

The Construction of Southern Identity Through Reality TV: A Content Analysis of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *Duck Dynasty* and *Buckwild*

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Abstract

The reality television genre has been increasingly at the forefront of media and cultural studies and a subject of critique across the disciplines of communications, anthropology and visual studies. While reality television programs have been analyzed for elements of racism and sexism, quantitative research to date has rarely been done to explore whether the portrayal of the American southerner was distorted. Using a data-driven approach, the frequency of commonly held southern stereotypes within three shows across three networks were evaluated through content analysis. The researcher observed 100 minutes of each program, marking incidents of visibly unintelligent, crude, violent and unhealthy behavior. Results showed high frequencies of the “unintelligent,” “crude” and “violent” stereotypes.

I. Introduction

Candid Camera, an American television comedy series that premiered in 1948, is often credited as the first reality television program.¹ Since that time, and particularly within the past decade, reality TV has exploded into mainstream popular culture. Reality-based shows are no longer a rare occurrence on television; they are now ubiquitous in television programming across networks ranging from MTV to The History Channel. Viewers are not just watching these shows, but they are discussing them long after the segment ends. According to an article from the New York Times, 15 of the top 20 highest-rated programs among those between ages 18 and 29 were reality or unscripted shows.²

In recent years, reality TV programs featuring redneck culture in particular have seen increased popularity, showing southerners doing everything from fishing with their bare hands, eating triple-fried foods at county fairs, making up words not found within the traditional English dictionary, and often times just acting downright ignorant and crude. The issue here is that while these shows may be watched solely for their enter-

1 Charles Slocum, “The Real History of Reality TV Or, How Alan Funt Won the Cold War,” Writers Guild of America, n.d, <http://www.wga.org/organizesub.aspx?id=1099> (15 March 2013).

2 Bill Carter, “Reality TV Once Again Dominates Summer Ratings,” New York Times, last modified September 13, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/13/business/media/13reality.html?_r=0 (15 March 2013).

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tainment value and while they seem harmless and even fun, they are constructing a distinct southern identity and it is not a flattering one at that. Shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC), *Hillbilly Handfishin'* (Animal Planet), *Duck Dynasty* (A&E), and *Swamp People* (History Channel) are beginning to dominate programming across multiple stations. It is interesting to note that these shows are appearing on a variety of networks. They are not limited to the less serious stations and are beginning to be featured on networks heavily trusted for disseminating accurate information through documentary-style production.

One must ask the question, as with any reality TV program, are the subjects of these shows really being represented as they actually exist when the camera is not present? To what extent may they be simply performing constructed cultural identities that have already been, in some sense, assigned to them? Related to this, one must also consider what role both subject and filmmaker play in the production of these programs. Critical analysis from disciplines ranging from anthropology to visual studies may be applied to explore these issues.

This paper will place the study of popular culture, specifically the exploration of issues within reality television, at an academic level. The analysis will be approached using theoretical frameworks from sociology and anthropology along with media studies. The intention of this paper is to explore issues of representation of reality television subjects from the American South. Secondary research will explore the impact of reality television on viewers' perception of reality and reference studies on stereotypes seen in other areas of reality television. Primary research will include a content analysis of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC), *Buckwild* (MTV), and *Duck Dynasty* (A&E).

II. Background

Some might argue that studying popular culture, which is sometimes referred to as "low culture," is essentially frivolous and therefore not worthy of scholarly study. After all, how could studying a genre where absurdity is heightened, where storylines are deliberately constructed, possibly be considered worthy of an intellectual analysis? How could material that is so mass-produced be on the same level as studying high culture?

Filoteo argues that it is precisely because this popular culture is mass-produced and mass consumed that it is worthy of study. Examining popular culture through a critical lens helps us learn about our society. It helps us hold the "dominant class" (i.e. those in control of editing and producing reality television and other forms of popular culture) accountable for the messages that are being communicated through various media. It is thus imperative for us to study these messages and try to uncover meaning from them.

Quoting Friedman (2002), Filoteo explains the possible reason that reality television has been studied minimally. The lack of scholarship is not due to "a lack of an interest in the subject, but rather to an inherent difficulty in describing and containing the ideological, economic, cultural, technological, and political influences that impact televisual representations of real events."³

If these reality television shows are deliberately being constructed in a way that expresses overt or perhaps more subtle messages about the subjects in the shows, it is imperative that we study these messages through a critical lens as they may be indicative of larger societal issues. While attention has been brought to the unfair representation of particular ethnic groups as well as women in reality television, little to no academic work has been written on the representation of the American southerner through these shows. Why has this group been neglected? In a 2011 article from NPR, Eric Deggans argues that these shows have emerged to make "a new generation laugh at the expense of real understanding." He writes, "Despite reality TV's tendency to stupefy everything it touches, perhaps it's time for these programs to actually get real and give us a vision of Southern culture that reaches beyond the fun-loving redneck."⁴

In an article from the *Washington Post*, Ted Ownby, the director of the Center for the Study of South-

3 Janie Filoteo, "Placing Reality TV in the Cultural Spectrum: Making a Case for Studying the World of Reality Television," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 13-16, 2005), 6.

4 Eric Deggans, "Disappointing 'Redneck' TV Shortchanges The American South," National Public Radio, last modified December 7, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2011/12/07/142861568/disappointing-redneck-tv-shortchanges-the-american-south> (4 April 2013).

ern Culture, is quoted saying that people from the South get frustrated at the “narrow range of representations” on these shows. According to this article, it has become increasingly apparent that individuals from the American South are the last cultural group to be openly mocked and stereotyped without penalty.⁵

III. Literature Review

Since introduction of reality shows, scholars have been studying the genre. Previous research has explored the psychological appeal of reality television for viewers, issues of performance and authenticity of reality TV subjects, as well as the many ethical issues that arise with the production of these shows. While previous studies have addressed everything from substance abuse in the popular reality show, *The Osbournes*, to issues of racism in *The Real World*, no studies to date have examined the recent explosion of “redneck” reality shows. While scholars and critics have written articles expressing their opinions on the representation of subjects in these shows, there is currently no quantitative research on the actual frequency of southern stereotypes in reality television. For this reason, the findings of this study may be vital in providing some of the first concrete data to support or contradict the claims that these reality shows play a role in emphasizing existing southern stereotypes.

Emergence of Reality TV: Explaining the Phenomenon

Several scholars have written about the emergence of reality television as a popular TV genre. Many have written about how reality television has been born out of earlier styles of observational filmmaking, and now can be considered a part of post-documentary culture, where documentary realism blends with celebrity and constructed scenes.⁶ Many have compared earlier observational documentary films with reality television, suggesting the latter is now more relevant in our study of modern culture.

One author who provides some historical background on why reality TV came into existence is journalist Richard Huff. According to Huff, during a time when networks were struggling to fill programming gaps, reality TV served as an inexpensive alternative to bring in the audiences that these networks were specifically trying to reach: young adults.⁷ Some of the earliest shows, including MTV’s longest running reality series, *The Real World*, and Fox Broadcasting Company’s *American Idol*, started to become some of the most watched, most talked about shows on television.

Performance and Authenticity

Several scholars have also explored issues of performance and authenticity in reality television, specifically looking at underlying motivations for reality TV subjects to perform an assigned role despite reality TV’s claims of depicting subjects as they really are in everyday life. In her text, Rachel Dubrofsky suggests that participants in reality shows do not actually have complete autonomy in how to present themselves, suggesting that editing techniques in particular play a massive role in constructing reality on these programs.⁸

Other scholars, including those who studied earlier modes of documentary filmmaking, have suggested that subjects are not represented as they really are because the presence of a camera inevitably causes a behavioral change in the subject. Some scholars have suggested that when subjects know they are being filmed, they have a greater tendency to “perform,” exaggerating certain personal characteristics or at the other end of the spectrum, changing their persona altogether. Annette Hill, a leader in reality television research, found that many viewers have the common-sense belief that in order to create entertaining television, there is a basic need for participants to be entertaining.⁹ Needless to say, this is problematic when considering the

5 Roger Catlin, “Reality TV’s explosion of Southern stereotypes,” *The Washington Post*, last modified June 7, 2012, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-06-07/entertainment/35460112_1_american-hoggers-turtleman-swamp-people (6 April 2013).

6 Justin Lewis “The Meaning of Real Life” In *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 288.

7 Richard Huff, *Reality Television* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 20.

8 Rachel Dubrofsky, *The Surveillance of Women on Reality Television: Watching The Bachelor and The Bachelorette* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2011), 100.

9 Annette Hill, *Reality TV Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London: Routledge, 2005), 75.

supposed authenticity of reality TV subjects.

The Impact of Reality Television on Viewers' Perceptions of Reality

As stated earlier, Annette Hill has been one of the leading researchers of reality television's impact on viewers' perceptions of reality. Hill has studied this topic over the past decade and has published research from in-depth interviews and focus groups that has shed insight on how reality television influences viewers' feelings and attitudes towards subjects, along with their overall trust or mistrust in the programming. Hill's research has shown that most audience members are not naive to the fact that reality television is often "set up" and at least partially scripted. In fact, Hill's research has shown that viewers often discuss and even gossip about how subjects "perform" their roles and to what extent they are acting or being true to their identity.

Ethical Issues of Representation in Reality Television

Especially within the past few years, scholars have given heightened attention to ethical issues within reality TV production, viewing, and participation. As mentioned earlier, the editing process involved with reality television production leads to some ethical problems.

Producers have the opportunity to include or exclude scenes often from many hours or days of filming. They are able to piece together scenes and show participants in a way that is most appealing or entertaining to viewers, inevitably contributing to the "construction" of the representation of reality television subjects.

Jonathan Kraszewski wrote a chapter -- "Country Hicks and Urban Cliques: Mediating Race, Reality, and Liberalism on MTV's *The Real World*" -- in a book, *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. There he discusses the ethical issues of representation in the MTV show, suggesting that the series is laden with racist elements that reinforce dangerous stereotypes. Kraszewski suggests that MTV producers in one season of the show have actually looked for racist participants, and when they were unable to find a participant who was "racist enough," they encouraged one participant to act as if he were, even though he claimed he "did not have a racist bone in [his] body."¹⁰ Another scholar has similarly noted that it is an ethical issue that viewers may be naive when it comes to casting decisions in that often, someone may be cast solely because that individual embodies and satisfies a stereotype.¹¹

The Explosion of Southern Stereotypes

Many scholars and journalists have published highly opinionated articles on the recent popularity of reality television programs showcasing "redneck" culture in the American South. As mentioned earlier, Roger Catlin of the *Washington Post* recently covered both sides of the issue, interviewing experts in the field and finding mixed reactions: While some fervently believed that these shows build upon and proliferate existing negative stereotypes, others felt that the shows are not derogatory because subjects are shown in an affectionate way that lets viewers connect to something both raw and real. Eric Deggans' recent article on NPR, on the other hand, argues that these shows are both disappointing and completely unacceptable and should not be universally embraced and celebrated.

While scholars and journalists have expressed their views by publishing a number of articles on the topic, to date, no quantitative research has been done to explore the issue. Therefore, this paper will serve to provide key, data-driven insights in a specific subject area that has not yet been given this attention.

The thesis statement of this study is that the proliferation of reality television shows featuring subjects from the American South exacerbates the existing stereotypes associated with these communities. The following research questions were derived from the thesis.

RQ1. What have previous scholars discovered about the potential problems with reality television and its representation of "reality"?

RQ2. What are the dominant stereotypes for southerners that exist within reality TV shows and to what extent and frequency do these stereotypes appear? Looking specifically at the stereotypes of southern-

¹⁰ Jon Kraszewski, "Country Hicks and Urban Cliques: Mediating Race, Reality, and Liberalism on MTV's *The Real World*." In *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 179.

¹¹ Brian Denham and Richelle Jones, "Survival of the Stereotypical: A Study of Personal Characteristics and Order of Elimination on Reality Television," *Studies in Popular Culture* 30, no. 2 (2008): 81.

ers as unintelligent, crude, violent and unhealthy, which stereotypes are most prevalent?

RQ3. To what extent does television have the power to influence viewers' perceptions of the subjects within reality television shows?

IV. Methodology

Content analysis was used to quantitatively measure the exploration of this topic. Three reality television shows were selected for the analysis: *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC), *Duck Dynasty* (A&E), and *Buckwild* (MTV). These shows were selected as they all contain subjects from and take place in the American South. These shows were also chosen because of their range in network, geographic location, and age of the subjects.

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo airs on TLC and takes place in the rural town of McIntyre, Georgia. It follows the daily activities of 7-year-old Alana "Honey Boo Boo" Thompson and her mother, father, and three teenage sisters. The show was born out of TLC's *Toddler's and Tiaras*, a child pageant reality show where Alana and her entire family proved to be entertaining, larger than life characters apparently deserving of a television show dedicated to chronicling their daily lives. The popularity of the young star and her family is undeniable; according to an article from *Parade* magazine, Honey Boo Boo was one of the ten most Internet-searched reality stars of 2012.

Duck Dynasty, which airs on A&E, follows the lives of the Roberston family in West Monroe, Louisiana. The series primarily follows Willie Robertson, the company's current CEO, while he tries to keep his family, who all work for the company, away from distractions. The family became extremely wealthy from their business, Duck Commander, which makes products for various duck hunting activities. The network's website for the show states, "They may be living the rags-to riches American dream, but they're just as busy staying true to their rugged outdoorsman lifestyle and southern roots." According to A&E, it is the network's most watched series and is in its third season.

Buckwild is a recently cancelled reality show on MTV that follows the lives of several young adults in both Sissonville and Charleston, West Virginia. The show features a group of young adults who have just graduated high school and are either taking classes at local colleges, working at businesses in the area, or not working at all. The show mainly follows the group as they engage in dangerous stunts, go out drinking, or get into fights with each other, neighbors, family members and friends. Following the death of main character Shain Gandee due to a carbon monoxide poisoning incident, the show was cancelled in early April 2013.

Each show was evaluated for four stereotypes sometimes associated with the South. Those elements included unintelligent, crude, violent or unhealthy actions. After reviewing literature identifying southern stereotypes, these four factors were chosen for the study.

Many authors have published articles on what they argue to be southern stereotypes proliferated through both politics and the mainstream media. Kristin Rawls of political journalism site *Salon.com* published an article last year arguing that the "white trash" representation of southern culture makes it seem as if the entire community is uneducated. While underfunded education remains a problem throughout the South, Rawls asserted that the representation of Southerners as universally unintelligent is inaccurate and leads to a dangerous misunderstanding of the entire community.¹²

The crude and violent stereotypes surrounding Southern culture may stem from films like *Deliverance*, which came out over 40 years ago. The influence of this film, according to University of Tulsa professor Robert Jackson, was both "powerful and pernicious." In an interview with CNN he said, "It's had a tenacious hold on people's imaginations, establishing the hillbilly as a kind of menacing, premodern, medieval kind of figure."¹³

The study included the unhealthy stereotype as the final factor for evaluation primarily because of the association of the South with high obesity rates. In 2011, a study from the nonprofit organization Trust for America's Health in conjunction with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that nine of the ten states

¹² Kristin Rawls, "The media's southern stereotypes," *Salon.com*, last modified April 4, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/04/04/the_medias_southern_stereotypes/ (24 June 2013).

¹³ Todd Leopold, "The South: Not all Bubbas and banjos," *CNN*, last modified April 14, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/14/us/bubba-southern-stereotypes/> (24 June 2013).

with the highest obesity rates were in the South. Mississippi, Alabama and West Virginia were at the top of the list, with obesity rates of 34.4%, 32.3%, and 32.3% of the state's population, respectively. This information was based on data from the CDC. According to Jeff Levi, executive director of the Trust for America's Health, this may be due to high rates of poverty in the South and a traditional diet that is unhealthy.¹⁴

The researcher fully acknowledges that selection of these stereotypes may be a limitation to the study. By narrowing the subject matter to four stereotypes for analysis, some stereotypes are neglected. In addition, no stereotypes with positive connotations have been included, limiting the results of this study so as to provide only insight into the prevalence of negative stereotypes. Additionally, the interpretation of the representation of the frequency of these stereotypes is, of course, personal; therefore, the results of the study may be largely dependent upon who is conducting the research.

These four factors, unintelligent, crude, violent and unhealthy, must be defined in more specific terms in order to explain the data collection. Any behavior that could be deemed "unintelligent" was included in the analysis. This included any time a character mispronounced or struggled over a word, used words like y'all or ain't, or any time a character expressed an obvious lack of awareness in a topic and it was brought to attention either by other characters or by the producers. It also included any instances of subjects making ignorant comments about other cultures or current events.

Crude behavior was another factor for evaluation. This included any time a subject swore or used vulgar language, any time focus was brought to bodily functions, or any occasions of heightened sexuality, specifically promiscuous behavior. Crude behavior also included any occasions of nudity, regardless of whether this nudity was sexual in nature.

Violent behavior included all physical violence ranging from pushing (even in a joking and not necessarily aggressive way) and general roughhousing to full fledged physical assault. Violent behavior also included verbal violence, where attention was brought to characters that were verbally berating or assaulting other characters or strangers on the show. Violent behavior also included any dangerous stunts, certainly capable of causing serious harm and possibly even death, performed by characters on the show.

Unhealthy behavior included any emphasis on subjects eating heavily processed or fried foods, particularly in excess of what could be considered nutritionally healthy. Unhealthy behavior also included any kind of emphasis brought to characters being excessively overweight or obese.

The process involved a careful watching of five full episodes of each of the three shows, marking tallies for each occasion of a particular stereotype, along with taking detailed notes to with the goal of drawing more qualitative thematic conclusions across the shows.

Based on analysis of the five episodes (roughly 100 minutes) for each show, the author tallied the instances of each stereotype and calculated their means as shown in the following three tables.

Table 1 Instances of four stereotype actions in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC)

| | Episode #1 | Episode #2 | Episode #3 | Episode #4 | Episode #5 | Total | Average/ Episode |
|---------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------|------------------|
| Unintelligent | 26 | 28 | 38 | 49 | 42 | 183 | 36.6 |
| Crude | 11 | 19 | 12 | 13 | 20 | 65 | 13 |
| Violent | 5 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 6 | 20 | 4 |
| Unhealthy | 5 | 5 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 21 | 4.2 |

¹⁴ Nanci Hellmich, "Southerners, poor have highest rates of obesity," USA Today, last modified July 8, 2011, <http://yourlife.usatoday.com/fitness-food/diet-nutrition/story/2011/07/Southerners-poor-have-highest-rates-of-obesity/49173468/1> (24 June 2013).

Table 2 Instances of four stereotype actions in *Duck Dynasty* (A&E)

| | Episode #1 | Episode #2 | Episode #3 | Episode #4 | Episode #5 | Total | Average/ Episode |
|---------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------|------------------|
| Unintelligent | 20 | 21 | 18 | 22 | 20 | 101 | 20.2 |
| Crude | 1 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 19 | 3.8 |
| Violent | 11 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 8 | 31 | 6.2 |
| Unhealthy | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0.8 |

Table 3 Instances of four stereotype actions in *Buckwild* (MTV)

| | Episode #1 | Episode #2 | Episode #3 | Episode #4 | Episode #5 | Total | Average/ Episode |
|---------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------|------------------|
| Unintelligent | 28 | 27 | 29 | 28 | 38 | 150 | 30 |
| Crude | 39 | 36 | 46 | 47 | 62 | 230 | 46 |
| Violent | 15 | 13 | 8 | 4 | 15 | 55 | 11 |
| Unhealthy | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 1.2 |

V. Primary Research Findings

Overall, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* demonstrated the highest frequency of subjects being portrayed as unintelligent at an average of 36.6 occurrences per episode, followed by MTV's *Buckwild* (30 occurrences per episode) and *Duck Dynasty* (20.2 demonstrations). It is important to note the implications of even this lowest value: it still means that on average at least one unintelligent behavior per minute was shown on screen during the 20-minute segment.

Buckwild had the most frequent demonstrations of crude behavior at an average of 46 instances per episode. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty* had considerably lower numbers of crude behavior at 15 and 3.8 instances, respectively. Much of the crude behavior in *Buckwild* had to do with subjects swearing, using otherwise vulgar language, and engaging in overtly promiscuous sexual behavior throughout the show.

Buckwild also appeared to be the most violent show, with an average of 11 incidents of violence in comparison to *Duck Dynasty* which had 6.2 instances, and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* with four. Violence in *Buckwild* included reckless and dangerous stunts performed by the characters as well as several incidents of physical violence. This physical violence ranged from subjects pushing each other around perhaps in a less serious way to full-fledged physical assault.

The unhealthy stereotype was the least frequent stereotype present in all of the shows observed. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* had the highest frequency of unhealthy behavior with an average of 4.2 incidents per episode, followed by *Buckwild* (1.2 occasions) and *Duck Dynasty* (0.8 occasions). The unhealthy behavior in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* largely had to do with the consumption of fried or heavily processed foods in excess. There was also a heightened attention brought to the weight of the characters as they intermittently competed against each other to lose weight. As the camera zoomed in on the scale reading, it was clear that every character, even young Alana, could be classified as overweight and some even obese or morbidly obese. In one episode, June, otherwise known as "Mama," clocked in at over 300 pounds. Rather than seeming concerned for their health, the characters made minimal efforts to change their eating and lifestyle habits. The camera frequently zoomed in on the subjects continuing to binge eat from huge bags of food.

VI. Discussion of Primary Research Findings

Southern Dialects: Translation, please?

The abundance of unintelligent behavior in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* largely consists of subjects struggling with the English language. Frequently, subjects struggle over words, use expressions like “y’all” and “ain’t,” and have accents so thick that what they say on camera is almost unintelligible. One character in particular who struggles with speaking is Mike Thompson, or as he is called on the show, “Sugar Bear.” When Mike is in front of the camera, subtitles are used to help the viewer understand what he is saying. Subtitles are used intermittently for multiple characters throughout the show, which differentiates it from any of the other shows that were observed. It seems there is a heightened attention brought to the struggle with language by the inclusion of these subtitles. For the viewer, it almost implies these subjects are so backwards, so uneducated, that they are unable to communicate in the ways in which we are able to communicate. We need the producers to “decode” what these people are trying to say. It seems that this “language barrier” is one of the most basic ways to emphasize the southern stereotype and to create a distancing sense of “other” for the subjects of these shows. In other words, their struggle with language creates in the viewers’ mind a sense of “other”: They are different from us; therefore, we are not the same.

Fist Pounds for Fist Fights: Celebrating Violence in Buckwild

As stated earlier, *Buckwild* stood as the most violent show. Through observing several episodes of *Buckwild*, the author found that violence did not just occur on the show, but it was celebrated. In a particularly gruesome scene, Tyler, a character on the show, physically assaults an unwelcome guest at a party to the point where the victim is bleeding profusely from his mouth, unable to stand, and seemingly left unconscious. The viewer feels as though they are thoroughly involved in this fight, as the camera wobbles and shakes while trying to capture all of the action. When Tyler returns to the kitchen where his other friends are congregating, he is met with high fives and one girl even exclaims, while beaming at Tyler, “Oh my god Tyler, that was so hot.”

Violence was ever-present throughout all of the *Buckwild* episodes observed. Each episode even starts with a warning, read aloud by a female character of the show: “The following show features wild and crazy behavior that could result in serious personal injury or property damage. MTV and the producers insist that no one attempt to recreate or reenact any activity performed on this show.”

Also in the introduction to the show, which is included in every episode, several of the subjects exclaim that living in West Virginia, a place “founded on freedom,” gives them the freedom to do “whatever the f*** [they] want.” A female subject of Bangladeshi origin is introduced in the second episode of the series. In her first interaction with the camera she exclaims, “I may look exotic, but I’m as country as it gets.” This emphasis on identification with the South, and West Virginia in particular, makes it difficult to separate the outrageous violent and crude behavior from this location. By the subjects’ constant communication of pride in their home of “wild and crazy” West Virginia, the viewer may be left feeling as though this is representative of the American South as a whole, which is, of course, problematic.

This reality show became tragically real when 21-year-old cast member Shain Gandee was found dead in early April 2013 after an off-roading trip with his uncle and a family friend who were also found dead. Shain’s name was synonymous with crazy stunts and daredevil activities through the series. In one episode, he rides a four-wheeler recklessly up a hill and is later yelled at by an adult (presumably a parent) for not wearing a helmet. Shain, along with his friends, laugh off the stern warning from the adult and continue riding up the hill without any kind of protection. This incident, along with countless others where Shain is clearly the ringleader of dangerous activity, seem to eerily foreshadow his death.

Camo versus Cappuccino: Cultural Differences Reach a Boiling Point in Duck Dynasty

In one episode of *Duck Dynasty* titled, “Duck Be a Lady,” several characters from the show express their frustration that the company coffee machine has broken. Jase Robertson, one of the brothers on the show, even goes so far as to say that he cannot survive without a cup of coffee. The men decide to travel to a nearby coffee shop and as they enter the door, immediately provide a stark visual contrast: a sea of cam-

ouflage, long untamed beards, and bandanas juxtaposed with the academic types who are reading, typing on their laptops, and sipping their complicated drinks in the shop. Every difference between the worlds of these two groups is emphasized for the next several minutes of the episode. Jase expresses his confusion over the menu, claiming that there is not a single option that is just “coffee.” A well-groomed man in front of the group orders a complicated mocha drink and Jase compares it to being as complex as building a bomb.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical frameworks of habitus and cultural capital may be applied to *Duck Dynasty* and especially to this scene in particular. Bourdieu theorized that the way in which we see the world and our own identities is inextricably bound to our gender, class, and the environment in which we are raised. For Bourdieu, “the culture of modern society is a class culture, characterized by socially ranked symbolic differences that mark out classes and make some seem superior to others.”¹⁵ When the men of *Duck Dynasty* enter the coffee shop, they are forced to depart from their habitus, a term used by Bourdieu to describe the personal ideological frameworks by which we all operate. They are forced to interact with people vastly different from themselves in terms of education and what Bourdieu would call “cultural capital.” While they reject the high culture of the coffee shop by making mocking remarks and generally putting down the lifestyle of these individuals, this world also in a sense, rejects them. This is visible from the barista’s patronizing tone as she, in the close-up shots, explains the different types of coffees to the men, appearing seemingly disgusted by them as they clearly do not regularly inhabit this space.

Something very interesting to note is that although the men of *Duck Dynasty* have acquired a small fortune through the success of their family business, they refuse to adopt certain “high class” behaviors. They all have large, beautiful homes, but continue to wear camouflage outfits and sport unkempt beards. Despite the family’s commercial success, it seems clear that they still are holding on to what the eldest family member, Si, would consider “honorable” things, like knowing how to “live off the land.” In one notable scene in the episode, “Tickets to the Fun Show,” Si teaches the younger sons of the family how to kill and prepare bullfrogs. When giving the boys advice on how to find what he considers to be the perfect woman, he says, “If she knows how to cook, carries her bible, and loves to eat bullfrogs, that’s a woman.” This “lesson” reinforces a number of southern stereotypes just in one sentence.

Throughout the episodes, it seems that Willie is the bossiest member of the family, but also the smartest and most responsible. While on vacation in Hawaii, Willie plans a complete itinerary for the entire family. When things do not go according to plan and the family essentially rejects Willie’s planned programming, the men in particular choose to get into some potentially dangerous adventures. They all find a small cliff and jump into the water, and Willie, who has tagged along, says, “I’m starting to see a link between Jase’s definition of manhood and poor judgment.” Despite looking down on his family’s actions and the entire situation, Willie eventually decides to jump off as well, claiming that he does not want his “manhood” to be challenged any longer. This theme linking masculinity to recklessness seems to be consistent throughout all of the episodes.

While there is a heightened attention brought to the clothes these characters wear and occasionally the way in which they mispronounce words and exhibit reckless behavior, overall, these traits do not seem to come across in a completely derogatory way. The viewer can see that when, for example, Willie is faced with the daunting task of taking his teenage daughter dress shopping, universal family issues are apparent. It is also important to note that each episode concludes with the family at the dinner table, showing that despite their bickering, at the end of the day they come together as a family and share a meal. There is typically also some sort of universal lesson communicated by the end of the episode and the lesson typically ties back in some way to the idea of family and togetherness. As Willie says in one episode, “Nobody drives us crazy like our families. They are the source of our biggest frustrations but also our biggest joys.”

VII. Discussion of Secondary Research Findings

Surveillance and “The Gaze”

One issue, briefly mentioned in the review of literature, is how issues of surveillance along with power relations play into reality television. Montemurro suggests that subjects who are placed in front of the camera

¹⁵ David Gartman, “Bourdieu and Adorno: Converging theories of culture and inequality,” *Theory & Society* 41, no.1 (2012): 42.

are perhaps deliberately placed in a position of subordination. Montemurro mentions one of the first examinations of this idea: sociologist Michel Foucault's discussion of prisons and more specifically, Bentham's Panopticon, which was designed so that prisoners knew that they could be watched at any moment, yet were not allowed to know when this was happening. Montemurro argues that this is one of the first examples of technology being used to aid in surveillance of subjects and draws the parallel to present-day reality television production as the modern form of surveillance. Montemurro's piece, which focuses on examining the technology that contributes to surveillance in the popular show *Big Brother*, notes that contestants are not in control over their representation. She states, "Contestants are usually required to wear microphones and sign contracts that dictate that they may be filmed at any time or all of the time. However, they do not know how much of what they do or which specific interactions will actually become a part of the television show."¹⁶ Ultimately, Montemurro suggests it is the producers that have the power over contestants or subjects in reality television because they choose what is shown.

Media scholar Mark Andrejevic also mentions the concept of the "omnipresent gaze of the camera and audience" in his *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. Looking at reality shows such as *Temptation Island*, which aired in the early 2000s, Andrejevic mentions the idea of voyeurism and the power and control associated with this "voyeuristic fetish" tied to reality television viewing. He argues that viewers are part of this "omnipresent gaze" as they are invited into the private relationships unfolding on these shows.¹⁷

Dubrofsky, who as mentioned earlier, completed a case study on *The Bachelor*, argues that participants in reality television shows do not have "complete autonomy" in how they present their selves under surveillance. She argues that the mediated presentation (i.e., the construction of montage sequences and the overall editing process involved in reality television filmmaking) plays an important role in the construction of participant identity. These deliberate editing decisions are not communicated to viewers, and they are often not communicated to participants, thus taking their own representation out of their hands. Hill (2004) argues, "All too often ordinary people have little recourse to complain about the way they have been treated or represented in reality programs."¹⁸

Reality TV & Artistic Sacrifice

One issue inextricably bound to reality television is the criticism that it has departed from "quality" programming or earlier modes of observational documentary. It has been widely argued that reality television is representative of "trash" culture and some have even gone so far as to say that it is playing an active role in making Americans as a whole, less intelligent.

Scholar Junhow Wei conducted an ethnographic study at a reality television production company called Sunshine productions. Through fieldwork, which included observation but also in-depth interviews with employees, Wei uncovered the struggle that workers in this industry face when producing these shows. Wei found that workers struggle to maintain and often have to sacrifice their "artistic integrity" when producing these shows, which ultimately do not meet their standards of artistic quality. Wei spent time with workers, was included in several planning meetings and parties, and also conducted several personal interviews where workers openly expressed frustrations. In one interview, a worker stated:

Well, I think that every single shot is based on will it have an impact on the buyer. Will it make—every single thing is based on is the buyer going to look at it and think, "Cool, I like that." It has nothing to do with my emotions or anybody's emotions. It has everything to do with is the buyer going to sit there and have a reaction to it, because otherwise you're wasting your time.¹⁹

Many employees expressed that "heightened drama" along with "larger than life characters" are more appealing to buyers and viewers, thus producers and editors are pressured to manipulate situations to

16 Beth Montemurro, "Surveillance and Power: The Impact of New Technologies on Reality Television Audiences," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, New York, August 11-14, 2007), 6-8.

17 Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 173-175.

18 Annette Hill, *Reality TV Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London: Routledge, 2005), 108.

19 Junhow Wei, "Dealing With Reality: Market demands, artistic integrity, and identity work in reality television production," *Poetics* 40 (2012), 451.

heighten entertainment value, even at the perhaps ethical cost of skewing reality. From a wealth of footage, producers and editors are forced to construct a kind of narrative or storyline. Because of the market pressures to create “sellable” entertainment, these decision-makers are likely to position footage in a way that creates the most entertainment value.

While Wei was on location filming a sizzle reel for a reality show called *Riders*, a show about a traveling carnival company, he had an interesting interaction with one of the junior level development associates who was clearly reluctant to focus on the dirty, ramshackle living quarters of the carnival workers. When Wei asked the employee why he felt this way, his grave response was “Well, that’s not really the truth.” He explained to Wei that he did not want to continue to perpetuate negative, inaccurate stereotypes about the carnival workers.

Viewer Involvement and Feelings of Identification

Several scholars argue that the nature of reality television causes viewers to feel as though they are thoroughly involved in the lives of reality TV subjects. Some scholars have argued that because these programs invite viewers to become involved in the lives of ordinary people, there is an increased level of identification with the subjects in both mental and emotional ways.²⁰ The danger in this, of course, is that with the increase in feelings of identification, there may also be an increase in viewers’ perceptions of reality. If viewers assume that they know the characters, they may potentially forget what could be staged events. They may also forget the good possibility that subjects may be acting a certain way because producers have encouraged them to act in this way or “play up” certain behaviors. Quoting Jaffe (2005), who wrote, “It is a significant issue for viewers to be lulled into a belief in something so artificially constructed,” Coyne, Robinson and Nelson note in their article on relational aggression in reality television.²¹

VIII. Conclusion

As the findings of this study suggest, our persistent and curious infatuation with reality television is dangerous because it continues to perpetuate the negative stereotypes associated with the people of the American South. Unintelligent, crude and violent behavior manifested itself across all shows under observation in this study. Through industry pressures to create entertainment, producers are forced to construct individual and cultural identities that are perhaps not representative of reality. The nature of reality television allows an artificial sense of closeness to the characters. This prevents a critical and analytical study of the show and thereby allows stereotypes to proliferate unchallenged. We are consuming without thinking. We are laughing without reflecting. We are exploiting a segment of society at the expense of real understanding and in the process, relegating an entire cultural community to a singular distorted vision.

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