troubling of the Winchester family dynamic in 4.19 "Jump the Shark."

[3.2] Our interviews bridge the gap between amateur and professional fannishness: we spoke with tie-in novelist Keith R. A. DeCandido, Wincon organizer Ethrosdemon, and the admin team for the invaluable resource Super-wiki. Reviews in this issue include texts that are specifically linked to the series, such as Alysa Hornick's review of the Supernatural essay collection In the Hunt and Douglas Schules's review of the Supernatural Role Playing Game, by Jamie Chambers. Other reviews are for texts that, although not about Supernatural itself, touch on issues of interest to Supernatural fans and scholars, including Gothic and ghostly fiction (Spooner, Weinstock), ghosts in folklore (Goldstein et al.), and monsters in popular culture (Newitz).

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"Kinda like the folklore of its day": *Supernatural*, fairy tales, and ostension

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[0.1] Abstract—This essay considers the use of folklore in the television series *Supernatural*: the show does not simply retell folk narratives, but *performs* them both diegetically and metatextually in a process known as ostension. In the process of performance, main characters Sam and Dean often research and analyze the stories themselves, and perform portions of the folk narrative in order to bring about a resolution. This essay focuses upon episode 3.05 "Bedtime Stories," which does not simply depict the folk narrative genre of fairy tales, but also directly engages with the discourse surrounding fairy tales in popular culture; in particular, the episode reproduces widespread understandings of fairy tales as a gendered genre. The essay concludes with a discussion of fan fiction that uses fairy tales, seeing it as a transformative response to *Supernatural*’s own transformation of folk narratives.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan fiction; Television


1. Introduction

[1.1] One of the appeals of the television series *Supernatural* is the way in which it uses folklore. Folk narratives and beliefs inform the majority of episodes; moreover, protagonists Sam and Dean Winchester are themselves presented as careful folklore researchers—each episode depicts the boys combing through libraries, archives, public records offices, and the Internet, investigating the folklore record. The series displays a more thorough knowledge of folkloristics than many pop culture texts (note 1); episodes such as 1.05 "Bloody Mary" and 2.04 "Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things" feature intelligent discussions of narrative variants and the multiplicity of folk beliefs, while simultaneously transforming folk narratives to best serve the purposes of the story the series wishes to tell (note 2). As Henry Jenkins (2007) and I (Tosenberger 2008) have discussed, the show does not simply depict folklore, but uses it thematically, as a way of reflecting and commenting upon Sam and Dean's
relationship. Just as *Supernatural* makes transformative use of folk narratives, fans of the series create transformative responses to the show, in the form of fan fiction, fan art, vids, and so forth, in order to further explore both the universe and the characters.

[1.2] In this essay, I want to discuss not just *Supernatural*'s representation of folklore but also the way it engages with discussions about folklore—and the way fans respond to the folklore in the show. The series both reproduces and subverts popular discourses about folklore, often setting traditionalist views against more nuanced, postmodern understandings of folk material, folk groups, and folklore research. And because *Supernatural* adheres much more closely to the existing folklore record than do other notable shows influenced by supernatural folklore, such as the myth arc-heavy *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Files* (both of which are far more focused upon their respective invented mythological narratives than they are on "real-world" folklore), it encourages fans of the series to do their own investigations—and transformations—of both the series and the folklore that inspires it.

[1.3] I will focus upon episode 3.05 "Bedtime Stories," which is, in many ways, a typical *Supernatural* episode: Sam and Dean investigate mysterious happenings that seem to be connected to supernatural folk beliefs. In this episode, the folklore in question is the European fairy tale canon, which, as creator Eric Kripke put it, is "the folklore most people know best" (Rudolph 2007, 36). However, this episode was not simply about finding a monster and defeating it using folkloric methods. "Bedtime Stories" explicitly engages not just with the fairy tales themselves, but also with the stories we tell about fairy tales in our culture—the folklore about the folklore. Fairy tales are a prime testing ground for questions swirling around the discipline of folklore, about the relationship between oral, literary, and media forms, the nature of the "folk," and the meaning of "authenticity." Since this episode is so concerned not just with folk narratives themselves but also with what we think about those stories, it is an ideal place to begin consideration of the use of folklore within the show. Fairy tales are likely to be most familiar to viewers through media representations, particularly those of Disney, and "Bedtime Stories" tackles not just the folklore record but also media transformations of folklore.

[1.4] My approach is informed by Mikel J. Koven's foundational work in *Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends* (2008), which is the first full-length work to combine folkloristics with film, television, and media studies. Koven argues that, if we wish to discuss folklore in popular culture, it is not enough simply to note folkloric motifs and narratives in popular culture texts: "To understand how popular film and television uses folklore motifs, we must dig deeper to see what happens when such motifs are recontextualized within the popular media text" (Koven 2008, 70). According to
Koven, the folkloric process of ostension is the most useful way to approach representations of folklore in media narratives; the premise and structure of Supernatural make it a particularly rich testing ground for Koven's "ostensive methodology" (2008, 153).

[1.5] Ostension is defined by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi as "presentation as contrasted to representation (showing the reality itself instead of using any kind of signification)" (1983, 6). Or, as Jan Harold Brunvand describes it, "sometimes people actually enact the contents of legends instead of merely narrating them as stories" (2001, 303). Supernatural does not simply retell folk narratives, but actually performs the stories. Koven expands these definitions further, in a way obviously relevant to Supernatural: "any legend text dramatized through popular culture...is also a kind of ostension, particularly when we are shown the narrative through actions rather than having the story retold to us through narration"; he calls this phenomenon "mass-mediated ostension" (2008, 139). Of course, every film or television series that dramatizes folk legends, as Koven points out, commits mass-mediated ostension. But Supernatural is unusual: the series not only uses ostension because it is a mass-media text that dramatizes folk narratives, it also actively and consistently depicts ostension as a process. Almost every episode features the majority of the characters performing ostensive acts—and Sam and Dean, at least, are fully conscious of this ostension. Supernatural relies heavily upon existing legend texts, and the majority of every episode involves Sam and Dean investigating the folklore record to determine which ostensive action will be most efficacious in defeating the creature of the week. Supernatural dramatizes the "practical" in "practical folkloristics": like Zora Neale Hurston training as a hoodoo doctor in Mules and Men (1935), Sam and Dean do not simply research folk belief, but actively put those beliefs to use.

[1.6] Ostension, in most discussions of the term, usually involves folk narratives defined as legends. Legends are best defined as stories that make a claim to real-world or historical truth: "at the core of a legend is an evaluation of its truth status...In a legend, the question of truth must be entertained even if that truth is ultimately rejected" (Oring 1986, 125). This is in contradistinction to the categories of myth (stories understood to contain sacred, if not necessarily literal, truth) (note 3) and folktale (stories told as fiction). It is not surprising that ostension usually occurs with legends—since the performance of ostensive acts is intended to produce real-world results, it makes sense that the narratives chosen for performance usually make some claim to real-world truth. Furthermore, Koven argues that legend ostension in popular culture texts encourages audiences to engage in "some form of postpresentation debate regarding the veracity of the legends presented" (2008, 139) (note 4). This is reflected in Supernatural; most episodes engage with narratives that are usually told in their folk context as if they were "true." Vampires, werewolves, shtrigas, the Hook
Man, La Llorona, witches, Robert Johnson's rumored pact with the Devil, zombies, djinn, changelings, evil clowns, and ghosts of all kinds have been featured on the show. Moreover, Sam and Dean's methods of defeating these creatures are those which folk belief likewise deems "true": salting and burning remains, performing exorcisms, helping ghosts resolve unfinished business, casting magic spells attested to by the folklore record, and so forth.

[1.7] However, on *Supernatural*, fairy tales—a subgenre of folktales, which are understood within the folk context as fictional—are also subject to ostension. This ostension functions rather differently than it does for narratives the show and folklore understand as "true." In 3.05 "Bedtime Stories," fairy tales retain their folklore classification as fictions: the fairy tales are not "really" happening, but are instead being used as scripts by the villain of the piece, a child who is forcing others to perform fairy tales in order to call attention to the abuse she has suffered at the hands of her stepmother. Sam and Dean must replace the fictional folk narrative with one understood, within both popular culture and the diegesis of the show, as "real": spirits can be put to rest if the living are willing to listen to and resolve their pain.

[1.8] The depiction of fairy tales becomes even more nuanced in fan fiction for the series. As I noted in an earlier article, "fans...often use folklore much as the show itself does: as a way of reflecting and commenting upon Sam and Dean's relationship" (Tosenberger 2008, 5.4). While fan writers drawing upon fairy tales do use these narratives as a way of illuminating the relationship between Sam and Dean, they often use the tales themselves in a manner markedly different than the show does. In most *Supernatural* fairy tale fan fiction, Sam and Dean do not, as in the episode, come in after the fact to resolve the story from the outside. Instead, they must assume the role of a character in the fairy tale, playing out the narrative from the beginning. Sometimes the role is thrust upon them, as in Quarterwhore's "The Frog Princess" (November 2, 2007, LiveJournal post), where Sam is turned into a frog. In other stories, one or both brothers deliberately take on the role of the hero on a fairy tale quest, as in Sweetestdrain's "Swear by All Flowers" (June 18, 2007, LiveJournal post). In these stories, fairy tales are treated not as fictions, but as narratives as diegetically "true" as legends.

[1.9] The majority of the scholarship on fan fiction, especially slash fan fiction, understands it as a way for women to intervene creatively in male-dominated pop culture texts. Fairy tales can be said to follow a parallel tradition—like fan fiction, fairy tales are a gendered genre of storytelling. As Marina Warner notes, "although male writers and collectors have dominated the production and dissemination of popular wonder tales, they often pass on women's stories from intimate or domestic milieux" (1995, 17). Postmodern feminist writers such as Angela Carter, Anne Sexton, and
Emma Donoghue reworked the "old wives' stories" collected by Perrault, the Grimms, and others, seeing in them a space to articulate female experiences and desires—a move not dissimilar to those performed by fan writers, most of whom identify as female. The status of fairy tales as a gendered genre directly affects their ostensive performance within Supernatural; fan writers' reworkings of both the series and its depiction of fairy tales thus combines two strains of gendered storytelling.

[1.10] Before getting into the specifics of "Bedtime Stories," it is necessary to speak more generally about Supernatural's engagement with folklore—an engagement that can be illuminated most efficiently through comparison with its television ancestor The X-Files, with which it shares not only a theme and aesthetic, but also a large portion of its production staff (note 5).

2. Supernatural's "folklore files"

[2.1] Like The X-Files, Supernatural is divided between myth arc episodes, which advance the long-term plot of the season or series as a whole, and standalone "monster of the week" (MOTW) episodes; Supernatural, however, has a much higher proportion of MOTW episodes, because of Kripke's stated frustration with the way the mythology of The X-Files (and other myth arc–heavy shows) became "totally befuddling," until viewers "collapse[d] under the weight of it" (Kripke 2008a) (note 6).

Koven, speaking of The X-Files, notes,

[2.2] The MOTW episodes can be further broken down into episodes of "literary fantasy," those that feature monsters created by the show's writers and based within the traditions of horror and science-fiction literature (rather than oral tradition), and those episodes of "legendry," those monsters that are based within a distinct oral tradition. It is to this last category that I apply the term folklore files. (Koven 2008, 70)

[2.3] This categorization of episodes is also appropriate for Supernatural, and I have adopted it. However, while Koven's episode categories are useful for both series, there are significant differences in the ways that the two series approach folklore.

[2.4] Both The X-Files and Supernatural display an interesting combination of progressive and decidedly traditionalist conceptions of what folklore is and who has it, although the two series manifest these attitudes in different ways. What I am calling "traditionalist" folkloristics is the collection of conceptions and attitudes about folklore and the "folk" that were dominant in folklore studies from the beginning of the discipline in the early 19th century until about the 1960s or so in the United States, and for a bit longer in the UK and Europe. Barre Toelken describes this traditionalist perspective:
The earliest "schools" of folklore were mainly antiquarian; that is, they concerned themselves with the recording and study of customs, ideas, and expressions that were thought to be survivals of ancient cultural systems still existing in the modern world...The assumption seems to have been that only away from the influence of technology and modern civilization could one find those antique remnants of tradition that might reveal to us the early stages of our cultural existence. (Toelken 1979, 4)

In other words, to traditionalist folklorists, the "folk" were best understood as "illiterate, rural, backwards peasants" (Dundes 1980, 6), who, isolated from modern culture, retained "rural, quaint, or 'backward' elements of the culture" (Toelken 1979, 5). Underpinning this condescension was the theory of "cultural evolution," a late 19th-century adaptation of the then cutting-edge theory of Darwinian evolution to fields that had nothing to do with biology. This theory, whose primary exponents were E. B. Tylor and Andrew Lang, posited that cultures, just like individual humans, proceeded in a unilinear fashion through the stages of "savagery" (infancy), "barbarism" (childhood), and finally "civilization"—with upper-class European patriarchal Christian culture representing the pinnacle of civilization (and adulthood), of course. European peasants were, naturally, barbarians, and their folklore represented traces of earlier "stages" of civilization; information on the ancestors of civilized peoples could be supplemented with studies of contemporary "savages," such as African tribespeople (Dundes 1980, 2). Lang, in particular, argued that the child is the microcosm of the culture, and therefore, logically, the stories of lower-class "barbaric" adults were suitable material—after extensive bowdlerization—for upper-class children, as they were all on the same level of development (see Smol 1996). In other words, the still-pervasive notion that folktales, especially fairy tales, are primarily "kids' stuff" owes a great deal to 19th-century racism, classism, and religious bigotry.

Endemic to this line of theorizing is the assumption that the folklorist, the one collecting and interpreting folklore, is not of the folk: the folk are always the Other. Traditional folklorists were educated bourgeois outsiders who traveled to rural areas in their own lands—or, better yet, foreign locales—since one cannot find folklore among one's own group, because only "they" have folklore—"we" have Culture (Toelken 1979, 3–7, 265). This did not change until Alan Dundes redefined the folk as "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor" (Dundes 1965, 2)—thus including everyone, including educated bourgeois folklorists, in the category of the "folk." This redefinition, and the movement away from cultural evolution (and antiquarian schools of thought in general), opened up vast new realms of inquiry for folklorists, including the study of "urban legends" (note 7).
Neither *The X-Files* nor *Supernatural*, for the most part, depict folklore solely as traces of ancient beliefs that have survived among ignorant peasants—*Supernatural*, in particular, relies heavily upon urban legends, which often circulate, both in real life and on the show, among contemporary middle-class educated Westerners. Where they differ is in how the protagonists are presented in relation to the folklore they investigate. *The X-Files* hews closely to the traditionalist bourgeois outsider perspective: Mulder and Scully are highly educated representatives of an official institution, the FBI. The chief axis of discussion about folklore in *The X-Files* is belief: Scully the skeptic spars constantly with Mulder, whose belief in extraterrestrials and the supernatural is considered incompatible with his class background and education, and therefore deemed irrational. Many episodes depict Mulder and Scully entering a community that holds supernatural beliefs, which Scully resists and Mulder accepts; "Spooky" Mulder raises among his colleagues, Scully included, the traditionalist anthropologist's specter of "going native"—that is, adopting the worldview of the primitive people you're studying, rather than maintaining your rational bourgeois distance. For *The X-Files*, a show centered around competing attitudes to the supernatural held by educated bourgeois sorts who are not "supposed" to believe in such things—much like traditionalist folklorists—this is appropriate. However, this particular concern does not translate to *Supernatural*, where Sam and Dean fully believe in the supernatural, and their belief causes conflict only when they need to convince educated bourgeois Scullys of imminent danger. Moreover, the Winchesters are embedded in a milieu far closer to that of the traditionalist folk than of the traditionalist folklorists.

Unlike Mulder and Scully, the Winchesters, even before Mary's death, are decidedly working-class; John, prior to becoming a homeless drifter, was a mechanic. Julia M. Wright, in a perceptive article on class in the series, argues that "to hunt in *Supernatural* is to be immersed in the local, not the multinational-driven culture of brand recognition and globalized consumerism, and this is understood in the series as an insistently classed move" (Wright 2008, ¶15). Although Sam and Dean often behave like professional traditional folklorists—not just by doing research, but also in the fact that they are almost always geographic outsiders to the sites they visit—they are actually amateurs, autodidacts with no formal academic training in the field (note 8). (While a number of 19th-century folklorists were themselves amateurs, most of these were clergymen, who were thus distinguished in both education and perceived religious orthodoxy from the folk.) Moreover, the Winchesters—as wandering outlaws and con men, as heroes on a quest, and, on Sam's part, as a possessor of supernatural powers—embody those around whom folklore traditionally collects, rather than the collectors or interpreters themselves (note 9). This is demonstrated on the show: the folklore that circulates in the hunting community about Sam's powers forcibly aligns the Winchesters with the folkloric entities they hunt, in opposition to the
hunters. This in-series folklore puts Sam and Dean in danger from fellow hunter Gordon Walker, among others (in 2.10 "Hunted" and 3.07 "Fresh Blood").

[2.10] Gordon's translation of narrative into action is one of many examples of the folk process of ostension on the show; in fact, I believe that ostension is perhaps the most useful means for discussing *Supernatural's* use of folklore.

3. Ostension, or "A reenactment? That's a little crazy"

[3.1] As discussed earlier, ostension in folklore is the enactment, rather than simply the narration, of a folk narrative, usually a legend. The concept will be familiar to anyone who has examined Halloween treats for razor blades and poison, mixed Pop Rocks and Coca-Cola, or played Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* while watching *The Wizard of Oz* (note 10). The most common form of ostention, what Carl Lindahl calls "ostensive play" (Lindahl 2005, 164), is "legend-tripping": visiting a local site reputed to be haunted or otherwise supernaturally unusual (such as "gravity hills," where cars roll uphill), in hopes of a spooky thrill (note 11). Teenagers are especially likely to go on such legend trips (Ellis 1983; Bird 1994; Brunvand 2001, 238–39; Koven 2008, 154–56). In *Supernatural*, we witness several instances of adolescent legend tripping, notably in 1.10 "Asylum," 1.17 "Hell House," and 3.13 "Ghostfacers"; in every case, Sam and Dean have to rescue the hapless thrill-seekers from malevolent spirits. The Winchesters are impatient with unprepared civilians who deliberately seek out supernatural experiences: in "Asylum," Dean advises one of the rescuees, "When someone says a place is haunted, *don't go in*" (note 12).

[3.2] However, it is not simply thrill-seeking teens who commit ostension on the show. Sam and Dean perform ostensive acts in just about every single episode, albeit for a larger purpose: when Sam performs the titular slumber-party ritual in 1.05 "Bloody Mary," he is not trying to scare himself, but drawing out the ghost in order to destroy her. The Winchester brothers travel to locations where supernatural doings have occurred, and once there, they often perform the folkloric act reputed to be the best way of defeating the supernatural force in question—after discerning which act that is.

[3.3] While many forms of ostension are harmless—in real life, if not on *Supernatural*—others are far more sinister. As Bill Ellis observes, folk narratives "are also maps for action, often violent actions" (1989, 218). In other words, some people use circulating folk narratives as scripts for antisocial or criminal acts. What can be called "criminal ostension" is probably the most well-documented form of the phenomenon, if only because the cases tend to be so spectacular. Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983), Ellis (1989), Lindahl (2005, 164), and Grider (1984) all discuss notable examples of criminal
ostension, particularly the infamous 1974 case of Ronald "Candy Man" O'Bryan, who poisoned his son with a cyanide-laced Pixie Stick, hoping that the urban legend of poisoned Halloween candy would conceal his crime (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983, 11–15). In Supernatural, several villains consciously use folk narratives as models for their criminality, particularly the ghost in 1.05 "Bloody Mary": Mary, a girl murdered next to a mirror, latched on to the narrative as a means of manifesting herself and doling out punishment to those who, like her murderer, had escaped retribution for causing the death of another.

[3.4] Most discussion of ostension, criminal or otherwise, focuses upon legends: because legends operate around questions of belief, the ostensive act engages with the possibility of real-world effects. However, on Supernatural, ostention is not confined to legends; in episode 3.05 "Bedtime Stories," the villain enacts fairy tales to violent ends.

4. Disney flicks and bedtime stories

[4.1] In this episode, a classic "folklore file," Sam and Dean head to Maple Springs, New York, to investigate a series of bizarre, unprovoked murders: three heavyset brothers, arguing over the proper construction of houses, are attacked by an animal-like man; a couple, hiking through the woods, come upon a house where an old lady feeds them drugged sweets and then attacks them, killing the man. The woman who survived the second attack tells Sam and Dean she spotted a beautiful little girl—black hair, pale skin—standing just outside the window while the attack was going on. Sam argues that the attacks are based on fairy tales, and Dean agrees to investigate this theory. They discover no dead children fitting that description, but do find a beautiful young woman—black hair, pale skin—who has been in a coma since the age of eight. This woman, named Callie, is the daughter of Dr. Garrison, a physician at the hospital, and he has been reading to her from the Grimms' fairy tales. After Sam and Dean rescue a woman who has been attacked by her previously loving stepmother—the mice and pumpkins on her front porch alert them to her plight—the little girl appears to Dean and hands him an apple. Sam and Dean conclude that Callie identifies with Snow White: her frustrated, angry spirit is frozen at the age of eight and is forcing others to reenact fairy tales as a way of calling attention to her trauma. Callie went into the coma from what was thought to be an accidental ingestion of bleach; her fairy tale reenactments indicate that she was, in fact, poisoned by her now-deceased stepmother. After the murder of an old woman and the kidnapping of her granddaughter (who is wearing a red hoodie) by the same "wolf" involved in the "Three Little Pigs" attack, Sam convinces the doctor to listen to the spirit of his daughter. The doctor acknowledges Callie's story and asks her to stop the attacks. This scene is intercut with images of Dean, in the role of huntsman, fighting the "wolf"
to save "Little Red Riding Hood." Callie agrees to stop and is finally able to die; with her dies her control over the "wolf," and he comes to himself just in time to convince Dean not to kill him. Though the case is solved, both brothers are left frustrated and unsatisfied. At the end of the episode, which will be discussed in more detail later, Sam sneaks out and calls up the crossroads demon who holds the contract on Dean's soul; after finding out that she no longer holds Dean's contract and couldn't get Dean out of the deal even if she wanted to, Sam kills her.

[4.2] Before getting into this episode's presentation of fairy tales, some background information is in order. Fairy tales, as a genre, are considered to be a subcategory of folktales. The category of "folktale" is a broad one, defined by most folklorists as "a narrative which is related and received as a fiction or fantasy" (Oring 1986, 126), as opposed to myths or legends, both of which are making truth claims; the German term Märchen is often used interchangeably with "folktales." Within that group of stories, fairy tales are usually understood as folktales which involve magic, particularly magical acts, objects, and transformations that are not remarked upon as unusual within the story: no one in a fairy tale stops and cries, "Wait a minute, frogs don't talk!"

[4.3] The most famous and influential collections of fairy tales include those by Charles Perrault (in 1697), Aleksandr Afanas'ev (in 1855–64), and, of course, the Brothers Grimm. The first edition of the Grimms' Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children's and Household Tales) appeared in 1812. Though the collection was presented as an unvarnished recording of oral tales direct from the mouths of rude German peasants —"the mythical dream of autochthonous purity," as Marina Warner (1995, 193) puts it—the truth is more complicated. For one thing, the majority of the Grimms' informants were educated middle-class people, who, as we have seen, would not have been considered the authentic "folk" by the standards of the time (Rölleke 1986). While initially published for scholars, the Grimms' collection achieved some success as a book for children, and subsequent editions (seven in total, with the final and most widely available edition appearing in 1857) were extensively revised by Wilhelm Grimm to better conform to changing ideas of what was appropriate for young readers. This marked a major shift in the perceived audience, as prior to this fairy tales were generally told as stories for everyone, rather than exclusively or even primarily children: Perrault's tales, for example, were witty confections aimed at the sophisticates in the court of Louis XIV, with whom he was engaged in intellectual warfare about the validity of modern French culture versus that of the ancient Greeks and Romans (Warner 1995, 165). As Maria Tatar (1987) has demonstrated, Wilhelm Grimm, in a move that would please even the moral watchdogs of today, downplayed or eliminated references to sex and increased those to violence, particularly punitive violence. Other revisions, documented by Tatar (1987), Jack Zipes (1991, 45–70, 2002a, 2002b), and Ruth Bottigheimer (1986), reflect a systematic imposition of
bourgeois mores, particularly in the realm of gender: this included curtailing the
proactivity and direct speech of heroines, while increasing them for female villains
(because good women are passive and silent). This was especially noteworthy in
stories that featured wicked stepmothers (note 13), as the texts often, in an exception
to the general rule of harsh justice, bend over backward to exonerate fathers for their
failure to protect their children (Tatar 1987, 36–37)—most egregiously in the case of
"Hansel and Gretel," where the father who led his children into the woods and
abandoned them there is rewarded with mounds of jewels that the children have
liberated from the witch's cottage (Zipes 1992, 64).

[4.4] This history of collection and revision, of the tension between the oral narrative
and the literary tale, while it is best documented for the Grimms, is true of the entire
genre of the fairy tale. Over the years, fairy tales became more and more identified
with children, and the oral and literary narratives became even more tangled as they
were deliberately adapted to contemporary notions of what was suitable or appropriate
for children. Disney films add another layer to the mix, as they often become the most
widely known versions of a given story; reading the Grimms after being raised on
Disney flicks can be, as Tatar mildly puts it, "an eye-opening experience" (Tatar 1987,
3) (note 14). Jared Padalecki, who plays Sam, reports as much: "When I went back
and read the original stories, they were creepy and freaky...I was actually a little
spooked. I grew up on the Disney movies, and I'm going, 'Oh, my God, this is what it
came from?"' (Rudolph 2007, 36).

5. Full of sex, violence, cannibalism

[5.1] Padalecki's comment highlights an essential dichotomy about fairy tales in our
culture. We all know what fairy tales are, or think we do. But really, we have two
stories about fairy tales—stories about stories, stories that matter in some ways as
much as the tales themselves do. First, there's the story that many of us absorbed,
which is usually blamed on Disney films (note 15): fairy tales are sweet, innocent,
adorable stories for children—or our culture's most saccharine idea of children. All is
cute, all is cuddly, unpleasant events are temporary and easily fixed, girls are docile
princesses and boys are brave princes, and, of course, everyone deserving lives
happily ever after in a candy-colored utopia. Also, the villains—older women, mostly—
get their just deserts, usually a fall from a cliff, although we are spared the splat. As
Donald Haase remarks, "The normative influences of Disney's animated fairy tales has
been so enormous, that the Disney spirit—already once removed from the originals—
tends to become the standard against which fairy tale films are created and received"
But there is another story about fairy tales. Far from being adorable delights for children, fairy tales are dark, bloody, murderous—"full of sex, violence, and cannibalism," in fact. Postmodern writers of literary fairy tales, such as Angela Carter, Anne Sexton, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, Emma Donoghue, Olga Broumas, and Terri Windling, are praised for getting back to the "roots" of the fairy tale, for peeling away the Disneyfied layers to get at the truth about the "original" stories. This story about fairy tales—we can call it the "recovery story"—is a rescue operation, uncovering the "real" fairy tale and liberating it from Disney oppression, and theoretically also recovering the "true" voices of the "original" tellers, usually figured as female. Versions of this approach have a long history in folklore studies, which, in the early days, tended to treat all folklore as brands rescued from the fire: in this case, the "fire" destroying a once-pure folk product is not urbanization and mechanization per se, but the stultifying effects of male collectors and male-dominated popular media. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls this "eleventh hour" folklore (1998, 300). This is why we have scholarly works on fairy tales with titles like *Breaking the Magic Spell* (Zipes 2002a) and *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Tatar 1987) and *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked* (Orenstein 2002). While scholars have for the most part rejected the problematic discourse of traditionalist notions of folk "authenticity"—such as lauding the Grimms for their closeness to the "folk" or, conversely, denouncing them for their reliance on middle-class (and therefore "non-folk") sources—the "authenticity" narrative is still with us in popular culture, and in the recovery story, the bloody is authentic.

I don't mean to suggest that this approach is invalid or mistaken, because it is one that I (mostly) support. Fairy tales have absolutely been sanitized to rid them of elements deemed unacceptable, whether those elements be violence, sexuality, nonnormative gender roles, insufficient respect for authority, or whatever bugaboos moral guardians wish to prevent young readers from encountering. In addition, female tellers, writers, and collectors have absolutely been ignored, silenced, and subsumed under the totalizing category of the anonymous "folk" by male authorities—and those male authorities such as Perrault sometimes had to turn around and defend fairy tales as worthwhile, despite the perceived feminine (or even, in the case of the French female salon writers, feminist) "taint" of the genre (Warner 1995, 168–70). I merely want to point out that, in the realm of popular culture, the "recovery narrative" is a story we tell about fairy tales, and it's one that both contradicts and relies upon the existence of the "fairy tales are sweet and innocent" narrative for its power. Disney's "normative influence" is so pervasive that any literature or media that concerns itself with fairy tales must negotiate the received Disney understanding, even if only to dismiss it.
[5.4] The genre of horror has been particularly effective at mining the contradictions of these competing narratives, focusing especially on the axis of childhood. One expects to find "sex, violence, cannibalism" in material for adults; what makes fairy tales' adult-level naughtiness so enticing is the transgression of cultural constructions of the innocence of childhood—and of its stories. The recovery narrative is exciting precisely because it relies upon the "innocent" story about fairy tales in order to work. As James R. Kincaid (1998) might put it, the best thing about innocence is the threat of its violation, and roughing up a story for kids is thrilling in a way that pre-roughed-up stories for adults are not. Thus, it is unsurprising that there are a number of horror films based explicitly on fairy tales, including Snow White: A Tale of Terror, Suspiria, Freeway, and The Company of Wolves. When horror turns to fairy tales, an interesting dance begins. Fairy tales, as the recovery narrative rightly asserts, do in fact already contain an enormous amount of material our culture deems unsuitable for children: simply by sticking closely to an uncensored version of a tale, the horror genre can have its cake and eat it too. Fairy tale horror doesn't simply emphasize the horrific episodes in fairy tales, but also makes a truth claim about the nature of the tales themselves: this is what fairy tales really are.

[5.5] About fifteen minutes into "Bedtime Stories," a noteworthy exchange takes place between Sam and Dean. While nearly every episode features a scene where one brother—usually Sam, but sometimes Dean—floats a theory on the identity of the monster of the week, this episode's theorizing perfectly encapsulates the cultural perceptions and debates swirling around the genre of fairy tales. After Sam announces that his theory involves fairy tales, Dean responds,

[5.6] **Dean:** Oh that's, that's...nice. You think about fairy tales often?

**Sam:** No, Dean, I'm talking about the murders. A guy and a girl, hiking through the woods, and an old lady tries to eat them? That's Hansel and Gretel. Then we've got the three brothers, arguing over how to build houses, attacked by the Big Bad Wolf.

**Dean:** Three Little Pigs.

**Sam:** Yeah.

**Dean:** Actually, those guys were a little chubby. But wait, I thought all those things ended with everybody living happily ever after.

**Sam:** No, no, not the originals. See, the Grimm Brothers' stuff was kinda like the folklore of its day, full of sex, violence, cannibalism. And it got sanitized over the years, turned into Disney flicks and bedtime stories.
Dean: So, you think that the murders are, what, a reenactment?

[5.7] There's a lot going on here—and not just the mislabeling of "The Three Little Pigs" as a Brothers Grimm story, either. First, there is Dean's line "You think of fairy tales often?" which Jensen Ackles delivers with contemptuous amusement: fairy tales are a dodgy, unmanly form of folklore. Later, Dean will mock Sam's knowledge of the genre as "gay"—again, unmanly. The irony of Dean mocking anyone for masculinity-failure will be reinforced at the end of the episode, when the crossroads demon characterizes him as "desperate, sloppy, [and] needy"; moreover, as Cox (2006) and I (Tosenberger 2008) note, the series positively thrives on flirtation with the possibility that Sam and Dean's love is more than brotherly. (When Dean wonders in 2.11 "Playthings" why so many people think they're gay, Sam retorts, "Well, you are kind of butch; they probably think you're overcompensating.")

[5.8] Dean's snide, defensive comments spring from the centuries-long linkage of fairy tales with women: the fairy tale is a gendered genre of folklore. More to the point, fairy tales often suffer the same fate as other female-identified artistic genres such as romance, "chick flicks," and fan fiction—widespread dismissal and denigration. It is no accident that the term "fairy tale" is widely used as a synonym for "childish, unrealistic fantasy"—the kind women must be discouraged from having, at all costs.

[5.9] In response, Sam invokes the recovery narrative, which, in the context of the rest of the scene, suggests a problematic conclusion: it is the goriness and sexuality of fairy tales that renders them appropriate for masculine interest. Sam defends his interest by claiming that the Grimms' stories were "kinda like the folklore of [their] day" (emphasis mine)—a statement that makes as much sense as "the Earth kinda revolves around the sun." Within the show, fairy tales do not automatically possess the status of "real" folklore, but must be shown to be both "scary" and "sexy"—as the show's UK tagline promises—to be worthy of the brothers' attention.

[5.10] The fact that Callie is depicted as a child, while reinforcing the problematic gendering of fairy tales as the narratives of choice for a young woman stuck in childhood, enables Supernatural to call attention to the juxtaposition of innocence and horror. The Gretel figure who first alerts them to the presence of Callie's spirit says, "She was a beautiful child; it was odd to see her in the middle of something so horrible." As it turns out, this "beautiful child" is not an innocent witness to horrific violence, but is actually causing it. Evil children infest horror films, with notable examples including The Bad Seed, The Exorcist, The Good Son, Village of the Damned, Children of the Corn, and Rosemary's Baby (note 16). Susan Stewart, speaking of horror, remarks, "The monstrous child...the child whose qualities are exaggerated inversions of our cultural notions of childhood, frightens in this manner" (1982, 42). Supernatural certainly believes in the power of this trope: evil children show up in 1.03
"Dead in the Water," 1.15 "The Benders," 1.19 "Provenance," 2.11 "Playthings," 3.02 "The Kids Are Alright," 3.12 "Jus in Bello," 3.16 "No Rest for the Wicked," 4.06 "Yellow Fever," 4.11 "Family Remains," and 5.09 "The Real Ghostbusters." (Jesse, the Antichrist in 5.06 "I Believe the Children Are Our Future," is a subversion.) Over the course of the series, Sam and Dean have probably encountered more evil children than they have innocents in need of rescuing. Callie, like the ghostly Peter in 1.03 "Dead in the Water," is out for revenge and is willing to exact retribution on innocent people; however, Peter confines himself to the relatives of his murderers, while Callie attacks random people who can be made to fit her scripts. Callie thus combines two sources of discomfort: she is not only an evil child herself, but she shows fairy tales to us as horror stories. One child, a "bad seed," is a mutant, an anomaly. But when we trouble the more abstract artifacts of childhood, such as fairy tales, we ourselves become implicated; we are forced to question the collection of cultural fantasy and memory that makes up our idea of childhood itself—including our own memories, our assumptions about our own pasts.

6. Fairest of them all

[6.1] Callie, the victim of attempted murder by her stepmother, identifies with Snow White. All of her ostensive action is designed as a cry for help, a way to tell her story even though she has been robbed of her voice. While Callie is undeniably the villain of the episode, she, like Peter, is also a victim, trying to be heard in the only way she knows how. It is interesting that Callie fixates upon Snow White, who is, according to Cristina Bacchilega, the epitome of the "passively beautiful female character with very limited options" (1999, 29); "Snow White," along with "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty," formed the centerpiece of second-wave feminist objections to the fairy tale (Lieberman 1986; Gilbert and Gubar 1986; Rowe 1986). Callie is able to mentally escape the prison of her body, and she uses this power to lash out, wreaking havoc according to the narrative conventions of the fairy tales she knows. It is a desperate, and ultimately successful, attempt to get her father to recognize the abuse she has suffered; far from letting Dr. Garrison off the hook Hansel and Gretel style, or even enabling his oblivion, she allows resolution of the story only when he listens and believes her (note 17). Freud, in "The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales," remarks, "In a few people a recollection of their favorite fairy tales takes the place of memories of their own childhood" (1997, 101). Callie, however, is doing the opposite—the only way she can communicate the truth of her childhood is through the medium of the fairy tale. Callie's ostensive acts weirdly resemble the therapeutic uses of fairy tales described by Bruno Bettelheim (1991), Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1995), and of course Freud, in the "Wolf Man" case (1996), though they likely didn't envision a body count. Fairy tale therapy aims to help the patient work through anxiety and
trauma through identification with fairy tale protagonists and narratives; for Callie, the tale of "Snow White" is not simply a means to work through her pain, but a necessary signifier of her own fairy tale tragedy, which she claims in order to communicate with the one who needs to hear: her father.

[6.2] In keeping with the therapeutic metaphor, fairy tales in *Supernatural* carry over their folkloric classification as fictions—they are not true stories in and of themselves, but they both mask and reveal real anxieties and problems. Though the *Supernatural* universe is chock-full of the kind of magic and brutality that would not be out of place in a fairy tale, the fairy tale's sense of justice—and its happy ending—are notably absent. "Bedtime Stories" ends on a far less hopeful note than its thematic predecessor, 1.03 "Dead in the Water," which likewise featured the spirit of a child on a revenge-fueled killing spree. However, in that episode, Peter was able—admittedly after a great deal of collateral damage—to exact justice upon his murderer. Moreover, Dean bonded with another sweet, terrified child and rescued him first physically and then psychologically, by helping the little boy come to terms with his father's murder. There is no such solace in "Bedtime Stories." Callie simply dies. There are no red-hot iron slippers (Zipes 1992, 204) for her wicked stepmother, as she is beyond the reach of mortal punishment. Her father, the sole survivor, is left alone with his crushing guilt. Even in the monster-filled world of *Supernatural*, the fairy tale is still a fantasy.

[6.3] The final scene of the episode drives the point home. Sam summons the crossroads demon who holds the contract on Dean's soul. He threatens to kill her unless she releases Dean from his deal. She refuses, and taunts Sam: "Aren't you tired of cleaning up Dean's messes? Of dealing with that broken psyche of his?...Admit it: you're here, going through the motions, but truth is, you'll be a tiny bit relieved when he's gone...No more desperate, sloppy, needy Dean." Sam, increasingly agitated, demands that she break the deal. She cannot; she is "just a saleswoman," and it's her boss (Lilith, as we learn later in the season) who actually holds the deal. Sam, prefiguring his moral disintegration in season 4, kills her, and the innocent woman she is possessing, even though he knows the act will do no good. Throughout this episode, Sam fails in the role of prince: he does not rescue anyone, merely stops the villains from harming further innocents—a good deed that he then negates by killing an innocent person himself. Of all the crimes committed in the episode, Sam's is the worst: Callie is a desperate child, the "witch" and the "wolf" are victims of possession, but Sam is an adult with choices, and he consciously chooses to murder an innocent woman despite the fact that killing her will not help Dean. The rough justice of fairy tales is overturned here: the "good" are not rewarded, the "bad" are not punished, and everyone suffers, not just the deserving. There is no happy, or even hopeful, ending, just sadness and futility. Sam, like Dr. Garrison, is unable to let his loved one go; Dr. Garrison's stubborn refusal to pull the plug on Callie's life-support, even when
it harms her and others around her, mirrors Sam's desperate attempts to break Dean's deal—and Dean's own inability to accept Sam's death, which led him to make the deal in the first place.

[6.4] Despite this episode's overall status as a "folklore file," Sam's murder of the crossroads demon is an important step in the series' overall myth arc: we get our first intimation of Lilith, the Big Bad for this season and the next, and Sam takes his first step on the road to self-destructive vengeance for his brother, which will culminate in accidentally(!) raising Lucifer himself at the end of season 4. In this, "Bedtime Stories" bears a striking resemblance to the film Snow White: A Tale of Terror (1997); John Stephens and Robyn McCallum argue that the film displays

[6.5] a penchant for postmodernist pastiche as familiar fairy-tale elements are reshaped as Gothic horror (especially in its use of grotesque paranormal elements) linked to contemporary films dealing with evil and subjectification by means of its affiliation with dystopian apocalyptic narratives. Thus the film includes several themes characteristic of apocalyptic narratives: the political powerlessness of central characters, persecution, serial killing, and subjective alienation. (2002, 206)

[6.6] Like the film, Supernatural uses the breakdown of fairy tales as a thematic foreshadowing of the apocalypse. However, what in the film is a metaphor for familial and social breakdown is, on Supernatural, also quite literal: during season 4, Dean and Sam between them manage to set the Christian apocalypse in motion.

7. In the beds of ghosts: Fairy tales and fan fiction

[7.1] It is not just Supernatural itself that enjoys "a penchant for postmodern pastiche of familiar fairy-tale elements"; fan writers have made extensive use of fairy tales in order to push at the received narrative of the series and explore the spaces contained within the text. Since fan fiction is usually understood as a primarily (if not exclusively) female space, fan fictional responses effectively pull Sam and Dean out of their canonical male-dominated narratives (note 18)—the Campbellian hero's quest, Byronic (and Beat) wanderings, the Christian apocalypse—and recontextualize them within a female-dominated art form. When fan fiction writers take fairy tales as their subject, the female-dominated narrative moves from metatext to diegesis. And they usually do "Bedtime Stories" one better: in most Supernatural fairy tale fan fiction, Sam and Dean participate as actors in the actual fairy tale narrative, instead of standing as rational male outsiders to the irrational female-identified story.

[7.2] Many fan stories use fairy tales to explore what happens when Sam and Dean—complex characters with a complex relationship—are placed inside the stylized, one-
dimensional, fairy tale plot. Some stories, such as Lazy Daze's "Der Hirsch" (May 26, 2008, LiveJournal post) and Malcolm_stjay's "Sub Rosa" (July 9, 2008, LiveJournal post), remove Sam and Dean from their Supernatural milieu entirely and place them in an alternate universe, where they unselfconsciously enact the fairy tale plot. "Der Hirsch" is "loosely based on/inspired by Swan Lake," which is itself based in part on "The White Duck" (Afanas'ev 1973, 342–45) and, more obliquely, on "Brother and Sister" (Zipes 1992, 41–46); "Der Hirsch" actually more closely resembles the latter tale than it does Swan Lake. Dean, a huntsman in pursuit of a magnificent stag, meets a young woodsman, Sam; they become friends, and eventually lovers. Flashbacks reveal that Sam and Dean are brothers, although they don't know it; after the death of his wife, John was overwhelmed by the two boys, and gave infant Sam away to be raised by what he thought was a kindly neighbor, but was in reality an evil witch. At the end of the story, Dean finally shoots the stag—which changes before his eyes into Sam, who had been cursed to be human by day, stag by night. Dean, in despair, kills himself, but, as in the ballet, their souls are united in death. "Sub Rosa" is a fairly straightforward retelling of "Beauty and the Beast" that, like the Disney film, borrows elements from Robin McKinley's YA novel Beauty. Malcolm_stjay tells the love story of Sam (as Beauty) and Dean (as a pie-loving Beast)—in this story, unrelated—in a low-key style that evokes the language of fairy tales. Other Supernatural characters fill out the supporting roles, including Bobby and Gordon as John's employees, and Ellen and Jo as villagers who befriend them after the family's financial downturn.

[7.3] Stories that remain within the Supernatural universe often borrow fairy tale motifs in order to explore their effects on Sam and Dean's lives. "The Frog Princess," by Quarterwhore (November 2, 2007, LiveJournal post), uses animal transformation as comedy. Sam is turned into a frog, to Dean's combined horror and amusement. Sam, of course, is returned to his proper form by a kiss, although this method of spell-breaking owes more to popular culture than to the Grimms (in "The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich" [Zipes 1992, 2–5], the princess hurls the frog against the wall). Fairy tale motifs can also be used for tragedy: in I_am_negotiable's "Lying in the Beds of Ghosts" (June 22, 2009, LiveJournal post), Sam falls into an enchanted sleep from which he cannot be awoken, no matter what Dean does, and the story tracks Dean's spiral into despair. Here, fairy tale spells exist, but fairy tale cures do not.

[7.4] Other fan stories fully integrate a fairy tale narrative with the universe of Supernatural, in ways that more closely resemble the structure of the show: fairy tales provide the impetus and narrative logic of the story, and Sam and Dean's knowledge of fairy tales enables them to perform ostensive acts that bring about the story's resolution. Russian fairy tales form the basis of two excellent longer stories: Rei C's "L'oiseau de feu" (July 14, 2007, LiveJournal post) and Sweetestdrain's "Swear by All Flowers" (June 18, 2007, LiveJournal post). In "L'oiseau de feu," the Yellow-Eyed
Demon sends Sam and Dean on an ostensive quest for the Firebird in order to rescue their father. While inspired in part by the fairy tale "Prince Ivan, the Firebird, and the Grey Wolf" (Afanas'ev 1973, 612–24), "L'oiseau de feu" is more a tour through the world of Russian fairy tales and legends (Sam and Dean encounter an alkonost, a band of vila, a dragon, Koschei the Deathless, and Baba Yaga) than a reworking of a specific story, although it follows the general fairy tale pattern of a quest and impossible tasks. Sam and Dean spend time researching Russian folklore in order to know how best to proceed when dealing with such tricky creatures. In the end, the brothers hand over the Firebird to the demon in exchange for their father, but Sam, Dean, and the Firebird know something the demon does not: "an old legend" warns that one should never put a collar on the Firebird, because, as Sam says, "binding it brings about destruction for the captor." The Firebird allows itself to be handed over, knowing the demon will put a collar on it—thus committing an act of unwitting ostension that will ensure its destruction.

[7.5] "Swear by All Flowers" is more tightly focused upon a specific cluster of Russian fairy tales that center around the great witch Baba Yaga; these stories include "Baba Yaga and the Brave Youth," "Baba Yaga," "Vassilissa the Beautiful," and "Maria Morevna" (Afanas'ev 1973, 76–79, 194–95, 363–65, 439–47, 553–62), among others. Though a cannibal, she is not a one-dimensional villain like the witch of "Hansel and Gretel"; she is, instead, more like a goddess of the forest or the underworld (Haney 1999, 98), and, if she feels like it, she will help heroes (rarely heroines) on their quests (Johns 2004). Sweetestdrain, like Rei C, does not reproduce any specific tale, but instead combines motifs from all the Baba Yaga narratives and creates a story that follows the logic of those tales, while simultaneously using the tales to illuminate Sam and Dean's relationship. Sam and Dean rely upon fairy tales in order to navigate a tricky series of encounters with Baba Yaga, performing ostensive acts in order to secure her help in releasing Dean from a curse.

[7.6] Fairy tale literary fiction has long been a space for writers, especially women writers, to interrogate culture: Angela Carter, Anne Sexton, Emma Donoghue, Olga Broumas, and Jane Yolen, among many others, have used the fairy tale to examine issues of gender, race, family dynamics, and sexuality. Fan writers take the received narratives that Supernatural's advertising presents—this is a manly, heterosexual show about manly, heterosexual men who hunt monsters—and interrogate them. Responding to the ostension depicted on the show, fans investigate folklore and fairy tales in order to illuminate both the folklore itself and Sam and Dean's relationship. Just as Supernatural transforms and comments upon existing folk narratives to tell the story it wishes to tell, fan writers transform the series itself to comment on both the narratives and the characters of the show.
8. Conclusion

[8.1] *Supernatural* contains some of the most interesting depictions of folklore in the current popular media landscape, and consideration of the series offers myriad possibilities for exploring the representation and transformation of folklore in popular culture texts. Using Koven's innovative fusion of folkloristics and film and television studies, anchored by his concept of "mass-mediated ostension," I hope to suggest possibilities for further research into the depiction of folklore not just in the series itself, but in popular culture in general. I have chosen to focus upon fairy tales, as both the series and its fan fiction engage with the discourses surrounding the genre of fairy tales in our culture; both fairy tales and fan fiction are gendered modes of storytelling. Fan writers, like feminist revisers of fairy tales (such as Angela Carter), interrogate our received notions of popular texts.

[8.2] I offer this essay as a starting point into further discussion of the depiction of folklore in *Supernatural* and its fan works; while I have chosen fairy tales as my path in, there are many potential places to begin. I hope that this framework will prove useful for future analyses not just of *Supernatural*, but of the multiple ways in which folk narratives and beliefs are used both in popular culture and in fannish communities.

9. Acknowledgments

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10. Notes

1. For an excellent overview of the depiction of folklore in film and television, see Koven's (2008, 3–22) critical survey.

2. See Line Nybro Petersen's essay "Renegotiating Religious Imaginations Through Transformations of 'Banal Religion' in *Supernatural,*" in this issue, for an excellent discussion of the way the show reproduces and transforms popular attitudes about religion and the supernatural.
3. In seasons 4 and 5, myths became prominent, as the series' myth arc engaged with the Christian apocalypse. However, myths, or popular understandings of myths, had always lurked in the background of the show: Kripke has stated numerous times that the show is modeled upon Joseph Campbell's "monomyth" of the hero's journey (Kripke 2008b). (Sam and Dean's mother's maiden name is Campbell.) Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1973), though beloved of male pop culture auteurs, is roundly despised by folklorists, anthropologists, and religious historians. See Marc Manganaro (1992) and Alan Dundes (1997, 17–18) for the best-known critiques of the Campbellian monomyth.

4. The "veracity of the legends" themselves is not the only topic of folklore discussion among fans, as Koven (2000) has also documented. Like *The X-Files* fans Koven studied, *Supernatural* fans also spend a lot of time investigating the folklore record itself, and commenting on—and correcting—the show's presentation of folk material. The Library section of the Super-wiki ([http://supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Category:Library](http://supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Category:Library)) is a prime repository of such commentary.

5. *Supernatural* has taken a few playful swipes at its predecessor, with Sam and Dean referring to each other as "Mulder" and "Scully," impersonating FBI agents, and firmly denying the existence of extraterrestrials (2.15 "Tall Tales").

6. This preference is probably not entirely aesthetic: until season 4, *Supernatural*, a genre show on a small network scheduled opposite Thursday-night powerhouses *Grey's Anatomy* and *CSI*, perpetually struggled in the ratings, and a preponderance of "monster of the week" episodes makes it more accessible to new viewers.

7. This distinction between the "folk" and the "not-folk"—as well as the revision of these definitions—is of obvious relevance to fandom studies. Fans have traditionally been figured as the Other, responding in unofficial and often "bizarre" ways to the official culture industry. The rise of the "aca-fan" as a category has gone a long way toward dispensing with these problematic assumptions.

8. The chief exception to Sam and Dean's general alliance with the traditionalist "folk" rather than the traditionalist folklorists lies in the series' treatment of non-Christian gods, which would do a Victorian cultural evolutionist proud. The pagan gods in episodes 1.11 "Scarecrow" and 3.08 "A Very Supernatural Christmas" owe far more to the long-discredited monomythic fantasizing of J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*—and to Frazerian-inspired horror films such as *The Wicker Man* (see Koven 2008, 25–36)—than to the documented beliefs and practices of European pre-Christian religions (and modern revivals of same). In addition, the most plausible culprit for the show's bizarre and inaccurate depiction of the "demon Samhain," in 4.07 "It's the Great Pumpkin, Sam Winchester," is fundamentalist Christian propaganda such as the Jack Chick tract
"Spellbound?" (http://www.chick.com/catalog/comics/0110.asp). I can only assume this is the case, since a few seconds with Google turns up a wealth of basically accurate information available even on nonspecialist sites such as Wikipedia. Samhain, pronounced "SOW-in" and meaning "summer's end," is an ancient Celtic festival marking the beginning of winter; it is also celebrated in modern pagan religions such as Wicca, Druidry, and Celtic Reconstructionism. See Ronald Hutton, The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 360–70, for more information. Even the Trickster, heretofore the only semirespectful treatment of a non-Christian divine being on the show, was shoehorned into the Christian narrative, as the archangel Gabriel in disguise.

9. For a clever and hilarious exploration of Sam and Dean as objects of folklore, see MissyJack's terrific fan fiction story "We Could Be Heroes" (LiveJournal post, September 9, 2008).

10. The recent Supernatural episode 5.06 "I Believe the Children Are Our Future" played with ostension. Folk beliefs that circulate among children (don't mix Pop Rocks and Coke, your face will freeze like that, you'll get hairy palms if you masturbate) start coming true; the cause is the Antichrist, a young boy who is unaware of both his role and his near-godlike powers.

11. While Lindahl defines simply visiting a legendary site as an ostensive act, others, such as Ellis and Brunvand, require a ritual action to be performed before calling it ostension. For example, many "crybaby bridge" legends in my (and Kripke's) home state of Ohio demand that you not simply go to the haunted bridge, but that you park your car on the bridge, and sometimes leave the car, in order to hear the wails of the titular murdered infant. Stephanie J. Lane has a good roundup of Ohio crybaby bridges for would-be legend trippers (Dead Ohio, http://www.deadohio.com/CrybabyBridges.htm).

12. Episodes 1.17 "Hell House," 3.13 "Ghostfacers," and 4.17 "It's a Terrible Life" feature Ed and Harry, parodies of the hosts of paranormal investigation shows such as Ghost Hunters and Most Haunted. Koven discusses Most Haunted extensively, arguing that the series itself functions as a form of legend tripping (2008, 153–74); in its depiction of Ed and Harry, Supernatural presents legend tripping as a foolish activity for nonhunters, particularly when done for profit.

13. Most of these wicked stepmothers were, in the oral tales, actually wicked mothers; Wilhelm Grimm clearly found the presentation of monstrous biological mothers incompatible with contemporary German idealization of motherhood, and so changed the villains to the less problematic stepmothers. See Tatar (1987, 36–37).
14. As many folklore and literature professors can attest, assigning the Grimms to Disney-raised students is an underappreciated source of mildly sadistic pleasure.

15. Disney is the focus of many arguments about the mass media's ability to circulate folk narrative, for good or ill (Koven 2008, 4–15). In addition, see Shortsleeve (2004, 1–2) for a good overview of "Disneyfication."


17. The episode dispenses with the dwarves, who, as Janet Spaeth remarks, serve as Snow White's protectors (1982, 21); Callie has no one. Their influence may be ironically marked in two ways, however. In a dark parody of Snow White's role as the good little housekeeper, Callie has been poisoned with bleach; more humorously, she presents her apple to Dean, who is occasionally mocked for being the shorter of the two brothers.

18. Early episodes were far more willing to involve Sam and Dean in "girls'" stories without gender-baiting commentary, as in 1.05 "Bloody Mary," where Sam performs the traditional slumber-party ritual. However, starting in season 3, the show began grubbing for straight male viewers in an increasingly unpleasant way. The nadir of this campaign was the wretched 3.09 "Malleus Maleficarum": this episode, named after one of the most notorious pieces of misogynist propaganda in history, uncritically turned Sam and Dean into Puritanical witch hunters. Women, innocent and otherwise, are lectured or gruesomely punished, while a cheating husband gets off scot-free; in addition, a significant portion of Dean's dialogue is devoted to gender-based insults, usually directed at Ruby. The episode is capped with a display of gratuitous lesbianism that could have been fun in another episode, but plays in this context as a mean-spirited appeal to straight male voyeurism. A number of female viewers, myself included, came close to abandoning the show at this point, feeling that we were considered a less valuable audience than the sexist portion of the straight male demographic.

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Praxis

Monstrous melodrama: Expanding the scope of melodramatic identification to interpret negative fan responses to *Supernatural*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This article examines fan responses to an episode of the CW television series *Supernatural*; the episode features a metatext including a number of shout-outs and jokes about fandom. The most controversial of the shout-outs related to "Wincest," a form of slash featuring an incestuous sexual relationship between the two lead characters. Ien Ang's notion of melodramatic identification is revamped for use in relation to contemporary television reception and specifically to interpret negative fan responses to this episode. I argue that the theory of melodramatic identification can be employed not only to understand soap opera viewers but also viewers of many other kinds of television, particularly cult TV with its frequent reliance on serialized melodramatic narratives. I further argue that not only is *Supernatural* a melodramatic text, but also that text must be viewed as extending beyond the narrative world proper to the multiple narratives or texts comprised by the industrial and cultural context of the show. These together constitute a multilayered melodrama with which the fan identifies and to which she can also contribute through extratextual fan activities. That is, participation in slash and Wincest communities can be viewed as expression of melodramatic identification. This accounts for the strong negative responses of some fans who perceive that the show's producers are exposing and/or mocking them.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Cult television; Fan; Melodrama; Slash


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1. Introduction

[1.1] Fans of cult TV have from time to time been addressed, directly or indirectly, through the plots or dialogue of their shows. In many instances this address is subtle or coded; it requires specialized knowledge to recognize what is, in fan language, a *shout-out*, or what Sharon Marie Ross has termed an obscured invitation to audience participation (2009, 9). Ross has herself documented several fan shout-outs within the texts of *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) (9), while also categorizing other forms of invitation—for example, the ongoing
invitation to engage in extratextual, Internet-supported interpretation and speculation on the narrative of ABC's *Lost* (2004–9) (9). The CW series *Supernatural*, which debuted in fall 2005 and is often described as a cult hit could be added to this list with ease. Certainly, many fans of the show would agree that the writers have been generous with fan service.

[1.2] Indeed, I would argue that the writers of *Supernatural* have issued invitations that transcend mere offers to participate. They have written fans into the show's mythology, even giving them a part in the unfolding of the battle between demons and angels. The episode that began this trend (4.18) is titled "The Monster at the End of This Book" ("Monster"), a "dizzingly meta" episode in the words of Sera Gamble, supervising producer and one of the show's writers (TVGuide News 2009). The initial airing of this episode (April 2, 2009) spurred an intense reiteration of positive response for a show that already basks in the affections of a hardcore, if relatively small, fan contingent. However, "Monster" also sparked a simultaneous conflagration of negative fan response. A mostly similar range of reactions has been invoked by the follow-up to "Monster," 5.01 "Sympathy for the Devil" ("Sympathy"), which aired a week ago as of this writing. It was in the latter episode that a fan was recruited to deliver a critical message to Sam and Dean Winchester, the show's lead characters. In the course of both episodes, the writers took the opportunity to deliver some messages of their own to the fans, couched in the form of affectionate ribbing about fan obsession, fan complaints, and the nature and quality of fan fiction—specifically Wincest.

[1.3] The primary purpose of this article is not to account for these shout-outs in terms of textual practice. Rather, this is an attempt to interpret fan reactions—both approval and disapproval—to these gestures of the show's producers toward their fandom. Given that the shout-outs are presumably derived, at least in part, from affection for the fans, it is worth investigating the reasons that some fans receive them so negatively. Indeed, the negative responses to "Monster" provide an interesting case study in the context of increasingly intimate relations between television producers and viewers, an intimacy that, generally speaking, is highly desirable to fans. What interests me particularly is that in some cases this increased intimacy is not desirable; for some fans, and in some contexts, distance is preferred. For instance, with respect to the references to Wincest, the shout-outs in question relate to fan practices that, despite being common knowledge, are carried on anonymously and secretively. In "Monster," the show openly acknowledges the existence of the Wincest community; in "Sympathy," the writers integrate a Wincest writer into the plot and introduce her in the process of writing (and reading aloud) one of her stories. Fan reactions (particularly among those who read and/or write Wincest) to these moments often take the form of strong discomfort, although it is worth noting that despite the
exposure, the predominant reaction to all the shout-outs, Wincest-related or not, is enjoyment. In fact, the pleasure of being recognized seems to be the overriding factor among all contingents of Supernatural fans. Thus my scholarly interest lies partly in theorizing this desire for recognition, but even more in the question of why, when the majority of a fandom is celebrating the attention received from their show, a minority should be exploding in outrage. To put the question in the fan vernacular—why the wank?

[1.4] The answer to this question depends upon an understanding of melodrama, one that is sensitive to the generic and cultural functions of this mode of storytelling, and that also sets aside connotations of emotional excess and female hysteria. Previous writings about TV melodrama have tended to restrict their analysis to those shows that were self-evidently melodramatic—in other words, soap operas—in order to account for their female viewership. Supernatural may seem an odd candidate for melodrama, given that it is generally assumed to be horror or cult TV, but it does exhibit a strong female presence among its audience (note 1). Moreover, when tested against the criteria given by Ben Singer in Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts (2001) and Peter Brooks in The Melodramatic Imagination (1976), the show will reveal its true nature as melodramatic through and through. Furthermore, it will also be clear that the many extratextual narratives surrounding Supernatural tend toward the melodramatic. That is, the melodramatic mode encompasses not only the text of the TV show itself, but also the various activities of fandom that surround it, including, in the case of Supernatural, the Wincest.

[1.5] Not coincidentally, I am arguing that slash itself is deeply grounded in melodrama and, moreover, that slash based on the incestuous relationship of two brothers is, if nothing else, an exceptionally powerful form of it (note 2). While previous scholarly attempts to characterize slash generically have linked it to fantasy/science fiction, romance, and a genre termed intimatopic, I prefer the descriptive power of melodrama as a type, a narrative style, and a cultural mode. As I will explicate further below, many slash stories dwell on situations of intense pathos, scenarios of emotional surfeit nearly unmatched in any other form of narrative. This is not to say that slash is melodrama in an exclusive and definitive sense. It is, however, to claim that these stories are melodramatic regardless of plot device, be they called utopian, romantic, dysfunctional, tragic, perfectly platonic, domestic, or any other category against which slash might yet be measured. Catherine Tosenberger has suggested that Wincest appeals to some fans because it is the ideal romance, invoking the possibility of a complete union between two lovers. This may be an apt characterization of some Wincest, but in many more of these stories—indeed, in the very scenario of two brothers engaged in a sexual relationship—we have the perfect melodrama.
In making these arguments, I draw upon Ien Ang's theory of "melodramatic identification" (1997) and modify it; mine is a theory of melodramatic identification reshaped to an era in which the notion of "the text" has become increasingly broad, encompassing fans, producers, writers, and actors. Certainly, the traditional text does continue to provide an important point of identification—amply demonstrated by the existence of extensive fan exegesis of the show's characters, plots, and themes, broadly referred to as meta. However, it is clear that a "show" now consists of multiple narratives derived from numerous textual, intertextual and extratextual sources. This is particularly the case if we consider how the idea of show is experienced by fans; since they concern themselves with all the lore surrounding the production in addition to the storytelling process, their text consists of overlapping and continuously expanding narratives that ultimately also include the biography/biographies of the fan and her community. In short, melodramatic identification cannot be restricted to an affective relationship with a character or plotline; rather, it is a relationship to a continuous interweaving of texts—including both fan fiction and the narrative of the fan herself—into a greater text that the fan knows as "my show." This expanded identification is the wellspring of the intensely experienced acts of reception that are so much a part of fandom. Melodramatic identification can account also for the acute divergence of fan responses that fall on a spectrum of emotional intensity ranging from mild amusement to profound anger. This is particularly so in the case of Supernatural, in which the show has made determined and deliberate overtures toward fans, attempting simultaneously to acknowledge and manipulate a complex affective relationship.

It is not my intent to dismiss or diagnose any of the fans whose reactions I cite here by characterizing them as melodramatic. I turn to melodramatic identification because it is the best explanation of the multiple pleasures to be had as a fan of Supernatural—and many other shows, including those whose fans would strongly resist the label. Indeed, melodrama, like many cultural forms associated with "female interests," is simultaneously omnipresent in television and yet continuously undervalued; it is that which must be avoided if a show is to be considered "quality" (note 3). At the same time, I do not propose to focus on the melodramatic to the exclusion of other possible causes of fan behavior; there are aspects of the negative response to the Wincest shout-out that are the result of a simultaneous and discrete, more community-oriented, objection. Just like fandom in general, slash serves many purposes and could never be reduced to one exclusively. There are dimensions of slash that approach the expression of queerness, in that they are dedicated to the exploration of intimacies in all its forms despite any social mores or standards of heteronormativity. Indeed, some forms of slash are completely committed to the exploration of intimacies in the most taboo, fantastic, or simply impossible situations.
Wincest might be an example of one such type; certainly incest is a kind of impossible situation.

[1.8] To invoke the term *queer* in relation to slash is to enter onto controversial ground. Even so, it is the case that, for some fans, an investment in a community and even an identity was part of the small but virulent negative reaction to "Monster," an episode whose clever and occasionally aggressive metatextual play triggered feelings of hurt, exposure, and outrage. It must be recognized that Erik Kripke—the show runner (and also creator and occasional writer-director) of *Supernatural*—and his team have essentially outed a subcultural group by choosing to write Wincest into canon. This kind of misunderstanding is perhaps understandable enough but still frustrating. From the perspective of some fans, it seems that the writers are condoning and even urging on those who prefer to assume that Wincest is weird behavior of some particularly marginal fans. This perspective has some validity, even if it is likely that the writers believed Wincest fans would welcome public acknowledgment. Indeed, many fans did welcome it.

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2. The "monster" show

[2.1] "Monster" begins with Dean and Sam Winchester investigating a haunting in a comic book store, where they are mistaken for LARPers (live-action role players). The clerk, upon hearing them ask their standard investigative questions, leaps to the conclusion that they are fans of a certain series of books—a series that bears an uncanny resemblance to their own lives. According to the clerk, these books (much like the television show) never had more than a cult following and are now languishing in the bargain bin. Sam and Dean thus discover that a pseudonymous author (Carver Edlund, a name cobbled together from the last names of two of the show's writing team, Jeremy Carver and Ben Edlund) has written a series detailing every aspect of their lives; coincidentally, every book in the series is one episode of *Supernatural*, beginning with the pilot and ending with the last episode of season 3. In this final book, Dean dies and is carried off by the hounds of hell in accordance with a deal he struck to bring Sam back from the dead.

[2.2] After further investigation, Dean and Sam encounter the book series' publisher (Sera Siege) who is also the quintessential fangirl. Not coincidentally, she shares a first name with Sera Gamble (an executive producer and writer on the show) and a last name with the writer of the episode, Julie Siege. The publisher Siege rants about audiences who eschew quality drama for Dr. McSexy (an allusion to *Supernatural's* rather heavyweight Thursday night timeslot competition, *Grey's Anatomy*). Concurrently, the writer Siege displays a keen understanding of the emotional investments of a large segment of *Supernatural's* audience, as the publisher drools
over Sam and Dean's moments of angst, sighing: "It's just the best when they cry." Later on in their motel room, Dean and Sam discover that they have an online fandom, which is to say that they discover the real life *Supernatural* fandom, even identifying a Web site and a username. Scanning the comments, Dean observes, "For fans, they sure do complain a lot." Then Sam introduces Dean to the concept of slash: "As in...Sam *slash* Dean...together." Dean inquires, "Don't they know we're brothers?"

Upon learning from Sam that it "doesn't seem to matter," Dean replies in a potential metacommendation of the existence of Wincest, "that's just sick."

[2.3] Fan responses to "Monster," as expressed on Television Without Pity (TWoP) and LiveJournal (LJ, where much of fandom lives now), for the most part expressed the delight of fans at being called out and acknowledged by "Kripke" (note 4). Also, many fans found pleasure in the dizzying interpenetration of fiction and real life. For instance, since Chuck Shurley, the author of the books, is revealed to be a prophet, Eric Kripke is, presumably, God. Sam and Dean are made to display their real, but supposedly imitation, tattoos based on the fictional Sam and Dean's tattoos, as proof of their dedication to the fandom. At one point, Dean reads aloud from a real fan's actual commentary: "Listen to this: Sympatico says: The demon storyline is trite, clichéd, and overall craptastic.' Well, screw you, Sympatico, we lived it." If this seems a trifle harsh, it does appear that Kripke et al. were willing to take it as well as to dish it out. The prophet Chuck apologizes, among other things, for putting the Winchester boys through some of his less polished writing efforts (1.08 "Bugs," 1.13 "Route 666," and 3.06 "Red Sky at Morning"), while in the same breath expressing regret for subjecting them to their depressing lives. In any case, comments posted shortly after the conclusion of the episode were nearly euphoric. A powerful interpretive energy transformed any apparent criticisms into clever inside jokes. As this fan put it:

> [2.4] I was expecting something horribly angsty, and within the first five minutes I was pissing myself in laughter and disbelief. Taking the mickey out of the fans and themselves was pretty fun there for a while. Especially since an episode that was *fictionally* a crossover between fiction and reality was at the same time *in reality* a crossover between fiction and reality. Art and life imitated each other into a tangled ball of timey-wimey, wibbly-wobbly stuff (to quote The Doctor). (Katiki, Television Without Pity, April 2, 2009)

[2.5] As for the cracks about fandom, it appears that many fans experienced them as affectionate pats; even Dean's disgust at learning of the existence of Wincest was not taken as real criticism. The pleasure of *being known* was the primary interpretive principle, for to be known was to be loved. As one poster expressed it on the TWoP *Supernatural* forum within hours of the airing of the episode: "Well. That was the first time a show has taken me into its strong arms, looked into my eyes with a scorching
fire, bent me back, and given me a kiss that drowned my soul—and than tickled me until I wet my pants. If anyone doubts that TPTB [The Powers That Be] read the boards..." (Snookums, April 2, 2009).

[2.6] A scan of the contemporaneous comments at TWoP and various communities on LJ reveal endless variations of the same theme:

[2.7] Kripke and Co. really know, understand and most importantly appreciate fandom for all its weird and sometimes downright disturbing awesomeness. How many tv show creators know their fan base as inside and out as Kripke and Co. know us? Not many I am certain. But that's the great thing about loving a show like Supernatural, the writers and producers are just as into us as we are into them. (Eden Winchester, Television Without Pity, April 2, 2009)

[2.8] Clearly, there is something emotionally alluring for fans about the idea of being known. In response to "Monster," they posted, over and over, "Kripke really loves us! He knows us! He sees us!" Jokes about the fandom appear to be the primary evidence of Kripke's knowledge, even if this results in exposure of all the habits, complaints, and obsessions of Supernatural fans, including the Wincest. Indeed, the show has continued writing their fans into the show's mythology with episode 5.01 "Sympathy" (September 10, 2009), allowing them to participate in saving the world à la Galaxy Quest (1999). Moreover, this episode takes the Wincest shout-out well past the obscured into the realm of the literal. The prophet Chuck needs to get a message to Dean and Sam, and reaches out by video chat to his "number one fan," a girl named Becky (alias SamLicker81), who is Webmistress of a site called MoreThanBrothers.net (note 5). When Chuck identifies himself and asks for her help, her first response is to castigate him for mocking her: "I may be a fan...but I know the difference between fantasy and reality." He snaps, "Becky, it's all true," and she immediately chimes, "I knew it!" Shortly thereafter, she delivers her message to Sam and Dean, whereupon there is some entertaining play with the fact that she is a Sam girl; she dismisses Dean as "not what I expected." She then caresses Sam's chest compulsively despite his request: "Becky, can you quit touching me?" In sum, Kripke et al. want to make it very clear to the Supernatural fans that they know them "inside and out." Rather than finding this a threat or insult, most fans seem to find it extremely pleasurable. It is a point of pride, even, because fans now believe that Kripke appreciates his fan base more than other show runners.

[2.9] Yet there is not total agreement with this interpretation, as can be seen in this fan's post on April 2, the night that "Monster" originally aired: "*blinks* Oh fuck you, SHOW. I mean, I love you and everything. That was an awesome episode. But still,
you know. Get that damn spotlight out of my face, thanks so much, friends ;P" (KatieJo, Television Without Pity).

[2.10] She received only a few replies; mostly she was ignored, except for the following:

[2.11] Aww, now that I see everyone's positive reactions, I wish I liked this episode better than I did. And there were definitely moments that had me laughing and very entertained. But on the whole? It seemed like bad fanfic... But yeah, I don't know about a show acknowledging stuff like Winchest in the show...Acknowledging the fans, sure, maybe a shoutout or two, but this was too much. I think the writers need to get off the internet. (Bloody Marie, Television Without Pity, April 3, 2009)

[2.12] Further on, another fan chimed in "After reading the thread, I seem to be the only one who feels this way, but I didn't like the meta at all. It seemed like a slap in the face to the fans as a whole, and much too much like mocking to achieve even a tongue in cheek effect. Talk about biting the hand that feeds you" (Asweet7492, Television Without Pity, April 3, 2009).

[2.13] Roughly contemporaneously, there was an explosion of angst on LJ that ultimately landed on the infamous Fandom Wank (http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank). Once again, part of the outrage concerned the self-referentiality of the episode, but this complaint is merely consistent with ongoing disagreements about the direction of Supernatural's narrative throughout season 4. There will always be a contingent of fans who are feeling disgruntled or disenchanted with the show's entire narrative trajectory. The strongest objections, however, were derived from a sense of being mocked and/or exposed. The following comment on LiveJournal demonstrates the level of passion some fans exhibited on the subject: "I'm beginning to think Kripke has no respect for his own fan base. I don't expect TPTB to condone slash or Winchest, but I don't appreciate it when the creators of one of my favorite shows make fun of the fandom in general. We MADE you, you fuckers!" (Spiderine, April 3, 2009).

[2.14] A milder and more frequent kind of complaint invoked expectations of privacy. Despite—or because of—the understanding that Winchest is a potential violation of the sensibilities of Kripke, or of the actors who portray the characters in question, there was and is a feeling that the references to Winchest are exposing something that should remain within the community. "Dear writers, how about 'what happens in fandom stays in fandom'? The fourth wall is a nice concept indeed. Do you realize that the casual viewers don't equal with the fandom and you've just shown the whole brother incest thing into their faces?" (Fernblick, Television Without Pity, April 3, 2009).
It is worth noting that the response to "Sympathy" has repeated these reception dynamics. Again, while the majority of comments cite pleasure at the direct address to fans, a portion of the online community has expressed dismay. There is what appeared to be an increase in the negative response (although it's virtually impossible to obtain a true measure of fan approval as opposed to disapproval), in that some have observed that "once was funny, twice is getting to be too much," while others reacted to the even more explicit adoption of Wincest into canon. In fact, the episode prompted Buddy TV writer John Kubicek (2009) to comment in an article titled: "Supernatural Slash: 'This is Wrong.'" He is careful to note that he doesn't mean the slash itself (he doesn't care how people "get their jollies"), but the fact that the writers of Supernatural have taken the joke "too far." He also opines that, despite "Monster" being one of the show's best episodes, with "Sympathy," the jokes about fandom are getting tired. Finally, he notes that the responses to his reader poll on the Wincest inclusion were split between "funny" and "disturbing."

At this point, it is useful to summarize the negative responses to "Monster" and "Sympathy"; they fall roughly into three categories. The first reaction was on textual grounds. These respondents either dislike the direction of the narrative in a given season, or the episode alone, or both. For example, some fans wrote that they hated having the putative fourth wall broken or they found the device of the Supernatural books overly clever, or tired, or simply unfunny. The second reaction was to the perceived insults to Supernatural fans in general ("Talk about biting the hand that feeds you"). The third reaction was to the Wincest shout-out. It should be apparent that, for my purposes here, the first reaction is of little relevance. These types of complaints have been the prerogative of fans since time immemorial and will continue to be so as long as there are professional storytellers and people to listen. I am focused on the second and third reactions, on the responses of those fans who felt some level of discomfort or disapproval or some other negative reaction to being seen. Whereas the majority of fans interpreted being seen as being known and therefore loved, the general trend of these negative comments is that fans were not so much being loved as being exposed in some way; in the case of the Wincest shout-out, this reaction frequently takes the form of a perception of being "outed."

3. Fans and producers: New intimacies

There is little in the way of academic literature that addresses directly the situation at hand; although there have been other instances where TV shows have written their fans into their texts, it is not apparent that the fan responses have been documented, analyzed, or theorized. In her introduction to Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet, Sharon Marie Ross observes that fandoms tend to differ in their qualitative sense of whether or not the creators/producers of their shows are truly
watching (2009, 2–4). Subsequently, she relates an instance in which the writers of *Xena* made "a plot joke out of TV viewers' desire to know whether or not Xena and her female companion Gabrielle are lovers" (7). Although Ross closely documents fan interpretations of the Xena-Gabrielle subtext, she does not indicate how fans felt about the joke. She describes, generally, that some fans read the characters as "definitely" lesbian, while others viewed that reading as optional depending on the preference of the viewer, and still others insisted on a platonic reading (2002, 568–80). Some of the comments of fans in relation to this issue expressed a concern that the actresses would go too far and "cross a boundary," but the primary concern seems to have been a fear that it was bad for the show rather than exposure of the fans (2002, 577).

[3.2] In more general terms, for some time now there has been recognition that there is a kind of intimacy—or at least a perception of it—between fans and creators of a text. In a recent essay, Janet Staiger reminds us that authors are themselves readers, eroding the link between producer and consumer (2008, 280); indeed, authors can often be fans. Henry Jenkins has also written of the "renegotiation" of relations between consumers and producers in convergence culture (2004, 38), and although he focused in this essay on the gaming and recording industries, there is no doubt that the same applies to television producers and consumers. Put another way, academics are increasingly aware that the line between production and reception has grown tenuous. In *Beyond the Box* (2009), Ross has created a framework for understanding the different ways that audiences are invited to participate in television texts and suggests different types of invitations. Where such invitations exist primarily on the level of aesthetics or narrative structure (as opposed to more direct solicitations such as voting procedures), they are "obscured" (4). This latter category would certainly apply to the shout-outs in "Monster," where only a watcher with specialized knowledge (a fan) would realize that there was a metatext to be read. The "invitation" in this case is subtle, but it is still an invitation; the fan is being asked to engage in an added layer of interpretation and share in a joke.

[3.3] Put still another way, the relations between producer and consumer, authorship and reception have come to resemble, increasingly, an actual relationship, albeit not a terribly empowered one on either side. Under different circumstances we might even consider applying the adjective *codependent*. Both the producer and the consumer can become passionately invested in the same story, and both can suffer from a lack of control over the story, being subject to the whims of corporate decision making. In the case of *Supernatural*, this situation is particularly acute; the show has been termed a *cult hit* in the press, which is to say that its audience is relatively small. The show has always been endangered; fans have had to bite their nails every spring. They have done what they can to support the show, spreading the word, engaging in publicity campaigns, and making a point of turning on the TV every Thursday night, even for
repeats. Thus *Supernatural* fans are showered with thanks—in interviews, on commentaries, and at conventions they are told how important and appreciated they are. The producers of such a show, particularly in a post-television landscape where audiences are increasingly fragmented, must be keenly aware that they need each and every viewer to survive; perhaps, despite their gratitude, they cannot help but resent this dependency. Some fans, watching "Monster," had to have felt just a tiny bit of genuine aggression in the playful slaps.

[3.4] In short, *Supernatural* fans are accustomed to a fairly luxurious sense of intimacy with their show, and where there is intimacy, there is likely to be deep emotion. Lawrence Grossberg has stated aptly the power that fans give to their cultural objects: "The most obvious and frightening thing about popular culture is that it matters so much to its fans" (1992, 59). Nor does this mattering always equate to positive feeling. The antipathy felt toward certain pop culture objects is merely the flip side of adoration. Moreover, such adoration can be the precursor to hurt feelings, and not just on the fans' part. Certainly, fans can hurt the creator-producer of their show, by rejecting characters or storylines, or by generally making a nuisance of themselves. Show-runners have been known to make statements seeking to justify decisions and even lash out at unappreciative fans; obviously, the role of personal feelings cannot be without some relevance in these situations. In his DVD commentary for 2.20 "What Is and What Shall Not Be" (2007), Kripke admits that he can feel hurt when he reads critical fan comments: "I'll be honest, it hurts my feelings sometimes!" In interviews, he has also stated that he has spent hours per week reading such comments, and has sometimes become "really down" if they were negative. The tone of his address in both commentaries and interviews tends to be personal and chatty, as though he is speaking directly to a friend. This is not to say that fans are in a real relationship with Kripke, but to demonstrate that the sense of intimacy between him and fans, however constructed and ultimately illusory, nevertheless has the affective and dramatic markers of a relationship.

[3.5] It is virtually impossible not to stray into Freudian territory when talking about affective investment, because the complete version of the latter phrase is "affective investment in a love object." The very notion of investing implies that we are "putting something into" an idea, person, or thing (object) and while not all of Freud's ideas may be equally useful, his theory of object attachments seems to describe something that meshes with our phenomenological experience of our own emotional lives (1917). Freud aptly demonstrated the link between object investment and identification; he observed that the more emotional energy (libido) we invest in an object (the process of cathexis), the more important it becomes to our sense of self. This is the actual mechanism of identification, a term that has been misused and abused in media studies. Identification is a process by which a fantasy copy of the loved object literally
becomes a part of our ego. In simple terms, the more we put into the "show," the more it becomes a part of us. Moreover, the libidinal attachment is not to the object that exists in the real world, but to the copy inside us. Hence Freudian reasoning brilliantly explains a commonsense proposition: loving an other is inseparable from the love of one's self (note 6). Desire and identification are similarly inseparable, founded on the inexhaustible energy that is libido.

[3.6] The "show" object can also be broken down further, into other objects and part objects. Let us suppose that I have an attachment to the character of Dean Winchester. In psychoemotional terms, this means that I have a "Dean" inside me, and it is this Dean that I love and nurture with my daily attention, not the objective Dean of the show. The same might be true of an object called "Jensen" (Jensen Ackles, the actor who plays Dean). These objects are not mutually exclusive, nor are they entirely separate from each other. The Dean object that I nurture within me is less a perfect billiard ball than an oblong ball of clay, constantly being reworked by new and repeated emotional investments. Moreover, "Dean" is infused with "Jensen" and vice versa, and both are aspects of the object "show." My fandom could be represented as a constellation of doughy lumps that stick to each other and accrete into a single object (Supernatural) while simultaneously retaining the discreteness of themselves as objects. Again, this object is held within me as part of my self. If I were to lose my Dean object for some reason, through ambivalence or perhaps through cancellation, it could all but literally tear a chunk out of me (my ego). This is the melancholic mechanism as described by Freud, in which he explained grief and depression as both founded upon a loss of self concomitant with the loss of a loved object. The efforts of fans to relate, to know their show and all of its constituents, are not only the means by which they continue to invest in (cathect) the show object, but the safeguard against its loss. To question the realness of such relations is moot, in a sense. From this context, a fan's investment in a show is no less a real relationship than investment in a person to whom they have daily access.

[3.7] Fortunately, fans have a myriad of ways of relating to their show object: weekly episodes, promotional materials, convention encounters, commentaries, interviews, and more. Networking technologies have made it possible for fans to feel even more directly connected to show producers, actors, and writers; it is now possible to participate in a scheduled chat with a show runner, or to follow a favorite actor on Twitter. Moreover, some fandoms (such as that of Supernatural) have been encouraged via offers to participate (in Ross's terms), to believe that the show is reaching out to them, even watching them. Although frequently presented in the form of information-sharing, all of these encounters represent opportunities for recognition—a kind of knowledge, but, more importantly, an affirmation of the relationship. Conventions, for instance, could be viewed as organized situations of recognition, in
which the actors let themselves be seen without makeup and without the crutch of a
script. They answer questions designed by fans hoping to cause them to reveal
information that could not be accessed otherwise. They have their pictures taken with
fans, meaning that a fan has the opportunity to stand in close proximity to their love
object, to see how they look up close, how they smell, how they relate person-to-
person. Simultaneously, the fan is seen by the actors. For the fan, the emotional
quality of the convention experience is based upon the quality of opportunities to know
the object of their emotional investment. Indeed, the fan is always engaged in trying
to know a love object who remains to some extent mysterious, always partially
obscured and on the verge of being revealed. Perhaps this paradox is the source, at
least in part, of the unique levels of emotional intensity frequently exhibited by fans
towards their love objects.

Based on all of these available opportunities, Supernatural fans could have said
they felt "known" by Kripke et al. even before "Monster" aired, but the episode could
be, and was, taken as powerful affirmation. To be known back, to be acknowledged,
was certainly an admission if not an intensification of the sense of intimacy between
Supernatural fans and the show. Under such fraught conditions, however, it could
hardly be surprising that some find the intimacy a bit too much to bear, particularly
those who are more disposed to keep their emotions and investment relatively private.
It is no wonder, also, that the shout-outs could be viewed by some as a revelation of
dislike, disrespect—or perhaps just something too intimate. Indeed, it is conceivable
that fans have access to more information about their love objects than they can
possibly process, including massive volumes of user-generated content available on
the Web that fans can shape into their own narratives. David Beer and Ruth Penfold-
Mounce (2009) have offered the suggestion that for fans to shape such material into a
usable narrative requires the exercise of a new kind of "melodramatic identification."
Being humans, we tend to narrativize our experience, and there are reasons why, for
fans, the narrative must be melodramatic.

4. Melodrama: Not just in my imagination

The concept of melodramatic identification as originally proposed by Ien Ang
(1997) focused on identification with a melodramatic character (Sue Ellen Ewing) in a
melodramatic text (Dallas); her definition of text, although not incorrect, was simply
traditional. While I do intend to expand of Ang's concept of text beyond the boundaries
of the box, I must now be old-fashioned for a time, in order to discuss Supernatural as
melodrama.

It might take few moments to see past the label of "horror show." Witness the
reviews of television critics in 2005: "Things that go bump in the night are all the rage
this fall" (Lowry 2005). However, for some who looked a little closer, there was also a quick insight into the presence of melodrama: "In the midst of all its other-worldly doings, *Supernatural* manages to address one of storytelling's enduring themes: the search of children for their father, and the desire to connect with parental figures" (Blum 2005, 12). Kripke and the show's writers have repeatedly referred to the relationship of the brothers Sam and Dean Winchester as the core of the series, and more recently Matt Roush, writing online of his "*Supernatural* Summer," made note of the entertaining horror and comedy elements of the show before going on to its "fiercely emotional center" (2009). Finally, Henry Jenkins (2007) stated in his blog review of *Supernatural*: "This is the stuff of classic melodrama." Indeed, Jenkins believes that this melodramatic core separates the show from other horror-themed shows such as *Buffy* and the *X-Files* (1993–2002), not to mention those that joined *Supernatural* in the fall 2005 cohort, such as *Ghost Whisperer* (2005–9).

[4.3] It need not be a stretch to suggest that supposedly male-oriented genres such as sci-fi and horror can be fundamentally melodramatic, particularly in the contemporary TV scene in which nearly all programs are strongly influenced by seriality. In his piece "Defining Cult TV: Texts, Intertexts and Fan Audiences," Matt Hills pauses to note the similarities in narrative structure between many cult TV shows and soaps—such as "narrative closure being indefinitely deferred" (2004, 513)—only to then carefully distinguish the two forms. There is no question that, for Hills, cult TV (however we may ultimately define it) is closely related to soaps because they both rely upon serial storytelling. However, he claims that in cult TV "programmes usually focus upon a defining narrative enigma or puzzle that is bound up with their creation of fantastic narrative worlds" (513), whereas soaps deal with multiple, intertwining narrative strands. Hills rather overstates the case, apparently keen to keep soaps away from his cult TV, although he does acknowledge that there are reasons why both soaps and cult TV seem to draw large and committed fan audiences: there must be something similar about the experience of watching them. Ross also noted that many respondents to her survey of *Buffy* and *Xena* fans found their shows to be "soap-like" (2002, 13).

[4.4] It is one thing to state that melodrama is everywhere; to define it is no easy matter. There have been a number of seminal pieces written in the field of media studies discussing melodrama in terms of both film and television, but Ben Singer offers a summary of much of this material, as well as a useful cluster of characteristics that identify melodrama. For a start, Singer notes that the popular understanding of melodrama links it to a sense of high sentiment, overwrought emotion, and women's content (2001, 39). In discussing the history of melodrama, Singer refers to key historical work performed by Steve Neale on the film genre, which demonstrates how the original meaning of melodrama shifted from its early usage in the late 19th and
early 20th centuries to its reimagination as "the woman's film" in the 1940s. That is, in terms of early film history, melodrama was not "the weepie" or the "tearjerker" but in fact a highly dramatic story associated with gore, strong, detailed action, and fantastic plots hinging on coincidence and accident. It was something that more closely resembles the action-packed plots of Supernatural than the classic soap opera or the woman's film. Of course, the plots of these early "sensational melodramas" were designed to arouse powerful emotions in the audience, largely through identification with characters who were in desperate need of being avenged. The plot constructions were less focused on continuity than on the arousal or agitation of the audience through the creation of "situation": a moment of shock or surprise created by some revelation or plot development. Eliciting a gasp from the audience was of greater importance than narrative realism, although melodramas were committed to a realism of their own. Certain details had to strike a note of verisimilitude; devices, explosions, and gore—the aspects that we would now relegate to the category of special effects—had to be absolutely believable (Singer 2001, 42).

[4.5] In addition to this useful historical perspective, Singer (2001, 44–48) suggests five concepts that characterize melodrama: nontraditional narrative structure, sensationalism, moral polarization, pathos, and overwrought emotion. He is careful to observe that one or none could be present in a given melodramatic text, and that a text may contain one or more of these characteristics without being melodrama. In the next several paragraphs, I will demonstrate that Supernatural meets all five of these criteria.

[4.6] The characteristic of nontraditional narrative structure applies, in the sense that Supernatural relies heavily upon seriality, balancing open and unresolved plot elements with more classic episodic elements. While this is entirely typical for so-called cult TV (Hills 2004), it does represent the lack of narrative closure that critics once lamented in relation to melodrama. Indeed, the adoption of an open narrative structure to a greater or lesser degree in so many prime-time TV shows (seriality) nearly equates to the adoption of melodrama on a wide scale. Seriality not only leaves narrative questions open at the end of an episode, it also (presuming some level of competence on the part of the writers) ensures character continuity; characters can have history, memory, and relationships of the kind of depth that echo real life. Soap opera scholarship, rather than viewing the lack of closure as a narrative failing, has commented on how the lack of closure in these narratives permits a multiplicity of connections between characters and that this in turn requires a unique competence from the viewer (Allen 2004; Feuer 1994; Modleski 1984).

[4.7] In Supernatural, the serial aspects of the story are apparent in what is generally referred to by fans and producers as the myth arc aspect of the show: the
aspects of the plot relating to Sam and Dean's part in the war between heaven and
dell, Sam's demon blood, the deal made by Sam's mother with Azazel, the role of the
demon Ruby, the intentions of the angels, Dean's destiny, and so on. Much like the
plot of a soap opera, these plot details retain little of their true melodramatic qualities
at being outlined in this fashion; to understand their psychological and emotional
complexities requires a commitment from the viewer. Only a viewer who has watched
every episode and has shared the vicissitudes of the characters of Sam and Dean
could fully appreciate the melodrama of the season 4 finale; as with soap opera and
other melodramatic narratives, a viewer requires that particular viewing competence
to grasp all the emotional resonances of the climactic scene. As Michael Kackman
(2008) notes, "it's melodrama's simultaneous invocation of, and inability to resolve,
social tensions, that makes it such a ripe form for serial narrativization." In sum,
seriality is both a characteristic of melodrama and an engine for melodrama, but it
requires an investment of time and attention from the viewer.

[4.8] There can be no question that the criterion of sensationalism is present in
Supernatural, given that this is a horror show. For Peter Brooks (1976), the originator
of the concept of the melodramatic imagination, melodrama is a style of storytelling
that employs narrative and stylistic excess to reveal the moral fabric underlying
mundane reality. The emphasis on ghosts, magic, the impossible, and the irrational
(the supernatural), equates with an aesthetic that is visually and aurally sensational.
At the same time, these trappings of horror become an especially literal way to refer
to the sacred moral world that Brooks argues is lacking in the post-Enlightenment era.
In fact, the horror of Supernatural enables the melodrama; the horror elements of the
story elevate or exacerbate the situations of the characters such that the costs of a
personal crisis could be paid in spilled blood, torn flesh, and screams of terror. Plots
are inevitably constructed such that the fates of people, families, and sometimes the
entire world, hang on personal choice. When one of the heroes is depressed or hurt,
the entire world might be endangered. This is the essence of the melodramatic
imagination, or as Jenkins (2007) puts it:

[4.9] Peter Brooks tells us that melodrama externalizes emotions. It takes
what the characters are feeling and projects it onto the universe. So that the
character's emotional lives gets mapped onto physical objects and artifacts,
gets mirror backed to them through other characters, gets articulated
through gestures and physical movements, and on a metalevel, speaks to us
through the music which is what gives melodrama its name. Supernatural is
melodrama in the best sense of the term.

[4.10] Indeed as Jenkins notes, almost every monster that Sam and Dean encounter
in some manner parallels their emotional journey.
Supernatural further meets the criteria of both Brooks and Singer in its emphasis on moral conflict. Brooks's "moral world" is quite literally realized in Supernatural, in a battle between heaven and hell, with human beings caught in between and Sam and Dean Winchester somehow key players. Literally, everything hinges on their choices—and appropriately, the two characters embody a conflict between two different modes of decision making. In his character and in his actions, Dean exemplifies what Carol Gilligan (1982) calls the "ethic of care" (traditionally gendered female), while Sam (as well as his father, John) represent the "ethic of universal justice." In the ethic of care, decisions are made according to what preserves personal and relational connections; in the ethic of universal justice, moral decisions are made with regard to rational, ahistorical values of right and wrong. Dean is motivated primarily by a need to preserve and sustain the relationships that he still has (to his father and brother)—to reiterate, the ethic of care (note 7). This mode of ethical reasoning is demonstrated also in Dean's preference for helping those who are still living as opposed to avenging his own losses. His moral growth over the course of the four seasons is one in which he becomes increasingly articulate about the need to put people and families (the personal) before causes (the abstract), even if the cause is saving his own life. Taken to a dysfunctional extreme, his moral decisions reflect an absence of self-esteem; for instance, when Sam is killed, he wastes no time in bartering his soul and his life in exchange for Sam's in (2.22 "All Hell Breaks Loose"). His journey is thus one of learning to value himself sufficiently that he will no longer engage in excessive acts of self-sacrifice.

Sam, with the benefit of the protection and nurturing provided by Dean, has grown up with stronger ego boundaries and has a stronger sense of self. The strength of the ethic of universal justice is the ability to rationally balance competing needs or weigh evidence, which Sam does. He is drawn to a legal career and is self-evidently a more contemporary, liberal man than Dean. In 2.03 "Bloodlust," he helps Dean to see that not all vampires are necessarily evil, that their moral status depends upon their actions rather than their nature. However, like Dean, he takes his particular moral gifts to a dysfunctional place; whereas Dean is selfless, Sam is selfish, even as he believes he is acting to help others. Just like John, Sam's moral compass tends to point toward revenge. After losing Dean at the conclusion of season 3, he becomes increasingly driven and lost in his anger. He deludes himself that his quest for revenge is for the good of all, failing to see his own arrogance.

Arguably, every season has concluded with a major clash over the two ethical modes, revisiting and reshaping, restating the question: Which is the right way to be? How should they (I) be if they (I) want to save the world? Is it the personal, nurturing, ethic of care (Dean) or the utilitarian, egalitarian ethic of universal justice (Sam)? In season 4, Dean is approached by a new character, an angel (Castiel) who tells him it is
his job to save the world from Armageddon; Dean is unable to accept that he was either worth saving from hell, or that he has the strength to save the world. Meanwhile, Sam believes that he is the only one with the strength for that job, which also happens to include killing the demon that sent Dean to hell (Lilith). In order to gain this strength, however, Sam is willing to become addicted to drinking demon blood; he traverses a path of self-justification, initially telling himself he is getting stronger to help people, then justifying their deaths in order to save the world—the classic utilitarian equation. 

[4.14] As of the end of season 4, it seems that Supernatural has chosen to affirm the ethic of care, although with at least one more season remaining and Lucifer at large, there will undoubtedly be a restatement of the need for the ethic of universal justice and a replaying of the conflict between the two. In 5.01 "Sympathy," Dean is told that he is the Sword of Michael, the destined vessel for the impersonal, merciless power of an archangel (the ethic of universal justice), and true to his moral preference, he immediately refuses the honor. With the world at risk of being "burned alive," it remains to be seen if he can avoid this destiny. This is yet another iteration of the show's moral preoccupations. The most melodramatic moments of season 5 will undoubtedly turn (as in previous seasons) on this question as stated by Kripke: "Can family save the world?" He cites the philosophy of the show as "humanistic" and clearly prefers the moral demands of personal connections over abstract ethics: "Religions and gods and beliefs—for me, it all comes down to your brother. And your brother might be the brother in your family, or it might be the guy next to you in the foxhole—it's about human connections" (Ryan 2009).

[4.15] Thus, the fundamental question of Supernatural is whether an ethic based on personal relationships can truly save the world. From this, it is clear that the show is melodramatic to its core, even if it does lack the black and white moral polarization that Singer suggests of the melodramatic imagination. Indeed, one of the more enjoyable aspects of the show is the way in which it rarely leaves viewers with moral certainties: as the show has proceeded through each season, it has become increasingly morally complex. Far from altering the melodramatic essence of the show, this complexity only enhances it. If, as Brooks argues, the modern soul was, and is, hungering for moral certainty, it must be a moral certainty that is relevant to the times, and in the current context it cannot have escaped the notice of the sensitive viewer that our moral context is extremely complex. In short, there are no absolute certainties, but conflicting ethical models. An appropriate TV fantasy is one that offers epic moral clashes—with, perhaps, one moral framework coming out on top.

5. Melodramatic identification writ large
The last two characteristics of melodrama as identified by Singer are pathos and strong emotion. Assume that pathos equates with empathy and identification, and it becomes abundantly clear that *Supernatural* brims with both. After all, it seems clear that fans empathize intensely (although perhaps masochistically) with the pain of Sam and Dean Winchester, as suggested by the comment of the uber-fan Sera Siege in "Monster": "It's just the best when they cry." Indeed, to elaborate on the countless examples of melodramatic moments within the text of *Supernatural* would encompass far too many words; suffice it to say that Sam and Dean could give any heroine a run for her money. "Those poor boys," Roush (2009) muses. "They've saved so many souls along the way but they keep falling short in their own destiny sweepstakes." They lose their mother at a very young age, are raised by a less than adequate although well-intentioned father, suffer from various emotional and personality disorders, and generally have lousy childhoods marked by poverty, loneliness, and fear. They are magnificently tortured in a way that has captured the hearts and minds of a significant female audience, just as Sue Ellen once drew the identifications of a female audience in *Dallas*.

Yet there is much more to the contemporary version of melodramatic identification than simply tuning in for the adventures of two pretty, angsty boys (although this doesn't hurt). The media landscape is not the same as it was when Ang studied the phenomenon of *Dallas*. The prime-time serial melodramas—*Dynasty*, *Dallas*—were ratings juggernauts. The fans of these shows did not have to contend with the constant anxiety of cancellation or wonder if their network was even going to exist in a month! From the perspective of the *Supernatural* fan, the melodrama of Sam and Dean cannot be detached from the melodrama of whether the show is going to be renewed each year. But the difference goes deeper still, for in the current era of television one cannot simply talk of texts in the traditional sense. As Ross puts it, the situation in relation to television in 2009 is one in which "the text and creators and viewers become inseparable from each other" (2009, 22).

As mentioned above, Beer and Penfold-Mounce (2009) argue the need for a new melodramatic identification as a kind of organizing principle in a complex mediascape, but it could be that such identification is already inevitable, for if there are multiple texts, then there are multiple points of identification. In terms of melodramatic identification, there is identification not only with the text in the original sense, but also with the entire show in its sense as a production and a cultural phenomenon. Hence the impulse to engage in certain extratextual fan behaviors is related also to melodramatic identification. Such activities as the writing of fan fiction, for example, are permeated by these identifications. The same is true of online fan interactions between fellow fans, or between fans and the producers of the show, or between fans and anyone who might have reason to comment on the show (such as a
journalist/reviewer). While the reviewer might also confess to being a fan or audience member, they can easily find themselves subject to outpourings of high emotion from fans who disagree with their comments.

[5.4] Slash is a unique example of an extratextual behavior that exists in the melodramatic mode, although this is, of course, not its sole function. It is not surprising, therefore, that some have argued that slash is a form of romance (Driscoll 2006). Similarly, Elizabeth Woledge has argued that many slash narratives are "intimatopic," (2006) although not all are such, nor are all intimatopic fictions slash. According to Woledge, intimatopic fiction is that in which sex increases intimacy (103) rather than being separate from it; in this way she distinguishes slash from romance and accounts for the intense focus and eroticization of emotions that is generally found in the fic. Woledge also attempts to acknowledge some of the elements of slash that other scholars either have not acknowledged or have found difficult to—the presence of rape, BDSM, and the hurt/comfort genre (109–10). For example, she argues that the purpose of hurt/comfort is to create intimacy; however, she fails to acknowledge the frequent intensity of both the hurt and the comfort.

[5.5] There is something else at work in this aspect of hurt/comfort as well as the obsessive quest of slash to describe, over and over, situations of intense intimacy—namely, a melodramatic impulse. Consider the following quote, which originally referred to film melodrama. If the word films is replaced with slash genre and stories and viewing with reading as I have done here, the quote becomes a perfect description of many slash narratives: "The [slash genre] clearly displays its affectivity in [stories] that dramatize affect itself, [stories] in which the expression of sentiment is at the center of the narrative, [stories] that, even after the most casual [reading], can be recognized as having as their project the dramatization of relationships of sentiment" (Affron 1991, 111).

[5.6] Certainly, slash can be described accurately as a genre of fan fiction in which two male characters engage in an erotic relationship (note 8) but this is not its purpose. The purpose of slash has to do with (in Affron's words) "the expression of sentiment." In slash, emotions do not go unacknowledged, and the entire aesthetic of the genre revolves around the particular manner in which these emotions are revealed, in "the dramatization of relationships of sentiment." In the classic slash trajectory, one man notices another in ways that they are not noticed in real life; feelings are noticed and people are seen for who they are. Feelings are always visible in unique ways, or if not, then there is a prevalence of certain plot gestures that ensure their discovery. The best slash stories draw out these events in scenes of rare psychological verisimilitude, culminating in a gut-wrenching outburst of feeling that is simultaneously real and fantastic. This scene may be followed by others in which the
two men will have long conversations about their feelings before eventually engaging in some acts of physical intimacy that consummate their emotional intimacy.

[5.7] It is as though, in slash, women are groping after the realization of some perfect expression of drama that has yet to be achieved or even attempted in the mainstream media, one in which the concept of excess no longer has meaning. This is not to deny the importance of the erotic in all of this—far from it. Indeed, as I described above with reference to a psychoanalytic framework, there is no boundary, no line where identification stops and desire begins. Slash can invoke both identification and desire simultaneously; the affective results are a powerful identification with scenarios of desire and identifications powerful enough to be erotic.

[5.8] If slash offers opportunities for intense melodramatic identification, then Wincest can take the story to still another level. Tosenberger (2008), in a piece titled "The Epic Love Story of Sam and Dean," argues that Wincest stories have as their raison d'être the desire to tell a perfectly platonic love story: Sam and Dean are united not only by their shared quest to bring their mother’s killer to justice, their united lifestyle, and their shared upbringing, but also their shared blood. According to Tosenberger, the breaking of the incest taboo permits a perfect unity, or rather, perfect intimacy. This may indeed be the attraction in some Wincest stories, but there are many stories where the breaking of the taboo leads to scenes of great pathos—where their father, or their surrogate father, Bobby, discovers their relationship, where one or the other is blamed for it, or blames himself, where they torture themselves with guilt but are helpless to stop. This is only a slim sampling of the plot possibilities. Not all Wincest stories dwell on the potential angst of the situation of Sam and Dean as a couple, but many do, drawing pleasurable identifications precisely because of the incest taboo, because the notion of the two brothers together is a shocking situational drama that generates great pathos. It is almost a soap opera cliché, except that in many Wincest stories, Sam and Dean are not drawn together by accident so much as by a helpless intimacy, a dysfunctional longing. In short, Wincest is the stuff that melodramatic dreams are made of. Slash fans who initially resisted have found themselves ultimately drawn to it, not because they have stopped believing in the incest taboo but because the melodrama is irresistible.

[5.9] To propose a melodramatic purpose for slash (and Wincest) is not, hopefully, to limit the potential meanings of slash, particularly for those who participate in it. Like most things in fandom, slash has multiple causes and multiple pleasures. This means, in turn, that the negative responses to the Wincest shout-out also have multiple causes—that is, causes other than melodramatic identification. One of these would be a community-oriented objection on behalf of slash as a fandom in its own right. Jenkins observes that "the meaning of slash resides as much in the social ties created
by the exchange of narratives, the sharing of gossip, and the play with identity as it does with the words on the page" (1991, 222). Moreover, slash may manifest some of the characteristics of a queer subculture; recently, a pair of essays (Busse 2006; Lackner et al. 2006) discussed the queer erotics between writers of slash in LJ communities. This might tread on the sensibilities of some members of slash fandom, but it seems appropriate in light of the reactions exhibited to "Monster"—reactions of being exposed or potentially outing.

[5.10] It must be emphasized that most of those women who reacted negatively to the Wincest shout-out did not feel shame about their activities, but rather, the kind of embarrassment that is derived from being caught engaged in something that cannot be easily explained. None of the fan responses from those who read or wrote Wincest indicated that Dean's negative assessment of Wincest in "Monster" would deter them. Even those fans who disliked the shout-out expressed their understanding that they knew better than to expect anything different from a character in canon. The source of their discomfort was based in their show's lack of understanding of what Wincest, or more generally, of what slash is. The writers of "Monster" constructed the Wincest shout-out as though slash were nothing but a sex game, when in fact it is not something that is easily and immediately explainable. The experience of slash is far more complex than the simple utterance of the words "Sam slash Dean" on national television—as though a fan's fantasy of the two of them together is a perverse decision solely based upon the sexual attractiveness of the two men and nothing more.

[5.11] As a community, slash fandom could be viewed as a subculture whose members expect a certain degree of privacy, or at least the freedom to carry on their activities free from interference. Sharon Cumberland sees slash online communities as a safe place for sexual exploration: "Women are using the paradox of cyberspace—personal privacy in a public forum—to explore feelings—to explore feelings or ideas that were considered risky or inappropriate for women in the past" (2004, 275). Not all of these identities are necessarily subversive or progressive in the sense of constructing something completely new, or deconstructing the status quo. In some cases they may even appear to be regressive. However, slash fandom is deeply involved with women's sexuality; the practice of slash involves women pleasing themselves, together. Although it begins with women at a physical distance, it is intimate; later, it also can include women in a room together, talking about sex; women reading stories to each other; women watching sex movies together; women going to drag shows together; and sometimes, women forming relationships, friendships, and sometimes sexual relationships as a result of their connections through slash. While these women may be reluctant or even embarrassed at the prospect of exposure, they generally refuse to allow these feelings to overwhelm or override the meanings and the pleasures of slash. This in of itself—the fact that a
group of women are committed to explorations of their own sexuality despite cultural ignorance, disdain, and sometimes disapproval—should earn them the right of not being trespassed against.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] According to Ang's arguments concerning melodramatic identification, the women who consume melodrama are in need of temporary surcease from the emotional realities of their lives; for Ang, melodrama provides this place of emotional relief, a refuge from the world in which women's desires are in constant conflict with the reality principle. It should come as no surprise that (female) fans could identify so intensely with a serialized TV show, particularly one whose characters are constantly thrown into situations of intense pathos. In her piece, Ang meets head on a difficult question: Why identify with a soapy, weepy character like Sue Ellen when there were more positive female characters to identify with? Ang replies, quite sensibly, that television provides us with fantasies, not role models (1997, 162), which is to say that melodrama may meet a need in fantasy, even a masochistic one, but that it is not thereby self-destructive. A female fan is not, by indulging in a momentary wallow in a melodramatic identification, falling down on the ongoing grueling project of inventing a female subject. The melodramatic identification is only providing momentary relief, even "moments of peace" (165).

[6.2] Female fans of Supernatural are seeking something similar in their show. It is clear that the TV series Supernatural is a melodramatic text, based on the criteria of Ben Singer and Peter Brooks. However, the melodramatic identification of fans must be understood as extending beyond the narrative world proper to the multiple narratives or texts comprised by the industrial and cultural context of the show—that is, the writers, actors, directors, producers. This new form of melodramatic identification includes reception practices such as slash and, particularly in relation to this TV series, Wincest. Thus Ang's notion of melodramatic identification can be useful in a contemporary context, once revamped to encompass not just melodramatic identifications with soaps but with other kinds of television, particularly cult TV with its frequent reliance on serialized melodramatic narratives. That is, contemporary TV fans have access to multiple levels of melodramatic identification, not only via the narratives of the show but also the texts that surround it; moreover, through their own activities in online fandom, fans have become accustomed to creating their own melodrama. Whereas Ang wrote of melodramatic identifications with characters on Dallas, it is now more accurate to write of complex identificatory relationships with the show, a text that comprises multiple inter-, extra-, and meta-texts. Given these identifications, every gesture of the show, and especially shout-outs to fans, will have a potentially volatile result. Something intended as an affectionate joke could be both
an act of recognition and an insult. Similarly, a fan of Wincest and/or slash probably can receive the show's references to Wincest as an exposure and a personal offense.

[6.3] To reiterate, there is nothing pathological about melodramatic identification; identification is a normal human behavior and in the case of these fans, it provides a release from everyday tensions. It is true these melodramatic identifications have an element of fantasy, but only in the sense that all relationships are based upon identification, and all identifications are based upon fantasy to some extent. Kristina Busse, in "My Life is a WIP on My LJ," observes that even if some of the statements on LJ are performance, all real life encounters contain aspects of performance (2006, 223); she adds that it would be a mistake to dismiss online interactions as mere illusion. Fan-producer relationships, too, are obviously not real life relationships, but there is something real about them as well, sufficient that they should be considered as having real emotional consequences.

[6.4] Perhaps at the same time the fan is giving herself license to feel and identify with a melodramatic narrative of her own. In her fan interactions, the fan is often writing online and anonymously, in a multidimensional space that is existentially a fact and yet fantastically pleasurable. With the protection of anonymity a fan can permit herself the luxury of melodrama—the luxury of being able to retreat into an extreme emotionality that she would never permit herself in her "real" life, where rationality and control are the more valued qualities. Whereas in the real world the fan knows that excessive emotion would be counterproductive, online she can write herself into the melodramatic narrative of a maligned heroine pitted against a thoughtless and ungrateful television writer—one of the faceless and terrible Powers That Be, perhaps. Whatever the story, it provides an emotional catharsis through its melodramatic power.

7. Notes

1. I do not mean to suggest that only female audience members are capable of melodramatic identification, or that Supernatural has only female fans. However, I find it more expedient to refer to the fan in question at this point as "she," since the female presence among Supernatural fandom has been noted repeatedly, and also because melodramatic identification is a theory that was posed originally to explain female investment in soap opera. I do believe that men are equally capable of such an investment, but that cultural learning tends to discourage them from the more emotion-oriented fan outlets. This could explain why male fans tend to engage in a different range of fan behaviors and practices. See this dialogue (mirrored from Henry Jenkins's blog) for an in-depth academic discussion of gender and fandom: http://community.livejournal.com/fandebate.
2. I would argue that all fan fiction is founded in melodrama, in fact, but this must be an argument that waits for some other paper. I will observe, though, that one of the more popular subgenres of fan fiction—hurt/comfort—is equally present in gen, het, and slash. I believe that this demonstrates, at the very least, that all fan fiction ultimately exists as emotional fantasy. Even where there is a concomitant investment in plot, character, or the physical details of sex, there always remains an investment in emotion for emotion's sake, as the object of the fantasy in its own right.

3. In a recent article for Flow TV, Michael Kackman (2008) gently chastises some of his colleagues in television studies for their celebration of "quality TV" as somehow aesthetically removed from its melodramatic roots. Indeed, he notes even in such "quality" shows as The Wire and The Sopranos, melodrama is not only present but necessary.

4. Although fans understand that the show is very much an industrial product requiring the collaborative effort of many people, including hair stylists, craft services, writers, directors, producers, actors, and cinematographers, they still tend to refer to this process in aggregate either as "Show" or as "Kripke." I believe that they either see "Kripke" as the controlling mind, very much in an auteurist sense, or they simply find it a convenient reference for what they know is a more complicated system.

5. The viewers discover Becky in the midst of composing (and reading aloud) what is self-evidently Wincest, albeit a very badly written example: "And then Sam caressed Dean's clavicle. 'This is wrong,' said Dean. 'Then I don't wanna be right,' replied Sam in a husky voice."

6. According to Freud (1917), love is always based on a fantasy relation to a copy of our beloved—not the actual person or thing. In writing this, Freud's intention was not to expose love as a hoax, but to explain the true basis of love in self-love. The object-relations to a fantasy object is not pathological, but normal. He would not (and did not) deny that love could lead to great acts of sacrifice and generosity, even altruism. The self-servingness of love, the irrationality and fantastic basis of it—these are not condemnations but a groping for understanding of humanity in its various complexities.

7. As one online journalist puts it: "It's easy to make Dean a hard drinking, sarcastic womanizer, but [the writers] also manage to make him the mom of the show" (Faraci 2009).

8. Although there are some scholars who consider slash to be any fan fiction about a same-sex relationship, regardless of gender, my preference is to limit the definition to
stories about two male characters. I would distinguish stories about two female characters from slash with the term "femslash."

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Praxis

The Impala as negotiator of melodrama and masculinity in *Supernatural*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This article explores the implications of the binaries of masculinity and melodrama as they pertain to the television series *Supernatural*. I examine the significance of Dean’s beloved Impala as a negotiator of both the masculine and the overtly emotional. The Impala directly provides Dean with both physical and emotional support throughout the series, while it does not directly interact with Sam. As *Supernatural* moves through its fourth season, the dramatic uses of the Impala are shifting, signifying and providing insight into a distinctive change in the relationship between Dean and Sam, where emotion cannot yet be overtly expressed.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Gender; Television


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1. Introduction

[1.1] At first glance, the CW series *Supernatural*, which is currently airing its fifth season, can be read as primarily masculine. The series appears to be a standard horror text and centers around its two leads fighting supernatural evil. The brothers Dean and Sam Winchester (played by Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki) live on the road, killing demons and hunting monsters, traveling in a classic 1967 Chevrolet Impala. *Supernatural* includes a soundtrack consisting primarily of strategically placed classic rock tracks and on the surface presents its audience with an overload of blood, gore, and action. Beneath its tough exterior, however, *Supernatural* calls upon strong melodramatic conventions, offering a glimpse into a genre typically read as feminine. To find a balance between the seemingly contradictory elements of the horror/masculine and the melodramatic/feminine, *Supernatural* relies on Dean's beloved Impala. The Impala offers a visual space that is typically masculine, yet the series uses it as a device through which to filter the more intensely emotional moments that characterize television melodrama and the Winchester brothers'
relationship. By offering both a marker of Dean's emotional condition and a physical connection to the current state of Dean and Sam's relationship, the Impala allows certain emotional exchanges to be negotiated that may not be typically acceptable in the realm of the masculine within our culture, thus directly connecting the brothers to melodrama.

[1.2] In an article dealing with melodrama and masculinity, Sasha Torres points to a similar issue when she states, "The tension produced by the possibility that femininity will be diffused onto men forces TV melodrama to reveal some of the ideological and representational stakes it tries to manage" (Torres 1993, 286). Through the use of melodramatic elements in *Supernatural*, viewers are being asked to set aside preconceived notions of the masculine to allow for the negotiation of emotional displays and exchanges between the characters. Within Western culture, emotion is typically equated with the feminine. Because of this, *Supernatural*’s intense focus on the emotional as the driving force for the main story arc could easily present an extreme source of tension for a series that relies so heavily on the framework of the horror/masculine. The emotional elements that *Supernatural* presents, however, expand and develop the relationship between the brothers, which, in turn, drives the series. The Impala offers a negotiating tool for this tension between the feminine form of the melodrama (the emotional connection between the brothers) and the masculine form of the horror genre (the basic story plots). The Impala itself is a primarily masculine object. Not only is it a classic muscle car, but its trunk contains what can only be termed an arsenal, holding everything from rifles, shotguns, and machetes to rock salt and holy water. Nonetheless, even as the Impala presents a primarily masculine visual space, for the Winchester brothers it also serves, significantly, as home—a domestic space—thus connecting it directly to the traditionally feminine. By setting the Impala on these two seemingly oppositional planes, the series foregrounds it as a space through which multiple genre lines may be explored.

2. Melodrama in *Supernatural*

[2.1] The melodramatic genre, according to Nick Lacey, is characterized by the "identification of moral polarities of good and evil within the narrative...character[s,] [who are] generally of lower social status...the use of music for dramatic emphasis...[and the] celebration of overt emotionalism" (2000, 203–4). All of these elements can be found within the confines of *Supernatural*. Lacey also points out, however, that "more than anything, melodrama is characterized by excess; if it isn't 'over-the-top' then it probably isn't melodrama" (204). In *Supernatural*, the entire premise of the series is decidedly over the top—demons and monsters, complicated boundaries between good and evil, pacts with the devil, etc.—Dean literally sells his soul to save his brother's life and is then dragged off to hell, only to be pulled out four months later
by an angel. With this in mind, it is clear that, regardless of its masculine surface, these elements strongly situate *Supernatural* within the genre of the melodrama.

[2.2] In his discussion of melodrama in film, Jon Lewis expands on the definition by equating melodrama specifically with "serial suffering." As Lewis explains,

[2.3] Whereas other genres neatly reward the good and punish the evil, melodrama is characterized by serial suffering. What the characters learn in the end is not that things can or will be righted but rather that the world is unfair, suffering is inevitable and people don't always get what they want or deserve...The ironies and tragedies outweigh the sweet and the good. Heroism lies in the acceptance of that unhappy fact. (2008, 123–24)

[2.4] A similar realization lies at the heart of *Supernatural*. The series makes it clear very early on that any kind of happy ending for Sam and Dean is extremely unlikely, and perhaps impossible. Though their fates may not be laid out in every detail, Dean and Sam are hunters, and whatever paths they may choose will more than likely end in tragedy. Regardless of *Supernatural*’s outwardly outlandish context, the core of the series exists on the more realistic basis that good does not always get what it deserves. The brothers' emotionalism, therefore, in a world where there is little chance that good will be "neatly rewarded" and evil punished, allows for necessary and profound workings out of melodramatic conventions. Still, the outward displays of emotion that characterize many of *Supernatural*’s most important moments do not come without difficulty. Though the series may take on a strong melodramatic tone, it holds a specific grounding in the masculine. Therefore, *Supernatural* makes use of the more masculine elements it presents to offer insight into character and emotion through both overt and covert means and, through the use of the Impala, effectively grounds both the masculine and the emotional.

[2.5] In an online posting of his thoughts on *Supernatural*, Henry Jenkins points to the masculine appeal of the series when he states, "On one level, it is made up of classic masculine elements—horror, the hero's quest, sibling rivalry, [and] unresolved oedipal dramas" (Jenkins 2007). Such elements are prominent in *Supernatural*, clearly situating the series in the horror genre, for which the expected audience is male. The horror genre is only roughly defined in mainstream television, and as a result, *Supernatural* is commonly referred to as a science fiction series. Given this, there is some expectation that the audience for a series like *Supernatural* will overlap with the expected audience for a science fiction series. Indeed, *Supernatural* has employed a significant number of actors, producers, and directors from the science fiction hit *The X-Files* (1993–2002) (most notably the late Kim Manners). While there is a long history of female fan involvement with science fiction, the producers and creators of such shows have, until very recently, imagined their audience to be primarily
adolescent males. Since the general expectation is that both horror and science fiction will appeal to a largely male fan base, *Supernatural*'s inclusion of overt melodramatic emotion may seem out of place. However, it is important to remember that in airing on the CW network, *Supernatural* also has the important task of appealing to a largely female demographic. As Jenkins goes on to discuss, despite its initial masculine presentation, *Supernatural* "seems ideally situated to the themes and concerns which have long interested the female fan community" (Jenkins 2007). Because the CW's target demographic is women aged 18 to 34, the survival of the series undoubtedly required that it appeal to this audience, especially early on. Of course, this is not to assume that *Supernatural* lacks a substantial male fan base. In fact, I would argue that *Supernatural*'s successful genre negotiations manage to hold the interest of a number of different types of viewers, rather than simply the CW network's most targeted audience. Finally, we must remember that a network's targeted demographic is never fully equal to its actual audience. *Supernatural* works to appeal to multiple audiences, but nonetheless leaves some people out—people, for example, who would never watch a "horror" show. Still, by negotiating multiple genre frameworks, *Supernatural* attempts to draw a relatively diverse audience.

In both appealing to the network's largely female demographic and negotiating the necessary emotionalism that drives the relationship between the Winchester brothers, *Supernatural* strategically employs multiple themes common to television melodrama. With the careful interweaving of both the horror/masculine and the melodramatic/feminine, "everything [in the series] seems designed to draw out the emotions of the characters and force them to communicate with each other across all of the various walls which traditional masculinity erects to prevent men from sharing their feelings with each other" (Jenkins 2007). As Jenkins makes clear, these melodramatic elements most often deal specifically with the intense relationship between the two leads and seem extremely out of place in such a masculine text, according to the norms that pervade our culture. I argue, however, that the inclusion of the family connection between the brothers makes such melodramatic elements allowable, especially when the family connection appears in conjunction with the Impala. Furthermore, by offering a space in which both the masculine and the feminine can be negotiated, the Impala works to strengthen the brotherly bond, while making some of the most overt melodramatic emotion acceptable to a general audience.

3. The Impala as masculine and melodramatic negotiator

As a typically masculine object, the Impala offers a visible means of constructing and keeping the series in a masculine context. Considering our society's cultural constructions of masculinity, it is unlikely that a mainstream audience could
ever accept the connection between the boys without such a tool's being employed. Of course, such emotional displays between Dean and Sam may also be acceptable because, as Catherine Tosenberger notes, "as brothers, they are given a pass for displays of emotion that masculinity in our culture usually forbids" (Tosenberger 2008, 1.2). Even so, the show flirts with the intensity of the relationship between them, and it is often read by fans as incestuous, a reading that Tosenberger deals with extensively in her article. Through the series, it is made clear that neither Sam nor Dean has ever truly had access to the "normal" society that enacts the strict gender binaries viewers are accustomed to. As a result of both their separation from "normal" society and their status as brothers, a general viewership is more likely to accept some of the melodramatic emotion that is often displayed between the two.

[3.2] When some of the most intense emotional moments occur—those that may still cause tension for a general audience—they are often grounded in the masculine through the use of the Impala. In discussing the depiction of the automobile in film noir, Mark Osteen makes the point that the automobile is itself connected, like the film genre, to masculinity and masculine cultural markers. "In these [noir] films, automobiles also become overdetermined symbols of characters' aspirations and disappointments," and to take away a man's car is essentially to take away his "identity and hope" (Osteen 2008, 184). In *Supernatural*, the Impala acts in a similar way for Dean in particular, functioning as an emotional filter and a direct extension of his character. Dean touches the Impala and emotes beside it more than we see him do with any other object, or even person. To separate the two is to leave Dean remarkably unstable. By situating the Impala within the tradition of the film noir automobile, *Supernatural* places it specifically within a masculine space, while also using it as a symbol of emotion—a means through which the relationship between Dean and Sam can be read and understood, particularly in moments when their connection is under extreme stress, as in much of season 4. The Impala offers insight into the surface emotional stability and more turbulent hidden emotions of each of the brothers, providing a stable and masculine space through which to explore the scenes of obvious emotion that so commonly pervade television melodrama. For example, the scene in the wake of their father's death when Dean takes a crowbar to the Impala offers particular insight into Dean's emotional condition, as I will discuss more specifically later.

[3.3] According to Osteen, what he calls film noir "automobility" offers the apparent freedom to become anyone, anywhere, but it perpetually ends in the solidification of the main characters' role as social outcasts—a fact of which Dean and Sam are consistently aware. As cars do in noir films, the Impala offers a homelike space for the two men, who do, in fact, fall into the category of roving criminals that Osteen stresses is a key factor in the film noir. The struggle between the brothers in season 4,
therefore, is not a struggle for social class mobility, but instead a struggle for mobility within their relationship. They are both desperately seeking control over their own lives and, by direct correlation, control in their relationship. Because the show is a television drama centered on the boys, it must remain impossible to separate Dean and Sam completely through any logic internal to the show, and therefore any change in one demands a change in the status quo for both—they are tied together by a bond stronger than any ever presented in the Supernatural universe. Sam and Dean are brothers, living practically in each other's pockets for most of their lives, each willing to die for the other—and the most physical embodiment of that connection is the Impala. It is the one constant in their world, outside of one another—it is arguably even more constant than John.

[3.4] The importance of the Impala in some of the most heavily emotional moments of the series can be seen at the end of the season 2 finale, when Dean reveals to Sam that he has traded his soul for his brother's life (2.22 "All Hell Breaks Loose 2"). Interestingly, the Impala is only actually visible for a moment at the beginning of the scene, when the boys approach it and Dean opens the door. The key emotional exchange between the two begins with the sound of Dean shutting the door, which resonates as he turns back to Sam, the two of them resting against the Impala. During this exchange, Dean, in particular, uses the Impala for physical support as the conversation becomes heavier. Though the Impala is not visible again until the very end of the scene, after the emotional exchange, viewers are aware that it is there in the background. The distinctive noise of the car door shutting shifts the mood from relief at Azazel's death to emotional distress. Thus the Impala acts not only as a means of physical support for Dean, but also as a means of emotional support for him—and for the viewer, it is a sign of the emotional content to come.

[3.5] The Impala is used most commonly to indicate Dean's emotional state rather than Sam's, at least in earlier seasons. As Julia M. Wright points out, it is "Dean who is at the centre of the series' exploration of competing ideologies and values," and his "'bad boy' masculinity is repeatedly marked as a mask or performance" (2008, ¶14–15)—one that is visibly shaken by the return of his father. In a short essay, Andie Masino discusses the significance of the Impala's physical appearance to Dean's mental state in season 1. She points out that "as Dean start[s] to internally deteriorate, so [does] the Impala's exterior condition" (Masino 2006, 217). I would argue that once we move beyond the first season, the correlation is no longer so consistent. However, Masino's argument that the Impala negotiates some of Dean's more covert emotions is still worth considering in light of John's return. When the car stops looking pristine, their father is back, and his presence always strains Dean's relationship with Sam. As Wilkinson points out, "When John reunites with his sons in 'Dead Man's Blood' (1.20), he makes a crack to Dean about the state of the car...
thereby reasserting his paternal authority—reminding Dean where the car came from and who the car represents" (2009, 204). With John back, Dean is suddenly forced into his former role of peacemaker between his brother and his father, as well as the role of subordinate to John. In order for Dean to step back into these roles effectively, he has to defend their father against Sam's anger. Dean is no longer able to act as an equal to Sam. It is during these episodes, when the boys reconnect with their father, that the Impala begins to appear unkempt and dirty. Masino points out that "the state of the Impala's cleanliness directly reflect[s] Dean's crumbling emotional state" (2006, 216), and it also reflects the state of the relationship between the boys, stress in which is often caused by issues involving their father.

[3.6] As I mentioned earlier, there is a moment in early season 2 (in 2.02 "Everybody Loves a Clown") when Dean takes a crowbar to the Impala. Immediately before this, Sam, with no provocation, confides to Dean his feelings about their father's death, and Dean remains silent. Such an exchange is uncommon between the two. At this moment, the Impala is almost completely destroyed, its condition reflected in Dean's unwillingness to open up to Sam. In fact, his only two words to Sam are merely a question—"About what?"—that sets off Sam's tirade. Throughout the entire exchange, there is a disconnect between the two brothers, mostly coming from Dean. Once Sam leaves, Dean takes out his anger on the half-restored Impala, taking a crowbar to its trunk and destroying much of the work he had put into restoring it. Considering this, I argue that the Impala's condition here reflects the loss of connection between Dean and Sam more than it does Dean's general emotional state.

[3.7] In 5.04 "The End" we see the damaged Impala as a marker of separation once more. Here, Dean is thrust into the future, where he discovers the Impala in what is probably the worst condition we have ever seen it—it has not been destroyed in a wreck, as we might expect, but rather abandoned and all but forgotten. And it is here that the worst possible scenario has become a reality. Dean and Sam have not spoken in five years and Sam, as we learn later, has become Lucifer's vessel. At this moment, when the Impala is literally falling apart, we are also presented with the complete and utter separation of the brothers' lives.

[3.8] The Impala, therefore, offers a clear and concise indicator of Dean's emotional condition as it relates to his relationship with Sam. Through its own physical condition, the Impala offers insight into Dean's hidden emotional state by helping to bring forward some of the melodramatic/feminine emotion that is not yet acceptable for Dean and, therefore, cannot yet be explicitly stated. Such a marker is necessary when Dean cannot be honest with Sam, as the audience is offered little other means of seeing through the mask that Dean constructs at these times. Often it is John's presence, whether literal or metaphorical, that so destabilizes Dean's emotional
condition that he shuts himself down, even to Sam. In these moments, the Impala functions strategically as a device through which the audience is allowed glimpses of Dean's emotional state. The Impala, therefore, filters the extreme emotion that pervades television melodrama, providing insight into the hidden emotional state of Supernatural's characters when certain emotional exchanges are not yet acceptable.

4. The question of ownership and shifting relationships

[4.1] In season 4 of Supernatural, the Impala is placed in a battle of wills between the boys, as each struggles for control over his own life—they are suddenly closer to being separate entities than ever before—and, by association, for control over their relationship. This struggle is embodied in the Impala, as Sam's relationship to the car has taken a significant turn during Dean's four-month imprisonment in hell. Before this moment, the Impala had been Dean's, unquestionably, and had in fact helped to solidify the roles of protector and protected that the boys had always played in each other's lives.

[4.2] Before season 4 it is always Dean, as the older of the two, who acts as protector in their relationship, a role he assumes when a six-month-old Sam's life is placed directly into his four-year-old hands at the very outset of the series and that is solidified when Dean takes ownership of the Impala. The bond they share holds strong and even intensifies as they move into adulthood as hunters, and it eventually begins to place strain on Sam in particular. For both Dean and Sam, these roles translate smoothly into their relationship with the Impala. Dean has always been the one to look out for Sam, and a large part of doing so meant taking the wheel—in this case literally—making the hard decisions and doing what had to be done, handing over control to Sam only when necessary to offer comfort or solidify trust. Such expressions of trust can perhaps easily be seen when we remember Dean's edict "No chick-flick moments" in the pilot. As Wilkinson points out, "Dean...of the 'no chick-flick moments' mentality, often relies on the Impala to help him express what he can't" (2009, 203). This distinctive use of the Impala as a tool of expression is never clearer than in 3.07 "Fresh Blood," when Dean allows Sam under the hood. Wilkinson explains, "Dean allows Sam back into his emotional sphere by lifting the hood of the Impala to expose her broken inner workings, trusting that Sam can help fix things. There can be no clearer sign of unconditional trust and love from Dean than letting Sam near the Impala's carburetor with a wrench" (2009, 203). Not only is Dean offering a clear sign of love and trust, but he is also allowing Sam back into his own emotional workings. As the Impala functions essentially as an extension of Dean's character, this is a moment in which Dean is entrusting Sam with a piece of himself. He is taking the first steps in accepting the fate that will take him to hell in fulfillment of the deal he made to restore Sam's life, and preparing Sam for life without him. Sam, however, is holding on to a
glimmer of hope that he may be able to save his brother. At this moment, Dean is still acting as protector, brother, and, in many ways, parent to Sam, as we can see when he tells Sam flat out, "That's my job, right? Show my little brother the ropes." Still, by letting Sam under the hood, so to speak, Dean is making a silent promise that he will "drop the act," as Sam had previously begged of him, while simultaneously beginning the transfer of the Impala into Sam's hands. Essentially, Dean is handing over a piece of himself—and offering Sam the possibility that he may one day be able to protect Dean. At this moment, Dean specifically uses the Impala to indicate some of the intense melodramatic emotion he is unwilling to express outwardly, while beginning an important shift in control over their relationship, as embodied by the shift in ownership of the Impala.

[4.3] Though Dean may not be officially handing over the Impala just yet, this emotional openness and pure trust is no small feat. Dean has always been the one to protect Sam and, by doing so, Dean has maintained a role equivalent to that of parent. At the very beginning of the series, we learn that the loss of Sam and Dean's mother resulted in the loss of both parents. Julia M. Wright points to this idea when she discusses the "lower-class children's vulnerability" and speaks of Dean "as his brother's primary caregiver and armed protector 'for days at a time'" (2008, ¶12). Throughout the series, it is made clear that from a very young age, Dean was forced to take over the role of caregiver for his brother and obedient subordinate to his father, both of which were later expressed through the use of the Impala. The Impala is, in fact, Dean's most precious possession, his home. It is the same for Sam, but always with Dean behind the wheel. As the only constant physical space in their lives, the Impala offers a stability that can be provided by no other object, and Dean's ownership of the car only solidifies his role as protector. By acting as the sole space of home, therefore, the Impala is placed within a specifically feminine framework, which allows Dean the freedom to display overt emotionalism that might not otherwise be acceptable.

[4.4] A struggle begins when Dean sacrifices himself to save Sam's life, an act that makes sense if we consider Cawelti's criteria for the melodramatic hero: "if the melodramatic hero meets a catastrophic end, it is either as a noble sacrifice to some good purpose or because he has become deserving of destruction" (1976, 46). It is at the moment when Sam learns of Dean's deal that he truly begins to fight to usurp Dean's role as protector. In the penultimate episode of season 2 (2.21 "All Hell Breaks Loose 1"), we watch Sam die in Dean's arms, and in the next episode (2.22 "All Hell Breaks Loose 2"), Dean makes a deal with a crossroads demon to bring his brother back. Dean sells his soul and is given one year to live: this is a melodramatic end, as he has sacrificed himself to save his brother. When Sam discovers this at the end of the episode, he insists that it is his turn to take on the role of protector, stating firmly,
"You save my life, over and over. I mean, you sacrifice everything for me, don't you think I'd do the same for you? You're my big brother. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you. And I don't care what it takes, I'm gonna get you out of this. Guess I gotta save your ass for a change." Even in this scene, however, it is made clear that this is not Sam's place. In Sam's own words, the roles they play in their current relationship are solidified. Even as Sam points out that it is Dean who does the saving, he uses the phrase "big brother," which stresses the established patterns of their relationship. When he speaks of saving Dean, it is "for a change." And his speech is followed by a touched but noncommittal "yeah" from Dean. At this moment, both brothers are well aware of the roles they occupy, regardless of Sam's hopes of changing them. This is the scene described above in which the audience is made aware of the Impala's presence primarily through auditory cues. As this new struggle for the place of protector begins, therefore, the Impala is foregrounded as a means of both physical and emotional support for the boys.

[4.5] For the entirety of season 3, Sam tries desperately to move into Dean's role, that of protector, but never succeeds. He comes close in the season finale, in which Dean does in fact die. The last image we are given is of Dean in hell, calling for Sam's help (3.16 "No Rest for the Wicked"). This is the moment when Dean becomes the one in need of protection, and Dean's final words to Sam—"take care of my wheels"—support my claim that the Impala functions as an extension of Dean. Dean hands over the wheel at this moment, passing the Impala on to Sam and thus entrusting his brother with a piece of himself. With Dean gone, Sam's relationship to the Impala changes. It now belongs to Sam, a symbol of both freedom and family, as it likely was when John passed it on to Dean. Wright argues that the Impala is simply something Dean received from John in order to do the job (2008, ¶15), but I am more inclined to agree with Wilkinson:

[4.6] We know John gave Dean the Impala, and while we don't know exactly when, it must've been a significant occasion—an anointing, if you will, of his oldest son. To Dean, the car represents John and his mission. In accepting it, Dean stepped into his role in the "family business" and acknowledged that he wanted to be just like his father. (2009, 204)

[4.7] The moment when Dean gives Sam control operates similarly. However, Dean has never truly become "just like his father"—Dean's main focus has always been Sam, rather than a blind, self-destructive hunt for revenge. When Dean passes on the Impala, one might expect Sam to accept his place in the "family business" much as Dean did, but with the aspiration of becoming like his brother, who has been the one to act as parent to him. Earlier in the season, Sam expresses this desire when he tells Dean, "The way I see it, if I'm gonna make it, if I'm gonna fight this war after you're
gone, then I gotta change...into you. I gotta be more like you" (3.09 "Malleus Maleficarum"). In the next scene, we see Sam drive off in the Impala. The camerawork here is similar to that in key scenes in 3.11 "Mystery Spot" and 4.01 "Lazarus Rising," both of which deal with Sam's extended separation from Dean, signaling Sam's changing connection to the Impala and marking his similarities to John. The irony here is that Dean has always been utterly incapable of surviving on his own and that Sam is becoming more like John, not Dean.

[4.8] Sam's newfound similarities to John, therefore, are the catalyst for the clear shift in the brothers' relationship throughout season 4. Sam is finally beginning to usurp Dean's role as protector, moving into a space he has never occupied before. This role shift is marked by Sam's taking ownership of the Impala, as he does fully while Dean is in hell. In those four months, Sam becomes accustomed to thinking of the Impala as his own, and he doesn't stop when Dean is brought back. Sam's assumption that the Impala now belongs to him parallels John's own inability to release ownership after he gives the car to Dean. In 1.20 "Dead Man's Blood," John chastises Dean for failing to keep up the car: "Why don't you touch up your car, before you get rust. I wouldn't have given you the damn thing if I thought you were gonna ruin it." His scolding indicates that he still has a sense of ownership and affirms his control over his relationship with Dean. Sam expresses a similar possessiveness in season 4, which begins with the revelation that Sam has spent the time away from Dean doing little more than seeking revenge against Lilith. This desire for revenge is similar to their father's, and it has already been made clear in earlier seasons that Sam is just as single-minded as John. Before Dean's death, however, Sam does not succumb to this obsession in the same way John did, despite the fact that Jess's death is coded exactly like Mary's. Instead, it is only when Sam is left without his brother and with a mission of revenge for an extended period of time that he, like John, begins behaving obsessively.

[4.9] Now that Sam sees the Impala as belonging to him—after all, he has spent the better part of four months believing it—the ways that it is used begin to change. The shift is immediately obvious in the season 4 premiere (4.01 "Lazarus Rising"). When we first see the Impala again, we discover that Sam has gone so far as to install an iPod jack, something Dean clearly does not approve of, and Sam's immediate response to that disapproval is "I thought it was my car." Sam similarly asserts ownership when he goes to meet the demon Ruby. When Dean calls and chastises him for taking the Impala, Sam's immediate response is "Force of habit." The assertion is not overt, but the fact that Sam does not give a second thought to taking the Impala in the middle of the night makes it clear. Sam makes a show of handing the car back over to his brother and does not overtly claim ownership of it now that Dean has returned, but his actions speak differently. Just as telling is the camerawork when Sam takes the car,
which seems to confirm Sam's feelings of ownership. When Sam pulls away, we see a beautiful shot of the Impala that makes the audience aware of both the car and the fact that it is Sam in the driver's seat. The camerawork here is what might have been expected upon Dean's reunion with the Impala. Instead, the moment comes with Sam behind the wheel. Anyone with a good knowledge of the series would be familiar with such scenes of the Impala, but these scenes almost always have Dean behind the wheel. Added to Dean's extended separation from the Impala, the use of Sam in this shot indicates a change in the boys' relationship to the car, and consequently to each other.

[4.10] Similarly, Sam seems to occupy the passenger seat only grudgingly throughout season 4. We see Sam driving more often than might be expected, considering Dean's long absence, and he seems to allow Dean into the driver's seat more because he has to than because he considers it Dean's place. In 4.04 "Metamorphosis," for example, Dean is driving when the brothers get into a heated discussion. Sam gets angry and orders Dean, "Stop the car, or I will!!" Not only does Sam issue an order to Dean, but Dean obeys without argument, something that has never occurred before in the context of the Impala. Such an exchange might be expected between John and Dean rather than Sam and Dean.

[4.11] As Sam's relationship to the Impala changes, therefore, so does his relationship to Dean. For at least a year, Sam had tried to take on Dean's role of protector. He is finally beginning to succeed, but in an arguably unhealthy manner. Sam convinces himself he is protecting Dean when, in fact, he is on a blind hunt for revenge against Lilith, even after Dean's return. In his single-minded pursuit he instead manages to almost completely destroy the trust Dean has always had in him. The first indication of this destruction of trust occurs in 4.01 "Lazarus Rising," when Sam has taken the Impala. As Dean rides in the passenger's seat of Bobby's car, he calls Sam, who answers the phone while sitting in the driver's seat of the Impala. At this moment, both of the brothers outright lie to one another. Here, therefore, instead of offering a site for the revelation of emotion, the Impala marks the changes that are occurring between the two.

[4.12] As these shifts are occurring in Sam's relationship to the Impala and his relationship with Dean, we also see Dean's overt emotionalism begin to change. Having lived through four months in hell, which felt like forty years for Dean, he is an emotional shambles. Previously, the most important emotional exchanges in the series, particularly those negotiated through the Impala, were related to Dean's relationship with Sam. In season 4, however, we are presented with some of the most extreme emotion Dean has ever displayed when he begins to open up about hell, and his overt emotionalism begins to reflect his own emotional state. The change is first
apparent at the end of 4.10 "Heaven and Hell." The scene begins with a full shot of the boys resting against the Impala, Sam sitting on the front of the hood and Dean leaning against it on the passenger's side. Significantly, the two are positioned in such a way that Sam is able to look at Dean, but Dean cannot face Sam without turning. As Dean confesses that he finally gave in to Alastair's demand that he torture others in hell, in order to escape more torture of his own, he uses the Impala for physical support. A shot shows Sam watching his brother from over Dean's shoulder as Dean looks off to the side. Though he has turned his head toward Sam a bit, Dean never actually looks at his brother, and his refusal to do so indicates the separation between the two. Dean is being honest, but from a distance, and this distance is emphasized even further as each turns away from the other and the scene cuts to black. In this scene and others like it, the Impala remains present and offers Dean the same emotional and physical support it always has. The pain Dean displays here, however, is for his own self-image—something he has always before put second to his concerns for Sam.

[4.13] Exchanges like this one leave Sam with the impression that his brother has become weak; in 4.14 "Sex and Violence" he tells Dean, flat out, "You're too weak to go after [Lilith], Dean. You're holding me back...You're too busy sitting around feeling sorry for yourself, whining about all the souls you tortured in hell." Sam is, admittedly, under the influence of a siren's spell at that moment, but his speech's impact on Dean is no less significant. At the end of this episode we are given another scene of both boys propped up against the Impala. Here, however, Dean avoids expressing emotion, and his discomfort is directly connected to the fact that Sam has admitted that he views Dean's overt expressions of emotion about hell as weakness. Sam has never before seen Dean as weak, and now he does so at the same time as he is growing obsessed with defeating Lilith. Dean recognizes the change in Sam, specifically pointing out in 4.19 "Jump the Shark" that Sam is just like John. Sam takes this as a compliment; Dean is not so sure.

[4.14] As noted above, one of the defining elements of the melodramatic is Lewis's notion of "serial suffering," and such suffering is never more apparent in Supernatural than in the battles that wage in season 4, whether it is Sam and Dean, Sam and Ruby, or Dean and the angels who are suffering. As Dean and Sam struggle for control over the Impala, they also struggle for the upper hand in their relationship. The Impala negotiates both masculinity and emotion while offering a space in which the emotional state of each of the brothers can be explored. By framing the Impala as both a masculine and feminine space and allowing it to provide consistent support for the Winchester brothers, the series offers insight into those emotional factors that are not otherwise accessible. The Impala acts within a specific context for each of the boys, marking both their connection to one another and the struggle for control in their relationship that begins in season 4. In allowing emotion to be filtered through a
quintessentially masculine object, *Supernatural* acts to negotiate both its surface presentation of the stereotypical horror/masculine and its more unconventional use of the melodramatic/feminine.

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6. Works cited


"Let's get those Winchesters pregnant": Male pregnancy in *Supernatural* fan fiction

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[0.1] **Abstract**—This article investigates mpreg slash fiction—same-sex relationships featuring male pregnancy—based on the television series *Supernatural*, looking at issues of gender and genre. It has been argued that slash writing is a highly subversive and resisting activity, appropriating someone else's characters and rewriting the romance script to suit different tastes than those prescribed by patriarchy. Yet fan fic texts are very diverse and it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw any general conclusions from them. The theme of male pregnancy has the potential to produce narratives that challenge our notions of gender, identity, sexual and social practices, as well as parenthood. Although the fan fiction I have analyzed all deals with these notions in various ways, the focus lies elsewhere. The authors of the texts focus more on exploring Sam and Dean as fathers and homemakers, on writing about family life, with all its traditional trappings. When the authors bring pregnancy into the equation, they draw on narrative and social conventions that follow this experience, resulting in conventional stories set in a very unconventional universe.

[0.2] **Keywords**—Gender; Mpreg


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1. Introduction

[1.1] The quotation in the title of this article is taken from the subtitle of the Winchester mpreg archive, and as the Winchesters are brothers, the statement produces a mental double take, similar to our reaction to the phrase "the king is pregnant," which Ursula K. Le Guin used in the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). In some Sam/Dean slash mpreg fan fic—fan fiction about Sam and Dean Winchester featuring a same sex incestual relationship and male pregnancy—phrases such as "Sam was pregnant with another man's child" (Calysta 2008) are presented as commonplace, forcing the reader to make a mental adjustment. The supposed conflicts between masculinity and giving birth are handled differently in the different
texts, however (note 1). Le Guin portrays a fictional society where the inhabitants are sexless most of the time, and alternate between sexes when they become sexually active. The alternative constructions of sexuality are gradually made known to the reader through the growing insights of the novel’s protagonist, a human sent to observe the alien planet. The Sam/Dean fan fiction discussed here, on the other hand, does not need to provide such mediation. Because of fan fic reading practices, and because of the existence of magic in the television series *Supernatural*, the author can rely on readers accepting a world where men can get pregnant. Even though male pregnancy results in a number of situations that produce the double take mentioned above, the texts analyzed in this article generally explore more conventional themes of love, trust, and homemaking. Rather than placing the focus on issues of biology and gender, the emphasis is on interrelational and emotional aspects. Pregnancy as a theme in popular culture narratives is commonly accompanied by a number of structures and conventions that are transferred, with very little change, into mpreg stories. In some narratives, the queer theme of male pregnancy therefore results in quite heteronormative stories.

[1.2] From the earliest studies of fan fiction there has been a tendency among scholars to read slash in terms of resistance and subversion. This tendency has been questioned, for example, by scholars such as Sarah Gwenllian Jones (2002) and Catherine Tosenberger (2008), who suggest that a more constructive way of reading slash is as an "actualization of latent textual elements" (Jones 2002, 82) and that a view of slash as always resisting the dominant meaning of a text prevents a deeper analysis of potential queerness in the canon, or as Tosenberger states: "too strong a focus upon slash as a subversion of canon can mask consideration in which the canon itself may make queer readings available" (2008, 1.3) Other scholars have also questioned the emphasis on resistance, albeit from a different perspective. In a study of fan fiction and genre, Elizabeth Woledge rejects the idea that slash is "a unique genre of literature that subverts the dominant literary and cultural tropes" (2006, 98). Similarly, Christina Scodari, in her analysis of fan activities, shows that the resistance label should be applied with caution, since "fans sometimes appropriate resistive rhetoric in defense of hegemonic proclivities" (2003, 111). What may at first seem like resistance may in the end reinforce heteronormative structures.

[1.3] Slash may thus rewrite dominant scripts and subvert heteronormative tropes, but it should not be assumed that the genre automatically produces resisting narratives. Although addressing different issues, Jones, Tosenberger, Woledge, and Scodari all point to and question an impulse within academia to valorize the slash author as a resistive force, a force that challenges both the commercial culture of big corporations, and the patriarchal, heteronormative structure of romantic/erotic relationships as expressed in a popular television series.
Interest in men becoming pregnant is not a new phenomenon. Male pregnancy has been used in fiction and on the screen by many authors for a variety of purposes: perhaps most often for comic effect, but sometimes also to explore gender identity. Mpreg fan fiction spans numerous fandoms and addresses a multitude of concerns. Some of those concerns are reflected in the mpreg intersection with domestic fic (Stein 2006, 253). Domestic fic, a much larger genre than mpreg, is not restricted to slash fan fiction; indeed some of the stories do not refer to sex or love at all. Domestic fics focus on characters going about their daily lives, doing mundane things, such as buying curtains, hence the alternative term curtain fic (Fanlore n.d.). Authors of domestic fic may be writing for humorous effect, to give a story a happy ending, or to explore how explicitly nondomestic characters behave in ordinary life. The Supernatural mpreg domestic fics discussed here are not centered on the hunting and destroying of demons and ghosts, but on the relationship between the brothers, exploring what they would be like if they settled down, bought a house, and tried to live the normal life they talk about in the canon. Indeed, some of the fan fiction, such as Fairytales Are for Princes and "Tears and Raindrops," dismiss hunting as a thing of the past in the first paragraph in order to get down to the business of the relationship. The analysis of these stories supports the claim that many fan stories are not really about action scenes, or plot development, but about what goes on in the interstices, in the downtime between adventures (Pugh 2005, 20–21; Cicioni 1998, 159). In the stories discussed here, the interest lies in what happens after the adventures are over, when there is time to explore emotions of love and tenderness.

Mainstream male pregnancy fiction tends to treat the pregnant male as monstrous. Discussing male pregnancy in film and on television, Stephen Kerry points out how such narratives are seen as posing a "threat to (male) audiences' homosocial bonds with a male character" (2009, 709), a threat that needs to be disarmed and dispelled in some way. Similarly, Barbara Creed, analyzing horror films, states that the pregnant man, taking over women's territory of reproduction, is presented as a monster (2005, 50). In the mpregs discussed here, the construction of the pregnant man is very different (note 2). The characters may be surprised to find themselves pregnant, but they are never constructed as unnatural, monstrous, or threatening. Instead the pregnancies are, most often, described as life-affirming experiences resulting in the joy of fatherhood.

2. From canon to fan fic

Before moving on to the analysis of the fan texts themselves, it is necessary to look at the canon, the television series Supernatural, and what particular features are remediated into the fan fiction. In the program, the two brothers Sam and Dean Winchester hunt and destroy all manner of supernatural creatures. Although both
brothers exhibit a sexual interest in women in the series, there are a number of features in the episodes that invite a slash reading. One of those is the brothers' great affection for each other, which is stressed throughout the series. Dean's feelings of responsibility for his younger brother are often discussed and their strong familial bond is repeatedly brought up. This is evident, for example, in 2.20 "What Is and What Should Never Be," where Dean is given the chance to live the normal life he has always wanted, where his mother never died, and the brothers never had to go on the run. Here the brothers have girlfriends and settled homes, and Sam is planning to get married. Everything is perfect, except that the brothers are not close; they are barely on speaking terms. This is enough to make Dean reject this opportunity for what should have been perfect happiness.

[2.2] Other aspects of the dynamic between the brothers also lend themselves to slash interpretations. Sam and Dean bicker constantly, and their arguments have overtones of a stereotypical, long-married couple. In 2.15 "Tall Tales," another character even comments on these overtones. The brothers are several times mistaken for a gay couple (1.08 "Bugs," 2.11 "Playthings"), and to a certain extent they are gendered as stereotypically male and female. Dean is a man of action who is interested in car maintenance and heavy metal music and who shies away from emotions. When he wants to express comfort, sympathy, or other tender emotions, he slaps Sam on the arm. He avoids hugs, and refers to any emotional displays as "chick flick moments." Sam, on the other hand, is an intellectual who is happy to talk about emotions, who wants to hug his brother, and who knows nothing about cars. Dean calls Sam a bitch, and Sam calls Dean a jerk. The gendering continues on the official Web site, where Dean is referred to as "the rugged bad boy" and Sam as "the sweet reluctant hero." This gendered dynamic is transferred to the mpregs analyzed here, where, in several instances, Dean is reluctant to express his love in public. In the mpregs, Dean repeatedly complains about Sam being "girlie" or a "whiny bitch." In "Tears and Raindrops," in particular, Calysta devotes a considerable amount of space to the exploration of Dean's inability to deal with his own emotions. Sam, for his part, is shown in these mpregs to be emotional, crying a great deal, and often succumbing to despair and depression. In this way, the traditional gender structures embedded in the canon continue in the fan fiction.

[2.3] In the canon, the brothers' sexual interest in women is repeatedly stressed; Dean, in particular, is shown to have a number of casual sexual relationships with women, but it is also made clear that no woman is allowed to come between the brothers. As Tosenberger argues, "all of Sam’s and Dean's romantic relationships with women are doomed to failure" (2008, 2.2). Every woman that might become a serious interest is removed in one way or the other (note 3). In the case of women in whom Sam might be interested, the removal can be quite violent (Tosenberger 2008, 2.2),...
but it is dangerous to approach Dean as well. In 4.01 "Lazarus Rising," the psychic Pamela Barnes propositions him in a rather straightforward manner, and minutes later her eyes have been burned out from seeing the angel Castiel in his true form, preventing a sexual liaison. There is a staggering amount of violence toward women in the series. Under the guise of defending themselves against demons possessing people, Sam and Dean beat up a number of women, killing some of them. This removal or mistreatment of women is echoed in some mpreg fan fic. In Double the Trouble, Basezcaf and Sammydeansgrl posit that Sam's girlfriend Jessica, whom he had planned to marry in the canon, was mainly a friend: "We were never that serious." In Missfae's "And a Little Child Shall Lead Them," Sam and Dean's mother Mary, whose death in the canon serves as the impetus and driving force of their existence as hunters of things supernatural, is reduced to a minor character, the younger sister of their father John, who has given birth to both of them. In SaryWinchester's Fairytales Are for Princes, Jo, an on-off love interest for Dean in the canon, is constructed as a threat to the brothers' happiness. Not only does she try to separate the brothers, but she also attempts to engineer Sam's death. In the end, she is herself killed, and the threat she poses as a rival is removed. In this way, the mpregs analyzed here continue the removal of women that has begun in the canon.

[2.4] As the television series progresses, there is an increasing insistence that there is no other life for the brothers, and that they do not want, or need, other people. This is particularly noticeable in 4.17 "It's A Terrible Life," in which Sam and Dean are stripped of their memories and given alternative lives as coworkers rather than brothers. Their lives as "civilians" are shown to be dull and dreary, and it is revealed that the whole episode is engineered by an angel in order to make Dean accept that he was born a hunter. The angel, Zachariah, points out that Dean is privileged to do exactly what he wants, drive a classic car, and "fornicate with women," and that he should stop longing for normalcy. In her article on Supernatural slash and Wincest, Tosenberger has postulated that the fan fic is not so much subverting the heterosexuality of the canon as responding to inherent queer cues, and that if there is any subversion in the fan fic, it is accomplished through the provision of the happy ending denied the brothers in the canon (2008, 1.5). In light of the development of the canon, her observation could be extended to the mpreg fan fic I have analyzed, where the brothers are allowed to settle down and create a stable family life, including children. Of course, not all mpregs end in happiness; Love Dean's "Five Days and Counting," for example, ends with the death of Dean's children, but those that I have analyzed in more detail all either end with a happy family, or are set on the road toward one.

3. Mpreg and Wincest
When constructing their stories, the fan fiction authors choose a variety of reasons for the pregnancies, including angelic intervention ("Angel of Mine"), demonic rape ("And a Little Child Shall Lead Them"), or a witch's curse on the family (Double the Trouble), whereas others simply take place in an alternative universe where men can get pregnant (Fairytales, "Tears"). This in itself could lead to very interesting questions: what would a society look like where men also need to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies, and where men are not dependent on women for children? Some mpregs touch on such questions, but none of the mpregs discussed here address these issues.

All Sam/Dean stories, whether they are "regular" slash or mpregs, are of course stories of incest, or Wincest. Incest in itself is not an unusual fan fic phenomenon. It is very common in fan fic based on Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Busse 2002, 207–17), but in those texts the taboo is perhaps less strong, since it is a question of sex with one's vampiric parent, one's sire, rather than a biological relative. Incest between siblings, on the other hand, can be found, for example, in the fandoms of Harry Potter, Firefly, and the Chronicles of Narnia. It is often assumed by non-fan fic readers that incest fic is written purely for titillation, for the breaking of taboos, but in much incest fiction it is a question of exploring love and emotional intimacy. Fans focus on the emotional ties between two specific characters, who happen to be siblings, rather than glamorize the breaking of social and sexual taboos. In the case of Sam/Dean slash, the canon itself rules out any long-standing heterosexual relationships, thus limiting the choice of potential partners to the brothers (Tosenberger 2008).

Even though Wincest is integral to the mpregs analyzed here, most of them do not discuss the concept itself. Instead, the stories are simply based on the understanding that in the world they describe, incest and male pregnancy are acceptable, and need not be commented on, leaving space for topics such as love and childrearing instead. Those mpregs that do address the issue choose a variety of approaches. In Double the Trouble, Basezcaf and Sammyndeansgrl use John to voice cultural rejection of incest; at first he expresses revulsion, but gradually and grudgingly he accepts Sam and Dean's love for each other, especially when the grandchildren start arriving. In Fairytales, SaryWinchester presents the relationship as accepted by everyone, and lets Ash explain why: "Look, I'm not judging you and I'm not disgusted. With what we go through in our lives, incest is just a blip on everyone's radars. Demons and saving people are more important." This story juxtaposes the canon world where humans are under constant threat from supernatural powers with the brothers' fan fic love to create a space where characters can argue that loving incest between consenting adults is more or less normal. Even though the supernatural is not generally part of the plot in this fan fic, it is in this instance used to
normalize incest. The fullest discussion of the incest motif is carried out in "Tears," where Calysta states that the brothers "had created a world where only they existed where they shut out the people who would judge and be disgusted by their relationship." The fact that the lovers are also brothers is kept secret from the brothers' coworkers (they do not seem to have any friends), leaving the brothers isolated. This isolation gives a claustrophobic feel to the story. Because the brothers love each other, they have nowhere to turn, apart from their father's friend Bobby, who has accepted their relationship.

[3.4] In a number of the stories, John, the brothers' father, is paired with Bobby, a longstanding friend in the canon. Although John and Bobby may have initial difficulties accepting the brothers' incestuous relationship, their grandchildren are always immediately accepted in all stories. In Basezcaf's and Sammyndeansgrl's *Double the Trouble*, the final tally is five children, and John and Bobby become proud grandfathers, spoiling them. At no stage in the fan fic does anyone address the notion that an incestuous relationship resulting in children might be violating cultural taboos, producing "genetically compromised offspring" (Tosenberger 2008, 5.2). The result of this plotline is paradoxical, in that the topics explored are very conventional: buying their first house, deciding which room should be the nursery, buying baby clothes, deciding on names and so forth, but played out in a very unconventional setting with two pregnant men living together with two grandfathers. The unconventional setup is used to create a family life for Sam and Dean, where they can enjoy giving birth and parenthood just like heterosexual couples.

4. Genre conventions and reader expectations

[4.1] Pregnancy on television follows certain conventions, some of which are transferred into mpreg fan fiction. Examples in the *Supernatural* mpregs analyzed here include pregnancy revealed through morning sickness, characters in denial using a large number of pregnancy tests, and a pregnant character falling over and immediately going into labor. Television pregnancies, particularly in drama series, seem unusually precarious, with women living under a constant threat of miscarriage, and this plot device is also employed in the mpregs.

[4.2] Another convention used is that of cravings. In the canon, Dean is portrayed as a voracious eater, who loves all manner of junk food, and his fascination with food is continued in the mpregs. In Basezcaf's and Sammyndeansgrl's *Double the Trouble* he makes a peanut butter, tomato, and salami sandwich, as well as mashed potatoes with sardine gravy, both dishes making Sam nauseous. In SaryWinchester's *Fairytales*, when it is Sam who has cravings, those cravings are less extravagant, limited to a giant portion of pancakes, and a pizza with banana topping.
Not all the mpregs give any detailed descriptions of the actual delivery of the baby. In Calysta's "Tears," it is briefly referred to in retrospect, whereas in Basezcaf's and Sammyndeansgrl's *Double the Trouble* all five children are delivered via caesareans. When the delivery is depicted, it is often using another convention, that of the extremely rapid birth, taking place away from medical help. In Silnt.whisperer's "Can't Do it Without You" the child is born very shortly after the water breaks, in the Impala. For women in real life, it may take many hours from the first contractions until the baby is finally delivered, but television births are often very rapid, and this is the convention that is transferred to some of the mpregs. Even though the stories describe a fantastical occurrence, men giving birth, they draw on narrative conventions of women giving birth.

In the *Supernatural* mpregs, the authors are using the conventions of the romance narrative, even though the stories are set in an alternate universe where male pregnancy and homosexual marriages are commonplace and where incest is accepted. (For discussions of slash as a rewriting of the romance script, see, for example, Driscoll 2006 and Kustritz 2003). The stories do cut across several different genres, but they all tend to contain a high proportion of emotional drama and suffering, with characters misunderstanding each other, crying, flaring up, storming off, only to be reconciled with more tears and professions of love. Other plot devices from romance novels are also employed, as in SaryWinchester's *Fairytales*, for example, when Jo manipulates Dean into a relationship, and makes sure that he cannot explain the situation to Sam, who thinks that Dean has stopped loving him. Resolution is delayed for as long as possible, making the most of the pain and suffering experienced by both Dean and Sam. Thus, these stories are using transgressive settings, but relying on conventional plots and plot devices.

5. Masculinity, pregnancy, and the male body

As stated above, all the mpreg stories discussed in this article can be read as examples of domestic fic, exploring domestic and familial themes, and when these themes are transposed onto the male, pregnant body, they bring with them a number of female-gendered features.

Loss of bodily authority is one such feature, common to many of the texts. As soon as either brother finds himself pregnant, he loses control over his own body, just as many women are shown to do in popular cultural narratives. He is now not allowed to drink beer or coffee, and he has to stop hunting demons, just as traditionally many women are encouraged to stop working. In "Angel of Mine" by KayR-I heart Dean, Sam suggests that Dean should stop working until the baby is born, a proposition Dean vehemently rejects, but Sam makes it clear that other concerns now override
Dean's autonomy: "It's [sic] just that even if you don't like it you ARE pregnant and its [sic] putting the baby's life in danger." The danger-to-the-baby argument is also used by Basezcaf and Sammyndeansgrl in *Double the Trouble*, when pregnant Sam has been upset with Dean. Dean replies: "I don't want you getting upset again like you did earlier. It's not good for our little guy in here!" This is a line of argument often used in narratives of female pregnancy, where women are told not to exert themselves, and not to express strong emotions, because they are endangering the baby. In Love Dean's "Five Days and Counting," Dean is not even allowed to decide when to take his pants off during the delivery: "Fine it is obvious between you and this baby I am not in control of my own body anymore." Thus, even though pregnancy as such is not constructed as feminine in the fan fiction, the narratives draw on the image of a loss of body authority that is usually associated with women.

[5.3] In a large proportion of the mpregs, Sam and Dean begin expressing emotions stereotypically expected of women when they find out they are pregnant. In several stories, Dean worries about looking fat during and after his pregnancy, and in *Double the Trouble* he even refuses to undress in front of Sam, because he feels overweight and unattractive. In "Tears," Dean comments to himself that Sam will probably "be back to his normal weight in no time," echoing the insistence in the media that women should shed their "pregnancy pounds" as quickly as possible. Both Sam and Dean spend a lot of time worrying about being abandoned by the other one, and, as pointed out above, they become very emotional, crying and hugging much more frequently than in the canon. In *Double the Trouble*, Sam, who is very happy about a house that Dean has bought with financial support from their father, is described as bounding out of the car, flinging himself into his father's lap, and crying with joy and gratitude: "No, Dad...it's not D-D-Dean. He's great. It's yoooooooou..." In the canon, this behavior would be ridiculed as unmanly and effeminate by both John and Dean, but this is how the effects of male pregnancy are constructed in this mpreg fan fic.

[5.4] It is not only emotions that are traditionally associated with women that Sam and Dean express in the *Supernatural* mpregs, but also desires and longings that go against the popular culture image of what a young man should be, and against the canon's images of masculinity. Dean, in particular, is portrayed in the canon as incapable of commitment to one woman, and when he suspects that he has a son (3.02 "The Kids Are Alright"), he becomes very uncomfortable. Although the characters talk of having been denied a normal lifestyle, they are at the same time shown to be quite happy traveling around the United States killing supernatural beings, having brief encounters with beautiful women. In the fan fiction, they voice very different desires, however. Mirna Cicioni has pointed out that some fan fiction authors want their characters to have "a lasting monogamous commitment and recognized, even if unofficial, family ties" (1998, 166). This is shown in the mpregs
analyzed here, where Sam and Dean want to settle down, set up house together, and start a family, as expressed, for example, in Calysta's "Tears." Even unplanned pregnancies make them happy, which is not an attitude commonly associated with young men in popular culture narratives. In *Double the Trouble*, Dean voices his longing for parenthood: "I want to have birthday parties, PTA meetings, Christmas mornings where the kids drag us out of bed at 4AM because they can't stand it anymore. I want trick or treating, kissing scraped knees—I want all that crap, I just never knew it."

[5.5] In general, the stories portray both men as supportive, nurturing, and caring, and longing for a stable family life that includes children.

6. Gender and identity

[6.1] In the mpreg fan fiction analyzed in this article, a very female experience, pregnancy, is mapped onto the male body, bringing with it a specific, gendered discourse that challenges our preconceptions of masculinity and femininity, of nurturing and family life. The stories are not simply dealing with a gay couple having a child, which could be accomplished through adoption, or insemination of a surrogate mother, but of two men reproducing themselves together. As Stein states, mpreg "raises issues of gender, identity and experience" (2006, 253) and in these mpreg stories these issues are explored in different ways.

[6.2] Two of the identity issues in the mpregs are how to label the relationship between the brothers and how they are to be viewed generally in terms of masculinity. In most popular culture narratives, homosexuality is constructed as incompatible with masculinity and this view of homosexuality has sometimes been transferred into slash, as has been discussed by Cicioni (1998), Scodari (2003), and Woledge (2006). Some fan fiction authors have presented the characters as not gay, but instead experiencing a deep love that happens to be directed toward a member of the same sex. In the *Supernatural* canon, popular culture assumptions that homosexuality equals effeminacy are repeatedly expressed, most often through the character Dean. The mpregs generally avoid discussing the concept of homosexuality, focusing on the exclusive emotional bond between the brothers instead. Those authors who do comment tend to allow Dean to stay in character, such as in *Double the Trouble*, where he reacts very strongly when a shop assistant assumes that he and Sam are a couple, congratulating them on their impending parenthood: "Dean's first impulse was to smack the shit out of her for assuming that they were gay," but later in the story, Sam ponders "their homosexual relationship." In many of the narratives, the characters voice a tension between the emotional tenderness between them, holding hands, snuggling up to each other, and a need to distance themselves from any
unmanly behavior, so that the brothers spend a lot of time accusing each other of being "girlie," and the term "chick flick moments," so often used by Dean in the canon, is repeatedly used in the fan fiction as well. When Sam and Dean get married in *Double the Trouble*, Dean makes it clear that Sam is the bride, a notion Sam strongly rejects. It seems the narratives negotiate a space where homosexuality, which in the canon is repeatedly ridiculed as effeminate, is separated from unmanliness. In other words, Sam and Dean may be gay, but they are not effeminate.

[6.3] Issues of gender also come into play in regard to Sam's and Dean's children, as in *Double the Trouble*, where Basezcaf's and Sammyndeansgrl's representation of the children develops from unconventional to traditional. Early in the story, Sam and Dean have an argument when buying baby clothes. Sam wants to buy dresses, in case they have a girl. Dean says that his daughter will not wear dresses: "She'll wear jeans and t-shirts, and look cute—not all foofy!" When Sam gives birth to their daughter it turns out that she has supernatural powers, and when Dean gives birth to twin sons a few months later, she uses her powers to save them from kidnappers. Even so, later on in the story, the characters refer to her as needing protection. When it is made clear that her youngest sibling will also be a boy, bringing the total of males in the household up to six, Sam worries that she will be unhappy. Dean dismisses this: "Naw, she'll love it. She'll be protected all around!" Since she is the one who has protected her brothers before, there is no narrative reason for this statement, but it reflects traditional attitudes, where brothers are supposed to protect their sisters. Toward the end of the story, it is Christmas time and as presents the children all receive vehicles to ride in. The four boys are given four-wheelers and the girl a pink jeep. Thus during the trajectory of the story, the girl has gone from a jeans and t-shirt kind of girl, to an infant who protects others from evil, to someone who needs to be protected, and who is only allowed to drive a jeep if it is pink. Even though the narrative is set in a most unusual family constellation, it still draws on traditional constructions of gender in the family.

[6.4] Gender, sexuality, and vulnerability are also explored in some stories, for example by Calysta in "Tears." In this mpreg Sam has a one night stand, which is narrated as a struggle between Sam and the other man, Grady, with them "each trying to possess the other." Grady finally wins "their sexual battle," turning Sam over, "claiming him." Sam's reaction to the whole encounter is similar to those displayed in countless popular narratives of rape of women. He waits until the other man falls asleep, staggers off to the bathroom, where he vomits, and spends a long time curled up on the floor. He then takes a long shower, scrubbing his skin in "frenzied efforts" trying to wash off the "memory of Grady Mallory's touch on his body." The image of a woman trying to wash off the taint of rape has become a visual shorthand for the emotional suffering experienced. Afterward, Sam is consumed by guilt about his
betrayal of his brother, and as he suffers emotional distress throughout the narrative he repeatedly states: "I deserve this. It's my fault." Throughout these scenes, the language describing Sam's experiences draws on conventions of female vulnerability, gendering Sam's body and actions as female.

[6.5] In "Tears," Calysta also explores Dean's sexual vulnerability, when he is subjected to another man's aggressive flirting. The language and imagery echo heterosexual narratives in which a man pursues a woman even though she is clearly unwilling. When Dean tells the man to let go of him, or he will break his arm, the man replies "I like a man with spirit," a clear reference to the stock phrase "I like a woman with spirit." The man attempts to rape Dean, and initially Dean responds like a female character in a romance novel, unable to comprehend what is happening, unable to defend himself. Yet since he is, after all, a demon killer, he is able to control the situation and overpower the attacker, breaking his nose. Dean's objectification is, however, discussed more in terms of personal suffering than in terms of gender. Since Sam's infidelity, Dean has allowed himself to become a victim, has lost sight of himself, and the narrative focus is more on Dean finding himself, and being able to forgive Sam, than on questions of gender and sexual predation.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] Early fan fic scholarship argued that slash writing is a highly subversive and resisting activity, appropriating someone else's characters and rewriting the romance script to suit different tastes than those prescribed by patriarchy, but more recent scholarship has called that notion into question. Fan fic texts are very diverse and it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw any general conclusions from them. The theme of male pregnancy has the potential to produce narratives that challenge our notions of gender, identity, sexual, and social practices, as well as parenthood. This potential is demonstrated, for example, by the quotation from Calysta's text at the beginning of the article. Such statements have the power to produce a mental double take and force the reader to consider her own reactions and what they say of her as a cultural and social being. Although the mpreg fan fiction I have analyzed all deals with gender, identity, and related issues in various ways, the focus in these stories usually lies elsewhere. These texts explore Sam and Dean as fathers and homemakers, depicting family life, with all its traditional trappings, but without women. When pregnancy is brought into the equation, it brings concomitant narrative and social conventions, resulting in conventional stories set in a very unconventional universe.

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9. Notes

1. The incongruence in Le Guin is really on a semantic level, since the king is actually female when conceiving, and the main drive of the plot is the fact that the characters change sex repeatedly. In the mpreg fan fiction analyzed here, on the other hand, both characters involved in the conception of the children are men, and their biological status does not change.

2. Whether this is because the authors and/or readers are women who do not feel that their homosocial bond with a male character is threatened, or because of other reasons, cannot be resolved here.

3. These female characters may be seen as versions of what Star Trek fans have dubbed "Captain Kirk's space bimbo of the week" (Scodari 2003, 119). The women's main function is to show that the brothers are "normal" men, with "normal" appetites, whom women find attractive.

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Praxis

Renegotiating religious imaginations through transformations of "banal religion" in Supernatural

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[0.1] Abstract—Supernatural is saturated with a wide range of religious representations. These elements often serve to instigate the storyline for one or more episodes, but do so in a way that is removed from their original setting in, for example, traditional religious contexts. In Supernatural, religion is subsumed to media logic, and thus transformed religious representations are an example of a continuous process of mediatization of religion. This essay applies a three-sided theoretical approach, considering mediatization, cognitive anthropology, and social theory. The concept of mediatization applied here implies long-term processes in which media play a role in cultural and social change. The theory of cognitive anthropology of religion allows us to understand how the series activates shared implicit knowledge of supernatural agents and events to evoke recognition and emotion; but by transforming these representations, the show challenges our imaginations. These transformations of banal religious representations in Supernatural come about in three ways: (1) as a mainstreaming of occulture, (2) through connecting banal religious elements to existential themes, and (3) through playful intertextuality. The series applies these narrative devices, which heighten plausibility and familiarity, while simultaneously offering viewers a change in perspective, thus creating opportunities for viewers to renegotiate existing religious imaginations.

[0.2] Keywords—Intertextuality; Mediatization of religion; Occulture; Television; Television fiction


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1. Introduction

[1.1] Supernatural follows the adventures of Sam and Dean Winchester, two brothers hunting demons and vampires across America. Throughout the first four seasons, the narrative develops from a primarily episodic structure to a more dominating overarching narrative as Sam and Dean set out to prevent an apocalypse. At different points throughout the series, it is indicated that both Sam and Dean are "special" and "chosen" for some greater purpose, and the true reason for Sam's newly developed
Supernatural powers is constantly discussed. Beyond the overarching existential themes, *Supernatural* is saturated with religious representations, from crosses to holy water to angels of God, but these representations are transformed as they are put in a variety of contexts. *Supernatural* is by no means faithfully selling Christianity, although there are numerous Christian references. Rather, the creators of *Supernatural* draw freely upon an immense pool of religious elements and religious narratives circulating in Western society.

[1.2]  *Supernatural* is one of a range of contemporary TV series with supernatural themes and strong religious undertones; in fact, we might argue that the technological advances in audiovisual media, along with factors such as the millennium Y2K craze and 9/11, have spurred an increase in these stories, which are often hugely popular with audiences (Hjarvard 2008). Although forerunners such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959–64) and *The Outer Limits* (1963–65) initiated a steady stream of supernatural TV fictions in the following decades, it certainly seems that the 1990s and 2000s have seen an increase in science fiction and fantasy programs focusing on destiny, the afterlife, and the apocalypse. Undoubtedly, the popularity of the TV show *The X-Files* (1993–2002), which was produced by Kim Manners, who also produced *Supernatural*, facilitated a renewed interest in such themes, which has persisted since then. *Supernatural* is currently in competition with the TV shows *Ghost Whisperer* (2005–), *Fringe* (2008–), and *True Blood* (2008–), which in different ways deal with supernatural beings and the afterlife. Modern technology allows audiences to see the unseen in ways that are increasingly convincing audiovisual accounts: transparent spirits rising from graves, humans transforming into demons, and vampires sucking the blood out of human bodies. The saturation of popular culture with supernatural narratives is not simply a result of producers' playfulness with technology; it is of course a result of the stories' marketability. Audiences are apparently fascinated by the idea of something outside the realm of natural ontology (as understood in the context of Western culture) and something bigger than themselves. The West is often understood as increasingly secular, but this view is challenged by many researchers within the field of sociology of religion (Davie 2007; Partridge 2004–5; Murdock 2008; Berger 1999; Lynch 2002), which often sees contemporary society as desecularized or resacralized. With the huge number of TV series focusing on religious issues, it is quite a paradox that research on religion and TV has been overlooked until recently; the edited volume *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion* (Winston 2009b) represents the most comprehensive collection of work to date. Meanwhile, religion and film have been studied extensively (Plate 2003; Wright 2007), as has the broader relation of religion to media (Schultze 2003; Hoover and Lundby 1997; Hoover 2006).
At the center of this essay is the concept of religion; but what is religion in the context of this analysis and of television fictions in general? For this context, we need a working definition of religion that allows us to discuss the religious themes in *Supernatural*. I propose an approach similar to one used by Steve Bruce (1992, 1996); his definition attempts to close the divide between the functional and the substantive approaches presented by Durkheim (2001) and Weber (2001). Bruce suggests the following: "Religion for us consists of actions, beliefs and institutions predicated upon the assumption of the existence of either supernatural entities with powers of agency, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose, which have the capacity to set the conditions of, or to intervene in, human affairs" (Bruce 1992, 10–11). Thus, Bruce agrees with Durkheim that practices uniting believers are central to religion, but simultaneously takes into account the connection to the supernatural that sets religion apart from communities based on secular ideology. Bruce's definition, because it is broadly formulated, has weaknesses like those of the functional approach. It invites a discussion about the meaning of "impersonal powers" or "processes possessed of moral purpose"; but his definition is valuable because it grasps the aspect of supernatural agency that has "the capacity to intervene in human affairs." Furthermore, Taylor (2007) points to the fact that the supernatural is a very recent (in a historical context) and Christian idea. Bruce also discusses the difficulty of defining religion as a universal concept and notes that in primitive societies, "things we would regard as mundane and this-worldly, such as hunting or fishing, were enmeshed with religious ritual. Unless rituals were properly performed, the hunting or fishing would not be productive. Such societies simply did not divide the supernatural from the natural in the way we do" (Bruce 1996, 25). While I agree with Bruce and Taylor that attempting to come up with a comprehensive definition of religion is a lifetime's work in itself, I do believe that we can identify some defining features that will be useful in this particular context. I argue that even if the divide between the natural and the supernatural is a particularly Western concept, and even if some religious communities do not incorporate this divide, the rituals Bruce refers to in this last quotation still illustrate how an intentional supernatural agent was believed to disrupt food gathering if the rituals were neglected. Furthermore, this approach is relevant to this paper for two reasons: (1) it allows us to consider religious elements outside the frame of institutionalized religion, such as non-Christian myths, which are presented side by side with institutionalized religion in *Supernatural*, and (2) it allows us to discuss people's continuing fascination with the supernatural, which cannot be fully explained by sociological theory.

This essay examines how *Supernatural* transforms religious representations, and thus simultaneously confirms and challenges viewers' religious imaginations, inviting them to renegotiate these imaginations. I apply a three-sided theoretical approach that considers (1) the media's dominant cultural role in representing
religious concepts, or in other words the mediatization of religion, (2) the cognitive predispositions that continuously reinforce the audience's nonreflective knowledge of these concepts, and (3) the sociocultural context in which these religious themes are recycled and consumed. I acknowledge the unorthodoxy of combining social and cognitive theory, but in fact they have been combined by other scholars (Zerubavel 1997; Fiske and Taylor 1991; Brothers 1997). Zerubavel provides useful points in his thoughts on cognitive sociology (1997); he proposes that we think not only as individuals and human beings, but also as social beings affected by the thought communities to which we belong. Folklore scholar Oring offers similar thoughts in regard to the study of folk narratives: "the approach to the narrative is multicontextual, since these contexts inform one another. There is no sharp division between the individual and the social, the social and the cultural, the cultural and the comparative" (Oring 1986, 141). Zerubavel and Oring capture my motives for applying this approach; these research fields inform one another, thus providing more nuances to the analysis of *Supernatural*. Religious concepts and representations are transformed in *Supernatural* through a mainstreaming of occulture (Partridge 2004–5, 2008; Hutton 1999; Ellis 2004), which is connected to larger existential themes discussed in the context of late modernity (Giddens 1991; Lynch 2002; Davie 2007; Clark 2003), and through playful intertextuality (Johnson 2005; McCabe and Akass 2007; Pearson 2007).

[1.5] Mediatization theory points to the media's role in long-term societal changes in many "areas of social and cultural life in late modernity" (Lundby 2009, 1; also see Hjarvard 2008) (note 1). Sociologist Davie argues that religious institutions have lost authority in modern Western societies, and labels people's current relationship with them one of "believing without belonging" (Davie 2007). The change in religion's role in the West can partly be ascribed to the media's increasingly dominant cultural role. Hjarvard states, "Through the process of mediatization, religion is increasingly being subsumed under the logic of the media. As conduits of communication, the media have become the primary source of religious ideas" (Hjarvard 2008, 9). Hjarvard introduces the term "banal religion" as part of his analysis of mediatized religion. Extending Michael Billig's theory of banal nationalism (1995), Hjarvard (2008) understands banal religious representations to include symbols and elements of institutionalized religion, myths and legends, superstition, and audiovisual representations that can evoke particular emotions (for example, upturned faces and rays of sunlight breaking through the clouds). Folklore scholar Oring (1986) clarifies the different subgenres of folklore, and for my purposes here I consider banal religion to include urban legends, which differ from folktales by being interpreted as true, even if their truth is negotiated within the narrative itself. Myths can also be banal religion, especially myths that are considered "both sacred and true" (Oring 1986, 124) by the community they belong to (note 2). Hjarvard underlines that calling these representations banal does not imply
that they are unimportant. Rather, they are primary, but are taken for granted in society (Hjarvard 2008), or, in Billig's terminology, they are "unwaved flags" (Billig 1995, 39).

[1.6] So how can we understand the nature of these banal representations? Why and how did they become banal in the first place? Cognitive anthropologist Justin Barrett (2004) argues that religion should not be seen as an anomaly in society; rather, our desire to believe is part of our mental processes. Like Hjarvard, Barrett stresses that most of our beliefs are automatic and nonreflective. "Such beliefs operate continually in the background, freeing our conscious minds to deal with other thoughts. Nonreflective beliefs are ubiquitous and so often nonconscious that we frequently are not aware they are there" (Barrett 2004, 2). They include absolutely mundane beliefs about our everyday lives as well as religious beliefs. The representations of religious concepts are banal in the sense that they are part of our implicit knowledge. As banal religious representations are constantly recycled in popular narratives, they become familiar, and as a result our imaginations of specific religious representations are very similar to the imaginations of others. It is the circulation and maintaining of certain religious imaginations through mediatization that reinforce their meaning in society. Thus, the recycling and recognizability of visual accounts allow viewers to find them plausible and meaningful.

2. Transformations of successful banal religious representations in Supernatural

[2.1] When religious ideas and messages are subsumed to media logic, we can expect changes in religious content, volume, and direction, along with the transformation of religious representations (Hjarvard 2008). In Supernatural, elements of traditional religion are presented alongside elements of folk religion and urban legends. Thus, the process of mediatization transforms religious ideas by using bits and pieces in new contexts. The creators of Supernatural and other TV shows intend not to proselytize for a particular religious thought but to attract audiences. With media logic, what is at stake is basically the renewal of a contract for another season, and creators therefore seek new ways to keep audiences hooked. Sconce (2004) and Pearson (2003) explore how they do this through narrative strategies and through the construction of characters in cult TV series. We can understand religious representations in Supernatural as one more strategy to this end. Mediatization theory of religion illustrates how religious symbols and content in Supernatural are woven into narrative strategies of variation and repetition (Sconce 2004); from the opening of hell's gates at the end of season 2 to the overarching season 4 narrative about the impending apocalypse. The transformations of religious representations on TV are not a new phenomenon; in the 1960s, housewife Samantha Stephens was a modern-day
witch in *Bewitched* (1964–72). Rather than having a crooked nose and a pointy black hat, she was a beautiful blond woman. Her witch powers gave the show a fresh feel and made it a variation on the disobedient-housewife theme familiar from, for example, *I Love Lucy* (1951–57).

[2.2] Indeed, *Supernatural* includes a variety of banal religious representations that are (re-)circulated in society, including all the symbols in the journal that the brothers' father John Winchester left behind, the incantations used to exorcise demons, and the appearance of vampires, angels, and Lucifer. In 4.01 "Lazarus Rising" an angel, Castiel, is introduced to the story as he pulls Dean out of hell on God's orders. The concept of angels is perhaps one of the religious concepts most familiar to people in the West (perhaps in the world). We implicitly "know" what angels look like. We know that angels have white wings and are surrounded by light, perhaps even a halo. We know this because of the constant circulation of the concept in society, from Christmas tree decorations to popular culture. TV series often represent and transform our basic ideas of angels, as *Saving Grace* (2007–) did with its angel Earl. In this way, banal religious representations are the foundation of our religious imaginations. These representations gain plausibility with viewers because they are familiar. Hjarvard notes, "The study of religion ought to consider the fact that both individual faith and collective religious imagination are created and maintained by a series of experiences and representations that may have no, or only a limited, relationship with the institutionalized religions" (Hjarvard 2008, 15). Thus we can understand the transformations in *Supernatural* as a way for these primary beliefs, or banal religious representations, to be brought to the forefront of our consciousness. As the concept of an angel is presented to us in a new form, we must either reject or accept this new representation, even if only in the specific context of the fiction. In *Supernatural*, Dean's angel-contact Castiel is also different from the popular image of angels (although perhaps closer to a more traditional depiction of angels as warriors). He has black wings and does not have the mild personality that we would expect in an angel. Dean reflects on this transformed representation in 4.02 "Are You There, God? It's Me...Dean Winchester" as he confronts Castiel and his questionable methods: "I thought angels were supposed to be guardians, fluffy wings, halos, you know...Michael Landon, not dicks" (note 3). Throughout season 4, the angels' true motives and, even more so, God's nature are questioned, and Dean struggles with their demand for blind faith. Castiel's character is a good illustration of how religious concepts are transformed in *Supernatural*. In a sense, basic dichotomies are destroyed. The good does not exclude the bad, the innocent does not exclude the purposeful evil, nor the other way around. This violation of what we expect of religious concepts is often repeated: *Supernatural* presents benevolent vampires drinking cow blood instead of human blood, the Grim Reaper as a beautiful young woman (2.01 "In My Time of Dying"), the angel Castiel burning out a psychic's eyes (4.01 "Lazarus Rising"), and,
last but not least, Sam's infection with demon blood that enables him to go back and forth between good and evil.

[2.3] Moreover, certain representations seem to be more successful than others in popular culture and religions alike. Consider the number of television shows that have featured a psychic character. In shows like *Medium* (2005–) and *The Dead Zone* (2002–7), the theme of someone seeing past or future events in dreams or flashes of light is familiar. The number of shows dealing with these issues naturally demands variation even if the core concept stays the same; thus Tru Davies in *Tru Calling* (2003–5) relives specific days, Allison Dubois in *Medium* dreams about the events leading up to a crime, and Phoebe Halliwell in *Charmed* (1998–2006) sees flashes in black and white. Even *Supernatural* explores this theme, as Sam develops psychic powers as a result of his encounter with the Yellow-Eyed Demon in season 1. Sam's abilities are not a dominant feature in *Supernatural*; rather they are referred to whenever they fit into the story. Pearson's thoughts on cult TV are relevant here; she suggests that "cult television characters can potentially move amongst [sic] an infinitely large narrative space" (Pearson 2003). For instance, the series also includes science fiction elements, and the generic conventions tied to this genre allow broader interpretations of time and space than do strictly cumulative television dramas. I will return to Pearson's concept of "narrative elasticity" as it relates to Dean's character.

[2.4] So why are some concepts successful in popular culture as well as in religious contexts? Barrett and Boyer argue that the shared feature of gods and other supernatural agents is that they are counterintuitive (Barrett 2004; Boyer 2002). Barrett labels these "minimally counterintuitive" concepts (MCIs). "Constructing MCIs merely consists of either violating a property (or a small number of properties) nonreflectively assumed by categorizers and describers or transferring a property (or a small number of properties) from a different category of things that is nonreflectively assumed for the other category" (Barrett 2004, 22). Naturally the context in which such concepts exist is culturally and socially determined, as Zerubavel points out (1997). We intuitively categorize human beings; therefore, a human with the ability to see the future is counterintuitive and demands attention. Furthermore, it is crucial, in order for these properties to be memorable over time, that they be there for a reason. Seeing the future or the past is not particularly interesting if the ability is not used to solve crimes or prevent accidents. Barrett describes what he calls a "hypersensitive agent detection device" (HADD), a mental process predisposed to identifying agency even when none may exist (note 4) (Barrett 2004, 32). Guthrie argues that our predisposition to ascribe minds is connected to our mental ability to anthropomorphize almost everything:
things and events are willful and intelligent, natural processes are purposive, and objects such as celestial bodies are either born (for example, from other celestial bodies) or made by humans or humanlike deities...People see animals, plants, artifacts, inanimate phenomena such as wind and rain, and abstractions such as death and time as more or less humanlike. (Guthrie 1993, 112)

Thus, anthropomorphism adds intentional agency and "fills in the blanks" in order for us to understand what we experience. Boyer emphasizes how natural this mental process is: "It is part of our constant, everyday humdrum cognitive functioning that we interpret all sorts of cues in our environment, not just events but also the way things are, as the result of some agent's actions" (Boyer 2002, 165). Familiar statements that something is "God's will" or "meant to be" can be understood as an activation of our HADD.

In 2.20 "What Is and What Should Never Be," Dean is surprised by a djinn (a genie that, in this episode, has a malevolent nature) that lets its victims live in alternate realities, dreaming the lives they wish they had. In this alternate reality, Dean lives a quiet life with his beautiful wife in a suburb, his mother is still alive, and Sam is engaged to Jessica and has a law degree. The use of an alternate reality in this episode is an example of what Pearson identifies as narrative elasticity in cult TV programs. "Non-linear narratives afford characters greater possibilities than do linear ones" (Pearson 2003). Thus, in this episode we see a softer side of an otherwise confident and masculine Dean, as he reflects upon his dreams and desires.

Slowly Dean realizes that in this alternate reality, all the people that he and Sam saved in real life are dead. He understands that he is forced to choose between what he wants for himself and his obligation to save others. In one scene, he stands in front of his father's grave and, with tears running down his face, demands, "Why is it my job to save these people? Why do I have to be some kind of hero? What about us, huh? What, Mom's not supposed to live her life? Sammy's not supposed to get married? Why do we have to sacrifice everything, Dad?" Dean's monologue illustrates that intentional agency exists on two levels here. First, the fact that Dean is talking to John's grave underlines a banal belief that the spirits of the deceased somehow "linger on" and can hear what we say to them. In this way agency is ascribed to people even after they die, and Supernatural reinforces this ascription again and again. Second, Dean touches upon another major theme in Supernatural, namely that of destiny. Supernatural is constantly playing with the idea that someone is sitting above, or perhaps below, pulling the strings in everyone's lives. The show both confirms and questions the familiar notion that we all have a certain "role to play" in this world and that these roles are assigned by an intentional agent; Dean has to hunt demons for
some greater good, planned by some supernatural agent. The agent's intentions, however, are more often than not hidden from both the viewers and the show's protagonists, only to be revealed—or partly revealed—at the eleventh hour; they thus serve to maintain suspense. Again, religious concepts become a vehicle for a narrative drive that keeps us hooked until the final episode. By activating basic mental processes, *Supernatural*, like religious narratives, attracts our attention, and at the same time the show's recycling of these representations makes it familiar and plausible.

3. Mainstreaming occulture

[3.1] We can understand the representation of a flawed or imperfect Christianity in *Supernatural* as a reflection of a dominant tendency in popular culture to reject the authority of traditional institutionalized religion, instead giving room to other belief systems (Davie 2007; Hjarvard 2008; Berger 1999; Ellis 2004; Hutton 1999). Hutton's work on pagan witchcraft (1999) emphasizes that nineteenth-century popular British literature used conceptions of the occult: "By this time, the word 'pagan' had become equipped with connotations of freedom, self-indulgence, and ancient knowledge, which were instantly recognizable to a Victorian reader" (Hutton 1999, 27). In a Christian cultural setting, these connotations often imply a connection to nature, but also to the devil and dark magic. Popular culture texts often adapt these connotations, as is visible in contemporary TV fictions. Shows such as *The X-Files, Charmed, Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Angel* (1999–2004), and *Ghost Whisperer* prominently portray an underworld of demons, human-like creatures living in the woods away from civilization, and of old symbols, books, and scriptures that can be applied to modern-day problems. An illustration of the popularity of the occult is the common theme of the friendly neighborhood vampire, which appears in *Angel, True Blood, The Vampire Diaries* (2009–), and the Twilight novels and their movie adaptations *Twilight* (2008) and *New Moon* (2009). The theme may have been popularized simply by the success of *Buffy and Angel*, but nonetheless, these stories invite us to adjust, even if only slightly, our imaginations of vampires. Sociologist Partridge discusses the increasing mainstreaming of occult phenomena and labels this tendency "occulture":

[3.2] There is a strong sense of continuity with the past. This powerful, sentimental attachment to the distant past is directly continuous with a romanticized understanding of ancient cultures and spiritualities. For example, our ancestors, it is often believed, used to live in a harmonious, symbiotic relationship with the planet. They were in touch with nature, themselves and each other. (Partridge 2008, 115)
In *Charmed*, the Book of Shadows has been handed down to the Halliwell sisters from generations of witches. The book provides them with knowledge about the demons they face and spells to vanquish them. Similarly, the Winchester brothers in *Supernatural* search through dusty old books and scriptures to find information about the demons they are going to hunt. Both *Charmed* and *Supernatural* have incorporated a range of ancient symbols and languages into the narrative. Often elements, symbols, and names in *Supernatural* are borrowed from actual religious history and folklore. For example, the first "a" in "Supernatural" is transformed into a pentagram in the second season's title sequence, and each brother has a pentagram tattoo to protect him from demon possession; the symbol has a range of religious connotations. In the season 1 finale (1.22 "The Devil's Trap"), the Winchesters lure the demon Meg into a devil's trap that consists of ancient symbols, including the pentagram, from which she cannot escape. Then Sam chants in Latin in order to exorcise the demon from the body it is possessing. Partridge explains the use of occult concepts and imagery in these terms: "a matter can be settled in occulture by a simple appeal to some premodern belief or practice. Because the ancients did it or believed it, it must be true; it must be good for us; it must be beneficial to the environment; it must be spiritually sound" (Partridge 2008, 118). Partridge could have added "it must be effective"; indeed, in *Supernatural*, it is. Furthermore, *Supernatural* often draws upon the history of supernatural concepts in order to challenge their popular image. In this way, the occult in *Supernatural* is made to seem authentic, allowing viewers to play with the idea that the show portrays something beyond fiction. For viewers, this authenticity functions much as a government cover-up frames many *X-Files* episodes; viewers are invited to link the fictional stories to the nonfictional world. In *Supernatural* the sense of connection to a distant past is strengthened by introducing figures from folklore and religious contexts, such as a djinn (a genie found in the Koran), the demon Lilith (a Mesopotamian storm demon who also appears in the Jewish and Christian scriptures), a wendigo (an Algonquian mythical cannibalistic spirit), a fallen angel (found in Christianity), and a rakshasa (a spirit or demon found in Hinduism). There are countless other examples, and devoted fans can look up these beings online and in literature and read about their history. Pearson (2003) argues that ancillary texts are central to cult TV. In this case, the ancillary texts that the series refers to were often written long before *Supernatural*—sometimes even long before the invention of television.

Through occulture and supernatural urban legends, *Supernatural* is a playground for exploring "what ifs" concerning religious imaginations: what if the urban legend of Bloody Mary were true ("1.05 Bloody Mary"); or what if someone had the ability to control others' thoughts (2.05 "Simon Said")? This narrative strategy can be understood in terms of Partridge's (2004–5) notion of a "dilution thesis": "Mass culture and modern restatements of spirituality dilute traditional religious worldviews;
they erode 'serious' occult beliefs by diluting them... 'the occult' may even become, as
is sometimes (not always) the case with astrology and Ouija boards, simply fun with a
supernatural edge" (1:122). Just as Ouija boards and tarot cards can be viewed as a
playful entry to a magical world, so too can *Supernatural*. Ellis discusses legend-
tripping, which is another entry to the supernatural realm as it "generates excitement
with an alternative, play-like redefinition of reality in terms of a supernatural 'dare.'
Teens need not believe that they are visiting a real witch's grave or putting themselves
in real danger. By means of the legend-trip, they temporarily escape what they
perceive as a restrictive, adult-oriented, everyday world" (Ellis 2004, 137–8).
*Supernatural* offers viewers a similar escape, but of course it does so without the
trouble of actually having to visit a graveyard in the dead of night. I will return to the
role of urban legends when I discuss the series's playfulness. In *Supernatural*, the
occult becomes cool, while traditional religion is much less so. Ellis discuss the role of
the occult in popular culture and argues that "one motive for becoming interested in
the occult is to participate directly in the mythic realm, in spite of organized religion's
effort to institutionalize it" (Ellis 2004, 12). This motive is, on the one hand, reflected
in Dean's character as he constantly taunts Sam for praying and believing in God. On
the other hand, traditional religion is often used in the series to pull all the strings
together and create coherency. Partridge (2004–5) discusses *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
in relation to cool occulture:

[3.5] It is not the popular artifact which is invested with subcultural capital,
but the occult themes informing the series which are "cool." If Buffy is cool,
it is because of the series' close relationship to actual occulture. Hence, to be
cool, to accrue subcultural capital, one needs to take these underlying ideas
seriously, to enter into the occultural world of rejected knowledge, and thus
to place oneself outside the mainstream. (1:132)

[3.6] Occulture is also a way of creating nearness and relevance. Schultze suggests:
"Religious stories often address the yearnings and experiences of everyday people, not
just the actions of the gods in some distant realm" (Schultze 2003, 180). On a basic
level, the incorporation of the occult appeals to us as a link to a magical world that
feels far closer to our lives than do distant gods, because the occult practices and
supernatural beings in *Supernatural* are brought into contemporary contexts. It is a
paradox that while the occult becomes cool as it places itself outside the mainstream,
it is increasingly mainstreamed. However, this paradox is hardly experienced by most
viewers because of the series's ability to incorporate intertextuality, thus preserving a
complex frame for interpretation.

4. Traditional religion revisited
The major themes in *Supernatural* include death, fate and destiny, and the end of the world. In fact, season 4 draws on a very explicit Christian inspiration as it includes the book of Revelation in the narrative. Naturally, the idea of revelation is transformed in several ways to provide narrative drive. On one hand, the concept of the apocalypse in TV serials is something of a paradox; the definitive nature of the end of the world seems incompatible with fictional narratives that are designed to go on forever. Still, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* depicted about eight different end-of-the-world scenarios over its life span. The title of episode 4.07 of *Angel* says it best: "Apocalypse, Nowish"; in TV series, the apocalypse is never the end, but rather the beginning of something new. On the other hand, in movies such as *Armageddon* (1998), *End of Days* (1999), and *2012* (2009), the threat of the apocalypse provides a strong narrative force by establishing a deadline by which a resolution must be found. The apocalypse serves as an excellent example of what Sconce calls the challenge of repetition and variation to the cumulative narrative of a TV series (Sconce 2004). *Supernatural* shares an interest in existential questions with established religion, but the connection to occulture gives these old (perhaps worn-out) topics a fresh feel. Occult rituals such as burning the bones of the dead, summoning demons, and using hex bags to attain goals are often connected to the overall narrative and the character development of Sam and Dean. In a sense, topics from traditional religion are legitimized simply by proximity to occulture. Partridge argues, "Few would rather plough through tomes on sociology, history, classics, religion and theology than watch *The X-Files* and *Supernatural* or read *The Da Vinci Code*" (2008, 122). Thus, familiar religious themes are repackaged for our enjoyment. Davie's concept of "believing without belonging" (2007) helps us understand the appeal of this repackaging. State churches and traditional religions in general have not been able to meet the needs of people living in modern societies, and rather than maintaining a lifelong commitment to their faiths, people constantly transform religion according to their life situations (Davie 2007). Davie and Lynch agree that the role of religion in the modern West is, at least, ambivalent. Lynch argues, "On the one hand, we can see images and ideas within popular culture that suggest that 'God' has at best a marginal significance for many people today...On the other hand, interest in 'God' still seems very much a part of Western culture" (Lynch 2002, 104). *Supernatural* reflects this ambivalence by confirming the existence of "a god," but simultaneously questioning the omnipotence of the Christian "God."

Davie argues that institutionalized religions are often considered static, unable to engage in dialogue and adjust to new demands. Fictions, on the other hand, are not only able to engage (thanks to their visual appeal) but eager to meet the spiritual needs of their audience. In Giddens's (1991) terms, we can understand our altered relationship with religion as associated with self-reflective individuality. The individual approach to religion common in late modern societies opens us to such narratives and
gives them relevance, as we are in a constant process of reaffirming and reevaluating ourselves and our place in the world. Giddens (1991) argues that the future of the individual is open and thus problematic. Our fate is affected by our actions and decisions. It is frequently noted in *Supernatural* that fate can be negotiated and destinies altered. Destiny becomes an even more penetrating theme for Sam and Dean from season 2 onward, and is a prominent theme in other contemporary television shows as well. *Heroes* (2007–) updates the well-established American superhero genre, as a group of ordinary people discover that they have supernatural powers and use these powers to try to save the world. In an entirely different setting, *Lost* (2004–) deals with the question of predestination, as survivors of a plane crash end up on a mysterious island. In *Supernatural*, destiny becomes yet another playground for ever-changing perspectives. At different points in the series, either Sam or Dean is portrayed as "chosen." While Sam is more eager to fulfill what he believes to be his destiny, Dean constantly doubts that the angels are "religious authorities." On the one hand, *Supernatural* is about choosing a life path, following your destiny, and accepting the sacrifices you make; but on the other hand, it constantly challenges the notion of a fixed destiny.

[4.3] A great number of TV series deal with the issue of death. In *Pushing Daisies* (2007), Ned can bring people back to life with a touch, but only for a minute; if they stay alive longer, someone else will die. Death is a major theme in *Supernatural*, and here the ambiguity and shift in perspective become particularly visible; sometimes death is definitive, but at other times death can be negotiated or even reversed. Just as the representations of supernatural beings violate our expectations, notions of death, reincarnation, the afterlife, and heaven and hell are transformed again and again. While the boys' parents' deaths are both irreversible (so far, at least), the brothers escape death again and again. Dean is almost killed in a car accident, but is saved when John makes a deal with a demon to take him instead (2.01). Sam is killed and remains dead for some time, until Dean makes a deal with a crossroads demon and saves him (3.01). As a result of this deal, Dean has only one year to live, and at the end of this year he goes to hell (3.16); but he is yanked out of hell after four months by Castiel, who has different plans for him (4.01). The return to life, for however long, is legitimized within the diegesis of the show. Sconce (2004) identifies several narrative strategies used by TV serials (and familiar to most TV viewers) that push the resolution of the plot further into the future: the reluctant romance, the evil twin, the meat locker, and amnesia. We might label *Supernatural*'s strategy "'til-death-no-longer-do-us-part." Once again, concepts with strong religious connotations undergo mediatization by means of media logic.

5. Playful intertextuality in *Supernatural*
The transformations of religious content in *Supernatural* are also playful. The series's playfulness is often connected to intertextuality, which in turn creates variation and offers new perspectives on otherwise worn-out themes. Therefore, intertextuality in *Supernatural* becomes a tool to transform the series's banal religious representations. Koven (2003) discusses how popular horror films often rework motifs from fairy tales (for example, Cinderella motifs in *Carrie* [1976]), and in *Supernatural* 3.05 "Bedtime Stories" reworks popular versions of *The Three Little Pigs, Snow White,* and *Hansel and Gretel.* Intertextuality is a well-known narrative device of TV shows that are often labeled "quality TV" or "cult TV" (Johnson 2005; McCabe and Akass 2007). Pearson argues that these shows "construct their wide narrative worlds within dense webs of precedent and intertextuality, laying bare the device in a deliberately self-conscious manner designed to appeal to the knowing viewer eager for clues to the show's mythology" (Pearson 2007, 248). The playfulness with intertextuality serves several purposes here: (1) it makes the shows' religious themes seem less self-indulgent and more palatable to the modern viewer, (2) it ascribes legitimacy to *Supernatural* by placing the show in popular culture history, and (3) it invites viewers to read additional meaning into the text (note 5). For example, Dean says, "Follow the creepy brick road" (2.16 "Roadkill"), which is an obvious reference to "Follow the yellow brick road," a line from the classic film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Furthermore, the show's musical score incorporates classic rock, thus underlining its generic heritage from the road movie *Easy Rider* (1969) (note 6). The show simultaneously reworks classic movie themes, such as the killer clown (2.02 "Everybody Loves a Clown") from *It* (1990) and the transformation of the citizens of a small town into mindless killers (2.09 "Croatoan") from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and others. The intertextual references in *Supernatural* are numberless, and Dean and Sam's ever-changing aliases are among them. As references to earlier cultural products are woven into the religious representations in *Supernatural,* these representations are transformed as they are given (the possibility of) additional meaning.

The show also follows more metareflexive strategies. For example, in 2.18 "Hollywood Babylon" the Winchesters go on a Hollywood studio tour and visit the set of *Gilmore Girls* (2000–7); the tour guide suggests that they may be lucky enough to catch sight of one of the show's stars. Jared Padalecki, who plays Sam Winchester, was previously one of the *Gilmore Girls* stars himself, playing a character named, of all things, Dean. Once again, *Supernatural* uses narrative elasticity, which Pearson sees as a defining feature of cult TV programs (Pearson 2003). She argues that "narrative elasticity sometimes entails generic elasticity," and that "cult television programmes often supplement their linear narratives with a non-linear one that can go backwards and sideways as well as forward, encompassing multiple time frames and settings to create a potentially infinitely large metatext" (Pearson 2003). This strategy is visible in
Supernatural's 3.13 "Ghostfacers," which is generically and aesthetically constructed like the reality show Ghost Hunters (2004–), and in 4.05 "Monster Movie," in which Sam and Dean drive into Pennsylvania (a lightning flash reveals that the sign flickers to say "Transylvania"): the entire episode is in black and white and reworks movie classics like Frankenstein (1931), The Wolf Man (1941), and others.

Similarly, in 4.18 "The Monster at the End of This Book," Dean and Sam discover that an entire cult book series, naturally titled Supernatural, is built around their lives. As they look up "their fans" online, they encounter slash fan fiction, an actual element of the TV show's fandom (note 7). As Sam explains the term, which suggests that Sam and Dean are lovers, Dean comments, "They do know we're brothers, right?" and continues, "Oh, come on, that's just sick." Through irony and by mixing the fictional narrative and the series's status as a cultural product, Supernatural draws in the viewer and blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. Pearson argues that "the imaginary qualities of cult television render characters more highly defined and complex, more capable of cutting loose from their original texts, than non-cult characters" (2003). Thus, inter- and metatextuality heighten viewers' imaginative awareness by placing the main characters both inside and outside the diegesis of the series. In "The Monster at the End of This Book," the author of the Supernatural series turns out to be a prophet, a conduit of the word of God. Castiel explains, "One day these books will be known as the Winchester Gospel." Here, it is as if the show is playing with the idea of being contemporary religion in the making. It is more than implied that the brothers' fate is determined, and when they try to deviate from the path laid in front of them, they are forced back in line. But at the end of the episode, Castiel gives Dean a clue that allows him to go "off route," and suddenly the show seems to argue that one can take one's fate in one's own hands. Clark discuss these shifts in perspective in her study of teenagers' reception of supernatural narratives in popular culture: "Still, we need to recognize that television programs and films are polysemic: that is, they are open to many levels of interpretation, from the obvious and literal to the metaphorical and mythical" (Clark 2003, 47). Johnson argues, "As a consequence, these programmes...offer their viewers the possibility of divergent, even conflicting, interpretations within one text" (2005, 59). The intertextuality in Supernatural provides a frame for almost countless interpretations enabled by an open narrative. Johnson argues that "the narrative logic of the [The X-Files] is constructed around continuation, which is possible only if ambiguity remains as to the reality of the fantastic" (2005, 65). The same narrative device is used in Supernatural, but here it is beliefs, morals, and worldviews that are ambiguous. This openness is both appealing and inviting to audiences.

Supernatural not only references popular culture texts but also reworks oral narratives such as urban legends. In 2.15 "Tall Tales," we meet a vengeful alligator,
living in the sewer, that attacks a researcher doing animal testing. Urban legends also
serve as a driving force in *The X-Files*. Episodes of both *The X-Files* (2.02 "The Host")
and *Fringe* (1.16 "Unleashed") rework the classic urban legend of alligators in the
sewers (Brunvand 1981), also giving it a supernatural twist. Urban legends are a
folklore subgenre, and are by nature transformative. Folklore scholar Brunvand
argues, "The corollary of this rule of stability in oral tradition is that all items of
folklore, while retaining a fixed central core, are constantly changing as they are
transmitted, so as to create countless 'variants' differing in length, detail, style, and
performance technique" (Brunvand 1981, 3). As urban legends enter television fiction,
they undergo yet another transformation, and in this one even the core is subject to
change; for example, the beast living in the sewers might be a generic hybrid
monster, as in *Fringe*, instead of an alligator. The reworking of urban legends in
*Supernatural* underlines how familiar aspects of American culture are drawn in and
seen from new perspectives as part of a general strategy. Although some elements of
the show encourage humor, other elements evoke other emotions, such as empathy or
sorrow.

6. Religion reimagined?

[6.1] Even fictional stories enable us to imagine the consequences of our and others' actions. By identifying with a character in a story, we consider not just what the character should do but also what we might do in similar circumstances (Schultze 2003, 179).

[6.2] The theory of mediatization tells the story of a Western society that ascribes more and more value to the role of the media. Mediatization not only causes institutional change, but can affect our own actions and imaginations. Popular culture products reflect an increasing demand for complex narratives that give people food for thought rather than representing a single worldview. References to religion, popular culture, and occulture invite viewers to engage on different levels. Television series are unique in their ability to produce long-term changes in our imaginations. Pearson argues, "Cinema reaches the end far too rapidly for those of us who prefer our solutions almost infinitely delayed, our imaginary worlds almost infinitely expanded and our middles almost infinitely elaborated" (Pearson 2007, 248). As institutionalized religions take a back seat to media when it comes to recirculating religious representations and messages, media narratives become central providers of material that shapes religious imaginations. The main focus of this paper has been how *Supernatural* offers new perspectives on religious concepts, and I argue that, because it does so, the series is a frame for renegotiating our religious imaginations. An investigation of *Supernatural* audiences and in particular of devoted fans would help determine if and how this renegotiation manifests in audiences. *Supernatural* has
several of the characteristics that Pearson identifies in cult TV. Hills discusses cult audiences and proposes the term "neoreligiososity" when considering cult fandom (Hills 2002). It is beyond the scope of this essay to thoroughly enter into such a discussion, although it is an obvious next step in research into religion and TV fictions. However, that fictional narratives can be used to legitimize belief systems is one of the points in Clark's study of American teenagers' reception of the supernatural. Clark notes, "They cited a variety of evidence for their views [imaginations about aliens], including television programs or films such as Un solved Myster ies, Contact, Independence Day, and The X-Files" (Clark 2003, 3). Furthermore, Winston argues that "watching television is a link in the chain of sacred storytelling, a latter-day version of Western traditions, such as hearing scriptures, 'reading' stained glass windows, or absorbing a Passion Play" (Winston 2009a, 2). The real impact of a continuous mediatization of religion remains to be fully grasped, but Supernatural certainly plays a role in this process.

7. Acknowledgments

[7.1] Thanks to Annemette Traberg for introducing me to the wonderful world of the Winchesters. I am indebted to Professor Stig Hjarvard for his comments on earlier drafts and for engaging with me in ongoing discussions of the concepts of mediatization and banal religion. I also owe thanks to Assistant Professor Lynn Schofield Clark for the inspiration to look at changing perspectives in TV fictions and to special issue editor Assistant Professor Catherine Tosenberger for useful input on the folklore aspects. The Danish National Research School for Media, Communication, and Journalism (FMKJ) funded this essay and made it possible. Thanks!

8. Notes

1. A comprehensive analysis of mediatization processes in regard to religion in TV fictions would include a greater historical perspective in order to detect long-term changes, and a reception study to uncover the impact of TV fictions as agents of religious change (Hjarvard 2008). This more comprehensive analysis is the focus of my PhD dissertation, to be completed in 2011.

2. As a media scholar, I cannot claim any in-depth insight into folklore studies, but certainly it is helpful to consider "the attitudes of the community" (Oring 1986, 124) toward a specific narrative when labeling something "religion" or "religious."

Heaven might better match our expectations, Landon's character is yet another example of a mediatized image of an angel as it fits in a contemporary frame.

4. Studies of the brain (Gallagher et al. 2001) have shown that humans can attribute thoughts, beliefs, and desires to other people and objects. Scientists label this cognitive function "adopting an intentional stance." The human ability to attribute mind and intentionality to others is central to understanding the role of religion, as supernatural agents are often construed as intentional agents. Our ability to ascribe minds to nonliving objects connects to Boyer's (2002) argument that gods are often human-like (they have minds, beliefs, and desires) and Guthrie's (1993) argument that, within religion, objects, beings, and elements found in nature are often anthropomorphized.

5. This invitation is reflected in fans' online responses to Supernatural, as discussed in Tosenberger, "'Kinda Like the Folklore of Its Day': Supernatural, Fairy Tales, and Ostension," in this issue.

6. For Supernatural's youthful audience, the references to sixties rock help legitimize or revitalize cultural products that they might only be familiar with through their parents. Contemporary popular culture phenomena can often encourage viewers to revisit old texts; a Danish newspaper study illustrates how the Twilight series inspires readers to read classics such as Pride and Prejudice, Romeo and Juliet, Wuthering Heights, and A Midsummer Night's Dream, because Twilight's main character, Bella, reads these works in the series (Petersen 2009).

7. Supernatural slash fan fiction is analyzed by Tosenberger (2008).

9. Works cited


Praxis

"Hey, check it out, there's actually fans": (Dis)empowerment and (mis)representation of cult fandom in Supernatural

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[0.1] Abstract—As Supernatural enters season 5, its status as a cult hit is becoming more evident both in the press and within the text of the series itself. The open acknowledgment of the show's fandom within 4.18 "The Monster at the End of This Book" has altered the power relationship between the product and its fans and brought on controversy regarding the creative team's attitude toward fandom in general. To investigate this relationship between Supernatural and its devoted fans, I will first develop a working definition of the cult fan and illustrate the many ways in which Supernatural is an ideal cult text, despite not having been marketed by its producers and network as such. Having set forth this framework, I will outline the dynamic that existed between Supernatural and its cult fans prior to "The Monster at the End of This Book." I will then demonstrate how "The Monster at the End of This Book" simultaneously empowers and disempowers Supernatural's cult fans by representing them within the show's diegesis and what the consequences of these (mis)representations might be.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan communities; Internet; Television


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1. Introduction

[1.1] With her hand clutched to her chest, a young woman gazes teary-eyed at the two men standing, bewildered, in front of her. "The best parts are when they cry," she declares, emotion riding high in her wavering voice. The woman, publisher of the cult-novelized comic series Supernatural, is discussing one of her favorite elements of the beloved stories: that Sam and Dean, the male protagonists, are in "touch with their emotions." What she doesn't know, however, is that the two men listening to her speak are in fact the "real" Sam and Dean Winchester. The joke here is that the "real" Sam and Dean are characters on a television show, Supernatural, and we, as viewers watching the program, recognize this meta-nod to the show's own die-hard fans.
Episode 4.18 "The Monster at the End of This Book" is divisive among Supernatural fandom precisely because of this open address to the show's core group of fans. Viewed by some as playful and inclusive, and by others as harsh and demeaning, this season 4 offering illustrates some of the ways that Supernatural and its creative team have responded to its status as a cult text with a dedicated following. While its relationship to fandom is most explicitly explored within the context of this particular episode, Supernatural and its ancillary products provide many opportunities to investigate the level of interaction between producer and cult fan. How much power and respect does Supernatural's creative team really extend to their fan base? Are cult fans being given temporary, controlled access to their favorite program, or are they taking power by acting without invitation? If so, how are Supernatural's producers retrieving that power? Drawing on the work of Matt Hills, I will outline what it means to be a cult fan and why Supernatural has found success as a cult show before placing the program in a broader context of the currently changing landscape of television fandom in order to more clearly see how Supernatural relates to its cult fans.

Supernatural is not the first television program to self-reflexively acknowledge its dedicated fans or the first to approach its fan base in ways that go beyond the product/consumer relationship. As discussed by fandom theorists such as Henry Jenkins, John Tulloch, and Sharon Marie Ross, spectatorship and reception are no longer adequate terms for how the modern fan operates in today’s media culture. The barriers between the cult fan and the producer are being both challenged by the fan and willingly altered by the producer. Interested viewers are being allowed, even asked, to affect the action that will take place on their screen. Sometimes fans so loudly demand to be heard that success depends upon the producers conceding to viewer opinion. However, the power accorded to the fan is still most often at the mercy of the producers of the text. Supernatural's "The Monster at the End of This Book" highlights the tenuous power cult fans actually possess and how the show's creators can both misrepresent and disempower them just as easily as they can do the opposite.

Before looking more closely at "The Monster at the End of This Book" and analyzing Supernatural in terms of the relationship between the producer and the cult fan, it is first important to understand what cult fandom means and why and how Supernatural fits within that category (note 1).

2. Neoreligiosity, interactive communities, and online fandoms

In a 2007 study for Television and New Media, Victor Costello and Barbara Moore conducted "a web-based survey to collect qualitative data about online fans' use of the Internet for keeping up with a favorite television program and for interacting
with other fans" (124). In doing this, Costello and Moore encountered a community of sophisticated fans devoted to the exchange of meaningful ideas in online forums. The collective body of an online fandom changed the private act of viewing a television program alone in one's home into a group activity that significantly enhanced emotional involvement (Costello and Moore 2007, 127). Sara Gwenllian-Jones describes these fans as such:

[2.2] Fans combine conspicuous, enthusiastic consumption of official texts and spin offs with their own creative and interpretative practices. Fans are viewers who do not merely watch films but also write fan fiction and cultural criticism, produce fan art, scratch videos, websites and so on, and who seek out other fans who share their enthusiasm...Fans are distanced from "ordinary" consumers because their modes of consumption are considered excessive. (qtd. in Costello and Moore 2007, 127)

[2.3] Gwenllian-Jones's definition of a fan is quite similar to what Matt Hills defines as a cult fan. In Hills's estimation, the cult fan shares with the fan "a deep personal and emotional involvement" wherein being a fan constitutes part of the symbolic project of self (2000, 73). But cult fans, both fascinated and frustrated by their chosen text, will challenge "discursive and productive monopolies" and "delegitimate institutional authority" through fan activities (Johnson 2007, 291). In other words, a fan of the television program Grey's Anatomy may discuss Meredith and Derek's weekly fights during the morning carpool and engage in a brief connection over the shared experience of watching the primetime soap. Meanwhile, a cult fan might log into ABC's online forum, criticize McDreamy for his churlish behavior, lambaste creator Shonda Rhimes for utilizing generic female stereotypes that he or she finds personally offensive, and then create a piece of fan fiction to "correct" the text to represent their own marginalized interests, such as the desire to see "MerDer" break up for all time. Cult fans may even organize campaigns to make their interests known, such as shipping bottles of Tabasco sauce or pounds of peanuts to producers, as was done in an effort to save the WB's Roswell and CBS's Jericho from cancellation.

[2.4] These activities, which some theorists and critics such as Gwenllian-Jones have labeled as excessive, are what partly separate the fan from the cult fan. The behaviors, which go above and beyond the "normal" behavior of the fan, have helped to create an image of the cult fan as deviant or Other. Joli Jenson observes that the emotional "obsession" of the cult fan is labeled as "bad" or "dangerous," while an "unemotional, detached, 'cool' behavior" is permitted by society (1992, 20–21). Jenson rightly states that this outlook is "insulting and absurd" (24–25). Nevertheless, cult fans in today's media culture still sometimes experience what Sharon Marie Ross calls an "us vs. them rhetoric" that devalues the emotional investments that cult fans
make in their chosen text and privileges presumptively objective academic responses (2008, 48). To combat this definition of cult fandom as deviant and unequal, Matt Hills (2000) utilizes the concept of neoreligiosity to more clearly demonstrate the value of studying the cult fan's emotional response to a certain text.

[2.5] It is important to understand that the term neoreligiosity does not unequivocally mean religion as it is commonly used—that is, an institutionalized belief system such as Catholicism or Islam. Nor does neoreligiosity invoke cult practices such as those of the Branch Davidians or Heaven's Gate. As Hills observes, "organized (institutional) religion may have declined in the West, but a privatized and individualized space remains open to the voluntaristic adoption of sacred themes and ideas, and it is here that discourses of 'cult' media and fandom find specific and historical context" (2000, 76). In other words, Hills believes individual neoreligiosity is centered on loosely grouped themes that can be derived from encounters with the mass media, experiences that are defined in the private sphere by the individual and not by socially bounded institutions in the public sphere.

[2.6] Furthermore, "while religion and fandom are arguably different realms of meaning they are both centered around similarities of experience...At the very least, the discourse of modern religion may provide fans with a model for describing the experience of becoming a fan" (David Cavicchi, qtd. in Hills 2002, 118). Media forms can play a role in the "ongoing constitution and reconstitution of patterns of sociability and friendship," offering individual fans a reason to come together and form social bonds, and a social community that may develop around a television program fits readily into the similarities of experience that define neoreligiosity (Longhurst, Bagnall, and Savage 2007, 135). The television study conducted by Costello and Moore found that online fandoms fit the model of interpretive communities wherein "the participants have in common only an interest in a program, a desire to talk about it, and access to the Internet" (2007, 135). An interpretive community does not passively receive media content, but actively creates meanings that are partly its own, shaped by its institutional, sociohistorical, and textual context (Lindlof, Coyle, and Grodin 1998, 221; Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, 102). These meanings are variable and therefore nonnormative; in other words, interpretive communities allow for varied emotional responses to material that may or may not adhere to strictly provable academic approaches or widely accepted definitions. This consideration of dynamic readings that produce meaning by active engagement with the text, first put forth by critic Stanley Fish, recognizes the social legibility of a plurality of response (1980, 2085–89). Hence, for cultural studies theorists such as Hills, the subjective neoreligiosity of a fandom carries equal weight to supposedly more objective academic readings by critics. Thus, an interactive online fandom can produce new and multiple meanings for a text, whether it be a film, a novel, a television program, or any other kind of media. In
short, media is not just media anymore—how we receive it and share it offers the opportunities for new social communities and new ways of thinking.

[2.7] Cult programs, which tend to have what John Fiske (1987) calls producerly stories that invite viewers to contribute to their meanings, often inspire strong viewer loyalty and involvement (Ross 2008, 61). The faithful viewers that comprise online fandoms demonstrate an attachment to a program, its actors, and the characters and become emotionally invested in the storylines. The Internet has only enhanced this involvement as it enables discourse among like-minded cult fans across the globe and offers recourse to viewers who may feel as if they cannot engage in an in-depth discussion of their favorite shows with their immediate family and friends. Viewers become loyal not only to the program and its producers, but also to the social community that is centered upon it. This shared experience with a text can often transfer from online interaction to face-to-face meetings, gatherings/conventions, and, for some, long-lasting friendships (Costello and Moore 2007, 134). This interactive discourse of cult fans online is an excellent example of a privatized emotional response leading to the formation of kinship with similarly focused individuals based on the arbitrary designation of a media text as the point of convergence. The text becomes a "shared property" that "can prompt fans to lay claim to their status as fans," thereby further solidifying the bond to the television program and the interpretive community to which they belong (Ross 2008, 57–58). In the case of *Supernatural*, a cult community with a strong feeling of shared ownership has definitely taken shape. A closer look at the many ways *Supernatural* fits into the cult television model reveals why this is so.

3. "Demons I get. People are crazy": *Supernatural* as a cult property for the Other

[3.1] *Supernatural* by its very nature lends itself well to cult sensibilities. Catherine Johnson (2005) categorizes science fiction, fantasy, and horror television programs such as *Star Trek*, *The X-Files*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as prime examples of cult television. In Johnson’s estimation, programs that utilize elements of these three genres are by their nature candidates for developing loyal and dedicated followings. The prior studies of prominent fandom theorists such as Henry Jenkins, John Tulloch, and Camille Bacon-Smith, along with many others, support Johnson’s classification. With its use of fantasy and horror, *Supernatural* showed all of the markings of a potential cult show from the beginning, most particularly by its narrative grounding in monster-of-the-week cases and heavily mythological overarching storylines. Gwenllian-Jones states: "The fictional worlds of cult television are governed by logics that mark their distance from the everyday. Gods, ghosts and monsters are tangible presences in these realms" (2002, 85). Grounded in a world inhabited by monsters,
*Supernatural* takes place in a realm of the fantastic, but it is also a realm wherein the viewers' relationship to the fantastic and the horrific is complicated by a complex relationship with the Other that only increases the show's potential for cult success.

[3.2] The horror genre, Robin Wood states, depends upon patriarchal, capitalistic heteronormativity, the "racial, ethnic, and/or political/ideological Others" and the relationship between the two (qtd. in Benshoff 2004, 63). In other words, there is normal and there is monstrous, and when the two collide, horror is created. For the Winchester family, this Otherness that ostracizes them from normalcy is doubled. Firstly, they are Othered by their encounters with supernatural monsters and otherworldly beings. According to Noel Carroll, in works of horror like those outlined above by Wood, humans must regard the monsters they encounter as "disturbances of the natural order" (1990, 16, 57). For viewers, the monsters and ghosts that the Winchester brothers regularly hunt would qualify in that category, and in this way, *Supernatural* is a program that fits within the horror genre. However, in the Winchesters' world, that which society views as abnormal—the supernatural—is normal (Jensen 2008, 28). For Dean and Sam and other hunters like them, horrific and exotic creatures are part of their day-to-day lives, and as viewers, we are invited to deal with them in the same nonchalant fashion. While the supernatural is still horrible enough in principle for the Winchesters to dedicate their lives to protecting civilians from monstrous attacks, if the viewer assumes the Winchesters' matter-of-fact attitude regarding the terrors to be faced, the horror factor is lessened and a participation in the fantasy of acting as a supernatural hunter can be entered. Either way, *Supernatural* has invited the viewer into a world with a majority population of Others.

[3.3] The Winchesters are placed as Other in opposition to normative culture not only by their interaction with the supernatural, but also by the socioeconomic status that results from the necessary life choices of a hunter. Discussing the Winchesters' Gothic lives, Julia M. Wright states that by their mother's supernatural death, the boys are propelled from a comfortable, middle-class, nuclear family, suburban (read: normal) lifestyle to an unstable, insecure world wherein "two young children [are] left alone for days in a cheap motel, their food running out, the sole parent absent because of work, and a loaded shotgun leaning against the wall as their only means of protection" (2008, 7). Their father, John Winchester, was more drill sergeant than dad, training Sam and Dean to be warriors after their mother's terrible murder. They have no established home apart from their beloved '67 Chevy Impala and spend most of their childhood and adult lives on the road, changing schools frequently and staying in cheap motels or temporary squats. Strange is the province in which the Winchesters live, where playing soccer rather than training to bowhunt (1.08 "Bugs") or going away to college rather than living life on the road (1.01 "Pilot") are abnormal desires.
Economically, the Winchesters are lower class. In order to live and complete their work, they run fraudulent credit card scams, carry around a cache of illegal weapons and fake IDs, and frequently find themselves on the wrong side of the law. While in earlier episodes Sam attempts to be or passes for upwardly mobile and often holds Dean to higher standards of polite or legal behavior, by season 4 both brothers are firmly encamped in a blue-collar lifestyle and Sam displays less reluctance to engage in immoral or criminal acts. Any last claim to normalcy Sam might have made is gone by 4.09 "Wishful Thinking," when Sam states that he has no wish to go back to his college life and all he wants is "Lilith's head on a plate. Bloody." Sam's middle-class aspirations have been set aside and he, as well as Dean, operates outside of what Wright calls "the consumerist, homogenizing aesthetic of suburbia"; they are "freed of property, legality, and other middle-class constraints" (2008, 13).

The Winchesters' outsider status is reinforced by the fact they are punished whenever they try to transgress boundaries and lay claim to anything normative in terms of relationships or lifestyle. This is demonstrated most clearly with the fiery death of Sam's beloved Jessica at Azazel's hands (1.01 "Pilot") and Dean's rejection by his one and only serious girlfriend, Cassie, after his honest admission of his hunting activities (1.13 "Route 666"). Relationships are no more easily formed in the realm of the supernatural; among the underground network of hunters, the Winchester family remains distinct and separate. After John's passing, Dean and Sam discover a whole world of hunters that they never knew existed because their father often alienated his friends and preferred to work alone. Yet if Sam and Dean attempt to form bonds with other hunters or civilians, those people usually wind up dead or estranged. In later seasons, the Winchesters' interaction with the civilian population is so severely limited that most of their time is spent with demons and angels. In fact, the Winchesters are exiled from society to the extent that they are Othered from the human race in general. More than once, both of the Winchesters are referred to or refer to themselves as freaks having more in common with the monsters they hunt than with other people. Throughout the series Dean often reiterates the sentiment he expresses in 1.15 "The Benders": "Demons I get. People are crazy." By the end of season 4, there is even some disagreement over whether Sam, having ingested vast quantities of demon blood, is still human or if he has become one of the creatures they hunt.

The blurred line between human and monster leaves the Winchesters outside the realm of normalcy. If, as stated earlier, horror media and folklore are the genres of the Other, Supernatural's protagonists do offer an opportunity for engagement on that plane. Catherine Tosenberger links the work of Harry Benshoff to Supernatural by stating that a narrative that equates "their monsters with racial, gender, and especially sexual others" has a potential to be read as queer, and that Supernatural, in depicting its heroes as Other, opens up myriad possibilities for minority identifications (2008,
While Tosenberger is primarily concerned with questions of sexuality, viewers who may struggle to find representations of their likenesses on the television screen, such as female or queer audiences, may respond strongly to material that is offered from a position of the Other. While Jenkins states that cult fandoms in general are well suited for marginalized groups anyway, as participation and recognition within fandom are predicated upon contribution to the community and not social status, this does not adequately explain all the reasons why *Supernatural* in particular has struck such a chord with cult fans (1992, 213). Considering the show is predominantly focused on two white men who have thus far been presented as exclusively heterosexual and the show has been criticized for its attitude toward both women and minorities, it seems odd that the show has developed a strong cult following consisting of a majority of female fans (Tosenberger 2008, 7.9). While aesthetic appeal helps, that many consider the lead actors to be attractive is not enough to account for the devotion of the show's fandom. Somehow Sam and Dean, with a masculinity extended by cars, guns, and machinery and reinforced by their lack of permanent relationships with women, still seem to offer points of identification for viewers of different sexualities, genders, and races. Given the numerous ways the Winchesters are placed so far outside of patriarchal, capitalistic heteronormativity, enough substantial evidence is offered to raise the question: when the heroes are so definitively Other despite their gender, sexuality, and race, is there much need for any other Other? That is a question better addressed as its own topic altogether, but the Winchesters themselves may be enough to represent Other for some of the show's viewers.

This Othered status of the Winchesters links directly to the presence of the cult fan, for one characteristic of the cult fan is certainly this identification with the Other in relation to mainstream media: "They [the fans] do their own interpretation of the text, ignoring the opinions and desires of producers, advertisers, network executives, and critics. And because fans go beyond the accepted boundaries of viewing, they are sometimes ridiculed" (Jenkins 1992, 86). Apart from the denigrated Other status mentioned previously, cult fans may conversely feel a superiority or pride in belonging to a privileged group that knows more than the average fan. The cult fan believes they are different than the normal viewer and therefore take enjoyment from connecting to a serialized drama such as *Supernatural* that allows them to create a community fascinated with the finer details, multiple story arcs, and heavy mythology (Costello and Moore 2007, 135). It is precisely this privileged status of the cult fan that producers have begun to tap into to help secure the success of their product. Yet while the cult fan may be viewed as a powerful tool for those producers, the cult fan is not merely a mindless consumer machine. *Supernatural*'s evolution into a cult hit shows that while the producer most often has control over both the text and the fan, sometimes the fan can exert control over the producer and the text without being expressly invited or permitted to do so.
4. Off-screen and on: Changing the relationship between cult fan and product

[4.1] As the Internet's popularity as a meeting ground for cult fans increases, the commercial viability of directly appealing to that particular niche market also grows. Realizing the potential of an audience of extremely loyal viewers who would be more likely to spend extra dollars on goods tied into their favorite show, producers see cult communities online as opportunities to ensure built-in audiences with purchase power. A cult audience with a solid reputation can also lend a critical stamp of approval and offer creative credibility (Harris 1998, 46–52). But as producers turn toward cult fans on the Internet to serve the interests of consumerism, the question must be asked: Is the relationship between the cult fan and producer a two-way street, a give and take? Are cult fans, to borrow Tulloch and Jenkins's terminology, a "powerless elite," or do they possess real influence (1995, 145)? This question is at the core of the fandom debate over "The Monster at the End of This Book." To properly address the issue of possible disempowerment of the Supernatural fans by its producers, it is first necessary to look at the changing landscape of producer/fan relationships and how Supernatural fits into that picture.

[4.2] Tulloch and Jenkins approach the issue of empowerment by defining "the ideal audience" as one that mindlessly buys into whatever the producers are selling and then contrasting that ideal audience with the idea of "the resistant and creative audience," which is now commonly associated with cult fandoms by academics (1995, 4). Cult fans are a conduit between the mass audience on whom the success of a show so often depends and the producers who have the most control over the text. Cult fans may produce their own meanings, but Tulloch and Jenkins present an image of the fan as relatively powerless over the product. Their powerless elite was a conception of 1995, however, and in today's media culture, the powerless elite may yet be powerless, but they are in higher demand by the producers than they used to be. In Hills's estimation, "fan consumers are no longer viewed as eccentric irritants, but rather as loyal consumers to be created," and the "loyal consumption" by those fans certainly appeals to television producers (2002, 36). He goes on to state that the supposedly resistant fan has become integrated into "market rationalizations and routines of scheduling and channel-branding" (36). For Hills, if producers court fans, the fans may begin to feel that they are empowered, but in reality the cultural power they possess is very limited (38). Hills is careful to state, however, that locating cultural power solely in the hands of one camp or another is problematic, as it can never be firmly located with either the audience or the producer (43).

[4.3] By the same token, it is important to underline that however powerless fans might be, audiences are not "cultural dopes" and it should not be assumed that they
are unaware of their place in the producer/fan power structure (Grossberg 1992, 53). Cult fans may not be able to fully control the product they are consuming, but that does not mean that they consume without thought or care. And if the power balance between cult fan and producer is always changing, the increased visibility of the Internet's effect on the relations between the two parties has given cult fans greater reason to believe that they can exercise *more* control than ever before. There may be an expectation for an audience to follow the guidelines set forth by the producers, but the cult fan/producer relationship can be more accurately described as "processes of negotiation" that continually alter and develop over the course of a show's life (Ross 2008, 75).

[4.4] As producers branch out into the Internet, cult fans have begun to "see themselves as an audience that at least occasionally can exert influence over the creators of their programs, and therefore, to a limited extent, they are part of the creative team" (Costello and Moore 2007, 137). Forums such as Television Without Pity (TWOP) and Entertainment Weekly's FanTV have become effective forums for fans to voice their opinions and often be heard/read by television executives and writers (Torrez-Riley 2008). In the past, copyright issues made the relationship between the industry and online fans contentious, but savvy producers now utilize the Internet to cultivate buzz and maintain viewer loyalty (Ross 2008, 108). In a sense, producers have exercised control over online fans by inviting them to the party before they can crash it. Also, by receiving encouragement or acknowledgment from producers, writers, and actors—or at the very least permission to borrow copyrighted materials for fannish activities—the sense of family and togetherness among fans is increased. This strategy assumes that people will be far less likely to abandon a particular program if they are immersed in "lifestyle media"—that is, they feel attached the show's stars and production team, are engaged creatively, and have a large group of friends who view the program as well (Ross 2008, 117–18).

[4.5] Some television creators/producers are taking advantage of what the Internet has to offer them by way of connecting with fans, cult or no. *Veronica Mars* series creator and executive producer Rob Thomas and *Battlestar Galactica*’s co–executive producer Ronald D. Moore both contributed to a 2006 article in the *New York Times* that investigated the breakdown of the barrier between fans and television production. Moore observed that "television writers really work in isolation [and] the Internet has really changed the immediacy of the contact" between writers and viewers (Aspan 2006). TWOP's cofounder, Tara Ariano, has stated that while many television writers come to the message boards and check things out, a show runner like Rob Thomas is one of few who actually interact with the fans on the message boards. During *Veronica Mars'* 3-year run, Thomas utilized the forum as a focus group but then backed off once heavy criticisms of certain characters and storylines began to affect his narrative
decisions and undermine his own personal goals for the series (Aspan 2006). For Thomas, the execution of his individual creative vision became more important than listening to the opinions of the fans. *Battlestar Galactica* executive producer David Eick agrees: "I particularly want to know what the criticisms are...but the worst thing you can do is take any opinion or any small segment of opinions, and use it to drive you" (qtd. in Ross 2008, 248–49). In other words, show producers would like fans to be invested enough in their product to offer their opinions, but this does not mean that they are necessarily going to listen.

4.6 Fandom, however, does not always remain heard/read but not seen. Over the last decade, some producers have taken the behaviors of cult fans and utilized them as plot points or characters within their shows. Programs from *The West Wing* to *The X-Files* have produced episodes that contain sly, knowing nods to their devoted fans (note 2), while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* paid dubious homage to their fans in season 6 by featuring a trio of villains who could be categorized as obsessive fanboys with a desire for power (Johnson 2007, 294–98). *Xena: Warrior Princess* went further than most, with three episodes over the course of its six-season run featuring acknowledgment of its cult fandom (Ross 2008, 39–44). These types of episodes recognize cult fans and their opinions in a way that postings in online forums cannot—openly in the mainstream for even the casual viewer to witness. Cult fans may receive this recognition as a celebration of their unique connection to the show, while others may view this mainstream acknowledgment as a betrayal, in that their privileged relationship and special interests have been exposed for ridicule or critique by any passive channel surfer who might happen to be watching.

4.7 These two facets of teleparticipation—interaction with the producer online and acknowledgment by the producer onscreen—and the degree to which they are present are strong indications of how the producers of a program view their cult fans and how they are prepared to interact with them. While producers of *The X-Files* and *Lost* were aware from the start that there existed cult potential in their product, other programs were surprised by their cult status, developing into a cult property well after their inception (Johnson 2005, 100). The balance of power between the producer and the fan can be affected by the degree to which a production staff is prepared for the cult activity that surrounds their work. With *Supernatural*, the cult that has grown up around the program was seemingly unexpected and as a result, the power structures between creative and the fans are less controlled—strong but strained. In *Supernatural*'s case, an invitation to participate was offered after cult fans had already invited themselves, and "The Monster at the End of This Book" demonstrates the ambivalent nature of the show's producers' attitude toward its fans.

5. "Hey check it out, there's actually fans"
[5.1] With a cult fandom described as both "fiery" and "intense" by *Entertainment Weekly*, the comparatively small average audience of 2 to 3 million viewers makes up for its meager size with large amounts of passion and devotion (Wheat 2009, 30–31). When *Supernatural* premiered on the WB on September 13, 2005, the most readily apparent marketing strategy was that it followed *Gilmore Girls* on Tuesday nights in hopes that fans of Jared Padalecki, who had previously been on *Gilmore*, would follow him to his new show. Besides the presence of Padalecki, the only thing these two programs shared was a focus on a stronger-than-usual familial bond; the similarities began and ended there. The Gothic horror drama seemed an odd pairing with the sunny, chatty dramedy, but it posted reasonable ratings in the timeslot, retaining about three-quarters of its lead-in ([http://supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Ratings](http://supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Ratings)). Since its move to follow *Smallville* on Thursdays and the WB's merger with UPN to become the CW, *Supernatural* has retained modest but consistent ratings. Yet it has never gained heavy promotional backing from its network and remains a relatively unheralded stalwart in its lineup (Jester 2009).

[5.2] Unlike the watercooler sensation *Lost* (2004–10), which had millions of dollars of strong promotional backing and a creative team of self-described fanboys that purposely and skillfully marketed the program as a cult property, the WB/the CW did not put much weight behind promoting its product and *Supernatural* producers did not act, at first, as if they knew they had a potential cult hit on their hands (Porter and Lavery 2006, 158–62; Jester 2009). The cult fans of *Lost* were offered overt invitations to participate with the text via an official message board, interactive podcasts, hidden Easter eggs, alternate reality games, mobisodes, and other extras that required dedication that went well beyond that of the casual viewer. Fans of comic books and fans online were targeted as possible audiences for the serialized sci-fi mystery drama, and new approaches to marketing such as "Have you seen this person?" ads featuring *Lost* characters and "messages in a bottle" planted on shorelines increased the show's visibility while requiring people to dig a bit deeper if they wanted to know their meaning (Porter and Lavery 2006, 158–62; Lachonis and Johnston 2008). *Supernatural* fans, however, were offered the text of the series' episodes and little else. Whereas *Lost* invited fan activity as a means of drawing interest, maintaining hype, and making money, the fans of *Supernatural* came to the show without a strong invitation to participate and the producers played catch-up with their rampant interest. The program grew into a cult hit on its own steam.

[5.3] Ancillary products were created well into the series' run in season 3 as a response to overwhelming fan demand. In this way, *Supernatural* fans do seem to be Tulloch and Jenkins's ideal audience, as *Supernatural* fans are more than willing to pay for their extras and then ask for more. Thus far, *Supernatural* has spawned an official magazine, five books, season companion guides, an *Origins* comic series, a collection
of academic essays titled *In the Hunt*, and fan conventions held in Dallas; Los Angeles; Chicago; Orlando; Birmingham, UK; and Sydney, Australia—as well as the 2009 additions of conventions in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and Vancouver, British Columbia, where the show is filmed. This impressive tally of *Supernatural* properties does not even begin to touch on the vast quantity of fan fiction, videos, art, reviews, and meta discussion that are available online, including the open-content collaborative *Supernatural* wiki site (http://supernaturalwiki.com).

[5.4] *Supernatural* conventions are useful illustrations of the kind of fan loyalty and high level of interaction that *Supernatural* has created (note 3). These conventions allow access to the show's full roster of actors—from its two leads, Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, right down to one- or two-time guest stars, anyone who has appeared in a *Supernatural* episode is welcome on the convention stage. Unlike the fan conventions chronicled in Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1992), when it was difficult to drum up enough money for one or two actors to visit, *Supernatural* conventions may feature as many as 10 of the shows' actors. Conventiongoers may purchase weekend packages, brunch and cocktail/dessert hours with the stars, question and answer sessions, photo ops, autograph signings, auctions, or concert tickets for musicians Jason Manns or Steve Carlson. That these two performers happen to be close friends with series star Ackles (and have little to do with the series) is only one example of the kind of "friends and family" attitude that has become part and parcel of the *Supernatural* experience and one that fans don't seem to mind paying for (Zubernis and Larsen 2009, 56). Padalecki himself is known to pop into the audience for an impromptu bear hug, while other actors can be seen hanging out in the hotel bar and singing karaoke with the attendees (58, 61).

[5.5] For the fans who cannot attend conventions in person, those who do attend quickly share their experiences through online communities and individual journals. Conventiongoers race to the Web to post their photos and videos; some even post immediately after sessions end, or send text messages and pictures to online friends all over the world while the actors are still on stage. These gatherings, along with the accessibility of some of the show's actors on the Internet via blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, have earned *Supernatural* an immense amount of goodwill from its fans and are often cited in online journals as an impetus for viewer loyalty (note 4). One *Supernatural* fan wrote, "When you consider their accessibility to fans via conventions and the like, I’d say they've done a pretty good job of letting us know we're appreciated. Far more than the makers of anything else on television that I know of" (invisiblelove, April 3, 2009). Actor Charles Malik Whitfield (Agent Victor Henriksen) echoed the fans' sentiment at the 2008 Chicago Convention: "It's kind of like hanging out with family...it's a lot of fun to interact with fans and get their perspective on things" (Zubernis and Larsen 2009, 59).
But audience interaction goes beyond lighthearted fun; each convention inevitably brings on what fans term *wank*, with certain fans acting out of line while at the convention and/or angry gossip spreading about events afterward. Whether it be a person with an agenda (as with an audience member questioning Jared Padalecki's work with PETA at "Salute to Supernatural" Vancouver 2009) or a fan being too hands-on (as with the implementation of a "no touching" rule at Asylum 2009), fans have come to expect that there will be trouble whenever a large group is permitted to interact with the show's stars. However, even though the rules set forth are often broken, with the options of skipping conventions and angering fans or attending and making fans happy, each convention sees more and more of the show's actors making appearances.

It is not only postconvention wank that causes contention between fandom and the actors and producers of the program. Fan opinion also has direct repercussions on *Supernatural's* text. When fan comments reach series creator Eric Kripke, he often responds indirectly to fans' concerns via print and video interviews or replies directly to fans online, as when he posted on the Web site Daemon's TV (2008) regarding fan outrage over Sam calling Dean a "dick" in 4.06 "Yellow Fever." Kripke has, along with members of his writing staff, also revealed that certain story arcs and characters in the show have been altered, reconceived, or entirely axed as a result of fan reaction. Most notably, in season 2 the character of Jo Harvelle began as a strong female character and a possible romantic interest for Dean Winchester (2.02 "Everybody Loves a Clown"). She then shifted to more of a little sister figure and a damsel in distress (2.06 "No Exit," 2.14 "Born Under a Bad Sign"), before she was erased from the show entirely. The adjustment of Jo Harvelle and her exit from the narrative were based on the reactions from the show's predominantly female fan base, which immediately made clear they brooked no interference with the Winchester brothers' solid relationship by an outside female source (Borsellino 2008, 107–17). The writers attempted to add female characters to the mix again in season 3 with demon Ruby and thief Bela, but by season 4 had learned their lesson. The only new lead character added to the roster was Castiel, angel of the Lord and decidedly male, while Ruby was revealed to be a traitor and violently killed. Female characters, Jo Harvelle and her mother Ellen included, may make temporary visits in the future, but as for permanent fixtures in *Supernatural's* world, the writers now take heed of viewers' past reactions.

It is in the writers' room that most of the issues between the *Supernatural* cult fan and the show come to the fore. The relationship between writer and cult fan appears to be a double-edged sword; while the creative team has direct control over the text, they are pressured by *Supernatural's* incredibly vocal fandom. With *Supernatural's* fans having "discovered" and celebrated the text independently of a dedicated pursuit by the network and an overt invitation by its producers, the degree
of shared ownership felt is stronger than that of a program such as *Lost*, where the relationship between the product and fan has been calculated and controlled since the program's very inception. For *Supernatural*'s staff, the figure of the cult fan is both a boon and a burden, simultaneously assuring their power and threatening it. "The Monster at the End of This Book" is an effort to tip the balance back in the producers' favor while acknowledging that the program is nothing if not a cult show, buoyed by fans' emotional and economic attentions. Speaking of this episode, creator Eric Kripke stated at Comic-Con 2009: "I have such a tempestuous, loving, conflicted relationship with the online fandom that...I was attracted to the possibility of poking...very loving fun" (Gonturan74 2009). Whether or not this fun was in fact poked lovingly is one of the main criticisms that *Supernatural* fans brought against "Monster" and one of the most important to consider when discussing the power structures between *Supernatural* and its fandom.

6. The power of (mis)representation

[6.1] "The Monster at the End of This Book," written by Julie Siege (with story by Julie Siege and Nancy Weiner), begins with Sam and Dean Winchester visiting a comic book shop in the course of an ongoing investigation. This investigation, however, is promptly dropped when they are led to discover a series of cult novels titled *Supernatural* that mind-bogglingly chronicle every intimate detail of their lives. Attempting to track down the writer of *Supernatural*, the boys first hit the Internet, where they encounter a small but rabid following that Dean observes "sure do complain a lot" while dividing themselves into fervent factions of Sam Girls and Dean Girls. Dean takes issue with a complaint lodged by poster "Simpatico" (which happens to be the username of an actual TWOP critic), while Sam makes particular note of a genre of fan fiction wherein the two brothers engage in a sexual relationship (Tosenberger 2008, 1.1). "As in Sam slash Dean. *Together,*" he explains to Dean, leaving them both feeling disturbed. The reality is that in *Supernatural* fandom, this Sam/Dean genre, identified by the slang term *Wincest*, is one of the most popular romantic pairings, taking up an estimated 40 percent of the online creative output (Turner 2008, 157).

[6.2] If the winking joke had stopped there, perhaps "The Monster at the End of This Book" would warrant only a passing mention in critical studies of fandom as an audacious acknowledgment of cult fan criticism, fiction, and community, but the knowing nods continue on and much more pointedly. In-jokes are made for the devoted fan to catch, such as the pseudonym for the author of the pulp series within the episode, Carver Edlund, which is a combination of series writers Jeremy Carver and Ben Edlund. In trying to discover the true identity of Carver Edlund, Sam and Dean meet with the book's publisher, Sera Siege. Her name, another mash-up of
writers' names, is only listed on the IMDB information for the episode and is never mentioned in the show; hence, learning this additional information is a reward only for fans who go the extra mile and do their research. That the publisher is a woman (and not a man, as "Carver Edlund" is revealed to be) underlines this direct and debatably hilarious send-up of the stereotypical Supernatural fangirl. As she discusses Supernatural, Sera lingers over her complete set of the novels, caressing their bindings lovingly. Suspicious of Sam and Dean's true intentions in pursuing information about the novels, she quizzes them about the Winchesters' birthdays, favorite tunes, the make and model of Dean's car, and Sam's score on the LSATs. She refers to Sam and Dean as "my boys," a common practice among SPN fans, and reveals her pentagram tattoo, which matches the design the Winchesters each have inked on their chests (hers is inked in a far more suggestive and private location). Going a step further, the publisher is portrayed by actress Keegan Connor Tracy, whom fans in the know would recognize as having previously appeared as grieving widow and future murder victim Karen Giles in 2.07 "The Usual Suspects" (note 5).

Fan response to the three opening scenes of the episode ranged from honored and amused to embarrassed and hurt. Some others were plainly unsettled by the open acknowledgment of fandom and all of its quirks, most especially the mention of slash fiction (Charles 2009). (Episode recaps with fan reaction are available at http://tvguide.com, http://buddytv.com, and http://supernatural.tv.) One fan, Zara, posted a positive response at supernatural.tv: "I loved this eppie! All the references to the real life fan stuff, from Sam girls, Dean girls, to the comments about slash and the negative comments that are sometimes posted on the boards...It was a very cool way to validate us fans" (Supernatural.tv 2009b). More negative responses were archived at other communities, some of which focused on the representation not just of fangirls in particular to Supernatural, but also of fandoms in general. Sometimes referred to as the "Fandom is Fight Club" rule—that is, "Don't talk about fandom"—many fans were bothered by their online activities being so blatantly exposed. Some fans expressed worry about mainstream viewers not really understanding the full context of cult fan practices, while others were concerned they'd suddenly face uncomfortable questions from casual fans regarding slash fiction and the like.

Supernatural has never shied away from shining a light on the Internet and the practices of its users, so perhaps this collision was a natural progression given the closeness of the online world to the text. Sam's laptop is his main research tool and he visits amateur and fan communities to find leads on possible cases; Internet sources have been continually reaffirmed within the show's diegesis to be worthy source material (Brickley 2008, 271). Fun has even been poked before at the expense of online fans of the supernatural: 1.17 "Hell House," 3.13 "Ghostfacers," and 4.17 "It's a Terrible Life" featured the duo Ed Zeddmore and Harry Spengler, bumbling amateur
ghost hunters, Webmasters of hellhoundslair.com, and pointedly, huge Buffy fans. With "The Monster at the End of This Book," Supernatural turned its gaze onto its own community of fans, and in so doing, further blurred the boundaries between fan and product.

[6.5] "The Monster at the End of This Book," however, references not only its fans, but also its creators. When Sam and Dean locate the true author of the Supernatural books, Chuck Shurley, they find him holed up in a run-down house, self-medicating his headaches with alcohol and writing his novels for no monetary gain. Once the brothers explain that Shurley has somehow been writing about their real lives, Chuck determines that "there's only one explanation. Obviously I'm a god...I write things, and they come to life. I'm definitely a god. A cruel, cruel, capricious god. The things I put you through!" This bombastic assumption shows the writer as laughably egotistical and presumably is supposed to show that the Supernatural writers are poking loving fun not only at the fans, but also at themselves, especially when Chuck, dismayed, continues: "Did you really have to live through the bugs? What about the ghost ship? I am so sorry. I mean, horror is one thing, but being forced to live bad writing..." These self-deprecating references are to episodes 1.08 "Bugs" and 3.06 "Red Sky at Morning," with which Eric Kripke has mentioned being disappointed at their quality (Knight 2007, 50–51, 2009, 12–13). This self-reflexive exercise jokingly positions Eric Kripke as an all-knowing, all-powerful god and we, the fans, as his followers. While this is a relationship referred to in jest, underneath the joke lies a kernel of truth, even more so later on when Chuck is revealed to be a prophet whose "Winchester Gospel" has earned him protection from the archangels.

[6.6] For while Kripke and company may be laughing at themselves, they do so from the comfort of the writers' room, a serious position of power. In doling out jokes, there is the presumption that by directing criticisms at themselves there will be a feeling that they are laughing with the fans, not at them. But jokes made at the writers' and fans' expense have unequal costs, as the writers have nothing to lose by making fun of themselves. "The Monster at the End of This Book" reinforces the power of the writers and reminds cult fans that they may only receive what is offered. In this situation, the cult fans' activities and emotional attachments are exposed for mainstream consumption and the cult fan has no way to recall that information once it is released. The acknowledgment of fan behavior within this episode is not an overt invitation to participate, but a demonstration that the producers/writers of the program are aware of exactly what their fandom is doing without an invitation. Whatever the producers' stated intentions, whether their die-hard fans view this as an inclusive or exclusive act, a compliment or an insult, the end result is the same. The cult fan is reminded that s/he cannot decide what is to be included and excluded, who can be complimented or insulted. Fans may feel a certain way in response to the episode, but
they cannot change it. They can post about their anger or their delight, but they cannot create an official episode of their own wherein the cult fan is depicted in a manner of their choosing. By representing their fans in the manner they see fit within the canon of the program, *Supernatural* has wrested some control back to the side of production and left the fans to either accept it or not. Although not a harsh disciplinary action like the villainy of the obsessive fan trio in *Buffy*’s season 6, "The Monster at the End of This Book" can be seen as a reminder to *Supernatural* fandom, delivered with a smile, of who exactly is in charge.

[6.7] As if to show that it was not a gesture of ill will, the acknowledgment of fandom within the show's canon will apparently continue in season 5. In 5.01 "Sympathy for the Devil," Chuck turns to his self-professed number-one fan, Becky, for help when he is unable to get a message to Dean and Sam. Taking a break from writing a Winchest fic in order to speak with Chuck, Becky is excited by Chuck's call but quickly becomes disappointed when she believes Chuck is merely making fun. After chastising Chuck for treating her like a crazy fangirl who doesn't know the difference between fantasy and reality, she giddily proclaims: "I knew it!" when he informs her the stories are real. This "I'm honored/I'm insulted/I'm honored" flip-flop of a reaction by Becky echoes fandom's reaction to "The Monster at the End of This Book." Becky, unlike the fan figures depicted in *Buffy*, is then enlisted as an aid to the heroes' quest, helpfully getting the important message to Sam and Dean (and taking an opportunity to coo over Sam and feel him up in the process). Becky may return in later episodes or she may never show up again, but the message to the show's fans is clear. Cult fans of *Supernatural* may be vocal, sometimes demanding, sometimes difficult, but a cult show needs its cult fans in order to continue on. Whether *Supernatural*'s cult fans like it or not, there will always be Sera Siege, tearing up over the boys' hardest moments, and there will always be Becky, smiling at her computer screen as she types up her latest Winchest story. Offensive to some, endearing to others, *Supernatural*'s producers may (mis)represent *Supernatural*'s dedicated fans, but in the end, Sera and Becky are the only cult fans over whom the producers have complete control. And while *Supernatural*'s real cult fans will never have more power over the text than its producers, that does not mean they are entirely powerless.

7. Acknowledgments

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8. Notes
1. Throughout, the term producer will be used for the sake of ease and clarity to represent not just those who hold the title of producer, but also those involved in the preproduction, production, and postproduction of the text, i.e., the writers, directors, editors, and network executives.


3. Creation Entertainment is responsible for the bulk of *Supernatural* events. EyeCon, held in Orlando, Florida, and hosted by Interstellar Productions; All Hell Breaks Loose, held in Sydney, Australia, and hosted by The Hub Productions; and Asylum, held in Birmingham, UK, and hosted by Rogue Events, are among the few not part of Creation Entertainment's catalog. The *Supernatural* team has also made appearances at the San Diego Comic-Con. *Supernatural* fans annually hold an unofficial fans-only gathering called Winchester Con (or "Wincon") at changing locations.

4. *Supernatural* guest stars Jim Beaver (Bobby Singer), Chad Lindberg (Ash), and convention entertainer Jason Manns all hold Facebook accounts and leave them open to public consumption, while Samantha Ferris (Ellen Harvelle) has her own blog, samanthaferiss.net, where she communicates directly with fans. Season 4 addition Misha Collins (Castiel) has become something of a sensation with his Twitter account, where he converses with *Supernatural* fans who call themselves "Misha's Minions."

5. Other fandom nods within 4.18 "The Monster at the End of This Book" include the diner's name, "Kripke's Hollow," a combination of show creator's Eric Kripke's name and Stars Hollow, the fictional town of Padalecki's previous television program *Gilmore Girls*, with Luke's Diner as one of the main locales. Dean instructing Sam to use the Magic Fingers or watch Casa Erotica is a reference to previous episodes 2.13 "Houses of the Holy" and 2.04 "Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things," respectively.

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Praxis

Annihilating love and heterosexuality without women: Romance, generic difference, and queer politics in Supernatural fan fiction

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[0.1] Abstract—This essay examines the differing generic tropes and sexual politics evident in Supernatural slash and in J2 fan fic. We argue that while some stories within Supernatural fan fiction provide happy endings to the characters that are denied them in the show's canon, dark!fic instead focuses on the intensity and exclusivity of Sam and Dean's love, thus illuminating dangers at the heart of the one-true-love trope. We also argue that RPS written within the Supernatural fan community demonstrates greater adherence to conventional romance tropes and normative sexualities, and thus reveals important ideological constructs of heteronormativity.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan fiction; Gender; J2; Real person slash; Sexuality; Slash.

1. Introduction

[1.1] Within the realm of fan fiction, real person slash (RPS) is often constructed as the genre even slashers look down upon. Too easily associated with stalking, fanaticism, and tin hatism—tin hat is a derogatory term applied to fans who, other fans believe, fail to recognize the difference between fictional stories about real people and those people's real lives—RPS is banned from the largest fan fiction site, Fanfiction.net, because "it's considered okay to play with characters, but not with real people" (Lee 2003, 71). Despite its denigration, RPS fiction in Supernatural fandom is extremely common: according to the Super-wiki, RPS stories appeared within the first year of the show's history (http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Real_Person_Fiction&oldid=12623), there are numerous sites devoted to pairing the main actors (note 1), and as many as half of the stories being written by the fandom on LiveJournal are RPS. According to the Super-wiki, one explanation for the unusual popularity of RPS in Supernatural fandom is that "because the main pairing in
the fandom, Sam/Dean, is incestuous, slash writers uncomfortable with this have
turned to writing RPS, even if it is a genre they would have shunned in other
fandoms." Such an explanation does not account for the many authors who write both
slash and RPS, however, nor for the story challenges that include both genres (note
2). Popular fan fiction recommendation sites such as Crack Impala, general fan fiction
communities such as Supernaturalfic, and community sites such as the Supernatural
Round Table and the Supernatural Newsletter, for example, all deal with both
Supernatural slash and RPS. In general, it would appear that Supernatural fandom
acknowledges and accepts both genres equally.

[1.2] As the Super-wiki suggests, some fans' discomfort with Wincest may account
for some of the prevalence of RPS in the fandom, but we find a better explanation for
its popularity to be that RPS does significantly different work than the canon-based
slash, particularly in its construction of romantic relationships. Slash is a slippery
genre which has been defined multiply as buddy-story bromance, romance, or just
plain porn (or pr0n, as the case may be) (Bacon-Smith 1992; Scodari 2003; Lee 2003;
Kustritz 2003; Woledge 2005, 2006; Driscoll 2006; Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 2006).
One of the reasons for the difficulty of defining slash is that stories tend to contain
elements that can be ascribed to all three categories, and the meaning of the text can
shift depending on how different readers take up the stories in different times, places,
and cultures. There are certainly many similarities to be found between Supernatural
slash and J2 RPS (named for the actors, Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles), but there
are also fascinating distinctions: J2 RPS, which is not restricted by the familial
relationship in the canon, is far more likely to follow traditional narratives of courtship,
based in large part on tropes from romantic comedy, while slash is often based upon
the more "epic" narrative of "one true love"; J2 RPS tends to place the boys within
communities of friends and family, whereas the slash focuses in large part on the boys'
isolation; J2 stories are often light-hearted in tone, while the slash is often dark and
focuses upon images of claustrophobia, desperation, and suffering (unsurprisingly,
given the source text); and RPS stories are, on their surface, far more likely to deal
directly with issues of homosexuality, homophobia, and straight and queer politics
than is the slash.

[1.3] What is fascinating about the existence of two related, interchangeably enjoyed
and valued discourses in Supernatural fan fiction is that fans themselves have
organically created this distinction. That is to say: there is no reason, ultimately, for
this separation between the often more conventional romance of J2 RPS and the
sometimes isolated desperation of slash; fan fiction is famously capacious in the
narratives it encompasses, and alternate universe (AU) stories are not uncommon.
Supernatural fan fiction authors can, and do, write slash stories featuring Sam and
Dean that include many of the characteristics we ascribe to J2 fiction above, and J2
writers also craft stories that are as dark and angst-heavy as even *Supernatural* canon; nevertheless, it often seems that given the choice, even the choice of a genre so disliked as RPS, fans do choose to write distinctly different stories in J2 RPS than they do in slash. In one case, the author Aeroplane_art reworked what was originally a Sam/Dean AU, "Sky in a Box," in order to make it J2 by changing the characters' names to those of the actors associated with the show and their friends. Tellingly, one recommendation for the new version argued, "It somehow works even better as a J2 story" (Lexzilla, "J2 AU Recs," LiveJournal post). Reading a selection of both *Supernatural* slash and J2 RPS, we will examine the logic that allows a story to "work better" within the latter genre. We will argue that the distinctions between the two speak to the constrictions and limitations of both slash and popular romance: RPS stories, that is, provide narrative imaginings that are not so easily encompassed within the slash framework, and, conversely, the slash pairing provides something that cannot easily be subsumed within popular romance. Therefore, the separation of the two genres in *Supernatural* fandom reveals fans' own complex reactions to and negotiations of generic difference.

[1.4] Some of the restrictions and limitations at work within these genres have to do with the sexual politics inherent in popular romance and the cultural constructions of queerness. One of the aims of cultural studies is to examine so-called low culture texts—such as fan fiction—in order to understand the workings of ideology and to interrogate dominant cultural values. By revealing its social construction, *Supernatural* slash and J2 RPS show that popular romance offers a complex space in which romantic tropes can be both subverted and perpetuated. Furthermore, while both genres can tell us something about the negotiation and transformation of traditional romance tropes, they also reveal myriad questions about representations of same-sex desire in relation to both isolation and community. The latter is, for us, one of the most intriguing differences between J2 RPS and *Supernatural* slash. It just might be the case that happy endings for male/male pairs do not necessarily signal transgressive or subversive romantic relationships, and that directly dealing with issues of homosexuality does not necessarily signal a break from heteronormative narratives of romance and partnership.

2. *Supernatural* slash

[2.1] In "'The Epic Love Story of Sam and Dean': *Supernatural*, Queer Readings, and the Romance of Incestuous Fan Fiction," Catherine Tosenberger convincingly argues that *Supernatural* slash writers subvert their source text because "they make things happy—a consistent theme of *Supernatural* slash is that a romance between Sam and Dean will give them a measure of comfort and happiness that they are denied in the series" (2008, 1.5). She supports her argument with reference to "modern genre
romance novels," in which true love is represented as "oneness with the beloved." Incestuous love, she suggests, is, "arguably, the ne plus ultra of oneness, as lovers are united not simply in body and soul, but in blood" (2008, 2.1). In *Supernatural* slash, fannish representations of incest "posit Sam and Dean's romantic attachment as merely 'an extension and intensification' of their already overwhelming love" (2008, 4.8).

[2.2] While Tosenberger's reading of Sam/Dean stories certainly accords with much of the fiction currently circulating in the fandom, it does not encompass the Sam/Dean stories that explore their incestuous relationship as one of pain, desperation, and annihilation. Certainly, the "overwhelming love" that Tosenberger refers to—and which is clearly present in the source text and in most of the fan fiction, gen and slash, written about the show—can lend itself both to utopian explorations of "oneness with the beloved" and to more claustrophobic examinations of a too-close, too-intense pairing.

[2.3] These claustrophobic examinations of Sam/Dean love provide a commentary upon the very notion of "one true love" and the inherent dysfunction at the heart of that concept. Tosenberger acknowledges that the inability of Sam and Dean to form romantic attachments in the show leads to an "intense, exclusive, excessive" love between the characters. She argues that this love is "not necessarily romantic, [but] our culture codes romantic love as similarly excessive, so the show makes it very easy to read Sam and Dean's excessive love as romantic" (2008, 2.2). While we agree, we also argue that when *Supernatural* slash stories represent "one true love" in negative ways or subversive ways, then the romantic nature of such excessive love is called into question; in other words, stories which focus on the dangerous or darker elements of the love between Sam and Dean may provide a critical commentary upon one-true-love romance, as opposed to iterations of it.

[2.4] Dark!fic and angst-heavy plots and characterizations have always been common in *Supernatural* fan fiction, echoing the dark tone of the show itself, and fans have, from the beginning, explored the dangers inherent in the intense love Sam and Dean share. As well, the show's representation of Sam and Dean's relationship, particularly in seasons 3 and 4, has increasingly focused on the pain they experience as a result of their intense codependency. After Dean sells his soul to bring Sam back from the dead at the end of season 2, the ground is set to examine the implications of his decision. Bobby's confrontation with Dean in 2.22 "All Hell Breaks Loose 2" reveals that Dean's decision is based not solely on love for Sam, but also on Dean's self-hatred; Sam castigates Dean for not being able to think of his own needs when he yells, "I don't want you to worry about me, Dean. I want you to worry about you" (3.06 "Red Sky at Morning"). In 3.11 "Mystery Spot," the Trickster attempts, in
typically unhelpful fashion, to teach Sam a lesson about love and self-sacrifice, arguing, "The way you two keep sacrificing yourselves for each other? Nothing good comes out of it. Just blood and pain," and in 3.16 "No Rest for the Wicked" even Dean, the model of self-sacrificing love in the first two seasons, says to Sam, "You're my weak spot. And I'm yours," and finally acknowledges his mistake in selling his soul: "Look how that turned out." Season 4, with its focus upon the rift between Sam and Dean, in part the result of the sacrifices they made for each other in the past, further examined the possibility that the love that Sam and Dean share may be as capable of tearing them apart as of holding them together. Seasons 3 and 4, that is, reverse the message of seasons 1 and 2 that they are "stronger as a family" (1.20 "Dead Man's Blood"), and instead represent the Winchesters' familial ties as a tactical weakness in the war against evil—"I mean," says Dean, "what we'll do for each other, how far we'll go? They're using it against us" (3.16 "No Rest for the Wicked"). Such canonical commentary reconfigures the intense love between Sam and Dean to examine the consequences of a relationship that seems to know no bounds and that has the potential to be both self-annihilating and utterly isolating.

[2.5] Therefore, though Tosenberger points out that "many fans argue that [Sam and Dean's] love is so excessive that sexual desire will not fundamentally alter their investment in each other" (2008, 4.8), it is nevertheless also true that the exploration of a sexual relationship between Sam and Dean in fan fiction, particularly in the light of the shifting canonical representations of their love, often includes a recognition of the problems that the addition of a sexual, romantic element brings to a pairing that is already too close. In Fleshflutter's "There's a Devil Waiting outside Your Door" (May 9, 2008, LiveJournal post), Carmen is horrified to find that she has been merely a stand-in for Dean in her affair with Sam: "Sam and me...wasn't about me at all. I was just...the next best thing, a stepping stone." Dean's response reveals the depths of his relationship with Sam: "Dean goes very still, shoulders hunched and his eyes fixed on her warily, nothing but a cornered animal. Then he straightens up and smiles without anything warm or happy to it. 'What fucking hope did I have of telling him no?'" That this story is set in the Wish universe Dean encounters in 2.20 "What Is and What Should Never Be" demonstrates that what might be wrong with Sam and Dean is not so much the nightmare world they occupy, but a lack of boundaries that means each risks being absorbed in the needs of the other, sometimes against his will.

[2.6] In Candle_Beck's "Gone Again" (August 23, 2008, LiveJournal post), it is the very prospect of close communion with the other which tears Sam and Dean apart as Sam seeks to avoid self-annihilation. Dean offers everything to Sam: "'If I can get all of you,' Dean says without looking over. 'You can have all of me.'" Sam can only argue helplessly back that "this thing is killing both of us" while desperately holding out against the unity Dean offers him: "Jesus, Dean, you already have almost everything."
This thing, it, it's too much, it's asking too much." Similarly, "oneness with the beloved" is coded as dangerous absorption in Britomart_is's "Me and the Devil Blues" and "Bury My Body down by the Highway Side" (April 23, 2008 and May 1, 2008, LiveJournal posts). In these post–season 3 stories, Sam takes Dean's demonic soul into his body as a way of saving Dean, and is left dealing with Dean's demonic impulses. When Bobby reacts with horror to what Sam has done, Demon!Dean!Sam attacks him: "When Bobby's body slams against the wall, Sam's not sure if it's him or Dean that does it. He leaves without checking for a pulse, needs to get out of there and never come back." The attack is met with matter–of–factness from Demon!Dean: "Should've let me kill him. He'll tell others. Hunt us." Sam replies that Bobby is "a friend." Dean's reply—"You don't need him. You have me"—is met with acceptance from Sam: "'I know,' Sam says, and it's true. He has everything he needs'" (April 4, 2008, LiveJournal post). This dark version of "oneness with the beloved" means that Sam's acceptance of social isolation and the literal annihilation of his independent identity is constructed in accordance with a demon's concept of need. The ending may be coded as romantic because the brothers achieve oneness and union, but the completion Sam and Dean find in each other is dangerous, and, importantly, it inevitably isolates them from a larger community.

[2.7] Tosenberger argues that the "threat of community expulsion that comes from the breaking of the incest taboo is simply not present for Sam and Dean" (2008, 5.3), but community expulsion does structure many of the Wincest stories. Typical explanatory slash devices include distancing the characters from reality by placing them in the alternate spaces of fantasy or science fiction, and isolating them (Woledge 2006, 101). These devices allow the characters' sexual relationship to develop at a distance from real–world politics, and they come together because their isolation or displacement creates a more intimate bond and greater frisson between them. In Sam/Dean, however, such isolation is at times figured as a source of pain.

[2.8] Xantissa's "Weapon of Choice" offers an excellent example. In his journal, John reveals his increasing awareness of young Sam's passionate feelings for Dean and asks, "Oh God, how could I have failed my sons so badly?!" John's self–recrimination comes from his desire to be "a better father" who "managed to give [his] boys a real life, not this constant fight" (July 2, 2006, LiveJournal post). Similarly, in Vamphile's "Sniper Vision," John notes the boys' codependency and worries about their closeness: he "was sometimes concerned, afraid, of this monster he'd created. Almost no personal space, few if any personal belongings, perpetual fear of death or abandonment and constant displacement. They had nothing to hold onto but each other." Later, when he finds them locked together in an embrace, John argues with himself: "It's wrong they're all they have" (March 24, 2009, LiveJournal post). The
world in which the boys turn to each other for something to "hold onto" is one of "fear" and "no personal space," not freedom.

[2.9] In some cases, the apocalyptic nature of Sam and Dean's story allows writers to explore their social isolation in shockingly literal ways. In Fryadvocate's "More Glory to Their Eyes than Blood," for example, Sam and Dean come together in their final moments, waiting for the destruction that has befallen everything else: "Dean opened his mind, opened his mouth, and leaned in to kiss Sam, long and hard. 'We're all there is,' Dean said, and Sam gave himself over with a soft cry" (March 30, 2006, LiveJournal post). Sam's final surrender mirrors that of the entire human race—their relationship can be consummated only in the absence of that world, and it is, in many ways, a form of consolation for the loss of that world.

[2.10] Similarly, Dru's "Lion and Lamb" (Drvsilla, January 22, 2009, LiveJournal post) ends with the apocalypse despite Sam's assertion that he and Dean managed to beat the system, that good and evil are "all dispelled because we finally got the chance to have that last big-bad confrontation, but instead of fighting to the death we fucked each other senseless." Their lovemaking is the catalyst that kills everyone, and afterward, they find themselves in a pastoral, prelapsarian near-wilderness. Their ability to live in a world where they "weren't afraid anymore, never had to be again" is directly connected to the unpeopled landscape they inhabit. Their love, and the happy ending, are only possible when everyone has been "absolved of mortality."

[2.11] What many Sam/Dean stories therefore explore is the character of a romantic or sexual relationship that is both too intense in its closeness and isolating by its very nature. In Sometimesophie's "To the End," the end of the world is averted, but Sam is utterly devastated by the loss of his community: "Afterwards, Sam cries; for Bobby and Ellen, for everyone else...Dean moves to put his hand on his shoulder and Sam flinches away as if burnt." Dean is unable to offer comfort because their physical intimacy is forced upon them—it is not a reflection of their love, but of the damage caused by outside influences, an act of desperation that must continue in order to keep darkness at bay. The story ends with Dean's hope that "maybe...some day soon, Sam will listen to him...Will hear I wanted to do it rather than just rape." His final thoughts are "None of it is going to be easy. It's the price they'll have to pay" (November 15, 2008, LiveJournal post).

[2.12] It would be a mistake to suggest that such dark explorations of Sam and Dean's love for each other somehow negate that love, or the pleasure that authors and readers find in exploring it. We would argue, however, that as a rift has developed between Sam and Dean in the show's canon, so too has Supernatural slash increasingly shown their love as annihilating or dysfunctional, or alternatively, shifted some of its focus to the Dean/Castiel pairing. The growing numbers of J2 stories (as
evidenced by, for example, the higher numbers of J2 stories in the latest Supernatural/J2 BigBang story challenge than in previous years) suggest to us that fans are, in part, finding more opportunities for happy endings and romantic, domestic bliss in a Supernatural-based pairing that is not bound by the show's increasingly dark canon.

3. J2 RPS

[3.1] Demon!Dean's assurance that Sam does not require friends in Britomart_is's "Me and the Devil Blues" and "Bury My Body down by the Highway Side" speaks to an important distinction between Supernatural slash and J2 RPS: community. In leodragon1 and pekover's "Can't Take the Sky away from Me" (Pekodragon, February 21, 2009, LiveJournal post), for example, Jensen breaks up with Jared and reflects that "he might have lost his lover, but he still had his friends; they weren't the same at all, but...they were better than nothing. He smiled fondly at them. They were a lot better." Such a consolation is almost unimaginable in the Supernatural world. Certainly, stories in which Sam and Dean achieve the core romantic trope of domestic bliss, which is signified in romance by the wedding or betrothal that ends the story (Kaler 1999, 1, 4; Smith 1999, 53–54; Regis 2003, 7, 21), can be found in Supernatural fan fiction. We argue, however, that the happy ending which provides the "peace of mind [that] is central to the convention of romance" (Marks 1999, 12), because of its familiar retreat to domesticity, is far more common in J2 RPS, and that the union achieved between Jared and Jensen not only is coded as healthy and stable, but focuses on what Sam and Dean often specifically lack: the support of a larger community, of which the romantic couple is only a part. Such narratives provide what critic Laura Kinsale argues is part of the psychological satisfaction of romance: "the integration of the inner self, an integration that goes on day by day...in the lives of women and men all over the world, because—yes—civilization and family and growing up require of all of us...a certain turning away from adventure, from autonomy, from what-might-have-been" (1992, 39).

[3.2] In order to compare the tropes in J2 RPS to those of conventional romance narratives, a definition of romantic tropes is necessary. Our consideration in this paper is not the romance of the heroic quest, but rather the romance of the love story, "the narrative of falling in love, with all of the obstacles, hesitations, failures, and delays that heighten tension and make the eventual consummation of the love relationship (whether physical or emotional) triumphant" (Strehle and Carden 2003, xiv). John Cawelti's early genre study found that in order for a story to be a romance "its organizing action" must be "the development of a love relationship...usually through a series of obstacles which need to be overcome," resulting in a conclusion which must affirm "the ideals of monogamous marriage and feminine domesticity" (1976, 42).
Although Cawelti predicted in 1976 that "the coming of age of women's liberation will invent significantly new formulas for romance, if it does not lead to a total rejection of the moral fantasy of love triumphant" (42), the extent to which the romantic formula has, in fact, been transformed by second- and now third-wave feminism is debatable; popular romance, particularly the romantic comedy, certainly continues to follow familiar, well-worn paths. Pamela Regis's more recent definition of romance confirms this—in 2003, as in 1976, the core elements of romance are expanded but remain very much the same (2003, 19–50).

Furthermore, although recent academic work has acknowledged that romance comes in many different forms, at its base romance is "formula fiction" in which "the story unfolds seamlessly, the conclusion ties all loose ends together in a happy ending, and the conventions blend so perfectly that romance is completely satisfying to our expectations" (Kaler 1999, 1). That being said, the "formula" is highly capacious: "the exoticism, the fantasy, the larger-than-life characters, the adventure, the breathless excitement" of romance "pervades and includes all categories—mysteries, horror, thrillers, western, adventure, fantasy, science fiction, gothic, and, of course, love stories" (6). At its root, however, romance "has a happy ending, always and in all ways. This endearing ending is the most critical and enduring convention of the romance genre" (4). It is this generic element that has been critiqued by some feminists, who see it as ultimately an absorption of the feminine identity into patriarchy (see, for example, Modleski 1982; Radway 1984; DuPlessis 1985; Rabine 1985; Langbauer 1990; Ganguly 1991; Dubino 1993; Shaffer 1993; Jackson, 1995, 50; Gilbert and Gubar 2000; and Frantz 2002, although the latter does address how romance could be subversively feminist with its expressions of a feminine economy of exchange that is preferable to patriarchy, if it were less derided), and by other critics—feminists and nonfeminists alike—who perceive it as a liberating celebration of female empowerment and equality (see, for example, Zidle 1999; Botts 1999; Heinecken 1999; Regis 2003). Regardless, according to most critics, the happy ending signified by consummate union is a core element that makes a story a romance. It can certainly be argued that *Supernatural* slash reconfigures the romance narrative, particularly in its troubling of "love triumphant," while J2 stories continue to provide *Supernatural* fan writers and readers with the opportunity to revel in more conventional romantic tropes, placing Jared and Jensen in domestic and community settings which satisfy desires for more traditional happy endings. The difference between the two reveals the extent to which cultural representations of happiness through love triumphant are ideologically bound.

The community featured in J2 RPS stories is, of course, an imagined one based in large part on the actors' real-life friends and relatives and on a stable of actors and actresses often found on other CW shows. Generally, stories in the J2 genre feature a
best friend; a number of fag hags, former girlfriends, or soon-to-be ex-girlfriends; family members; and costars and others associated with *Supernatural*. Interestingly, within the RPS fanon, the personalities of these celebrities are fairly set—Chad Michael Murray, who often plays the role of Jared's best friend, is frequently represented as either a mostly lovable or an utterly unrepentant "douchebag" (the term is so common as to require mention), and Christian Kane often appears as a cynical, devoted, and protective sidekick. Whether these stories are meant to imaginatively represent the actual lives of the boys or are entirely AU, the same groups of people tend to constellate around Jared and Jensen, and are often directly involved in either placing obstacles in the way of the boys' love or in bringing them together—usually the latter.

[3.5] What these representations of community provide is a way of imagining romance as something negotiated in relation to already-existing relationships of love, loyalty, and commitment. For example, one lover must often prove himself worthy to the best friend of the other. In some cases, the lover demonstrates worthiness by making up for hurting his lover in the past, as is the case in Keepaoftcheez's New OTP'Verse: "'When'd you get so smart about Jared?' Chad wonders, tone a bit suspicious...[Jensen] glances up again and his gaze snags on Jared's. 'When I let myself know him. Wasn't hard after that.'...Chad nods, then sticks out a hand. 'So, friends?" (September 19, 2006, Sinful Desire Archive). Exchanges such as this allow the lovers to triangulate through their friends in order to have their relationship troubles managed and healed in part through interacting with others.

[3.6] In many stories, posturing or threatening on the part of the "best friend" reveals the social surveillance which protects the vulnerable or wronged party. In Sometimesophie's "The Jared Padalecki Untitled Project" (August 22, 2007, LiveJournal post), for example, both Christian Kane and Chad Michael Murray act out the hostility and anger that is repressed by the now-estranged Jensen and Jared, while in Fleshflutter's "Do I Seem Bulletproof to You?" (June 24, 2008, LiveJournal post) Christian Kane judges Jared before the relationship between the two boys begins—"There's a new intensity in the way he watches Jared, which is somehow even more unnerving"—as well as putting him in his place after the relationship has imploded: "Chris comes up and drapes his arm over Jensen's shoulder. The grin he gives Jared isn't very friendly." Here, as in some other cases, friends attempt to warn one of the boys away from a relationship with the other—"'Jensen's a nice guy too,' Jared interrupts. 'Yes, he is,' says Tom...'it's not him I'm worried about.'" However, protective actions by a friend more often speak to devotion than to a desire to scuttle the happiness of the couple.

[3.7] The J2 fanon also offers something not readily available in *Supernatural* fan fiction—significant and meaningful relationships with female characters. *Supernatural*
fandom has the reputation of being particularly misogynistic, largely as a result of fans' responses to the female characters on the show (note 3). One could argue that this misogyny is, in part, a by-product of the show's own overarching misogyny, particularly in seasons 3 and 4, which feature many female villains and far too many examples of gendered and sexualized insults and violence. Though there are certainly hateful portrayals of women in J2 fiction, presenting the boys' real-life partners as either jealous harpies or vicious destroyers of the boys' happiness, there are also many positive and loving portrayals of women, suggesting that J2 stories offer fans a place to enjoy the positive portrayals of women as friends, supporters, defenders, and confidantes so lacking in the show's canon. Certainly, such narratives safely enclose women in roles that negate their possibility as love interests, but the placement of women in the nonbeloved role does expand their frame of action.

[3.8] In Titheniel's "Snapshots" (September 15, 2007, LiveJournal post), for example, Sophia Bush is both the tough-as-nails-with-a-heart-of-gold protector and supporter of a traumatized Jensen and an up-and-coming fashion photographer with a crush of her own on Sandy McCoy. Apocalypsos's "I Taught Your Boyfriend That Thing You Like" (May 23, 2008, LiveJournal post) features a delightfully slutty Alona Tal, and Titheniel and Splashpink's "Orwell" (Orwell_fic, November 1, 2008, LiveJournal post) includes Angelina Jolie as a kick-ass medic with a love of explosives. In some cases, a female character fills much the same role usually occupied by the male best friend, as in Audrarose's "Open Mike Night at the Freemont" (June 23, 2008, LiveJournal post) in which Allison Mack, a poetry-loving barista, advises Jared on his relationship with a disabled and emotionally damaged Jensen: "'You hit on his dog,' Allison said... 'What?' Jared asked, trying to look innocent. 'I like dogs. And that's an awesome dog.' 'You hit on him through his service dog. You have no shame at all.'" Such characters demonstrate that women have individual identities, a variety of interests, and a wide range of sexualities. Furthermore, they depict women as crucial members of the larger community.

[3.9] Family also plays an important role as community, though sometimes a very different role than friends do. While friends often represent the peer group of the boys, family sometimes stands in for a more conventional, traditional society, particularly in the stories that deal heavily with issues of homosexuality and homophobia. In such narratives, families provide important external barriers—and thus romantic narrative tension—to the boys' burgeoning or deepening relationship, and offer fan authors the opportunity to explore opposition to homosexuality within a world that looks much like our own.

[3.10] J2 stories that focus on familial rejection of the boys' homosexuality demonstrate the pain that can result from a break with one's community: Pic Akai's
"Coming of Age," for example, illuminates Jared's grief and confusion as he attempts to fulfill his father's hopes for him while also attempting to stay true to himself: "I tried so hard to make him proud, I...he's the reason I'm a mechanic, you know?...And he was proud of it until the day I told him I was gay, and then he just...didn't care any more. Didn't want to accept I was his son" (b_s_n_m, December 9, 2007, LiveJournal post). As fan writers show, such rejection by a parent can also result in a painful separation from oneself and one's own desires. Felisblanco's "In a Mirror Distorted and Indistinct" (January 19, 2008, LiveJournal post) recounts an incident from Jensen's past in which his family condemns homosexuality, which causes Jensen to reject himself: "He's not. Not that. Not that. Whatever he is it's not that. Please, God, don't let me be that. Please, please, please." In this story, as in others, the boys are only able to recover from past experiences of rejection and homophobia through their sexual and romantic connections, which reconfigure their relationships to their own bodies and to their larger community: "It's been four months, one week and three days since Jared kissed him for the first time. Since his whole life changed" (2008, LiveJournal post). Unity with the beloved here heals the hurts of the rejection and hatred that the boys may face in a homophobic world.

[3.11] Although family is sometimes constructed as an obstacle, many stories focus on more mundane issues related to the boys' meeting their respective in-laws and being accepted into a family that extends beyond their own. In "Meet the Family" (January 28, 2009, LiveJournal post), one of Titheniel and Splashpink's Days in Our Lives stories, Jensen must deal with the tension of preparing their first family Thanksgiving dinner. Similarly, Not_Refined's "Jensen Inside" (February 25, 2008, LiveJournal post), a story that concerns itself with mental illness and its effects on relationships, relates Jared's anxiety about meeting Jensen's mother. In both cases, calm interludes with the family serve as foils for the drama in which the boys usually find themselves, and remind them, and the reader, that family will endure beyond excitement and upset, to be, in many cases, the final arbiter of the success of the relationship.

[3.12] In some stories, such as those in Technosage's Break Loose Ranch series, the monogamous love between Jared and Jensen provides the model which disrupts the more casual sexuality of their other gay friends, thus allowing for their friends' "development" toward more stable romantic relationships: Christian Kane, thinking of Jared and Jensen, reflects that "they don't get to be like that, because happily ever after and riding off into the sunset is movie shit...but what he really wanted was to see [if] it could be like that...Like hearts and flowers and rainbows and puppies and wedding rings and goddamned forever and no one but you" ("That Triangular Circular Love Thing," November 29, 2007, LiveJournal post). Unity with the beloved, in this case, offers the comfort not just of a soul mate, but also of belonging to and
negotiation within a larger social contract (note 4). Many J2 stories offer, that is, what the annihilist versions of Sam/Dean fiction cannot: immersion of the boys within community frameworks, within a society that reflects the "normal," the (largely) conventional, and the acceptable, even if that acceptance has to be negotiated, worked at, and fought for, in order to elucidate a more traditional version of happily ever after.

4. Sexual politics

[4.1] In "They Cavort, You Decide: Transgenericism, Queerness, and Fan Interpretation in Teen TV," Louisa Ellen Stein argues that the generic differences between The OC and Smallville allowed for different constructions of queerness in fan fiction: the combination of "teen generic elements" with "the apocalyptic, superheroic and fantastic" allowed Smallville to pose queerness metaphorically," while The OC, with its "more commonly associated generic elements," allowed room for fans to address "sexual identity overtly as a social issue" (2005, 12). We see a very similar distinction at work in Supernatural fandom. Like OC fan readers and fan fiction authors, Supernatural RPS fan fiction authors who write stories set within our world must "play with the possibilities of the literal rather than the metaphoric" (Stein 2005, 14). In doing so, they have the opportunity to discuss the reality of gay relationships and homophobia in a way that Sam/Dean slash often does not, in part because the incestuous nature of the relationship usually trumps its homosexuality.

[4.2] If we see the acceptance of family and friends, a key feature of many J2 stories, as emblematic of acceptance within larger social frameworks and the happiness of "fitting in" romantically, then we must also recognize the problematic nature of the sexual politics represented in much J2. Keeping in mind that J2 stories often deal directly with issues of homosexuality and homophobia, many of the stories nevertheless present no alternatives to normative social frameworks: Jared, Jensen, and their families and friends are very often portrayed as firmly middle class or wealthy and holding middle-class values, providing an obvious contrast to the poverty and underclass status of the Winchester boys. Furthermore, though many of the stories deal with homophobia, they are often also set in a world in which everyone is seemingly gay, rendering gayness, as an alternative to heterosexuality, invisible. In fact, what these stories often seem to offer is not homosexuality as an alternative to or commentary on heteronormativity, but rather male/male monogamous love as the same as men's sexual, romantic, and marital relationships with women, a result of their containment within Western romantic tropes which are relentlessly heterosexist. As critics Susan Strehle and Mary Paniccia Carden put it, "love not only makes the world go round, but the western world also makes certain forms and outcomes of love go round" (2003, xi). Thus the very tropes which lead to and include a satisfactory
happy ending can only be coded as "satisfactory" and "happy" in a society where "scripts of heterosexual romance" (DuPlessis 1985, 2) exist not only within individuals, but also in social institutions such as law and religion.

[4.3] Some explanation for the heteronormative elements so prevalent in J2 RPS can be found in Tania Modleski's analysis of the role romance plays to "'inoculate' [women] against the major evils of sexist society" (1982, 43). Modleski argues, for example, that romance teaches women to recode anger or violence as love, thus helping us to cope with the demands that patriarchy places on us, whether those be the social demands for heterosexual union and reproduction, or the demands created by a system in which hegemonic masculinity is increasingly violent. As Pamela Regis later puts it, romance is a place where women's problems are explored (2003, 29). When two men play out the same roles, fights, and challenges that a man and woman do in a conventional romance, it is possible that we are seeing a form of Modleski's inoculation at work: even when it is two men, the message suggests, the relationship is the same, the fights are the same, the worries are the same; therefore, the implication is that relationships inevitably play out within power structures. The feminine domestic space and the relational concerns that romance often focuses on, and that are so common in J2 RPS, rely upon the codes of heterosexual monogamy within relationships that are, on their surface, written as gay. This creates the paradox that in J2 women are absent in contexts that are coded heterosexual.

[4.4] Thus, J2 RPS does not necessarily result in representations of gayness in ways that the potentially more subversive Sam/Dean does. To explain, Eric Anderson argues that there "has been tension between two working ideologies regarding the relationship between homosexuality and the dominant social structure...Assimilationists desire inclusion into the existing social structure," while "reformists...have sought to transform dominant social structures" (2005, 47). While we would not argue that fan fiction writers are necessarily cognizant of or participants in such debates, we certainly argue that the success of the assimilationist model, one that uses the argument "I'm just like you" to win the respect of heterosexuals and their support for aims like gay marriage, has certainly affected the representation of homosexuality in the broader cultural arena. It is important to recognize that the relative lack of representations of gay political alliances, gay culture, or more flamboyant or camp expressions of gayness in J2 fiction must temper any readings of even those stories that deal directly with the subject of homophobia as doing queer work, particularly given the fact that many RPS stories rewrite romantic comedies, Harlequin romances, and Disney movies, replacing the female characters with males. While some of these replacements may parody heterosexuality and reveal the performative nature of gender, the ease of adaptation suggests that a heteronormative framework is firmly in place. Such substitutions literalize the "I'm just like you" argument, simply replacing heterosexual
narratives with homosexual versions, while simultaneously erasing both women and gayness in a seemingly queer text.

[4.5]  *Supernatural* slash, by contrast, more often explores the consequences of truly alternative sexuality, and part of its ability to do so may lie in the way it complicates the happy ending. Though Tosenberger is correct that happy slash stories in *Supernatural* fandom do subvert the misery of the source text, the darker representations of Wincest serve to disrupt and subvert sexuality that is coded normative, despite its deviations, and to fantastically imagine the still all-too-common response to relationships that do not fit into the heteronormative framework: hatred, isolation, and fear. As Elizabeth Woledge argues, "The culturally distant settings of science fiction and fantasy clearly present writers with both the opportunity to discuss homosexual acts and also the opportunity to separate these acts from culturally specific identities. The same cultural distance allows writers the liberty to explore gender variations within this theme in more or less explicit ways" (2005, 52). As with *Smallville*, in which, Stein argues, "the themes of alienation and the search for identity easily transmute into homoromanticism and sympathetic queerness" (2005, 21), so too does Sam and Dean's relationship in dark fan fiction—one that cuts them off from a larger community and places them in a "separate world," one that is "fucked up as hell...but it just doesn't matter what's wrong sometimes because it's their world and they're both in it and that makes it alright" (mimblexwimble, July 6, 2009, LiveJournal post)—vividly imagine both the pleasures and the pain that nonnormative identities can provide.

[4.6]  Dark Sam/Dean fiction, that is, can, in its exploration of an annihilating relationship that has no future, no productivity, no ability to be absorbed or welcomed into the larger social framework, be seen as embracing what Lee Edelman identifies as "sinthomosexuality"—an identity that "finds its value not in a good susceptible to generalization, but only in the stubborn particularity that voids every notion of a general good. The embrace of queer negativity, then, can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself" (2004, 6). Such a construction of queerness, one that embraces the death drive as a means of battling against what Edelman identifies as "reproductive futurism"—a heteronormative ideology that would have us restrict personal rights and freedoms in the name of "the Child" and a future to which the present must always be held hostage—aptly describes what is present in many *Supernatural* slash stories: a celebration of annihilistic love as both a valid choice in a world that rejects difference and a means of locating pleasure and joy in that which most people would regard as unhealthy, unproductive, and deviant.
Sam and Dean's dark and hopelessly unproductive love in such stories is not a consolation for something that they cannot have as a result of their upbringing or circumstances, but instead something that gives them what Edelman identifies as "access to jouissance in place of access to sense" (2004, 37). In Fleshflutter's "Drown and Float Away" (December 20, 2007, LiveJournal post), for example, Antichrist Sam finally locates Dean, who has been sent by hunters to kill him: "'You asked where I was,' Dean says at last. 'I've been with them. The hunters. They've teamed up, got organised...They know your weakness, Sam. Just like you and me both know it. It's me...I killed them,' he says. 'Who'm I kidding? I'm yours. Always gonna be.'" Here, Dean's words disrupt the canon's representation of Sam and Dean's love as unhealthy, or, more accurately, acknowledges it while rejecting the idea that they should necessarily desire "healthy" love in the first place. His final words to Sam—"Long live the boy-king"—revel in the rejection of reproductive futurism, placing him and Sam in a perpetual boyhood in a world that they have emphatically made their own.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] The generic differences between much Supernatural slash and J2 RPS reveal multiple negotiations of the concept of love and romance. J2 RPS, like romance in general, plays a dual role. It certainly subverts normative sexuality with its male/male relationship(s), but ironically it often bolsters normative sexuality by its use of heteronormative tropes—possibly an inevitable effect of the romance formula, which is itself embedded in a history of heterosexual signifiers. However, the very predictability of a heteronormative happy ending is part and parcel of what makes romance work for its readers, according to many critics, and the possibility for happy endings in Sam/Dean is slim, given the darkness of the source text. The fact that so many RPS stories offer up happy endings that conform to heteronormative futurism "always and in all ways" (Kaler 1999, 4)—ironically, given the male/male love story—indicates the hold heterosexism has on the popular imaginary and popular romance.

[5.2] It is important to note, however, that writers' and readers' relationships with romantic tropes is complex. Susan Strehle and Mary Paniccia Carden argue that "few people's experience exactly fits the normative model of romance. But in the register of ideology, commonly held notions of civilization, humanity, and identity remain grounded in the structures of heterosexual union" (2003, xi). We find that many J2 RPS stories, like many romances, are examples of "dissenting perspectives flaring out...and deeply held assent to cultural norms taking over and restricting impulses to more radical experiment" (xii). The annihilist isolationism of much Supernatural slash, on the other hand, offers a space in which the effects of the connections between romantic happiness and heterosexism can be more radically questioned.
6. Notes

1. Three LiveJournal communities specifically devoted to *Supernatural*-related RPS are super_real, padacklesrps, and jsquared_rps. As well, there are two LJ communities devoted specifically to fiction about actors on the CW network (formerly WB), the network on which *Supernatural* airs, which are dominated by J2 stories: wb_rps and cw_rps.

2. See, for example, the LiveJournal communities for the *Supernatural/J2* BigBang challenge (spn_j2_bigbang), the *Supernatural* Harlequin challenge (rewritings of Harlequin romance novels: spn_harlequin; the Reel *Supernatural* challenge (rewritings of Hollywood films: reel_spn), and the About Two Boys challenge (rewritings of romantic comedies: abouttwoboys.)

3. The popular fandom mockery site Fandom Wank regularly derides the sexism displayed by many in *Supernatural* fandom. Such mockery could be dismissed as mere mean-spiritedness on the part of the wankas, yet the actors on the show also seem to recognize this problem. Misha Collins, in an interview for Australia's Channel 10 News, stated, "This is an incredibly sexist group of people, this fandom," to which Jared Padalecki added, "Yes. Against their own sex" ("Jared, Jensen & Misha," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoZYuKkjWGY).

4. Although the Break Loose Ranch series offers multiple sexual identities framed within queer discourses, for the purposes of this essay we have focused on an example in which heteronormativity is evident.

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1. Introduction

[1.1] *Supernatural* is an amalgamation of stories built upon stories, in which the creators use forms of myth and folklore to create monsters of legend—as do the characters of Sam and Dean Winchester themselves, *within* the show. The information they need to defeat a certain creature is rarely set in stone, instead requiring research into stories and myths that have developed in numerous cultures. As truth and fiction continue to mix in the Winchesters' lives, sometimes they are faced with the burden of tales literally come to life, such as in 1.17 "Hell House," when a tulpa is created because millions of people believe in it.

[1.2] One of the most poignant and fascinating versions of this idea can be found in Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Tlön, Uqbar, and Orbis Tertius" (1962). In the tale, the main character comes across a body of information about an imaginary planet, describing the customs and culture of its people so specifically that it seems too detailed to be real, or at least too grand a project to be created by one person. Eventually it is revealed that a large group of people created this idea initially but it was sustained over generations of followers and, in the end, Tlön becomes so popular and admired that our world begins to resemble the fictional creation.

[1.3] These patterns become useful for what they reveal about fandom, as the communal and transformative nature of folklore allows works to go through similar changes and versions, and the literal fans of *Supernatural* also draw from the episodes
and characters to create new opinions, hypotheses, fan works, and more. But fans, especially those who focus on creating transformative works, have had little reason to believe that their creations would ever reflect back onto the canon of the show—at least, until 4.18 "The Monster at the End of This Book," which departed from other instances of reference to fandom by directly acknowledging it. It also values the influence that fans, both real fans and their avatars within the story, might have on the greater narrative.

[1.4] Tlön was created not through a traditional team of static authors, but through communities of people separated by distance and time, continuing to add onto and shift the ideas of others. *Supernatural* has shown its fans that their Tlön may be transforming The Powers That Be's Earth, which has many implications not only for the communication between fans and creators, but also for the nature of creators themselves. Though the effect that fans have is still minor, I suggest that in the long run *Supernatural*'s fans have gained a measure of power that will help them feel more included in the general fan base, communicate better with the creators, and, possibly, force the creators to address critical and difficult problems in the show—all through transformative fan works.

2. Acting out fiction: "Screw you, Simpatico, we lived it"

[2.1] In "The Monster at the End of This Book," fandom and its interweaving stories are explicitly drawn into the narrative and made an integral part. As the Winchesters discover the existence of a book series depicting their lives, they are forced to confront three forms of audiences that can all be compared to fans. Chuck, the author of the books, believes that he writes and creates merely through his imagination when he is instead being used as a vessel for divine prophecy, taking his stories from the lives of Sam and Dean (figure 1). His publisher is equally invested in the production of the books, but also in the story and characters, displaying herself as both a fan and an authority. And of course there are the fans of the books themselves, who closely resemble the real fans of *Supernatural.*
Figure 1. Writer Chuck Shirley (Rob Benedict) is shocked to see his "characters" Sam (Jared Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) come to life (4.18 "The Monster at the End of This Book," 2009). [View larger image.]

[2.2] To top it all off, Sam and Dean have to represent themselves as fans to the publisher and are mistaken for fans by Chuck. They are forced to confront the idea that someone else may have some control over their lives. The show has covered the issues of free will and destiny in many different ways throughout the seasons, and the experiences cause Sam to believe that he has a set path, while Dean rages as hard as he can against fate. Once again, the battle comes to a head in "The Monster at the End of This Book," when Sam and Dean are confronted by a record of what may lie in their future. They not only fulfill their destinies exactly as Chuck wrote them, but their knowledge of what is ahead perpetuates some of the predetermined events. Without Dean's intention to park his car in a neighborhood and leave it there, he would not have been hit by a minivan and plastered with the pink Band-Aids that Chuck's writing described. Sam's knowledge of Lilith's arrival causes him to plan ahead and pretend to strike a deal with her.

[2.3] Once again, the in-text version of fandom—Chuck and his books, which ostensibly tell Sam and Dean's story instead of dictating it—instead helps to change and determine the outcome of Sam and Dean's "real life." The discovery that Chuck is a prophet also carries significance, giving him a higher role as a conduit for the Word. Here original works are respected on a level equal to those that may seem transformative; Chuck also shows that transformation of narratives is literally as old as the Bible. And finally, the episode again raises the question of a higher authority, a literal author of events, bringing us back to our own eternal questions of who rules our lives—Supernatural may attempt to answer it for Sam and Dean, but the answer is rarely simple and can still make us question ourselves.

[2.4] If the fictional versions of fandom are able to change real life in the theoretical ways illustrated through the various levels of narrative in the show, perhaps the real Supernatural fandom has also affected the creation of the original source material. This can also be seen in "The Monster at the End of This Book," and, most significantly, it engages not only with direct criticism by viewers but also with fan criticism in the form of fan works, which are usually not acknowledged or taken to be valid.

3. The effects of fandom on source texts

[3.1] As long as popular culture is fueled by the need to be popular, especially in a world of commercialized entertainment, audiences will have some measure of power
over creators of entertainment. For *Supernatural*, there have been a number of movements and complaints from the fans that have affected editorial decisions in the show. Most notable has been criticism regarding some female characters in *Supernatural*, prompting their removal from the show. Other critiques have had little effect, such as repeated outcries by fans over racist, sexist, and homophobic overtones in the show. Because of these failures to acknowledge criticism, many fans believe that they are only able to effect change where Eric Kripke and the other creators were previously inclined to the suggested alterations.

[3.2] Fans affecting the canon through direct criticism and discussion is thus accepted as a viable form of communication with creators, despite varying effects. More remarkable is the idea that not only the opinions of fans carry influence, but also their creations, particularly in the case of transformative works.

[3.3] In the past, the only effects have been jokes or quips that are considered "fan service," such as people mistaking the brother for a couple, or a character in 2.18 "Hollywood Babylon" who mentions the show *Gilmore Girls*, which actor Jared Padalecki acted in for a number of years. Writer Sera Gamble has also joked about "the epic love story of Sam and Dean" (Borsellino 2006); various actors have mentioned that they enjoy reading fan reactions on the Internet; and actor Misha Collins, who plays the angel Castiel beginning in season 4, has even mentioned reading fan fiction.

[3.4] But none of these are significant on an editorial level, and no one particularly expected fandom to be directly acknowledged in the show because there was no precedent for it in *Supernatural* or television itself. Once again, "The Monster at the End of this Book" shattered the barrier between fandom and text. When Sam and Dean encounter Web sites about the *Supernatural* books, they discover online forums, fan reactions, and even fan works that mention Sam/Dean slash. Such direct references go further than fan service; these fans are expected to be an integral part of the entire experience, sending a message to the real audience of the television series. The episode is also littered with references to the real-life creators and *Supernatural* works: the publisher is named Sera after writer Sera Gamble (figure 2), Chuck's pen name "Carver Edlund" is a reference to writer Ben Edlund, the diner in which Dean and Sam eat is called Kripke's Hollow after creator Eric Kripke, and among the posters on Chuck's walls is a cover from an issue of the comic tie-in *Supernatural: Origins* (Johnson and Dow Smith 2008), to name a few (figure 3). Because the characters of Sera and Chuck are in positions that are both administrative and fannish within the episode, the fact that they are named after real writers of *Supernatural* makes a connection between the two, blurring the line between creator and fan.
4. The implications of influence

[4.1] Many of the long-running assumptions about television and fandom can be refuted by these analyses. For example, researchers assume that fans buy into the capitalist system of commercialized entertainment and cannot escape from it, acting purely as consumers with buying power. Fandom and the influence fandom reflects back onto the source help to disrupt the one-way flow of information, giving fans a greater stake and making them more equal participants in the larger conversation between mediums and audiences. Given the competitive nature of the entertainment industry, ceding more power to those who don't necessarily have a way in may have implications for the accessibility of entertainment production or working toward social equality in the entertainment industry. This becomes problematic when the positions played by fans are viewed not as part of a mutual conversation, but as free fan labor
for the industries. However, this manipulation by the creators has always been seen as unlikely for *Supernatural*, given the controversial nature of the themes in its fan works.

[4.2] If the idea of fan labor as power is controversial, equally so is the increase of fan visibility that both caused and results from such interactions between fans and source texts. It is clear, however, that no matter what fans do, the social nature of the Internet and efforts to make fandom accessible to anyone do open it up to the public eye, whether specific fans participate in the opening or not. For those who see increased visibility as inevitable, it is preferable to have positive reports published. *Supernatural* fandom is a striking example of both sides of the argument, given the popularity of Winchest and real-person fiction narratives that may not be accepted even by other slash fans. The specific reference to Winchest in 4.18 (figure 4) caused pain to fans who did not want their already controversial practices to be further exposed. On the other hand, by posing the reference as a light joke, the editorial team may have been sending a message to such fans that they are just as welcome as others who love *Supernatural*. After the episode, many fans pointed out that the joke was not particularly offensive to fans and did not belabor the point; when Dean reacts to the idea of slash by saying "That is just *sick,*" many fans read it as the inevitable response for the character.

![Figure 4. "What's a slash fan?" Dean and Sam discover their popularity on the Internet (4.18 "The Monster at the End of This Book," 2009). [View larger image.]](image)

[4.3] Furthermore, engaging with the source texts means that the creators of the canon are not only acknowledging and communicating with these fans, but in a similar way. This is particularly significant given the qualities typically associated with slash fandom, populated largely by women and by a minority of queer men: slash fandom is less given to direct criticism than straight male fandoms, and its responses tend to be through fiction. The creators of *Supernatural* have demonstrated a willingness to appreciate and participate in the transformative culture, even when it may be risky or unfamiliar to their other audience demographics.
But what does this mean for fannish opinions that are still unacknowledged by the creators? Criticism of *Supernatural*'s social dynamics has had little effect, and many fans feel alienated by sexist, racist, and homophobic elements in the show. And although most of these arguments have taken the form of direct criticism, unlike complaints about specific characters, they do not provide easy solutions for the creators of the show because fans rightfully expect that to be the responsibility of The Powers That Be. However, some of the best-known forms of critique are transformative instead of direct—undoubtedly the most famous is the vid "Women's Work" by Sisabet and Luminosity (http://www.viddler.com/explore/Luminosity/videos/2/), which combines images of violence against women in the show to reveal its sexism. The acknowledgment of Winchest and transformative works may give more power to those who use fan works for their critiques. Although the burden of addressing these issues shouldn't be placed on the fans, it may been seen as a slightly more hopeful indicator.

In any case, the effects of these new developments in shows like *Supernatural* have important consequences for the relationship between fans and creators, and likely positive ones. Fandom has changed drastically thanks to the Internet, including the attention drawn to fandom through other channels, the increase of global communication, the possibilities of increasing access to different types of people and fans, and so on. The relationships between stories and life, fans and creators, fan works and source material, and other complex dualities may prove just as important as any of the other factors, helping fans to improve their relationships with the canons that they love so much.

5. Works cited


"What you don't know": *Supernatural* fan vids and millennial theology

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[0.1] *Abstract*—The Millennial discourse on religion, dogma, faith, and belief are evident both in *Supernatural* and its fan vids.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Audience; Authorship; Generation Me; Generation Y; Millennial Generation; Religion; Vidding

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1. "God has left the building": The millennial generation and religion

[1.1] In a 2008 opinion piece in *USA Today*'s online blog, Boston University professor Stephen Prothero poses the question, "Is religion losing the millennial generation?" In his encounters teaching students about religion, Prothero has found widespread discomfort with traditional religion, or at least with certain dimensions of traditional religion—dimensions that many would see as key to religious belief systems: dogma, divinity, and heaven. In his words:

[1.2] These young people aren't just allergic to dogma. They are allergic to divinity and even heaven. In the religions of their imagining, God is an afterthought at best. And the afterlife is, as one of my students told me, "on the back burner."

[1.3] ...What will today's youth do with religions whose ethical injunctions arrive as strict commandments rather than friendly suggestions? Will they be able to abide religions that divide the human family into the saved and the damned, that present as absolute truth what they suspect is mere speculation?
Prothero offers these observations in a cultural moment where questions of religion, ethics, and morality have come to the fore. As we face two continuing wars, deep economic hardship, and political debates about the role of government in community upkeep, cultural conversations about shared morals and the rise or decline of tradition are omnipresent. Thus perhaps it is not surprising that we would see these themes raised not only in the op-ed section of USA Today, but also in contemporary television programming and its reception.

Indeed, the questions that Prothero raises likely sound strikingly familiar to viewers of the television program Supernatural, as these are the very questions faced by the program's characters and thus raised by Supernatural itself. The main characters of Supernatural, Sam and Dean Winchester, do what they can to put the afterlife on the back burner, resist strict commandments (even when they come from angels), and certainly resist the splitting of their family into the saved and the damned, despite season 4's revelation that Dean is a chosen warrior of heaven and Sam a chosen tool of Lucifer.

Supernatural is one of many programs directed at the so-called millennial audience referenced by Prothero, a generation imagined in public discourse to embrace moral nuance in a seemingly contradictory union with ethical high ground. The "Millennial Generation" is a term made popular by cultural analysts William Strauss and Neil Howe (2000), among others. In recent years, the term millennial has become fairly widespread, supplanting the overlapping generational terminology of Generation Y and Generation Me (note 1). Those invoking the millennials as generational category cast a wide net, imagining a group with shared cultural values ranging from current 12-year-olds to 32-year-olds (birth years from the late 1970s to the late 1990s). So imagined, such a wide yet supposedly unified audience construct appears significant for media institutions, businesses, and political and religious organizations alike (note 2).

In his 2008 USA Today piece, Prothero suggests that millennials have a religious vision that diverges from those of the past (or from those of today's religious institutions), one of tolerance, open-mindedness, and focus on the present:

What my students long for is not salvation after they die but happiness...here and now...They want to discover themselves and to give voice to their discoveries. They want to experience joy because of their bodies, not despite them. And they don't want to be told what to do with those bodies, or with whom...Almost invariably, they mix fun with faith...But they do not mix faith with dogma. My students are careful—exceedingly careful—not to tell one another what to believe, or even what to do. Above all, they want to be tolerant and non-judgmental.
Again, these themes of withholding judgment and of pleasure in the now (prompted by doubt in the afterlife) may seem familiar and resonant to *Supernatural* fans, although perhaps the match is less perfect. *Supernatural* does not open and close questions of faith, but rather poses them and holds all possible answers in tension. In so doing, the program has provoked prolonged and diverse discussions among its fans. The introduction of overt religious themes in season 4 of *Supernatural* (complete with angels as well as demons and references to a possibly absent god) has elicited fan explorations of questions of morality, faith, and God, as well as the role of religion.

These issues emerge in conversations about religion in and beyond the show, but they have also surfaced somewhat more indirectly in fan textual creativity. The centrality of the character of the angel Castiel to a new portion of fandom who pair together Dean and Castiel as romantic partners has prompted fans to (at times playfully) question their own investment in fandom as fantasy, pastime, and literature/art form (note 3). Given the new, overtly religious themed underpinnings of season 4, fans found themselves asking questions such as: What does it mean to cast an angel in a romantic and/or erotic situation with another character—of the same sex, no less? What are the religious, spiritual, moral, and ethical implications of such investments and authorships?

Shortly after the introduction of Castiel, fans struggled with the notion that the narratives and fantasies they were writing now included an angel of the Lord (rather than say, a teen wizard, a young Superman, or two demon-fighting brothers). At various *Supernatural* fan fiction communities, we saw disclaimers describing slash fiction featuring Castiel as blasphemy. However, as the season progressed, we saw more and more fiction that introduced biblical themes beyond those specific to *Supernatural*, incorporating other angels and even God as a character. Fan fiction and fan vids took up questions of God, spirituality, dogma, faith, and tradition as concepts to be interrogated and debated in relation to the show and at times beyond.

The question of the role of religion in millennial identity—or the role of millennials in the future of religion—is a vexed one, full of contradictions. Where Strauss and Howe's *Millennial Rising* (2000) claim that millennials are increasingly turning toward/identifying with religion, Cooperative Institutional Research Program data suggest the opposite: that religious engagement among young adults has declined on all fronts. Their statistics show that the number of those who identify as belonging to a religion, praying, or focusing on spiritual concerns has either stayed the same or decreased (2007 College Board National Forum, http://www.artsci.com/documents/CollegeBoardNatForumMillenialPresOct24_07.pdf). Prothero's op-ed echoes this sense of decline or stasis, yet reintroduces the discourse
offered in *Millennial Rising* suggesting that the millennials could potentially offer a new, revised approach to religious belief. But where Strauss and Howe argue that this new religiosity includes a return to tradition, Prothero's analysis suggests the opposite: that millennials first and foremost want to break from traditions, or at least from any traditions built on dogma.

[1.13] Thus, the conversations surrounding millennials and religion is curiously contradictory (also a tendency of discourse at large about the millennial generation): according to the many varying analyses, blog posts, books, and newspaper articles, millennials seek a return to tradition and organization, yet want less dogma and more acceptance of diversity. In *Supernatural* we see these conflicting factors writ large: the show invokes religion, hell, heaven, dogma, salvation, and resurrection; it recreates the narrative of Jesus via Dean's resurrection at the hand of Castiel. And yet at the same time, *Supernatural* shows us a heaven that looks like a crime movie, angels who appear to be morally bankrupt, and, in season 5, a potentially sympathetic Lucifer. After all, not coincidentally, season 5's premiere episode was entitled "Sympathy for the Devil."

2. "What you don't know won't hurt you": *Supernatural* vids as millennial reception discourse

[2.1] As I've suggested above, we can't necessarily define the millennials as a generation—generational constructs are cultural fantasies, not scientific or historical realities. However, we can recognize the items under debate in public discourse about the millennial generation and see how they surface in texts directed at and received by the age group under question. And indeed, while the notion of the millennial generation is a cultural construct, not necessarily a historical truth, it is a construct with enough weight itself to affect the texts directed at the generation (like *Supernatural*) and the larger cultural frameworks shaping reception discourse.

[2.2] As *Supernatural* (and in turn, its fandom) moves from more subtle engagement with moral ambiguity to direct exploration of moral and religious themes, the fan texts that spring from it—including both online discussions and literature/artwork—offer a rich window into the contested space of (so-called) millennial reception discourse, and more specifically, into contemporary discussions of religion, spirituality, and God, as well as the spiritual or mythic value of popular cultural texts like *Supernatural*.

[2.3] For the remainder of this piece, I will explore two fan videos that feature not only Castiel and the angel story lines, but also consider questions of God and faith. These two vids, "In Heaven" and "Fall of Man," exemplify the interrogations within fandom that intertwine questions of theology, dogma, spirituality, and morality—
questions akin to those raised in the debates about the hearts and minds of millennials.

[2.4] Francesca Coppa (2008) describes the fan cultural/artistic practice of vidding as "collaborative critical thinking" often put to the purpose of providing "alternative perspectives" (5.1) relevant to female fans within a specific fan community. Julie Levin Russo describes vidding as a "subcultural practice" and "underground art form," suggesting that with the increasing visibility as remix culture becomes more mainstream, vids may be "dislodged...from their interpretative landscape" and as a result be subject to misrecognition (2009, 126). But vids do not exist only within the vacuum of fan communities. Just as Supernatural itself engages with the public conversations about politics, morality, and religion that have come to the fore in a particular cultural moment, so too do vids contribute to larger contemporary cultural conversations, in part by virtue of their speaking back to the source texts they take inspiration from.

[2.5] "In Heaven" and "Fall of Man" demonstrate how vidders draw on source textual material (at times, in combination with other cultural media texts, new and old) to offer through artistic authorship an additional thread in a larger cultural conversation—a conversation that is both particular to this moment and that extends over history. Both vids use the vidding tradition to not only offer interpretations of Supernatural but also to pose significant questions of religion, dogma, faith, and personal responsibility. Thus these two vids serve as compelling examples of artistic and cultural work of contemporary transformative/remix practices within and beyond vidding and fan communities.

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Vid 1. Castiel666, "In Heaven" (2009).
This vid, by a vidder with the appropriately contradictory moniker Castiel666 (a union of the angelic and the satanic) combines a trancelike repetitive soundtrack by Bang Gang with a series of images focused on the angelic story line in *Supernatural*'s season 4. The slow, measured pace of the music track is echoed in the vid's editing, and together, music and image provide a sense of looming heavenly threat.

The vid opens with the introduction of heaven via the figure of Castiel, shadow wings outspread, but cuts quickly to his unexpected negative effect, as, in his introduction to the narrative, he burns out the eyes of the overreaching psychic who summoned him. The vid then moves to images of Dean and Castiel and the more militant angel, Uriel, in the unsettlingly idyllic location of a lush green park and playground. We see a montage of violence perpetrated by and against angels, highlighting the violence of angels having their grace violated and angels being murdered by other angels. The continued repetition of the song's lyrics ("In heaven, everything is fine, you've got your good things and I've got mine") works with the montage of images of angelic violence to cumulatively communicate the message that heaven and angels offer a trap and a lie.

The introduction of Castiel's angelic superior, Zachariah, ratchets up the stakes of angel corruption to the level of the institution. But the vid itself becomes truly chilling when it introduces the factor of human belief in God and angels through the character of Jimmy Novak, the human who plays host to Castiel. Accompanying the lyrics "You've got your good things / And you've got mine," we see Jimmy Novak pray, convulse as Castiel prepares him to be his vessel, put his arm in boiling water to demonstrate his calling, and accept Castiel into his body. The twist in the lyrics instigates the vid's climax by drawing attention to the more sinister dimensions of the angelic use of humanity as a tool. Driving this point home, the vid concludes with Castiel forcing Jimmy to choose to sacrifice himself for his daughter. The combination of these images and narrative references with the song's lyrics finally suggests that angelic power is co-opting and perverting human dedication precisely through human faith in the heavenly.
Vid 2. Obsessive24, "Fall of Man" (2009).

[2.9] Where "In Heaven" presents an analytic overview of the representation of heaven in season 4, Obsessive24's "Fall of Man" offers its viewer insight into Castiel's perspective as he struggles with his role as Dean's angelic guide. This vid draws on a wide range of images beyond Supernatural, weaving them together to highlight Castiel's increasing self-awareness as he comes to terms with the roles that he and Dean must play in the fate of the world. At the same time, the vid's trajectory is also suggestive of Castiel's changing feelings toward Dean and toward God.

[2.10] Supernatural itself of course evokes heaven/hell parallels (and the resulting moral ambiguity) by casting both demons and angels as noirlike gangsters, with angel wings only glimpsed in rare moments in shadow. In contrast to Supernatural's more muted, metaphoric approach to representations of heaven and hell, "Fall of Man" reintroduces epic imagery, interweaving overt imagery of hell (not only from Supernatural but also from other, more explicit source texts) with a manipulated image of Castiel with full wings and with vast images of apocalyptic battlegrounds realized rather than imagined—again, from cinematic source texts such as Constantine (2005), The Devil's Advocate (1997), and End of Days (1999) with the budget and generic or narrative impetus to depict hell and the apocalypse as literal experiences. This reintroduction of overt angelic and apocalyptic/hellish imagery does not reinscribe fantastic moralistic dualities, but rather makes overt the suggested moral/spiritual ambivalence of Supernatural. Now we must face the notion that an angel—wings and all—may struggle with moral imperatives just as a human would.

[2.11] The lyrics of this vid, in combination with the imagery, suggest that Castiel has chosen to protect Dean from the truth of heaven's bankruptcy, spelled out most clearly in the closing refrain: "What you don't know won't kill you." Indeed, this vid's vision of the role of the heavenly is akin to that brought out by Castiel666's in "In
Heaven." Both vids emphasize the canonical revelation in season 4's finale that the angels are working to bring the apocalypse, that there is little difference between heaven and hell, and that God may very well have left the building.

[2.12] However, "Fall of Man" also offers a powerful montage paralleling Dean and Sam's physical confrontation with Castiel's conflicts with Uriel and the other angels. This intercutting suggests that despite the vid's title, it is Castiel and not Dean who has fallen. Indeed, the vid's title surfaces as lyrics only once: the words "the fall of man" accompany imagery of a flock of birds falling from the sky and scattering on the ground. Supernatural's season 4 aligns imagery of birds with angels—from its Hitchcockian bird wing opening credits to Castiel's birdlike head tilt—in an effort to make angels less anthropomorphized and more uncannily inhuman. In its literalizing of the bird imagery, Obsessive24's vid equates the fall of man with the fall of the angels (or perhaps vice versa). Through Dean, Castiel has recognized the possible absence of God, including the darker (inhuman) dimensions of Castiel's own being ("I was never that nice"). The layering of Castiel and Dean in similar motion in conjunction with the lyric "what you don't know" transitions the "you" of the vid from Dean to Castiel; it is Castiel who hasn't yet faced the absence of God, and it is his fall, his realization of heavenly bankruptcy (and thus perhaps his own moral bankruptcy), that fuels the vid's climax.

[2.13] The ultimate moment in this vid is its final image, which incorporates and transforms the iconic imagery of Adam reaching to God from Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam." We see Adam reaching for God (who is depicted giving Adam the breath of life), but through a subtle dissolve, God (and, not incidentally, the angels who cling to him) disappears, leaving Adam reaching out to nothing. The punch of this conclusion comes in our awareness that it is Castiel who has now accepted the absence of God and the betrayal of his brothers. And in that closing image, with the collapse of Castiel and Dean as "you," combined with the highly familiar but non-source-textual imagery of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, we, the viewers, perhaps also become the "you" struggling with the possibility of the absence of God.

3. Conclusion

[3.1] Both "In Heaven" and "Fall of Man" could be read as millennial texts par excellence, with Supernatural used as a vehicle to raise millennial questions of the necessary reconfiguration of the role of religion, dogma, faith, and belief. In the same stroke, we could acknowledge Supernatural itself as part of this millennial discourse, both asking the questions and shaping their ability to be asked. "Fall of Man" and "In Heaven" in turn reframe the questions and push them further. "Fall of Man" especially, with its incorporation of non-Supernatural source texts ranging from B movies to the
Sistine Chapel, shows us clearly that these questions, while momentarily specific to a cultural, historical, and generational context, are also connected to larger cultural debates that we can trace across history, shifting discursive constructs probing humanity’s relationship to the divine. Thus "Fall of Man" is both millennial and high renaissance, or at least it links the two. In so doing, it renders clearly the potential of vidding as artistic and cultural expression, not only as subcultural and local, community-specific tradition, but as part of much larger arcs of cultural work. Indeed, vidding’s capacity to quote, remix, rework, and remake through intricate processes of visual and aural montage make it an especially apt form for revealing in relief the interconnections within and between industry and audience, culture and subculture, and historical specificity and transhistorical discourse.

4. Notes

1. In 2000, Strauss and Howe introduced the concept of the millennial generation in *Millennial Rising*. At around the same time, the term *Generation Y* had become popular to define a similar age group (Martin and Tulgan 2001). In 2006, Jean Twenge introduced another term, Generation Me, to describe approximately the same age group. All three generational terms coexist in popular discourse about generational communities to describe overlapping audiences.

2. The CW’s target demographic of 18- to 34-year-olds coincides roughly with the boundaries set by cultural critics seeking to define the millennial generation. Pinning down actual audience demographics at any given moment is a slippery project; we can’t simply assume that this demographic encompasses the actual viewers of *Supernatural*, let alone those who participate in fandom or make vids. However, if we approach this notion of the millennial as a discursive construct borne out of industrial discourse and the resulting media texts and reception, then we can understand both *Supernatural* and its audience reception, at least loosely, as millennial creative textuality.

3. These discussions evolved in various fan communities dedicated to the character of Castiel and/or to his relationship with Dean. I have chosen not to provide direct links to these discussions out of concern for protecting these fannish spaces.

5. Works cited


Symposium

What are little ghouls made of? The Supernatural family, fandom, and the problem of Adam

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[0.1] Abstract—An exploration of family in Supernatural through the episode "Jump the Shark" and the character Adam Milligan.

[0.2] Keywords—Family narratives; Fandom


[0.3] "He died like a hunter. He deserves to go out like one."

—Dean Winchester

[1] Vampires, werewolves, suicidal teddy bears, and, lately, ghouls: these are, as Dean himself once put it, "the family business." More accurately, the Winchesters are in the business of defending family. When John Winchester offers himself in trade for the life of his oldest son in 2.01 "In My Time of Dying," when Dean Winchester quite literally makes a deal with the devil to bring his little brother back from the dead in 2.22 "All Hell Breaks Loose 2," when Sam Winchester becomes a heartless killing automaton after Dean's death in 3.11 "Mystery Spot," we see the heroes of the story defining themselves, and their heroism, by their devotion to family above all. The heart of the show, and the way in which it most actively offers a response to postmodern cynicism and malaise, lies in Supernatural's advocacy of family and familial bonds as a refuge against the monsters of the darkness, a refuge that has been eagerly welcomed by viewers in the large and active fan community. When this dysfunctional but functioning family becomes disrupted in 4.19 "Jump the Shark," the threat is not merely to the Sam-Dean dynamic but to the sense of comfort and reassurance that Supernatural has so far asserted in its privileging of family as security against unknown and powerful threats. The problem of Adam, a newly discovered son of John Winchester, is that he threatens to destabilize the Supernatural family, representing as he does a competing narrative of family. The problem of Adam must be resolved in such a way that he cannot serve as a viable alternative for
characters or fans; his death reinforces the show's commitment to the choice of family as an ethical position, while emphasizing the element of tragedy in the background of such a choice. Sam and Dean choose to be together as a family because no other choice is viable. In the Supernatural world, one chooses freely to devote one's life to the family, regardless of one's family's flaws, or one does not live—literally, in the case of Adam, as well as metaphorically. In this way, the problem of Adam is resolved. As fan reaction to the episode demonstrates, "Jump the Shark" successfully upholds the compelling theme at the heart of Supernatural: in the end, the family may be broken, confused, and conflicted, but its members always choose to fight their demons at each other's side in the end.

[2] In her critical study Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon, K. Dale Koontz makes a case for both the redefinition and the importance of faith in popular television fantasy: "Whedon's work," she concludes, "has much to say about the transformative power of love, the importance of family, the possibility of redemption for past actions, and the dangers posed by fundamentalism and zealotry" (2008, 8). For Koontz, faith appears in Whedon's universe not as an element of organized religion, but as a simple core of acceptance and belief. Buffy and her friends find strength in one another's diverse abilities; the adopted misfits in Firefly accept other members of the family for who they are and have faith in the power of the bonds that tie them together. Koontz's terms can be applied equally to the Supernatural 'verse, in which the Winchesters sacrifice everything they have for love of the family, in which both Sam and Dean obsess over the roles they may play in bringing about the apocalypse, and in which Gordon the Vampire Hunter serves as a terrifying reminder of the dangers of obsessive zealotry—and perhaps a frightening glimpse of a possible future Sam, who, like his father, has become increasingly willing to sacrifice everything around him in pursuit of his goal. The importance of family, in Supernatural as in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, is paramount. Moreover, as Koontz asserts, it is a family that is repeatedly chosen, despite momentary rejections or dissolutions. Sam departs for Stanford and an attempt at normality, but when Dean asks for his help in 1.01 "Pilot," he chooses to aid his brother without (much) hesitation:

[3] **Dean:** I can't do this alone.

**Sam:** Yes, you can.

**Dean:** Yeah, well...I don't want to.

**Sam:** [pause] What was he hunting?

[4] Later in season 1, Sam temporarily leaves Dean after an argument (1.11 "Scarecrow") but returns the moment he believes his brother to be in trouble; in later
seasons, John gives up his own life, and the opportunity to complete his quest for vengeance, to save Dean from death (2.01, "In My Time of Dying"), and Dean trades his soul to bring Sam back from the dead (2.21–2.22 "All Hell Breaks Loose") (note 1). Even Bobby Singer, fellow hunter and family friend, acts to protect his surrogate sons on many occasions, even speaking the memorable line "Family don't end with blood, boy!" to Dean (3.16 "No Rest for the Wicked"). The family, despite fights and flaws, remains paramount for Sam and Dean, and the desire to protect the family emerges as the driving force of the show overall. Avril Hannah-Jones suggests in her essay "Good and Evil in the World of Supernatural" that "Supernatural, like other forms of pop culture that deal with themes of good and evil, offers its viewers the hope that evil can be defeated by humans taking responsibility for their own actions and working together" (Hannah-Jones 2009, 64, emphasis mine). Hope, in other words, can be found in the choice to stand together against evil, and this is the choice that Supernatural advocates time and again in the actions of Sam and Dean.

[5] This family dynamic faces its greatest challenge in 4.19 "Jump The Shark," in which the Winchester brothers discover a younger brother they never knew they had, courtesy of John. As Sam puts it, John wasn't a monk, after all, and life is not foolproof. But the introduction of Adam raises a multitude of questions, especially as Sam and Dean, and viewers, discover that Adam's family life with John involved baseball games and birthday visits—in short, elements of a normalized American suburban family narrative that were noticeably missing in Sam and Dean's childhood experiences (note 2). The episode thus provides a potential challenge to the show's definition of family: Adam's relation to John and to Sam and Dean appears to rest primarily on the DNA he shares with them. He has not been given the choice to enter into the hunter life with them; he has not chosen, as Sam has, to place family over a world of normalcy. This is hardly his fault, of course; John made this decision for him by not informing him of his half-siblings and the life they all led. Adam is deprived of any opportunity to search for a new definition of family beyond the blood he shares with John; he therefore functions perfectly as a representation of family completely alienated from the Winchester version, set so far apart that he is unaware of the existence of another version of family life. If Adam and John could lead a fulfilling and contented existence in happy oblivious normality, the element of choice that the show has privileged thus far in the Winchester family becomes devalued, even meaningless.

[6] The problem of Adam was from the beginning correctly read as a threat to the Winchester "chosen family" by fans. Comments on the CW message boards reflected this theme of concern: one user observed, "I've never been so worried about an episode...hope it's all good by the end of the night" (Mousisita, April 23, 2009) (note 3), and another commented that "a third brother at this point would only distract from the main storyline...Supernatural is about Sam and Dean only, everyone else is just..."
something to bounce off these two main characters and impact them" (lovepass77, April 24, 2009). *Supernatural*, for these fans and others, is about, tellingly, Sam and Dean only. The "main storyline" is equated with the story of the siblings who choose each other over everything else, even life itself, every time; as Sheryl A. Rakowski observes in her discussion of family strengths and weaknesses in the show, "for the Winchesters, needing family and having the ability to acknowledge and sustain that need is the wellspring of their mission" (2009, 106). The family, as it is needed, acknowledged, and actively supported, lies at the heart of the Winchester mission, the narrative quest of the show. Adam, a family member seemingly unacknowledged and unneeded, appears at first glance as a startling distraction from this main narrative.

[7] This distraction is definitively dealt with, as Sam and Dean discover that the Adam they've met is in fact a ghoul, who—along with his mother—menaces Sam in a particularly gruesome fashion until killed, with fittingly brutal head shots, by a very protective Dean. By the end of the episode, Adam has been eliminated as a viable alternative, both literally and metaphorically, and the threat he poses with his desire to devour Sam's body is shown in beautiful juxtaposition to Sam and Dean's evident concern for each other's welfare (note 4). The *Supernatural* family of Sam and Dean has once again demonstrated its superiority by means of its ability to overcome threatening forces, whether narrative or physical.

[8] The show, however, supports a more complicated reading than a simple assertion of its own definition of the One True Family over all. The death of Adam is presented as a genuinely tragic moment, with a real sense of loss, an emotion that Dean reinforces with his choice to give Adam a hunter's funeral: "He died like a hunter. He deserves to go out like one" (note 5). Dean, and the show, may support a specific narrative of family as a function of choice over blood and knowledge over innocence; but that does not mean that the failure of a competing narrative of family should not be mourned. In giving Adam a hunter's funeral, Dean accepts him into the family; importantly, this is not a "Winchester's" funeral, but a "hunter's." The family is not defined by blood, but by the life one chooses, the life that Sam and Dean have chosen to share. They offer Adam a hunter's pyre, demonstrating their acceptance of him as family and as a person of worth despite his seemingly oppositional embodiment of family. In the flames of Adam's funeral pyre, *Supernatural* suggests that the seeming opposition is just that. Adam's alternate narrative still has value for Sam and Dean; Adam himself still has value for them, and they demonstrate this value by genuinely mourning his loss. Adam, at the moment of his funeral, becomes a member of the chosen family of *Supernatural*, not because of his blood but because Sam and Dean choose to consider him so. In this choice, paradoxically, *Supernatural* makes the claim that Adam and the narrative he represents must also have value. The family whose members choose each other freely may be the strongest—after all, our heroes must
prevail—but the show willingly complicates its own themes by suggesting that its formulation of family is not the only one with value.

[9] This use of Adam was embraced by fans, as it provided a resolution to their concerns while simultaneously expanding the thematic embrace of the show. One poster commented after the episode aired:

[10] I think Kripke handled this really well. Throwing the kid brother in, teaching him how to hunt and whatnot is really the stuff for fan fiction and would have completely thumbed its nose at the point of this particular episode. The truth is, the boys never got to know Adam. He was already dead by the time the boys got there and the Adam they got to know wasn't real. We'll never know if they would have gotten along with Adam and that's the, forgive me here, wonderfully tragic part of the episode. (MasterofPuppets, April 24, 2009)

[11] The "wonderful tragedy" of the episode lies in that unanswered question: could these two narratives of family have coexisted? Could Sam and Dean have "gotten along with Adam"? A second poster concurred: "The best part of the episode is that Kripke made sure that Adam was already dead so that they never really got to know him and likely never will. This episode was never about Adam, or adding a third brother to the mix, it was all about Family and Sam and Dean dealing with Family issues, secrets and showing their bond is still there" (lovepass77, April 24, 2009).

[12] For many fans, this episode is about family and the definition of family—the bonds that are still there, despite challenges to them. Specifically, some fans read this episode, tellingly, as centering on various narratives of family and the respective values of those narratives:

[13] Perhaps John, in his own way, wanted to make things right by Adam and give him some kind of normalcy (the rare times he saw him)...something he couldn't do for Dean and Sam. Everything considered, I believe John did the best he could for all his sons. He committed the ultimate sacrifice and gave his life so Dean could live. A father has to truly love to do that. (SuperFanatic, April 24, 2009)

[14] For this member of the fan community, John's dual families each represent the best John could offer; the loss of one of them in the form of Adam becomes a true sacrifice of a valuable ideal. Overall fan response, in an informal poll conducted by a forum member (table 1), displays general satisfaction with the episode (note 6).

Table 1. What did you think of Jump the Shark? [thread title]
Fandom, clearly, responded well to the introduction of Adam on these terms: his death allows Sam and Dean, a family who have consistently chosen each other, to reemerge as the series's preeminent image of family. But Adam's sympathetic portrayal and hunter's funeral suggest the show's inclusivity and willingness to consider alternative narratives as possible sites of value. Part of *Supernatural*'s continuing appeal consists of this inclusive approach, offering an optimistic view of tolerance that sits in a strangely comfortable pairing with the otherworldly monsters and situations that Sam and Dean face from week to week. As *Supernatural* makes the monsters, vampires, and werewolves into familiar sights, an accepted part of the lifestyle of one peculiar family, it also negotiates otherness and alterity in more subtle ways, providing a refuge for families of all types and compositions. Family, to paraphrase Bobby Singer's words, is reaffirmed as a connection that neither begins nor ends with blood.

**Notes**

1. This is by no means an exhaustive list; many of the tensions of the show manifest themselves in stress and temporary splitting of the family dynamic, and a main source of as-yet-unresolved discomfort throughout season 4 has been the emotional separation of Sam and Dean. Until this point, the show has reaffirmed the importance of family by consistently depicting a reconnection after separation; season 4 appears to be affirming the importance of choosing family by demonstrating the negative consequences of a sustained separation.

2. Excellent examples of John's absentee parenting occur most notably in episodes 3.08 "A Very Supernatural Christmas" and 4.13 "After School Special," among others. In all fairness, as at least one fan has observed on the CW forum for the show, John did preserve mementos of Sam and Dean's childhood as well, such as Sam's soccer trophy and Dean's first shotgun; the fact that the boys are surprised to find this
memorabilia, however, suggests that they did not know of or expect such indications of parental pride and "normality" from John.

3. All quotations from fans are taken from the CW official message boards for *Supernatural*, accessed April 27, 2009.

4. This relationship dynamic, operating along lines of pain and concern, is much beloved by fandom, to the extent of its formulation as a specific category of fan fiction affectionately known as h/c, or hurt/comfort.

5. Adam's funeral pyre is one among many effective visual images linking death with fire, a pairing employed by *Supernatural* since the show's opening sequence of Mary Winchester burning to death on the ceiling in season 1; here, the multiple layers of meaning—the person whose body they burn has just been represented in quick succession as an innocent, a victim, a threat, and now a warrior—suggest the complicated and shifting nature of identity with regard to familial roles.

6. This poll is not in any way statistically significant, relying on only the views of the 77 members who felt strongly enough about the episode to rate it, but it does offer a representative idea of the general response to the episode among the same population who had previously expressed such doubts about the new Winchester sibling.

Works cited


[0.1] Abstract—Although Sam and Dean are "marked" by various forces, wounds tend to disappear or be rendered invisible. Fan fiction writers bring these into the forefront, creating physical reminders of the plights that claim their bodies.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan fiction; Television


1. Introduction

[1.1] Collectively, the Winchester brothers on Supernatural (2005–) have been tied up, caged, beaten, cut, stabbed, shot, possessed by a demon, hit by a truck, swarmed by insects, gripped by yellow fever, and nonfatally killed multiple times via the Trickster and a Babylonian wishing coin. That's just all in a day's work for the young demon hunters. Cuts, bruises, and breaks are usually healed and forgotten by the next episode, while magical deaths are soon reversed.

[1.2] From living under their father's command, to being infected with demon blood or resurrected by angels, it has become clear that neither Sam nor Dean has an exclusive claim on his own body—or his fate. When they do evade the clutches of the supernatural, the brothers physically hold on to each other, asserting their bodily reality and their genetic, affectional, and human brotherhood—in defiance of the divine forces that bedevil them. In this paper, I will discuss how Sam and Dean's bodies are constructed by the commercial demands of the broadcast television medium, the diagetic events within the show, and fan readings.

[1.3] Supernatural was commissioned by the WB, now the CW, a network that targets teens and young adults, emphasizing youth and beauty in its casts. Supernatural is not exempt from the CW's rules, even though the show is about two grifting near-serial killers living out of an old car, fighting monsters every week. Jared
Padalecki, who plays Sam, did not want to appear shirtless in the movie *Friday the 13th* because "I'm already on the CW, which is kind of like the pretty boy network" ([http://www.joblo.com/index.php?id=23727](http://www.joblo.com/index.php?id=23727)). He has also directly addressed the commercially driven demand for magic healing. When Padalecki broke his wrist in real life during season 2, he was happy that the cast he wore was written into the show "because it sort of frustrates me when there's a show and you're cut up and you're bruised and your arm's in a sling, and then the next day you're sparkly clean. We used to joke about it and call it WB ointment" (Knight 2008, 129).

[1.4] The show resolves the tension between marketability and storytelling by making scars disappear and wounds invisible. The patriarchal forces on the show "mark" Sam and Dean for ugly futures, but without leaving unsightly physical traces. The few visible marks they do have are acceptable, even aesthetically pleasing in the case of the antipossession tattoos, for mainstream prime time viewing. Deeper scars remain invisible. Marked by a blood infection, Sam's scars are internal and internalized, so there is no surface disruption of his (and Padalecki’s) fresh, collegiate looks. But while casting former soap opera star Jensen Ackles as Dean fulfills television expectations of beauty, it goes against the text of the elder Winchester brother being a lifelong warrior and a bit of a redneck. The many psychological scars and the angel handprint that Dean retains indicate who owns him, and how.

[1.5] Fan fiction writers bring these metaphorical and physical scars closer together. Most fan constructions of Sam and Dean are just as handsome as the characters on the show and just as resilient to the effects of hard living, heavy drinking, and bad eating. But many fan writers give Sam and Dean bodies of consequence, bodies that bear the scars of the past and that also exercise proactive agency, thus creating opportunities for Sam and Dean to mark each other in defiance of the industrial and patriarchal forces acting upon them.

2. Dean as Foucauldian hero

[2.1] Dean's body is a field of play that French philosopher Michel Foucault would recognize: "the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest in it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Foucault 1977, 25).

[2.2] John is the first authority figure to leave his mark on Dean. Despite a lifetime of defending John against Sam's criticisms, Dean harbors the thought that his father was "an obsessive bastard" who molded Dean into "a good soldier, an attack dog" who mindlessly follows commands (3.10 "Dream a Little Dream of Me"). As a consequence, Dean tends to gravitate toward domineering father figures. While this helps him on the
hunt, especially when he goes undercover as a figure of petty authority (for example, as a prison card shark in 2.19 "Folsom Prison Blues" and a gym teacher in 4.13 "After School Special"), it also leaves Dean open to attack from those with real power, the demons and the angels.

[2.3] Alastair is the second patriarchal figure to scar Dean. Because Dean's body does not bear any physical scars from his time in hell, the show characterizes his torture as metaphysical: hell's victory over Dean is over his psyche, not his body. "They sliced and carved and tore at me...until there was nothing left. And then, suddenly, I would be whole again. Like magic. Just so they could start in all over" (4.10 "Heaven and Hell"). What endures is the psychological torture to which Dean subjects himself over giving in to Alastair's temptation: "I enjoyed it, Sam. They took me off the rack, and I tortured souls, and I liked it...No matter how many people I save, I can't change that. I can't fill this hole. Not ever" (4.11 "Family Remains").

[2.4] According to Dean, the angels "rehymenated" (4.05 "Monster Movie") him when they raised him from hell. But they leave Castiel's handprint—a cattle brand indicating that the ownership of Dean's body has passed from John (his biological father) and Alastair (his father-figure in hell) to the agents of God, the Father-Creator whose existence Dean has disbelieved. The fallen angel Anna eroticizes this mark of submission to patriarchal forces when she places her hand on it as she and Dean undress in 4.10 "Heaven and Hell." At that moment, Anna and Dean bond as former child soldiers in their fathers' wars.

[2.5] After Alastair reveals that Dean broke the first seal, Dean falls into a crippling depression, which is ironically an act of passive resistance to the angels, as if Dean intuitively understands that "the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (Foucault 1977, 26). As long as Dean does not actively help Sam kill Lilith, he delays the apocalypse. The "upper management" of heaven stages an intervention (4.17 "It's a Terrible Life") that succeeds until Dean looks past the metaphorical curtain to see Zachariah operating the controls (4.22 "Lucifer Rising"). Again, Dean channels Foucault: "Power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (Foucault 1978, 86). In the same vein, when Dean discovers that the archangel Michael cannot forcibly possess him, he realizes that his body is a political site and withholds consent, defying the angels in a display of negative force (5.01 "Sympathy for the Devil"). Metaphysical marks such as the prospect of becoming Michael's vessel, the coercion by the demons, and his father's psychological imprint remind Dean that his body has never been his own. During the apocalypse, Dean has influence over his own fate, but only as long as the angels need his body.
3. Sam's Gothic body

[3.1] As constructed on the show, Sam's body is a repository of Gothic tropes: "the legacies of the past and its burdens on the present; the radically provisional or divided nature of the self; the construction of peoples or individuals as monstrous or 'other'; the preoccupation with bodies that are modified, grotesque or diseased" (Spooner 2006, 8).

[3.2] In Sam's story, as in the Gothic vampire novel, these themes are carried forth through the device of blood infection. The burden of the past becomes evident as Sam's disease spreads along familial lines to doom four generations of past and possible Winchesters (demons claim the lives of Sam's grandparents, father, mother, brother, and fiancée, the potential mother of the next generation of Winchesters), but there are no outward signs of it. It is comparable to a stigmatized disease that is physical yet not visible, and must be hidden. Sam's greatest fear is rejection by his brother for being "different" and "a monster" (4.21 "When the Levee Breaks"). Conscious of his othering, Sam tries to turn this infection into a virtue. In 4.04 "Metamorphosis," he says: "I've got demon blood in me, Dean. This disease pumping through my veins, and I can't ever rip it out or scrub it clean. I'm a whole new level of freak. And I'm just trying to take this—this curse—and make something good out of it. Because I have to."

[3.3] Sam proactively modifies his body to match the new mission with which he chooses to define himself. Resolving to avenge Dean's death and damnation by killing Lilith, Sam accepts Ruby's offer to train him. His growing power is visually represented by Sam's imposing, demon-smiting physique. Serendipitously, these scenes were filmed after actor Padalecki spent the summer building up muscle to match the monster he faced in Friday the 13th (note 1). This bit of physical metastorytelling expresses Sam's forceful will and forges Sam's body into an exceptionally strong vessel, both of which are required to contain Lucifer.

[3.4] After Lucifer rises, Sam believes that "whoever put me on that plane cleaned me right up" (5.01 "Sympathy for the Devil"). But in Sam's mind, the stain in his blood has been replaced by a blot on his conscience. While his demonic infection may have been cleared up by supernatural intervention, Sam's human deeds cannot be undone. Previously ashamed about what he was, Sam is now mortified about what he has done: distrusted Dean, consorted with a demon, and became addicted to demon blood—essentially becoming a vampire. In 5.02 "Good God, Y'All," Sam decides to step back from the hunt: "The problem's not the demon blood, not really. I mean, what I did, I can't blame the blood, or Ruby, or anything. The problem's me, how far I'll go. There's something in me that scares the hell out of me, Dean."
This is a different Sam than the one who appeared in the first episode of the series. Back then, he was constructing an identity as a pillar of normalcy in the rationalist profession of law. But college boy Sam—not the bad-attitude, leather-clad Dean—is the rebellious Winchester. Like a modern day Lucy Westenra, once infected, Sam goes on to break the skin of convention, abandoning his family and the hunt, allying with a demon, and giving himself over to the power of blood. The tragedy for Sam is that everything he tried to do to save Dean, to make the world safe, and all the alterations he made to his character and his body, were ironically driven by the demons' agenda, carried out by Sam's body via blood infection.

4. Written on the body

The demons and angels may metaphorically ride roughshod over the Winchester brothers on television, but in fan fiction, Sam and Dean are given bodies that bear the calluses and scars that testify to their individual histories, victimization, and resistance. The show depicts Sam and Dean as being absolutely devoted to each other and implies their need to affirm each other as physically real and human, especially after they survive metaphysical trauma (such as Sam's release from the time loop in 3.11 "Mystery Spot" and Dean's return from hell in 4.01 "Lazarus Rising"). As Catherine Tosenberger (2008, 2.1) notes, the brothers' diagnostically intense closeness easily leads slash-minded fans to write Sam and Dean as lovers, calling up the Romantic and Gothic literary trope of incest as the ultimate expression of physical oneness: "united not simply in body and soul, but in blood."

Tosenberger continues: "The intense, exclusive, excessive nature of their love is not only central to the plot, but also named by the creators, actors, critics, and fans as the show's primary strength. While this love is not necessarily romantic, our culture codes romantic love as similarly excessive, so the show makes it very easy to read Sam and Dean's excessive love as romantic" (2.2).

In Wincest stories, it is common for Dean's scars to be seen through the eyes of Sam, who has a new regard for his brother after spending years away in the normal world. In arby_m's "Hell" (2005), posted just weeks after the show debuted, Sam conflates erotic desire with a melancholic awe for the sacrifices Dean has made: "All muscles and scars; Dean was (really) built, but his body also bore witness to years of the hunt." Proprietary sexual marking (bites, hickeys, scratches) has appeared since the earliest published Wincest stories. In joyfulgirl41's "Can't Just Walk Away" (2005), Dean apologizes for leaving a "crescent-shaped bruise" on Sam's shoulder. Sam replies: "I kind of like it."
In the same vein, some fan fic writers have picked up on an increasingly important trope on *Supernatural*, the equation of possession by demons and angels with sex and sexual assault (note 2). Often creating more naturalistic universes than is possible on network television or within the parameters of *Supernatural*’s heightened genre reality, fan fiction writers convert the show’s metaphorical, agency-denying rapes into concrete plot points, especially in sexual fiction that explores the power relations that have resulted in the characters’ psychological scars. The show’s depiction of patriarchal forces' use of Dean's body—to the extent of eradicating his identity—is explored in fic that casts Dean as a victim of rape at the hands of monsters, demons, angels, and even his own father and brother. Some of that same fic ascribes a need or tendency toward sexual domination to Sam, whose desire and behavior is either rooted in or blamed on the demon blood in his system.

These tropes are effectively employed in the hurt/comfort epic "The Bright Lights of Disturbia" by leonidaslion (2009a). In this fic, the Yellow-Eyed Demon reiterates his claim on Sam by raping Dean on multiple occasions, acting out Sam's long-harbored sexual feelings for his brother. The attacks leave an external scar on Dean's temple, internal tearing after a near-fatal rape, and psychological trauma. In an incident that reimagines the confrontation in 1.22 "The Devil's Trap," the Yellow-Eyed Demon rapes Dean while possessing John's body, forcing Sam to watch the literal and obscene manifestation of Sam's main issue with his father, John's domination of Dean: "It [the demon] broke Dean with deliberate, calculating malice—fashioned him into someone who would be open to a relationship with his brother because he didn't trust anyone else enough to give it a go. It raped Dean as some kind of sick, twisted gift for Sam" (2009b). But Sam goes on to use markings to reposition himself vis-à-vis his father figures: John, his biological father; Azazel, the Yellow-Eyed Demon who, in vampire terms, sired Sam; and Dean, his older brother and main caregiver. When John orders the boys to get antipossession tattoos, Sam drafts them himself, stepping up as a hunter, literally by his own design. Then, without John's knowledge, despite the demon's physical and sexual claims, and counter to normative relations between siblings, Sam designs a second tattoo, a marriage rune. At the tattoo parlor, Sam pitches the idea to Dean: "I want to mark you...This'll be different. Just for us" (2009c).

Sam's turnabout marks a moment of identity reclamation, shared exclusively between the brothers, away from patriarchal eyes. Significantly, there is one other person in the room in this scene, an original female character named Trish, who tattoos both symbols of protection onto the boys. Trish can be read as an avatar for female fan fiction writers who write resistance onto Sam and Dean as a corollary to diagnostic and productorial uses of their bodies—explicitly outlining the naturalistic
implications of the show's unrelenting imperilment of attractive young men caught up in a sexualized play of power relations (note 3).

5. Conclusion

[5.1] On Supernatural, Sam and Dean's destinies are defined by the interests that claim their bodies. But the physical marks remain invisible, fulfilling broadcast television demands for unmarred beauty, blank slates on which both producers and fans can write stories. Fan fiction writers play with ideas and themes that can be developed to only a limited extent on the show due to time, budget, broadcast, or marketing constraints. In Supernatural fan fiction, writers explore Sam and Dean's perpetual subjugation by picking up on key textual cues about the characters' histories and constructing bodies that are physical repositories of external forces' agendas, as well as sites of resistance.

[5.2] However, on the show, the near-complete absence of scars on the Winchester brothers displaces their battles from the physical to the metaphysical plane. The emotional scars of their actions and of being acted upon, and the proprietary marks left in Sam's blood and on Dean's shoulder, have groomed the close-knit Winchester brothers to receive the warring archangel brothers Lucifer and Michael. As characters whose actions—self-preservation in Dean's case and misguided heroism in Sam's—led to the apocalypse, what is frightening about the Winchester brothers' twinned fate is not only the loss of physical control of their bodies: it is also the possibility that they will be complicit in their own corruption. "It's not one of the key dramatic urges for the viewers to feel like he's going to die or not. Our discussion is living with angst, living with fear, living with all the things that require catharsis," says Supernatural producer Ben Edlund (http://www.acedmagazine.com/component/content/article/95-celebrity-event/3527-supernatural-looks-to-the-wal-mart-apocalypse). "Supernatural is a non-stop nightmare. Those men and their dreams are thwarted every week."

6. Acknowledgments

[6.1] Thanks to Katherine Keller, Wolfen Moondaughter, and Justin Jordan for commenting on earlier drafts. I am greatly indebted to my editor, Suzanne Scott; my enabler, Catherine Tosenberger; and my mentor, the late Gilbert Bouchard.

7. Notes

1. In 2009, Men's Fitness magazine named Jared Padalecki one of the 25 fittest men in the world. "Padalecki also made sure he was at peak fitness for the recent Friday the
13th. 'There's nothing worse than watching some 120-pound dude killing the bad guy,' he says" (http://www.mensfitness.com/fitness/469?page=3).

2. As the possessions become increasingly tied to the brothers' fates, Dean's jokes about them become grimmer. When Meg possesses Sam, Dean laughs about the "naughty" connotations of Sam having "full-on had a girl inside [him] for like a week" (2.12 "Born Under a Bad Sign"); when the angels introduce a shaky concept of consent, Dean likens the situation to prison rape: "I got an archangel waiting for me to drop the soap" (5.08 "The Curious Case of Dean Winchester"). In between, Sam confronts Ruby directly on the issue—"Whose body are you riding?" (4.09 "I Know What You Did Last Summer")—forcing her to switch to a vacated body before he allows her to engage him further.

3. Sam and Dean have many traits of the Final Girl in slasher horror movies. While Final Girls have gender neutral or masculinized names (Stretch in the 1974 Texas Chain Saw Massacre and Erin, a homonym of Aaron, in the 2003 remake), "Sam" is as popular a nickname for Samantha as it is for Samuel and Dean is named after his maternal grandmother, Deanna; just as Final Girls are tomboyish, Sam and Dean's feminized features (Sam's long hair; Dean's lush eyelashes and lips) are routinely fetishized by fan fiction writers; and although Sam and Dean are not as virginal or sexually unavailable as Final Girls, they are emotionally unavailable to women and sex is on their timetable. In Men, Women, and Chain Saws, Carol J. Clover (1992) argues that the Final Girl is the sexually ambiguous victim-hero through which male viewers can identify: female enough to be inscribed with fear and male enough to triumph over figures of troubled or troubling masculinity (sister-obsessed Michael Meyers in Halloween, mother-identified Jason Voorhees in Friday the 13th). As Supernatural's Final Boys, Sam and Dean could be read as the subject-objects of the female gaze as it peers into a world of troubled or troubling femininity as played out in Mary's bad mother deal with the devil, Meg and Ruby's sexual aggression, and the boys' feminized victimization at the hands of an endless parade of male and female villains who tie them down; shoot, stab, or poke them with phallic objects like guns, knives, and fingers; or attempt to seduce them (the siren Nick and Lucifer, both of whom appear in shifting gender identities). Ironically, in 2009 remakes of classic slasher films, Padalecki and Ackles were cast in lead roles positioned as Final Boys. In Friday the 13th, Clay (Padalecki) is the Final Boy alongside Whitney, his Final Girl sister; in My Bloody Valentine, Tom (Ackles) closes the Final Girl-Killer loop by being set up as the hero-victim, but turning out to be the monster.

8. Works cited


of the Bible, the symbol of the cross, Catholic priests, and Judeo-Christian occultism (for example, Enochian magic), and the Winchesters' origin in predominantly Christian Kansas, the show's hell is most likely intended to be a Christian one. Yet neither Luminosity's vid nor the depiction of Dean in hell at the end of "No Rest for the Wicked" matches the arguably more common biblical images of hell as a fiery place or a state of separation from God. They depict instead a dark and gloomy hell filled with suffering souls (figure 1). The precedent for *Supernatural*'s depiction of hell, *The Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri, is often considered to have firmly established the West's view of hell, and it holds cultural significance within the fandom. Dante describes hell as comprising nine circles: Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Wrath, Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery. The first six hold those guilty of sins of incontinence or unreasonable desire, while the final three are for the brutish and malicious (Dante 2000, chap. 11). Sinners are placed in the circle corresponding to their most grievous sin; punishment in hell thus depends on a sin's nature and consequently reveals the sinner's nature.

![Dean in hell, from 3.16 "No Rest for the Wicked" (2008).](image)

**Figure 1.** Dean in hell, from 3.16 "No Rest for the Wicked" (2008).

[1.3] Since normally only sinners go to hell, the question of whether Sam and Dean have sinned is important. For Dean the answer is an emphatic yes, as before his death Dean's aggressive behavior suggested that he was guilty of wrath, and a personified Envy itself identifies him as "practically a walking billboard of gluttony and lust" (3.01 "The Magnificent Seven") (note 1). In addition to these there is also blasphemy, demonstrated by Dean's statements that he has faith only in what he sees and that "there's no higher power, there's no God...just chaos and violence and random, unpredictable evil that comes out of nowhere" (1.12 "Faith," 2.13 "Houses of the Holy"). These comments indicate that Dean was an atheist or agnostic prior to his descent, beliefs traditionally considered blasphemous in and of themselves.

[1.4] Whether Sam has sinned is not as clear. Prior to his brother's descent to hell, Sam is never depicted as overly violent or aggressive. Not only is his behavior
moderate, but he is a faithful person who believes in God and angels and even prays "every day" (2.13 "Houses of the Holy"). None of the Seven Deadly Sins identify themselves with Sam. In fact, the only conflicts he is shown to be involved in are between him and his family, and even in them he only broods (Dean remarks on Sam's "broody and pensive shoulders" in 4.18 "The Monster at the End of this Book"). It seems a stretch to call broodiness a sin. However, Dante's model suggests a sin of which Sam could be accused: sullenness, punished in the fifth circle, much as Luminosity's "The Fifth Circle" suggests.

2. Moderation

[2.1] In Luminosity's vid, Sam's fall into hell begins "as soon as he came back to life," although he only becomes aware of it upon killing the crossroads demon about five months later (sockkpuppett, May 1, 2008, LiveJournal post; 3.05 "Bedtime Stories" is also being referenced). At the point in Supernatural when he summons the crossroads demon, Sam has been spending all of his energy attempting to prevent Dean's fall, becoming increasingly desperate. This desperation is both visually and audibly represented in "The Fifth Circle" by the identification of Dean as Sam's "one grain of sand," to which Sam clings among the imagery of the "three drops of water." The depiction of Sam's fall into hell takes 22 seconds, at the video's climax, and he certainly falls into the hell described by Dante's Inferno: the video begins with a woodcut of the Inferno, an image reaffirmed by the background during Sam's fall. The circle Sam falls to is similarly identified by the visual imagery, as the video is bracketed by images of a person (presumably Sam) riding on a boat over dark water, and then being pulled into the water by angry people. This matches Dante's description of the fifth circle of hell, where "water...darker than the deepest purple" is filled with the wrathful, "people with angry faces in that bog, / naked," who "struck each other with their hands" (Dante 2000, 7.103, 110–12); hidden in the water are the sullen, "souls whose sighs / with bubbles make the water's surface seethe" (119–20).

[2.2] Sullenness is clearly Sam's sin; fans have long noted his tendency toward it. "The Fifth Circle" also highlights Sam's reliance on his brother for support: lacking that support, Sam will apparently drown unless he is able to expiate this sin. How this is to be done is not made clear. Luminosity offers a suggestion, saying it is Sam's refusal to embrace his destiny as "a very powerful demonic force" that prolongs his stay in hell (May 1, 2008, LiveJournal post). If Sam embraces his demonic nature and uses it, he can release his pent-up anger and bitterness by essentially burning it up; to use Dante's language, if Sam's incontinently keeping his anger in is causing his soul to suffer, he must release it in order to become more moderate. Once he has done so, Sam will be out of hell (note 2).
And what of Dean? Dean has certainly felt lust, but he does not suffer Dante's punishment for this sin in the hell depicted in 3.16 "No Rest for the Wicked," that is, being flung on whirlwinds. Why? Simply put, Dean is not incontinent. In *The Inferno*, Dante describes his conversation in that circle of hell with Francesca de Polenta, who reveals that she is being punished for having an affair with Paulo Malatesta. Instead of accepting the blame, Francesca blames the affair on Paulo's beauty, her husband's cruelty, and the story of Lancelot and Guinevere (Dante 2000, 5.121–38). This is not how Dean thinks; he may sleep around, but he wouldn't betray family for sex. In fact, Dean apparently wants to settle down, as his reaction to Cassie Robinson's rejection and his dream of living with Ben and Lisa show (1.13 "Route 666," 3.10 "Dream a Little Dream of Me"). Dean may be a little lustful, but he is not flung on the winds of his passion, so his lust is unlikely to damn him. Dean's continence also explains why he doesn't suffer punishment for gluttony and violence, while his agnosticism about God (Dean would believe in him if he had sufficient proof) explains why he doesn't suffer for being blasphemous. He is certainly guilty of committing fraud, but considering that he does so merely to obtain supplies necessary for his lifestyle, the only type of fraud he could be condemned for is schism, which will be dealt with below.

That Dean is depicted as moderate is important. This moderation is perhaps only seen by his family within the space of the show, but fans also notice it. If Dean were a crazed and sinful person, he would deserve punishment. Instead, fans emphasize Dean's restraint and care for those around him, and by not using imagery drawn from Dante's vision of the other circles of hell, the show acknowledges these aspects of him. Conversely, Sam's emotional state, also most visible to his family but noticed by fans, is indicated by the imagery drawn from Dante's *Inferno* in "The Fifth Circle."

3. Dean's scandalous nature

In Schism, a subdivision of Fraud, the eighth circle, a devil hacks sinners open, repeating the action every time their wounds close; there are so many wounded that "neither thought nor speech / has the capacity to hold so much" (Dante 2000, 28.5–6). This closely matches Dean's description of a hell where demons "sliced and carved and tore at me...until there was nothing left. And then suddenly I would be whole again...just so they could start in all over" (4.10 "Heaven and Hell"). Dean has company in Schism besides those who deviated from church doctrine. There are also those who "sowed scandal" (Dante 2000, 28.34–36), which, according to Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, means they were stumbling blocks causing spiritual downfall (1997, 2.2.43.1). Sinners in this circle have prevented their own or others' spiritual growth by splitting with the church; Dean seemingly follows no doctrine, so he cannot split from it, but his refusal to believe without proof is scandalous. This
refusal's effect on Dean is enacted literally: as his spiritual being has been cut, Dean himself now is. This direct and simple symbolism briefly makes Dean's sin clear to fans, especially those who were unaware of his relation to scandal, while laying the groundwork for some of Dean's later actions, such as breaking the first seal.

[3.2] That Dean's role in the myth arc of *Supernatural* is important is clear—Reverend Roy Le Grange tells Dean he has a job, and upon their return from hell Castiel tells Dean God has work for him (1.12 "Faith," 4.01 "Lazarus Rising"). When the final seal is about to be broken, Zachariah tells Dean he is to kill Lucifer, giving Dean a holy role (4.22 "Lucifer Rising"). Unfortunately, Dean's scandalous nature has prevented him from accepting angels and the existence of God, limiting him; as Castiel says, Dean's problem is that he has no faith (4.01 "Lazarus Rising"). The simplest way to fix this is by providing proof; since only angels and God can take someone out of hell, Dean must go there so they can unequivocally prove their existence by rescuing him, allowing him to accept their existence on his terms while absolving his scandal and allowing him to become the desired holy warrior. This need for unequivocal proof explains the length of Dean's stay: any shorter and Dean might claim that he had survived by his own willpower.

[3.3] Yet after thirty years in hell, Dean accepts Alastair's offer to stop his torture in return for Dean's torturing the other sinners, an action seemingly uncharacteristic for moderate, holy Dean (4.10 "Heaven and Hell") and one that breaks the first seal. Dean's making this decision is significant, as Dante comments that sinners in hell "have lost the good of the intellect" (Dante 2000, 3.18). Still, if Dean is no longer a sinner, why did he break the seal? Castiel states, "The first seal shall be broken when a righteous man sheds blood in hell. As he breaks, so shall it break," linking the seal with Dean's righteousness as a holy warrior (4.16 "On the Head of a Pin"). Clearly, punishing sinners is righteous, and Dean punishes with skill comparable to Alastair's, but he admits he felt good while torturing: "That pain I felt? It just slipped away" (4.11 "Family Remains"); see also 4.16 "On the Head of a Pin"). Escaping pain by inflicting it is not righteous, but it is human and understandable, and it is this split between human need and righteous behavior that breaks the seal. Nevertheless, once Dean is rescued his scandal is absolved: he is no longer damned, and thus is released from hell (note 3).

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4. Conclusion

[4.1] Sam's actions during Dean's absence and after his return are notably unlike those prior to his brother's fall: he embraces his demonic nature with assistance from Ruby, in part by drinking her blood, and throughout season 4 consistently uses his abilities to fight, exorcise, and kill demons (4.01 "Lazarus Rising," 4.16 "On the Head
of a Pin"). He is initially excited at meeting angels, but his first encounter with them leaves him disillusioned; however, no reference is made to any change in his behavior as a result of this disillusionment (4.07 "It's the Great Pumpkin, Sam Winchester"). Finally, at the end of the season, Sam kills Lilith, using up all of his demonic abilities and breaking the final seal in the process (4.21 "When the Levee Breaks"). What Luminosity's vid predicts thus comes to pass. By embracing his destiny, Sam finally stops drowning in the misery his brother's fall caused him and leaves hell by releasing all of his withheld anger in the form of his demonic abilities; this release finally ends when he burns out upon breaking the final seal. Sam has purged himself, though he will have to deal with the consequences of doing so.

[4.2] Dean breaks out of his grave; he then reconnects with Sam and ultimately accepts the existence of angels after exhausting all other possibilities, although he struggles with the idea of suffering for the greater good (4.01 "Lazarus Rising," 4.02 "Are You There, God? It's Me...Dean Winchester"). Dean undergoes his first test of battle readiness, but no one can tell him if he passed; later he is called to torture Alastair, with arguable success, and ultimately joins the angels to prevent Sam from becoming demonic (4.07 "It's the Great Pumpkin, Sam Winchester," 4.16 "On the Head of a Pin," 4.21 "When the Levee Breaks"). Such actions demonstrate the change that has occurred in Dean. Although he previously did not believe in either God or angels, he now treats Castiel as a peer and has openly sworn to follow the Lord's will; he also increasingly considers the morality behind difficult choices, such as Sam's decision to drink demon blood (4.21 "When the Levee Breaks").

[4.3] Therefore, allusions to Dante's Inferno operate on multiple levels in Supernatural. The imagery's simple symbolism quickly develops the Winchesters through one-to-one correlations with their personalities, and its richness enables them to foreshadow the scope of the upcoming apocalypse by emphasizing the drama of their descents into hell. Finally, the cultural significance of the images in establishing the West's view of hell and in inspiring media is well known; consequently, the images are familiar even to fans who haven't read Dante, and particularly to those responsible for creating most of the fandom's view of hell. By drawing on these elements, Supernatural and "The Fifth Circle" manage to both emphasize the aspects of the Winchesters that fans are drawn to (for example, Dean's caring and moderate nature, Sam's angst and connection with Dean) and simultaneously show what was sinful in the brothers, what they needed to be absolved of to continue smoothly toward Armageddon.

5. Notes

2. The idea that Sam can free himself this way seems more appropriate to Dante's purgatory, wherein those who are willing to redeem themselves from their sins work out their time. As neither "The Fifth Circle" nor Supernatural ever mentions purgatory, and sins cannot be atoned for in heaven, it makes sense that this possibility is placed in hell.

3. This raises the question of whether Dean wouldn't have broken the seal if rescued sooner; the description Castiel gives of the angels' urgency to reach him suggests that he wouldn't (4.16 "On the Head of a Pin").

6. Works cited


Symposium

From canon to fanon and back again: The epic journey of Supernatural and its fans

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[0.1] Abstract—The relationship between Supernatural and its fans is tested through the suspension of disbelief with its evolving mythos and through its canonical portrayal of fandom. This testing has allowed the relationship to grow deeper and more extensive than most similar relationships, and while it is not always smooth, it remains largely positive.

[0.2] Keywords—Fandom; Fantasy; Willing suspension of disbelief; World building.


[1] Enjoying any fictional universe, such as Supernatural, is predicated on a relationship of trust: the willing suspension of disbelief. This is an age-old agreement between the storyteller and the listener: she'll tell her story well, and he'll believe. In the case of Supernatural, its creators are trusting that we're willing to give them the opportunity to establish the Supernatural universe properly and tell the characters' stories. In return, we're trusting that it will be worth our while to stay and be engaged—that the payoff will be worth the emotional and mental work involved in believing things that range from just outside our direct experience to, frankly, the preposterous. Once thoroughly engaged, a devoted fan will put up with a fair amount of inconsistency and hard work if she trusts the universe and its creators, and believes that she will enjoy the results—entertainment, edification, thrills and chills, beloved characters and complex relationships.

[2] Supernatural is an emotionally authentic three-dimensional universe with characters, such as the brothers Sam and Dean Winchester, whose essential reality we recognize. The Winchester family are monster hunters, and although much of their life is inherently unbelievable, it still has enough elements recognizable as part of our reality to help fans suspend their disbelief. The basic tenets for this universe are (mostly) laid out early: we know the basic story of hunting, the Winchester family and its curse by the end of 1.01 "Pilot." Later changes in the universe are revealed organically, with layers added rather than elements replaced—evolution, not
revolution. The universe maintains enough internal consistency that even fantastic elements are believable in context. And of course the show is entertaining on a number of levels. These elements are the core reasons why people are able to suspend their disbelief and actively engage with any fictional world.

[3] The most easily believable aspects of Supernatural, as with any story, are based on reality as we know it. There's nothing really unfamiliar here, just familiar elements in different combinations, if perhaps taken to an extreme, and easily extrapolated from our reality. The human elements are established on this level—relationships, families, emotions—and it is extremely important that these elements feel authentic. If the characters don't ring true, neither does their universe, and engaging fans' willing suspension of disbelief is increasingly unlikely. If the characters and their relationships are believable, fans will follow them and their universe just about anywhere.

[4] In the eyes of the fans, Supernatural handles some of the human elements very well indeed. One of the biggest appeal factors of the show is the characters, primarily Sam and Dean, but also a whole host of secondary characters, including their father, John Winchester; fellow hunters Bobby Singer, Ellen Harvelle, and Ellen's daughter Jo; and more recently the angel Castiel. They're three-dimensional—one could imagine meeting Sam in a coffee shop and having a conversation with him. They're sympathetic—by the end of season 4, Sam and Dean are broken and sad, having both done horrible things, but fans still love them and want them to have happily ever after. They are individuals with believable personalities, faults, and life journeys that fans can empathize with and laugh and cry over.

[5] Supernatural's characters also have intense relationships that we empathize with and enjoy, especially between Sam and Dean. Fans have celebrated their brotherly bond, their bromance, as the core of the show ever since 1.01 "Pilot," when we learn that they can't count on anyone else to go the distance. We revel in the strengthening of their relationship—indicated on the cosmic scale by Dean going to hell because he can't face living without Sam, and Sam experiencing his own forms of hell without Dean. On a smaller scale, their growing closeness is shown by numerous instances of brotherly affection (exchanging endearments in the form of jerk and bitch as well as epic hugs), forbearance (being forced to listen to endless mullet rock), help (taking each other's word for things that are just unbelievable), and irritation (engaging in prank wars involving itching powder and krazy glue).

[6] Unfortunately, events overtake them, and Sam and Dean's relationship starts to show serious signs of stress. Their understandable inability to cope with Dean's tenure in hell, their unceasing manipulation by angels and demons, and the increasing stress on both brothers induced by the coming apocalypse and their roles in it take their toll on the bromance. Their resulting inability to communicate, their tendency to keep
secrets, and their absorption in the pain of their estrangement are, arguably, a prime factor in the success of the angels' and demons' plans to throw an apocalypse.

[7] Many fans did not react well to the breakdown of the bromance and the resulting trial separation in season 5. There was much gnashing of teeth over a perceived lack of Sam in season 4, accompanied by much controversy over whether Castiel was going to take Sam's place in the front seat of the Impala and Dean's life. Fans more or less successfully maintained their trust in Supernatural's creators by reassuring themselves that the creators couldn't possibly keep the brothers apart indefinitely, either emotionally or physically. Fans also hoped that their trust would be rewarded in the end with a stronger brotherly relationship. Lazy_daze, in response to a comment about her reaction to 5.02 "Good God, Y'All!" and Sam and Dean's separation, writes reassuringly, "I think this split up is needed for a reunion and I do still have faith their love is strong—it clearly hurt them both so much, and it will come back around to them. I do have faith for this season! I am sad you are losing enthusiasm :( I say stick with it!" (LiveJournal, September 18, 2009).

[8] Fans have severe problems with other aspects of the Supernatural universe, such as its archaic take on gender politics. Sometimes Supernatural presents itself as an extension of the old boys' club for the young and violent. The stories are sometimes winceworthy; many would say (as many have) that the telling of 4.08 "Wishful Thinking" completely missed the point with the nerd and the princess story line—the problem wasn't that the nerd didn't get the princess, but that the princess didn't get a chance to say no. There are very few continuing female characters; they almost always get killed off. I had hope for Ellen and Jo—they lasted into season 5, but no longer, alas. Various aspects of habitually used language are disrespectful of women: bitch is omnipresent, and men are men while women are girls. Much of the fan base, a sizable portion of which is made up of women, does not appreciate this. Fans have expended considerable online ink pointing out these faults. Their subsequent avowals of love for the show in spite of its problems is a sign not of the triviality of the show's faults, but of the strength of its virtues.

[9] I've seen similar sentiments expressed about problems fans have with some of Supernatural's other issues. As Alaya Dawn Johnson says in her "Open Letter to Eric Kripke," which addresses the equally disturbing race fail of the show, "I want you to know that this is a fan letter...There are some problems I need to discuss, some issues that have repeatedly cropped up on your show that I just have to talk about. But this is still a fan letter. I love Supernatural. In my opinion, it's the best speculative genre show on the air at the moment" (http://theangryblackwoman.com/2009/09/09/an-open-letter-to-eric-kripke/). Johnson, and fans like her, take the time to thoughtfully address the issues that disturb them. They try to tell The Powers That Be (TPTB) what
needs to be changed—"I can't ignore the aversive, stereotypical and damaging ways that your show deals with race," Johnson writes—while at the same time expressing their sincere affection for the show. This demonstrates the fans' passion for *Supernatural* and their belief that it's something worth spending time and energy on—something more than mere entertainment.

[10] Other aspects of *Supernatural* prove more of a challenge to the willing suspension of disbelief. *Supernatural* originally billed itself as a horror show, including fantastical elements drawn from urban legends, folklore, and mythology in a universe that otherwise mostly adheres to our understanding of reality to create a series of relatively uncomplicated monster of the week (MOTW) episodes. However, it's no longer a horror show; it has bloomed into a full-blown, richly textured fantasy universe, the basic tenets of which differ wildly from those of our reality. Successful fantasy requires highly sophisticated universe building skills because it means creating a universe from the ground up. In the case of *Supernatural*, the creators began with a base of carefully conceived fantasy and judiciously inserted enough elements from our reality to build a matrix that allows them to tell their stories and for which fans more or less willingly suspend their disbelief. Fantasy requires more work from both the universe builder and the fans, to make the willing suspension of disbelief successful. Neither party can rely on the created universe having a core of shared reality as we know it to facilitate the communication of ideas, as they can in reality-based and horror universes.

[11] The *Supernatural* universe builders start by presenting fans with a horror show, one based in reality as we know it but displaying carefully selected aspects of the created universe. Additional fantastic elements are gradually introduced until the full glory of the fantasy mythos is revealed. This is an effective technique that works only with sufficient attention to detail; the reveal has to be smooth and gradual, and it works best if the revelation is only fully seen in hindsight. In the course of one of *Supernatural*'s horror-based MOTW episodes, elements might be included that are relevant to that particular episode and contribute to that episode's horror or reality-based motifs. However, those elements are later revealed to foreshadow something more momentous that contributes to the fantasy mythos. Hence, in 1.09 "Home," when the ghost of Sam and Dean's mother, Mary, tells Sam she's sorry, one plausible interpretation is that she's sorry about the poltergeist attacking Sam and his having to revisit his tragic origins, both main motifs of that episode. But later, in 4.03 "In the Beginning," we learn that she was also sorry for making the deal with the Yellow-Eyed Demon that led to Sam being fed demon blood as an infant and started him down the road to possibly becoming the Antichrist. Regardless of whether these sorts of layered revelations are created according to a preconceived plan or are successful thanks to
careful manipulation of extant material, they are important in integrating the horror and fantasy episodes and forming them into a seamless myth arc.

[12] One of the basic fantasy tenets of the *Supernatural* universe is that the Winchesters, Sam and Dean in particular, are the most important humans in the world, influencing events on a cosmic scale. This is only explicitly revealed through the oncoming apocalypse in season 4; Dean is the first of the seals binding Lucifer's cage, Sam breaks the last seal, and the Gospel of Winchester is a biblical record of it all revealed to the Prophet Chuck and published as the *Supernatural* novels. However, the Winchesters' significance has been an underlying theme from the teaser of the pilot episode, with the introduction of the Yellow-Eyed Demon. In 3.11 "Mystery Spot," the Trickster—a minor god (later revealed to be an archangel)—says that one of the reasons he's toying with Sam is to toughen him up so he can survive alone while Dean is in hell. 4.03 "In the Beginning" shows Dean traveling into the past and precipitating the Yellow-Eyed Demon's interest in his family, thereby arguably also precipitating Armageddon. In 2.21–2.22 "All Hell Breaks Loose," the Yellow-Eyed Demon tags Sam as the possible, and preferred, leader of his demon armies. In 1.22 "Devil's Trap," the Yellow-Eyed Demon tells Sam that he has plans for him and all the other children who were fed demon blood. Sam and Dean are no longer regular blue-collar guys from Lawrence, Kansas, in a tough spot. Rather, they have emerged as the instigators of Armageddon and the potential saviors of the world. This is not our reality at all, and yet as a result of the success of the fantasy mythos and its organic reveal, we embrace it.

[13] The willing suspension of disbelief when applied to the *Supernatural* universe is a complex proposition for both creators and fans, requiring a lot of thought, passion, and will. But the interaction goes beyond the creators' universe building and the mere suspension of disbelief and into the realm of fans actively engaging in a fictional world. *Supernatural* has moved in part from the hands of its creators into the hands of the fans, who are appropriating and transforming the canon into fanon—a living mythology that fans gift to the show's creators and to each other through fandom.

[14] The authenticity and richness of the *Supernatural* universe is truly appreciated by the fans, and the fans have built a corresponding richness and authenticity into the fandom. We share our heartfelt reactions to and interpretations of the episodes and the situations that Sam and Dean get themselves into. We identify with the characters, their relationships, and their society and use them to hold up a mirror to our own society and ourselves. We tell stories through print, vids, comics, dolls, and other media about relationships and situations we have never seen on screen. We create meta that speculates about aspects of the *Supernatural* universe that are never
explicitly discussed by TPTB. We truly have a sense of inviting these characters into our lives as living, growing people who have become our friends.

[15] This is why fandom is so rewarding: the vast sharing of points of view and creativity that makes it our universe, belonging to the fans as well as the creators of the canon, with our own characters and settings and situations. I can no longer watch episodes the way TPTB likely intended. I bring not only my unique experiences to my viewing, but also the wealth of fanon background material that I've absorbed over the years, both my own and that of others. Plastic!Sam's waffle dance, the Impala as sentient being, the Winchesters' experiences while Sam was at Stanford—these bits of fanon all enhance my enjoyment of the show, and therefore the richness of fandom. It's a complex and fulfilling relationship.

[16] To the consternation of some fans, the relationship doesn't end there. TPTB have taken notice of fandom and shown their appreciation by letting Sam and Dean Winchester meet their fans. This has become an ongoing theme in the show, with fan characters featuring in three episodes before the season 5 hiatus. Fan reaction has by no means been all favorable, and reaction has grown increasingly ambiguous with each new fan-featuring episode. The dissatisfaction is not so much with TPTB breaking down the fourth wall and portraying fans and fandom on screen, but with how they are being portrayed.

[17] Much of the fan reaction has centered around the personalities of the fans being shown. Of the four fans we've spent any real time with on screen so far, Becky Rosen (from 5.01 "Sympathy for the Devil" and 5.09 "The Real Ghostbusters"), is the least popular. Apparently she's TPTB's chosen representative of fandom in general and online fandom in particular, and many fans find her embarrassing. She represents an extreme in fandom, and many fans think TPTB might better have decided on someone more middle of the road for the fan character who's gotten the most screen time, and who very well might appear again. Fans know that there are Beckys out there, but that the Beckys are greatly outnumbered by fans who understand the concepts of personal space and discretion. Becky is refreshing in her refusal to be embarrassed by her obsession, however, and she may be a deliberate commentary on some of the fans whom actors Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles have encountered at conventions. She may represent a way of TPTB getting a little of their own back.
Sera Siege, the publisher of the *Supernatural* books from 4.18 "The Monster at the End of This Book," has not elicited nearly as much fan reaction. She comes across as a smart, professional woman who fangirls a series of books, but she displays her obsession appropriately and has a life outside of it. Many fans can identify with her; she's in their comfort zone.

Demian and Barnes, the live-action role players (LARPers) from the *Supernatural* convention in 5.09 "The Real Ghostbusters," seem to have hit a chord with fandom. Fans see them as sweet and celebrate their relationship as a positive portrayal of homosexuality.
As a nod to the importance of fandom to *Supernatural*, TPTB have not been committing gratuitous fan portrayal. In every episode in which they've appeared, not only have fans played a role vital to the plot, but their fannishness is also vital to their role. In 4.18 "The Monster at the End of This Book," Sam and Dean most likely wouldn't have gotten Chuck's address from his publisher without their demonstrably sharing Sera Siege's enthusiasm for the books. In 5.01 "Sympathy for the Devil" and 5.09 "The Real Ghostbusters," Becky feeds the Winchester brothers vital information that she only knows because she's plugged into the fan community and therefore known to Chuck, and because of her close study of the primary texts. Also in 5.09 "The Real Ghostbusters," Demian and Barnes, while playing the roles of Sam and Dean, uncover crucial information (the map) and dig up graves while the real Sam and Dean are occupied fighting ghosts. This usefulness ameliorates some of the antipathy displayed toward the portrayal of the fans.

Another big fandom reaction has been to the discussion, brief though it was, of male/male slash fan fiction, particularly Wincest (Winchester incest). Many *Supernatural* slash fans feel outed by TPTB's deliberate and explicit discussion of Wincest in 4.18 "The Monster at the End of This Book" and Becky's writing of a slash scene in 5.01 "Sympathy for the Devil." This was not helped by an *Entertainment Weekly* article's gratuitous mention of Wincest ([http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20270843,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20270843,00.html)). Many slash fans were happy to be immersed in their own world away from the mainstream and really did not want to have to discuss the concept of slash fan fiction, especially incestuous slash, with their "mundane" friends and family, even if their participation in it was not part of the discussion. With male/male romance being the next big thing on the romance novel front ([http://www.laweekly.com/2009-12-17/art-books/man-on-man-the-new-gay-romance](http://www.laweekly.com/2009-12-17/art-books/man-on-man-the-new-gay-romance)), along with the lure of the forbidden and the thrill of reporting sensational news, the media attention is not surprising, but neither is the discomfort of the fans who feel betrayed that TPTB would out them for a laugh, exemplified by Counteragent's *Good Fourth Walls Make Good Neighbors* ([http://community.livejournal.com/supernaturalart/1796967.html](http://community.livejournal.com/supernaturalart/1796967.html)).

The relationship between *Supernatural* and its fans is not always smooth, but it is deeper and more extensive than most similar relationships, and the trust remains mostly intact. The level of reciprocity may not be unique in fandom, but it is certainly unusual, and it bespeaks a commitment to communication and the presence of a love relationship on both sides. I don't think we've seen the last twist in this relationship. I wonder where we'll decide to take it next?

Symposium

"I'm glad we got burned, think of all the things we learned": Fandom conflict and context in Counteragent's "Still Alive"

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[0.1] Abstract—A close reading of Counteragent's fan vid, "Still Alive."

[0.2] Keywords—Fandom; Meta; Supernatural; Vidding.

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1. "This was a triumph/I'm making a note here, huge success"

[1.1] Since its first airing, the CW series Supernatural (2005–) has attracted fans in droves. These fans actively produce scores of fiction, art, and music videos (vids) relating to the adventures of brothers Sam and Dean Winchester as they fight monsters and demons across the United States. I rather blissfully followed the series through its opening seasons and enjoyed reading fan fiction and watching action vids about "the boys." However, despite all the fannish passion for this text, all is not well in Supernatural fandom.

[1.2] I was not aware of these conflicts until I saw the now renowned vid "Women's Work" by Luminosity and Sisabet (August 15, 2007) for the first time. It so clearly deconstructs the representations of women throughout the source material and highlights the series' (mis)treatment of its female characters that suddenly I was watching Supernatural in a whole new light, and one that was not necessarily favorable. During season 3, in particular, I struggled with my newfound relationship with the source material after watching what has become the most controversial episode, 3.09 "Malleus Maleficarum." I sought out episode reviews on LiveJournal for the first time to see if other fans shared my reactions and discovered a maelstrom of negative commentary: not only were fans incensed with the series and its writers, but they were also arguing with each other.
For the purposes of this essay, I will seek to unpack and reflect on the layers of context, conflict, and meaning within a particular critique of *Supernatural* and its fandom: Counteragent's meta vid "Still Alive" (October 19, 2008). This vid directly confronts the clashes among the fans with what the vidder has called a bit of "well-meant self-criticism" (personal communication, September 2, 2009). Using a tongue-in-cheek style, "Still Alive" addresses the online fandom on LiveJournal and the fannish reactions to season 3 of *Supernatural*, reactions I stumbled across rather unwittingly in early 2008.

Still Alive


According to Counteragent: "Season Three was accompanied by a lot of posts in fandom about misogyny in *Supernatural*. Some of them were well thought out (on both sides of the debate) and some were full of...women being mean to other women" (personal communication, September 2, 2009).

In particular, the vid uses footage from the aforementioned controversial episode 3.09 "Malleus Maleficarum," which was thought by fans to represent the pinnacle of *Supernatural*’s misogynistic representation of women. In order to fully engage with the vid, some context is useful here. The title of the episode comes from the infamous medieval handbook from the Inquisition, which describes how to discover and convict witches and makes a special case as to why women, rather than men, were more likely to be susceptible to the forces of the devil due to their carnal natures (note 1). In the episode, Sam and Dean discover a coven of witches who have been using their powers to improve their lives, until they begin to turn on one another. Fans found this episode to have an overpoweringly negative view of all the female characters and were extremely put off by the repeated use of the word *bitch*; many
(myself included) were deeply unnerved by the revelation that Ruby was a witch herself, reducing this powerful female character to just another "lying whore." A review of the episode by deadbeat-nymph, one of the first I stumbled across while searching for fans' responses, is worth quoting at some length:

[1.6] Our Dean. We know he loves pussy, but that shouldn't preclude loving women. I guess my interpretation of Dean was one in which both were true—I never felt that he looked down upon, reviled, or scapegoated upon women. But now? Now he wants to burn the witches. And plunge a twisted blade into a possessed woman's back, over and over again with shocking vehemence. Plunge his sword into the depths of her insides. Bad porn turned literal. And Ruby, who threatens with her spiritual power and knowledge, is a skank. And a bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch—how many times did he say it? ...Dear Show, You cannot make of Sam and Dean Inquisitors and still have us love them. Your audience is primarily female. You don't value us as viewers, we know, you want male viewers, whose eyes are apparently more valuable than ours, we know. (February 1, 2008)

[1.7] Many other fans found the episode similarly disturbing, but there were also many posts that sought to explain the supposed misogyny in the context of the show. Factions developed within the LiveJournal community around different points: some argued that fans shouldn't read too much into it. Others commented that the negativity toward these witches was due to their demonic nature, not their gender, and therefore the charges of misogyny were unfounded (note 2). Critics and apologists clashed, and the debate spiraled out of control until there was a great deal of bad blood circulating around the community. "But," wrote Counteragent, "I couldn't help pointing out that some of the fights in fandom about misogyny are scarier than what is on the screen" (October 19, 2008).

2. "We do what we must because we can/For the good of all of us/Except the ones who are dead"

[2.1] The vid itself opens with shots of the different female characters in the series, representing the fans. Embodying competing opinions, Meg and Ruby argue whether season 3 "sucked" or "rocked," with their position represented in the form of a LiveJournal username.
The season 3 debate is at first argued politely between these character/fans, each stating their own opinions, until the discussion collapses into "wank." The fan-written wiki Fanlore.org defines wank in fandom in three ways: as a "loud or public online argument," a "catchall term for objectionable or contemptible fannish behaviour," and/or as "elaborate canon-rationalisation or theorizing" (http://fanlore.org/wiki/Wank). Utilizing the visual shorthand of the devil's trap from the series mythology, the vid shows these female fans trapped by their own endless, wanky debates.

3. "I'm not even angry/I'm being so sincere right now"

The fans are represented as the malicious witches from "Malleus Maleficarum" who were so criticized: as in the episode, these women begin by working together to
create great fan works. The fans cooperate and enjoy the fruits of their labor, but ultimately they turn against each other with deadly results: the fans are just as guilty of mistreating other women as the characters they malign.

Figures 4 and 5. The fans work together in LiveJournal communities (like SPN_multimedia) at first, before some members become victims of the virulent debates. [View larger image of figure 4.] [View larger image of figure 5.]

[3.2] Again and again the fans argue and reconcile. The intrafannish anger of the witches in the previous shots of the vids is resolved, at least temporarily. But a new debate sparks off the anger once again. The rage is so consuming that the fans are here represented by demon characters from the Supernatural canon: powerful and violent, their eyes turn black as they summon their power and attack each other yet again.

Figure 6. The female fans of Supernatural brutally debate the series. [View larger image.]
4. "But I'm glad I got burned, think of all the things we learned/For the people who are still alive"

[4.1] However, all is not lost: "Debates on canon missteps aren't always wanky. Sometimes they are the impetus for brilliant art-commentary," explains Counteragent (personal communication, September 2, 2009). The debates about misogyny have actually inspired some detailed examinations of the canon material, with "Women's Work" as just one example (note 3). "Still Alive" showcases not only the fans who make up the Supernatural fandom as a whole, but it also contains a level of textual criticism. As with "Women's Work," by using episodes that were seen as particularly misogynistic by the fans, "Still Alive" offers up Supernatural's treatment of its female characters for analysis. For example, recurring images of women in white dresses and of supremely feminine demonic little girls appear alongside criticism of such tropes. Shots from "Women's Work" also appear in the vid as part of the larger fannish conversation. The clips from "Women's Work" (which also uses clips from Supernatural) are made visually separate from Counteragent's use of the footage by first showing an article from New York Magazine (http://nymag.com/movies/features/videos/40622) that discusses the vid, and then the clips are centralized in the frame and made smaller in order to be visually distinct. While the title of "Women's Work" is briefly visible, the viewer must be extremely familiar with Supernatural, vidding, and online fandom in order to separate all these shots and their contexts.

[4.2] Next, the vid shifts its focus as the faces of the character/fans spin and blur into an audience of fans at a Supernatural convention, turning to examine the more positive elements of fandom: namely, its creativity.

Figure 7. The fans and characters of Supernatural blur together. [View larger image.]

[4.3] The character/fans welcome the Winchester brothers into their lives, and use the raw material of Supernatural to delve into the elements of the story the television text has not: minor characters are given back stories, relationships are explored, and crossovers developed. The vid increases its pace, and shots of the diverse comics,
novels, LiveJournal communities, art, games, and vids swirl across the screen, paying tribute to all the talent the vidder has discovered through fandom, despite the wank. The vid ends optimistically, with the refrain "I will be still alive": no matter what happens, the fans will persist. The final shot is of the character/fan Ruby giving the Winchesters a cheeky grin.

![Figure 8. Ruby lets the Winchesters know she will be "still alive." [View larger image.]](image)

[4.4] In addition, a contextualization of the selected song, "Still Alive," is helpful in our reading of the vid. The piece was composed by geek musician Jonathan Coulton for the popular videogame Portal (released in 2007). The song appears in the final credits after the game has been completed, and is sung in the persona of the fan-favorite character of GLaDOs. Familiarity with the source context of this song adds another layer of meaning to this vid for the viewer: GLaDOs, voiced by Ellen McLain (who also performs the song) is an increasingly passive-aggressive artificial intelligence that initially assists the player, and ultimately must be destroyed in the final level of the game. Despite the apparent death of GLaDOs, the game ends with this song, the lyrics of which suggest that GLaDOs is indeed "still alive" (note 4). The evolution of the character of GLaDOs, from friendly to ambiguous to antagonistic, parallels the evolution of the fannish arguments. And just as it seems as though "she" (note the feminine gender here) has been defeated, GLaDOs reminds us that she hasn't gone anywhere. Thus, the resilience of fans to survive despite their destructive battles is emphasized through the use of this song, but so is the potential for it all to happen again.

5. "I will be still alive"

[5.1] Throughout the vid, Counteragent creates multiple layers of commentary that require an in-depth knowledge of Supernatural, its fandom, and the associated LiveJournal communities. I have attempted to provide sufficient contextual information for this vid to be read by a wider audience, but this vid will always be meant for a very specific audience at a very specific time in this fandom's history. It is also interesting to consider that while it is these female character/fans who form the bulk of the first
section of the vid, this is also the portion that is extremely critical of fandom. The celebratory second half of the vid, meanwhile, focuses almost entirely on the brothers. Certain characters like Jo and Cassie are taken up in fandom as seen in the vid, but as Counteragent pointed out to me, "There is a recurring theme in SPN fandom of [the fans] not liking female characters, stars, or actors' girlfriends" (personal communication, September 2, 2009). The final, uplifting montage in the vid features fan works solely dedicated to Sam and Dean. While the fans lament the treatment of women in the show, it is these male characters who are seen to be most worthy of their attention (and indeed, who are the most well-developed in the source material). In the end, Supernatural is a show about "the boys," and this focus is reflected in the fan works.

[5.2] While fandom usually celebrates multiple perspectives and interpretations in fan fiction, vidding, and other fan works, I was surprised at how violently dissenting opinions were put down in this battle over season 3. In this vid, I can see myself and my fellow fans, participants in fandom and viewers of Supernatural, implicated in propagating these tensions. Each time I watch an episode of the series I am infinitely more aware of the problematic nature of the text and my engagement with it. While I was uplifted by the montage of astounding fan works, this vid also left me profoundly unsettled as I recognized my own participation in similar "wanky" arguments. As I understand it, "Still Alive" reaches out to ask its audience to respect the diversity of subject positions that are usually so cherished in fandom. Hopefully, we can maintain our good humor and be "still alive," despite it all.

6. Acknowledgments

[6.1] Grateful thanks go out to Counteragent for her permission to use her vid and online comments, and for her candor and enthusiasm. Thanks also to PK, GB, AW, CM, BW, and JV for their comments on the early drafts of this piece. This research has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Wollongong.

7. Notes

1. The entire text of the original 15th century document (in its 1928 translation by Montague Summers) is available online at http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/mm.

2. See the LiveJournal community metafandom for more details, specifically the links for Supernatural and gender on Delicious: http://delicious.com/metafandom/spn+gender.
3. Other excellent examinations of *Supernatural* include kiki_miserychic's "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" (August 19, 2008) and Obsessive24's "Climbing Up the Walls" (August 22, 2008).

4. See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byBrIbGuPT4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byBrIbGuPT4) for a video of the final scene of *Portal*, including "Still Alive." Another possible reading of the character in *Portal* is that GLaDOs is actually training the female protagonist of the game to survive in the new postapocalyptic world using extreme methods.
A box of mirrors, a unicorn, and a pony

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[0.1] Abstract—Fans and creators have traditionally treated fanworks with a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. However, Supernatural incorporates fans and their creative works into the show itself, changing the status quo of the fan/creator relationship.

[0.2] Keywords—Convergence; Fandom; Fan fiction; Supernatural; Television


[0.3] Fan: If you could ask Castiel one question, what would it be?

Misha Collins: What question would I ask the character I play? That's like being in a box of mirrors. With a unicorn. And a pony.

1. Introduction

[1.1] It all used to be so simple. There were fans and there were The Powers That Be (TPTB), the shows' creators. TPTB created stories that we, the fans, adored, consumed, criticized, and chopped into bits and made into shiny new things for our amusement. There was a version of the fourth wall—more a one-way mirror, really—between the source text and fandom, with both sides generally happy to keep it that way. But with Supernatural that fannish fourth wall has been demolished, and we are trapped inside a box of mirrors with the show's writers and the unicorn and pony of our creative endeavors.

[1.2] The Organization for Transformative Works defines "transformative works" as "creative works about characters or settings created by fans of the original work, rather than by the original creators" (OTW n.d.). This delineation between fans and original creators, never rigid to start with, is blurring. What happens when the creators of original work take the fans and their creative works and incorporate them into source material that the fans in turn will further transform?

2. I can see you

[2.1] Even before the Internet, the transformative works of fandom were no secret to TPTB—not since the first Star Trek fan turned up at a convention wearing some rubber ears and clutching a mimeoed fanzine. However the growth of the Internet, and particularly of Web 2.0 (note 1), has made fan works much more accessible.
Fandom and Web 2.0 are a match made in cyberspace—the Web helps us communicate, collaborate, and create faster than we ever have before, and in prettier colors. Henry Jenkins called Web 2.0 "fandom without the stigma" (2007), because it embodies many of the activities inherent in fandom: getting together, having fun, and making stuff. The playground of Web 2.0 has brought fandom and TPTB closer together as our creative works have become much more visible and accessible on sites such as LiveJournal and YouTube and through the social bookmarking site Delicious. Since the mid-1990s, any show runner looking at media forums or blogs to gauge audience reaction has also come across links to fan works. TV writers and directors now actively engage with fans through message boards and forums, and more recently through Twitter (note 2).

3. The one-way mirror

Fans have always felt some anxiety around the idea of fannish works being noticed by the original creators. On the one hand, some fans see the works as tributes to the source material, and many creators feel the same way. The gift of a fan creation to an actor or show runner is an indication of how much the source material is valued and appreciated, and also often embodies a wish for approval. Yet some fans have wished to keep these works hidden, for both legal and cultural reasons.

Fans' fear of litigation has diminished in recent years, and both sides have been operating under a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, although this has recently begun to break down (note 3). Some of this change has been driven not by any cultural shift, but by the profit motive—the realization by TPTB (particularly in TV) that the production of fan works is a sign of an engaged viewer, one who will consume your product (and that of your advertisers).

Many fans still hold the opinion that we do what we do for our enjoyment and it is not something to be shared outside of fandom, and particularly not with TPTB. Many people who are active in fandom do not share their activities with friends or family because of the negative stereotypes that persist about fandom (Chaney 2008).

A natural law that holds true across all fandoms states, "Two male characters in possession of some personality must be slashed." Since Supernatural has only two regular characters, who happen to be brothers, this means that the slash fan fiction for the show is 85 percent Wincest (note 4). (The other main slash pairing is of Dean with Castiel, who was introduced in season 4.) Few who write porn in fandom would share that fact with those outside the community; the double transgression of writing about not only sex but gay incest in particular is reason enough for fans to want to keep their creative endeavors in the closet.

The first professional convention held for Supernatural was called Asylum; it was run by Rogue Events in Coventry, England, in May 2007. During a question and answer session, Jensen Ackles was asked whether he knew about fan fiction:

Some of those fan fictions have some very, very crazy ideas. And sometimes very...disturbing ideas. One of my favorites is, uh, Wincest...I only hope that my grandmother never reads those. Jared and I had a good laugh about that one. It was
only brought to our attention because Kim Manners posted it. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdYh2wJh7vE)

[3.7] The topic of fan fiction has been raised by fans at nearly every *Supernatural* convention that has been held. When asked about what he thought of Wincest at the EyeCon convention in Florida in April 2008, Jared Padalecki managed to validate transformative works while avoiding the tricky incest issue:

[3.8] With fan fiction and RPGs, it's like an aspect of what I was talking about earlier, that everyone's taking a part in *Supernatural* and they're not just watching it... and they're really passionate about the show, and especially the fans of *Supernatural*. It's a great learning tool, and exploring tool, to explore this world. So I'm supportive. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxkAG3N5lM0)

[3.9] Jim Beaver was the first actor to tease fans with his knowledge of fan culture when he wore a T-shirt proclaiming "I read John/Bobby" to the EyeCon Convention in April 2008.

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4. Mirrors on the ceiling

[4.1] In April 2009 a spotlight was shone on *Supernatural* fan fiction. In anticipation of the last four episodes of the season, *Entertainment Weekly* did a feature on *Supernatural* in its print edition and a few days later reproduced one of the articles on its Web site. It began by outlining the "intense universe of fandom" surrounding the show and included this reference to Wincest:

[4.2] There's also a unique and very creepy subset of romantic fan fiction dedicated to siblings Sam (Jared Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) called "Wincest"—the less said about it the better. (Wheat 2009)

[4.3] The reason the print article had mentioned fan fiction became obvious when 4.18 "The Monster at the End of This Book" aired that evening. In this very meta episode, Sam and Dean discover a series of books about their lives called "Supernatural," written by Chuck Shurley under the pseudonym Carver Edlund. The episode uses this metafictional device to comment on the process of writing in general, and on the TV show and its writers in particular. Chuck—who calls himself, in his role as writer, a "cruel and capricious god"—stands in for show creator Eric Kripke (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wU8yuUuXSLo).

[4.4] The episode also introduces Sam and Dean to fandom and fandom into the canon of the show, when the brothers find an online fan community:

[4.5] **Dean:** Check it out. There's actually fans. There's not many of them, but still. Did you read this?

**Sam:** Yeah.

**Dean:** Although for fans, they sure do complain a lot. Listen to this—Simpatico (note 5) says, "The demon story line is trite, clichéd, and overall craptastic." Yeah, well, screw you, Simpatico. We lived it. There's Sam girls and Dean girls and...What's a slash fan?
Sam: As in "Sam slash Dean," together.

Dean: Like together, together? They do know we're brothers, right?

Sam: Doesn't seem to matter.

Dean: Well, that's just sick!

[4.6] Are you starting to get that whole box of mirrors vibe?

[4.7] The episode was one of the highest rated in season 4 (Super-wiki, "Ratings," http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Ratings&oldid=25848), and the mentions of fandom in the show and the media attracted much discussion among fans. Some were delighted to be part of the canon of the show, and appreciated being included in the meta commentary alongside the show's own writers. Other fans were uncomfortable about the (literal) airing of what they saw as "fandom business." Some fans felt loved, others felt mocked. This variety of reaction is not surprising. Subcultures like fandom form because a group of people are engaged in customs and behaviors which are considered unacceptable in wider society. Within the subculture these activities become normalized, but when the mainstream discovers them its invariable condemnation reminds people of their outsider status. Some people feel shame when their behavior is pointed out as deviant, but for others being an outsider can be a thrill.

[4.8] These different reactions were incorporated into the text when the character of fangirl Becky Rosen was introduced in 5.01 "Sympathy for the Devil," written by Eric Kripke. Becky's screen name is samlicker81, and she is the Webmistress of a site called morethanbrothers.net. Becky is contacted by TPTB—Chuck Shurley, prophet and author—and asked to contact Sam and Dean.

[4.9] Becky: Yes, I'm a fan, but I really don't appreciate being mocked. I know that Supernatural is just a book, okay? I know the difference between fantasy and reality.

Chuck: Becky, it's all real.

Becky: I knew it!

[4.10] And this is where the unicorn gets put in the box with the mirrors, as the scene begins with Becky reading from a piece of fan fiction she is writing:

[4.11] Sam shivered as he leaned against the splintered wooden wall of the barn. His shoulder ached from his fight with the demon spawn Mar-Delok and his clothes were soaked from the cold rain which fell outside. He let the knife fall into the dust and turned to his brother.

[4.12] Dean was shaken up. His chest was heaving with exertion and his shredded shirt was barely clinging to his muscular frame. Sam could see he was hurt.

[4.13] "Hey. Are you OK?" Sam stepped closer and put his arms around Dean. "We're going to get out of this, they can't keep us here long."
The brothers huddled together in the dark as the sound of the rain drumming on the roof eased their fears of pursuit. Despite the cold outside and the demons who, even now, must be approaching, the warmth of their embrace comforted them.

And then Sam caressed Dean's clavicle.

"This is wrong," said Dean.

"Then I don't want to be right," replied Sam, in a husky voice.

It's a fine example of the Wincest genre, combining an irrelevant demon with a classic hurt/comfort narrative and the eroticization of a specific body part, suggesting that Kripke is familiar with the genre and its tropes. Thus the creator of the show that inspired Wincest writes Wincest. Of course, his "fan fiction" is unfinished. However on September 13, 2009, only three days after the episode's airing, a LiveJournal user called Samlicker81 posted a completed version of Becky's story—now called "Burning Desires"—to a Wincest fanfic community on LiveJournal. Thus the pony is shoved in the box of mirrors alongside the unicorn.

"Sympathy for the Devil" is not the first time Kripke has written fanfic. In November 2008, the last issue of the second series of *Supernatural* comics—"Rising Son"—was published. It included a six-page stand-alone story called "The Beast with Two Backs." The story starred the Ghostfacers team from episode 3.13, and the beast in question was a chimera of Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, a beautiful two-headed creature that killed fangirls because it could not bear to let anyone prettier than it live. Kripke, it seems, ships his stars—or at least is well aware that we do.

A subsequent episode, 5.09 "The Real Ghostbusters," is set at a *Supernatural* convention, and the episode again pokes fun at the show's writers, actors, and fans, with many details that suggest TPTB have closely observed fandom's activities. Kripke, who has described himself as a fanboy (Kripke 2008), also uses the episode to give a strong positive message about being a fan. The episode subverts the clichéd trope of the socially awkward, emotionally immature fan by making the *Supernatural* fans Demian and Barnes gay lovers who save the day and provide Dean with an emotional insight. Kripke's most definitive statement, however, is made through the relationship between Becky and Chuck: the creator falls in love with the fangirl. Becky, initially more enamored with his creations (Sam, in particular), eventually transfers her affections to him.

5. Misha and his minions

Actor Misha Collins, who plays the angel Castiel, has also been actively involved in this reconfiguring of fannish relationships, kicking over whatever was left of the fourth wall with gusto. At the All Hell Breaks Loose convention held in Sydney in April 2009, as Jensen and Jared's last session came to a close, there was one final question from the audience—"How does it feel playing brothers when you're lovers in real life?" There was an audible shocked gasp from the audience. The question, it turned out, came from Misha.

A month previously, at the 2009 Salute to *Supernatural* con in L.A, Misha Collins had said he was fascinated with fandom as a subculture, and would like to read some slash if he could do so "without getting molested." At the Asylum convention in May 2009, Misha said that
he'd read some slash and admitted that doing so had been uncomfortable—it was a bit like "finding your parents' pornography." The following day he was at pains to emphasize that he wasn't criticizing fan fiction. "I've done some pretty pervy things myself," he added. At subsequent conventions he continued to talk about reading fan fiction, even suggesting that he comments on stories (for instance, at the Salute to Supernatural in Chicago in 2009: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2c1T-_8qJA).

[5.3] Misha is well aware of the discomfort that this break with traditional fan boundaries can elicit. In an interview in October 2009 he said,

[5.4] So there's these fan conventions...and I've mentioned it [slash fan fiction] in the Q & A things and you can sense the whole audience tensing up. They don't want you talking about this weird, slash fiction, weird pervy stuff they get up to. So I do like to bring it up for that reason. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGlhkjcZRU)

[5.5] Misha has also engaged in an original way with fandom through his Twitter. More than any other aspect of Web 2.0, Twitter has been responsible for redefining the relationships between fans and celebrities, as the application allows a new immediacy and intimacy in interactions. Misha has developed a Twitter "persona" who is a rather surreal megalomaniac and whose followers are known as minions. In this space Misha is creating crack fiction with himself as a Mary Sue, or self-insertion into the story. Fans are creating art, stories, and videos about Misha and his minions (Super-wiki, "Misha's Minions," http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Misha%27s_Minions&oldid=25484). He has paired himself in his tweets with people as different as Kim Jong Il and Michelle Obama, and described running into Queen Elizabeth in the gay fetish section of an adult bookstore.

6. What happens when you cross a pony and a unicorn?

[6.1] The integration of fandom and the stories we make into the text of Supernatural fits perfectly within the show's narrative mission. At its heart Supernatural is concerned with exploring the stories people construct and tell about themselves and their relationships, in particular the stories that form, shape, and sometimes destroy families. It has explored modern morality tales (in the form of urban legends) and ancient ones (from folklore), and it is retelling the epic stories of society—the ones we call religion. It has examined the storytelling of pop culture through episodes satirizing movies (2.18 "Hollywood Babylon"), TV (5.08 "Changing Channels"), and celebrity culture (5.05 "Fallen Idols").

[6.2] Now that we are trapped in this box of mirrors with TPTB and our respective creations, we must ask how this new situation will transform us. Our creative endeavors have already changed the source text. TPTB are creating transformative works about themselves. As the source text incorporates and comments on both itself and its fandom, it remains to be seen how knowing we are being watched, seeing what we do reflected back to us, will change how we play at being fans.

7. Notes

2. Allyson Beatrice (2007) documents her experience of Buffy fandom, particularly her interactions with the writers and show runners. Many actors, writers, and show runners are on Twitter. For example, the writers' room of the comedy Psych can be found at http://twitter.com/Psych_USA.

3. Some creators of original texts have continued to vigilantly oppose transformative works. Anne Rice is one example, and Warner Bros. recently forced the cancellation of a Harry Potter dinner party (http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/10/28/2726040.htm).

4. This analysis is based on around 33,000 stories written in the Supernatural fandom that have been listed on the Supernatural newsletter on LiveJournal (http://community.livejournal.com/spnnewsletter) and tagged on delicious (http://delicious.com/supernatural_fic) as of January 31, 2009. For a further exploration of Winchest, see Tosenberger (2008).

5. Simpatico is the online name of a poster at the Television Without Pity Supernatural forums: http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/show/supernatural/the_monster_at_the_end_of_this_1.php?page=5.

8. Works cited

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Interview

Interview with Keith R. A. DeCandido

TWC Editor

[0.1] Abstract—TWC interviews Keith R. A. DeCandido, author of Supernatural tie-in novels Nevermore, Bone Key, and Heart of the Dragon.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan fiction; Supernatural; Tie-in


1. Introduction

[1.1] TWC conducted an e-mail interview with novelist Keith R. A. DeCandido, whose Supernatural tie-novels Nevermore and Bone Key are well known in the fan community. DeCandido, a self-identified fan, spoke to us about the differences between writing fan fiction and pro fiction, responding to the Supernatural canon, and negotiating the media shifts between television and literature. More information on his work can be found at his LiveJournal blog (http://kradical.livejournal.com/).

[1.2] The following TWC editorial team members contributed to this interview: Kristina Busse, Karen Hellekson, and guest editor Catherine Tosenberger.

2. Writing tie-ins

[2.1] Q: How did you get into writing tie-in novels, and what do you find to be the most rewarding aspect of it?

[2.2] KD: Well, to be brutally honest, the most rewarding aspect is the paycheck. That may sound crass, but it's also true. Writing is my profession, and it's what I do for a living. So those checks they send me when I write the books are not an unimportant part of the process.

[2.3] As for getting into writing it, I actually came originally from the editor's side of the desk. In 1993, I started working as an associate editor for the late Byron Preiss and his assorted book packaging concerns, and that included a fair number of tie-in
projects, most notably editing an extensive line of novels and anthologies based on Marvel Comics superheroes.

[2.4] I started publishing short stories here and there, and it eventually led to writing novels. Each credit builds on previous credits, and it's like a snowball rolling down a hill. Eventually you hope for an avalanche.

3. Pro fic vs. fan fic

[3.1] Q: What do you perceive as the most important differences, creatively speaking, between writing tie-ins and writing (for lack of a better term) original, nonderivative works? In short, why would professional writers choose to write the former rather than the latter?

[3.2] KD: Choice isn't always involved. One of the reasons why I've continued to do lots of tie-in work and have comparatively little work that I keep the copyright on is because they keep sending me checks for the former and rejection letters for the latter. That doesn't mean I stop trying to do original work, but it also means that I keep doing the tie-ins because, again, this is how I make my living.

[3.3] Leaving that aside, however, writing tie-ins is fun. One of the reasons why I started writing tie-ins is because I get a great deal of pleasure from it. I like getting to write new adventures of characters whose stories I've enjoyed in other media.

[3.4] As for the differences—they're not as stark or drastic as some may think. True, you're often relieved of having to come up with setting and character (though not always) in tie-ins, but you're also beholden to please a particular audience, both internally (the editor and licenser) and externally (the readers), who expect the characters you're writing to behave and speak a certain way. If my Dean doesn't sound like Jensen Ackles, it doesn't work. You have to convincingly immerse your story in a world that is not of your own creation, and that's not as easy as it sounds.

[3.5] Q: What specifically do you find fun about writing tie-ins? And then there's the media mix-up aspect of it: how do you transfer, say, comic books to prose?

[3.6] KD: Like I said, it's fun to write new adventures of characters I like. And it can be rewarding to translate things into other media because each medium has different storytelling needs. The best example is that in prose you can get inside characters' heads to a degree that is just not possible on TV or in movies. The camera is omniscient, but prose can root around inside a specific character's thoughts.

[3.7] That applies to going from comics to prose as well, since internal point of view is hard to do in comics as well.
Q: It's been said that tie-ins are fan fiction written for money. But obviously tie-in writers have to deal with many more strictures than fan fic writers. What are some of the artistic parameters when writing a tie-in novel? What publishers' rules are typical for tie-in novels? Have you ever had an idea you wanted to write about rejected by the publisher as unacceptable? What sorts of ideas would be considered wholly unacceptable—and the reverse: what sorts of ideas are preferred? Do these restrictions affect your creativity or storytelling ability, and if so, how, and for good or for ill?

KD: There are no single answers to any of those questions, because—as with most questions about publishing and writing—the answer is, it depends. Some licenses are very loose and let you do what you want as long as you put the toys back when you're done. Some are very strict and only allow certain types of stories. Some change as they go along—the early Buffy the Vampire Slayer novels were very restrictive of what was allowed, but as the line became more successful and as the show progressed, the strictures were lessened considerably. Star Trek and Star Wars fiction are both very free, to the point where main characters have been killed off in the novels of both lines.

I've had ideas I wanted to write about rejected all the time, and I will continue to, but that has nothing to do with it being a tie-in. That's part of the nature of writing professionally—stories get rejected. The reasons might be different when writing a tie-in, but it's rarely for any sinister reason: either the show's already doing a similar story, or another tie-in novelist is doing something similar, or they don't feel that it's appropriate for the characters.

And yes, tie-in writers have many more strictures than fan fic writers because a tie-in writer generally has to write either a novel or a short story. A fan fic writer can do a fragment or a drabble or a character profile or a novel that's 500,000 words long.

Q: How did you embed yourself in the world of Supernatural? Do you review episodes of the TV show, are you given scripts to read, or is there some other method used to keep you in the loop in Supernatural's aired canon? Is there a Supernatural bible you have to use that is provided by the publisher?

KD: The first two: I watch the episodes, and when necessary, scripts are sent my way. As an example, during the writing of my third novel, Heart of the Dragon, I needed to be aware of what would be happening in the early part of season 5, but it hadn't aired yet when I was writing the book, so I was sent the scripts.

In all my years of writing tie-in fiction, I've received a series bible precisely three times, and in all three cases, the bible was utterly, totally, and in all ways
useless in the writing of the fiction. There is no substitute for the source material itself—in the case of *Supernatural*, the episodes. That's the basis for what I'm writing, not a bible written as a guideline for early scriptwriters for the show (which is all a bible is, and it's subject to change anyhow).

[3.15] **Q:** Can you tell us more about the characterization restrictions and the world-building restrictions and give us some examples? What are your parameters, and how much are they constricted? What does it mean to you for writing to be "in character"?

In fandom, we see all the time that different groups have different "true Dean" voices, for example—or that readers (and viewers) are willing to accept a continuum of voices as "true Dean." What does it mean to "sound like Jensen Ackles," as opposed to, say, "Sera Gamble writing for Jensen Ackles," or "Jensen Ackles interpreting Eric Kripke's words," or "Jensen Ackles being directed by Robert Singer"?

[3.16] **KD:** Again, it depends on the license—and also most of the time you don't know what those restrictions are until you violate one of them. These things are rarely spelled out, but licensers know them when they see them.

[3.17] As for the character voices—I don't see a significant difference among those examples, because it's all a continuum, as you said. I'm basing my writing of Dean and Sam on the four-plus seasons' worth of episodes and how they've behaved and talked and acted in those episodes. It's an aggregate of scripts by the various writers, the directing by the various directors, and the performances of Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki (and others who've played both brothers as young kids).

[3.18] One other advantage that fan fic has is that it can choose to ignore interpretations of the character they don't like. To give an example from fan fic I've written, my ex-wife and I wrote a bunch of fan fics that crossed over *Highlander* with the *Hercules/Xena* universe, and we chose to ignore pretty much everything that happened on the latter two shows after a certain point where the shows went in directions we didn't like (the death of Iolaus in *Hercules*, and the Dahak and India arcs in *Xena*). But if I'm writing official tie-in fiction, I don't have that luxury. If Dean acts in a manner I don't like on one episode, that episode *has* to be part of what I take into account in a *Supernatural* novel.

4. **Supernatural** audiences

[4.1] **Q:** What aspects of *Supernatural* do you find most enjoyable to write?

[4.2] **KD:** The brotherly banter. The casual abuse, the affection, the teasing, the ease with which they work together—Sam and Dean have all the best and worst elements of a sibling relationship, and that's tons of fun to write.
[4.3] **Q:** You have a good relationship with and a healthy respect for the *Supernatural* fandom. What do you attribute this to? Are your books aimed more at casual fans, or do you consider fans embedded in *Supernatural* fandom when you write? What sorts of things resonate with the fans—that they really like (or dislike)?

[4.4] **KD:** I always try to have a good relationship with the fandoms I write in, especially if it's something like *Supernatural* where I'm a fan of the show first, and also a tie-in writer. I'm also plugged into *Star Trek* fandom, *Farscape* fandom, *Serenity* fandom, et cetera.

[4.5] My books are aimed at people who like the show. Some of those are the hard-core fans who post on Internet bulletin boards, but numerically speaking, that's a very small number of my readership and an even tinier number of the show's viewership.

[4.6] Also, I discovered early on that it's impossible to please "the fan base," because they're not a monolithic group. So it's hard to say what resonates, because different things resonate with different people. I've had readers tell me that I "obviously" like Dean more than Sam, and ones who are just as sure that I prefer Sam and think Dean's an idiot. For that matter, I've read plenty of online reviews that profess how obvious it is that I've never actually watched the show, which is categorically untrue (I even have witnesses!).

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5. Novel interpretations

[5.1] **Q:** One of the elements of your books I most enjoy, especially in *Bone Key* (2008), is the racial and sexual diversity among the supporting characters—much more so than the show, in fact. Is this a deliberate choice? Why do you include these elements?

[5.2] **KD:** That's something I'm hyperconscious of in all my work. I hate the tendency to default to the white WASP male, which is commonplace in popular fiction of all kinds, both in print and on screen. I remember as a child going through the *Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe* and being depressed to discover that all the Italian characters were mobsters or villains (plus one incompetent hero, who was the son of a villain).

[5.3] Plus I live in New York City, the most ethnically and culturally diverse city in the world. I tend to pull character types from the people I see around me.

[5.4] **Q:** Your first *Supernatural* book, *Nevermore* (2007), engaged with the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. I'm interested in the way you negotiated the doubled layer of derivative texts here: you engaged with both Poe and with the *Supernatural* canon.
Can you talk a little bit about your artistic process here in terms of the media shifts between literature, TV, and tie-in? How did you negotiate this complex relationship?

KD: Carefully. I wanted to tell a story that was particular to the Bronx because I wanted to write about the Winchester boys in New York City, and I figured that it was a place they wouldn't go on the air. Even in the unlikely event that they tried to make Vancouver look like New York City—after all, they have been to Chicago, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Baltimore, and St. Louis, among other big cities—they weren't likely to go to my home borough.

Since Poe lived in the Bronx for a time—his wife died there—I thought doing a story with a Poe connection might be apropos, since he all but created the horror genre. I also wanted to do a story with a supernatural component that turned out to be wholly fake. While the show is predicated on the notion that all the stuff we think is fake is real, there'd still be fakers and scam artists and people who are just plain wrong even in the Supernatural world. So that was fun to play with as well.

Q: You have a new Supernatural novel coming out soon. What can you tell us about it?

KD: Heart of the Dragon was inspired by episode 4.03, "In the Beginning," when we found out that Sam and Dean's mother and grandparents were also hunters. I thought it would be fun to do a story that has each generation of the Campbell/Winchester dynasty dealing with a particular supernatural problem. So the novel is broken into three parts, taking place in 1969, 1989, and 2009—the first involving Samuel, Deanna, and Mary Campbell, the second involving John Winchester, and the third Sam and Dean.
Interview with the Super-wiki admin team

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Abstract—Interview with Hope, Leandra, Jules (aka Missyjack), and Vanae of the Super-wiki admin team on the wiki's creation, its content, and the challenges unique to crowd-sourced information and multiauthorship, conducted by Deborah Kaplan.

Keywords—Collective authorship; Fan community; Television; Wiki


1. Introduction

In 2006, one fan, Hope (http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Hope), formed a Web site called the "Super-Canon," in which she aimed to single-handedly provide a resource for fans of the television show Supernatural, including documentation of tie-in material and canon minutiae. Shortly thereafter, she and another fan, Lea, converted it into a wiki format. Thus the Super-wiki (http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/) was born. Now run by a team of four administrators, the Super-wiki is a rich resource documenting both Supernatural and its fandom.

Some statistics will indicate the growing size and popularity of the site. The Super-wiki currently has 1,211 entries and 2,218 editors registered. In the year from October 2008 to October 2009, the wiki had over 1.13 million hits, from over 500,000 unique visitors. They came from 196 countries, with the top six being the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Australia, and Brazil. The Super-wiki is growing in popularity, and October 2009 saw 127,855 hits from 67,182 visitors—an increase of more than 50% for the same month in 2008.

The interviewees are Hope, Leandra, Jules (aka Missyjack), and Vanae. Also vital to the wiki, though not interviewed, is Esther.
This interview was conducted in fall of 2009 via e-mail, and the text was then edited for brevity and clarity. Deborah Kaplan (http://suberic.net/~deborah.kaplan/), the interviewer, is a former Fanlore software administrator and the current software and content administrator of the Diana Wynne Jones wiki (http://suberic.net/cgi-bin/dwj/wiki.cgi). This interview explores the challenges unique to crowd-sourced information gathering and the multiauthorship mode of the wiki.

2. Multiple contributors, crowd sourcing, and shared work

[2.1] **DK:** Wikis have to contend with a multitude of viewpoints that often conflict with one another. How did you choose what was appropriate for the *Supernatural* wiki?

[2.2] **Lea:** The wiki originated from Hope's site "Super-Canon," which in 2006 aimed to provide as much information on *Supernatural* as possible. At that time, Hope did all the work by herself. I became involved through some meta I wrote on my journal and which she wanted to include on the site. We came to talk about archiving not only facts, but also meta. The problem was that we felt that one or two people couldn't do all the work, and then suddenly a thought popped up like the proverbial lightbulb: "What if anyone could add information to the site?"—and the wiki was born. To me, that's the Super-wiki's central idea: The fans themselves can add and alter information. That way, we have a broad range of information, which also includes the documentation of fandom projects (in that, we differ from most other TV-series wikis). Of course, if more people work together on one topic, there are bound to be controversy and different points of view. That's why we aim to provide as many sources as possible for the material we add. We do a lot of fact checking, too. Some parts of the entries on the wiki are protected—for example, when there are direct quotes involved. Whenever possible, we cite sources and urge the users to do so as well. In case of controversy, we try to resolve the problem by involving the users as well. We strive for a neutral point of view, but in case of controversy, we try to be as objective as possible and also feature multiple points of view.

[2.3] **Hope:** The Super-wiki has been a delight to work on when it comes to the multiple-authorship model, to be honest. Over the past 4 years of its life, I can recall only a small handful of instances when we had to intervene as a result of a significant contradiction to the wiki's model—and in these cases, it was more users getting the absolute wrong end of the stick with regards to what the wiki is for and how it works. It was just a matter of approaching them personally and trying to assist them in working alongside everyone else, if they wished to.

[2.4] Its growth in terms of policy has been very organic and reactive—we only really write and publicize policy if an issue comes up that requires some form of policing or
administrative ruling. But as I said, there's been very little need for this. I think in part this is to do with the content of the wiki—when it comes to canon, it's really just a matter of everyone putting their heads together and sharing all the details they remember, and with the fandom aspect it's not much different—as with canon, if you have more minutiae or info about a fannish article, it's just integrated with what's on the existing page. There's really not much opportunity for there to be conflicting viewpoints in all of that.

[2.5] I suppose on a different model there might be more likelihood of conflict, but the other thing that I think makes the Super-wiki so low on conflict is the example set by the admins (for lack of a more delicate way of putting it). The admin team definitely has its own internalized MO of inclusion and completism—our goal is not to assert our own personal points of view, promote a piece of fandom or canon over another, or be arbiters of taste or opinion. Our main goal is to document as exhaustively as possible. This is reflected in the language we use when writing articles and assisting other users, and the wiki model, with its endless internal linking, helps to connect all the elements together in a very inclusive way, rather than fostering some monolithic concept of fandom/canon/ideas.

[2.6] It makes it easy to keep everyone happy, as does participating in a project whose primary goal is to gain every grain of glee from every tiny, hidden corner of fandom and canon. I get the impression that people don't participate in order to provide contradiction to or aggressively assert individuality to what they read on the wiki, but to be a part of this bigger collective consciousness of fandom that has sprung up in the form of the wiki.

[2.7] **DK:** How much of the work maintaining the wiki during the regular season comes from the site administrators, and how much comes from your user base?

[2.8] **Jules:** The mod team works to maintain the core of the wiki and to systemically undertake tasks like keeping certain pages up to date and checking for accuracy, while the editors will edit and enhance entries. For example, a mod will put up the basics of the episode entry each week in the season—production information and so on—but the general editors will provide the bulk of information on the page. Some editors have undertaken to maintain certain entries—like the ratings page, or the appearances of the deer's head in episodes (hey, that's important!). Periodically a call will be put out for particular projects that need attention, such as completing transcripts. Our general users are essential in adding to the depth and diversity of information on the wiki, and they are particularly assiduous in proofreading and fixing my typos.
3. A collaborative Internet

[3.1] DK: There are a number of wikis dedicated to *Supernatural*. Do you have relationships with the creators of any of the others? How do you encourage people to contribute to yours, and how do you encourage high-quality or high-volume contributions? Do you encourage cross-linking with the other *Supernatural* wikis or with Wikipedia?

[3.2] Hope: When we first set up the wiki, season 1 of *Supernatural* was still airing, so the volume of *Supernatural* fan sites was considerably less than it is now. Still, we didn't really do much research into alternate sites before establishing the Super-wiki. I think part of that was because I, at least, felt it was filling a gap I perceived in the SPN community I was a part of (fic writers on LiveJournal [LJ]). Already fen in that community were gathering minutiae and seeking out more. It seemed to be a perfect opportunity to make a central place for them/us to continue to do so with ease.

[3.3] I believe that set up our ongoing mode of engagement—I think its success in establishment relied at least a little on Lea and me being familiar to the community. We were voices and sources that people trusted—enough to follow our links, see what we were doing, even invest their own knowledge in our project. The personal, one-on-one aspect of that continued as the wiki grew. We gained attention not so much by promoting ourselves randomly but by continuing to fill gaps; if someone was asking a question about canon, we'd point them to the answer on the wiki. If someone made an awesome, impacting fan work, we'd invite them to create an article for it on the wiki.

[3.4] We have discussed ways of drawing in fen from the broader SPN communities through more strategic promotion, but frankly, most of the team's energy is spent on the wiki, adding information and helping users there. There's not a lot left for concentrated outreach. With regards to cross-linking—we encourage linking to any relevant resources, and we get many hits from Wikipedia, though we must follow their strict linking policy (I believe it wasn't even the admin team who had a link to us approved on Wikipedia!).

[3.5] The issue of translating the wiki has been brought to us a few times, and while we've been leaning toward putting a GNU or Creative Commons license on the wiki to allow non-English-speaking fans to create their own projects using the information we've gathered, again, the constant demand for administrating the wiki has prevented us from moving in new directions.

[3.6] Jules: Relationships are very important in fandom, and the Super-wiki has worked hard to earn a reputation as a good fandom citizen. We always acknowledge the source of material or links, whether from individual fans or other Web sites. We
are there to document other sites and to link to them when they have content of interest, without favoring one over another. It's a reciprocal relationship, and I think as a result of the unique nature of the Super-wiki, there is no other site doing what we do, which means that we aren't seen as competition for the audience of other sites, but rather complementary.

4. Rules

[4.1] **DK:** What are your guidelines for permissible content?

[4.2] **Jules:** Ha ha. This is the fandom where canon includes slaughtered nuns, baby eating, and psychopathic clowns, and where real person slash battles with gay incest and angel porn for the high moral ground. So possibly we have broader definitions of what is acceptable than most! We have clear and quite strict policies regarding copyrighted material plagiarism. It's generally about educating editors—for example, we link to original material rather than copying and pasting it; and we provide clear citations and attributions.

[4.3] **Hope:** We do limit material for copyright reasons, sticking with a fair use policy when it comes to quoting text directly from tie-in material or storing images on the site. It's sometimes a frustrating balance to strike—on the one hand, we want to be completists and include all the promo images released for each episode; on the other, that risks violating fair use. So we try to link to people who don't have such concerns to try to get that completism fulfilled. (That concern is less of an ideological issue and more that we don't want to risk losing the massive body of work the wiki has become.)

[4.4] Legal issues aside, our content guidelines have always been less about what's "permissible" (along with what Jules said above about the questionable nature of canon, we're all for a warts-and-all documentation of fandom as well, and so we are anticensorship on that front), and more about scope. Earlier on, the admin team had big planning sessions on just how far we wanted the wiki to go (and of course, how to organize it all). We've had to find a balance between what is useful and what is available elsewhere. Our Library section is mainly where this is an issue—while users might find it useful to know about vampire lore in the one place on our wiki, we see it as counterproductive to rewrite (or copy and paste) info that can be found more easily on Wikipedia (especially when their users are going to provide more exhaustive info on that score than ours). So primarily we want to archive what canon says about vampires, and make it clear that that's what our MO is, but still provide users with links to where they can get further—not seen in canon, even—info about the topic elsewhere.
So as far as unsubstantiated research goes—the vast majority of stuff on the wiki should be from canon itself, and therefore cited pretty directly and able to be backed up by several thousand other people who've seen, heard, or read exactly the same thing. It's all part of the nerdy completism that characterizes the wiki that everything is cited down to a T, really.

As a sort of tangent (and sort of related to the "edit wars" question), I do recall one or two instances early on in the wiki's life where an editor felt the urge to delete content from some of the fandom pages (namely, a couple of slash pages). Although the user didn't respond to our communication, I got the impression that she assumed our model was more similar to Wikipedia than it was; with the inclusion of fandom material, it automatically resembles Fanlore's PPOV [plural point of view] rather than Wikipedia's NPOV [neutral point of view] (note 1).

**DK:** What's your spoiler policy? Do you have an international user base, and if so, has this affected your spoiler policy's development?

**Jules:** The Super-wiki is totally spoiler free until an episode airs. That includes all show-related material—casting spoilers, promotional pictures, and episode titles. We do, however, provide links to spoiler material on other sites. For example, we provided casting information for episode 5.01 "Sympathy for the Devil." We also warn for spoilers in material we link to, such as interviews or articles about the show. The majority of the mod team is not based in the United States, but these days, through the wonders of the Internet, viewing of the show around the world is possible within hours of its airing in the States. We try to have at least the major components of an episode entry completed by the day after the episode airs.

**Hope:** The spoiler ban only extends as long as the first airing of the episode because that's often the most active period of content contribution—right after an episode airs, when viewers are still excited, and details are fresh in their minds! It is worth making clear, though, that our spoiler policy is splashed all over our wiki not only to stop people posting spoilery info before the episode airs, but also to allow spoilerphobes to avoid the wiki until they've seen the episode. It's less about us declaring what we think the length of a spoiler period is, and more about making sure spoilerphobes aren't caught out by us. Fen in Australia know that as soon as it's aired in United States, the wiki will contain spoilers; therefore, they can avoid it if they wish.

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5. Fandom

**DK:** How do you approach fandom wars, both in character or canon interpretation, and the personal vendettas that arise in a fandom?
Jules: Supernatural must be a very peaceful and harmonious fandom, because we have no issues like this either in the canon or fandom pages. The most heated arguments that ever occur are over issues such as the spelling of character names. Who could forget the Henrickson/Hendricksen/Henriksen contretemps of 2007?

Seriously, the highlight of the wiki has been how its embodied those tenets of fandom: creativity, collaboration, and community. It not only documents fandom's creativity, it is a creative space. Your contributions might be proofreading, translating Latin exorcisms, or adding The Simpsons allusions to an episode entry. One editor said to me, "I love that it's somewhere I can feel my contributions really make a difference." Collaboration occurs from the admin team, whose members live on three continents, and every time someone edits the wiki. And it has developed an important role in providing a link, a sense of community, between the parts of fandom that are flung far across Web 2.0.

Hope: With regards to fandom wars, we see it as more our responsibility to document the differing opinions (and their battle strategies!) rather than to serve as a site for conflict to occur. I think the software, and the independence of the site from existing fandom service providers, helps us maintain this position—it's very clear just what the wiki is (and isn't) for.

One of the facets of this independence is that the sharing of information here isn't influenced by the same expectations of fannish etiquette particular to other multiauthor models, such as an LJ community. I think this is one of the reasons we don't suffer from the same sorts of conflicts among community members that crop up frequently in spaces like LJ. Nor do we experience the sort of conflict other fannish wikis go through.

I think part of the harmonious nature of the Super-wiki is due to the fan work-producing community we sprang out of. With most other fannish wikis (if not all; I haven't done extensive research, but I hope that I would have heard otherwise if that were the case), the scope is very specific to the canon of the original text. The furthest the wiki contributors venture away from canon material might be to provide canon analysis, theories, or predictions. In the cases of some fannish wikis (such as Lostpedia [http://lostpedia.wikia.com/], as written about in the last issue of TWC!), conflict has arisen when content that strays into fanon was shut down.

In contrast, we see what goes on in the Supernatural fandom, and the fanon (and fan works) Supernatural fans have developed, as just as important to archive and document as the canon. We make sure to distinguish what material on the wiki came from official sources, but this isn't to discount what comes from fans. Rather, it's to place proud distinction on what the fandom produces!
[5.8] It's been said that the Super-wiki straddles the SPN fandom and canon because the canon component exists to serve the fandom—and in a way, this is true. I know that part of the reason I set up the site in the first place was to provide a useful resource to people playing in the Supernatural universe, checking out the canon and choosing to take it or leave it as they wish. But that's not the extent of it; I think that this collation and documentation is, in a way, just as much a fan work as a piece of fan fiction or fan vid or fan art (or plushy Metallicar, or filk!). In straddling the content scope between canon and fanon, I think we're also muddying what's often seen as quite distinct waters between the types of fan communities that produce Lostpedia, and the types of fan communities that write Wincest. I think we're demonstrating in practice that both sorts of fannish engagement are not only worthwhile but equal—and certainly not mutually exclusive! We've demonstrated pretty clearly that fans can be obsessed with the minutiae of canon as well as the construction of fanon/fandom. In doing this so successfully, and becoming more widely known, I like to hope that we've also succeeded in one of the things that was really important to Lea and me when we were deciding on this canon/fandom scope early on—demonstrating through example that the texts and practices of fandom are just as valid and important as the canon, in the big-picture experience of Supernatural.

[5.9] **DK:** You note that fandom and its artworks are just as important to archive and document as canon. The wiki itself, though, has remarkably little about specific fan works or fanon, and most of what is there is packed into the (amazingly well organized) Fandom Chronicles. Have any users wanted to add more comprehensive details about specific fan works or fan creators?

[5.10] **Jules:** The Super-wiki documents fandom and fanon in a number of ways. First, it documents where this large and disperse fandom lives, with entries on and links to many of the fan sites, message boards, and blogs such as Supernatural.tv (http://www.supernatural.tv/), Winchester Bros. (http://www.winchesterbros.com/), and the CW Lounge (http://www.cwtv.com/thecw/cwlounge). We also link to the Supernatural Yellow Pages (http://delicious.com/spnyellowpages), a fan project on Delicious that links to over 500 Supernatural fan sites, including ones in languages other than English.

events that have prompted entries on Fandom Wank (http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/).

[5.12] The Fan Projects category at the Super-wiki covers major fan efforts from zines and anthologies, to promotional campaigns for the show and charity fundraisers. It also covers fan projects that support the infrastructure of fandom, such as the Supernatural newsletter (LJ community spnnewsletter) and rec communities on LJ.

[5.13] The Fan Works category covers the major creative efforts of fandom—fic, vids, art, meta, and music and audio productions. The Fan Fic section documents its history in Supernatural, including the origins and early influences in the major genres of Wincest and RPF [real person fiction], and when certain pairings appeared in relation to canon. There are explanations and examples of subgenres such as crack, alternate universe, kink, and crossovers, and links to the major fiction challenges. We document the amazing Fic Link Archive, which categorizes and links to all fic listed in the Supernatural newsletter—over 30,000 entries! This great project also has an analysis of the proportional representation of different genres. The wiki also provides an overview of the history of art and vids in this fandom, and links to the various archives and fan sites related to these. The meta entries links to both collections and individual essays.

[5.14] Individual fan works are documented where they form a significant body of work—for example, the Plastic Winchester Theatre, the Episode Reviews of Doom, and the Encyclopedia of Weirdness.

[5.15] Other fan efforts are embedded in the canon documentation. For example, the entry on the original music score for the show includes a fan analysis of its themes and motifs. Dudemeter and Laundry List are also testaments to colossal fan effort expended to record and analyze the details of the show.

[5.16] The Vernacular category captures terms and phrases unique to Supernatural fandom, such as the coining of the term Metallicar on the Television Without Pity boards, through its spread in fandom, to its use by both the show itself and commercial merchandising; or the history of the term Wincest from the first time it was used in fic, to the appearance of Wincest fic on the show itself.

[5.17] Finally, the pages that list fan conventions have acted both as documentation and meeting place. Fans come here to share their reports, pictures, and vids about fan conventions. The top five pages alone have over half a million hits. The Super-wiki was also responsible for starting the use of con-related hash tags on Twitter. Many other media sites refer to the Super-wiki convention entries as the major source of
information on professional conventions. In addition, the wiki documents the history of fan-focused conventions such as Winchestercon.

[5.18] **Lea:** Personally, this question seems to me a misinterpretation of the terms *fan works* and *fanon*. *Fanon*, as a term, is especially interesting: it derives from the word *canon*, which describes everything that has been established by the official text (of a show, of a book, of a movie, and so on). *Fanon*, on the other hand, is something not officially confirmed, but rather implied by the official text and then picked up by fans. Something doesn't become fanon just because one or two fans perceive something from the original text. It only becomes fanon when it is generally acknowledged by the collective of the fans making up fandom. Fanon is at the same time "true" and "untrue," as it is perceived as such by a large number of individuals, but fluid and constantly in movement because it can change in time with other observations. Thus, fanon is collective knowledge, and fandom is like a collective mind—a beehive, so to speak. There's just no queen bee, even though certain BNFs [big-name fans] like to believe they are.

[5.19] I'd like to stay with that notion of fandom as a collective. To me, *fan works* is likewise a term used for texts, video, and other items produced by fans that are based on what an individual or a group of fans perceive to be influenced by the original text of the show, or by an occurrence or trend in fandom. Henry Jenkins calls the process of their creation *textual poaching* (in that sense, fanon is textual poaching, too, by the way). So what we do on the wiki is document certain aspects of this poaching by trying to fit these things into certain categories so they can be looked at as a general tendency or as an occurrence. It's a very scientific approach, actually. We don't want to document fans by putting up essays or pages for each individual. Instead, we look for certain types of fans, certain fan products, and fandom as a collective.

[5.20] **Hope:** This is an interesting question. I think the way it's been phrased illuminates the bit of fandom you're coming from, Deb, and our reaction to it has made me realize the position we feel we occupy—though I think that among the admin team, we have different experiences of this! Here are my theories on it.

[5.21] Though we (the admin team) as individuals originate in media fandom—the communities that the Organization for Transformative Works ([http://transformativeworks.org/](http://transformativeworks.org/)) sprouted from, and subsequently the modes of engagement and degrees of importance that are writ upon the Fanlore wiki—the Super-wiki doesn't really operate within the same place, or with the same degree of insularity. Personally, I think this is for a couple of reasons—as mentioned before, our distance from the locale of LJ, and the connections we've made through other services (Twitter, fan message boards—as discussed by Jules). This results in us taking the wider view of fan activity: we document things that have a higher profile, whose
significance extends above the self-contained media fandom on LJ, and we also document things of similar notoriety that popped out of other SPN fan communities.

[5.22] This perspective reflects the scale of SPN fan communities slightly more accurately than a focus on the minutiae of a specific fan community would. I think it also invites more contribution from a wider scope of SPN fans in recording their activities, because that's part of it too. The tone of the wiki does lean more toward documentation than analysis; I think talking about individual fan works would be more analysis. The documentation is evident throughout the wiki in the fandom categories.

[5.23] In addition—and this is something I say upon reflection; it was certainly not explicitly planned on—the fact that we don't go so deep into media fandom as to have pages about the activities of individual fans or their individual stories protects the insularity of those media fandom spaces, which already have a blurred public/private boundary. We're very aware of the high profile of the wiki and of the breadth of its audience, and we know that TPTB [The Powers That Be] are aware of it (and some visit it). I think that skimming the surface of media fandom—by documenting its topography rather than showing it in its knickers (to dramatically mix metaphors)—allows us to both showcase the bits of it we're happy for the wider audience to see, admire, and engage with, and to maintain the degree of privacy that exists in our other fannish spaces. And of course, as I recall, this privacy was Lea's and my MO when we first conceptualized fannish material on the wiki. It provides visitors with both reassurance that the fannish activities we're introducing are fun and wonderful, as well as with the tools for leaping into it if they want more. We provide links that will take users to other sites where their engagement with other fen or with fan works are already established within the terms of the community.

[5.24] But to directly answer your question about users inserting information about fans and fan works. Has anyone ever tried to add that kind of material? Not that I'm aware of. I think the model of this wiki and its existing content do not necessarily suggest this kind of entry, and that is something reasonably consistent across fandom wikis in general. The Fanlore wiki, on the other hand, is doing something new in these terms—something that doesn't necessarily automatically occur to contributors, even where there's already fannish content.

6. Technical details

[6.1] **DK:** How did you choose your software? How do technical considerations affect the administrative experience, editor experience, and reader experience?

[6.2] **Hope:** The MediaWiki software was chosen out of convenience and availability. My Web host offers some automated sys admin [system administrator] support for
MediaWiki, and because neither Lea nor I are sys admins by trade, it was the easiest option! It also helped that MediaWiki is what Wikipedia runs on, which means that visitors are likely to have some visual familiarity with how the site works—the same going for editors too. Of course, it also runs the risk of being conflated with Wikipedia, but I don't think we've had that sort of issue for a while.

[6.3] So far, we've had a reasonably good run of it with our technical considerations. While I'm not a sys admin, I do work in the IT industry, which means I do feel generally capable of administrating the wiki. One of the other benefits of using MediaWiki is that because it has such high-profile use (in Wikipedia), as a piece of FOSS [free and open source software], it's quite well supported—in terms of things like security upgrades to the software, or developers creating useful plug-ins and extensions to enhance it. This has certainly enhanced the reader experience—it's helped us provide things like a Google Maps extension and more page-ranking details.

[6.4] This kind of enhancement has been gradual, though—mainly because the software was new to us as administrators when we started. As the technical administrator of the site, I have to say I've learned massive amounts about the software just through using it (and have since worked more with MediaWiki professionally, growing that knowledge exponentially!).

[6.5] **DK:** If you could change one thing you did at the beginning of the wiki's construction, what would it be?

[6.6] **Hope:** Right now I'm really happy with the way the wiki's data are organized. A couple of years ago, we had a big overhaul of the site structure that involved a lot of recategorization. This was mainly because Lea and I were experimenting in the early stages. But since then, after working more on the Super-wiki and other wikis, we realized there was a better way to do it. All that recategorization was a lot of work; it would have been nice to decide to do it that way the first time around. But on the other hand, all the discussions we had about scope and so forth during that period were invaluable, and we couldn't have had those conversations if there wasn't an existing model (and stack of content) to look at.

[6.7] **DK:** What kind of recategorization did you do?

[6.8] **Hope:** Mainly we just looked at all the articles we had and figured out how to better arrange them, especially in light of the growing focus on the production/celebrity side of Supernatural, and in light of the growth of tie-in material. We sat down and made decisions about how far we should go in documenting official material versus relevant material. We looked at how both content and the text itself
had grown, and we created a site map that was both flexible enough to expand as the whole shebang grew, and restrictive enough to not just be a big soup of information.

7. Note

1. Fanlore (http://fanlore.org/) is a multiauthored reference based on wiki software that tracks the history and current state of fan communities and activities. Its plural point of view policy states that each author's contribution is valid and valuable. Fanlore is a project of the Organization for Transformative Works, which also sponsors *Transformative Works and Cultures*. 
Interview

Interview with Wincon organizer Ethrosdemon

TWC Editor

[0.1] Abstract—TWC interviews Ethrosdemon on Wincon, its functions, and its origins.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan community; Fan convention; Supernatural


1. Introduction

[1.1] TWC conducted an e-mail interview with Ethrosdemon, founder and organizer of Winchester Convention (now called Wincon). The first Winchester Con was held October 13–15, 2006, in Nashville, Tennessee. The second annual Winchester Con took place on October 12–13, 2007, in Los Angeles, California. The third annual Winchester Con took place on October 17–19, 2008, in Baltimore, Maryland. The fourth annual Wincon took place on October 9–11, 2009, in Denver, Colorado. The convention is small, ranging from just under 100 to no more than 250 attendees at various times.

[1.2] Ethrosdemon is a longtime fan who started in 1995 in Buffy the Vampire Slayer fandom and has been an active writer and member of various fan communities ever since. In our interview, she described the convention as follows:

[1.3] Wincon is a by the fans, for the fans operation. Our goal is to provide an annual gathering for SPN fans (focused around the LiveJournal community but certainly anyone can come—we aren't too picky) to come and meet, hang out, discuss the show and the fic written about it, party and have a good time. In other words, a giant slumber party where we can all do the fannish things we do online in person and in our pajamas. No one from the show is affiliated with this convention, nor will there be any appearances by any show actors, writers, or other personnel.

[1.4] The following TWC editorial team members contributed to this interview: Kristina Busse, Karen Hellekson, and guest editor Catherine Tosenberger.
2. Inception and infrastructure

[2.1] Q: What were your initial reasons for setting up a show-based fan convention? You must have started planning as the show was just beginning to gain popularity—the first con was in 2006, when the show had just finished its first season. Did that affect the dynamic at all? Have things changed over the past 4 years, and if so, how?

A: The initial reasons for putting on the con are lost to the dust of sound bites and bourbon, but if memory serves me (à la Iron Chef), we wanted to have a big party and talk about how hot Dean was. I think we started planning the con before the hiatus of season 1, actually. So, yes, very early on.

[2.3] The first con was pretty much just me and Estrella30. We winged that on enthusiasm and paint fumes. The second year, Estrella30 was experiencing life changes, so Coiledsoul stepped in to help run the con. Coiledsoul still co-runs Wincon. As far as the con itself changing, no. Until next year, when we go multifandom, the first four were all pretty much the same format in that we had a mix of comical panels and more serious ones, and we have a big party on Saturday night and karaoke on Friday. The show changed; the con did not.

[2.4] Q: Please briefly explain how you use online resources and sites, such as LiveJournal, to set the programming and registration, and indicate how this relates to an online SPN community.

A: We've always run the convention through a LiveJournal community. The community name was Winchestercon until last year. Now it's Wincon. We take payment of con fees through PayPal (like everyone). We always send people to the hotel Web site to get the special con rate for rooms. It's nothing special or unique. In 2010, we'll be in Chicago (http://doubletreeoakbrook.com/). Fandom has a high level of Internet acumen, so nothing we're doing here is inventing the space wheel.
[2.6] As far as I know, the Internet is the only tool we use (besides the phone) for organizing. And with the introduction of smart phones, this is all six of one and a fistful of knuts of the other. Wincon has a LiveJournal community; hotel registration is done through a button from the LiveJournal com that leads to the hotel Web site, where we have a special con page; we accept registration fees through PayPal (but we also take checks since that's convenient for some people); we host con photos on Photobucket and Flickr; we have a Twitter account for attendees that we use for the lead-up to the con, during the con to alert or remind attendees of activities, and throughout the year for various reminders. In the democratic manner of the Internet, there are Wincon tags on Delicious, Digg, and other aggregating social media tools.

[2.7] Fans are some of the most Internet-savvy people on the planet, and fandom is created by fans. A natural function of this Internet savviness is that fan culture is heavily tapped in to the newest Web 2.0 platforms. As a matter of fact, I kind of feel that fans breezed through 2.0 before CNN started tweeting back at viewers and have been helping to create Web 3.0 for a while now.

[2.8] **Q:** How is the con organized? How does it compare to big cons that many people are familiar with, such as Worldcon or Wiscon, besides the fact that there are no actor or writer guests? What sorts of programming and panels are featured? Is there some unique way content is chosen?

[2.9] **A:** Here I will have to plead some ignorance. The only big con I've ever been to is the biggest of the big, Comic Con. Compared to that? We're chained in a cave watching the shadows of Sam and Dean load their rifles.

[2.10] I don't actually even think the comparison is fair or necessary. We're not a pro con. We're not attempting to be one. That's not the purpose of Wincon (or other fan cons—I've attended several of those). We are for the fans, by the fans. It's all about *us*, not about the actors or the show's creators. People come to Wincon to hang out in a comfortable environment with other people who are interested in similar media sources. We sit around on couches talking about slash or Dreamwidth pros and cons. Wincon is the Internet in real life, with cake.

[2.11] The con programming is determined by the vicissitudes of my heartburn from barbecue and what's going on with the show. Or this has been the case in the past. This year, we're taking pitches from attendees interested in doing panels. So if you've got a great idea for a *Fraggle Rock* panel, I'm on Gmail like everyone else.
3. Content and context

[3.1] **Q:** What do you perceive as some of the most popular topics at cons past? Why do you think these topics were of particular interest? What sorts of panels do you offer, and what is their format?

[3.2] **A:** The types of panels we do at Wincon vary. We do whatever it is that people want. The first year, there was a lot of controversy over John Winchester, Father. And the hot topic was RPS [real person slash] because the first year of SPN fandom was really a breakthrough year with regard to RPS acceptance for many fans—whether that had anything to do with the fandom specifically or whether the show and change of sentiment happened to coincide is impossible to determine conclusively, but I have opinions on the topic, for sure. This year, it was speculation on future story lines.

[3.3] We tend to do a mix-up of more serious topics ("Is John Winchester a bad father?") and silly panels (Tin Hats). The formats for the panels vary depending on the needs of the panelist. There are no hard and fast rules or standard operating procedures for this. All panels are absolutely interactive, with the audience often catcalling the panelists or interjecting from the floor. The atmosphere can get rowdy, but the truth of the matter is that the veil is permeable, because there are no expert/pupil roles at Wincon. We are all equals, all on the same footing, all in the room for the same reason: to share our interest in similar fannish pursuits.

[3.4] An example of interactivity from the 2009 con was that one of the panelists on the "How to Survive the Apocalypse" panel taught the audience Morse code by slapping her thighs and clapping and asking the audience to do likewise—the overwhelming majority of the crowd did (I think the only people who didn't were taking photos of everyone else instead). Because we are changing from a single-
fandom con next year to a multifandom one, we are asking attendees to pitch panels they would like to put on, à la Escapade and various other fan cons. Our goals are always inclusivity, the highest level of attendee participation, and good times.

Figure 3. Morse code for fangirls by Girlguidejones, Denver, Colorado, 2009. Photo by Ethrosdemon. [View larger image.]

[3.5] But the real draws at Wincon are the parties and the wacky stuff we do, like the Tin Hat Pageant and Fic Idol. What are those, you say (or I will pretend you did). Starting in LA, we initiated a yearly tradition, if you will, of giving con attendees tinfoil and allowing them to create their very own actual fact tin hats. We then have a contest on the best hat, and the winner...wins. You would be amazed at the creativity of the attendees.
[3.6] Clearly, this enterprise is a nod toward the fangirl tradition of tin hattery (http://fanlore.org/wiki/Tinhats). This event is hosted by Missyjack (which is part of the joke, because many people believe her to be one of the shiniest of all J2 tin hats). We also have an event called Fic Idol where we parody American Idol, but contestants compete by submitting atrocious, intentional badfic. We're having to institute a word limit next year because people get very enthusiastic about this. Again, we are lambasting ourselves and having a laugh at our own expense. Wincon is not srs bznz.

[3.7] Q: How does the convention deal with some of more problematic points of contention within the fandom? Do you address wank directly? Has it ever caused problems?

[3.8] A: We address wank full on. In our second year in Los Angeles, we had a sock puppet crafting hour and debuted our annual Tin Hat Pageant. For those not in the know, a sock puppet is an avatar or blog created for a specific purpose—usually trolling. In season 1 of Supernatural, we also had a Sock Puppet Day where fans competed with each other by creating ridiculous fake LiveJournal accounts to comment in the journals of fannish friends (there was a pirate, a Puritan, many slash haters, all kinds of wackiness; I was myself a Fall Out Boy fan—oh, the poetic justice there). Every year, we have a contentious panel consisting of a topic fraught with caps lock and fandom outrage.

[3.9] We've hit all of the big wanktastic players as far as SPN fandom goes. In a way, I think it's good for people to actually discuss contentious issues face to face so that they can see that we're all just people, even when we disagree. This is a "your mileage may vary" issue, but panels are not mandatory.

[3.10] Supernatural fandom, like all, is self-policing in a way. By that I mean that I and other visible people involved in the con have a reputation. I don't think any of us have been involved in the major wanks involved in the fandom. We're neutral and not inclined to take sides in the big wars. Because of that, we don't have a problem with the wank on the ground at the con. I'm sure there have been huge fights among attendees (this is fandom, after all), but I've never heard about them. Supernatural has a reputation as a super wanky fandom, but I'm not sure this is as deserved as people (outside of the fandom) believe. We have a core group of attendees, and I think we've all stayed civil since season 1 in large part because we get together every year to party, so why be a hater? We might fall on opposite sides of the spectrum on the Jo issue, but we also shared a cab after karaoke, so I know you're good people.
4. Wincon and more

[4.1] **Q:** Your con is clearly and purposefully set up as a fan convention. How does this dynamic play out at the convention itself? What do you think are the advantages of fan-run cons versus ones that serve corporate interests, such as Creation Con?

**A:** A con like ours is a completely different beast from an actor con. Both serve their own purposes, and I don't think there is any competition between them, honestly. There is some crossover between the people who attend the cons, but even those people who do both will tell you frankly that the purposes are at wide variance. Actor cons offer access and a certain kind of insider trafficking that fan cons do not. You're not going to come to Wincon and charm Misha Collins into marrying you. You'll probably be exhausted when you leave thanks to sleep dep, however.

[4.2] We're also a labor of love (to use a completely hackneyed phrase). We're not paid. We put on the con year after year as a fan service, like writing fic or vidding. Everyone who pitches in does so because they owe me (ha ha) or they love each other and the fandom. Even at the height of the wank during the writer's strike, when the fandom was eating itself, we had almost as many volunteers as attendees. Wincon is an extension of fandom, one of its many faces, not unlike a big fic challenge or a meme. We're not outside of fandom peering in; we're just a journaling platform in real life hanging out and sharing a plate of fries.

[4.3] There is a gulf between EyeCon or Creation Con and fan-run cons like Wincon. We're as different as a Saint Bernard and a shih tzu. Part of this is the DIY ethic that fandom has a long tradition of (see Escapade, Muskrat Jamboree, Writercon, and all the other fan-run enterprises going strong), which long predates the Internet. Connectivity just makes the planning and ability to reach your audience easier and more centralized.

[4.4] I think having the same nomenclature for events such as Wincon and Creation Con is misleading. We've probably come to the end of the utility of calling both sorts of events by the same name, but we muddle through.

5. Wincon and the *Supernatural* community

[5.1] **Q:** You have been in SPN fandom from the very beginning. What are the effects the con has had on the online community—the best and worst? And what effects do the online community have on the con?

**A:** What effects we've had on the fandom is beyond my purview, I have to say. It's hard to be in the eye of the storm and discuss effects 10 miles from you. I think to
a certain degree Wincon has drawn together factions of fandom that would have otherwise been oblivious or hostile to each other. I know I'm actually personally much more knowledgeable about Australia because of the con—this is a random trading card fact, but at the same time it's an example of the butterfly effect of fannish pursuits.

[5.3] As far as the online community affecting the con itself—well, there wouldn't be one without LiveJournal. We began on LiveJournal, and we've stayed there. I imagine this will continue indefinitely. Personally, I interact with many people online solely for Wincon, and I imagine that this is the case for many attendees and volunteers. The Internet has a very different texture when you know the human being behind the LiveJournal handle. I don't think there's a way to discuss the Internet's effects on the con because Wincon itself is simply an extension of the Internet.

[5.4] Q: How has organizing the con affected your personal and fannish relationships with others? In terms of your role as an organizer of the con, what do you think your responsibilities are to the fan community in general? Does the professionalism required to, for example, execute financial transactions or keep fan versus real-life names confidential affect your personal interactions?

[5.5] A: Let's be honest here. I behave myself much better since I started putting on Wincon (which anyone who knows me marvels over). I think three times before I wade into any conversation that can devolve into hair pulling and wank_report posting. Whether this is all the con or whether I'm just old now is too knotted up to parse. I am the public face for something larger than myself, and I don't feel that it's worth it anymore to alienate people who could be friends and con attendees and who could be friends of my friends. This isn't for myself but because I love the people who come to the con so much. I suck it up and wear my big girl pants and don't post in rage caps lock on coms YOU SUCK AND YOUR OPINIONS SUCK AND I HATE YOU DIEDIEDIE, even when I want to.

[5.6] However, I don't think I necessarily have a responsibility to anyone, let alone fandom in general. We put on a con, which we do out of love for the people who attend year after year. The first year, it was out of fannish enthusiasm, but the second year, it was because we wanted to give all the people who came the first year (and the new people who had just gotten into the fandom) a chance to meet with current friends and to meet new ones. My responsibility to fandom begins and ends with making sure that attendees get charged the right hotel fees and their breakfast tickets. I think probably responsibility is where I'm being held up here. We put on Wincon not out of obligation but out of love. In the same way I'm not obliged to write prompt fics from memes or to participate in the Yuletide fic exchange, I'm not obliged to put on the con. Everyone who puts on a fan con does it out of the same spirit as
community builders or challenge makers—we're all in this together, and someone has
to do the fandom husbandry, so why not me?

[5.7]  As far as my real name goes, everyone knows it anyway. I feel that the
pseudonymity of fandom has become more and more porous over the years, to the
point where so many of us (in certain fannish circles) know each other anyway that we
don't bother using LiveJournal handles as names. Supernatural has been like that as a
fandom from Day One because so many of us knew each other in real life (the fandom
builders, I mean).

[5.8]  And that's the actual story of Wincon. So many of us knew each other in real
life during season 1 that we wanted to get together and have a party. Five years later,
we're still throwing the party.
Book review

_In the hunt: Unauthorized essays on "Supernatural,"_ edited by Supernatural.tv

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[0.1] _Keywords—Fan; Television_


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[1] _In the Hunt: Unauthorized Essays on "Supernatural"_ is a collection of essays about the television show _Supernatural_, and to some extent its fandom and fan works. Although at a glance this collection may seem targeted toward fans and too casual for an academic readership, taken as a whole, it offers a broad and insightful look at its subject from many angles and proves surprisingly thought-provoking.

[2] _In the Hunt_ is among the more recent entries in BenBella Books' Smart Pop series, which since 2003 has published collections of essays investigating popular culture texts and characters. The series takes pride in being accessible to nonacademics, in being "serious...but not too serious" (Smart Pop Web site: http://www.smartpopbooks.com/), though it accepts submissions from all kinds of writers—by invitation only. Thanks to this formula, some names have become familiar across the series. _In the Hunt_, however, breaks from the formula by including three essays written by winners of a fan contest co-organized with the fan Web site Supernatural.tv, and by naming this Web site as editor of the volume. As a result, _In the Hunt_, in addition to being the first officially published collection on _Supernatural_ of its kind, also functions as a kind of snapshot illustrating some of the enduring tensions between academia, fandom, and publishing.

[3] The essays are not organized into stated sections, but a topical continuum is discernible: family, horror and fear, religion and morality, heroism and sacrifice,
misogyny, gender and sexuality, identity and transgression, fandom and fan works, specific objects and secondary characters in the show, and folklore and other sources. The use of such a continuum reinforces the idea that the collection should be taken as a whole rather than in parts. However, other elements ultimately harm the impression of integrity. Aside from the unavoidable tensions between academia and fans, the book also reveals a consistent and troubling gendered divide between stereotypically male and female interests in the show and its fandom—so much so that it may color some readers' receptivity to the ideas presented.

[4] The foreword, "Not Just a Pretty Face (or Two)," by Keith R. A. DeCandido, who has written for other Smart Pop titles as well as penning some Supernatural tie-in novels, sets the tone by its very title, and also by opening with a fannish inside joke about his "bizarre" position as a "heterosexual man" in the "sea of female faces" (ix) that constitutes most of Supernatural fandom. This joke, while well intentioned, may seem off-putting, as may its essential message: that it's okay for a straight man to enjoy this show as long as his interests in it are masculine enough. Although it can be argued that gender is irrelevant to authorial respectability, the fact that DeCandido was asked to provide this foreword can be read as a paternalistic and potentially offensive swipe at the heavily female scholarship that it precedes. The introduction by Dawn (aka kittsbud, Webmaster of Supernatural.tv) thankfully improves things, outlining further and deeper reasons that many fans love the show. In addition, the naming of a single author here, writing on behalf of the Web site named as the editor, helps highlight the book's multivalent position as it strives to be seen as a serious scholarly effort by individual voices and yet still maintain the patina of a communal, fan-generated project.

[5] Within this context, the essays most likely to be of interest to academics are those by Mary Borsellino, Jacob Clifton, Carol Poole, and Emily Turner. They are grouped together in the collection on the basis of their interconnected discussions of gender, sexuality, identity, psychology, and fandom. It is useful to read them together to form a more complete picture of the way the inherent complexity of these topics is handled by both the show and those seeking to critique it.

[6] In "Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Jo the Monster Killer: Supernatural's Excluded Heroines," Borsellino tackles the issue of sexism. Supernatural often attempts to position itself as relentlessly masculine, and one by-product of this is the continual stereotyping and degrading of female characters. Focusing mainly on the character Jo Harvelle, Borsellino illustrates some of the ways in which Supernatural can be painfully retrograde in its gender politics, particularly as an example of post-Buffy genre television. This makes one give serious and necessary pause to either casual enjoyment of or deep investment in the show, and it should inform the work of any
subsequent discourse. Interestingly, an earlier version of this essay appeared in a fan-produced, self-published, not-for-profit compilation (Jules Wilkinson and Andie Masino, *Some of Us Really Do Watch for the Plot: A Collection of "Supernatural" Essays*, 2007), and although Borsellino is not the only writer who contributed to both of these collections (in fact, appearance in *Some of Us* may have influenced an essay's inclusion in *In the Hunt*), the double recycling taking place here—from *Some of Us* and from online fandom meta before it—may have the deleterious effect of undermining the legitimization of fannish writing that is part of *In the Hunt*’s mission. It may serve to deny a reading of *Some of Us*, and perhaps any similar fannish projects by extension, as important in any larger context. Although Borsellino's essay is one of the strongest in either collection, and its presence in *In the Hunt* ensures that it can reach the much larger audience it deserves, it is disappointing that such an outspoken writer would choose to recycle an essay rather than produce new work—perhaps on the same subject but treating the show's third season.

[7] Clifton's "Spreading Disaster: Gender in the *Supernatural* Universe," one of the longest entries in the collection, is as meandering as its predecessor is pointed. Clifton gamely examines the question of why *Supernatural* has such a large female fan base, reflecting the long-standing scholarly interest in female fan identification with male protagonists. He argues that the show's heroes are phallically-charged "masculine characters traversing a female landscape" (123) and posits that the show is thus driven by the resulting conflicts. The heroes' quest, then, must be one of containing, rejecting, and only occasionally compromising with the Female. Clifton also argues that the tensions exhibited by fans whenever new female characters are introduced are a natural outgrowth of the audience's established identification with the heroes. This is a valid reading, but also a provocative and troubling one, in that Clifton relies on traditional definitions of "femaleness" that equate it with "Otherness," evil, shadows, and permeability, doing little to problematize them or to problematize the notion of traditional masculinity. Clifton raises many good questions about the nature of fannish enjoyment but does not fully succeed in answering any of them; he never quite connects the presence of a "female landscape" (though one that still privileges the male gaze) to a working explanation of why so many women enjoy the show. However, by implying that female and queer enjoyment of *Supernatural* might only occur by reading against the text and "around the edges," and stating that "fan creative output [is] just as important...as the canonical work itself" (124), Clifton leaves the door open for further consideration.

[8] Next comes Poole's "Who Threw Momma on the Ceiling? Analyzing *Supernatural*'s Primal Scene of Trauma." A practicing psychotherapist, Poole uses "depth psychology" (144) to present an elegant and captivating analysis of Mary Winchester's death scene and its subsequent influence on the characters and the narrative. Poole states plainly
that "there is no way to construe this as a feminist show" (149), but she also positions *Supernatural* as a postmodern statement on loss, place, identity, and gender, provides a gentle and sensitive take on what she sees as the Winchesters brothers' quest to heal themselves from the loss of the Mother, and draws connections between this quest and that of American mythology, which seeks to "put [fragmented stories] either to rest or together" (151). The placement of Poole's essay between two very different entries on gender and transgression renders it even more poignant, but it is a standout essay in the collection, and a good starting point for further investigation into the psychology, postmodern fragmentation, and myth building of the characters and their world.

[9] In "Scary Just Got Sexy: Transgression in *Supernatural* and its Fanfiction," Turner looks at the form and content of *Supernatural* fan fiction and discusses how such works can function as metatexts reflecting back on the show, which itself features themes of transgression. Turner spends more time discussing fan works than discussing the show itself—not a surprise considering her background in acafandom—but this discussion sheds much light on the content of the show regardless, which is exactly what much fan fiction attempts to do anyway, making this essay a cogent example of its own argument. Turner also touches on the idea that fandom's love of transgression and metatextuality function as a mirror for the show's clear love of intertextuality, most visible in *Supernatural*'s frequent callbacks to classic horror cinema and filmmaking. This idea leaves open new areas for the study of intertextuality on the show, and between the show and its fandom. Although the analysis sticks closely to the specifics of *Supernatural* fan works, this is a standout piece for anyone interested in fan studies in general.

[10] Aside from the essays featured above, there is plenty more here with which scholars can concern themselves. At the start of the collection, Tanya Huff's "We're Not Exactly the Bradys" begins a section about family dynamics in *Supernatural* by discussing what can be inferred about John Winchester and his sons' childhoods and emotional development vis-à-vis his parenting. Segueing into a section on horror and fear, Randall M. Jensen's "What's *Supernatural* About *Supernatural*?" then examines the show's ideas of what renders something supernatural, and whether such things have actually been rendered natural within the show's created world. Jensen also addresses the notion of familial love as a common source of horror, and the show's place within the larger horror genre canon. In "Horror, Humanity, and the Demon in the Mirror," Gregory Stevenson—a professor of theology perhaps best known in acafannish circles for his work on morality in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—here writes again about morality and sacrifice, and also about fairy tales and monsters as metaphors.
Tanya Michaels's essay concerns heroism and sacrifice. Her "Dean Winchester: Bad-Ass or Soccer Mom?" analyzes Dean's presentation as a kind of bad boy with a heart of gold, who outwardly exhibits the trappings of rebellion but is at heart a loyal nurturer who takes on family responsibility as a full-time job, and who exhibits the most emotional vulnerability of the three Winchester men. Michaels notes that "bad-ass" and "soccer mom" do not have to be mutually exclusive roles (although there still exist unexamined, underlying assumptions about gender here). In a section on specific objects and secondary characters, Jules Wilkinson's "Back in Black" is one of two essays focusing on the Winchesters' car as mirror and symbol, especially for Dean, and also as a separate character in itself. The car's endless crisscrossing of America is conflated with the idea of the postmodern Road to Nowhere.

From another perspective entirely, Jamie Chambers's "Blue Collar Ghost Hunters" offers a practical guide to supernatural "hunting" as if it were real and celebrates the Winchesters' "have-not" way of life. Chambers, a game designer who has worked on the official Supernatural role-playing game, is full of interesting and useful observations, but his essay also exudes a kind of reverse snobbery, touting the have-not way of life as ethically superior to one with more privilege—the kind of life likely shared by most of the show's viewers. It's a striking position to take when one considers how little the topic of class difference is directly addressed within the show itself, but this essay's macho blue-collar posturing comes off not as interrogative commentary but as an expression of earnest admiration. This will undoubtedly help to prompt further inquiry into class issues on the show, but it also becomes another example of how male and female fans' concerns are positioned as jarringly disconnected.

The collection closes with London E. Brickley's "Ghouls in Cyberspace: Supernatural Sources in the Modern, Demon-Blogging World." Brickley, one of the fan contest winners, discusses the influence of modern technology in the show's narrative and on audience perception of it and points to the pervasiveness of the Internet, which she identifies as a kind of folkloric practice writ large because of its role as contemporary society's tool for rewriting and contributing to folklore and mythology. Supernatural's characters frequently put modern information technology on par with ancient tomes, and the audience never questions this parity. These characters use the tools that we give them, situating themselves in our "real world" as we create it. Brickley weaves a fascinating metatext here, one that manages to be about the show, the audience, and modern life itself.

Ultimately, In the Hunt is not without its flaws, but it broaches an impressive variety of ideas and gives academic readers much food for thought. One can hope that
future scholars will build on this collection to present even more thorough and nuanced work on this complex show and its fandom.
Book review

*Supernatural role playing game*, by Jamie Chambers

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[0.1] **Keywords**—Fan culture; Paranormal; Participatory culture; RPG; Television.


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[1] *Supernatural Role Playing Game* is one in a series of role-playing game (RPG) rule books published by Margaret Weis Productions that focuses on a popular television show or book series. *Supernatural Role Playing Game* builds off the CW Network's television show *Supernatural* (2005–), which follows the exploits of two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, as they hunt monsters and, in the current season, literally try to prevent hell on earth. In early episodes, the brothers were aided in their endeavors with the help of their father's journal, which contained all sorts of mystical tidbits and occult knowledge, as well as clippings of odd newspaper stories, Post-it notes, and photos stuffed between the pages.

[2] The format of *Supernatural Role Playing Game* approximates the layout of the famous Winchester journal. Pages typically contain two columns of information directly explaining the game rules, but this information wraps around photos from the show, torn notebook fragments detailing potential story ideas, and newspaper articles describing weird events. These materials are "clipped" to the rule book pages with a photographic paper clip. They enhance the information in the main columns: nothing essential is conveyed, but these extras offer interesting distractions and reading material. In addition, the book assumes multiple voices, shifting between a sarcastic tone reminiscent of Dean Winchester, one of the main characters, and a more neutral, informative tone emblematic of technical writing.
The book is divided into eight chapters that cover the game world, the rules, ideas for stories and campaigns, and a bestiary detailing supernatural and mundane creepy-crawlies. A brief nuts-and-bolts version of the game setting, rules, and character creation are given in the first three chapters so that players who want to begin playing immediately, or those familiar with the rule system on which the game is based, can do so. For readers who need more explanation, chapters 4 through 6 explain how the rules work and how they apply to character creation. Chapter 7 offers advice on creating stories and the game atmosphere, including techniques of storytelling, and the final two chapters outline the various creatures players may encounter, from the paranormal to the just plain normal.

The organization of the *Supernatural Role Playing Game* is quite different than older generations of RPGs, such as the iconic *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR and Wizards of the Coast, 1974–) and the short-lived *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* RPG (Palladium Books, 1985). Whereas older generations of rule books foreground the rules, explaining the nuances of die rolls and the technical aspects of character creation, the *Supernatural* revision lessens the importance of rules and attempts to make the game more organic. This point is made early on and is repeated throughout the text:

First off, the game is supposed to be fun. You're telling a story—one that's full of drama, suspense, humor, and action. The rules should make this easier, but sometimes, they get in the way. Sometimes, they just don't cover some crazy ass idea that the players come up with. In that case, the Game Master should keep in mind that the story is key, not the rules. Wing it using the basic game mechanics, and when in doubt, give the players the edge. (19)

The emphasis on developing a gaming experience guided by the rules, not determined by them, is an interesting and perhaps necessary step to counterbalance the computerization of RPGs. Although many RPG rule systems have made the digital leap (such as Bioware's implementation of the *Dungeons & Dragons* rules), these digital versions are governed *only* by rules, sublimated into computer code; the organic approach advocated by the *Supernatural* RPG does not easily make the digital transition. Speculation about the digital application of RPGs aside, *Supernatural's* position on rules actually stems from the more generic Cortex System of rules of which it is composed. The Cortex System, a creation of Margaret Weis Productions, is essentially a set of broad, generic rules designed to be applied to any number of game worlds. *Supernatural Role Playing Game* is one game using these rules; others (also authored by Jamie Chambers) include *Serenity Role Playing Game* (2005) and *Battlestar Galactica Role Playing Game* (2007).
The Cortex System assigns a die number ranging from d2 to d12 to a character's attributes, and combining this number with a similar number for skills generates a third number representing a character's proficiency with a certain action. The higher the number, the better the attribute, or the more proficient the player is at the given task. For example, in the course of game play, a character discovers an old tome written in archaic runes. The player's ability to identify the origin of the runes may be based on a combination of intelligence (an attribute) and knowledge of lore (a skill); combining these numbers results in the score representing proficiency, which, when rolled against a game master–determined number to represent difficulty, would be used as a baseline to determine whether the player could read the text.

The underlying Cortex System that informs *Supernatural Role Playing Game* could be seen as a transformative work, given that the rules are meant to evolve through game sessions. Different groups of players will create and modify different sets of rules to meet their needs; in other words, variations in the same basic set of rules potentially produces a multitude of fan identities.

The connections that that rule book explicitly makes with the television series offer more fertile ground in exploring the book's transformative potential, although the game doesn't present anything groundbreaking in this regard. The design of the book itself, as mentioned earlier, seems like a scrapbook. This choice evokes the television show, where the Winchesters frequently solve mysteries and locate monster weaknesses by reading their father's journal, composed of newspaper fragments, notes, pictures, and a host of other random texts. In mimicking the design of one of the show's most recognizable items, the rule book invites users to keep the show in mind as they play.

But keeping the show in mind does not necessarily mean that players or game masters will engage with it as they play. For this, the rule book explicitly incorporates characters, villains, and even plots from the television series into the game world. In the character sections, for example, Dean and Sam Winchester are fleshed out in all their pen-and-paper glory, complete with histories and statistics, for use in the game. Likewise, several old villains from the show make their way into the bestiary as specific examples of the supernatural creatures that are discussed.

Including these existing and familiar characters in the game isn't that innovative; after all, TSR, the first owner of *Dungeons & Dragons*, has been incorporating characters from books into their game settings since the 1980s. But this fact doesn't diminish the potential connections fans can make between the game and the television show. Incorporating well-known characters and villains into the game allows players and game masters to fashion their own stories, to expand on and alter the existing television story line.
Supernatural Role Playing Game doesn't contribute anything too novel to the genre of RPGs. Although the rule book emphasizes story and experience over rules, this is not an innovation of this text but rather one of the premises of the more generic Cortex System that forms its base. Even the incorporation of the television show's characters, monsters, and plots into the text as potential campaign suggestions parallels industry practice, but this does not diminish the potential of players and game masters to appropriate the show and make it their own.
Book review

Scare tactics: Supernatural fiction by American women, by Andrew Jeffrey Weinstock

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[0.1] Keywords—Historical analysis; Literary criticism; Women writers


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[1] Weinstock states as the main objective of this book to "establish the existence and argue for the importance of an American literary tradition that has received very little scrutiny"—namely, the supernatural tale by women in the United States written between 1850 and 1930. Pointing to the existence of this subgenre and bringing the work of these neglected writers to the forefront constitute the main contribution of this book to the field.

[2] The existence of this distinctive subgenre of literature is established by Weinstock on the following basis: about 70 percent of ghost stories in this period in the United States were written by women, and these stories often had specific features, such as the presence of less horrific or sinister ghosts, and the rendering of a relationship between the natural and the supernatural worlds that is depicted as a continuum rather than as a binary opposition, with the latter being more often the case in stories written by men. The book thus sets out to offer explanations why this might have been so, and to redress the neglect these writers have experienced by discussing their work in six chapters organized by theme. Each chapter pairs a well-known woman writer—even if not necessarily well known for her supernatural tales—with a lesser-known author who has written on the same topic, then analyzes both tales comparatively.
Chapter 1, "The Ghost in the Parlor," with tales by Harriet Prescott Spofford, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Anna M. Hoyt, and Edith Wharton, foregrounds tales on the control and abuse of women; chapter 2, "Queer Haunting Spaces," with tales by Madeline Yale Wynne and Elia Wilkinson Peattie, on haunted spaces; chapter 3, suggestively entitled "Ghosts of Progress," with tales by Alice Cary, Mary Noailles Murfree, Mary Austin, and Edith Wharton, on the expansion of capitalism; chapter 4, "Familial Ghosts," with tales by Louise Stockton, Olivia Howard Dunbar, Edith Wharton, Josephine Daskam Bacon, Elia Wilkinson Peattie, Georgia Wood Pangborn, and Mary E. Wilkins, on family, marriage, and motherhood, chapter 5, "Ghosts of Desire," with tales by Rose Terry Cooke, Alice Brown, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward, and Helen Hull, on transgressive sexuality; and chapter 6, "Ghostly Returns," with stories by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gertrude Atherton, and Josephine Daskam Bacon, on the rewriting of the male Gothic tradition. Weinstock's main argument is that gender is absolutely central to the rise of this subgenre.

Among this book's strengths is a thorough introduction that succinctly summarizes the existing literature on the topic, including literature that seeks to elucidate whether supernatural tales are inherently subversive (Breton 1937; Jameson 1981) or conservative (Summers 1974) (note 1). More to the point, it also crucially addresses a number of explanations that would account for the rise of ghostly tales written by women during this period in the United States, ranging from those that focus on form—that is, that ghost stories express anxieties that are hard to articulate or have been repressed (Cavaliero 1995, 23), and that they allow "exploration of forbidden psychosexual themes" (Kerr et al. 1983, 5) and of thorny social issues (Lundie 1996, 3)—to historical reasons, such a religious crisis in the face of the Enlightenment and nostalgia for the past in the face of modernity.

Without denying or contesting the accuracy of these reasons, Weinstock prefers to focus on explanations centered on gender. The book thus makes one of its key arguments: that the features specific to ghostly tales by American women writers of the period can be accounted for by the disadvantaged social conditions in which they lived and which they, through their literature, wished to overcome. Rather than joining those who have put it in terms that the women felt like ghosts themselves, with no real material existence (Patrick 1995), Weinstock sides with those who remark on the power of ghosts to intervene in the course of events, to act as agents for justice or protection, and to scare others. He thus concurs with Rosemary Jackson's (1981) famous contention that these supernatural tales define a literature of desire; they can be conceived of as wish-fulfillment fantasies—tales about what is missing and lacking, about absence and loss. This would be the reason, Weinstock contends, that ghosts in tales written by women tend to be less horrific, because "far scarier than the ghosts... are the forms of violence to which women are subject: confinement, loneliness and
varying degrees of physical, sexual and psychological abuse" (21). These arguments are particularly convincing in chapter 1's analyses of Edith Wharton's "Kerfol" (1916) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's "The Ghost in the Cap'n Brown House" (1872). This also explains why in supernatural tales by women space is often a source of horror, unstable and queer, because even "home" could turn out to be a dangerous place for a woman. This view is analyzed in chapter 3, which examines Elia Wilkinson Peattie's "The House That Was Not" (1898) and Madeline Yale Wynne's "The Little Room" (1895). Weinstock contextualizes the ghostly tales he presents while making the case that they should be regarded as a genre that "developed out of, responded to and in many instances critiqued" (2) the roles of women in the United States at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th.

[6] Weinstock provides a balanced view of the authors he engages because he acknowledges that their interventions were not always necessarily progressive: they tended to be more aware of oppressive conditions faced by white middle-class women. Many of the tales were blind to issues of ethnicity and class, if not positively reactionary. Weinstock argues that taken together, "these ghostly tales demonstrate the ways in which nineteenth and early twentieth century American female authors deployed familiar conventions of the supernatural...to critique not just the disempowered status of women in American culture but also the expanding capitalist system that is shown to underlie gender oppression" (22). In this, the book succeeds admirably.

[7] Nevertheless, Weinstock's approach is ultimately reductive. With its narrow focus on gender and nation, it contracts rather than expands the context for and the suppleness of the criticism and engagement with the supernatural tales he has chosen to discuss. Although the book does mention that the tales are inscribed "within the larger tradition of American and British supernaturalism more generally" (23), it does not acknowledge the extent to which what has been termed "British" traditions are in fact constituted by what might be called versions of French and German supernatural. Important women writers, including Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, and Charlotte Smith, were translators themselves, and research has drawn attention to the effect that this had in their own writing (Horner 2002). Indeed, to Terry Hale, the English Gothic was shaped "in the crucible of translation" (Hale 2002, 23). Thus, although Weinstock's book will, I hope, bring welcome broader attention to the work of a number of writers hitherto little known, by its focus on the "Americanness" of the writers, it negates the cross-fertilization that has been central to the genre and misses a wealth of intertextual readings.

[8] More importantly, defining this literature through its criticism of patriarchy and its fantasy-fulfilling aspects is a profoundly dismissive stance. Rather than arguing that
because these authors were disempowered women, their literature must be thus be understood as a protest and a source of consolation, it has always seemed to me that that their literary achievements lay in transcending boundaries—not least the boundaries of gender and of nation. The supernatural tales by the host of writers introduced by Weinstock matter, and they should be studied not because their writers were American women, but because they were human beings able to go, through words, literally beyond, and to take their readers along.

Note

1. Those arguing that supernatural literature is subversive focus on the way supernatural tales dare think of another, alternative world, touch on transgressive social issues, and refuse to settle difference. Those arguing that it inherently conservative point to the way the different is rendered monstrous, with the other world invoked so that our world can ultimately be restored.

Works cited


A volume that continually returns to the commodified status of Gothic themes and iconography, it is fitting that *Contemporary Gothic* begins with a shopping trip. Stumbling across a calendar—entitled, simply, "Gothic"—filled with images of specters and graveyards underwritten by a funereal imagination, the author finds within this seemingly low-rent kitsch an exemplar of her central thesis. Containing reproductions of a diverse and unconnected range of fine art images (by, among others, Goya,
Munch, Henry Singleton, and Evelyn De Morgan), the calendar represents the continuum between past and present while simultaneously highlighting the perplexing disconnection of these images from their original social and historical context. A dislocated and mass-marketed emblem of contemporary time(s), this apparently banal product serves as a metonym for the mainstream commercialization of artifacts that strive to exist at a marginal or culturally subterranean level. Although the Gothic has always held popular appeal, in the current economic climate, it is a particularly lucrative business. Above all, Spooner notes, "Gothic sells" (23). Unlike many would-be subcultural phenomena, however, the Gothic persists despite its co-optation by late capitalist consumer culture, its seductively vampiric allure systematically refusing to be slain despite exposure to the overlit world of globalized commerce.

[3] Contemporary Gothic begins in earnest with an interrogation of mock Gothic. Spooner argues that the Gothic mode has long been preoccupied by the tenuous distinction between authenticity and depth on the one hand, and a fascination with surface and performance on the other. Contemporary Gothic illustrates this by recourse to Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's celebrated Blair Witch Project (1999), Mark Z. Danielowski's labyrinthine novel House of Leaves (2000), and the genuinely uncanny work of American photographer Gregory Crewdson. The chapter ends with a prolonged discussion of Michael Almereyda's vampire film, Nadja (1994). Noting that the movie is a highly self-conscious and reflexive metacommentary on the conventions of the vampire narrative, Spooner's analysis here echoes the work of Stacey Abbott in her contemporaneous Celluloid Vampires: Life After Death in the Modern World (2007). With vampirism so omnipresent in contemporary culture—both as fictional icon and increasingly as youthful lifestyle choice—there is, as with Gothic culture as a whole, a danger of the vampire narrative "falling prey to its own central metaphor and being sucked dry of invigorating life, doomed to replicate itself as empty cliché" (52). Yet in the short period since the publication of Contemporary Gothic, the enormous popularity of Stephanie Meyer's Twilight saga (books, 2006–8; films, 2008–) and the HBO television series True Blood (2008–, based on Charlaine Harris's ongoing Southern Vampire Mysteries series featuring Sookie Stackhouse, 2001–), coupled with serious critical acclaim for the Swedish vampire film Let the Right One In (2008, based on a 2004 novel by John Ajvide Lindqvist), all suggest that these monstrously malleable passions refuse to be so easily lain to rest.

[4] Spooner's ambivalent survey of the undead terrain of contemporary vampire narratives typifies the broad tone of Contemporary Gothic, torn as it is between celebrating the enduring potency of the Gothic mode and decrying its commercial reification and cultural exhaustion. This dialectic continues in a chapter focused on corporeality and the grotesque body. "Contemporary Gothic is more obsessed with bodies than in any of its previous phases," she argues (63). Spooner usefully
contextualizes this accelerated material fascination with the body as a return of the repressed, "an attempt to reinstate the physicality of the body in an increasingly decorporealized information society" (65). Beginning with Gunther von Hagens's overhyped Body Worlds exhibition, the author continues to survey the fusion of freakishness and carnivalesque humour wherein she finds evidence of "the democratization of monstrosity" (66). Here, Contemporary Gothic casts its critical eye across Tod Browning's film Freaks (1932), Katherine Dunn's novel Geek Love (1989), and Angela Carter's novel Nights at the Circus (1984). In contrast to the broad body fascism of late capitalist Western culture, Spooner finds in these celebrated fictions an engagement with disability politics and a sharp critique of the presumptuousness of "ableism." Moving on through AIDS metaphors in the work of authors Will Self and Patrick McGrath, Spooner concludes with an extended discussion of Rupert Wainwright's would-be millennial nightmare film Stigmata (1999) and the work of photographer Joel-Peter Witkin. In Spooner's view, these texts signify something of an uneasy revival of spirituality in contemporary Gothic culture. Yet while the author makes a compelling case for "the restoration of the spirit to the suffering flesh" and "a new kind of Gothic revival, a spirituality for our secular times" (85), her examples are nevertheless limited in range. While fans of Supernatural (2005–) may enthusiastically point to the neo-Christian mythology underpinning that series as a way of supporting Spooner's thesis, one might just as readily point to the fascination with physical suffering in the recent cycle of torture-porn films. With their brutal depictions of a contemporary world entirely emptied of spiritual or moral substance, the Hostel films (2005–7) or the phenomenally successful Saw cycle (2004–) may well have led the author to very different conclusions.

[5]  Contemporary Gothic's strongest card is its level-headedness vis-à-vis the mainstream commercial prevalence of the Gothic. As Spooner shrewdly notes, the Gothic has always been closely allied to the machinations of post-Enlightenment consumer culture. In addition to the huge advances and multiple reprints of classic Gothic novels by Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, the author also cites the revealing case of George du Maurier's Trilby (1894). The book was estimated by some to be the best-selling novel of the 19th century, and its success was linked to an impressive array of associated events and ancillary merchandise, "including Trilby shoes, sweets, soaps, sausages, concerts, parties and, of course, the celebrated Trilby hat" (24). Spooner is also healthily skeptical where fetishistic appropriation of the Gothic by academic scholars is concerned:

[6]  Gothic has apparently become popular among academics because it is invested with the thrill of the forbidden, which in this context is not entirely different from the thrill of the low-brow. Suddenly, Gothic is PC: championed by feminists and queer theorists for its level of attention to women and non-
heteronormative sexualities; the reading material of the masses; the spaces in which colonial guilt could be explored and exorcised. (24–25)

Indeed, the reinvigoration of interest in the genre since the late 1970s has witnessed the wholesale romanticization of the Gothic "as a marginal genre, invested with subversive potential" (25). Spooner’s wary tone here points to the critical (ab)use of popular culture as a conveniently darkened mirror through which to reflect the furtive political longings of middle-class scholars.

To this end, there are few cultural practices that have attracted more sensationalized media scrutiny and academic fascination than spectacular postwar youth subcultures. In a chapter entitled (with an appropriately knowing wink) "Teen Demons," Contemporary Gothic explores the links between youth culture and Gothic style. Due in no small part to the neo-Marxist underpinnings of subcultural theory, Goth has perennially been dismissed as the self-indulgent affectation of middle-class youth. This has particularly been true in the United Kingdom, where the Goth subculture has never been deemed serious or transgressive enough to foster the media ire that it has sometimes attracted in the United States. However, readers more interested in the tribal fashions and music-based affiliations loosely gathered under the label Goth are perhaps more usefully directed toward Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby's sporadically intriguing collection, Goth: Undead Subculture (2007) or Paul Hodkinson's Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture (2002).

Nevertheless, Spooner's broad sweep in this section provides a lively overview of the Gothic appropriations of contemporary youth culture, from the reinvigorated Gothic imaginary of teen horror films (a lucrative subgenre that has sustained the American horror film both commercially and thematically throughout the 1990s and 2000s), via the knowingly postmodern Gothic stylings of Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003), and on to the latent moral panic surrounding the alleged links between Gothic youth culture, the music of self-described Antichrist superstar Marilyn Manson, and the 1999 Columbine massacre. Also of interest here is the pop paganism of Wiccan culture and beliefs and the concomitant trend for teenaged girls to self-identify as witches, a trend refracted in the popular youth-oriented soap operatics of Sabrina, the Teenage Witch (1996–2003) and Charmed (1998–2006). Spooner offers a useful critique here, arguing persuasively that supposedly alternative belief systems like teen witchcraft are always already commodified lifestyles subject to the conservative cultural logic of self-help narratives and consumer-driven individualism.

My principal reservation about Contemporary Gothic is its broad approach to the diffuse and malleable nature of the contemporary Gothic mode. While Spooner offers a lively analysis of Gothicized postfeminist discourses and direct address of a darkly gendered sensibility in entertaining and intelligent films such as The Craft (1996) and
Ginger Snaps (2000), it would take a particularly loose conception of the Gothic to incorporate Donnie Darko (2001) under this rubric. Elsewhere, the volume's (relatively) brief engagement with Buffy the Vampire Slayer seems a little redundant when the author readily acknowledges that the show has already received "an unprecedented level of critical and academic attention" (114). Contemporary Gothic's penultimate chapter, "Gothic Shopping," underscores the strengths and weaknesses enforced by the relative brevity of the volume. Examining both the increasingly prevalent use of Gothic imagery in advertising and "the marketing of Gothic products that straddle the uneasy borderline between the subcultural and the mainstream" (135), Spooner attempts to make sense of the wholesale commodification of the Gothic in the global marketplace. Like the book as a whole, Contemporary Gothic here shifts somewhat uneasily between valorizing the Gothic for its enduring cultural potency and elsewhere quietly despairing at its hyperreification in the collective consumer consciousness. For example, a discussion of Gothic imagery and the invocation of Satanism in a successful marketing campaign for Smirnoff vodka arguably tells us a lot more about the ingenuity and commercial logics of contemporary advertising than it does about the uncanny resonance of the Gothic today.

[11] This, of course, is precisely Spooner's point, though the author does perhaps overlook the dipsomaniacal irony in her own reflexive questioning: "Why should a genre with distinctly unpleasant connotations (claustrophobia, fear, decay and moral turpitude) be revived as a means of selling alcohol?" (136). Elsewhere, Spooner's enthusiastic discussion of the Living Dead Dolls toy line seems content to simply validate the manufacturers' careful niche marketing of their products with a wholly commodified aura of cult exclusivity. These toys, argues Spooner, "signal both underground commitment and the joys of...a new Gothic: Gothic as pure commodity, pure luxury, pure excess" (153). The new Gothic, it seems, floats merrily free amid the transnational ebb and flow of the global marketplace.

[12] Yet Contemporary Gothic concludes on an appropriately ambivalent note. Alluding to the broad sense in which the Gothic mode is perceived to have exhausted itself, Spooner intimates that "where once Gothic provided a space in which the dark dreams of the Enlightenment could be realized, now it simply exposes the void at the heart of an advanced consumer culture" (155). The seemingly inescapable Gothic now functions as the perfectly protean postmodern commodity:

[13] [The Gothic] can be progressive or conservative, nostalgic or modern, comic or tragic, political or apolitical, feminine or masculine, erudite or trashy, transcendentally spiritual or doggedly material, sinister or silly. It is difficult to say what contemporary Gothic "is," or even what it is like, since it
does all of these things so well... It is a perfect product, readily available and simply adapted to the needs and purposes of a wide variety of consumers. (156)

[14] Spooner makes her case well, and although it lapses into solipsistic cultural studies orthodoxy at this juncture, I have no real argument with her key point. Equally, while one struggles to argue against the argument that "individual consumer choices can indicate renegotiations of identity politics at a micro-level" (156), it is equally tempting to ponder whether the selfsame argument could just as easily be made about any mass-produced commodity. One might even argue that Contemporary Gothic is itself a wholly typical example of the mode in the early 21st century: strategically ambivalent, accessible to a wide audience, and beautifully illustrated throughout, the book is in many ways a perfect Gothic commodity. Yet in a lucid and powerful closing commentary on the post-9/11 moment—focusing here on the film Batman Begins (2005) and McGrath’s linked short-story collection Ghost Town: Tales of Manhattan Then and Now (2005)—Spooner underlines the continued relevance of the Gothic. Even in a hypercommodified global information society, it seems, the Gothic imaginary has not entirely unshackled itself from the genuine frisson of the uncanny; nor has it forsaken its ability to distinguish between Gothic lite apparitions such as Emily the Strange and the all-too-real nightmares of our times.
Haunting experiences: Ghosts in contemporary folklore, by Diane E. Goldstein et al.

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[1] In Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore, folklorists Diane E. Goldstein, Sylvia Ann Grider, and Jeannie Banks Thomas raise questions about the role of ghost stories in a media-saturated culture. Is our knowledge of the supernatural drawn from oral traditions, or from television and film? Does the mediation of the paranormal have an effect on traditional stories? Although folklore is transmitted orally and intimately while popular culture is transmitted in mediated contexts, the two are constantly intertwined. Furthermore, popular culture circulates both in intimate conversations and in public discourse among fans, critics, and audiences. Taking this into account, Haunting Experiences considers different encounters with and perspectives on the paranormal that result from varied means of transmission. The authors argue that although new technologies and media create and perpetuate ideas of the supernatural, the ghosts of the digital age are not terribly different from the ghost stories transmitted orally over many generations. The book addresses audiences from both threads of the discussion, folklore and popular culture. Other than the introduction and conclusion, which are coauthored by Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas, each single-authored chapter highlights the research interests and expertise of its author.

[2] In chapter 1, "The Usefulness of Ghosts," Thomas looks at ghost stories in folklore, arguing that such stories can enhance understanding of both the natural and
the supernatural worlds, as well as our cultures and worldviews. For example, ghost stories can create a sense of place for visitors and residents that may not otherwise be manifest. In discussing her visit to Cape Breton, where she collected ghost stories from local residents, Thomas notes that the ghosts in a particular narrative "helped change my attitude toward place; they reminded me of its mystery and power" (45). Thomas also argues that supernatural entertainment trivializes the significance and gravity of ghost stories (30). From *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) to *Ghost Hunters* (2004–), there is a resurgence of interest in the supernatural drawn largely from popular culture. If we are exposed to the paranormal primarily as a means of entertainment, Thomas asserts, it is more difficult to take seriously first-person accounts of haunted encounters, whether contemporary or historical. The narrative complexity and elaborate visual representation of the paranormal on a TV series like *Supernatural* (2005–) makes a straightforward recounting of a ghostly encounter seem quaint and unimpressive, potentially diminishing folklore's cultural significance.

[3] Chapter 2, "Scientific Rationalism and Supernatural Experience Narratives," posits that one would expect rationalism to stand in the way of belief in the supernatural: academics in folklore and other fields have dismissed ghost stories as mere folly and may see traditional stories as superstitious or ignorant. Yet Goldstein uses first-person narratives to demonstrate that when individuals tell stories of their own paranormal experience, they are constituted within a rationalist frame. Thus, to disregard ghost stories is, as Thomas also notes in the preceding chapter, to miss an opportunity for a point of access into a particular culture, its history, and its beliefs. To support her arguments and those that follow in subsequent chapters, Goldstein cites a 2005 Gallup poll showing that three out of four people surveyed in the United States believe in at least one aspect of paranormal activity (65).

[4] Chapter 3, "Gender and Ghosts," argues that most ghosts encountered in folklore and in popular culture are gendered, and that our cultural expectations for men and women extend to the supernatural world as well. Thomas specifically details two gendered stereotypes of ghosts, which she calls the Extreme Guy and the Deviant Femme. Extreme Guy is hypermasculine, while the Deviant Femme defies stereotypical expectations of a nurturing, passive woman. Rather, female ghosts often act violently in response to harm previously done to them. These two types are compared to what Thomas calls the Genderless Presence, arguing that the amorphous presence of a spirit "repudiates culture by offering the possibilities of a realm where gender does not matter" (109). One might counter that the Genderless Presence could also be indicative of a paranormal sensation not well formed enough to mark as gendered, or an experience of the supernatural for which there is no ready link to a narrative in which a ghost would be tagged as male or female.
In addition to an engaging series of excerpts from spectral narratives, this chapter includes a lengthy discussion of the Winchester Mystery House, recounting the author's visit to the extraordinary home of Sarah Winchester, heiress to her husband's family fortune from the manufacture of guns. Thomas notes that "the house generates its small bit of spooky capital these days by playing up Sarah Winchester as a Deviant Femme" (100), although Winchester's deviance is merely in her belief in ghosts and in her endless construction on her house, intended to ward off spirits. Along with the discussions of haunted houses and the commodification of the paranormal that appear in later chapters, the section on the Winchester Mystery House ties together the book's themes of gender, architecture, and tourism in a single site.

Sylvia Ann Grider examines children's ghost stories in chapter 4, tracing a tradition in which these stories are used as means of acculturation for young listeners and storytellers alike. She recounts several commonly told ghost stories, highlighting and explicating variations to the stories. In the telling of such stories, Grider notes, elementary-age children "attempt to keep their terror of the supernatural and the perverse under control by humor and parody" (117), implying that storytelling sessions can disarm some of the horror and fear children experience with regard to the paranormal.

The discussion of haunted houses in chapter 5 shows the commingling of folklore and popular culture, in that the visual characteristics of the haunted house are iconic and taken for granted across literature, film, folktales, children's drawings, and mass-market Halloween merchandise. Grider points out that in each of these instances, the haunted house serves as both a setting and a character. Yet from these similarities in depiction and use across the culture, Grider argues, "the traditional ghost story overall is not nearly as dramatic as the tales presented in contemporary popular fiction" (147). She notes that those who encounter ghosts in stories from popular culture typically experience negative consequences, which is not the case in the oral tradition (157).

Chapter 6, "The Commodification of Belief," argues that gaining profit from the supernatural, whether through selling haunted real estate, promoting haunted hotels, or hosting ghost tours, does not diminish the seriousness of the paranormal, nor is it a new phenomenon: ghost tours date back to the late 18th century. The argument that consumer culture turns experiences and objects into commodities is complicated by the ways in which those who participate in ghost tours or stay at haunted hotels find personal value in their experiences.

After an examination of specific appearances of the supernatural in popular culture and folklore, the authors revisit the significance and ubiquity of popular culture, asking, "Do the 'mass' and the 'popular' quality of popular culture carry a
voice of credibility and expertise that exerts a new kind of authority over folklore and belief?" (210). This is a lingering question that Haunted Experiences addresses but does not resolve, as the scope of the question far exceeds the discussion of the supernatural. With regard to the supernatural, however, the authors express concerns shared among folklorists that "media discourse will replace or dominate folklore," particularly because of the recent prevalence of the paranormal topics in literature, television, and film (212).

[10] Because the products of popular culture are widely dispersed to a broad audience, shared knowledge of a particular cultural product lends it credibility. Unlike the ghost stories of folklore that exist in many similar versions, film, television, and books are static and fixed; a particular episode of a television series always plays out the same way whenever one watches it, and every viewer sees the same episode, although their interpretations and understandings may vary wildly. As such, fans discussing a television series can lend that series a kind of authority that folklore generally lacks. An example would be the way in which urban legends from folklore are carried to media presentations, becoming fixed stories proven true or false online or in various books and television series like Urban Legends (2007–) and MythBusters (2003–). Supernatural also incorporates these legends from folklore into its plot, including 1.05 "Bloody Mary" and 1.07 "Hookman." The series, then, transforms the colloquial ghost stories into plotlines tied to the fictional world of Sam and Dean Winchester rather than moving freely in public discourse.

[11] Haunted Experiences is primarily of interest to scholars and fans of the paranormal, with a secondary audience of folklorists and media scholars. The authors are not focused on the practices of fandom, yet the comparisons of the supernatural in oral traditions, lived experience, and mediated experiences can model ways to study a particular thread of fandom across the cultural landscape. A final nod to fandom appears in one of the last paragraphs of the book, where the authors conclude that "regardless of the narrative-based work of ghost hunters, it would be foolish to maintain that they are in any way average contemporary tradition bearers. They are over-the-top professionals and enthusiasts, more a part of a fan community than the average tale teller" (226).
Book review

Pretend we're dead: Capitalist monsters in American pop culture, by Annalee Newitz

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[1] In Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture, Annalee Newitz applies Marxist, postcolonial, feminist, and postmodern theories to an assorted collection of monsters (loosely defined) in film and fiction. In this effort, her coverage is broad, as she aims to discuss the monstrous in America (with some Canadian content allowed) from the late 19th through the early 21st centuries. Essentially, Newitz's rather simple thesis is that "capitalism creates monsters who want to kill you" (3). Within this thesis, Newitz also seeks to define monsters as specifically capitalist monsters. That she then ultimately aims to prove that "capitalism creates [capitalist] monsters" makes her argument seem rather obvious. Still, the paths that she takes as she pursues this relatively well-trod road take some interesting turns along the way.

[2] Newitz explains the title of her book in relation to Marx's notion that "capital is dead labor," which sucks the lifeblood from the worker, transforming the latter into "an appendage of a machine" (6), a kind of not-living, inhuman monster. She emphasizes the "made" aspect of the monsters that she wishes to consider, as opposed to "born" monsters. Given the social constructedness of the monstrous, one might argue that all monsters are made, whether born that way or not. Certainly within the parameters set out by Newitz, her monsters are all created by capitalist forces. Newitz posits a paradox, one that she unfortunately does not dissect but rather simply exposes. Her book, she says, "is ultimately an extended meditation on how
works about monsters represent economic crisis" (12). The monsters appear, however, within the constructs of "the capitalist culture industry" of Hollywood (12). Why the capitalist machine should offer criticism of itself is a question that Newitz makes no attempt to answer, though it is obvious from her book that the cultural artifacts of Hollywood can be read as self-critical, if not self-awaresely so.

[3] After a short introduction, Newitz's first chapter explores the connection between serial killers and the capitalist work ethos. This chapter draws together ideas of masculinity, corporate productivity, and violence in interesting ways, though sometimes to the point of straining credulity. For instance, her notion that modern images of violence can be traced to the Civil War novel The Red Badge of Courage (1895), by Stephen Crane, sounds hollow in the face of centuries of Western apocalyptic imagery and even the gore of Homer's Iliad. Her discussion of the modern serial killer as an extreme example of the laborer who produces literally dead commodities is definitely worth consideration, however. Her discussion reveals the way Marxist theory can be broadly applied: anything can be seen as a veritable workplace, thus leaving open the possibility of production in any context. Turning to the Civil War, Newitz depicts it not as a series of military engagements but rather as a workplace in which soldiers as laborers become the appendage of a military machine producing literally dead capital in the mass of corpses. The serial killer, for Newitz, "acts out the enraged confusion" (27) of redefined masculine identity in the context of modern capitalism wherein laborers produce no tangible goods. Further, the connection between masculinity and productive economy is drawn out in fascinating detail.

[4] The second chapter, dealing with mad scientists, follows on some themes present in the first chapter and moves along the lines of redefined labor. Here, a staple of B horror is compared to the modern-day professional whose mental labor results in the alienation of the professional from his or her mind. The result is depicted, according to Newitz, as early as Robert Louis Stevenson's Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) and continues in a variety of forms today. Most interesting is the argument that "mental labor...alienates workers from their own minds," leading to a "proletarianization" of professionals (55). Newitz also muses on the image of the disembodied brain as a sexual fetish, allowing the alienation of self from mind to be viewed along gender lines. Newitz repeats observations on gender and sexuality alongside the major narrative of capitalist control. Though the reader can make the connections, a more sustained argument would have been valuable.

[5] The third chapter, nominally about the undead, marks a weak point, although this is perhaps the result of my own high expectations. The undead, especially zombies, have been regularly associated with Marxist interpretations, not only by critics but also by filmmakers themselves. Given the title of the book, one expects to
find at least an overview of this history. Instead, Newitz engages with the appearance of racism in horror, again a topic regularly associated with the zombie from its origins in Haitian folklore. Rather than discussing the zombie in this context, however, Newitz spends half of the chapter on the work of H. P. Lovecraft and his Cthulhu mythos. Certainly a discussion of Lovecraft is worthwhile, but it is out of place given his work's limited connection to the undead as normally defined. Newitz idiosyncratically interprets, for instance, Lovecraft's Great Old One, Cthulhu, a cosmic deity, as an undead creature. On the other hand, Lovecraft's pronounced racism lends him to her chosen topic in this particular chapter. Further, once turning away from Lovecraft, Newitz passes over the zombie only briefly in discussing the 1943 film *I Walked With a Zombie* alongside the 1915 Civil War film *Birth of a Nation* before moving onto 1972 blaxploitation vampire film *Blacula*. Again, her examples present obvious racial interpretations, though Newitz fails to recognize the breadth of alternate interpretations that present themselves. Film critic Robin Wood, for instance, goes without mention despite the usefulness of his discussions of the return of the repressed in horror, some examples of which align closely with Newitz's own arguments. Newitz may have wished to avoid rehashing previous discussions of vampires and zombies (of which there are a great many) in this chapter, but it is clear that she applies a Procrustean bed, selecting her examples carefully and then overgeneralizing her claims—a long-standing problem with Marxist (among other) interpretations.

[6] Chapter 4 engages with robots and cyborgs. Newitz grants for the purposes of her argument that the robots in the films she will consider are taken to be alive, or at least sentient in some way. Essentially, then, she will only consider robots that are people. Thus limiting her discussion, Newitz again applies the Procrustean bed, as those robots that are clearly people can obviously be seen as having become appendages of a literal machine. Still, Newitz believes that these robot people can be viewed as blurring a line of consensuality because they are often at least partially enslaved by their programming, just as modern humans are not entirely free to decide the course of their own labor and production. Of particular interest for the film buff are the number of relatively obscure films that are discussed.

[7] Finally, Newitz concludes with a chapter discussing the "corporate monsters" of the capitalist movie industry. This chapter, which lacks a clear focus, ranges from aged actress-monsters to Jean Baudrillard's simulacra devouring the masses through modern media. It presents no clear conclusion, except the vague hope that "perhaps, one day, our monster stories will not express the grief of a nation whose people pretend to be dead in order to live" (183). This chapter might have been the locus for a sustained discussion of why the monstrous industry might elect to depict itself as monstrous rather than attempting to hide itself from public scrutiny. That no answer to
this question is attempted, except to simply suggest that "the media are also infected" (182), weakens the overall argument.

[8] Overall, Newitz effectively and deftly manipulates some diverse theories. The likes of Baudrillard, Žižek, Gramsci, and Girard all find homes in this discussion. On the other hand, some notable omissions with bearing on the specific topic of this book include Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond* (2003), Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993), Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), and Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990). The structure, specifically its lack of a precise conclusion, leaves the reader unsatisfied. Indeed, several questions beg answers. In the concluding chapter in particular, Newitz observes that while horror films point to the monstrosity of corporate cultural control, and so serve as a warning against it, the fact that corporate filmmakers produce such films does not pose a problem for her thesis, but instead illustrates that they too are infected by some even greater force that instills the same sense of dread in them.

[9] Despite the weakness in the overall argument, Newitz does demonstrate a flexibility in her application of a range of theories to a number of films, often obscure ones, that gives one pause for reflection. The strength of the text is in the various discussions of specific films, or of groups of films brought together in new and interesting ways. As a collection of essays, as opposed to a book of chapters moving toward a clear conclusion, *Pretend We're Dead* will provide an engaging read for scholars as well as horror fans. In fact, the latter will be especially pleased with some of Newitz's choices of literature and film, many of which have received little or no previous scholarly attention. The book will be most interesting to those readers who are not already familiar with Marxist interpretations of horror or to those interested in applications of Marxist theory to specific films that have not already received such treatment elsewhere.