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Spring 2022

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Megan Jenkins

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Recommended Citation

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Dean Winchester's Borderlands: *Supernatural's* Mixed Modes of Identity and Death

By Megan Jenkins

Much of the scholarship on *Supernatural* examines the series' constant reckoning with free will and American exceptionalism, with the Winchesters' serving as enforcers of the American mythos (Valenzano 562). The brothers also "escape, overcome, cheat, transfigure, and repeatedly deny their own deaths," with death posing as the threat to the American life and the Winchesters as the heroes who hold it back (Neill 52). These frameworks position the Winchester brothers as figures who enforce and maintain the rules of the America that wrote them. Dean Winchester, in particular, serves in the early seasons of the show as the moral compass for the brothers' hunting trips, determining who deserves to live and die. However, Dean is as subject to these rules of his world as the monsters he hunts. Throughout the series, Dean repeatedly struggles with the rules of both the *Supernatural* universe and the cultural systems that the show came from. He begins the show positioned as fulfilling three roles simultaneously: that of the devoted brother, obedient son, and violent hunter. These positions are introduced as immutable and unchanging at the start of the series, but death, new relationships, and an expanding universe of morality introduce questions about their permanence. Dean Winchester's drive throughout the series is to classify both himself and the world around him according to existential rules. Examining how *Supernatural* structures Dean's self-identity and position in the world provides an opportunity to look at the instability and artificiality of the boundaries the Winchesters are meant to enforce.

In order to study the bound categories that Dean struggles with in *Supernatural*, it is useful to take theoretical frameworks that examine the artificiality of such distinctions. In "The Epistemology of Genre," Jonathan Sadow talks about "the instability of genres" in literature, and the impossibility of firmly categorizing something as entirely one genre or another (163). For

Sadow, this instability reflects an “anxiety of mixed modes,” in which the individual or character struggles with the contradictions of humanity and living in a real world. The anxiety is because any classification is necessarily partial—the subject position of son, for example, is not ever the only thing about a person—but also because of “the fictionality of concepts produced by an active operation of the mind.” The fact that these modes are unstable and can be applied in different ways reveals their constructed nature. Categories such as genre come from the human mind and are not nature laws of being. *Supernatural* does play with genre, bringing in elements of horror, fantasy, and religion as well as a frontier narrative of movement and freedom (Valenzano 559). However, Sadow’s framework can be removed from genre specifically and applied to the artificiality of other concepts, such as the binaries of life and death that Dean wrestles with. This way of looking at the instability of both characters and the narratives they’re in allows us to examine Dean Winchester’s struggle to classify himself and the world around him. Dean’s repeated deaths and resurrections push him into a “mixed mode” in which he is not fulfilling either one rule of *Supernatural* or another, but is somehow between both. Rather than a confusion of genre, Dean’s anxiety stems from confusions of binary and repeated encounters with borderlands, or spaces that are between two defined extremes.

Supernatural’s mixed mode primarily comes from a mixing of binaries, such as that of life and death. Dean begins the series with full belief in oppositional binaries, much like Michel Foucault’s conception of humanity pre-scientific revolution. He references the “space of emplacement,” which is a space of binaries: “sacred places and profane places: protected places and open, exposed places: urban places and rural places” (Foucault 1). The world of *Supernatural* is composed of these profane and sacred places: heaven, hell, purgatory, the bunker, the Impala. The show is also existential, with a universe full of rules and punishments

and a set of characters who struggle to justify them. In this essay, I will focus on Dean's particular existential narrative. The show's "existentialism argues that all of these rules are the same in type, if not degree" (Neill 62). Dean views all rules as firm borders that should not be crossed. He is unable to reconcile his unstable identity with his belief in boundaries and rules.

Supernatural embodies its first key binary through the Winchester brothers: the distinction between "normal life" and that of the hunter. Sam, who is our introductory character, is normal. He's in college, a good student, and in a committed heterosexual relationship. He has plans for law school, then marriage, then a family. Dean, in contrast, is a hunter. In his first scene, he breaks into Sam's apartment in the middle of the night, an intruder pinned in shadow. The brothers briefly grapple before Sam realizes it is Dean (*Supernatural* 1.01). From his very first appearance, Dean is representative of the abnormal side of the binary, and a disruptive force in Sam's ability to remain normal. Throughout the series, both Dean and Sam have several occasions when they step back or 'retire' from the hunting life, but they always go back. It is also always an all or nothing approach. They are either domestically cohabitating with a woman (Amelia, Lisa, Pamela in an alternate universe) or in the male world of hunting, killing monsters every episode. The life of a hunter is solitary and short. Death is an inevitability. The show encourages this view over and over, with most of the other hunters that Sam and Dean encounter on their journeys ending up dead, often in the process of helping the Winchesters. Dean is the most fervent evangelist for this belief. He tells his brother: "Sammy, it ends bloody or sad. That's just the life" (4.12).

The division between life and death is the primary binary in *Supernatural*, and one that encompasses many of the rules that Dean believes in. The border between life and death is one that, on the hunter side, is only crossed through violence. The Winchesters are both running from

death and freely accepting it as a tool, to fulfil their mission of killing all evil things they encounter. In *Supernatural*, the concept of death is defined in terms of physical spaces: Heaven and Hell are places the Winchesters can travel to and visit if they die or have the right portal. They are also inherently oppositional. Heaven and angels are good, Hell and demons are bad. The act of dying is therefore both an act of movement and a crossing to a new place, and a process of categorization.

In addition to being a domain of physical space, death in *Supernatural* is embodied and sensory. Dean's first real death is extremely physically brutal, with a hellhound clawing his chest open. The viewer watches Dean experience the death and pain. This, as compared to the cartoonish deaths in "Mystery Spot" and the cut to black car crash of the season one finale, touches on Dean's need for physical certainty. It is the first time Dean fully crosses over and dies without coming back the same episode, and this is only accomplished through direct sense. It is a clean crossing of the boundary, and an embodied one. There was also a concrete boundary for viewers in the form of a season break. The death appears to be finite, after a season of attempts to prevent it.

Not only is death a physical presence, but also a direct companion to Dean's moral rules about good and evil. Dean uses death as a tool to confirm and enact his preexisting beliefs about who deserves life and who does not. For Dean, "people (humans) must be saved and kept alive, while things (the supernatural) should be hunted and killed.... Death is punishment; life is precious" (Neill 53). These rules are not developed by Dean through experience, but rather have been taught to him by his father and the hunter culture he was raised in. Sam questions this dogma occasionally, such as when someone they know becomes a vampire, or a werewolf appears to have regret for killing. When met with this argument, Dean shuts it down. He "lives

his life dictated by rules that he believes to be morally correct and justifiable” and views any transgression of these rules as punishable (Neill 61). He insists that they don’t have a choice.

Dean’s death forces him to apply these rules to himself. The expectation of death as a hunter can be explained by his experience, but when Dean actually dies, he must define himself as something that deserves to die—and therefore something evil. This is compounded by the physicality of hell: Dean was in the space of hell, and enacted physical torture on other souls. His boundary crossing at the end of season three was meant to be a permanent crossing: living to dead, and good to evil. His eventual resurrection at the hands of the angel Castiel forces Dean into a mixed mode, in which he must reckon with his identity. Although the show has established dying as embodied, Dean’s resurrection is also immensely physical. We wake up with Dean in a coffin, buried underground. He must immediately physically penetrate two barriers, the coffin and the earth, before he can fully reenter the world of the living (4.01). However, he exists as a contradiction for a moment—in two worlds. A living man inhabiting a dead man’s physical space, and his role.

After season four, Dean is never quite able to return to an “unmixed” mode. The reason for his resurrection was to thrust him into a new role, as a weapon of heaven meant to defeat Lucifer. He is constantly asked to exist in a space outside of the hunting, Impala-driving world he knows. When Dean is asked by the angels to use his torture skills on the demon who tortured him in hell, he is returned to a role that should be limited to the physical space of hell, and that was supposed to be negated by the boundary crossing of resurrection. His reluctance to participate in the torture is not because he doesn’t want to enact violence but because he believes that once he crosses the boundary, he will turn back into what he was in hell. The demon needles Dean saying, “you left some of yourself back in the pit” (4.16). This division of Dean’s identity

is used as an example of Dean's wrongness. One should be on one side or the other, not split between both. The act of torture is not a moment of identity conflict, but rather a complete return to evil.

As Dean struggles internally with identity conflict, he must also face external choices that put multiple sets of binaries in conflict with one another. Sam begins keeping secrets from Dean and developing a set of demonic powers. Lying and demons fit solidly on the 'bad' side of the binary, but Dean's primary role is that of Sam's caretaker. Any other human with demon powers, Dean would kill. However, "the dissonance between family and duty becomes incompatible, and he is forced to confront, in a moment of existential dread, the conflict between Winchester exceptionalism and his core beliefs" (Neill 63). Simultaneously, Dean must reckon with both his own and his brother's right to live, according to the rules he follows. When Sam ultimately sacrifices himself, Dean, according to Sam's wishes, crosses the border into normalcy by giving up hunting and moving in with Lisa (5.22). He makes it six months before he picks up a hunt in secret, and Sam eventually returns. At that point, he attempts to straddle the line by leaving with Sam and visiting Lisa. It ultimately fails when Dean is transformed briefly into a vampire (6.05). He nearly hurts Lisa's son, and this confirms to him his monstrosity. No matter that he is turned back by the end of the episode, he quickly pulls back into his familiar role as a violent hunter. "What I'm good at is slicing throats. I ain't a father. I'm a killer. And there's no changing that" (6.06). He views his subject position as static and unchanging. Dean can return to the hunter role in seasons six and seven because with the angel plotline wrapped up, he is not asked to exist in a mixed fashion anymore.

His constant deaths and resurrections force him to reckon constantly not only with how he categorizes himself, but also with the potential of boundaries to be permeable, fluid, and

impermanent. In addition to struggling to fulfill the rules of his universe, Dean's mixed modes transform his psyche into a borderland—a place where he is not quite one side or the other. Following its conception of death as embodied and physical, *Supernatural* often places Dean in physical spaces that act as borderlands, reflective of his own inner turmoil. These in-between places force Dean to deal with his anxiety about his mixed identity in a different way. In the season 2 premier, "In My Time of Dying," Dean is a spirit in a hospital, near death. At this stage in the show, Dean is still very firmly in the world of binaries, and as a result tries to inhabit his own solid identity in this moment of both physical and emotional vulnerability. He immediately puts himself in the role of hunter, trying to track down and kill the reaper that he sees hovering near his comatose body. He forces his own time of uncertainty into the mold of any other "monster of the week" episode of the series. He also follows his own typical framework of family: he centers his father and brother, focusing on getting back to them and helping them. He doesn't care if he gets to keep on living his own life, he just wants to return to his role as family protector and mediator.

Dean is forced to reckon with his borderland position when the reaper, Tessa, tries to coax him to the other side. She speaks of "an honorable death, a warrior's death." But Dean Winchester, the hunter who expects the early grave, says, "there is no such thing as an honorable death. My corpse is going to rot in the ground, and my family is going to die" (2.01). Again, Dean here is focused on boundaries, and in this case they're all physical. He tackles the reaper away from his own comatose body; he breaks a glass when Sam and John argue; he's focused on his corpse rotting. Even though he is in an unknown space of spirits, Dean tries to assert himself physically in order to continuously fulfill his established roles. Another key aspect is Dean's insistence that there is no honorable death. This ties back to the characterization of death as a

punishment in *Supernatural* universe: bad things die, so to die is never honorable. To die is to be bad, or weak, or corrupted. To abandon his family is not honorable. Dying confirms that there is something wrong about him, a worry that haunts Dean throughout the show.

Tessa finally breaks through to Dean by reminding him that he can remain behind as a spirit when his body dies, but that he will become one of those angry spirits that he spends his life hunting. And when asked to make the choice between death, the punishment for evil, and evil entire, he hesitates. He doesn't know which is worse, confirming his worst fears or transforming into something irredeemable. Before he can decide, he's resurrected. He immediately steps back into his role as mediator between Sam and John, breaking up their argument. Notably, he doesn't remember his time on the other side of the veil. He has crossed a boundary and come back, but without any of the lessons. He's faced his greatest fear, and yet he forgets and will not face it again for many years. He can comfortably return to his world of binaries.

As the show continues Dean is put into more and more situations in which he is between boundaries and rules that govern his life. The show also loses its faith in any sort of rule or prescription that limits will. John, the angels, demons—anyone with a firm and unbreakable set of rules or morals ends up being the villain who will do anything for their own gain. It's the characters that exist between such extremes, such as Rowena and Crowley who both sacrifice their lives for the Winchesters, who end up doing the most good in the show. The show moves away from Foucault's emplacement to something resembling his conception of the heterotopia. Foucault frames our world as having moved past the emplacement of pre-Enlightenment Europe and towards "a epoch of simultaneity," in which everything is informed by intersections of space and relationships. Rather than a world of oppositions, Foucault says that our world is "an

ensemble of relations that makes them appear...as a sort of configuration” (Foucault 1). Like Sadow’s mixed modes, Foucault acknowledges that these rules or relationships are constructed and flexible. Despite their constructed nature, however, our current society still follows oppositional rules as if they are laws. The heterotopia is, like a utopia, a tool that reflects the constructed nature of rules back to us. However, while the utopia perfects or inverts our world to reveal its flaws, it does not exist. A heterotopia, however, is a real site in the world that does the same work to “exposes every real space...as still more illusory” (Foucault 8). In *Supernatural*, Dean repeatedly enters real sites that flip or contradict the binaries that he experiences on earth. Taking Foucault’s heterotopia and Sadow’s mixed modes allows us to take the mixed sites of *Supernatural* as reflective of Dean’s constructed universe.

Supernatural’s first physical heterotopia is purgatory. Purgatory is a heterotopia because it is a place where multiple contradictions can exist at once, and it also allows Dean to question some of the rules and binaries that seem inalterable on Earth. Purgatory is a place of contradictions: it is where monsters go when they die, but Dean has not died to get there. The monsters can also be killed again and seemingly sent to oblivion. All monsters immediately go to purgatory when they die, so there is no aspect of judgement. And purgatory is also embodied: it’s a physical place that Dean and Castiel are sent to through a portal, and it’s a place of violence. Purgatory is the first place where Dean does not fit into any assigned role. He is alone in a wide forest full of monsters trying to kill him. The violence is familiar to him, an aspect of his self-construction, so he easily falls into that role. However, even this hunting is disrupted in purgatory. He both spares and befriends a vampire named Benny, breaking his own rule that all monsters must die. He also focuses all his energy on finding Castiel, even though Castiel left Dean alone the second they arrived in purgatory. Despite this seeming double-cross, after Dean

has barely forgiven Cas for his season six betrayal, Dean still prioritizes finding Cas. Even when Benny offers Dean an escape from purgatory, Dean will not leave until he finds Castiel. Rather than forcing himself to fit into a specific category, Dean follows his own instincts and desires. Once he escapes purgatory, he describes it “bloody, messy.... Most days felt like 360 degree combat. But there was something about being there...it felt pure” (8.01). This feeling of purity is notable because it is through a mixing of modes—and an acceptance of the blurred boundaries—that Dean reached it. Dean’s ability to find purity in a mixed place like purgatory reveals the arbitrariness of such definitions. The purity of being either good or evil isn’t true, the purity is in the affirmation of his identity and desires.

As soon as Dean leaves the mixed space of purgatory, he attempts to return to Earth-bound binaries. He brainwashes himself into believing that he accidentally left Castiel behind because it fits into his self-blame framework, better than the thought of Castiel staying behind willingly. He must be the one who has done wrong, because he feels that he’s “failed every other godforsaken thing that I care about!” (8.07) Once he is back in a space that he defines as having defined borders and rules (Earth = life = good), he reverts to his definition of himself as the man who deserved to die and keeps doing things that will justify his next death.

Dean’s next death fulfills one binary to an extreme: he is killed by an angel and transforms into a demon (9.23). However, this seemingly irrevocable border crossing is actually the midpoint of an extended period that Dean spends not in but *as* a borderland. Purgatory served as a heterotopia—a real embodied “intersection of places” (Foucault 1). In the Mark of Cain arc, however, Dean himself is the physical embodiment of a border. The Mark is directly branded into his skin and is paired with the First Blade, which influences the bearer of the Mark to become more bloodthirsty and violent the more they kill. Cain says that the Mark can only be

passed to someone who's worthy. Dean replies, "you mean a killer like you?" (9.11). Dean accepts quite easily that he is an innate killer and receives the Mark. The narrative of Cain aligns with Dean's concept of himself as inherently bad, and he only uses this to further convince himself that he doesn't have a choice. Castiel, in comparison, does not recognize Dean's nature as aligning with the Mark. When Castiel and Dean see each other for the first time since Dean received the Mark, Castiel immediately says, "there's something different about you...what have you done?" (9.18). Castiel, who has had direct contact with Dean's soul, and who was the object of his desires in purgatory, thinks of the Mark as an action, a choice—something Dean has done, not something true about Dean.

Dean misidentifies the mixed mode of the Mark and interprets this borderland as another reflection of truth. Since purgatory was a place of blurred boundaries, Dean now understands that there is some way to find the truth in an in-between space. However, since "the mixed mode sometimes falsely passes for ideas rooted in the senses," Dean experiences the embodied nature of the Mark as a sort of truth-telling or reflection of who he really is (Sadow 165). However, the Mark is not a free space for Dean to practice agency. Rather, as Castiel notes, it feeds him with its own desires, which he mistakes for his own. In this case, Castiel is more of a heterotopia than Dean is. By seeing the contradictions of Dean and holding them as action-based, not an innate law, Castiel's view reveals the artificiality of Dean's borders. The confusion also stems from the Mark's mode, which is violence. Violence is Dean's tool with which he both crosses boundaries and, like in purgatory, experiences them. This association also encourages him to assume that this darkest self is his truest self. In addition, the show's narrative of Cain and Abel mirrors Dean and Sam's season 5 plotline, with Cain killing the Lucifer-possessed Abel. Dean easily sees

himself fulfilling Cain's role. All these factors combine into Dean believing that the Mark of Cain is revealing, not influencing.

Dean's death at the end of season nine is the most complete role change and border crossing of the series, and yet Dean still disrupts it. When he dies, his physical body is reanimated, and he becomes a demon. Unlike the other demons in the show, who must possess humans to walk the earth, Dean is in his own body and presumably can't leave it. He also doesn't engage in the murderous mayhem that the Winchesters have spent ten seasons protecting humans from, but instead spends his days drinking and having sex (10.01). It may be immoral to get in bar fights and not call women back, but in no way has his physical death and transformation turned him into something evil. And, unlike his other borderland experiences, Dean's return to humanity does not end with a return to normalcy. He is no longer a demon, but he still has the Mark and as a result still struggles to interpret these desires as real.

The Mark plot also leans into a theme that recurs throughout the series, but especially in the later seasons of the show: Dean actively playing with death or expressing a desire to die. Death has been used as a tool before, to retrieve souls or talk to ghosts, but always with the intention of resurrection (4.15, 6.12). Dean has also felt that he's deserved previous deaths. However, he doesn't actively wish for death until the Mark of Cain, when he's convinced that he is becoming more and more evil. In the season ten episode "The Werther Project," Dean comes close to suicide. This moment is an immense blending of boundaries and physical spaces. It's a spell that attempts to influence Dean to kill himself, but the hallucination it gives him is one of purgatory—one of purity. It's his vampire friend Benny that tells him, "You can't tell me you haven't been thinking about it...I know you can see it. The purity. The honor." Sam physically restrains Dean to prevent him from harming himself, furthering the doubling: Dean is both freely

mobile in purgatory and static on Earth. At the same moment that Dean accepts Benny's weapon in purgatory, he can break his bonds in the real world (10.19).

Dean manages to kill the Benny hallucination and free himself from the spell, but this scene demonstrates Dean's increased comfort in heterotopic spaces. He says, "I always did love it here," acknowledging that a place outside of his death/punishment binary is a place where he can find a sort of stable identity. By defining suicide in terms of purity, the Benny hallucination—which Dean acknowledges is an aspect of his own psyche—implies that suicide is actually a place of mixed modes, wherein the agency of the death removes some aspect of punishment. Choosing to die as a protective measure is honorable, unlike Dean's car crash death in season two. Purgatory is a truly mixed mode, and fulfills Foucault's requirements of the heterotopic site: "either the entry is compulsory... or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures" (7). Entry to purgatory requires ritual and power, or else death if one is a monster. Dean's association of purity and honor with the mixed mode demonstrates an acceptance of mixed boundaries and his role within them.

In each of these borderland moments, and each of Dean's moments of suicidal ideation, Castiel serves as the axis around which Dean's identity revolves. Even once Dean has freed himself from the mark of Cain and has reached a furtherance of boundary acceptance through his repeated journeys to purgatory, his ability to exist in in-between spaces is always and explicitly tied to Castiel. Castiel is the first character with a transgressory ability: he had the power to cross into hell and pull Dean out. Even his existence shatters preexisting boundaries: the Winchesters previously believed that angels didn't exist. The handprint that Castiel leaves burned into Dean's shoulder also serves as an embodied reminder of this border crossing. Like

with Tessa, Dean initially reacts to his resurrection by doubling down on his hunter role: he declares that they need to hunt whatever pulled him out of hell, and when Castiel finally appears Dean's first act is to stab him (4.01). Cas is not killed by the knife that should be able to kill everything, and Dean is faced with evidence that the strict binaries he adheres to are permeable. The 'relapses' into binary mode are always accompanied by Castiel's absence, and borderlands such as purgatory and the Mark of Cain are places where Dean makes decisions based on Castiel, even more than Sam. Castiel, for example, is the only person who can break Dean out of his Mark of Cain haze of violence in "The Prisoner," explicitly aligning him with Cain's wife, who got him to stop killing.

Castiel's death in season thirteen underlines his essential and reflective role in Dean's borderland psyche. Castiel has died before and been resurrected, as most characters on *Supernatural* have, but this death is seemingly permanent—and embodied. Castiel is stabbed and dies the way other angels on the show have. His body remains behind, and Dean is the one who wraps him in a shroud and burns him. In the five episodes that Castiel is dead, Dean again approaches suicide. Unlike the purgatory moment, Dean is not under any mystical influence when he intentionally stops his heart. The conceit is that Dean will die for three minutes, communicate with some ghosts in the veil, and be resuscitated by Sam (13.05). This death is mixed, too, because as a non-violent injection it goes against the hunter binary. While he is dead, Death, who is a reaper named Billie, reminds Dean of universal rules—including those he's broken, such as his repeated resurrections and the increasing frequency with which the Winchesters cross interdimensional boundaries. In this moment where Dean is faced with evidence of his ability to cross borders, however, he declines resurrection. They make a deal to free the ghosts in the house, but Dean does not ask for his own life. This contextualizes Dean's comment at the

beginning of this episode, that “I’ve been down this road before, and I fought my way back. I will fight my way back again” (13.05). ‘This road’ is what leads him to his most explicit moment of suicidal ideation in the show. During the Mark of Cain, Dean positioned suicide as an honorable or pure act, reflective of purity and truth. That element of truth can only come from mode mixing. Even the idea of honor, however, is mixed with Castiel when Benny asks Dean if killing Cas would be more honorable than killing himself (10.19). With Castiel dead, Dean no longer frames the mixed border of suicide as one of honor, but in terms of escaping boundary. The role of hunter or, as Billie puts it, “the guy who saves the world, the guy who thinks he’ll always win no matter what” is a role that Dean knows he cannot revert to. While Castiel reflects the constructed nature of the role, Dean can only see that in this moment he can’t fulfil it. Suicide is the only blurred boundary that Dean can see, rather than looking for complexity and gray areas in the real world. Billie eventually sends Dean back because she informs him that it’s not his time, further illustrating the rules of the *Supernatural* universe.

The fifteenth and final season of *Supernatural* takes a meta-approach to its preexisting existential universe of rules and hierarchy. The show’s Judeo-Christian God, named Chuck, is fashioned as a writer, and he admits to ‘writing’ every trial or villain that the Winchesters have faced throughout the series (14.20). They never had control of their lives—just a series of obstacles created for him. This revelation sends Dean into a full existential spiral. He interprets it as completely negating everything that has come before: “nothing about our lives is real. Everything that we lost, everything that we are is because of Chuck” (15.02). He says that he can’t pretend they ever had a choice. Dean returns to an extremely one-sided view of the world, like his early season binaries. Either Chuck decided everything, or Dean had complete and entire free will. Again, Castiel is the figure who reveals the middle ground, telling Dean that “you

asked ‘what about all of this is real?’ We are” (15.02). Castiel understands the layers of gradation: they may have been given choices, but they still made the choices. They exist somewhere in between, and their individual relationship matters. Dean is unable to hear the words in this episode because he still has Cas positioned on one side of his binary. He blames Castiel for his mother’s season 14 death, and therefore cannot hear Cas’s reminder of the mixed mode.

Dean returns to the heterotopic space of Purgatory again this season, and in it finds some room for contradiction. The format of the journey mirrors that of season eight, with Castiel and Dean arriving together and getting split up. While Dean and Castiel are in purgatory, Sam is shown an alternate future in which the catalyst for Dean giving up the fight is the loss of Castiel—not a death, but an embodied living burial that Dean, much like the shroud, does himself. Again, without Castiel Dean is unable to move forward or find his own solo identity. In purgatory, Dean’s moment of realization comes when he’s alone, trying to find Castiel before their portal closes. He sinks to his knees and prays, fighting tears. “I don’t know why I get so angry...it’s just always been there. And when things go bad it just comes out and I can’t stop it. No matter how bad I want to I just can’t stop it” (15.09). This anger is part of Dean’s identity, but even admitting that is a big step for Dean. In addition, he’s allowing forgiveness and anger to exist together in the same space. In the heterotopia of purgatory Dean is able to realize both that Castiel is an essential part of his identity, and the ‘bad’ parts of himself that he’s fought his whole life can coexist with other elements. It doesn’t have to be all of him.

Castiel’s essential role in Dean’s borderland navigation is affirmed by his final death. Dean and Castiel team up to try to kill Billie, the literal Death. She remains representative of the immutable rules of the universe, even though the Winchesters have repeatedly broken those rules

and double crossed her, demonstrating their weakness. She singles out Dean specifically: “it’s always been you. Death-defying. Rule-breaking. You are everything I lived to set right... You are human disorder incarnate” (15.18). As the show comes to a close, the world around Dean acknowledges that his power comes from the in-between spaces, the crossing of borders, and the mixing of modes. Even the concept that Dean could kill Death involves some blurring of boundaries, that between ultimate power and human frailty. The remaining step is for Dean himself to understand this.

Billie references Dean’s suicidal tendencies by asking him if he’s ready for death, but the presence of Castiel immediately points viewers to understand that that is not a possibility here. Dean does not need that extreme solution because he has a more grounded, embodied option in the form of Castiel, as well as the rest of his found family. Dean and Castiel lock themselves up in the bunker, which becomes a transitory space. The bunker has been unequivocally a home for the Winchesters over the show, and now it is breached and transformed into a prison. Castiel uses his own blood—another embodiment—to seal them away from Billie’s power. Dean blames himself for the situation, “because I was angry,” referencing the purgatory prayer, sinking back into old roles: “I just needed something to kill...because that’s all I know how to do” (15.18). He believes that they’re both going to die and reverts to the old binary that dying is a punishment.

Castiel, however, both has a solution and sees the truth of Dean. He has made a deal with the entity in charge of The Empty, yet another dimension that can only be breached by death—in this case, of angels and demons. Castiel’s deal was that when he experienced a moment of true happiness he would be taken away to The Empty forever. He tells Dean that “the one thing I want...It’s something I know I can’t have...But I think I know... Happiness isn’t in

the having, it's in just being. It's in just saying it." This concept, that happiness is in just being, is radical for a show that is so focused on choice and action. Behavior is the element that matters to Dean: he doesn't care that Jack killed his mother by accident, just that he did. It doesn't matter if a monster is a good person if they've killed. Castiel verbalizes the theme that comes out of all of *Supernatural's* mixed modes, from purgatory to befriending monsters. It's being in the world, which is inherently one of blurred borders and gray areas, that is pure and true. And that can lead to happiness. The thing Castiel wants, of course, is Dean. And this moment of happiness that Cas uses to get The Empty to take him is not only the "I love you" that he lets hang between him and Dean without expecting an answer, but also his speech to Dean. He reflects Dean's exact thoughts back to himself verbally, so Dean for the first time must explicitly face the struggles of identity and self-perception that he has repressed and fought against for fifteen seasons of television. "I know how you see yourself, Dean...the same way our enemies see you" (15.18). The enemies, which at this stage are Billie and Chuck, are entities who force rules and order upon an inherently disordered universe. They see Dean as a killer fueled by anger, and that view is one Dean cannot escape from. The binaries of good and evil, life and death, still sit at the basis of this identity, and even the borderlands he inhabits throughout the show cannot entirely erase this core.

Castiel, however, can. Castiel, as a transgressor of borders, as the person who pulled Dean from hell, sees the truth of him: "knowing you has changed me. Because you cared, I cared... I cared about the whole world because of *you*" (15.18). Rather than focusing on behavior, which is shaped by circumstance and Chuck's machinations and Dean's childhood, Castiel focuses on intent and emotion. He reveals the artificial nature of these roles of killer or "Daddy's blunt instrument" because their influence on Dean was constructed by power

structures. These are not laws of being, and Castiel's comfort in mixed spaces—both Dean's psyche and physical spaces—allows him to see outside of them. The core of identity is not if Dean is hunting or being hunted, not if he's killing or being killed. It's that he loved the people he fought for, and his love showed Castiel, border crosser, another way. Dean, however, is not given room to respond to this reflection. Castiel says "I love you," and is taken by the Empty, who also kills Billie. Dean is left alone in the empty space of this revelation for the rest of the show.

Castiel is taken completely—there is no corpse left behind—but he does leave a physical mark that yet again crosses the borders of *Supernatural's* many realms. He leaves a bloody handprint on Dean's shoulder, in the same place that the brand from his season four rescue is. The handprint is visible on Dean's jacket for much of next episode, in which the Winchesters face off against and eventually defeat Chuck. The circumstances of Chuck's defeat are nearly irrelevant except for two key factors. First, Chuck is stripped of his powers and left before the Winchesters as a man. Now that Billie is gone, Chuck's transformation to human reflects a collapse of the universal order of rules and binaries. As a man, Chuck is beaten by the Winchesters, corporeal violence that would not have been possible when he was God. The other key moment is Dean's realization that Castiel's words to him were true. Chuck says, "to die at the hands...of Dean Winchester, the ultimate killer? It's kind of glorious." Dean responds, "that's not who I am" (15.19). Dean, who has said time and time again that he *is* a killer, like Cain, like the demon who tortured him in hell, takes Castiel's words to heart. He seems to believe it, that the role he has strapped himself into is not static or real. It's a construction, and he can deconstruct it.

In its series finale, after 322 episodes and fifteen years, *Supernatural* is forced to face its existential narrative, both as a whole and for each character. Castiel's confession and dying speech to Dean opened space for Dean to recontextualize his role in the world and to fully accept the "human disorder incarnate" that Billie mentioned—not in a destructive manner, as she meant, but rather the complexity of in-betweenness that makes us human. We are neither all good or all bad. The penultimate episode closes open-endedly, with Dean commenting that he and Sam are "finally free" as they drive off together in the Impala towards an uncertain future. This ending has Dean free of all of the roles that he and the show have forced on himself (brother, hunter, son, killer) and existing as some unknown intersection of the three that the viewer—and Dean—can interpret how they want. By ending the penultimate episode in this open way, the finale sets itself up to be an epilogue to the series.

Rather than solidifying the ending of "Inherit the Earth," however, "Carry On" solidifies the binaries that the show established in its early seasons. Dean only mentions Castiel briefly in this episode, in a throwaway line about how Cas would want them to live their lives. However, the consequences of his absence are clear. Dean's room is messy and full of beer bottles, both the mess and the alcohol a repeated motif of Dean's grief throughout the series. Sam and Dean live alone in the bunker, looking for hunts. They are still strictly on the hunter side of the binary. They go on a hunt, one that their father failed to finish in 1986, when Dean was five years old. And, on the hunt, Dean dies. Dean's death returns him to every single static role of the early seasons: he is hunting with his brother on his father's behalf. The monster they're hunting is a vampire from season one who got away from them. He dies the hunter's death that he anticipated.

The most instructive aspect of Dean's death is what he himself says. His death is seven minutes long, drawn out courtesy of a dying speech that he manages to give while impaled on a six-inch piece of rebar. Sam attempts to save him, but Dean rejects this: "You knew it was always going to end like this for me. It was supposed to end like this" (15.20). The freedom that was promised at the end of the last episode, and after Dean's confession to Cas in purgatory and Castiel's final speech, all folds back up into the hunter's death that Dean expected at the very start of the series. And a hunter's death is a fulfilment of binary. There is no mixed mode here, there is one mode. Dean also returns to a fully Sam-based identity by spending his last words reassuring Sam, and telling Sam that he's proud of him. There is no space in this speech for Dean or his identity, he is simply filling in an outline that the series set up for him.

The episode splits after this, following both Sam for the rest of his life and Dean's arrival in heaven. This is another reaffirmation of the binary of hunter vs. normal citizen, as Dean dies the hunter's death and goes to heaven, and Sam retires to raise a family. Sam's apple pie life, the one he thought he would get at the beginning of the series, is finally his. Meanwhile, heaven only reaffirms these roles. Dean appears wearing the same outfit he did in the pilot, outside Ellen and Jo's Roadhouse, with Bobby waiting for him. Bobby informs him that Jack and Castiel "tore down all the walls" in heaven, transforming a series of rooms in which souls relive their best memories into an open world (15.20). This opening up of heaven, however, does not provide Dean with any room to construct his own independent identity. Sarah Neill, writing around the release of season thirteen commented that the brothers' repeated resurrections stem from one issue: "with no real indication that any afterlife would be preferable to nothingness, the brothers are left longing for the familiar: no Heaven, no Hell, just more of the same..." (66). This insight is fascinating when compared with the actual ending of the show. In this final death,

Dean has been freed from dying again, but not from his abusive father or the quashing roles of a four-person nuclear family that he explicitly rejected. His final death returns him to the familiar just as his resurrections did. Heaven for Dean is nothing but a series of already rejected roles that he steps back into. His parents are not a reward—he rejected the option to have John resurrected in order to keep Castiel in season fourteen—but a reversion. He dies the hunter’s death and returns to the nuclear family that hasn’t existed since he was four years old.

The only moment that the show gives Dean alone to process his death is a four-minute montage of him driving the Impala to a rendition of “Carry On My Wayward Son,” in which he does not speak a single word. Because time moves differently in heaven, by the time Dean finishes his drive, Sam has died of old age, and is waiting for him (also in his pilot episode outfit). Just as Dean’s dying speech focused on Sam and took the focus away from his own experience of death, this moment of solitude is not one of reflection but of silence. While the drive in the Impala in “Inherit the Earth” reflected an open ending, unbound by the rules that have governed Dean since the pilot, the drive in heaven is restricted. The Impala is not real but a construction of Dean’s memory, and the ‘unbound’ space of heaven is the same scenery of the show. The Impala is also tied explicitly to the hunting side of the binary. Dean cannot drive out of heaven, and he has no control over how long the drive is or when Sam appears. Although there are no longer limits on who one can interact with, heaven is still a constructed space. The social relationships and expectations are still there. The growth and ability to shift between states and identities is removed, because in heaven Dean is static. Heaven is not heterotopic or mixed. Although Castiel was able to reveal the constructed nature of rules, binaries, and borders, Dean himself cannot break free. This reversion is only possible because Castiel is gone. As the first

character to reflect the artificial rules Dean followed, Castiel's absence allows this reversion, and Dean's borders again become solid and impermeable at the end of the show.

Dean Winchester begins the series strictly defined: as a man, as an American, as a hunter. Each of these categories fits comfortably on one side of their binaries and supports the others. The role of hunter is uniquely American, uniquely male, and uniquely violent. By pushing Dean across boundaries, into the borderlands in between the binaries that shaped his world, *Supernatural* reflected the constructed natures of its rules back to the viewer. Dean's "human disorder" took the power away from villains such as Chuck and Billie, but also freed him from the limiting laws that he enforced. Castiel's ability to transgress borders and reflect their artificial nature back to Dean allowed Dean to explore his shifting identity and accept the gray areas between. Castiel's categorization of Dean as a man who "did it all for love" pulls him away from the hunter binary of justice and revenge, and the masculine repression taught to Dean by his father (15.18). Although Dean and his family and friends safe from further harm, they have been removed from the heterotopic truth of earth and placed into an oppositional space where they will remain in their roles without the human ability to just be.

The radical ending of *Supernatural* would have been one that dismantled the American exceptionalism and masculinity that shapes hunting and Dean's violence. An open-ended drive, such as that at the end of "Inherit the Earth" would free the characters from the show's rules and instead embrace the uncertainty and complexity of being human. An acceptance of "the mixed mode" would have alleviated some of the fear that comes from knowing our laws are created. *Supernatural*, however, chose to alleviate its existential anxiety by escaping the mixed mode. It picked one side for Dean and the other for Sam. Castiel's borderless approach to Dean's identity threatened the heterosexual, American, and uniquely masculine role of hunter. By combining a

love confession with a reflection of false roles and constructed hierarchies, Castiel provided an opportunity for *Supernatural* to back away from its deterministic reading of an American hero and explore a sort of “new man” who could exist in such mixed modes. Over fifteen seasons, *Supernatural* successfully exposed the illusory nature of its rules, but rather than accepting uncertainty, *Supernatural* ultimately responds by acknowledging its false narrative yet choosing to remain inside it. The rules, in the end, are arbitrary, but Dean isn’t given the freedom to stray outside them, either.

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