

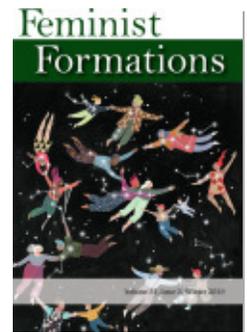


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and the American Dream

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Feminist Formations, Volume 31, Issue 3, Winter 2019, pp. 72-94 (Article)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2019.0031>

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“We’re Country”: Britney Spears, Southern White Femininity, and the American Dream

Jennifer Musial

This essay examines vacillating affective responses to pop star Britney Spears. I juxtapose Spears’s career ascent as a teen queen from the rural American South to her career descent into “white trash” rebellious adulthood. I contend that Spears exposes the cracks in the celebrity system: while it promises transformation to ordinary people, it treats cruelly those who fail to transform into the “right” kind of celebrity. In Spears’s case, she was chastised as a working-class woman from the rural South who could never rise above her roots. Ultimately, Spears’s “failure” became an individualized shame, which reifies a celebrity system built on neoliberal, bourgeois ideals of transformation.

Keywords: celebrity / rurality / Southern woman / Spears, Britney / US South / whiteness / working-class

The agent told her mother she’d be a symbol of the New South and took her to a dogtrot house for the shoot. She’d brought her own pink halter, whose ties she knew brushed her bare skin when she moved. She understood his vision right away: She should grasp the whitewashed column like a pole, hold it like she’d never left her home.

—Rachel Richardson 2008, 279

I'm convinced she's an inbred hick /
Gosh golly, ma dawters so a purrrty.

—Gavin Campbell 2001, 82

Leave Britney Alone!

—Chris Crocker 2007

The US celebrity system is built on three interconnected premises: if a person works hard enough, leverages their talent, and finds themselves in front of the right people, then they will be successful; ordinary people can become famous if they want it badly enough and make strategic decisions; and, people will root for an underdog because they enjoy a Pygmalion transformation. If celebrity is the perfect marriage between neoliberal capitalism and the American Dream because it promises anything is possible, then pop star Britney Spears exposes the fissures of an idealized system. Spears shows us that not everyone can be transformed and that public shaming awaits those whose behavior betrays what is expected of affluent white women.

In this essay, I argue that despite achieving megastardom, Spears was not transformed into the “right” kind of neoliberal subject because she remained defiantly rural, Southern, and working class despite access to wealth and power. When Spears went from virginal yet provocative “good girl”¹ to out-of-control “bad girl,” many blamed Spears for being a morally reprehensible “white trash”² woman who was either unable or unwilling to rise above her roots. In other words, Spears faced public ridicule because she failed to use the celebrity system to convert financial capital into cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1984). The racialized class disgust directed toward Spears demonstrates lingering tensions over race, gender, and class, mapped onto historical tensions between the US North and South. Spears teaches us that the celebrity system cannot uplift everyone, particularly those who cling to a rural, Southern, working-class identity.

This essay focuses on Spears’s career as a teen performer, sexual adult, and mother (1997–2007). In late 2007, questions about her mental health arose (Voronka 2008). Though the period of “mad Britney” to “recovered Britney” (2007–present) is a fascinating trajectory marked by further affective vacillation, I am more interested in why Spears was shamed as a Southern “white trash” celebrity and what this says about expectations of celebrity to transform one into the proper object of adoration. To engage these questions, I employ Foucauldian discourse methodology to analyze print newspapers, television programs, concert documentaries, and gossip websites that covered Spears. I organize this essay around two spatial analytics: Kentwood and Hollywood. In the former, I use self-authored narratives like Britney Spears’s *Heart to Heart* (2000), *Britney Spears: There’s No Place Like Home* (2000), and MTV’s *Diary* (2001) to show how

Spears's hometown of Kentwood, Louisiana is pivotal to building her brand as a wholesome, working-class, Southern girl-turned-superstar.³ Kentwood represents the idealized US South as a place where the white rural working-class nurture their American Dream through nostalgia, family values, hard work, and a belief in meritocracy. In the latter, I use an episode of *Dateline* (2006) alongside digital, print, and tabloid media to analyze the racialized class disgust directed toward the rural, working-class celebrity who became "a white-trash pageant queen . . . trainwreck" (Fischer 2011, 313, 318). In Hollywood, Spears's Southern roots were a liability because they represent the inability to transform into the respectable white, affluent woman by leaving her rural white Southern working-class sensibility behind. Finally, I conclude by contextualizing the backlash against Spears within the contemporary political landscape that frames a geo-ideological divide between the seemingly progressive urban North and the seemingly backward rural South. Analysis of Spears's early career reveals that rural South-shaming was brewing beneath the surface long before the 2016 US election.

Britney Spears is the ideal vehicle to understand the promise of the celebrity system and the racialized, gendered, regional, class disgust directed toward those who "fail." She has few female, working-class, Southern pop superstar peers outside of genre-specific performers (e.g., country, gospel, or hip hop). Pop singers Brandy and Monica hail from the Deep South (Mississippi and Georgia, respectively) but they did not grow up in rural environments. Likewise, Texas-born superstars Selena, Beyoncé, Kelly Clarkson, and Selena Gomez grew up in cities. Among those listed, Selena stands out as the only performer whose familial financial struggle punctuates her biography much like Spears. However, women of color in the aforementioned list were subject to racialized respectability politics that skirted Spears. As a white performer, Spears could play with a Lolita image in a way that is inaccessible to racialized teenagers who are always-already positioned as hypersexual and non-innocent according to gendered logics of white supremacy. Of Spears's white (or white passing) teen peers Mandy Moore, Christina Aguilera, and Jessica Simpson, only Simpson grew up in the South (Texas) and Simpson was read as the "good" naïve, Christian white girl. In contrast, Aguilera, a bi-cultural white-coded Latina, was slightly more sexualized than Spears.⁴ Due to her upbringing in the rural working-class South,⁵ there are few superstars who can be compared to Spears: she stands as a unique celebrity who could effectively build her brand through a new Southern Belle-meets-Lolita performance.⁶

Existing scholarship on Spears has neglected how rural white Southern working-class identity shapes her celebrity. Research considers her hypersexual femininity (Meyers 2009), psychiatric crisis (Projansky 2014; Voronka 2008), and claims to authenticity (Meyers 2009; Williamson 2010). These studies advance analyses of gendered sexuality, but miss the intersections of place, class, racialization, and gendered sexuality. Kimberly Bachechi (2014) remedies this gap through her analysis of Spears's strained relationship to whiteness,

affluence, and acceptable femininity. Bachechi argues that Spears was labeled “white trash” when she transgressed maternal norms of heterofemininity (167). In conversation with Bachechi, I contend that geography matters too because the American South has a particular construction of white femininity and class-positioning. Gavin James Campbell (2001) is the only author who develops an analysis of place by connecting Spears’s identity to segregated whiteness in the South. However, Campbell’s essay neglects to examine working-class Southern femininity within the contemporary celebrity system. My essay uses celebrity studies, feminist critical race theory, and recent popular writings on the rural working-class whiteness to think through the rise and fall of this white working-class superstar from the rural South.

Kentwood: Building the American (Teen) Dream

Britney Spears’s hometown of Kentwood, Louisiana, is central to her celebrity persona. The town made Spears likeable in the beginning and was the launching pad for her entrance into celebrity. Kentwood is a small town with roughly 2,300 residents near the Mississippi border. Represented in self-authored narratives, Kentwood harkens back to an imaginary “Main Street USA,” a temporal landscape bathed in white normative gendered heteromonogamy, family values, and rural working-class ingenuity.⁷ In the television special *Britney Spears: There’s No Place Like Home* (2000), Spears explains that her hometown is

the kind of place where everyone knows everyone else. People yell, “Hi y’all.” Everyone takes care of everyone. And that’s the thing about, like, when I go home: I go to my same little restaurant that I used to go to when I was a little girl and she’s like “Baby, what do you want me to cook for you today?”

Britney Spears: There’s No Place Like Home opens with shots of Kentwood where we see a billowing American flag, a Kentwood town marker, a girl riding her bicycle, local businesses, a man on his porch swing, a dairy farm, children lazily walking down unnamed streets, and a woman waving to the camera. Though it is nearly ninety minutes from New Orleans, Kentwood bears none of the stereotypical, popular markers of Louisiana—it is neither bayou nor Big Easy. Instead, Kentwood is known as the “Dairy Capital of the South,” and it looks like anywheresville rural USA. This is important because it establishes Spears as from the South but not a caricatured or highly specific version of the South. It also establishes Spears as an ordinary person with big dreams.

Kentwood establishes Spears as simple and ordinary, “just like us,” characteristics that are essential for celebrity ascent. Spears explains how hard it is for girls like her to imagine life outside of Kentwood. She remarks, “I’m from a small town and it’s just really just unheard of just to up and go to New York [City]” (*Time Out with Britney Spears* 1999). As a consuming public, we enjoy

watching ordinary people get their first taste of stardom because they become a proxy for us. In the early years, Spears is frequently shown to be a “fish out of water” at major celebrity events, such as when this “country bumpkin” (Fisher 2011, 312) exclaims, “oh this is pretty, y’all!” upon seeing the Las Vegas skyline in her MTV *Diary* (2001). Spears’s reaction marks her as an ordinary person experiencing the extraordinary. Joshua Gamson (1994, 168) stresses that ordinariness is “mobilized here as evidence that stars are regular folks who simply wanted something badly enough and made different choices. Ordinariness is taken as proof not only of merit (they must have worked hard to transform themselves from a regular person to a star) but of the openness of celebrity (anyone can want, choose, and work).”⁸ Karen Sternheimer (2015, 2) affirms that the American Dream seems attainable when we see ordinary people become celebrities while the hypervisibility of celebrities acts as a continual reminder of all that is possible. Spears’s narrative exemplifies the populist theory of celebrity: she was an ordinary person rewarded by a system that recognized her specialness.

As a rural small town, Kentwood instilled positive working-class traits like hard work, humility, and sacrifice, which were mobilized in service of the capitalist American Dream through pursuit of celebrity. Kentwood represents what Robert Wuthnow (2018, 4) calls a “moral community,” a phrase used to describe small town living that values loyalty, familiarity, care, and doing the right thing. The values learned in working-class Kentwood solidify the myth of meritocracy and celebrity salvation: celebrity can transform the working-class female star if she works hard enough and has the “right” attitude.

The family’s economic hardship was central to Spears’s backstory. Stories of barely getting by established Spears as a working-class entertainer whose family sacrificed the “right” things to ensure her success. As an audience, we are meant to root for her after learning about her modest upbringing. Lynne Spears’s (Britney’s mother) recollections are worth quoting at length:

In the beginning, things were okay. We had a house and a car and were living comfortably. Then in about 1990—and until as recently as a year or two ago—my husband Jamie’s contracting business wasn’t doing well. That made things tight. My little salary from the day care center or the school that I ran hardly helped much. Then also we had expenses for doctors and medicine, because when Bryan [Britney’s brother] was little he had terrible asthma. . . . The bills would come and we couldn’t pay them; the power company threatened to turn off our lights, and the phone company went right ahead and cut off our service. Our heater broke and we couldn’t afford to fix it, so for two winters we made do with these itty-bitty gasoline space heaters (it was so cold sometimes you could see your breath). The cupboards were often bare, and there were days when all we had in the fridge was a pint of ice cream. . . . There was no such thing as an allowance in our home. Are you kidding? Brit and Bry got \$2.50 each day for lunch money, and even that was a struggle. . . . Looking back, I

don't know how we managed, but somehow we did. Bad as it was, it taught us something: God helps those who help themselves. We came together as a family in our times of need, and just knowing that the five of us were in this together (not to mention all our kin and friends who were always offering us help and hand-me-downs) gave us the strength to see it through. (Spears, Spears, and Berk 2000, 25, 26)

Lynne Spears does not blame others (or the failing of capitalism) for familial economic difficulty; instead, she recuperates the family as temporary victims of economic recession and medical debt. As a result, she contests the prevailing neoliberal discourse that the working-class are bad choice-makers who exploit social assistance programs or continue purchasing habits despite a lack of financial capital. This is a typical white, rural, working-class narrative communicated as “don't be a burden if you can help it, and pitch in generously when you can be of help” (Wuthnow 2018, 8). Wuthnow finds that rural working-class townspeople “expect fellow citizens to take responsibility for themselves as best they can, and when they can't for community organizations [or the Church] to help” (8). This allows white, rural, working-class townspeople to claim the moral high-ground for not relying on the government for what they perceive as handouts (Hochschild 2016; Wuthnow 2018). Therefore, it is unsurprising that Lynne Spears would cite her personal faith, church, co-workers, and the local community as helping the family survive, and that this narrative would construct Spears as tenacious and humble.

Britney Spears's resilience paid off, literally, but she remained humble through economic success. She wrote, “I remember how hard it was, and how bad it made us feel sometimes when there was so little in the refrigerator or our car kept breaking down. So with everything I earn now, I am ten times more grateful for it and for the security I know it gives us” (Spears, Spears, and Berk 2000, 129–30). Spears voices the proper attitude for a rural, white, Southern, working-class woman: she is gracious and thankful for the opportunity to support her family. In her early career, celebrity saved the family financially. By espousing humility, Spears affirms that celebrity can be transformational.

Though Kentwood could be read as any-small-town-USA, Spears firmly identifies as a Southerner. Early on, she tells an interviewer, “I'm a Southern girl and I'm used to Cajun food, and um Blues music” (*Time Out with Britney Spears* 1999). Spears's strategic deployment of a Southern identity, continued through her career, contributed to her self-presentation as innocent in the early years of her career. Few performers tiptoed the sweet Southern Miss–Lolita divide as skillfully as Spears did. This tension is key to understanding how Spears was marketed as a “good” girl largely ignorant of her sexuality, which is common for manufactured teen idols (P. Marshall 1997). Kimberly Bachechi (2015, 170) notes, “With her small-town Southern charm, her Bible Book, her submissiveness, and her unintended and unattainable sexual allure, Spears capitalized on every

idealized tenet of white womanhood to launch herself into superstardom.” For every accusation of hyper(hetero)sexual provocation, there was a swift denial. She not only played on social mores surrounding teenage heterofeminine sexuality, she also fed into the “national fascination with southern white femininity” (Campbell 2001, 83). Spears’s response to outrage about her wardrobe furnishes an excellent example to explore this tension.

Spears consistently downplayed controversy over her appearance by reinvoking Kentwood (and the South). While much has been written about Spears’s Lolita performance (Meyers 2009; Sweeney 2008), her regional identity must not be erased in this discussion. Keen to explain why midriff-baring is innocuous, Spears rationalizes, “The crop tops and hip huggers I wore in some of my videos were the kind of clothes we used to wear in Kentwood (it can be scorching during the summer, so the barer the better!), and I’m real comfortable dancing in them” (Spears, Spears, and Berk 2000, 86). It is typical to keep cool during dance class, according to Spears, who declares, “Me showing my belly? I’m from the South; you’re stupid if you don’t wear a sports bra [when you] go to dance class, you’re going to be sweating your butt off” (Vena 2009). Spears’s denial of titillation was often paired with a claim to Southern identity. Audiences are reassured that the dance style and outfit are authentically Southern “Brit” and therefore *not* indicative of a “good girl gone bad.” To remain popular, Spears had to deny knowledge of her sexuality; she also had to deny that she knew her performance evoked sexual desire. The gendered script for white Southern women dictates one should be “submissive, obedient, self-denying, innocent, and dependent” and family-oriented (Boles and Atkinson 1988, 129). Spears’s “coy sexuality” is typical for a white New Southern Belle who “is expected to be a tease or a flirt, to promise sexual accessibility, and to be physically provocative” while remaining chaste (Lynxwiler and Wilson 1988, 118). In reality, many white Southern teenagers reject this script in their daily life, which historian Susan Cahn argues has the potential to challenge “the South’s foundational association between chastity and whiteness” (2007, 10). However, Spears was not interested in contesting white Southern conventions around gender and sexuality. Instead, she deploys Kentwood/the South to claim sexual naïveté.

Adults in the entertainment industry reinforced Spears’s sexual naïveté. There are multiple examples of television hosts acting paternalistically toward her when it comes to her wardrobe. For instance, after an embarrassing moment at the 1999 Nickelodeon Kid’s Choice Awards where Spears (then 17) appeared in a white crop top that showed the outline of her nipples, talk show host Rosie O’Donnell chided, “I’m old enough to be your mother. I don’t want to see you in that shirt again, unless you have a vest” to which Spears replied, “Oh I’m so glad you’re bringing this up. I was so humiliated. You do not understand. I’m going to Orlando thinking it’s going to be like 90 degree weather. And a storm, of course, goes through when I get there. And then I go out there, and when I came back there’s nothing I could do. And I was so humiliated.” O’Donnell

alleviates Spears's mortification by saying, "You are a sweetheart of a girl, and I know you are" (*The Rosie O'Donnell Show* 1999). Here, O'Donnell treats Spears as an unknowing child who can be teased into adopting heterofeminine middle-class respectability, thereby keeping the white New Southern Belle perpetually "childlike" (Lynxwiler and Wilson 1988, 114). Audiences are expected to accept that any overtly sexual behavior is inadvertent rather than carefully crafted by either Spears or her management team.

Spears could claim Southern heterofeminine sexual innocence because she is white (Bachechi 2015; Campbell 2001). Like Spears's embodied whiteness, Kentwood itself appears racially white in her documentaries and concert specials. 85–90 percent of rural US is white (Wuthnow 2018, 10); however, Kentwood has a higher population of Black residents (65.5 percent) than the Louisiana state average (31.7 percent) (US Census Bureau 2000, 2006). Gavin James Campbell affirms, "Her small-town southern background and the presumed absence of Blacks in Kentwood are two powerful means by which Britney projects an overwhelming aura of whiteness" (Campbell 2001, 84–85). Despite Kentwood being a majority-Black town, few of its Black residents appear in *Britney Spears: There's No Place Like Home* (2000). Those featured include a fast food worker and back-up dancers. The concert documentary, as well as Spears's own narrative, position Black bodies as marginal, servile, and supportive, thus furthering a white imagination of the rural South. Depicting Kentwood in this way invokes a nostalgia for an antebellum-era South populated by good "unspoiled" white girls. That Spears could signal this version of the South was especially important because her proximity to bodies of color just a few years later was enough to fracture her connection to white chastity.

Spears's celebrity ascent was tied to rural, white, Southern, working-class heterofemininity. Gavin James Campbell (2001, 84) contends, "Kentwoodians must play the provincial stick-in-the-muds. Britney's South, then, is a kind of talent hot-house. It provides the loam in which talent grows, but at some point that talent must be transplanted or it will wither, uncultivated." I disagree with Campbell; whereas he says that Spears needed to leave Kentwood to achieve the American Dream, I assert Kentwood was central to *why* Spears achieved success in the first place. Through Kentwood, Spears appears humble and likeable. Kentwood also represents the idealized white American South as a place where the rural, working-class nurture their American Dream through nostalgia, family values, hard work, and a belief in meritocracy. Kentwood made Spears palatable to white audiences with a fondness for the South too. For Campbell, Kentwood is "a brake on her career, providing her moral grounding, but also hard economic times and narrow perspectives" (84); however, I believe Kentwood was the accelerant that allowed Spears to become an American sweetheart. Spears represents the "right" kind of rural, white, working-class Southerner who maintains a disciplined work ethic, perseverance, and faith in God to achieve the American Dream. Audiences wanted to root for her because they

wanted the small town girl to be transformed by celebrity, and they wanted to go along for the ride.

Hollywood: The White Trashing of Britney Spears

If Kentwood represents humble beginnings in Britney Spears's backstory, Hollywood represents the payoff, at least at first. Spears's appearance on MTV's *Diary* (2001) proved that she made it in Hollywood. Part confessional, neo-*Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, *Diary* films Spears enjoying the perks of celebrity with her expensive convertible car and her \$2.9 million-dollar mansion in the Hollywood Hills. Despite access to wealth, Spears still appears ordinary. While driving around Hollywood, Spears quips, "I feel like sometimes I forget that I'm a celebrity. I'm like 'hey,'" then Spears turns to a car that has pulled up alongside her to take a photo. *Diary* follows Spears to major events and family gatherings, sometimes blending the two such as when Spears drives the pace car with her father during a Daytona Nascar event. *Diary* shows Spears struggling between prioritizing family (as per the expectation of white Southern women)⁹ and finding independence as a newly rich young celebrity. When audiences saw Spears in her convertible with the top down joking about being a bad driver and singing "Sweet Home Alabama" in *Diary*, it was endearingly on-brand for this superstar from small town rural Louisiana. Just five years later, Spears was demonized for poor driving decisions, and when she explained her behavior via her Southern upbringing, she was labeled "white trash."

The height of Spears's popularity in Hollywood illustrates how hard it is to reconcile rural, white, working-class, Southern values with expectations of celebrity transformation. The Hollywood celebrity script required Spears to turn her background into a brand (Genz 2015) or transcend it altogether by adopting bourgeois respectability (Raisborough, Frith, and Klein 2013).¹⁰ Spears did not follow this path. She gained financial capital but did not have enough cultural capital to earn respectability. Negative reaction to shopping at Walmart seems to confirm that Spears does not have cultural capital: her penchant for Walmart as an adult millionaire opens space for class chauvinism. When Spears was photographed shopping at Walmart, she was chastised, "Of course she shops at Walmart. You can take the girl out of Louisiana," exemplifying disdain for the South as being unsophisticated (Thompson and Tian 2008). Another commenter reprimanded, "No! Bad Britney . . . seriously can she just give me her money? I have such *classier* ways of spending it" (O'Connor 2010; emphasis added). Comments like these are intended to shame Spears to know (and buy) better. Walmart, a marker of working-class consumption, especially in the South and rural areas, indicates a *choice* one is supposed to outgrow unless a celebrity can profit from the brand association like Destiny's Child did in 2005 when they appeared in a Walmart commercial.¹¹ Spears shopped at Walmart privately; Destiny's Child got paid to represent Walmart—there is a difference between

these brand associations. Public derision shows a frustration that wealth is in the wrong hands. It is class disgust not “against privileges being granted” in general, but that “they have been granted to the wrong people—to ‘them’ and not to ‘us’” (Connell 1992, 82). Celebrity is supposed to transform ordinary people. Ordinary working-class people dream of having Spears’s fortune so they do not *have* to shop at Walmart. When a multimillionaire celebrity *chooses* to shop at the discount chain store, it fractures the veneer of the promise of celebrity. Dissimilar to celebrities like Roseanne, who made working-class style campy (or performative) according to Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray (1997, 178), Spears was read negatively as “white trash with money.”

What started as a positive attachment to a relatable star who worked hard to achieve success turned into racialized, gendered, and regional class disgust directed toward what one girl on an Internet chat called “a fake ass talentless bitch [that] doesn’t deserve any kind of respect” (Campbell 2001, 87). Beginning as class chauvinism regarding Spears’s consumption habits, negative response was solidified when she transgressed white, heterofeminine, middle-class norms of respectability. Then she was labeled a Southern “white trash” “bad” girl who could not successfully transcend her working-class Southern roots. You can take the girl out of the rural working-class South, but the South “sticks” (Ahmed 2004, 89) to celebrities like Britney Spears.

The public has always been curious about Spears’s romantic life. She dated fellow pop star Justin Timberlake from 1998 to 2002, which coincided with their rise to stardom. This celebrity power couple was scrutinized because Spears claimed to be a virgin prior to their relationship. The media was fixated on finding evidence that Spears and Timberlake were sexually intimate while the couple continued to represent themselves as wholesome, former-Disney child stars. The dissolution of the Spears/Justin Timberlake relationship marked a pivotal moment when the public began to question Spears’s propriety (Guthrie 2005; Smith 2005). After her breakup with Timberlake, Spears violated bourgeois norms for “good” white girls. She admitted to being sexually active, thus challenging her claim to chastity, and tabloids alleged that she used cocaine (Smith 2005, 206, 223). Between 2003 and 2006, Spears married twice, had two children, and experienced a psychiatric crisis in late 2007 coinciding with the disintegration of her second marriage and removal of her children. Tabloid media, gossip magazines, bloggers, and newspaper commentators reveled in pointing out Spears’s “trashiness.” Sarah Projansky (2014, 4) asserts that negative media attention is rooted in a misogynist “contempt for girls.” Milly Williamson (2010) concurs that female celebrities are particularly at risk for public ridicule if they trouble normative femininity, and she points to the convergence of misogyny and class disgust aimed at the working-class female celebrity in particular (119). In addition to misogyny and class derision, Spears faced racial disciplining when she was called “white trash.” Next, I outline why Spears encountered gendered, racialized, and regional class disgust by focusing on her proximity to Blackness,

marital behavior, and “mommy mistakes” that proved Spears had “gone bad.” I conclude with an analysis of *Dateline* (2006) to illustrate how Spears’s rural, Southern, working-class, white femininity, which once marked her as humble and hard-working, eventually became a liability.

Spears’s displays of socio-sexual agency came through a relationship to Blackness. Unlike fellow white pop stars Katy Perry and Miley Cyrus, who have been critiqued for using Black bodies, Black aesthetics, and Black culture to forward their careers, Spears’s association with Blackness did not benefit her—quite the opposite. It laid the groundwork for her to be called “white trash.” Post-relationship with Timberlake, reports surfaced that Spears was romantically involved with Columbus Short, a Black dancer separated from his wife, who was eight months pregnant at the time. Allegations of an affair with a married Black man were complemented by reports that Spears began “attending a large Baptist church with a primarily Black congregation in an unfashionable area of [Los Angeles]” after another breakup (Smith 2005, 270). Not only was Spears stepping into more agentic displays of sexuality, she was pushing her record label to embrace a hip hop-inspired sound that the record label first felt was “too hard” for Spears’s image (“Britney Spears—Press Conference, 2001,” 2011).¹² The “good” girl whose persona was built on rural, working-class, Southern whiteness began associating with, and sounding like, people and communities of color. This was the height of Spears’s popularity and initiated her celebrity descent.

Regardless of what happened between them, the implication of an affair with a man of color was enough to pollute Spears’s whiteness (Hartigan 2003, 62, 99). Jacqueline Zara Wilson (2002) and John Hartigan Jr. (2003) argue that “white trash” can refer to white people who are tainted by proximity to people of color. Hartigan explains, “White trash is also applied to whites whose lifestyles, speech, and behaviors too closely match the ‘marked’ cultural forms associated with Blackness or other symbolically informed forms of racial identity and difference” (2005, 115). White trash, then, “marks white people who are rupturing decorums associated with whiteness” (Hartigan 2003, 105). “White trash” is “the Swiss army knife of insults. It’s deft in the ability to demean multiple groups at once: white people *and* people of color, poor people and people who act like poor people, rural folks, and religious folks, and anyone without a college degree” (Donnella 2018). While it is true that this slur is used across the country, its Southern roots cannot be overlooked.

The slur “white trash” originates in the US South, and its complex history is tied to both anti-Blackness and to a sociopolitical division among white people. According to Nancy Isenberg (2016), the first “white trash” were “disposable,” incarcerated, and/or poor British citizens sent to the Southern colonies to build the agrarian infrastructure. The term linked poverty to Southern ruralism. Enslaved Black people yoked “white trash” to whiteness when they used it to refer to white servants in the early 1800s (Newitz and Wray 1997, 2). During the mid-1800s, Northern abolitionists used the phrase to argue that slavery kept

poor white Southerners out of employment, but then post-Reconstruction, travel writers from the North chastised poor white rural Southerners for failing to rise above their indentured or servant status. Privileged white Northerners assumed laziness or lack of intelligence created the white underclass, and hence it was a choice for white people to be poor, unlike Black people, who were consigned to their marginal status due to enslavement (Hartigan 2005; Sullivan 2014; Winders 2003). By the early 1900s, eugenicists sought to categorize the white rural poor as “genetic defectives” whose lineage could be traced back to incarcerated, institutionalized, and/or biracial people (Hartigan 2005; Newitz and Wray 1997, 2). In the mid-twentieth century, bourgeois Southern reformers recast “white trash” as racist and violent agitators who threatened Southern progress (Taylor 2015). This formation of “white trash” re-emerges in the wake of the 2016 election when left-leaning voters framed Trump supporters as backwards white people. Assembled together, this history shows how “white trash” is a pejorative term often used by those in power (either cultural power like Northerners or political power like bourgeois Southerners) to refer to those who, through poverty, carcerality, sexual immodesty, tradition, or proximity to Black bodies, “don’t act like white people” (Donnella 2018), thus reinforcing unstated assumptions of what white people are supposed to be and do. In this way, “white trash” is a boundary-marking term; it is a way to call white people back “in” to respectability and responsibility: it is a way of telling white people to fall back in line. Calling Spears “white trash” was an attempt to racially discipline her behavior.

By embracing hip-hop influences in her music, attending a Black church, socializing with a married man of color, and claiming adult sexuality, Spears broke the rules that govern respectable Southern white femininity. It is beyond the chronology of this essay but important to note that in 2007 Spears began associating with Osama Lutfi (an Iranian-American man) and Adnan Ghalib (a Pakistani-British man), a new business manager and romantic partner respectively. Lutfi and Ghalib were frequently faulted for Spears’s erratic behavior, as though they encouraged her “badness.” These associations represent another case of racialized men cast as “polluting” white womanhood. Islamophobia was overt in some entertainment news stories such as one entitled “Britney Parties with Osama Lutfi; Terror Alert Raised” that ran on the *Hollywood Gossip* website. The website story included a photograph of Spears with a birthday cake and Osama Bin Laden’s body superimposed over Lutfi’s. A part of the text read, “Lutfi is planning on waging jihad against our nation by pilfering Britney Spears’s bank accounts and holding the pop singer hostage, we must remain on heightened alert. After all, in a war on terror, you never know who your true allies are” (“Britney Parties with Osama Lutfi; Terror Alert Raised” 2007). Nearly a decade later, in 2016, Spears started dating Iranian model/personal trainer Sam Asghari. No longer a young Christian white woman whose sexual innocence needs to be protected, Spears’s romantic life is not subject to the Islamophobia it once was.

Spears not only violated white, middle-class norms by associating with men of color, she breached normative heteromonogamy in her twenties. Ghalib, Short, and second husband Kevin Federline were in complicated long-term relationships with other women when they each started a relationship with Spears. Spears went beyond normative middle-class rule-breaking because she did not take heteromarrriage seriously enough. Not only was she linked to a married man in 2003 (Short), she married a platonic childhood friend (Jason Alexander) while intoxicated (Smith 2005, 235). It was around this time that the “white trash” label began to appear more frequently, particularly when it was reported that “the bride wore a baseball cap and torn jeans down the aisle and was escorted by a Palms [hotel] limousine driver” (Associated Press 2004). This was not the image of a New Southern Belle who gets married at the “right” time for the “right” reasons under respectable circumstances.

Spears’s 2004 marriage to white b-boy Kevin Federline did not cement respectability—quite the opposite. Federline was coded as a penniless gold-digger who separated from his pregnant girlfriend when he met Spears (*Dateline* 2006; du Lac 2006; Bachechi 2014). Spears and Federline were a grotesque challenge to bourgeois heteroromanticism. During their engagement, Spears and Federline were photographed on their balcony at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Knowingly performing for the paparazzi, Spears grabbed Federline’s crotch. This act marked Spears as tasteless and vulgar, signifiers often used to describe working-class sexuality (Skeggs 2005). Miu von Furstenberg, editor for *Socialite Life*, scolded, “Once more, Britney Spears shows us what a mature woman she has become. Don’t they ever go inside? What is with them cavorting on that balcony all the time. Apparently they want the whole world to see how much they are in love. Kevin’s little cash cow is certainly becoming trashier and trashier” (von Furstenberg 2004). In this incident, Spears embraced spectacularized raunchiness in a way that dismantled her earlier performance of “good,” white, Southern heterofemininity. This lack of “good” taste continued through the Spears-Federline courtship. It was reported that the Spears-Federline wedding featured chicken and ribs and wedding party athleisure wear that read “Maids,” “Hot Mamas” and “Pimps” or “Mrs. Federline” and “The Pimp.” This was not a fancy wedding one might see covered in celebrity *Life and Style*.

White celebrities who do not forgo their rural, Southern, working-class roots are likely to face racialized class disgust. Two bloggers illustrate this negative reaction. When reports leaked about the Spears-Federline wedding, blogger Ron Mwangaguhunga skewered the festivities in his blog post “How to Throw a Trailer Trash Wedding” (Mwangaguhunga 2004). Two years later, blogger Patrick Varone created “Britney Spears White Trash Spotter” by using a tabloid photograph of Spears with her son. Varone drew circles and arrows around (supposed) signifiers of Spears’s trashiness (e.g., smoking in a bikini, son reaching for cigarette pack, Christmas light bulbs around plants in July). Blog readers were asked to identify other signifiers that Varone missed (Varone

2006). While intended to be humorous, these blogs demonstrate that the public never bought the act; Britney and Kevin were not performing “white trash,” a popular aesthetic at the time; they *were* “white trash. When Spears was photographed later without underwear or with stains on her shirt, contrary to the New Southern Belle whose body is orderly and contained, she revealed that she lacked the cultural and social capital tied to neoliberal self-fashioning and appropriate bourgeois whiteness.¹³

Though she experienced a brief reprieve from media shaming during her first pregnancy, this did not last as the tabloid media fixated on her “bad” mothering through intense visual surveillance. Any sign of “bad” motherhood reinforced the “white trash” stigma. A few incidents are noteworthy. First, Spears was photographed driving with her four-month-old in her lap instead of a car seat. Spears told interviewer Matt Lauer, “That driving incident, I did it with my dad. I’d sit in his lap and drive. *We’re country*” (*Dateline* 2006; emphasis added). This episode, and another one in which Spears was photographed driving with her son in a front-facing car seat “against federal safety standards” (*Dateline* 2006), prompted visits from the California Department of Child and Family Services. As in the past, she attempted to normalize her actions through her rural, working-class, Southern upbringing. Unlike her early years, Spears was no longer the humble, wholesome, New Southern Belle; now she was backward, irresponsible, and unapologetic. Hank Stuever, writer for the *Washington Post Magazine*, skewered, “The episode takes place nicely in the essential trashiness of Britney’s broader story arc, from recording songs that were too stupid-dirty for words, to marrying someone else’s babydaddy (the squinty-eyed K-Fed), to using public bathrooms barefoot, to having to dodge rumours that she smoked and drank while preggers” (2006, 5). Later that month, a pregnant Spears almost tripped carrying her eldest son while leaving a hotel in New York City. Many gossip websites speculated that Spears was drunk, a taboo for pregnant women and new mothers. Eventually, Spears appeared on *Dateline* to set the record straight and rehabilitate her image.

On *Dateline* (2006), Spears attempts to use New Southern Belle heterofemininity (manners, gentility, love for family, and an ordered home) to convey her ordinariness. Interviewer Matt Lauer tells Spears that some people value her modest Southern upbringing while others scoff “maybe she’s a little bit of a red neck,” and Spears defiantly points to the camera and declares that she can “make good tea okay?,” a symbol of Southern authenticity. Then she goes on to emphasize her Louisiana accent as she gives Lauer a tour of the backyard and tells him, “I like to cook, try to cook, and I like to clean. I clean, and I’m obsessive like that. If I watch TV, I like to watch the home, the redoing-the-house whole thing,” and she laughs, “Oh honey, that is the real me, honey!” when Lauer kids her about doing the laundry and keeping her home clean (*Dateline* 2006). Spears trades on Southern hospitality by inviting Lauer into her home, but the public reaction was overwhelmingly negative.

Response to the interview was contemptuous. The press was keen to pick apart Spears's wardrobe and demeanor. Robin Givhan, staff writer for the *Washington Post*, was particularly unrelenting:

One surefire way to nick one's public image is to go on television chomping open-mouthed like a shill for Bubblicious. It is also best not to wear a denim miniskirt so short that when seated it practically disappears beneath the protuberance of one's pregnant belly producing an image that is more gynecological than fashionable. . . . Pregnancy cleavage can be a beautiful development, but serving up one's bosom like melons at a picnic is aggressively self-indulgent, enormously distracting and, unless you're auditioning for a spread in *Penthouse*, unnecessarily vulgar. . . . Pearlized eye shadow was caked on her lids. Her cheeks looked as though they had been smudged on with cherry soda. Her lips appeared to slathered with Bonne Bell lip smackers. Her hair looked over-bleached and uncombed. (Givhan 2006)

Givhan calls Spears a "slovenly wretched" "stereotypical hick" with "do-it-yourself raggedness." She may have shown off her multimillion dollar home and landscaped grounds, but Spears is read as "white trash" through her clothing, demeanor, and Southern accent. Givhan says she looks "sloppy, coarse [and] undignified" (2006). Givhan places blame squarely on Spears's shoulders, reminiscent of the ways in which Northerners assumed Southerners were wholly responsible for their backwardness.¹⁴ While Spears exhibited a neoliberal drive (e.g., hard work, dedication) to become famous, her unkempt appearance and lack of etiquette marked not only her failure as a New Southern Belle, but also her failure as a neoliberal subject and working-class female celebrity. Her home may have been "clean and proper," but Spears was not.

In the *Dateline* interview, Spears declared love and loyalty to her husband but shortly after the birth of her second son, she filed for divorce. Instead of practicing intensive mothering, Spears appeared selfish by participating in celebrity night-club culture with fellow "bad" girls Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan, who represented the worst of Hollywood excess and uncontrolled hyperfeminine sexuality. When Spears was photographed exiting a car without underwear multiple times in one week, ABC news reporter Sheila Marikar (2006) described her as "a panty-less menace." Gossip blogger Perez Hilton was especially cruel. In Marikar's article, Hilton is quoted as saying that humble new Southern Belle Britney was a fake image constructed by her handlers. This iteration of Britney is the "real Britney—the one that would walk around barefoot, the one that would eat Cheetos, the one that married the loser. . . . She's trashy" (Marikar 2006). Hilton, and others, could not reconcile the image of the respectable, humble, new Southern Belle with Spears's new behavior. It led Hilton and others to believe that she must have been "trashy" all along. These types of articles appeared frequently throughout 2007. It was a tumultuous year for Spears

because she was hospitalized after a psychiatric breakdown and then entered rehab. Public sentiment turned in Spears's favor the following year (2008) when she was involuntarily placed in psychiatric care. Now it is widely known that Spears has bipolar disorder, though she rarely acknowledges this diagnosis by name (Celizic 2008; McBride 2013; Voronka 2008). What were once derided as incidents of “trashy” behavior were likely manic episodes exacerbated by Hollywood celebrity culture. Spears's recovery was met with sympathy and, once again, the public cheered her on.

Spears and the Post-2016 Geo-Ideological Divide

Affective response to Britney Spears, which shifted from admiration to disgust, represents the failure of capitalism and celebrity to elevate an ordinary, rural, white, working-class Southerner. By analyzing public reaction to Britney Spears, we can see how stereotypes about the rural white South bubble to the surface when a celebrity from this region transgresses the boundaries of respectability. Celebrity is meant to elevate rural white Southerners, and here “elevate” means to save from their perceived “backwardness.” Spears failed to be the “right” kind of Southerner that we (are supposed to) root for. Racialized class disgust oriented toward Spears proves that celebrity cannot uplift *everyone*.

Revisiting the negative press and public attention surrounding Britney Spears's “bad” period is especially illuminating post-2016 US election. Media and public response to Spears's downward spiral, framed as her “bad” period, illustrates how easy it is to shame the South as “trashy” and “backward” and thus how close to the surface Northern ethnocentrism, pronounced since the 2016 election, remains. During the 2016 campaign, many Northern, bourgeois, urban voters were quick to deride the rural, white, working-class South for their support for then-candidate Donald Trump. Left-leaning voters used the same language that has historically framed the region: Trump supporters, like the rural white South, are “poor, uneducated, pathologically parochial, irresponsibly impulsive, intolerant, and culturally backward” (Thompson and Tian 2008, 603). Unsurprisingly, these voters were called “white trash” and Trump became the “white trash” candidate (S. Marshall 2016).

It is true that the majority of Southerners voted for Trump. However, suturing Trumpian politics to a conception of the rural, white, working-class South fails to account for, or wishes not to contend with, his appeal across the country. For comparison's sake, roughly 65 percent of voters in Tangipahoa Parish (where Spears's hometown of Kentwood resides) voted for Trump, but 66 percent of voters in Cape May county (in mostly multicultural urban New Jersey) voted for Trump too (*Politico* 2016). The rural white working-class South becomes an easy dumping ground for anxieties about whiteness, working-classness, rurality, and political engagement. The South is where troublesome whiteness and white supremacy (i.e., slavery, lynching, anti-Civil Rights movements, voter

suppression, Confederate monuments) shows, which serves to displace white supremacy onto the South, thereby neglecting to reckon with white supremacy across the country. Rural, white, working-class Southerners are well-aware of this perception, as sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016, 44) captures in her election ethnography of Lake Charles, Louisiana when she writes,

“Crazy redneck.” “White trash.” “Ignorant Southern Bible-thumper.” You realize that’s *you* they’re talking about. . . . On top of that, Hollywood films and popular television either ignore people like you or feature them—as in *Buckwild*¹⁵—in unflattering ways. . . . You are a stranger in your own land. You do not recognize yourself in how others see you.

If there is a disconnect between rural, white, working-class Southern self-image and media image, or how Southerners see themselves and how they are represented in popular culture, there are also interesting moments of recognition. It is worth noting that the vlogger who pleaded to “Leave Britney Alone!” (Crocker 2007) was a fellow Southerner who seemed genuinely concerned that Spears would end up like Anna Nicole Smith, another working-class, white Southerner-celebrity labeled “white trash” who died via an accidental drug overdose. Important follow-up research may explore how other Southerners viewed Britney Spears as I suspect regional media may have been less willing to characterize her as “white trash.”

As a working-class white woman from the rural South, Spears encountered opposing messages: on the one hand, personalities like Rosie O’Donnell told a young Spears to “Stay there in Louisiana. It’s a nice place, and it will keep you grounded” (*The Rosie O’Donnell Show* 1999), but on the other hand she was chastised for being unable to leave the white, rural, working-class South behind. Unlike her celebrity sister Jamie Lynn Spears, who retreated back to Kentwood when she became pregnant at age sixteen, Britney Spears remained a disobedient celebrity in the public eye.¹⁶ Roughly fifteen years after she faced racialized class disgust in the national media, Britney Spears seems to have found a way to reconcile these messages. When Spears posted a short video of herself painting at home on social media, the public ate it up responding that she was “truly living her best life” (Bryan 2017). Twitter user @touchofnick lovingly joked, “Britney Spears casually painting flowers on the balcony of her multi million dollar mansion with her tits out while listening to Mozart. A new renaissance is beginning” (NICK 2017). October 2018 was a big month for Britney Spears: she announced a new Las Vegas residency and celebrated the twentieth anniversary of her single “. . . Baby One More Time.”¹⁷ In many ways, Vegas is the perfect home for a celebrity who was once rebuked as tasteless but is now regarded with kitschy nostalgia for the early 2000s. Spears subsequently cancelled her Vegas show to care for her ill father. Shortly after the cancellation announcement, Spears was reported to be in a psychiatric care facility. Some fans believed she was there involuntarily and circulated their support using

#FreeBritney. By the fall of 2019, Spears was back to appearing on the red carpet and posting family photographs on Instagram. As Spears continues to manage her psychiatric health in private, the public now cheers for her success rather than revels in her downfall.

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Acknowledgments

My sincerest thanks to Amber Davison, Michael Mario Albrecht, and Matthew Ascah for talking out ideas, reading drafts, and offering constructive feedback along the way. And thank you to Shaista Patel for being a great virtual writing buddy.

Notes

1. I use quotation marks around “good” and “bad” to denote discursive markers.
2. The term “white trash” is a classist phrase connected to anti-Blackness and white supremacy; it has yet to be “rehabilitated or reclaimed by the white lower class” (Sullivan 2014, 31).
3. Record companies, agents, managers, the Spears family, and Spears herself intentionally craft these self-authored narratives. I am less interested in the question of authenticity, as others have more brilliantly taken up that question with respect to Spears (see Lockett 2010; or Meyers 2009), and instead analyze these narratives as texts that produce Spears as an affective object that is meant to elicit a feeling about the rural, white, working-class South.
4. This may explain why the media paid far more attention to the Madonna/Britney Spears kiss at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards than the Madonna/Christina Aguilera kiss. Spears was coded as innocent whereas Aguilera was not.
5. When I say working-class South, I am referring to a geo-socio-economic formation defined by agricultural, manufacturing, and service sector labor that developed out of the postbellum period. Race and ethnicity are notable modifiers of one's experience in the working-class South. Rural racialized Southerners may work in the same industries as rural white Southerners, thus adopting a shared working-class identity; however, their sociocultural, educational, and/or spiritual spaces may be segregated: for instance, Spears's school and church were mostly white despite being in a predominantly Black town (Campbell 2001). For clarity's sake, I intentionally name whiteness when

I am referring to the particular intersection of a race, socio-geography, and class that framed Spears's backstory.

6. "Southern Belle" connotes class privilege afforded by antebellum plantation-slavery. The "New Southern Belle" is white performance of (hetero)femininity that may or may not be tied to affluence, according to Lynxwiler and Wilson 1988.

7. I explore Spears's whiteness in Musial 2010; see also Bachechi 2015; or Campbell 2001.

8. For more on the relationship between ordinariness and the star system, see Dyer 1998.

9. Many chapters in *Southern Women* (Dilman 1988) highlight the importance of family to the normative gender script Southern women encounter.

10. Dolly Parton is the quintessential example how to turn the rural, working-class South into a brand. For a stellar analysis of Parton's use of white Southern rurality to build a fan base that includes feminists, queer people, and white nationalists alike, see Wilkerson 2018.

11. Weston (2009) argues that Walmart grew its operation out of the South by replacing General Stores that were inhospitable to Black Southerners. Walmart is a staple of the working class, but it is also rooted in Southern consumerism.

12. The Neptunes, a highly sought-after pair of hip hop producers, wrote "I'm a Slave 4 U." It was originally intended for Janet Jackson, who passed on recording the song. In fact, quite a few of Spears's hits were originally offered to Black female artists who passed on them.

13. In hindsight, one may see these behaviors as early signs of psychological instability; however, Spears's mental health challenges were not known at this time. Instead, her behavior seemed to furnish proof of her "badness."

14. Givhan is a Black fashion reporter originally from Detroit but working out of Washington at this time.

15. *Buckwild* was a MTV reality show set in rural West Virginia that aired in 2013. It was criticized for propagating stereotypes about the state.

16. Jamie Lynn Spears's pregnancy was met with moral disdain because she was an unwed, pregnant teenage celebrity. She returned to Kentwood and re-emerged with a documentary *When the Lights Go Out* (2016) and a country music single. Her retreat and mea culpa are worthy of analysis too, but beyond the scope of this essay.

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