

EVERYDAY INTIMACIES: THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY IN POST-  
RECESSIONARY SOUTHERN REALITY TELEVISION

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Rather than taking a broad genre-based approach to analyzing reality television as digital media, this dissertation understands the field of reality programming as operating within a new media model and as composed of micro-genres. My project specifically explores the “intimate” micro-genre, considering the politics of respectability and gendered labor as foundational elements in what is a particularly fertile and volatile site of meaning-making. Grounding my analysis in a comprehensive map of reality programming allows me to explore a pattern of politically rich programs set in the South. Shows such as *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *Real Housewives of Atlanta* offer insight into the circulation and currency of race, class, and gender with significant theoretical implications for an economically and politically unstable national moment. Using an intersectional lens to investigate reality television, my project seeks to better understand the gears driving our cultural anxieties and media trends through an analysis of digital paratexts, branding, labor, and affect.



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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Micro-Genres, Intimate Programming, and the South

In 2012, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* premiered on TLC with its family of wild, country rednecks who viewers remembered from *Toddlers & Tiaras* (TLC, 2009-present) where six-year-old Alana competed for pageant crowns. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s fourth episode attracted nearly three millions viewers and earned a 1.3 rating, ranking higher than cable news and broadcast cable coverage of the simultaneously airing Republican National Convention (O'Connell "Here Comes Honey Boo Boo"). What precipitated this staggering viewership of a show still finding its bearings on its network, as a spin-off of another popular program, and amidst unflattering public controversy surrounding the family's stint on *Toddlers & Tiaras*?<sup>1</sup> Alana and her family entered a televisual landscape growing increasingly saturated with Southern reality programming and coping with the aftermath of a recession, both movements yet to be fully theorized in reality television scholarship.

Over the past twenty years, reality television programming has become the dominant televisual form, both in the U.S. and globally. The capacious, fluid nature of reality television allows for these shows to reflect a range of identities and behaviors not typical of other genres of programming. As I began researching this project, I obsessed over every popular reality program with even a whiff of resistant, bizarre, or contradictory identity politics. I didn't set out to write about the South, but I continue to see patterns, cultural and industrial, which link this Southern trend in reality television production to the recessionary fallout. I was raised in the South like my parents and their

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<sup>1</sup> I address all of these elements in more detail in chapter IV, "*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s Politics of

parents before them. I appreciate and am often confounded by the variety of Souths articulated by reality television. “Everyday Intimacies” is an attempt to reckon with that variety of representation and its cultural significance.

This project provides two important interventions in the field of academic scholarship on reality television. First, I establish a genre-based map of reality television that reveals the wide variety of ways that reality television works, as a cultural and industrial product, ways that are often generalized by scholarship that imagines it as a monolithic genre. I divide reality TV into five micro-genres: crime, competitive, intervention, workplace, and intimate. This generic map, grounded in historical context and close readings of narrative and formal techniques, enables new reality television scholarship with nuanced analyses and theorizations that account for how race affects the performance of class as in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Bravo, 2008-present) or how the performances of gender on *Duck Dynasty* (A&E, 2012-present) are inextricably linked to the show’s prescriptive heterosexuality. These nuanced analyses consider the ways in which reality television micro-genres regulate and structure content, especially in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Second, I utilize the map of micro-genres to analyze the prolific site of “intimate” reality programming, which is characterized by its domestic settings, emphasis on the dramatic tensions and affections of close interpersonal relationships, and glossy, denaturalized formal style. The intimate micro-genre is a productive site for analysis due to its representations of and critical engagement with intersectional identities and its potential for critiquing social power structures and injustice. Intimate programming allows for moments of resistance because of its melodramatic, affective register in

specific ways unattainable by the other, more prescriptive micro-genres. The theorization I provide of the intimate micro-genre counters the neoliberal paradigm that dominates most scholarship on reality television. The neoliberal paradigm constrains substantive analysis of race, gender, class, and sexuality due to its insistence on framing culture from a masculinist perspective. Approaching intimate reality shows from the map of micro-genres qualifies my analyses to address the complex, intersectional identities that are central to intimate programming and situate them within historical televisual legacies of genre and production as well as contemporary cultural events related to the Great Recession (addressed at length in Chapter II).

The second half of this project is comprised of three case studies of intimate reality programs set in the South: *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Unified by their contemporaneousness, commercial success, Southern settings, and flair for the dramatic, these shows articulate three distinct cultural standpoints. I examine these shows with particular focus on their recent seasons to evaluate the ways in which they each register the economic and political changes of America's post-recession era. Using these programs as localized site of change, I contend with how the media industry and culture at large absorbed and coped with the anxiety and melancholy following the Great Recession of 2008 as illustrated by the patterns of political identity produced and negotiated by reality programming set in the South. This project seeks to explore and establish an approach and a vocabulary for grappling with how behavior in television shows is regulated and produced. What are the boundaries of how bodies and identities move and work? This is especially significant when thinking about the South and its strict politics of respectability.

The South exists in the national imaginary as a place always and already dramatic; the region is both home to the traumatic histories of slavery and Jim Crow and a sophisticated, thriving cultural landscape undergoing substantial economic and population growth (Kotkin; Flax). The South is consistently figured as a place where melodramatic excesses are woven into the social fabric of the everyday and made visible through cultural productions of all kinds about Southern life. We can see how this leveraging of the South as a site rife with melodrama shapes the type of stories told and the way in which those stories are crafted in what is perhaps the most recognizable story of the South, the 1939 David O. Selznick film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel, *Gone with the Wind*.

Scarlett O'Hara, the story's main character, is the embodiment of the Southern belle—a small white female body, coiffed for the pleasure of would-be suitors, and whose primary use-value is decorative. Scarlett represents the epoch of Southern culture undergirded by a vibrant slave trade and *Gone with the Wind* follows the disaster of the Civil War and Scarlett's stuttering attempts at recovery afterward. Storylines include unrequited love, untimely death, financial ruin and are produced with a swelling score, elaborate costumes, expressive character acting, and painterly landscapes to both emphasize and naturalize the dramatic (to the South) at every turn. The film ends with Scarlett despairing that her husband is leaving her, appropriately representative of themes resonant today like anxiety, loneliness, economic uncertainty, and regret. Further examples include films like *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997), and *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), the landmark novels of Southern authors such as Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), William Faulkner (1897-1962), Carson

McCullers (1917-67), Flannery O'Connor (1925-64), Harper Lee (born 1926), and Charlaine Harris (born 1951), and television programs such as *Designing Women* (CBS, 1986-93), *House of Payne* (TBS, 2006-12), *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-14), *Treme* (HBO, 2010-13), and *Hart of Dixie* (The CW, 2011-present). The melodrama of these works and as imagined as inherent to Southern culture holistically give shape to a specific structure of feeling informing the intimate micro-genre's programs set in the South. I'll talk more about this structure of feeling later in this chapter.

The post-2008 surge in reality programming set in and concerned with the South, especially these shows steeped in melodrama, offers a point of entry for studying patterns of media productions interested in the post-recessionary era's ongoing anxiety and melancholy. These three shows, in particular, represent a range of financial circumstances and class statuses. *Duck Dynasty* features a wildly wealthy family of entrepreneurs who present themselves as down-home Louisiana rednecks who haven't let their millions go to their heads. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is about a white working class family living in rural Georgia and making entertainment of the frugal habits they practice to get by such as gathering and cooking road kill and extreme couponing. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* are a group of wealthy working women, mostly entrepreneurs of some type, with new money and embracing all the luxuries they can afford. The representations of class in these shows inform how the cultural work these programs do is declarative and interpretive, that is, the characters are constantly negotiating and articulating their identities against and within the Southern social order while interpreting the value, relevance, and boundaries of respectability politics.

In their discourse on and performance of identity, the characters of these programs insist on race, gender, class, and geography as unifying terms. *Duck Dynasty* insists on white patriarchy—comprised of a specific type of rural, Southern masculinity and heterosexism—as its unifying force and goal. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* centers white, poor, fat matriarchy as a means of resisting methods of prescriptive citizenship such as Southern culture’s rigid codes of conduct and the omnipresent pressures of a capitalist culture amidst a recession.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, these programs revel in the tension between the messy, dramatic playfulness that is characteristic of intimate reality programming—displaying these exuberant excesses via narrative, aesthetics, production, and paratextual presences—and the often unforgiving structures of Southern society, replete with unspoken behavioral rules, dress codes, and class boundaries that police consumption habits, social venues and groups, and voice and visibility.

The intimate micro-genre is instructive for understanding the structures of Southern society and offers a focused perspective onto the industrial context of current reality television production. The micro-genres capture and organize the narrative and cultural sprawl of reality television, but also mirror the industrial changes that have followed the end of U.S. television’s broadcast era, particularly in terms of how audiences are imagined and defined. Broadcast television addressed a homogenous audience or as William Uricchio describes it, “an ideologically coherent national public” (60). Within the broadcast era, this public was imagined to be white, male, heterosexual, and middle class. In contemporary television programming, reality television challenges

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<sup>2</sup> How I think about the declarative and interpretive modes of work happening on reality television, as well as the intentionality of the ways in which characters insist on identity unification for socio-political means is due to the influence and work of Courtney Thorsson. See the introduction to her book, *Women’s Work: Nationalism and Contemporary Women’s Work* (2013) for more on her establishment and deployment of this theoretical frame.

any “coherent national public” (60). Instead, reality television addresses a multiplicity of identities that are fought over and articulated. Joshua Gamson argues that in the negotiation of identities on talk shows (in the 1990s), such representational work is often contradictory, but the visibility afforded to individuals and people groups who may otherwise remain marginalized or invisible is significant and worthy of analysis. Gamson says, “[talk shows] are spots not only of visibility but of the subsequent redrawing of the lines between normal and abnormal. They are, in a very real sense, battlegrounds over what sexuality and gender can be in this country...” (5). This project picks up the mantle of analyzing the ways in which identity is disputed, challenged, made sense of, and formed within reality television.

### Beyond Neoliberalism

Most scholarship, such as benchmark works like Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray’s *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* and Mark Andrejevic’s *Reality TV: the Work of Being Watched*, attributes the beginnings of the genre of reality programming to *An American Family* on PBS in 1973. But it wasn’t until the cable era and programs such as *COPS* (Fox; Spike, 1989-present), *America’s Most Wanted* (Fox; Lifetime, 1988-2012), *America’s Funniest Home Videos* (ABC, 1989-present), and *Star Search* (CBS, 1983-1995; 2003-4) that the contours of the genre began to take shape. Programs like these prepared the way for the emergence of *The Real World* on MTV in 1992 and the version of reality television that dominates airwaves today. Scholarship and criticism accompanying the genre’s development has been slower in coming, largely because of the devalued nature of these shows. For a decade, television scholarship, produced by



scholars such as Jack Bratich, Laurie Ouellette, Rachel Dubrofsky, Mark Andrejevic, Anita Biressi, Andrea Nunn, Brenda Weber, Su Holmes, and Deborah Jermyn, has used a neoliberal lens to understand reality television.<sup>3</sup>

While neoliberal theory has helped us understand the mechanisms of surveillance and control evident particularly in an earlier era of reality television, as reality television has proliferated and expanded into a wide range of micro-genres, the neoliberal lens has proven more limited. For example, in “Programming Reality” Jack Bratich discusses A&E’s *Intervention* (2005-13) and argues that reality television transforms its characters in order to create “malleable subjects adequate to new economic and social conditions” (7). While Bratich’s explanation of neoliberalism in relation to *Intervention* is compelling, his theory, employed by many media scholars, cannot satisfactorily account for the rich variety of practices present in the contemporary field of reality television. The relevance of neoliberalism is historically determined and it would be a mistake to assume that this frame with very specific economic and political lenses could capture a fully accurate portrait of a cultural moment as evidenced via media.

In order to understand reality television’s propensity for control while at the same time attending to the ways in which the genre has increasingly provided space for intersectional identities, this project focuses on the period following the 2008 economic collapse. Our contemporary, post-recessionary moment is characterized by political volatility, manifested in the Occupy Wall Street movement, the racist discourse surrounding the murders of African American teenage boys Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis and the trials of their killers, and the ongoing policing of women’s bodies and

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<sup>3</sup> See the References Cited page for information on each of these scholars’ works (spanning 2004-2014) that engage reality television from a standpoint primarily interested in the manifestations and consequences of neoliberalism.

rights. These cultural negotiations of values and policies are seen in reality television via confrontation with the public failure of a national financial icon (Wall Street) and coping with the fallout of its negligence affects the lives of characters who are black, white, gay, straight, upper crust, working class, and occasionally somewhere in between.

Analyses and theorizations of reality television, especially those programs within the intimate micro-genre, require an attention to the intersectionality of identity (i.e. there are machinations of identity and power at work beyond gender or class—indeed, these facets cannot be accurately understood apart from each other) that the neoliberal paradigm has not proven itself capable of supporting. Intersectional analyses offer valuable insight into the power structures shaping identity, or, as Gamson says, what kinds of identity performances are *allowed* in a particular cultural moment (5). To understand how we arrived at this moment, we must survey the body of scholarly literature on reality television.

### A Brief History of Reality Television Scholarship

Analysis of reality television to date has addressed the areas of its association as a field with documentary; the delineation and/or blending of forms; various types of representation such as race, gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality; globalization and permutations of narrative and form; its contributions to celebrity culture; and the effects of reality television as form on a national makeover culture inextricably linked to surveillance and neoliberalism. Biressi and Nunn's *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (2005) is a study of reality television's relation to realism and documentary. Multiple clear media legacies—documentary, game shows, soap opera, etc.—contribute to reality

television as a form; this multiplicity is reflected in the fact that most scholars agree that the one thing all reality programming has in common is hybridity of form.

Significant studies of the blending of form include Bill Nichols' *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (1994) and articles by Jon Dovey (2000) and John Corner (2000). Scholars who have contributed important work on reality television and representation, critically engaging intersectional identity, political stakes, and cultural histories include: Amanda Ann Klein (2011), Kristen Warner (2011), Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012), Rachel Dubrofsky and Antoine Hardy (2008; 2011), and Jennifer Pozner (2010). Marwan M. Kraidy and Katherine Sender's *The Politics of Reality Television: Global Perspectives* (2010) is the only book-length examination of reality television in a global and globalized context, which does the crucial work of bringing a globalized perspective to an industry that reflects national values and partially sustains itself through the importing and exporting of culture via programs reproduced in a variety of countries, cultures, and languages.<sup>4</sup>

Influential collections dedicated to analysis of form, content, history, and industry include Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette's *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (2004) and Su Holmes' and Deborah Jermyn's *Understanding Reality Television* (2004). Mark Andrejevic's *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (2004) and Rachel Dubrofsky's "Fallen Women in Reality TV: A Pornography of Emotion" (2011) both emphasize the importance of surveillance to understanding the cultural and political implications of reality television writ large. Brenda Weber's *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity* (2009) and Laurie Ouellette's *Better Living Through Reality*

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<sup>4</sup> The best examples of this im/exportation include *Big Brother* (Veronica, 1999-present), *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-present), *Supernanny* (ABC; Style; NBC, 2004-12).

*TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (2008) join the contributions of Andrejevic and Dubrofsky in claiming neoliberalism as foundational to the narrative of reality television in the U.S. These works have bookended the most recent wave of reality television scholarship and have made it difficult to talk about reality television in North America outside of the context of neoliberalism.

This dissertation enters into the scholarly conversation at a juncture that requires a reevaluation of the usefulness of the neoliberal paradigm (as a way of understanding and narrating the relationship between reality television programs and the cultural moment from which they emerge) because of the recent proliferation of intimate and workplace programming operating beyond the scope of the neoliberal paradigm. The scholarship with which my work is in most direct conversation includes Jack Bratich's pieces on reality television, "Nothing is Left Alone for Too Long: Reality Programming and Control Society Subjects" (2006) and "Affective Convergence in Reality Television: A Study in Divergence Culture" (2011), which argue for framing reality television in terms of intervention and transformation *rather than* representation. Bratich claims reality television demonstrates that affectivity (which he uses synonymously with "social bonds") is programmable and emphasizes the relational nature of being. He emphasizes the importance of affective and transformative relations over the political forces of identity and power that I take up in subsequent chapters.

Misha Kavka's books on reality television, *Reality Television, Affect, and Intimacy: Reality Matters* (2008) and *Reality TV* (2012), establish the significance of intimacy to reality television and define the terms of engagement for scholarship on reality programming, though the books lack robust analyses of power and intersectional

identities. *Reality Television, Affect, and Intimacy* argues that reality television is the ultimate example of how television functions culturally, as “the technology of intimacy” that creates intimate relations across and through the screen (xi, 2). Kavka argues that reality television involves a performance of reality that generates intimacy as its affect (which is the zone of potential emotions). Further developing the broadly conceived theorization of reality programming in *Reality Television, Affect, and Intimacy*, in *Reality TV* Kavka takes up questions of reality television and genre. Using an adaptation of Foucault’s genealogical method, Kavka analyzes programming patterns and the multiplicities of reality television’s origins that result in a three-generation schema of reality television: the camcorder generation, the competition generation, and the celebrity generation (4). Kavka’s genealogical account illustrates the difficulties of categorizing reality television while doing the important work of accounting for the shifts in the genre and the attendant cultural implications.

This dissertation builds on the work of Kavka and Bratich, making a case for the importance of micro-genres in understanding reality television and enabling thorough analyses of the power and privilege evident in contemporary reality television (and its paratexts) that can no longer be explained by a neoliberal paradigm. The intimate and workplace micro-genres represent the newest turn in reality programming and are also the micro-genres most unable to be explained through the neoliberal paradigm. We need to understand the meaning of neoliberalism as it circulates in media scholarship and discourse on reality television and turn a critical lens onto the neoliberal paradigm for its inability to thoroughly account for shifts in the function and content of reality programming.

## Neoliberalism, Defined and Applied

At this present moment, the paradigm of neoliberalism is so enmeshed in U.S. daily life that it is prudent to call upon Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony as (historically determined) common sense, and advocate for rejecting neoliberalism as neither acceptable nor sensible. Neoliberalism, according to Wendy Brown, is a form of economic rationality that informs and shapes culture and society. Popular understandings of neoliberal rationality include: a (radically) free market achieved through competition, de-regulation and elimination of tariffs; financial and social policies that privilege businesses over financially (or otherwise) vulnerable citizens; social and cultural destruction, and long-term environmental depletion and ruination (Brown). These concepts do not reside only in the realm of the abstract or in distant, intangible entities such as the federal economy; they determine the contours of our everyday lived experiences and are reflected in reality television.

Some of the clearest manifestations of neoliberalism in daily life are direct results of governmentality. Brown defines the relation between neoliberalism and governmentality thusly, "...this rationality is emerging as governmentality – a mode of governance encompassing but not limited to the state, and one which produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social." As scholars, teachers, and media consumers, we must discuss neoliberalism as more than "a bundle of economic policies with inadvertent political and social consequences" and push forward in making clear the political underpinnings and subversive social functions of the neoliberal agenda and its attendant governmentality (Brown).

As we critique the neoliberal turn and its consequences, I want to think carefully

about the scholarship we're producing and its affiliations and effects. First, it seems that within current scholarship, there are enough publications to fulfill the obligation scholars have to explore neoliberalism in our contemporary moment. Second, the position taken by most scholars studying these topics has its own political pitfalls. Scholarship that relies on neoliberalism and subsequent governmentality is aligned with a narrow history of white, male, first-world intellectuals such as Deleuze and Foucault. The continued privileging of these theorists at the expense of a diversity of perspectives is mirrored in the books, articles, and (academic) institutional stances that address neoliberalism and reality television.

The dominance of such neoliberal-focused scholarship has resulted in a dearth of criticism interested in race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and ableism in reality television. This isn't to say that these subjects have received no treatment in the scholarship or criticism on reality television, but instead to demonstrate that there are issues of justice, equality, and privilege requiring more nuanced handling than the neoliberal paradigm can offer. Not all culture can be reduced to a mere reflection of neoliberalism and there are historical and political forces that exceed the neoliberal paradigm, a paradigm that typically fails to accommodate intersectional identities, as evidenced in scholarship by Ouellette and Bratich.

The neoliberal paradigm for understanding reality television posits that the form is born of a need to discipline and regulate citizens. Similar to, though not a literal interpretation of Foucault's panopticon, this paradigm argues that the surveillance built into the production of reality television modifies the behavior of the general audience. Two of reality television's most popular micro-genres, competitive shows and expert

intervention shows, are premised on the political ideals of neoliberalism. Participants or characters who want to be considered successful must qualify as self-reliant, responsible, submissive to surveillance, and invested in the ideals of citizenship and civic duty. This is evidenced through communal evaluation and judgment (elimination) and through the behaviors and characters that are prized and rewarded.

For instance, self-reliance and responsibility are prized in Discovery's competitive series *Naked and Afraid* (2013-present) in which contestants have to survive in the wilderness for 21 days with a partner while naked. Winners are celebrated as paragons of entrepreneurialism and conquerors of the wilderness. The theme of responsibility for oneself overlaps, but evaluating and cultivating citizenship is key to understanding the work of intervention shows like *What Not to Wear* (TLC, 2003-2013) and *Supernanny* (ABC; Style; NBC, 2004-2012) that guide participants through carefully directed makeovers and lifestyle modifications to conform more closely with the national ideals as promoted by the shows. Self-reliance and citizenship are taken as givens while submission to surveillance and civic duty are foundational to competitive shows such as *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-present) and *Big Brother* (Veronica, 1999-present) where contestants are under invasive 24-hour surveillance (footage can be accessed online) and must form alliances, however temporary, in service to the greater good and in pursuit of the grand prize.

Laurie Ouellette uses neoliberalism as a frame for analysis of shows like the ones listed above. Ouellette says, “[r]eality programming is one site where neoliberal approaches to citizenship have in fact materialized on television. [Shows] ... construct community relations in terms of individual competition and self-enterprising” (“Take



Responsibility for Yourself,” 224). She continues to say that such shows present and champion “an intensified government of the self” (224). Such governing structures are critical to shows like *Survivor*, *Wife Swap* (ABC, 2004-10; 2013-present), and *Hoarders* (A&E, 2009-13). *Survivor* requires teamwork despite naming only one winner and thus preventing any true collaboration, *Wife Swap* teaches that neglecting self-improvement, particularly in terms of familial relations, may cost you the respect, love, and loyalty of your loved ones, and *Hoarders* emphasizes that intervention is simply a starting point for a lifelong pursuit of self-bettering and discipline.

This analysis by Ouellette represents the shortcomings of scholarship employing the neoliberal paradigm. Such work points out largely abstract political forces visible in these programs, yet fails to account for how race, gender, class, and other aspects of identity contribute to or influence the cultural situating and functionality of the shows. The ways of being a citizen and governing oneself vary widely depending on gender, race, class, and sexuality. The mobility and visibility granted to people as a result of the confluence of those elements largely limits the type of citizen one can be and neoliberalism fails to adequately address these different factors. As Stuart Hall once observed of Foucault, neoliberalism as an analytic theorizes power but neglects relationships of force. Foucault has not provided a robust, flexible framework for thinking about the intersectional modalities of race, gender, and class (“The Work of Representation”).

If scholarship critiquing neoliberalism includes bodies, those bodies are usually generic subject/citizen bodies rather than bodies in particular configurations of access to privilege and justice or experiences of disadvantage and inequality. Gayatri Spivak’s

1988 “Can the Subaltern Speak” critiques first-world intellectuals such as Deleuze and Foucault for exerting their privilege and silencing the third-world Other. I am not claiming the subaltern for reality television, but I am suggesting that scholars relying on the work of Deleuze and Foucault, especially when discussing neoliberal governmentality, must take care to not replicate the erasures and silencing of perspectives Spivak critiqued in their work initially. Instead, we must be aware of the tendency to apply political concepts and frameworks wholesale, without tending to the details of identity, privilege, and place that inform and appear on reality television.

Laurie Ouellette, in her discussion of *Judge Judy* (CBS, 1996-present) and neoliberal citizenship says such programs “*construct* templates for citizenship that complement the privatization of public life, the collapse of the welfare state, and, most important, the discourse of individual choice and personal responsibility” (“Take Responsibility for Yourself,” 224). In her analysis of the program, Ouellette acknowledges the difficulties women and women of color, specifically, have in upholding *Judge Judy*’s prescribed model of citizenship, but her article lacks critical engagement with the institutional forces and structures that create these difficulties such as lack of access to financial and educational resources, the scarcity of affordable childcare, and rising costs of housing and healthcare.

#### Expanding the Frame: Considerations of Identity, Power, and Melodrama

Rather than ignoring such institutionalized difficulties, the melodramatic nature of

intimate reality programming often means that such everyday, feminized concerns are foregrounded. Linda Williams has described melodrama as being more accurately understood in terms of affect, or a structure of feeling, rather than a genre strictly defined by formal qualities (“Affect as a Rhetorical Strategy”).<sup>5</sup> Understanding the micro-genre of intimate reality television requires a definition of melodrama as a functioning affect that gives shape and structure to the abundance of emotion, bodies, and melodrama that characterizes these shows. There are formal and thematic qualities, characteristic of melodrama, that are visible in intimate reality television like, “emotional and psychologically charged situations as against narrative and linear progression towards a specific end,” “lapses in realism,” “excesses of spectacle,” “displays of primal, even infantile emotions,” and “narratives that seem circular and repetitive” (White, M. 338; Williams, L. “Film Bodies.” 3). Lynne Joyrich defines melodrama within its postmodern context, saying that melodrama is where “true stakes of meaning, morality, and truth” are located in an otherwise unstable period full of empty signifiers, significance with particular resonance in a post-recessionary era populated with questions of meaning, morality, and truth (235).

This melodramatic affect is visible in the domestic environments of the shows that shape the characters’ affective bonding and also optimizes affect’s potential for community- and world-building. Lauren Berlant describes the community created through these affective bonds as an intimate public sphere that:

Whether linked to women or other nondominant people, [...] flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain

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<sup>5</sup>I will draw on Raymond Williams’ work on structures of feeling in *Marxism and Literature* to craft my own theorization and application of intimate reality programming’s specific structure of feeling.

experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an x. The intimate public provides anchors for realistic, critical assessment of the way things are and provides material that foments enduring, resisting, overcoming, and enjoying becoming an x.” (viii)

Thus, the world-building, or intimate public sphere, enabled by the evolving partnership between reality programming and celebrity culture—evidenced through the inextricable links between reality shows and the other sites where star texts are produced such as social media, gossip magazines such as *Us Weekly*, and other entertainment programming like E!’s satirical weekly digest *The Soup* (2004-present)—can be attributed to the melodramatic affect and structure of the shows. This structure of feeling, one that this project will prove to be specifically melodramatic and Southern, informs both the narrative construction of stars of the shows and the affective assembling of celebrities of popular culture.

The main characters of intimate programming, consistent with its melodramatic heritage, are usually women. Most of these women are also businesswomen. The shows feature women’s work by following their careers but also by making transparent the labor of being a woman in a relationship. The type of relationships featured represent the range of love and affection from romantic partnerships to parent/child and employee/employer relationships. The way that these women cultivate their personal brands and business ventures is by performing emotional labor for their programs. This melodramatic structure of feeling is made legible through culturally specific codes of conduct and politics of (dis)respectability that govern behaviors, inform shared social norms, and give

viewers a tether from reality television to reality as they can interpret how similar situations occur in their own lives. The structure of feeling is created in the texts of the shows and is shaped by culturally resonant themes, regional affects and lexicons, and accepted preferences and expectations.

The boundaries that shape and define these expectations and behaviors are often only visible, particularly in Southern culture, when you bump up against them. These boundaries also differ along lines of gender, race, and class. There are evident material differences in *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* visible in their homes, wardrobes, vehicles, careers, etc. And those material differences also change the boundaries within which life is both possible and legible, as evidenced through the particular class-based differences in the characters' speech, mannerisms, bodies, values, experiences, and ways of being and moving in the world.

*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* emphasize relationships and melodrama and both have strict rules, different on each show, for how their characters experience the world. Much of intimate programming is characterized by focus on powerful, business-savvy women whose lived experiences and relational prowess challenge misogynistic political rhetoric. Both workplace and intimate programming contain controversial performances and productions of gender, race, class, and sexuality that appropriately reflect the debates that comprise our nation's current reality over the governing of bodies by institutions, policies, and language. I tease out the nuances of how privilege and political identity define and limit bodies, personalities, and lived experiences because they are crucial to understanding how these shows operate as cultural snapshots. These definitions and limitations reflect back to viewers the value and

belief systems the television industry sees as most likely to resonate with as broad an audience as the advertising dollar can buy. My analyses aim to reveal how systems of power operate within reality programming. In order to do this, we must first understand the realities of contemporary Southern life and the implications of representing the South on screen.

### The Southern Turn: Political Drama

During and following 2008, programming set in the U.S. South emerged as a major trend in reality TV. This shift to the South was partly due to new economic initiatives enacted by southern states to reward producers for shooting on location and partly due to increasing industry recognition of Southerners as an underrepresented and under-marketed demographic (Catlin, “Crash Course;” Mathiason). Though it is impossible to attribute causality to this pattern of reality programming and the economic crisis, these new shows reflect how the media industry copes with and understands, or narrates, the stress and anxiety of a post-recession era. This Southern turn in reality programming also reveals a broader cultural coping mechanism of displacing anything loathsome or difficult to understand onto the South. (McPherson 6).

While the plantation no longer has a hold over the fantasies of our national imagination, fascination with the lore, history, characters, and evolution of the U.S. South persists. Thus, the contemporary spate of Southern reality programming is able to flexibly address multiple iterations of Southern life. Reality television’s conventional excesses and sensationalizing, characteristic of the melodrama inherent to the intimate micro-genre, find a natural fit in the South, purported home of vampires and voodoo, debutante

belles and welfare queens, rednecks and refined gentlemen. Such fantastic characters and complicated histories often frame the (Deep) South as a place out of space and time, a site where social progress is evaluated from a purely local rubric and nostalgia is expressed for what could have been had secession been a viable move. The South figures in the national imagination as drama-rich terrain, a fertile land of excessive affections, vulgarities, and expressions (McPherson 17; Bronstein 56). McPherson says the South is imagined as:

[A]lternating between (if not simultaneously representing) the moral other and the moral center of U.S. society, both keeper of its darkest secrets and former site of a ‘grand yet lost’ civilization, the site of both church bombings and good, old-fashioned family values. (17)

The way the South figures varies across the reality television landscape, with characteristic trends among the micro-genres, but the slipperiness of identity and performativity infused with the excesses of melodrama makes for rich, engaging programming, or at least that’s how the networks market it.

These Southern reality shows, exemplified by *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, mobilize stereotypes of political identities to stabilize and reassure a nation reeling from a faltering economy and the visible failures of masculinity, resulting in broad social anxiety assuaged by the affirmation of such stereotypes. The interdependence of the economic context and articulation of political identities against and through stereotypes further substantiate the insufficiency of the neoliberal paradigm for critically attending to reality television. The same stereotypes mobilized on these shows are simultaneously disrupted by resistant, progressive

characters and, as Gamson argues, the power of visibility (221). Gamson says:

For people whose life experience is so heavily tilted toward invisibility, whose nonconformity, even when it looks very much like conformity, discredits them and disenfranchises them, daytime TV talk shows are a big shot of visibility and accreditation. It looks, for a moment, like you own this place. (5)

For reality television more than talk shows, thanks to the serialization, ensemble cast, and integration of social media important to most intimate programs, characters who may have previously only been granted the televisual spotlight during a daytime talk show now have the luxury of more space, more time, and more direction over their performances, production, and professional lives.

It is hard to imagine the loud and large, and excessively embodied and fiercely resistant characters of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*'s Nene Leakes or *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s June Shannon receiving thoughtful, sustained treatment on recurring seasons of successful network television before the advent of intimate reality programming.<sup>6</sup> The breadth and depth of lived experience brought to network television through these women and others like them makes all the more poignant and material the consequences that follow a recession and the potential for resistance to the related political maelstrom.

### The Intimate Micro-Genre

As gestured toward with Nene and June, reality television is a complex site where

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<sup>6</sup> Unruly, excessive characters like Roseanne Conner (played by Roseanne Barr on *Roseanne*, 1988-97) and Fran Fine (played by Fran Drescher on *The Nanny*, 1993-99), paved the way. Their characters are perhaps suggestive of reality television that was yet to come as their characters both share their given names.



marginalized identities are celebrated and exploited, deconstructed and reified and this happens in the most interesting and complex of ways in intimate programming. The categorical micro-genre map (established in chapter II) uses new media theory and feminist media studies frames to focus specifically on synchronic case studies, representative of this post-recessionary cultural moment, in the intimate and workplace micro-genres of programming. These two micro-genres are underrepresented in current scholarship, perhaps because they cannot be adequately understood or theorized using the neoliberal model that dominates reality television scholarship and criticism.

In the second part of this project, I map case studies that analyze the negotiating of intersectional identity that gives shape to these programs. My analyses illuminate how reality programming narrates current anxieties over gender, race, and power. Specifically, recent national conversations about rape, welfare, birth control, same-sex marriage, and abortion—are focal points of *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Via close reading, I demonstrate how the representations on these programs offer roadmaps for what it means to be women and men, urban and rural, gay and straight, rich and poor, Southern and not, and white and African American or Latina/o in contemporary American culture.

The three case studies of *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, comprise the final three chapters of this project. These case studies represent the Southern trend in reality television as commercial successes and through making the question of what it means to be Southern central to each program's narratives. This centralizing of Southernness happens by shooting on location, integrating the setting into narrative and character development, and framing the shows as culturally

specific in their marketing and production. These shows evidence the ways in which the South is growing with its gated communities showcased in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*; the productive, expensive landscape of *Duck Dynasty*; and the complex small-town pluck of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. None of these shows operate in a cultural or historical vacuum (though *Duck Dynasty* seems to aspire to). The South's thorny racial histories shape the shows' narratives and operate as inescapable, pervasive subtexts.

In the chapters that follow, I attend to the ways in which reality television micro-genres regulate and structure content, especially in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality and contend with the political implications of how representations of political identity are articulated through these programs in a post-recessionary moment. Chapter II, "Mapping Reality TV: Historical and Cultural Contexts," establishes the micro-genres of reality programming I have identified, discusses the significance of such categorizations, and explains their dynamic interactions. This chapter situates these micro-genres within the history of reality television—including soap operas, cinema vérité, and the game show format—and the specific cultural condition from which they emerged. In addition to historicizing the form of reality television, I theorize its place among historical media representations of the U.S. South. All three of the case studies that follow chapter II analyze shows set in the South and the representational work they perform of negotiating political identity and explaining Southern culture to a national audience.

Chapter III, "*Duck Dynasty*: Whiteness and Family Values" takes on representations of whiteness, class, and rural masculinity in a successful show about family, politics, and power. This chapter addresses the emergence of workplace (and

hybrid workplace-intimate) shows following the 2008 economic collapse and what I describe as “fiscal masculinity:” a shorthand for workplace programming’s characteristic veneration of masculinized businesses that emphasize traditional gender roles, politically conservative “family values,” and risky circumstances as a way of re-securing the cultural centrality of men-at-work after Wall Street crumbled. I argue that *Duck Dynasty* operates under the guise of intimate reality programming, exhibiting many of its formal qualities, but ultimately operates as a classic workplace program. The show (and its masses of merchandise and paratexts) promotes neoliberal values such as self-reliance but muddles that message through narratives about family, who—spoiler alert—turn out to be more employees and colleagues than relatives.

*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is inversely positioned against *Duck Dynasty* in that its narratives are also about family, but its characters and storylines are interested in affection and cooperation rather than office work or business promotion. Where *Duck Dynasty* showcases redneck millionaires at work, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* presents a radically different South lacking in professional ambition or land holdings. Despite TLC’s framing of the show as an unforgiving look at the poverty of Southern culture, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* celebrates women and a multiplicity of vulgarities and excesses. Chapter IV, “*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*’s Politics of Resistance and Solidarity” argues that *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* crafts a logic of solidarity that defines everyday life, as experienced by the Shannon-Thompson family, as intimate, affectionate, playful, and creative.

Similarly to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* centers and lauds womanhood and melodramatic excess. It is these qualities that most explicitly

distinguish *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* from competitive or intervention shows better explained by the neoliberal paradigm. Chapter V, “‘Gone with the Wind Fabulous’: *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and the Politics of Respectability,” concludes with an analysis of African American womanhood, self-branding, digital culture, emotionality, celebrity, and affective labor in the most successful installment of Bravo’s *Real Housewives* franchise. I argue that *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* tells us that the South—as written onto modern-day Atlanta—can be urban, black, sophisticated, and progressive while still processing nostalgia for times past.

Both *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* suggest potential ways for progressive identities to evolve and make themselves at home in the South, work enabled by the particularities and historicity of the intimate micro-genre. Many shows across the competitive, crime, intervention, and workplace micro-genres do fit easily within the neoliberal frame, but in this project, my purpose is to examine these select shows, as part of or in relation to the intimate micro-genre, that challenge that mode. The solidarity, community, and collectivity sketched in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, offer resistant practices and conversations that challenge the neoliberal agenda present in other forms of reality television and across the political landscape. These practices of resistance redeem television often dismissed as worthless trash, but even more importantly, they present the radical potential of popular culture in a time in which communications corporations are increasingly monopolized, net neutrality is under siege, and the effects of capitalism and consumer culture are becoming so naturalized that they can be difficult to ascertain, much less evaluate. To

that point, my starting place is a close reading of *Duck Dynasty* and the rapidly expanding Duck Commander company that sustains the Robertson family.

## CHAPTER II

### MAPPING REALITY TV: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

#### History of the Reality Telegenre

Just as the neoliberal paradigm is incapable of explaining the proliferation of contemporary reality programming so it also does not have much to say about the history of the genre. This chapter establishes a frame from which the subsequent case studies are able to assess and analyze the potentiality and restrictions of intersectional identities as they currently appear on U.S. reality programming. Reality television's historical lineage—from the quiz and game shows of the 1950s to the dating and hidden camera shows of the 60s and 70s, to the talk, talent, and competition shows of the 80s and 90s—is prolific and varied. In a broad historical view of reality television there are three eras that I've designated (simply for ease of reference) the historical period, the early contemporary period, and the contemporary period. The historical period, from the 1950s-early 1990s, is an era most profoundly shaped by cinema vérité-inspired programs and quiz shows. Early examples include Fred W. Friendly and Edward Murrow's *Harvest of Shame* (1960), Friendly and Murrow's series *See It Now* (1951-58), and Mike Wallace's "CBS Reports: The Homosexuals" (1967) all of which were produced by CBS. Another example is a program often cited as the official birth of reality television, the PBS documentary, *An American Family*, which aired in 1973. Talent competitions such as *Star Search* (1983-95; 2003-4), quiz and dating shows such as *Two for the Money* (NBC; CBS, 1952-57), *Newlywed Game* (ABC; GSN, 1966-2013), and the prank show *Candid Camera* (ABC; NBC; CBS; PAX, 1948-2004) also defined this formative era for reality

television. These informational, educational productions brought an element of gravitas and journalistic authority to future of entertainment and infotainment programming while also providing a glimpse into the convergence culture yet to come.

The early contemporary era, 1992-2008, is broadly defined by two events: the emergence of the Fox Broadcasting Company (1986) and the new success of the home videocassette recorder (VCR) in the mid-to-late 1980s. Fox changed the landscape of broadcast television that had previously been dominated by the big three: ABC, CBS, and NBC. The primary characteristic that differentiated Fox from the big three was that it left a significant amount of its schedule free for its affiliates to air syndicated programs and live sports events. In addition, the network still produced many significant and successful programs.<sup>7</sup> The programs that most directly influenced reality television premiered in the late 1980s and aired back-to-back on Saturday nights. Those programs are *Cops* and *America's Most Wanted*. Another characteristic feature of this era is the emergence of new home technologies.

The VCR granted viewers the ability to record programming, thereby increasing their access to televisual material and introducing the public consciousness to a new archival form, possibilities for manipulation, and novel modes of control over viewing experiences. The newly commonplace remote control maximized competition among television advertisers who foresaw the consequences of “zapping” across channels and contributed to the rise of narrowcasting strategies in the industry (Bignell). This moment also witnessed a burgeoning market for home video equipment as it became more

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<sup>7</sup> Fox still produces influential and successful programming, notably *American Idol*, which debuted in 2002 and is still a cornerstone of the genre.

common for upper middle class and affluent families to own camcorders and to initiate a generation into experiences of production and editing, no matter how amateur. These technologies and their contemporary programming characterized reality television as surveillance drama while also enabling participatory culture and shifting cultural expectations regarding control over and of programming.

The third era, 2008-present, is that of contemporary, post-recession reality programming. This is the era in which convergence culture is fully realized, indicated by the rise of cable and its connections to the internet, digital television, and reality television's numerous paratexts, including social media, tabloid and popular press, and spin-off programs (Jenkins). *American Idol* (Fox, 2002-present) is a classic example of post-convergent programming as it invites viewers to experience the show live, following a traditional television format, but the show doesn't stop there. Episodes invite viewers to participate by voting via the internet, SMS messaging, or a toll-free phone number; engaging with content such as video, bios, games, quizzes online; live premieres at nationwide movie theaters featuring interactive question-and-answers session with judges via satellite and livestream; and attending national concert tours where past contestants perform. Not all reality television has *American Idol's* vast infrastructure of paratexts and entry points for interactivity, but, in order to compete, all reality shows aspire to convergence.

Two landmark shows aired before reality television had any type of generic coherency, MTV's *Real World* (1992) and CBS's *Survivor* (2000). These shows, more than any others in the U.S., popularized reality television programming. *Real World* laid the foundation for a conversation that would culminate with the controversy surrounding



MTV's *The Hills* (2006-2010) about what exactly the "reality" in "reality television" designates. *Real World* and *Survivor* taught audiences how to understand reality television as a form. They introduced the tropes, forms, and conventions now easily recognizable to reality television viewers. *Real World* and *Survivor* also initiated audiences and critics across the U.S. into semantics debates about just how *real* reality television isn't.

The Hollywood Writers Guild of America strike in 2007-8 saw a boom of reality programs in production as the strike came mid-season and forced networks to scramble for programming to fill the gaps. The cheaply produced and endlessly adaptable format of reality television was an easy solution to a complex problem, thus the number and variety of reality television programs multiplied. Drew Grant writes that networks held reality programs as their "ace up their sleeve" following the 1988 writers' strike of the Writers Guild of America against members of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers and the three networks over negotiations regarding residual payments and artistic control ("Strike Announced"). Though the strike only lasted 16 hours, networks could no longer afford to be caught unprepared for future strikes without canned or easily producible content, resulting in the development of *Unsolved Mysteries* (NBC; CBS; Lifetime; Spike, 1987-2002; 2008-10) and *COPS* ("Writers Guild of America Strike Begins"). In other words, it is important to acknowledge the economic drivers behind the birth and rapid growth of the genre. The 2008 strike marked the first appearing of conventions, tropes, styles, and characteristics across micro-genres.

Five years later, reality television remains the fastest growing form of television programming and is one of the highest-grossing genres. Both popular and scholarly

presses have attended to research on and criticism of reality television, yet critics continue to regard reality television as a single, bloated genre that encompasses a wide range of shows that all work in homogenous ways.

This tendency is a result of class-informed distinction in media studies. In other words, unlike in discussions of reality programming, there would be no need to make the point that primetime dramas on HBO do not all work the same way or address the same questions. Reality television—even, or perhaps especially, when featuring very wealthy characters and lifestyles—has yet to escape its designation as low-class, trash entertainment, replicating longstanding patterns of devaluing the popular in celebration of the (usually white male) auteur (Radway). These patterns are evident in social media and water-cooler conversations as the rhetoric of “guilty pleasure” is still *de rigeur* in discussing reality television, particularly the Southern-set, melodramatic-laden shows examined in the following chapters, but programs like AMC’s *Mad Men* (2007-present), HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011-present), and HBO’s *True Detective* (2014-present) are considered required viewing for cultural and artistic literacy.

As examples, these three shows represent a broader trend in television programming encapsulated by the adoption of the term “quality TV” into popular discourse. Representing quality television, these shows receive weekly treatment in publications like *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*. In addition, all three of those programs receive award nominations, headlines like “True Detective: The Best Show on TV” (Orr, *The Atlantic*), give their stars the freedom to jump to film after production wraps or to move freely between film and television, a feat not easily accomplished in times past. These quality television examples are apt, as Maureen Ryan argues, because

“one-hour dramas and miniseries represent the major pillars of popular culture: Their programs not only capture the public imagination, but often cement or increase the power of the people who make them” (“Who Creates Drama at HBO?”). These shows also circulate in a cultural circuit where cultural significance and artistic value are given. And each of these shows is about white people and created by white men, which isn’t a unique problem. Melissa Hugel writes that this newly heralded “golden age of television” is really only golden for white men, citing *True Detective*, *Mad Men*, *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-13), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-08), *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012-present), and *Generation Kill* (HBO, 2008), as “critical darlings [...] failing a large section of the population—women.” Ryan agrees, criticizing HBO’s lack of women or people of color on their writing staffs. She says:

With one exception over the course of four decades, HBO has not aired an original one-hour drama series created by a woman. With one exception over the course of four decades, HBO has not aired an original one-hour drama or dramatic miniseries creatively led at its debut by a person of color. That exception is more than 21 years old. (“Who Creates Drama at HBO?”)

In contrast, reality television features a wide variety of intersectional identities in its narratives and staffs and tells off-center, culturally specific stories as evidenced in the case studies following this chapter. Reality television’s low-culture designation cannot be discussed solely in context of this focus as elements of production, distribution, stardom, network affiliation, and cultural context are also a part of that constellation of meaning. The next section examines the cultural milieu that shapes contemporary reality television and the micro-genres defining it.

## Cultural Context for Contemporary Micro-Genres

A sponge-like genre, reality TV has absorbed many historically important media genres, including melodrama, documentary, soap operas, game shows, talk shows, police procedurals, and others. Reality television also absorbs the complexities of its cultural, political moment and reproduces those on-screen in provocative ways. These complexities can best be addressed and understood through micro-genres. These categories of programming allow for a richer, nuanced appraisal and historicizing of reality programs. The beginnings of the third era of reality television, contemporary programming, must be contextualized within the political and economic attitudes and temperatures from 2008-present.

The social and cultural circumstances that gave birth to this contemporary era of reality programming include national economic turmoil and anxiety over the role of women in U.S. society. The economic collapse of 2008—of the writers’ strike was only one consequence—is now known as The Great Recession and still under analysis as such by the Pew Research Center, the International Labour Organization, and the National Bureau of Economic Research. These studies cite The Great Recession as lasting only 18 months, yet the economy and job market has still to recover in 2014 following the sequester of 2013, disappearing federal education, science, and art programs, and even deeper budget cuts looming on national, state, and local levels. The *International Business Times* just published an article addressing these issues with the descriptive title, “US Is In Recession, Says Noted Economist; Why The Obama Economic Recovery Plan Has Faltered” (Obel). Janet Yellen, the Vice Chair of the Federal Reserve, recently gave a speech that addresses the lingering implications of the recession on workers (i.e. the

99%) and their families. The *New York Times*' most recent treatment of the crisis bears the hope-filled title, "Economists Agree: Solutions Are Elusive" (Porter).

The conventional wisdom that a weak economy results in a lower national birth rate has rang true over the past five years, regardless of whether one influences the other ("U.S. Births Fall"). News reports, books, blog posts, and articles regarding dropping marriage and birth rates, women's divided attentions, and "having it all" speak not only to specific concerns, but gesture toward broader cultural anxieties about the roles and identities of women.<sup>8</sup> Consider Anne-Marie Slaughter's article for *The Atlantic*, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." The widespread responses to her piece resulted in dizzying cycles of published backlashes to the backlashes. Attempting to forge a universally accepted definition of what "having it all" even means is no more possible than it's ever been, but the attempts to articulate what that might mean and the critiques of those attempts offer a glimpse into the politics and cultural values informing the moment from which the debates emerge.

Within a cultural context including a flagging economy, frail systems of education, defunded welfare programs, and constant hand-wringing over what women aren't doing (having babies and getting married) or should be doing (having babies and getting married), I see the imperative that Biressi and Nunn charge reality television with, to "*make sense of reality,*" operating (4). More than any other prime time form of

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<sup>8</sup> High-profile examples include: Jessica Valenti's book, *Why Have Kids? A New Mom Explores the Truth About Parenting and Happiness* (2012); Kate Bolick's article in *The Atlantic*, "All the Single Ladies" (30 September 2011); the *New York Times*' discussion between seven authors on "Motherhood vs. Feminism" (30 April 2012); *The Economist*'s article, "Marriage in America: The Fraying Knot" (12 January 2013); and Jonathon V. Last's "America's Baby Bust," for *The Wall Street Journal* (12 February 2013).

programming, reality television is more centered on female audiences and concerns than male. This gendering can be traced through the emergence and evolution of the genre.

Here, I am arguing for a system of categories that illuminates different features and functions of reality television programs. As Jason Mittell argues in *Genre and Television*:

[G]enres can be seen as key ways that our media experiences are classified and organized into categories that have specific links to particular concepts like cultural value, assumed practice and social function. By considering genre an ongoing multifaceted practice rather than a textual component, we can see how genre categorization points to much more than just whether *Northern Exposure* is a comedy or a drama, providing greater insight into the specific ways in which our most widespread cultural medium shapes our social world through categorical differences and hierarchies. This theory of genre situates genre distinctions and categories as active processes embedded within and constitutive of cultural politics, pointing to how media engage with and shape our culture, and how underexamined facets of media, like genres, matter. (xii)

For example, identifying *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* as intimate reality programming allows us to understand the shows' debt to extra-televsual forms of historical media such as romance novels and cinematic melodrama while also directing attention to the relational, communicative aspects of the shows. The title, "intimate," and its cultural cousins highlight the gendered assumptions made about the shows as cultural products and the viewers/fans as consumers of "trash." Similarly,

reckoning with the complexity and category-overlap of shows such as *Say Yes to the Dress* and *Toddlers and Tiaras* (which could qualify for the intimate, expert intervention, and/or competitive categories) acknowledges that these shows are more culturally complex than the relatively standard formatting of their episodes would suggest.

Reality television could be an unwieldy object without boundaries to differentiate it from sports programming, news or other reporting, educational programming, talk shows, or biographies. The definition of reality television I use in this project requires programming to purport to be primarily unscripted and to be produced as commercial entertainment. Ouellette and Murray suggest that the coalescence of “cultural and ‘branding’ discourses” defines a new contemporary phase of reality television that is “united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the real” (3). Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn identify the defining quality of reality television as “its discursive, visual and technological claim to ‘the real’” (5). Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn understand reality television as “taking on the burden of making sense of reality” (4). Each of these definitions distinguishes reality television as a mode from other entertainment television by pointing to the shows’ ostensibly privileged access to reality, but they don’t attempt to explain the current variety of reality programming or acknowledge the distinctly gendered elements of reality television. Indeed, much of the scholarship on reality television treats it as a monolithic entity, equally indebted to traditions of game shows and documentary. Many of these adaptations are most obvious in the evolving conventions of the genre. Initially, non-actors as characters, minimal scripting, and low-interference production served as

defining characteristics of the form, but even those conventions are playfully manipulated now, reflecting the form's cultural pervasiveness.

The micro-genres I outline offer a theoretical structure that situates reality television within its cultural context and offers a more thorough understanding of the shows' origins and influences. These micro-genres are also a way of defining the parameters of my project as the field of reality television continues to expand and evolve. There are five main categories/micro-genres that encompass reality television airing in the U.S. today: intimate, competitive, crime, expert intervention, and workplace. Many shows span multiple categories, especially more recent programs.

These categories should not be understood as having rigid, impermeable boundaries considering the fact that many of them are blended at this point. Mittell addresses emerging generic hybridity, a by-product of the radical proliferation of programming, and says, “[W]e cannot jettison genre analysis simply because the cases are not 'pure,' but must look instead to the multiplicity of genres evoked in any instance. Through the prevalence of generic mixing and niche segmentation, genres may be even more important today” (xiii). In the following section, I outline the contours of each micro-genre in terms of setting, formal qualities, narrative production (including storylines and character development), and extra-textual, paratextual footprints. Micro-genres appear in rough chronological order to provide a broad sense of trends in reality programming over its development. The two final micro-genres—workplace and intimate—have seen rapid growth in recent years and offer the richest material with which to treat questions of identity, culture, and politics. Those two micro-genres serve as my case studies as the most illustrative of cultural context and as productive sites of



inquiry for the current political moment. Details about branding, production, distribution, and cinematography, and examinations of generic overlap and mixing are located in the subsequent chapters' case studies of workplace and intimate micro-genres of programming.<sup>9</sup>

### Characterizations and Analyses of Micro-Genres

The first academic publication indexed as using the term “micro-genre,” or “microgenre,” is “On the Status of the Scholarly Study of Henry James in Korea” by Choon-hee Kim in 2003. The term appears across scholarly literature sporadically over the next several years, primarily in reference to music or film. Micro-genre appears to enter the popular lexicon in the last five years through a variety of articles and books on film, literature, music (particularly hip-hop with its region-based subgenres), and television seeking ways to make expansive bodies of work more manageable for critical projects. In recent months, the term has found most of its use-value in projects and articles evaluating Netflix. Headlines such as “Netflix Built Its Microgenres by Staring into the American Soul,” signify both the broad import and the personal nature of the micro-genre (Madrigal). In the same thread, headlines such as “How Netflix Creates Movie Micro-Genres” and “How Netflix Reverse-Engineered Hollywood” speak to the industrial and economic influence of the term as a method for understanding, narrating, predicting, and personalizing a vast media landscape (Madrigal; *Flowing Data*). The micro-genres outlined below perform the same operations for reality television.

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<sup>9</sup> My understanding of how branding works in reality television is heavily indebted to Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture* and Mark Andrejevic's *Reality TV: the Work of Being Watched*. And my discussion of cinematography in intimate reality television relies on Amanda Klein's *FlowTV* article, “*The Hills, Jersey Shore, and the Aesthetics of Class*.”

## **Competitive**

Competitive programming is the most pervasive and easily recognizable category of reality television, beginning with ABC's *Survivor* in 2000. Competitive programming encompasses a wide range of shows including: *American Idol* (Fox, 2002-present), *The Bachelor* (ABC, 2002-present), *Big Brother* (Veronica, 2001-present), *Amazing Race* (CBS, 2001-present), *Project Runway* (Bravo; Lifetime, 2004-present), *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004-present), *Dancing with the Stars* (ABC, 2005-present), *Flavor of Love* (VH1, 2006-2008), and *Top Chef* (Bravo, 2006-present). Contestants are usually brought on through an audition process and character development happens over the course of episodes featuring challenges, flashbacks or editorial-style features on individual contestants, and exercises that eliminate contestants until only one winner remains. These shows attract substantial viewership, especially in their first seasons; they are cheap to produce; they offer highly visible, and ostensibly lucrative, commercial sponsorship opportunities in the form of prizes and travel; and their simple format makes them easy to export to and import from other countries.

Competitive shows usually include a form of the confessional, wherein individual competitors have a private space to talk to the camera and, sometimes more obviously than others, the producers, about events that occurred. These taped confessionals are intercut throughout each episode to offer more detail and individualized insight into the context of the situation. Confessionals are certainly not exclusive to only competitive reality programs, but many of the identifying features of the confessional became established through early competition shows such as *Survivor*. Because the cast of

competitors is refreshed with every season, the setting, hosts/judges, and the consistent structure or narrative arc (of challenges and landmark events that vary from show to show) each season provides reassuring continuity in spite of the rotation of characters.

The high turnover rate of characters also means that, barring any spectacular scandals, these shows don't have as big a celebrity culture footprint as those from the other micro-genres. For example, contestants who aren't finalists from *America's Next Top Model* (UPN; The CW, 2003-present) are rarely, if ever, featured on magazine covers, interviewed on talk shows, or featured in paparazzi photos on gossip websites.<sup>10</sup> Frequently the judges or hosts of these competitive shows are already well known in their respective fields (such as Tim Gunn from *Project Runway* or Randy Jackson from *American Idol*) and thus the shows trade on that notoriety, but rarely do individual contestants achieve remarkable levels of fame within their season. There are exceptions for contestants who go on to be successful in their field or who are deemed attractive enough to the camera to earn jobs performing in the media in other capacities.<sup>11</sup>

Competitive programming fits neatly within the theoretical paradigm of neoliberalism that understands U.S. reality television as a tool championing self-reliance and individualism, as discussed at length in chapter I. Competitive shows bear witness to the achievement of individual goals. Competitive shows have the guaranteed incentives of cash, prizes, or a romantic partner for the winner. This celebration of hyper-

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<sup>10</sup> Contestants/competitors from *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* franchises are common exceptions to this rule.

<sup>11</sup> *American Idol* contestants and winners are a good examples of this: Jennifer Hudson, Carrie Underwood, Ruben Studdard, Clay Aiken, Jordin Sparks, Chris Daughtry and Kelly Clarkson all gained fame due to their exposure on the show, even if they weren't generating many headlines during their specific season's airing.

individualism is recognizable in the clichéd mantra of competitors on these programs: “I’m not here to make friends.” The statement implies that the personal “journey,” an over-used metaphor in reality programming, and, even more importantly, winning the competition takes priority over any interpersonal relationships that might distract the eye from the prize.

Elimination is the foundation of this micro-genre. The details of how competitors are eliminated vary depending on the show, but in almost every one there is an elaborate ceremony with a familiar set of rituals consistent across seasons. For example, *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* (ABC, 2003-05; 2008-present) include a cocktail party at the end of nearly every episode where the competitors vie for the attention of the eponymous love interest. At the close of the party, Chris Harrison gathers all the contestants gather on choir-style risers in a small room used solely for this ceremony and the bachelor/ette calls them by name, one-by-one, and asks her or him to accept a rose as an indication of continuing interest in pursuing a romantic relationship. Those left on the risers not holding long-stemmed roses or wearing rose boutonnieres (in the case of the bachelors on *The Bachelorette*) are asked to leave by Chris Harrison. Elimination is merciless and swift, despite the customary escort out to the limo by the prize bachelor/ette. The elaborate ceremonial process adds import and drama to counteract the silliness and triviality of the conflict between competitors and the scenes that occur between (drunk) adults over the course of long hours of confined boredom. In other words, elimination grounds an otherwise relatively predictable, boring party that viewers are privy to via catty comments and snippets of make-outs and awkward “getting to know you” conversations between the competitors and the bachelor/ette.

The nature of the competitive structure breaks down interactions into morally charged scenes that often rely on binaries of good and evil and recognizable stereotypes in order to establish heroes or the villains. The people filling these roles may shift over the course of the season, or even the episode, as they reveal more of themselves (rewarding disclosure of personal challenges, insecurities, and traumas). These roles and stereotypes are comforting as they construct a simplified universe in which characters, behaviors, and scenarios are predictable. The hero and the villain are usually identified within the first few episodes of a new season and which characters are assigned to what role speak to the cultural values of the specific moment from which they emerge. For example, at the 2014 *SCMS* conference Alice Leppert argued that recent seasons of MTV's *The Challenge* (1998-present), a competition show where veterans of MTV's other reality programs compete for prizes and a final cash award, centers white masculinity at the cost of villainizing and de-humanizing black male bodies. I add that these narrative moves are responses to or at least significantly shaped by national tragedies of the murders of black teenagers Trayvon Martin (1995-2012) and Jordan Davis (1995-2012) and the subsequent political and cultural storms. Both Martin's and Davis's shooters escaped conviction, affirming, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, "the irrelevance of black life" ("On the Killing of Jordan Davis"). Continuing a national legacy borne in slavery that imagines black bodies as dangerous as commodities mobilized in service of white supremacy, it is disheartening but not surprising to see black bodies on shows such as *The Challenge* framed as muscular and irrational in contrast to their white counterparts granted qualities like sensitivity and vulnerability. The recruiting patterns and narrative structure of competitive shows result in a reifying of

stereotypes of all types though black men are subject to the stereotypes that are some of those that are the riskiest in terms of material consequences.

## **Crime**

Crime shows emerged earlier than competitive ones, but began to proliferate and rise to prominence, becoming widely mimicked, alongside competitive programs in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Crime programs primarily follow law enforcement agents while on duty and some shows also recruit civilian aid. *America's Most Wanted* (1988-present) and *COPS* (1989-present) represent the earliest iterations of crime-themed programming, both on Fox, with newer shows emerging, such as: *To Catch a Predator* (MSNBC, 2004-2007), *The First 48* (A&E, 2004-present), and *Bait Car* (truTV, 2007-present, intermittently). Both *America's Most Wanted* and *Rescue 911* (CBS, 1989-1996) feature dramatized footage of past events. These reenactments—a defining feature of this type of reality programming—complicate the shows' status as reality television and speak to an important historical moment in the evolution of the genre. Reenactments signify the real rather than laying direct claim to it, as is the preferred posture of most reality television today.

These reenactments are combined with an abundance of fuzzy, poor-quality footage of action sequences that can be both part of the reenactments but be stylistically different from the primary footage or it can be live footage from the actual event being documents that is cut into or bookends the reenactments. This footage is often blurry, fuzzy, grainy, night-vision, or otherwise obscuring clear depictions of anything. The purpose is not to offer deeper insight into the situation but to heighten the authenticity of

the sequence and the show. Such footage also works to establish the dramatic tension of scenes and storylines that tend to follow fairly rote formulas.

Formulaic narratives and clear audience expectations have defined this category even in its historical antecedents, crime procedural dramas and television crime news. Shows such as *America's Most Wanted* build upon the warnings issued and telephone hotlines advertised in crime news, appealing to viewers' sense of active citizenship or duty. *America's Most Wanted*, in particular, assigns responsibility for surveilling and apprehending criminals to civilians as part of their citizen-obligation to aid the police force. Part of the "Luis Mena" episode (2012) of *America's Most Wanted* recreates the story of a female cab driver, Patricia Davis, who was assaulted in her cab by a drunk male passenger. Two of her fellow cabbies came to her rescue, ostensibly preventing her murder, then the perpetrator (Michael Tuele) stole one of their cabs and fled. The story is told through intercuts between extended recreation of the story, interview with the victim, and a voice-over sequence explaining how the show helped put various departments and investigations in contact, resulting in the apprehension of Tuele.

Davis weeps throughout her interviews and stresses that the attack made her uneasy about returning to a job she had previously loved. There are two other women in the reenactment: one who pays for the cab and bids her friends farewell and another who accompanies Tuele in the cab, but promptly passes out and remains unconscious. The male voice-over that describes Tuele's apprehension and imprisonment, the male cabbies who rescue Davis, and the fact that all law enforcement officers shown are male suggests that *America's Most Wanted* isn't just interested in distributing information about criminals, but is also invested in perpetuating a system in which women are only victims

and men are either heroes or villains. And the show usually features heroes who are white and villains of color.<sup>12</sup> The show's rhetorical appeals to the duties of citizenship operate beyond the show's self-identified parameters to uphold traditional structures of power that privilege white men above anyone else. The closing statement of the sequence, "...that's what this show is all about—putting away the bad guys and finding justice for their victims, one way or another," is meant to reassure the viewer and Davis that life will go on as usual now that Tuele is behind bars, but it also claims an authority on sorting out or through who deserves justice and what that practically looks like.

Other crime shows also work to reinforce governmentality, but lack the conspicuous call for participation that *America's Most Wanted* is founded upon. The emphasis on governmentality, documentary style, and inclusion of mostly male characters all contribute to the genre's overwhelming masculinization. In TV One's *Parole Diaries* (2012), viewers are invited into the daily activities, conversations, and reflections of selected parole officers and through those scenes are also exposed to criminals, the proceedings of the justice system, and poignant moments where the system's failings are made clear, mental illnesses are confused for weak morality, and the limited resources available for (working class) people in need. These elements combine to make the series an investigation of particular parolees and their officers, but also a contemporary portrait of the justice system in a nation where social services are being routinely defunded and eliminated, demonstrating that possibilities exist for creating nuance within the crime category of programming.

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Beth Oliver and G. Blake Armstrong conducted and published a study that demonstrated that reality crime shows, such as *America's Most Wanted*, "portray a world that is much more crime-infested than is actually the case, they cast people of color in the role of the villain, and they are perceived as realistic by many of their viewers" (30).



## **Intervention**

Like crime programs, intervention shows rely on a problem individual and process of defining a rehabilitative path to solve said problem. The intervention micro-genre includes programming that centers on the presentation of a problem or problematic circumstances, which can only be resolved by the intervention of an expert or a team guided by an expert. Makeover shows can be classified as interventionist shows.<sup>13</sup>

Examples of problems defined by and supposedly resolved by this kind of programming include: body modification (*The Biggest Loser*, NBC, 2004-present), wardrobe improvement (*What Not to Wear*, TLC, 2008-present), development of self-esteem (*How to Look Good Naked*, Channel 4; Lifetime 2008-present), organization and sanitization of living spaces (*Clean House*, Style, 2003-present), identifying and overcoming addiction or compulsions (*Intervention*, 2005-present and *Hoarders*, 2009-present), and strengthening of interpersonal, often familial, relationships (*Supernanny*, ABC; Style; NBC, 2005-2011). The expert intervention category can also include shows that might otherwise straddle the border between reality television and educational programming such as *Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan* (National Geographic Channel, 2004-2012) and *Nanny 911* (Fox; CMT, 2004-09).

Rather than a rotating cast of competitors, the variable in this type of programming is the problem or troubled individuals (or subjects) treated. The experts or interventionists usually remain constant, mirroring the figure of the host in competitive programming. The confessional is utilized to document self-improvement or feelings about the changes individuals undertake. The experts also often weigh in on the subject's

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<sup>13</sup> Brenda Weber says that in order for subjects of televisual makeovers to be empowered they must “fully surrender to experts” (4, *Makeover TV*).

progress in confessional mode, but often their voices serve as a voiceover, narrating scenes, rather than taking on the less authoritative position of being vulnerable and asked to talk about private feelings in front of a camera crew. Interventionist shows lack elimination, which plays a significant role in structuring the affect and narrative of competitive programming. Viewers are invited to identify with characters in deeper ways and imagine those characters as complexly developed rather than the stereotypes and tropes that populate competitive programming.

Frequently, the setting of these interventionist shows is also more consistent. *What Not to Wear*'s 360-degree mirror, makeover salon, and mirrored reveal room serve the same purpose as the homogenous environment *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* (VH1, 2008-12) and similar shows stage for the intervention encounters of each episode. Like competitive shows, interventionist shows have a relatively small internet presence due to the lack of celebrity their characters have the chance to earn. Many of the experts are well known (Staci London from *What Not to Wear*, Cesar Millan of *Dog Whisperer*, Jo Frost of *Supernanny*, Gordon Ramsay of Fox's *Kitchen Nightmares*, 2007-present), but their relatively staid figures as experts do not usually lend themselves to creating the types of dramatic stories integral to celebrity culture.

Similar to competitive programs, shows within the expert intervention micro-genre usually endorse a neoliberal agenda. The effects of neoliberalism on the shows doesn't fully capture all meaning-making, but it can explain more about the ways in which such shows operate than it is able to for intimate programs. Experts initiate the modification processes necessary, but the end goal is for the subject to agree that the problem area being attended to is a serious matter and subsequently commit him/herself

to following through on the improvement plan implemented during their episode. These programs promote ideals of organization, sanitization, and makeover as imperatives acted upon with the self-entrepreneurial spirit neoliberalism requires and celebrates.

The age, gender, race, and location of the subjects on these shows vary (though the channel or network producing the program determines some demographic trends), though the overwhelming majority comes from the middle or working classes. The dearth of subjects from upper economic tiers has an important implication. Wealthy, financially independent citizens do not require the same training as working class citizens. The push for self-reliance comes alongside the elimination of welfare programs and social services. The disparity in access to resources across class lines is far from a surprise twist in the story, but it is important to say it out loud and make the injustices that these shows speak to, implicitly or explicitly, visible. Also visible in this genre and the next, in particular, is the details of labor and work. The workplace micro-genre addresses labor more explicitly, but both define narratives and environments along the boundaries of labor.

## **Workplace**

The programs of this micro-genre feature characters' careers or jobs and surrounding narratives. The primary setting in the workplaces of the characters is this micro-genre's most distinctive characteristic. These narratives emphasize conflicts and challenges encountered in the workplace, interpersonal drama between coworkers or clients, and the shifting patterns of success and failure of specific characters (*Cake Boss*, TLC, 2009-present) or of an entire industry (*Big Shrimpin'*, History, 2011-present, intermittently).

These shows typically feature confessionals as a way of highlighting interpersonal drama (commonly, complaints about other employees' work ethic) and of narrating events, although providing multiple perspectives on the same event isn't as necessary or prized here as in the intimate micro-genre.

The blatant neoliberal agenda of competitive and expert intervention reality programming also plays a (non-comprehensive) role in the narratives of workplace shows. Hard work is figured as a central tenet of good citizenship and economic failure or setback is portrayed as an individual obstacle to overcome rather than a systemic problem. Recent trends in this type of programming feature working-to-middle-class types of characters and occupations other than the glossier, cultural-production careers associated with the characters of intimate programming. For example, consider the contrast between Lauren Conrad's internships at Teen Vogue and fashion P.R. firm People's Revolution on the glossy, intimate reality television landmark, *The Hills* (MTV, 2006-2010) with the kinds of gritty or seamy work performed in shows such as *Ax Men* (History, 2008-present), *Storage Wars* (A&E, 2010-present), *Gator Boys* (Animal Planet, 2012-present), or *Pawn Stars* (History, 2009-present). The stark distinction speaks to how shifting economic conditions, brought about by the economic downturn of 2008, have affected the role of class in reality television writ large.<sup>14</sup> Reality television understood as a "social process" reproduces class in important, reflexive ways<sup>15</sup> illustrated in the swath

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<sup>14</sup> Since I began this project Diane Negra has written about this phenomenon for *Cinema Journal* and co-authored with Yvonne Tasker the relevant *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*. Duke UP, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Couldry, Nick. "Class and Contemporary Forms of 'Reality' Production, or Hidden Injuries of Class." *Reality Television and Class*. Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs, eds. 33-44.

of programs depicting the chasm between the elite wealth of the 1% and the everyday struggles of the 99%.

Workplace shows also frequently feature family businesses and the trials that come along with working closely alongside family members, whether they are spouses, children, siblings, or extended family. This element is especially important to the recent generation of these shows outlined above; the familial dynamic contributes to the way in which the characters of these shows are classed and placed, geographically. Like some programs from the intervention micro-genre (particularly *Hoarders* and *Kitchen Nightmares*), many workplace shows are set outside of urban centers. Due to the nature of the work featured, the rural setting is necessary and allows for the inclusion of working- to middle-class characters. Such characters are usually figured as grungy Norman Rockwell-types who wear store-brand overalls and overflow with colloquialisms. The types of characters prevalent in these programs can easily represent the kind of quiet, frustrated desperation experienced by many people with little to no financial protection from the devastating consequences of the economic crisis. The much-celebrated family owned and operated businesses like those often featured in these shows (*Sons of Guns*, Discovery Channel, 2011-present and *Deadliest Catch*, Discovery Channel, 2005-present) can be understood as foils to the upper-class, privileged insulation happening in shows such as the *Real Housewives* franchise (Bravo) and *Big Rich Texas* (Style, 2011-13).

### **Intimate**

Intimate programs, beginning with *The Real World* (MTV, 1992-present), are structured by interpersonal dramas that result from the volatile mix of large personalities, frequent

feuding, and produced environment and events that keep the characters rotating in the same social circles. The homes of the characters are the most common setting for intimate programs, but there are also bars, restaurants, and social venues that become recognizable fixtures. For example, *Jersey Shore*'s (MTV, 2009-2013) most important setting is the "shore house" in Seaside, New Jersey where the characters live during filming (and its Miami and Florence, Italy counterparts), though the clubs, restaurants, gyms, the Shore Store (part-time job), and entertainment venues—especially the boardwalk—the characters frequent are important ancillary locations. *Jersey Shore* is an exception in that it is (for the most part) not set in an urban center. Each of the *Real Housewives of...* series is located in wealthy neighborhoods of major cities (currently, Orange County, New York City, Atlanta, Beverly Hills, Miami, and New Jersey—previously including Washington, D.C.) or nearby wealthy suburbs. All of the shows featuring the Kardashian family are located in big cities.<sup>16</sup> Other examples of intimate reality programming include *Bethenny Ever After...* (previously titled, *Bethenny Getting Married?*, Bravo, 2010-2012) and *The Rachel Zoe Project* (Bravo, 2008-present), set in New York City and Los Angeles, respectively. Early precedents, *The Hills* and its spin-off, *The City* (MTV, 2008-2010), were also set in Los Angeles and New York City, respectively. Another early forerunner of this specific kind of programming, *The Osbournes* (MTV, 2002-2005), was also set in Los Angeles. The types of characters, careers, and lifestyles cultivated are directly tied to the shows' urban, monied locations and distinctly contrast with those typically rural or less-wealthy zip codes featured in the

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<sup>16</sup> *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (2007-present) is largely set in Los Angeles. *Kourtney and Khloé Take Miami* (2009-present) and *Kourtney and Kim Take New York* (2011-present) are both shot in their eponymous locations. *Khloé & Lamar*'s (2011-12) first season was shot in Los Angeles with the second season filmed in Los Angeles and Dallas, Texas.

workplace subgenre. There are exceptions to the polish of the category such as TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-present), as we will see in chapter IV.

Intimate programming, as suggested by the name, offers a microscopic view of a variety of intimate interpersonal relationships: familial, romantic, domestic, and friendly. Misha Kavka defines television's formal characteristics of intimacy using *The Bachelor* as an example that includes:

...the oscillation between group surveillance and the individual interview, the omnipresent yet invisible cameramen, the personal microphones miraculously attached to skimpy clothing, the ritualised set and rhetoric of the send-off, [and] the close-ups of faces contorted by emotion or dissolving into tears. (108-9)

While not all of these qualities apply holistically across the intimate subgenre, many do, and Kavka's work enables a theorization of how camera angles and performances of emotion are both feminized and intimate.

Kavka claims that television is the technology of intimacy and points to the "connection between media and the feeling of proximity" as producing the "(im)mediacy and intimacy" that are present in moments fertile for investigation (xi, 2). Historically intimacy as a by-product of the narrative emphasis on interpersonal relationships, has been made visible through fan practices, celebrity culture, and in melodrama writ large. Intimate reality television also shares other characteristics with historical melodramas (especially soap operas) such as: continual emphasis on physicality and bodies, female-heavy casts, and an abundance of emotion. All of these elements further link intimate reality programming to soap opera's feminized heritage. Intimate reality shows present a

version of mostly white femininity at the beginning of the twentieth century, directing attention to the contradictory nature of representations that are simultaneously nostalgic and progressive, often within the same episode.

Intimate shows feature largely the same cast for multiple seasons, manipulate and mine the cast members' personal lives for narrative purposes, and produce an intimate environment. The narratives of these shows are driven by the highly charged relationships between dramatic personalities navigating emotionally fraught circumstances and events. A good example of what I mean by this is the unraveling of Kim Kardashian and Kris Humphries' marriage on the 2011-12 season of *Kourtney & Kim Take New York* (E!, 2011-12). The news of the Kardashian-Humphries divorce broke well before marital conflict entered the narrative of the show, but the intimate details of the couples' troubles were made available for public consumption exclusively through the television show, which positioned itself as having the advantage of an insider, or intimate, perspective on the dissolution of their relationship. The same narrative structure and cycle happened again in the 2014 season of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E!, 2007-present) with Kim Kardashian and Kanye West's engagement.

Location and setting are more important for the intimate and workplace micro-genres than for the competitive or expert intervention micro-genres. Both the competitive and expert intervention categories craft artificial environments (consider the prominently featured Los Angeles hills home on *The Bachelor* or the previously described spaces of *What Not to Wear*) within which to document competitive behaviors and self-improvement processes rather than seamlessly integrating the television cameras and crew into the lives of the characters as in the workplace and intimate micro-genres.



Relatedly, the formal trope of the videotaped confessional takes on special significance in these two categories, but particularly for intimate programming.

*Kourtney & Kim Take New York* is representative of this micro-genre in its heavy emphasis on interpersonal and familial relationships, but it is also representative of how the female characters on these intimate shows are not solely defined (as they might have been in traditional soap operas) by these relationships. Instead, all of the female characters are working women and are often the primary breadwinners of their households, even if their biggest paychecks come from the networks that produce their shows. The female stars of these shows aren't acting in a traditional sense because there aren't (necessarily) scripts to be memorized, sets, or delineated scenes. Instead, the sets, costumes, scripts, and crew are integrated and integral to the women's daily lives and they are performing the roles of themselves. These women are, for the most part, unquestionably smart and successful entrepreneurs and businesswomen. Their jobs might not be the focus of the shows in which they star (particularly for examples like *Real Housewives* series), but their business savvy and success are still important. And the labor, especially the affective labor, that they perform structures the shows' narratives and offers insight into the world these shows are seeking to interpret and portray.

## Culture-Work and Ideology in Southern Reality Television

For this cultural moment and media milieu, the South is more than simply a setting or a slice of the demographic pie (with all of the political assumption that come along with that). The South is understood as a site that is tacitly more dramatic, culturally richer, and not terribly intellectual, making it an ideal setting for reality programs whose primary currency is melodrama and who benefit from easily manufactured and inviting universes for audiences interested in and attracted to richly textured cultural histories, elaborate rituals, and social and cultural boundaries made explicit.

The South serves as a type of domestic exoticism from which enamored fascination and repulsive displacement can be derived in equal measure. For example, within a single episode of *Duck Dynasty*, the viewer could be charmed by one of the family's cook-off competitions and the bizarre foods and friendly, familial banter therein while also repulsed by the regressive social politics apparent in the characters' constant espousal of the American Dream and hard work as the guaranteed keys to financial security and professional success. This type of polysemy is inherent to all media, but the political and cultural registers activated by these Southern shows reveals a negotiation and a displacement specific to my case studies (and their reality contemporaries also set in the South, as outlined on page 161).

The South offers the best example of communal cultural identity that is available in the U.S.—there's no clearly defined culture or historically unifying traditions of the western or mid-Atlantic states. The presence of the South on television isn't new. As defined and examined by Phoebe Bronstein in *Televising the South: Race, Gender, and*

*Region in the Primetime South, 1955-1980*, the beginning of the 21st century saw the emergence of a flurry of television programming set in and about the U.S. South. The reality programs examined here all draw from and are indebted to the media pathways paved by the shows Bronstein discusses. Tara McPherson also writes about Southern culture and media. In *Reconstructing Dixie*, McPherson situates the cultural functions of the South within mainstream media and academic discourse when she says:

Mindsets that question why interrogate or ‘reconstruct’ the South at all replays the South’s role in the nation in an academic setting, cordoning the South off, much as the *Oprah* broadcast of gothic southerners did, as hopelessly out-of-date, as backward, as an embarrassing site of retrograde regionalism. This attitude precisely misses what we can learn from the South about both the region and the nation, if not the circuits of global capitalism. Certainly the inability to envision meaningful cross-racial contact in the new millennium is a problem that infects the nation as a whole, and as we’ve seen, the South offers powerful instructions in both the roots causes and possible solutions to this epidemic. (254)

While the following three case studies are not framed nor designed as “solutions” as called for by McPherson, they are instructive in what they reveal about the ways Southern culture operates amidst economic turmoil, retrograde social politics across the nation, and ongoing tragedies of social injustice (254). The shows are not documentaries or exposés. They are not expected to formulate world-changing policies nor are they widely looked to as potential sites of revolution. This project does not claim them as such but instead seeks to illuminate the everyday intimacies and resistances, the powerful affects, and the ways that complex character identities outright refuse (while also

sometimes succumbing to) the flattening process of most mainstream television writing and marketing.

What follows is a comprehensive account of the possibilities of functions of the micro-genres at work, each locating a specific instance within a defined larger historical and cultural context. The case studies illustrate the particular workings of genre within reality television as a form while serving as productive sites of inquiry into the national cultural and political moment from which each program emerges. *Duck Dynasty*—the unexpected hit of the group—is the starting place as a site rife with the white, Southern masculinity that is a productive place to begin an analysis of how identity and power in popular culture as written onto the places and bodies of the reality-real contemporary South.

### CHAPTER III

#### ***DUCK DYNASTY: WHITENESS AND FAMILY VALUES***

A&E's *Duck Dynasty* premiered in 2012, one of a number of reality television series set in the "Hollywood South," which is the industry's shorthand way of referring to the recent boom of television and film productions produced in the South. Partial credit for the boom goes to Southern states' generous tax credit initiatives designed to lure Hollywood producers to work in the region (Robertson, C.). The region's powerful pull on the national imagination alongside the South's complex history and relation to national politics—often represented culturally by eccentric, charismatic characters—accounts for the outstanding appeal. *Duck Dynasty* revolves around the everyday lives of the Robertson family of entrepreneurs from Louisiana who have made a fortune selling duck calls. *Duck Dynasty* appears to be a textbook intimate program at first glance, but though the show deploys many of the intimate micro-genre's techniques, it actually operates as a workplace program. The show distinguishes itself from other programming through its emphasis on a particular brand of rural, regional, white masculinity. This chapter explores the nostalgic, masculine world of *Duck Dynasty*. It's a world that harkens back to earlier, ostensibly more natural and powerful versions of masculinity in order to illustrate the characteristics of the workplace micro-genre of reality programming, focused on racialized and heteronormative constructions of masculinized labor.

To do so, this chapter combines Tara McPherson's understanding of the role of the South in popular culture with Ruth Frankenberg's focus on the racial aspects of setting and geography in order to analyze *Duck Dynasty*'s investment in whiteness. This

investment in whiteness, as we will see, results in an explicit defining and policing of borders among races, efforts legitimized through the language of family values. In order to unpack the implications of *Duck Dynasty* as a representative for this workplace micro-genre of reality programming, I look at the visual representations of gender difference (crucial markers of masculinity), the elision of race through visual re-segregation, and the program's prescriptive heteronormativity and white masculinity.

The Robertsons' stake in their particular white masculinity is one of the directing forces of their lives and of the show. In *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, George Lipsitz explains how whiteness shapes the social and cultural hierarchies that run throughout visual representations. Lipsitz argues:

...that public policy and private prejudice work together to create a 'possessive investment in whiteness' that is responsible for the radicalized hierarchies of our society. I use the term possessive investment both literally and figuratively.

Whiteness has a cash value: it accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal educational opportunities available to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination, and especially through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations. I argue that white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity. (vii)

The Robertsons' possessive investment in whiteness is visible in the school they choose for their children and support financially, the places where they eat, shop, and work, and the employees they hire. Their investment is also visible in the absence of bodies of color on their show, meaning that people of color are absent from their workplaces and social lives. The prescriptive imperatives built into the show's narrative are not simply related to masculinity but are about the preservation of a specific Southern, capitalistic white masculinity.

#### Industrial and Historical Context: The Post-Recession Boys' Club

*Duck Dynasty* was delivered an audience primed by a cohort of earlier programs set in the South and other rural locations, with narratives centered on manual labor, bizarre or seemingly old-fashioned jobs, and a celebration of the great outdoors. High-profile examples include *Deadliest Catch* (Discovery Channel, 2005-present), *Swamp People* (History, 2010-present), and *Gold Rush* (Discovery Channel, 2010-present). White, heteronormative masculinity grounded in the performance of jobs requiring physical strength defines each of these programs. Maureen Ryan, TV critic for *The Huffington Post*, describes the *Duck Dynasty* and *Deadliest Catch* cohort of programming in the following terms, "The best of those shows inspire intense loyalty because they're savvy, well-crafted dramas about driven men battling knotty personal and professional problems" ("Duck Dynasty"). Diane Negra agrees, citing shows such as *Gold Rush Alaska* (Discovery, 2010-present) as exemplary of our post-recessionary moment. She argues this is evidenced by their "exhaustion with aspirationalism" and desire to "recuperate masculinity as a state of territorial expansion while promulgating

ideologically ‘safe’ modes of entrepreneurialism” (123). Both authors make useful points about the androcentrism of these workplace reality programs, but neglect the concomitant centralization of whiteness. In these programs, white masculinity works as a visible boundary, defining what are otherwise unruly, untamed natural settings.

The programs’ emphasis on physical labor, rugged outdoor settings, and the conflation of professional and natural obstacles sufficiently gender the drama for networks seeking to attract a male demographic. I propose the phrase “fiscal masculinity” as a way of understanding this emergent trend in programming and its cultural implications; the deliberate and explicit crafting and marketing of a particular brand of masculinity suggests a relative insecurity and cultural anxiety about the role and place of men in the contemporary United States. Fiscal masculinity describes the specific way that *Duck Dynasty* understands the workplace as defining the world. I want to make two main points about the figuring and work of fiscal masculinity in *Duck Dynasty*. First, masculinity is understood within a specifically southern frame and brings with it attendant cultural specificities of religion, values, and beliefs about family and gender roles. The second point is that an implicit part of *Duck Dynasty* is that the characters—especially the male characters—are sorting through, trying on, and otherwise figuring out what it means to identify and perform as “southern” (McPherson). Within a frame defined by fiscal masculinity, the show can only come to one conclusion: the reproduction of Southern capitalist patriarchy via the Robertsons’ work place and practices.

The specific cultural frame for *Gold Rush*, *Flying Wild Alaska* (Discovery Channel, 2011-12), and *River Monsters* (Animal Planet, 2009-present) differs from *Duck*



*Dynasty* (Figure 1). *Gold Rush* tells the story of a group of men from Oregon who lost their jobs in aftermath of the recession and took that seeming misfortune as an opportunity to take risks and travel to Alaska to mine for gold.

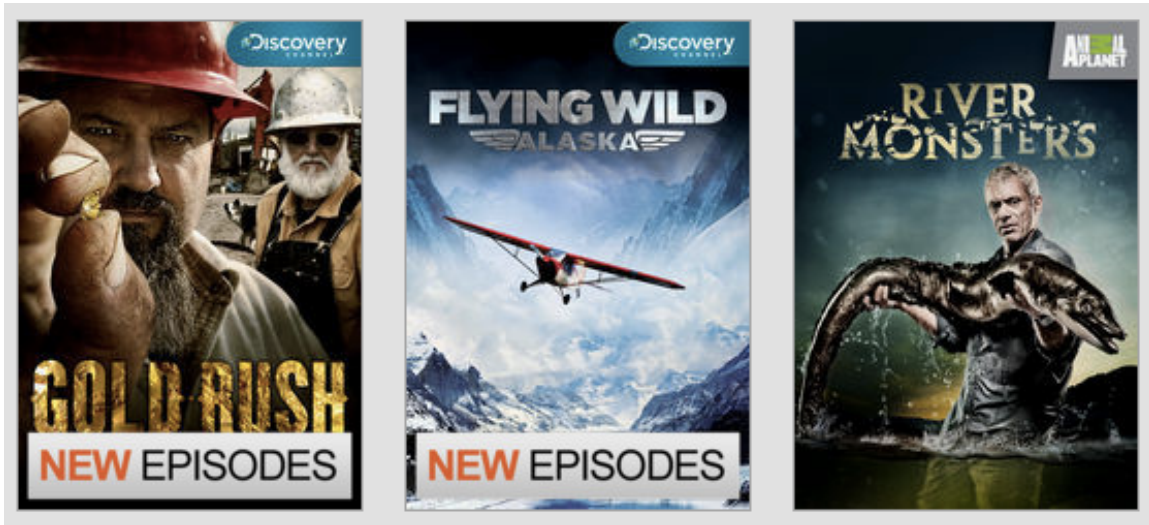


Figure 1: Marketing images for *Gold Rush*, *Flying Wild Alaska*, and *River Monsters*

*Flying Wild Alaska* features a family who owns Era Alaska, an airline that delivers supplies and passengers to otherwise inaccessible locations. *River Monsters* follows biologist and extreme angler Jeremy Wade who travels the country to investigate local lore surrounding river creatures. Each of these shows represents a crystallization of a post-recessionary moment in which masculinity was simultaneously threatened (as part of the failings that led to the stock market crash) by a national presumption of white men's inability to rebound and be reaffirmed as part of a patriarchal culture that needs traditional masculinity to remain at the center of operations. Workplace programs—and these shows, specifically—characteristically venerate a kind of masculine labor and businesses that reify traditional gender roles, politically conservative “family values,” and risky circumstances as a way of re-securing the cultural centrality of men-at-work after

Wall Street faltered. Shows such as *Pawn Stars*, *Big Shrimpin'*, and *Ax Men* are also representative of a form of programming grounded in fiscal masculinity. The recessionary logic contributing to the formation and reception of these types of programs demands energetic, masculinized labor, environments dominated by men, and actionable goals. The combination of these elements result in narratives celebrating the strength, vitality, and *value* of masculinity, a crucial contribution to a culture reeling from the greatly personal repercussions of a very public failing of masculinity.

In *Duck Dynasty*, Phil is the primary face of the Robertson family. His wife, Kay, and their children, Jase, Willie, Jep and their wives, as well as Phil's brother Si, who all live in Monroe or West Monroe, Louisiana, comprise the primary cast. The show's narrative, focused on the family's multi-million dollar duck call business and the hijinks come with working a family who would much rather be in the woods duck hunting, is carefully constructed with neatly woven and tightly managed storylines. The family's investment in outdoor life is mirrored in the show's earthy palette and the heavy use of establishing and transitional shots of natural settings. *Duck Dynasty* is produced with episodic pacing, enhancing the sitcom-like tone of the show's humor and characterizations. The show is marketed and produced as easy-to-digest, family-friendly programming in line with the Robertson family's conservative and evangelical affiliations, but it maintains a sharp moralistic edge and a constant centering of patriarchy.

In his book, *The Duck Commander Family: How Faith, Family and Ducks Built a Dynasty*, Willie talks about having to cajole Phil to continue to join him on press tours and at conventions because the fan base—especially the longtime Duck Commander

customers who Willie figures as “white-collar guys who dress up in camo on the weekends and go hunting”—expected to see Phil (135). Phil is the stoic patriarch, while son Willie is the classic buffoon. Willie’s character has to be developed in such a way so as to not threaten Phil’s patriarchal control, despite Willie’s evident business acumen and his superior social skills. In order to keep the show from detouring into a story about the son supplanting the father—in business or otherwise—Willie’s goofy sense of humor, younger sibling status, and physical resemblance to an overgrown teddy bear are all channeled into portraying him as a bumbling, dopey character. Willie is consistently making bets he loses or exaggerated claims he can’t live up to or produce on; Willie backtracks and eats his words on a regular basis. Phil’s status as the patriarch raises the stakes for the outlandish and often openly sexist claims he makes, like “Women are like Labrador retrievers. They all have quirks. After being married to one for 45 years, you learn to go with the quirks” (“Redneck Logic”). Phil never apologizes, retracts, or otherwise admits that he might have been mistaken in his beliefs or word choice. Despite this distinction, which I think works more as an internal structuring of authority and characterization within the show to keep Phil and Willie’s characters interacting harmoniously, both men’s positions are grounded in an actively discriminatory, exclusively white, rural Southern masculinity.

This white, rural, Southern masculinity is established and policed throughout the show. The episode “Can’t Hardly Weight” centers on son Willie and daughter-in-law Korie’s upcoming high school reunion and Willie’s desire to lose weight before they attend. Willie and Korie’s conversation about Willie’s weight begins in their kitchen when Willie’s brother, Jase, pokes fun at him for his weight gain as they look through old

high school photos. Willie's sensitivity about his weight is made clear in a subsequent scene with Korie in their huge dressing room-closet area. Willie tries on a leather sports coat Korie bought for him for the reunion only to find that it's too small for him.

Unwilling to acknowledge the changes in his body, Willie accuses Korie of leaving the jacket in the car for so long that it shrunk. In the confessional sequence intercut with the dressing room scene, Willie says, "She shops at these fancy stores that sell clothes for like little European men. They don't fit." Willie uses "fancy" because it suggests that it is something he is not; "fancy" certainly has no place in the Robertson family's universe. The mocking lilt Willie uses to verbally pair "fancy" with "little European men," contrasts the identity of an imagined, smaller male subject, but implies that that male subject is effeminate, probably homosexual, and definitely weak in comparison to the brawny, rugged Robertson men. This implied contrast preps the viewer for Korie's proposal to Willie. She says, "If you did want to lose a few pounds you can come to yoga with me." Anyone with even a passing familiarity with the show or its branding could anticipate Willie's reaction, which only serves to confirm the central significance of regulatory masculinity. Willie's reply begins in confessional when he says, "I may want to lose some weight, but I'm not going to lose my pride." After cutting back to their dressing room scene, he continues, "I'm not going to yoga. That's for girls. I'm not doing it." Willie's refusal to attend yoga with his wife goes beyond disinterest or even unwillingness to risk public embarrassment. He dismisses yoga on the basis of its effeminate nature. There is a clear binary established between laudable male activities (hunting, outdoor labor, eating) and unacceptable female activities (shopping, grooming, caregiving), and Willie wants to make sure he stays on the male side, especially as his

masculinity has already been threatened by his performance of concern about his appearance.

This binary between appropriately gendered activities is further reinforced in a later scene when Jase attempts to convince Willie to let him help him lose weight before the reunion. Willie says, “I would rather put my hair in pigtails and wear makeup than take work-out tips from Jase.” Willie’s statement doesn’t have anything to do with working out, body image, or weight loss—he’s simply trying to emphasize how much he doesn’t want to hear what his brother Jase has to say about fitness, and in order to make that contrast clear he calls up what would have previously been considered the worst thing in the world—to look like an infantilized girl in pigtails and makeup—to say that he’d *rather* do that than listen to Jase. Despite Willie’s preferences, his conversation with Jase continues. Willie suggests that he should go to a gym. Jase—outdoorsman extraordinaire—is personally offended by the idea that Willie would prefer to work out in a gym in pursuit of calories burned rather than continue to chop the firewood Jase needs. To communicate this disappointment and offense to Willie he says, “Wear the little shorty-shorts and prance around in a gym?” Jase’s use of “shorty-shorts” and “prance” signal to the viewer—and to Willie—that Jase imagines gym-goers to be feminized and weak in a way that paragons of *Duck Dynasty* masculinity are likely to find reprehensible. Here again, stereotyped, traditional gender roles and performance are at the center of the Robertson’s values and worldview.

The plot climaxes in a subsequent scene that opens at Blue Sky Yoga where Korie and Willie are in the middle of a class. Willie is struggling through the poses and making mocking comments, but in an intercut confessional he comically says, “What can I say?”

The going gets tough, the tough strap on yoga tights.” And Willie does actually seem to be wearing camouflage-print cropped tights underneath his gym shorts. His ridiculous outfit, inability to master any of the poses, and his ongoing self-deprecating commentary contribute to the scene’s comic effects. Near the end of the class one of Willie and Korie’s daughters bursts into the room, followed by her grandfather and Willie’s father, *Duck Dynasty* patriarch, Phil. Phil stops short at the curtain that sets off the studio space, as surprised to see Willie as Willie is to see him. Korie narrates for the viewer saying, “I thought Miss Kay was picking [Willie and Korie’s daughter] up,” thus indicating that Phil’s presence is unexpected. Phil dramatically removes his signature sunglasses to ensure he’s seeing clearly and to allow the judgmental expression he wears to be seen by Willie and the viewer. Willie begins to explain, but Phil merely replaces his sunglasses, drops the curtain, and walks away.

Phil never speaks during the scene, but in his confessional voiceover that’s laid over his departure from Blue Sky Yoga he says, “Danger. Bomp bomp bomp. Red lights blinking. What has happened to my boy?” Willie’s reply, edited to neatly dovetail with Phil’s alarmist confessional is “I’m never going to hear the end of this.” Played for laughs, these extreme reactions and statements make explicit the valorization of masculinity. Phil’s position is that of venerable patriarch: he started and continues to run the company that now supports his entire family (plus some). He is also celebrated in the show and through its paratexts for being a devout Christian who travels to speak about his faith and preach (often vitriolic) sermons, sometimes even uninvited ones.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Joe Carter details Phil’s sermonizing in “9 Things You Should Know About *Duck Dynasty*.”

## Geographic and Cultural Location: Imagining a Recreational, White South

What are the Robertson family's possessive investments in whiteness that structure the bounds of masculinity in the show, with Willie as buffoon at one end and Phil the stoic patriarch at the other? In *Reconstructing Dixie*, Tara McPherson deploys the concept of the "southern frame" to indicate the deeply rooted cultural, social, political, and regional specificities associated with the South. The southern frame in McPherson's book is broad—encompassing a variety of Souths and ways of being southern.

Although this project is not primarily concerned with the complicated histories of the South that McPherson analyzes, these histories are relevant to the contemporary specificities and boundaries of the rural space in which *Duck Dynasty* is set. Racial demographics, schools, and maps offer a nuanced perspective on some of the material consequences of living out this southern frame in a kind of mediated, lived reality. *Duck Dynasty's* specific white masculinity necessitates a variety of borders. Understanding the literal, geographic boundaries structuring the world of the show and the everyday lives of the Robertsons enables an understanding of the relationship between the literal and the abstract boundaries and how they work together to mobilize a reactionary political agenda cloaked in family values rhetoric.

*Duck Dynasty* is set and filmed in the hometown and workplace of the Robertson family, Monroe and West Monroe, Louisiana. The Ouachita River flows through the heart of the area, dividing it into the sister cities of Monroe and West Monroe. The stark difference in racial demographics of each area tells a tale of segregation and institutionalized racism not uncommon in Southern towns, despite official sentiments

expressed by the city such as, “[t]he friendliness and helpfulness of the people who live here belie deep divisions in the community” (“Monroe—One City, One Future”) (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

As these charts illustrate, the majority of the area’s white population lives in West Monroe while the majority of the black population lives in Monroe. The data demonstrates the racial segregation and disparities that persist in the South (2010 Census).

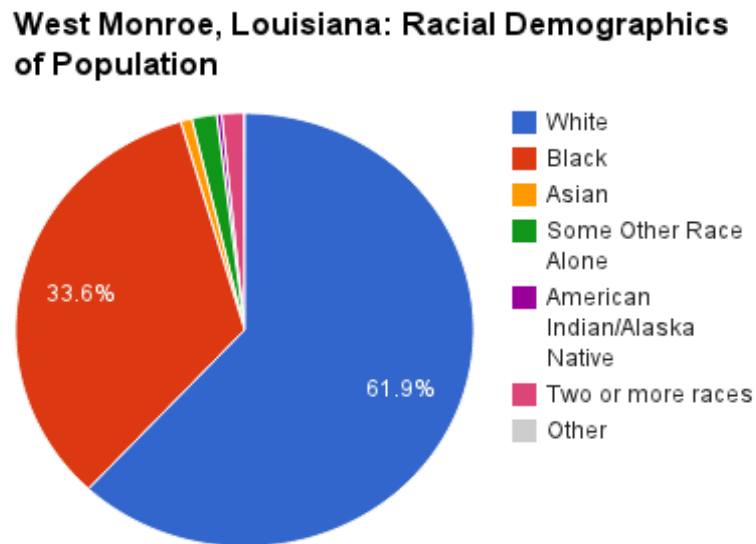


Figure 2: Chart of West Monroe, Louisiana's Racial Demographics



### Monroe, Louisiana: Racial Demographics of Population

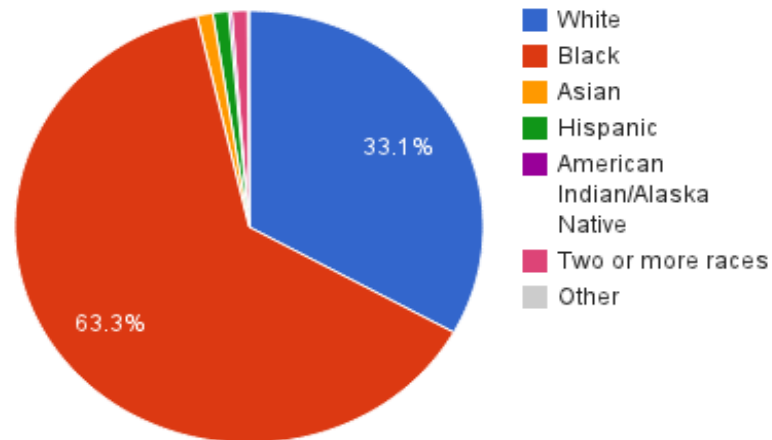


Figure 3: Chart of Monroe, Louisiana's Racial Demographics

However, the story isn't as simple as the municipal division suggested by the river. The city's development and ongoing public conversations regarding racial disparity indicate that the sharpest division is oriented north and south with Louisville Avenue serving as the understood white-black boundary (Spurlock). All of the Robertson family live in West Monroe. Mapping the landmarks of the show demonstrates that not only does *Duck Dynasty* feature a segregated televisual world, but that world is identical to their real world lives.

The Robertsons' performative white masculinity is explicitly "redneck," preferring woods and water over people and civilization, so it isn't entirely surprising that many of the spots they frequent would be on the rural outskirts of town. What is noteworthy is how intentional the Robertsons seem to be in creating a whites-only world for their families. Their daily travels usually keep them in strict adherence to the towns'

recognized racial boundary line. The one location on the map of their recognized travels below Louisville Avenue is their warehouse, which is far west of Monroe’s city center. A clearer visualization of their intentionally whitewashed world manifests in the racial demographics of the private school to which the family sends their children (Ouachita Christian School Statistics) (Figure 4).

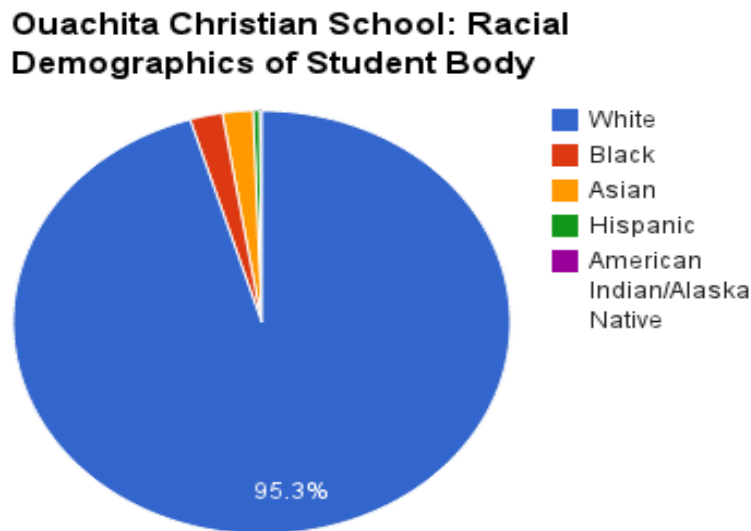


Figure 4: Chart of Racial Demographics of Ouachita Christian School

Considering these figures alongside those of West Monroe, where the families live, or those of Monroe, where the school is actually located highlights the intentional whiteness of the world in which the Robertsons live. In an area with a lot of racial diversity, the Robertsons choose to put their children in a private school where 95% of the students look just like them, and the other locations they frequent during filming hew to the lines of racial segregation or what Frankenberg refers to as “racial social geography,” a term that captures the ideological contours of these geographical and municipal boundaries. Using the concept of racial social geography to understand Monroe, Louisiana denaturalizes the racial divisions of neighborhoods and cities,

directing attention to the social processes and policies that shape the demographics of how and where people live. The Robertson family's investment and dependence on the centrality and supremacy of white masculinity results in the production of an all-white world that excludes bodies and voices of color.

Social geographies of race are structural rather than individual. According to Frankenberg, "racism emerges not only as an ideology or political orientation chosen or rejected at will but also as a system of material relationships with a set of ideas linked to and embedded in those material relations" (70). *Duck Dynasty* presents an uncannily white vision of Louisiana and the South more broadly. Frankenberg speaks to the erasure of people of color saying, "[e]ven the presence or absence of people of color seemed to be as much a social-mental construct as a social-physical one..." (69). Certainly *Duck Dynasty*'s open whitewashing of a region with both a racially diverse population and a long history of extreme, institutionalized racism operates on multiple registers.

#### Framing the Details: Beards, Blinds, and Bootstraps

*Duck Dynasty*'s celebration of a particular version of white masculinity grounded in chivalry, wilderness-taming, and familial obligation has its origins in ultra-conservative political and evangelical religious ideologies. Their beliefs are formed into a palatable product courtesy of their country speech patterns, overgrown, messy beards, and casual style. One reporter says, "[t]hough they may look like the feral love children of Willie Nelson and ZZ Top, Duck Commander CEO Willie Robertson and his father Phil are both highly-savvy businessmen with post-graduate degrees" (Ritchie). In other words, the Robertsons pose no threat to the good ol' boys club – rather, they're card-carrying

members. Ritchie quotes one of the show's executive producers, Scott Gurney, who tells him, "[*Duck Dynasty* is] like *Modern Family* in camo. [...] What intrigued me initially was not the fact that they're rich rednecks, but that they're extremely true to who they are and they're extremely intelligent." Gurney pinpoints *Duck Dynasty*'s conservative politics and worldview by comparing it to *Modern Family*, which has been rightfully criticized for failing to live up to the promise of its title and instead promoting business—and politics—as usual (Doty, Shipley). However, *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present) diverges from *Duck Dynasty* in its open endorsement of gay marriage. The comparison is an important one, at least before December 2013: despite the eccentricities of family members, both *Modern Family* and *Duck Dynasty* extol normative family values.

Jarret Ruminiski argues that the practically trademarked beard worn by the men of the *Duck Dynasty* clan is a longstanding cultural signifier evocative of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a signifier that works to assuage fears about gender ambiguity or non-conformity while also promoting traditional markers of masculinity (Figure 5).



Figure 5: A&E promotional image featuring (L to R) Phil, Jase, Si, and Willie

Beards also broadly signify fundamentalisms of all kinds. Ruminiski says that the conservative cultural meanings their beards activate for viewers and fans have contributed to the show's success:

The Robertson men's beards alone do not a successful show make. But their beards do symbolize and invoke a long history of cultural construction based around generic Southern American values served up hot and ready to many Americans.

These folks want a little something simpler in their lives to combat what they see as a host of uncomfortable modern social changes.

Ruminiski's argument is made even more relevant in consideration of Phil Robertson's statement in an interview (Balog). When asked "[a]re there significances to the beards? Other than fashion?" Robertson replies:

Me being a Genesis man — the Almighty made us with hair coming out of our face — is there a remote possibility that the reason it's there is because it's supposed to be there? Protection — UV rays, wind, cold? I'm just thinking whiskers are a good thing. I'm doubting the logic that the reason they are there is to scrape them off every day. What they're saying is, 'Make your face like a woman.' At one time in our culture, all men wore beards. For my line of work, it makes sense.

The Robertsons' respect for the slight biological differences between sexes is so great that they promote beards for all men as a way of vanquishing the anonymous "they" who issue shaving edicts. Their fear of gender ambiguity is so great that they are constantly seeking to eliminate any confusion about whether or not their gender performance matches up with their anatomy, and more importantly, the societal and cultural roles to which those body parts entitle them. Phil's demeaning statements regarding femininity or

womanhood suggest that he understands masculinity—the type of masculinity he performs—as the default, natural way of being in the world, while femininity is recognized as artificial and performative. Femininity is something that is put-on, groomed, and refined, but for Phil, masculinity is the most natural way of being in the world. He can't acknowledge the performance of *both* femininity and masculinity without putting his own sense of self-worth and understanding of some natural God-given order at perilous risk. After all, Phil doesn't think his beliefs emerge from his own mind but that they are informed and supported by a politically conservative, evangelical Christian God and His directly inspired word, the Bible. Indeed, the Robertson family's Christian faith frames each episode, ending with the entire family around a dinner table saying a prayer related to the events of the episode. Many of the family members have talked about how important their faith is to their family and how they let A&E know that their appearance on the show was conditional on their ability to openly express their faith (Robertson, W. and K. 189). Despite this apparent agreement and the family prayer that closes each episode, Phil Robertson has said that the producers continue to “pretty much cut out most of the spiritual things” (Carter).

In the workplace micro-genre, white masculinity operates as the defining cultural and narrative structure that shapes behavior and ideology; it functions as the law of land, air, and sea. In marketing images like Figure 1 on page 63, white men conquer and claim land and resources. Hunting and fishing are key signifiers of masculinity in *Duck Dynasty*. Many narrative arcs revolve around the men hunting together—dove, ducks, frogs, turkey, deer, etc.—and teaching the younger generations how to do the same. They celebrate hunting and wax poetic about communing with nature and living off the land.

Within the show and *Duck Dynasty*'s particular southern frame, hunting operates as a quintessential patriarchal activity and as an assertion of the white, masculine rhetoric touting self-sufficiency and a biblical order in which mankind dominates animals and the environment. Hunting is also an explicit justification for obtaining and keeping guns in the home. Other programs in the genre, including *Deadliest Catch* and *Big Shrimpin'*, also celebrate patriarchy, a natural order in which men seek and affirm kinship with other men through rituals of self-sufficiency, domination, and violence.

The Robertsons use their Christianity as a platform from which they justify hunting as an activity and seek to convert more people into avid hunters. Jase Robertson told a reporter that hunting is, “good, clean, God-sanctioned fun” (Kazek). Jase and Phil figure hunting as entertainment with a holy stamp of approval but don't address its status across the South as a time-honored homosocial activity. The spectrum of hunters in Southern culture ranges from casual novices to avid experts; placement on this spectrum doesn't only indicate one's interest in the activity but access to specialized gear, guns, off-road capable vehicles, and, most importantly, land. Some hunters don't own the land that they hunt on, but they have to be on intimate enough terms with the landowner to secure both permission and keys to the locked gates bordering the wooded acres where they hope to find prey. These elements explain at least part of why hunting is also a primarily white masculine activity: a century of laws and policies prohibited African Americans from purchasing or owning land in the South. Even if an African American man had access to hunting land—in 1914 and 2014 alike—the inherent dangers of being black in a remote, rural South unlikely to be populated by anyone other than white men with guns are undeniable. But the Robertsons don't question the power structures and

privileges that enable them to own the vast acreage they do, nor the leisure time and economic resources made available to them but denied to others. They understand these privileges as natural rewards for hard work and divine favor.

Evangelical, conservative Christianity and its associated privileges for white people shade every part of *Duck Dynasty*'s Southern frame. For the Robertsons, and vast portions of Southern citizens, the bible operates as part morality tale, part life manual. The bible is referenced constantly; verses sprinkle daily conversations as evidence for one's truth-claims and personal moral standing. Questioning the accuracy, historical context, or creation and compilation of the sacred text is to question the foundation upon which many Southerners—the Robertsons as a prime example—understand their life to be built and directed. Phil Robertson seems to have memorized every biblical passage that could possibly be interpreted as endorsing hunting and is happy to recite them at any given opportunity. Willie and Korie Robertson cite Genesis 1:28 in their book as justification for hunting, eating road kill, and selling crawfish (Robertson, W and K, 73). That verse is part of a passage, Genesis 1:26-28, that has been interpreted by many fundamentalists to justify not only hunting but environmental neglect and abuse.<sup>18</sup> The Robertsons' understanding of the Bible represents the lowest common denominator in terms of educated, nuanced interpretation and application, which they aren't looking to change since their understanding supports the activities that they value personally and that have made them millionaires.

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<sup>18</sup> However, many scholars have demonstrated that those verses do not support such beliefs or activities and that mis-interpretation and ignorance is to blame for such mis-application. Refer to the following scholars' work for more about environmentally responsible interpretations of Genesis 1: Lynn White, Jr., Liz Jakimow, Finomo Julia Awajiusuk, and Steve Bishop.



### Codes of Likability and the Insularity of Southern Charm

Criticism of the Robertsons is typically hard to find. They appear to be as affable in real life as they are on their show. This well-mannered veneer is part and parcel of Southern culture. Jase Robertson was kicked out of Trump Hotel in New York City when an employee assumed he was a homeless man seeking refuge in the establishment, but he didn't seem perturbed by the incident when recounting it during an appearance on *Live! With Kelly and Michael* (WABC; ABC/Disney; 1983-present; hosts have changed) (Cieczkowski) (Figure 6). When the host, Michael Strahan, a black man, asked him why he was escorted out, Robertson replied with a particularly tone-deaf attempt at a joke. In a year in which race-based profiling and violence against people of color has been in the headlines constantly, Robertson's quip that he was kicked out of the hotel because of "facial profiling" fell flat.<sup>19</sup> Strahan replied, "Facial profiling, huh? I don't like facial profiling." Strahan's straight-faced reply indicated that the pun was both unfunny and problematic; comparing the crimes, violence, and oppression committed in the name of racial profiling was not comparable to Jase's hotel mishap. The cultural capital and assumed good intentions accumulated by the Robertsons insulated Jase Robertson from being publicly shamed for his joke.

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<sup>19</sup> For analysis of specific headlines from 2012-14 refer to the work of Mychal Denzel Smith, Brittany Cooper, Heavy Mettle, Raphael Chestang, Tina Moore and Ginger Adams Otis, and J. David Goodman.



Figure 6: Screenshot of appearance on *Live! with Kelly & Michael* taken December 11, 2013

This instance is an exemplary representation of the Robertsons' overwhelming collective privilege and ignorance. During the same interview, Willie Robertson complains that it's difficult to get around New York City without being recognized and that their stand-out beards make any undercover tourism nearly impossible. His complaints make clear both the entitlement he feels to move around the city as a white man and his insensitivity to the limitations imposed (recently and in close proximity) on other bodies.

The implications and subtexts of this talk show example were borne out in an explicit way on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Phil Robertson did an interview with *GQ* magazine wherein he famously made ignorant and hateful comments that compared homosexuality to bestiality and claimed that black people in the South were happier in the Jim Crow South than they are currently (Magary). In reference to homosexuality, Phil observed:

It seems like, to me, a vagina—as a man—would be more desirable than a man’s anus. That’s just me. I’m just thinking: There’s more there! She’s got more to offer. I mean, come on, dudes! You know what I’m saying? But hey, sin: It’s not logical, my man. It’s just not logical.

Phil deploys friendly, cajoling language to soften the edges of the claims he makes here, and perhaps to even disguise the complete lack of “logical” evidence or authority he offers for his claims. Phil’s lack of imagination and strict worldview limit the possibilities of sex to heterosexual intercourse. Phil continues, outlining various sins and appealing to the authority of the bible as evidence for his outrage:

Start with homosexual behavior and just morph out from there. Bestiality, sleeping around with this woman and that woman and that woman and those men,’ he says. Then he paraphrases Corinthians: ‘Don’t be deceived. Neither the adulterers, the idolaters, the male prostitutes, the homosexual offenders, the greedy, the drunkards, the slanderers, the swindlers—they won’t inherit the kingdom of God. Don’t deceive yourself. It’s not right.

It’s important to Phil that his audience understand the *effects* of their behaviors.

Conservative Christianity teaches believers that they must convert as many people to their faith as possible in order to *save* those sinners from the eternal horrors of hell.

Conservative Christian churches also emphasize the bible’s teachings that those who fail to warn people of their coming doom will suffer the punishment of wearing those people’s blood on their hands—a pretty motivating consequence (*Holy Bible*, Ezekiel 33:1-9 and Acts 18:5-6). Phil is fulfilling the imperative given him by his faith community, and he is setting himself apart as a vocal prophet more committed to his faith

than he is subject to the (imagined) pressures of Hollywood that would have him conform to more mainstream politics and views.

Phil's homophobia was explained as owing to his fundamentalist religious views, but the racism that accompanied his homophobia could not be accounted for by the same mental gymnastics. In the same interview Phil presents a revisionist historical account of the Jim Crow era:

I never, with my eyes, saw the mistreatment of any black person. Not once. Where we lived was all farmers. The blacks worked for the farmers. I hoed cotton with them. I'm with the blacks, because we're white trash. We're going across the field. ... They're singing and happy. I never heard one of them, one black person, say, 'I tell you what: These doggone white people' — not a word! ... Pre-entitlement, pre-welfare, you say: Were they happy? They were godly; they were happy; no one was singing the blues. (Magary)

Phil rhetorically aligns himself with the group he denigrates by equivocating his “white trash” heritage with “the blacks [who] worked for the farmers.” Even if we gloss over the inequity of that move, Phil goes on to offer an account of life in the South starkly different from the stories told by African Americans or as documented by historical materials. Moving beyond even this willfully ignorant account, Phil mobilizes his personal politics—steeped in his possessive investment in whiteness—to argue that there was a historical moment in which black people were happy, before they were entitled, on welfare, and ungodly (Lipsitz). Phil doesn't—and *can't*—specify what it is that these people are suddenly feeling entitled to, nor does he demonstrate any knowledge of what welfare is nor its historical place as inheritor to centuries-old systems of inequality of

wealth and access. Phil frames his own racial social geography as one in which black laborers were self-sufficient, living lives simple and happy enough to render the blues irrelevant and unnecessary. He imagines his voice, his story, as the centrally important narrative people need to hear about a Jim Crow South. The implication is that if we follow Phil's prescriptive masculinity, bound up in whiteness, far right wing politics, conservative Christianity, and neoliberal citizenship, then we can get back to what he imagines as a moral, idyllic time.

With the *GQ* interview, Phil Robertson was finally awarded a platform unavailable on A&E. That Robertson believed such things or was willing to say them out loud did not come as a surprise to the most religiously ardent of the *Duck Dynasty*/Commander fan base as he has been giving sermons and leading Bible studies on some of these same issues for years before the show was created (Richard, Lee, E.). *GQ* simply provided an unplugged version of Phil Robertson with national visibility whereas the visibility A&E offers is exclusively reserved for the watered-down, marketable version of the Robertson family's religious beliefs.

Robertson's interview appears in the January 2014 issue of *GQ* though the news broke before most people even saw the magazine. *The Los Angeles Times* was one of the earliest news outlets to publish a story about the *GQ* interview, and it spread quickly via social media in that particularly pervasive and prolific way that stories combining politics, religion, perceived "freedom of speech" issues, and popular culture seem to circulate (Blake). A&E was quick to release a statement denouncing the views expressed by Phil Robertson and announce his suspension from the network. Their statement, also released on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013 reads:

We are extremely disappointed to have read Phil Robertson's comments in *GQ*, which are based on his own personal beliefs and are not reflected in the series *Duck Dynasty*. His personal views in no way reflect those of A+E Networks, who have always been strong supporters and champions of the LGBT community. The network has placed Phil under hiatus from filming indefinitely. ("Phil Robertson Suspended")

Think piece editorials followed close behind in predictable fashion with liberal media holding Robertson accountable for his remarkable lack of self-awareness and homophobia and conservatives decrying "liberal media's" bias against middle America's religion and "family values."<sup>20</sup> In their typical attention-grubbing fashion, Sarah Palin and Rush Limbaugh spoke publicly about how Robertson's suspension reflected a nation with no regard for Constitutional rights or moral righteousness (Figure 7).

A&E's suspension of Robertson prompted further outcry from evangelical conservatives who leapt at the chance to claim persecution. Palin, heralded by a popular conservative website as politician who "most resonates with Duck Dynasty Nation" was quick to jump to Robertson's defense and frame the issue as one of free speech (Lee, T.). Palin shares the Robertson's possessive investment in whiteness. For Palin, this investment manifests in a need to manufacture persecution where it doesn't actually exist.

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<sup>20</sup> For examples, see Adrienne Royer, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Jonah Goldberg.



Sarah Palin  
December 18, 2013

Free speech is an endangered species. Those "intolerants" hatin' and taking on the Duck Dynasty patriarch for voicing his personal opinion are taking on all of us.



Like · Comment · Share

63,182

429,372 people like this.

Figure 7: Screenshot of Sarah Palin's Facebook page taken January 8, 2014. Claiming persecution grants Palin, and evangelicals like her, a position from which she is figured as a victim *and* granted a platform to preach her politics wearing a religion costume. T. F. Charlton reports on a video produced by Reach America called "The Thaw" that features teens reporting the ways they've been persecuted as a result of practicing Christianity. Charlton says "The Thaw," and I would add *Duck Dynasty* "represents a generation raised to believe their divine mission is to entrench a racialized and politicized Christian supremacy" and that those fears of persecution are "often steeped in white racial anxiety and resentment." Charlton would argue that the teenagers in "The Thaw" make the same rhetorical move in claiming persecution in school that the

Robertson family makes when claiming their religious views and practices are censored and silenced by A&E.

The Robertson family framed the controversy as a family crisis in which they were the victims of the distorted perspective that coastal, liberal media elites have on religious faith. Following A&E's announcement of Phil Robertson's suspension, the Robertson family released a collective statement on their website on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013:

We want to thank all of you for your prayers and support. The family has spent much time in prayer since learning of A&E's decision. We want you to know that first and foremost we are a family rooted in our faith in God and our belief that the Bible is His word. While some of Phil's unfiltered comments to the reporter were coarse, his beliefs are grounded in the teachings of the Bible. Phil is a Godly man who follows what the Bible says are the greatest commandments: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Phil would never incite or encourage hate. We are disappointed that Phil has been placed on hiatus for expressing his faith, which is his constitutionally protected right. We have had a successful working relationship with A&E but, as a family, we cannot imagine the show going forward without our patriarch at the helm. We are in discussions with A&E to see what that means for the future of Duck Dynasty. Again, thank you for your continued support of our family. ("The Robertson Family Official Statement")

There are many descriptors that apply to Phil's opinions, some of which I've already used here: ignorant, hateful, vitriolic, etc. The Robertson family has been in the business of marketing their image long enough to know that the more down-home, plainspoken, and



countrified they can seem, the more appealing they (and their merchandise) are to their target demographic. “Coarse” suggests that Phil lacks refinement and that he’s an unfinished product; it does not acknowledge or take ownership of the fear, hate, self-righteousness, and superiority inherent to his statements.

In a clever turn of phrase regarding their disappointment in A&E’s decision to suspend Phil, the family gestures toward the first amendment of the constitution and its protection of free speech without directly claiming it for this circumstance. It’s clever because including the phrase, “constitutionally protected right,” feeds conservative fans and followers who are looking for a way to frame this perceived injustice as being about a violation of constitutional rights without actually claiming it as such in their statement. The Robertson family was wise to avoid fully crossing over into that territory and shouting about constitutionality since, as should be obvious, Phil Robertson’s first amendment rights were never in danger as no government official tried to silence him, nor was he ever at risk for arrest or detainment due to anything he said in the interview (First Amendment). The Robertsons could not afford to risk losing more credibility or good faith by actively claiming legal persecution or denial of constitutional rights so, instead, they mobilize their less-advised fan base to claim persecution for them.

The cries of persecution worked. A petition signed by 250,000+ people calling for the end of Phil Robertson’s suspension, related trending Twitter hashtag #IStandwithPhil, and alleged reports of thousands of rubber ducks sent to A&E offices by disgruntled fans were enough to persuade A&E to end their declared suspension of Phil Robertson after a mere nine days (Kuruville; De Moraes). A&E’s statement reads (in part):

As a global media content company, A&E Networks' core values are centered around creativity, inclusion and mutual respect. We believe it is a privilege for our brands to be invited into people's homes, and we operate with a strong sense of integrity and deep commitment to these principles.

That is why we reacted so quickly and strongly to a recent interview with Phil Robertson. While Phil's comments made in the interview reflect his personal views based on his own beliefs and his own personal journey, he and his family have publicly stated they regret the 'coarse language' he used and the misinterpretation of his core beliefs based only on the article. He also made it clear he would 'never incite or encourage hate.' We at A&E Networks expressed our disappointment with his statements in the article and reiterate that they are not views we hold.

But *Duck Dynasty* is not a show about one man's views. It resonates with a large audience because it is a show about family ... a family that America has come to love. As you might have seen in many episodes, they come together to reflect and pray for unity, tolerance and forgiveness. These are three values that we at A+E Networks also feel strongly about.

So after discussions with the Robertson family, as well as consulting with numerous advocacy groups, A&E has decided to resume filming *Duck Dynasty* later this spring with the entire Robertson family.

We will also use this moment to launch a national public service campaign (PSA) promoting unity, tolerance and acceptance among all people, a message that supports our core values as a company and the values found in *Duck Dynasty*. These PSAs will air across our entire portfolio. (O'Connell "A&E Welcomes")

A&E's executives use this statement as opportunity to document their irritation with Phil Robertson, but they are treading a fine line between maintaining mainstream popularity while not isolating *Duck Dynasty's* admittedly more fringe fans. A&E needed to assert their ownership of the *Duck Dynasty* brand and hopefully instill a little fear of the corporate in the Robertsons. Including language from the family's statement (released on December 19<sup>th</sup>) was a gesture of goodwill and perhaps a requirement from the Robertsons' legal advisors. What A&E's promised PSA campaign will actually promote or accomplish and how they will harness the now divisive *Duck Dynasty* brand to promote "unity" remains to be seen. What is more predictable is that the show's popularity is unlikely to last much longer. Phil Robertson said in a summer 2013 interview that he is not planning to do the show long-term, and comparable sub-culture programs have not proven to have significant staying power for their networks (Tadeka).

Scholar-authors Ta-Nehisi Coates and Brittney Cooper both published articles naming the large-scale failure to address or hold Phil Robertson accountable for his racism alongside his homophobia. Just as *Duck Dynasty's* fantasy world is free of sinning gay people, so it is largely devoid of people of color, especially with their messy, undesirable histories. In reference to Robertson's misplaced emphasis on welfare and entitlement, glossing over the gruesome realities of a civil-rights era South, Coates says:

The belief that black people were at their best when they were being hunted down like dogs for the sin of insisting on citizenship is a persistent strain of thought in this country. This belief reflects the inability to cope with an America that is, at least rhetorically, committed to equality.

Coates agrees that *Duck Dynasty*'s world, the Louisiana they inhabit, is a construct.

Interrogating what shapes and informs that construct is where things get messy and leads to Phil Robertson saying ignorant, hateful things in which he gets to imagine himself as a noble figure, fighting the good fight for religious country folk. Cooper aligns herself with both progressive Christianity and the black church of her childhood while contextualizing Phil Robertson and his racist comments within a history of white evangelicals conflating Christianity with the Republican party ("Evangelical church's ugly truth"). Cooper says:

The Church can no longer afford to be disingenuous about its racism problem. Easy unity is not what we need. Time has run out for an African American Church that continues to tack hard to the right — uncritically imbibing the agenda of the (white) Evangelical Right, without acknowledging that this position, predicated as it is on the belief that Christian = Republican, is fundamentally averse to, and in some ways responsible for, the declining social and political condition of African Americans, gay and straight alike.

Cooper's article is important for many reasons, not the least of which is that she explicitly names the intimate public sphere that so many active church members take pride and comfort in belonging to (Berlant). Cooper names this sphere, identifies its transgressions and failings, and holds it accountable for its cultural impact. However, I am less hopeful—more cynical—than Cooper is in her article. This debacle seems to signal the beginning of the end for *Duck Dynasty*, though it is unlikely that the show's conclusion will ever appear as anything other than the deliberate orchestrations of an insulated, privileged family calling the shots over what their world looks like and who is allowed to share it.

### Conclusion: Prescriptive Masculinity and Anti-Intellectualism

*Duck Dynasty*'s brand of masculinity isn't just a description; it is prescriptive. We gain a better understanding of the cultural and social context of that masculinity by positioning the show within the cohort of other reality programs focusing on masculinized, outdoor labor and the specific racial social geographies of Monroe and West Monroe, Louisiana. The examples from the show's narrative about how gender is used as a shaming device, the policing behaviors and identities within the show, tell us about whom the characters imagine themselves to be and the relational functions of those identities. The show's total erasure of people of color tell us about the possessive investment in whiteness exemplified by the Robertsons. *Duck Dynasty*'s agenda certainly includes seemingly innocuous objectives like humor, and "family-friendly" (profanity and nudity-free) entertainment, but those objectives are shaped, as I've demonstrated in this chapter, by a host of behaviors and beliefs that promote racism, homophobia, and misogyny. The final element of *Duck Dynasty*'s southern frame is the one that makes these behaviors and beliefs more dangerous than they already are on their own merit. *Duck Dynasty*'s prescriptive (white, Southern) masculinity is also firmly rooted in a particular religious brand of anti-intellectualism.

In the third episode of season one, Phil Robertson is talking about the things he teaches his grandchildren about hunting, the outdoors, and "living off the land." He rounds out this confessional sequence by saying, "[t]he last thing I would want for my grandkids is to grow up to be nerds." This denigration of education is a persistent theme in *Duck Dynasty*. The other Robertsons mock Willie for going soft and finishing his college degree before joining Phil at the helm of the family business. Sports, hunting,

fishing, and other outdoor activities are lauded as worthwhile accomplishments, but there's no conversation regarding studying, homework, grades, or educational goals. If education is understood solely as a path to career advancement and your family already has more money than they will ever spend and a rock-solid business for the next generation to inherit, then education loses any potential value.

But this anti-intellectualism isn't just a dismissal of the value of higher education. *Duck Dynasty* appeals to nostalgia (Americana), "common sense," and tradition in ways that are insidious and dangerous in their perpetuation of policies, beliefs, and practices that marginalize identities not white, (traditionally) masculine, or heterosexual (Gramsci). The show's resistance to progressive politics—on every level—is camouflaged by Southern drawls and the rhetoric of family values, but the overt discounting of education and critical thought begin to reveal the *Duck Dynasty*'s blind spots and concerning agenda. A material example of this anti-intellectualism is seen in the headlining appearance made by Willie and Korie, the younger counterparts to patriarch Phil and matriarch "Miss Kay," in the trailer for the soon-to-be-released film, *God's Not Dead*. The opening of the trailer uses a journalistic tone, quick cuts, and suspenseful music to communicate the gravitas of its subject ("*God's Not Dead*"). In the early moments of the trailer, Willie and Korie interviewed by a young woman who says, "What do you say to people who are offended by your show because you pray to Jesus in every episode?" The sequence cuts from the interviewer to Willie and Korie, standing near one another, outdoors, and shot from a low angle to establish their authority. Willie replies firmly, "We disown him, he'll disown us." Korie looks at him, and both of their facial expressions remain serious throughout the take. Willie and Korie are framed and styled

(Willie even wears the American flag bandana originally required by A&E's producers to help viewers distinguish one Robertson from another) in such a way so as to appeal to their celebrity and their characters on *Duck Dynasty* as both bait and support for the film (Robertson, W. and K.).

The trailer continues, transitioning from the hard journalism intro to the actual narrative, signaled by bright sunlight, glimmering bokeh, and a lift in the musical score from minor chords and drums to major chords and lilting strings. The protagonist is introduced: a young white man, Josh, registering for college classes, advised by another young white man helping him register to take a different philosophy class once the helper notices the protagonist's cross necklace. The registration helper compares the professor's philosophy classroom to the Roman coliseum. Cut to the maligned professor, a middle-aged white man (Kevin Sorbo) entering a stadium-style classroom for their first philosophy class and telling his students, "All I ask of you is to fill in the pieces of paper I've given you with three little words: God. Is. Dead." The central narrative conflict unfolds from there. Should Josh accept the heathen professor's challenge of defending the antithesis of "god is dead" or accept defeat? Will Josh continue in his pursuit even after the professor pulls him aside with the warning, "do not try to humiliate me in front of my students!" The last half of the trailer includes an energetic live concert from The Newsboys, a Christian rock band popular in the 1990s, raging against the man who would claim god is dead.

The trailer has been circulating around social media in February 2014 as part of a campaign to prompt interested people to request a screening of the film in their hometowns. Willie and Korie Robertson's appearance has been a major marketing point

for the trailer and the campaign. *God's Not Dead's* assumptions about atheists (or agnostics), higher education, and even the operations of rhetoric and logical argumentation are great and greatly uninformed. The film operates under the same cultural logic as “The Thaw,” as discussed by Charlton. The need to cry persecution is a central part of conservative, evangelical Christianity in the U.S. It is problematic when educators, public schools, and critical thought are the identified enemy imagined to be doing the persecuting. Higher education and cultural criticism is the primary way that young people are exposed to the realities of racism, homophobia, and misogyny. This is a problem for the Robertsons—and other people who would support a film such as *God's Not Dead*—when those systemic inequalities and injustices undergird their entire way of life and understanding of themselves.

*Duck Dynasty's* white, Southern masculinity is both represented by the show and lived out in the Robertson's daily lives. There are material consequences to the absence and erasure of people of color and their histories and stories, the conflation of family values with extreme right-wing politics and rabid fundamentalism, and the continued privileging of whiteness in terms of the distribution of wealth, resources, and opportunities. The South often works as a reservoir for reactionary and extreme ideologies on a national level. Just as *Mad Men* and Sci-Fi's series *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi, 2004-2009) use settings of time and space different from our contemporary one to enable critical conversation of contemporary issues, setting reality programs in the South works to displace or de-center national cultural work *and* national unsightly cultural blemishes.



## CHAPTER IV

### ***HERE COMES HONEY BOO BOO'S POLITICS OF RESISTANCE AND SOLIDARITY***

*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo's* domestic setting, the intimacy among the characters, the insider access viewers are granted to those relationships, and the program's unapologetic focus on domesticity, family quibbles, romance, and personality quirks in lieu of entrepreneurial activities make the show exemplary of the intimate micro-genre. Where *Duck Dynasty* adheres to an entrepreneurial, androcentric agenda characteristic of the workplace micro-genre, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* proves the intimate micro-genre capacious, fluid, and capable of negotiating and expressing a wide variety of political and intersectional identities.

In this chapter I argue that *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which premiered a few months after *Duck Dynasty* in 2012, differentiates itself in crucial ways from the workplace micro-genre, functioning not in entrepreneurial ways but through a logic of resistance and solidarity. While the show itself disrupts the normative frames of mainstream television, in this chapter I address the small-scale, everyday acts of resistance enacted by the Shannon-Thompson family. The layered intimacies, breadth of represented identities, and affectionate perspectives on everyday life—all characteristic of the intimate micro-genre—are *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo's* defining qualities.

*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is a hit TLC program, a spin-off of *Toddlers and Tiaras*. The ongoing mainstream media response to the program is well represented by this headline: "Here Comes Honey Boo Boo: Are You Appalled?" (Graff). Critics such as Ryan McGee for *A.V. Club* claim that the show features child abuse when his actual

complaint is that Mama June won't be shamed into changing her behaviors or values. McGee says, "It's not so much that Mama actively abuses her children so much as provides perhaps the worst example possible of how to live a life with a bit of respect, or at least decorum." It's frustrating for McGee and his cohort of critics and anti-fans to see poor, white, fat, rural, and Southern people actively refusing to buy into a political system that demands compliance with ideologies of upward mobility grounded in aspirational forms of consumption.

The critical reception of the program, based as it is on rejection and mockery, illuminates the response that *respectable* viewers and citizens should have to these representations of unruly bodies (Karlyn 33). Because the framing of the program works to reinforce in the national imagination a South that is ignorant, hopeless, and happy to be so, the Shannon-Thompson family's Southernness is presented as "redneck" or white trash. Although the *Duck Dynasty* clan also lay a stake to this claim, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s brand of redneck lacks the patriarchal foundations of the Robertsons', their family corporate empire, immense wealth, and vast holdings of real estate and land.

This chapter presents an analysis of how *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* functions as an example of the intimate micro-genre and argues that the Shannon-Thompsons define themselves *against* Southern culture's insidious, persistent nostalgia for antebellum graces. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s South evolves not only as actively resistant to antebellum myths but as a space in which a working class family can maintain a contented "country" and "redneck" lifestyle seemingly unruffled by our contemporary moment's economic and political instability. In direct contrast to shows like *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* centers solidarity and cooperation over the

competitive and entrepreneurial spirit and goals directing reality shows like *Big Shrimpin'* and *Survivor*.

*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* features Mama June, her partner Mike (better known as Sugar Bear), their daughter Alana (Honey Boo Boo, 7), and Mama June's daughters who Sugar Bear co-parents, Lauryn (Pumpkin, 12), Jessica (Chubbs, 15), Anna (Chickadee, 17) and Anna's daughter Kaitlyn (1). The show centers on their collective conflicts and triumphs but strikes a decidedly different note than *Duck Dynasty* despite their shared focus on family. The Shannon-Thompsons celebrate vulgarity and affection in equal measure. The eccentricities of the characters are mobilized more to enhance authenticity rather than used for slapstick humor as in *Duck Dynasty*. The show's tone varies between underhanded mockery (of its own characters), playful excesses and indelicacies, and warm affection. Appropriate to its rural Georgia setting but also indicative of the authenticity sought by the producers, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s scenes are often too bright, frequently shot outside in the full glare of the relentless summer sun (the time of year when the seasons are usually shot because the girls are out of school). The Shannon-Thompson home, the characters' wardrobes and cars, the objects of their everyday lives look tired and washed out. When the characters wear bright colors, those colors read as garish and trashy rather than sophisticated or cheerful.

The particular details of redneck identity—style, manners, food preferences, family structure and priorities, and recreational habits—in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* differ dramatically from those presented on *Duck Dynasty*, underscoring the sharp ideological distinction between two programs that arguably share a regional frame. Of this specifically Southern frame, Tara McPherson argues, “If [...] southern settings help

underwrite southern mores and manners, in turn inscribing certain relations of gender, class, and race, we need to think more carefully about how to reroute these familiar emotional paths, reworking the meanings of someplace” (219). Where *Duck Dynasty* inscribes predictable relations of gender, class, and race, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* reroutes these “familiar emotional paths” (219).

### The Anti-Southern Belle: Excessive Bodies and Melodrama

*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* sheds light on the workings out of Southern cultural specificity—the redneck in this case—within intimate reality television. The first episode of season 3, entitled “The Manper,” includes several intersecting story lines that can be summed up thusly: the household’s menstrual pad supply needs re-stocking and the teenagers are begging Sugar Bear to go buy more. He refuses because he’s tired and says he’s at his wit’s end living in a house with “too much estrogen.” The program cuts to a shot of an unfamiliar pick-up truck backing a small, shabby pop-up camper down their driveway. Sugar Bear is delighted with his unauthorized new purchase and deems it his “man camper,” which is promptly shortened to “manper.” Sugar Bear fights with Mama June about the eyesore now parked in their driveway and discusses ways to “make it more homey” with Alana. His early attempts at decor include a “No Trespassing” sign on the exterior. After other narrative threads (including the family’s annual excursion to the local “Redneck Olympics”) resolve, the episode concludes with Mama June and Sugar Bear striking a deal that he can keep his manper if he moves it out of the driveway to somewhere in the backyard where Mama June can’t see it. The girls express their pride in Sugar Bear for standing up to Mama June and he’s smug about having worked out a

compromise that allows him to keep the camper (Figure 8). The episode closes with Sugar Bear coming into the house and silently dropping a package of pads on the dining room table in front of Mama June. Harmony is restored.



Figure 8: Screenshot from S03E01 of Sugar Bear in his "manper"

The manper works to give Sugar Bear a masculinized space where he can be alone, but it also serves to reinforce the not-so-hidden celebration and centering of femininity in the Shannon-Thompson home. This episode figures Sugar Bear's manper as a visible, discrete representation of masculinity juxtaposed against the femininity of menstruation. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* goes out of its way to make menstruation visible and equates it with the significance of the leading narrative regarding the manper. It is rare for menstruation to be explicitly featured as a storyline rather than a punch line on television, but the melodrama and politics of resistance and solidarity that characterize *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* make it commonplace examine the rituals and performances of gender.

Sugar Bear's only personal space in the home pre-manper was a small closet that he kept locked, but he wanted a space that he could call his own with a "TV and a

refrigerator full of sodas.” No one in the house apologizes that Sugar Bear is outnumbered or overpowered. The only person who sees it as a potential problem is Sugar Bear, and he takes the initiative to find a solution independently, ultimately striking a balance between finding solace from the loud demands of his family and confirming that, “I’m happy to have my own space now to get away from all the estrogen from time to time, but I’m happiest when I’m home with the girls” (S03E01). The conflict between Sugar Bear and Mama June over the manper is resolved and femininity is reaffirmed as holding the central place within their household.

Where the setting of *Duck Dynasty* bounces between the characters’ homes and the company’s headquarters, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is clearly set in the domestic sphere. Episodes take place against the backdrop of the Shannon-Thompson home and the narrative is driven by the relationships of the characters. For *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, intimacy and its relational manifestations are the program’s primary currency. In many ways, the Shannon-Thompsons reject the entrepreneurial thrust of the competitive, intervention, and workplace micro-genres of reality television, instead featuring characters who refuse to behave as aspirational, docile workers or good, respectable consumers. In the intimate setting of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, the cultural work of the reality genre becomes explicit. Taste and distinction are revealed in the overweight body of Mama June, the vulgarity of the characters’ language, and the family’s lack of interest in signifying distinction through their habitus. The peculiarity of their diets and consumption practices signal their refusal to conform to middle class behaviors and the social shame and respect that accompany such choices. Their performances give visible structure to invisible Southern codes of behavior and relationality.

*Boo Boo*

The mainstream media's initial response to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* was structured by the strategic marketing campaign produced by TLC – a campaign that presented the show as a voyeuristic opportunity to gawk at, ridicule, and judge the overweight, backwoods folks who caused a ruckus on *Toddlers and Tiaras*. This discourse of (dis)respectability has circulated around *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* since Alana's first national television appearance on *Toddlers and Tiaras* in January 2012 (S05E01). Alana attracted negative attention as a result of her working class status, which is made visible via the condition and style of her home, her mother's professed devotion to couponing and willingness to talk openly about finances, and Alana's inability to or disinterest in performing a well-mannered, restrained, and appropriately feminine sophistication. Instead, her televisual debut performance was defined by head bobbing, finger snapping, and colloquialisms played for sass and laughs that are often audible from the production crew behind the camera, like "...a dolla makes me holla honey boo boo, child!"

The discourse around disrespectability that envelopes Alana and her family owes to the family's refusal to perform class and gender in an acceptably middle-class, respectable way. This outright refusal has resulted in media controversies over Mama June's alleged (in)ability to parent her children, as well as class-based judgments about their lifestyle informed by media-driven moral panics over obesity and education, conveniently enacted over the bodies of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s female characters. "Taste," as evoked by McPherson and theorized by Bourdieu, and referring to the ways in

which class status is expressed through habitus, run throughout every produced scene of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and its social media paratexts, as well as in mainstream media's responses to the program.

The centrality of taste appeared as early as the first episode of season 5 of *Toddlers & Tiaras*, which generated criticism about June giving Alana “go-go juice.” The juice is a mixture of Mountain Dew soda and Red Bull energy drink (Goldwert). June has said she gives it to Alana before pageants to keep her energy levels high and give her some extra “oomph.” Other pageant moms on the series give their little competitors candy and sugar cubes, but June’s “concoction” created what she saw as the best energy for Alana. This go-go juice brought out the concern trolls: people who layer critical input on issues more difficult to talk about through a veneer of politeness (because it’s likely not their business to comment on) through statements of concern.<sup>21</sup> The discussion boards on the recently-defunct but once-vibrant website *Television without Pity* were filled with concerns about Alana’s health (Roselg). Blogger Julie Ryan Evans wrote an article for CafeMom headlined “‘Go-Go Juice’ Pushing Pageant Mom Should Go Straight to Jail,” self-righteously observing, “It’s child abuse plain and simple as far I’m concerned – to knowingly put your child’s health in danger so blatantly for what are selfish reasons.” From their first appearance on television, June and Alana have sparked public interest and inspired campaigns (literal and metaphorical) that are ostensibly *for* healthy eating and the ideal of an innocent childhood but are actually campaigns against obesity or any body that doesn’t look as if it’s been carefully manicured to conform to Hollywood’s standards of beauty.

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<sup>21</sup> For more on concern trolling, see Whitney Phillips’ 2012 dissertation, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: The Origins, Evolution and Cultural Embeddedness of Online Trolling*.



Distinctions based on taste run throughout other accounts of the program. Scholars and popular critics alike decry *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* as “poverty tourism” and “rednexploitation” (Harris). Those criticisms have merit though there is an inherently ironic loathing for the working class embedded within them. Andrew Scahill characterizes *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*’s framing of Alana thusly:

The program demands that [Alana] holler, more appropriately, squeal—loudly, boorishly, trashily—for our entertainment. And for that, she secures her place as a white trash diva child and in turn secures her (family’s) paycheck. But to be a success at this show, she must be a failure at pageantry, at femininity, at whiteness, and at humanity.

Scahill rightly points to the carnivalesque dimensions of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, using Kathleen Karlyn’s work on unruly women to suggest a Bahktinian reading of the women’s bodies. However, Scahill sees the characters framed as grotesque caricatures, rather than as fully human. This reading stands in direct contrast to the program: while there are vulnerable moments where Mama June talks about wishing she could lose weight, more often than not the Shannon women are self-aware, confident, and unapologetic about who they are, their bodies, and their life choices and priorities. In fact, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* portrays a home flush with affection, care, and mutual respect.

The central dysfunction in their family is that created by TLC, evident in episodes such as the one where an etiquette coach is brought in to teach the girls middle-class manners but is then offended by their flatulence and profanity (S01E02) (Figure 9).



Figure 9: An early promotional image of the Shannon-Thompson family at their home, in poses suggestive of dysfunction

The narrative implies that viewers are meant to share the coach's sensibilities rather than celebrate the girls' playfulness, self-possession, and refusal to put on a bourgeois performance. This defiance separates *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* from so many shows, typically within the intervention, competitive, crime, and workplace micro-genres, whose actual narratives are about assimilation, respectability, and model citizenship, despite

claims to the contrary.<sup>22</sup> Despite external pressures to participate in the politics of respectability, by which I mean a broad social structure dispensing shame and respectability in measure with how successfully one adheres to normative ways of being, the Shannon-Thompsons haven't changed much since their debut.

### Resisting Fat-Shaming and Food Policing of Southern Belle-Dom

The excesses of June, in particular, and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, more generally, are visible in loud and boisterous behaviors, the consumption of cheap junk food, and the characters' large bodies. The Shannon-Thompsons mock the idea that they should behave in a proper or mannered way (making Alana's pageant costumes and simpering on stage during competition extremely campy), but forms of white privilege inform this mockery. Whiteness grants the Shannon-Thompson family a kind of security and naturalized invisibility that allows them to participate in or disavow a politics of respectability as they please. Because they're white, that is, their behaviors are understood for their cultural significance rather than assigned as racial markers. This (in)visibility is especially poignant in conversations about foodways and racial identity in the South with its legacies of soul food, Cajun cuisine, and other regional specialties, all bearing witness to the importing, appropriation, and enslavement of people and cultures as well as the continuing discrepancy of available resources, economic, comestible, and otherwise among persistently racially segregated communities.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* doesn't shy away from showing the full

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<sup>22</sup> Specific examples include: *America's Next Top Model* (2003-present), *Extreme Makeover* (2002-2007), *Shear Genius* (2007-2010), *Supernanny* (2004-2012), and *The Bachelor* (2002-present).

<sup>23</sup> Refer to Courtney Thorsson's work for more on the cultural work of Southern foodways in *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women's Novels*.

impact of cycles of rural, Southern poverty. The Shannon-Thompson home is modest, notably including only one bathroom and located a (weak) stone's throw from busy railroad tracks. Their pantry staples and weekly menus reflect sale-priced foods from the processed food-filled middle aisles at the Piggly-Wiggly and auctioned flats of boxed snack foods. The criticisms that emerged around Alana's "go-go juice" have only grown louder regarding the family's preference for junk food, evident in headlines such as this one from the *Daily Mail*, "At least it's not go-go juice! Honey Boo Boo fills up on unhealthy junk food as her mother stands by."

The shopping, preparing, and consumption of food – all dictated more by price point and availability than any particular regional style – are central components of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s narrative. Likewise, the food eaten by the family has remained a source of material for journalists, bloggers, and writers of all kinds. Mama June's "sketti" made headlines as a surprising favorite meal of the family: a mixture of margarine, ketchup, and spaghetti noodles. The family takes pride in scavenging and picking up roadkill, not because they can "live off the land," but because they're budgeting and maximizing their resources. Unlike *Duck Dynasty*, the show maintains no traces of survivalist masculinity or pastoral fantasy. Couponing and frugality (gathering) are privileged over hunting (Negra 123). Food reflects comfort and love in the Shannon-Thompson household. On one family road trip, for example, Mama June packs a bunch of hotdog wieners in the family's rented RV because she knows how much her family enjoys microwaving and eating them. Indeed, a plot point of this episode features the girls fighting over individual wiener allotments (S03E03). On the same road trip, Sugar Bear arranges a romantic night in a hotel for him and Mama June and upon arrival it's

revealed that he's called ahead and requested for the staff to prepare Mama June's favorite snacks on a table in their room (S03E04) (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Screenshot of romantic snacks from S03E04

The food isn't Hollywood's version of romance – the candy bar, powdered doughnuts, tortilla chips, jarred salsa, popcorn, and packaged muffins aren't comparable to caviar, champagne, and chocolate-covered strawberries – but they do resonate with a particular classed, geographical identity represented by the show. Mama June is pleased with Sugar Bear's thoughtfulness in providing foods that she enjoys.

For the Shannon-Thompson family, eating and food aren't necessarily fraught with the political posturing those editorial authors would imagine. The Shannon-Thompsons live in a rural area that likely qualifies as a “food desert” due unavailability of local, fresh foods. In order to feed a large family, they must work within a fixed budget. Such restrictions change the stakes and parameters of grocery shopping and food preparation. Being responsible for feeding a large family in a small home, requires calculated choices regarding household fights and wise uses of energy. That the Shannon-Thompsons make

the food choices they do simply because they enjoy it is unconscionable in a fat-obsessed culture: pleasure is a crucial, underrated factor in conversations about healthful eating and availability of produce. Moreover, preparing food also requires substantial cultural capital. If food requires extensive or confusing preparation and still doesn't taste as good as less nutrient-dense foods like those that the Shannon-Thompsons enjoy, what would be the motivation to change those preferences?

Food preferences work in tandem with characters' home and appearances to frame viewer insight into the family's socioeconomic status and ideological positioning. Their home has one bathroom, ample furniture in practical, drab shades that disguise stains and signs of wear, small bedrooms filled with piles of clothing and the basic wooden furniture—no interior design schemes here—and a dining room furnished with a simple wooden table and chairs and walls lined with plastic shelving groaning under the weight of the household items Mama June stocks by couponing. The staging of their home and its geographic location, both within McIntyre, Georgia and the nation at large, explicitly mark the family as working class. Their home appears comfortable—there isn't any glaring need or basic comfort missing—but it is crowded. At a time in which the square footage of homes has increased, the family lives in a small home and within their modest means. Sugar Bear, Mama June, Anna and her daughter Kaitlyn, Lauryn, Jessica, and Alana double up in bedrooms and they share the home's single bathroom. When they're all together the family room, or living room, seems to be the only space that can adequately house them all, thus family meals are eaten on the sectional sofa rather than in the dining room (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Screenshot of family couch time from S03E01

Eating their meals off paper plates and in the living room rather than in the dining room go directly against the grain of genteel Southern manners.

The Shannon-Thompson family's class status is made obvious in this defiance of Southern manners, rituals, modesty, and graces. Manners and status are also measured through the location, keeping, and style of home, particularly in the South. The Southern states are dotted with small towns such as the one where the Shannon-Thompson family lives. McIntyre, Georgia is two hours from anywhere and doesn't have a nationally recognized history of anything. Their home looks like a sturdy old farmhouse but without any architectural flair or details that would qualify it as charming. The home has an ample lawn that typically appears neatly mown, but the most recognizable feature of the home is its extreme proximity to a well-travelled railroad track. In fact, trains blare immediately next to the home with such frequency that it's difficult to discern whether the producers are recycling footage in an effort to emphasize the undesirability of the



home's location or if the train does actually come by often.<sup>24</sup> The trains that run by their home are so close and so loud that the characters often have to pause in front of the cameras because their voices cannot be heard over the blowing of the horns. If there was ever any question how a working class family with as seemingly limited of means as the Shannon-Thompsons could afford the home they have, the answer lies in their rail-bound neighbors.

Their location – on the wrong side of the tracks as it were – speaks to their lower-class status, their language use, excessive bodies and appetites, and refusal to subscribe to prescriptive behaviors and manners of Southern ladyhood. It also highlights a refusal to enact the legacy of the Southern belle. In *Reconstructing Dixie*, Tara McPherson describes some of the characteristics of this figure, a woman who must “select her silver pattern with care, never . . . use dark meat in chicken salad, and . . . wear white shoes only between Easter and Labor Day” (149). Magazines like *Southern Lady* and *Southern Living* continue to promote these ideologies of genteel Southern womanhood. According to *Southern Lady*,

While we Southern women move forward in today's world, we also hold tightly to the culture of the South. We remember our roots, treasure our traditions, and cherish our families. We look for reasons to celebrate and find great ways to do it. And, we each have our own personal way of adding something special to the lives of our families, our friends, and the people we meet. (“About”)

*Southern Living* is described as:

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<sup>24</sup>According to the Shannon-Thompson Family-authored book, *How to Honey Boo Boo*, the trains *do* come by that frequently. Mama June says that during the week they come by “about every ten to fifteen minutes” (138).



created to highlight the beauty and culture of the growing South. [...] With characteristic Southern hospitality, Southern Living is committed to sharing the region we love with our readers, no matter where they may live. (“About Us”)

Both publications have substantial circulation numbers and figure largely in a specific segment of class-aspirational Southern culture (“2013 Media Kit” and “Our Circulation Story”). These publications give a good sense of the contemporary currency and shape of the Southern belle figure. And as we have seen in the preceding pages, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* works to actively resist modes of being that would restrict their behaviors, police their bodies or language, or code their identities as aspirational or “proper,” meaning socially sanctioned and subject to the judgment and approval of external power structures. Just as *Duck Dynasty* is premised on and presents a prescriptive white masculinity so *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is premised on and actively resists the code of manners that would restrict their behaviors and language to the very prescriptions exemplified by *Duck Dynasty*.

The myth of the Southern belle subscribes to that driving force of most U.S. self-help or self-improvement movements: that one must overcome natural desires and tendencies, denying appetites and desires, in order to allow the best version of one’s self to emerge. For Scarlett O’Hara, exemplary Southern belle, the denial of appetites paid off in how tightly bound her corset could be, and therefore how much (more) she was worth as a potentially marriageable mate. Despite the dramatic shifts in culture since *Gone with the Wind* was penned and shown in theaters, the demand on women’s bodies hasn’t changed, as Diane Negra and Brenda Weber point out in their work on women’s bodies

in U.S. reality television and popular media.<sup>25</sup>

In what is perhaps Mama June's most important legacy for her children, she refuses to believe her body is anything less than ideal. She occasionally indulges in fat-shaming other women, but she holds a radical position of acceptance of her own body and those of her daughters. In season one, Pumpkin and Jessica want to diet to be more accepted at school and June begrudgingly agrees to join them when they ask her to diet with them in a demonstration of support, but she repeatedly clarifies that she is happy with how she is. Over the course of filming *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* Mama June lost over 100 pounds and various media outlets picked up the story, but Mama June refused to submit to the narrative those same outlets are used to publishing, which usually goes one of two ways: either celebrities detail the strenuous routines of diet and exercise they adhere to in order to lose weight or the celebrities insist that they do nothing at all, yet have chiseled physiques that betray their supposed sloth. Mama June gave an interview to a gossip magazine after her weight loss saying, "I'm just doing what everyone does—I gain a couple of pounds back then I lose them. But even if I gained the whole 100 pounds back, I'd be okay with it. A lot of larger people beat themselves up when they gain, but I'm really happy with myself" ("Exclusive: Mama June."). It's important to point out that *People* magazine ran the same story, but completely omitted the part where Mama June said she was happy with her body, regardless of how much she weighs (Coughlan). Bourdieu suggests that social schemes such as manners are "turned into muscular patterns and bodily automatisms," and structure a particular "way of bearing one's body, presenting it to others, moving it, making space for it" and we can see that borne out in

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<sup>25</sup>Refer to Negra's *What A Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of the Self in Postfeminism* (2008) and Weber's *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity* (2009).

the struggles and resistances enacted by Mama June and her family (474).

I am not suggesting here that *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* operates outside of existing power structures. Nevertheless, the Shannon-Thompsons do seem to recognize the forces at work when it's suggested they should curb their profanities, refrain from farting, or wear shoes to the store. There's a distinction between the behaviors they resist, however, and the manners they perform. On *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, not abiding by rules of etiquette does not involve being rude or unkind to each other or to other people. On the show, the family is seen interacting with strangers and service workers while eating out, shopping, attending events, and selling lemonade. In each of these scenarios the family communicates politely, is generous with "pleases" and "thank yous" and respectful to those helping them. Kindness and general courtesy to others is one area of socially contracted manners the family upholds. This distinguishes the program from other micro-genres that trade in cruel and unkind behaviors. However, when they're at home or alone as family unit, these sort of social niceties are irrelevant.

No Millionaires, Hunters, Businessmen, or Missionaries: Inverting the Logic of *Duck*

*Dynasty*

Just as the South contains rich and varied histories, cultures, and lineages, so the region's redneck subculture is unstable and has different meanings depending on context and identity. For *Duck Dynasty* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, the redneck identity is central to how the characters understand themselves as Southerners and as members of their local communities. However, the ways in which both shows wield the idea of the redneck has very different inflections and effects. *Duck Dynasty's* redneck—as illustrated

in the previous chapter—is hyper-masculine. His default put-downs of other men suggest that their weaknesses or failings be understood as feminized. *Duck Dynasty*'s Robertson men are explicit about the fact that they hunt and kill animals for pleasure though they also take a lot of pride in the fact that they could survive off the land available to them should it be required. The Robertson women are occupied keeping homes, raising children, peripherally supporting the family business, and cooking the animals that their husbands bring home from hunting. Their relationships and connections to the world beyond their family are not deemed appropriate or relevant material for the show.

For the label of redneck to be one that the Robertsons identify with closely and use freely, it must be grounded in the same logic that informs their primary identity category—white masculinity—and have similar discriminatory, misogynistic, homophobic, and racist consequences. Redneck identity looks different on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. The Shannon-Thompson family also frequently apply the “redneck” label to themselves, but the most explicit things that redneck signifies for them include: enjoying playing in the mud and going barefoot, occasionally eating roadkill, living in the country, and creating an entire vocabulary canonized in their own “redneckopedia” (Shannon & Thompson Family). Honey Boo Boo's redneck identity benefits from the privileges inherent to the exclusive white heritage of the label, but her redneck(ness) doesn't celebrate and reify the other entitlements or oppressions enacted by the Robertsons on *Duck Dynasty*.

The redneck identity claimed by the Shannon-Thompsons is shaped by the local culture from which it was formed. Residents of McIntyre, Georgia who were interviewed because of their familiarity with the Shannon-Thompson family, no matter how casual,

refer to them as “simple, country people” who are “good [...] to be around” even if they don’t believe the show to be as fully representative of the town or region as it could be (“Honey Boo Boo Panned”). *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is—in most ways—an inverted version of *Duck Dynasty*. The show celebrates matriarchy over patriarchy, poverty over wealth, heathens over saints, and “the joys of sitting around one’s house” over dominating nature and industry (Juzwiak). These cultural representations illustrate very different anxieties about, and attempts to make sense of, the realistic disparities of a post-2008 unstable national economy. In *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, this involves representing people like the Shannon-Thompson family on television. We do not often see people like this on television – particularly large, loud, loving people who star in their own show on a cable network. The characters of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* represent a profoundly undesirable type of whiteness for this televisual landscape: working class, unambitious, and lacking in redemptive talents or tastes. Winfrey Harris says, “Some folks may be made uncomfortable by ‘Honey Boo Boo’ because it challenges their association of thin, shining, educated middle-classness with whiteness and Southern accents, fatness and poverty with blackness.”

The gendered division of labor between hunting animals in the woods versus clipping coupons and attending food auctions further cements the patriarchal and matriarchal distinctions of the shows (Negra). The Shannon-Thompsons are working class and put on no airs that might suggest otherwise. A recent storyline has potential to align the family with an aspirational, neoliberal imperative but resists. Mama June opens the sequence by saying that the girls have been thinking about what they want to be. Pumpkin (Lauryn) has decided she wants to be a cosmetologist, an explicitly feminized

aspiration that would doubtlessly be ridiculed by the class ascendant characters of *Duck Dynasty* as such. Pumpkin says, “The reason I wanna be a cosmetologist is because of the fact that I’ve seen a lot of people like do nails and all that and that’s basically what I wanna do” (S03E01). Within *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, Pumpkin’s desire to be a nail tech/cosmetologist is taken seriously; her mom and sisters agree to let her do a “spa day” with them in their living room, a decision they regret when the wax strips and face masks get a little out of hand (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Screenshot of Pumpkin's spa day from S03E01

Each of the women is prompted by producers to speak about the spa day and assess Pumpkin’s preparedness for becoming a cosmetologist. Even though the interviews are individual, they all agree that she needs to work on her social skills, but that she has the potential to be successful. The family encourages Pumpkin’s desires and takes her interests seriously. Their support of her desire to pursue beauty school rather than a liberal arts degree is reflective of their socioeconomic status and concerns with preparing the next generation to provide for themselves and their families. The family’s class status

requires a practicality and sharp-eyed perspective on professional or technical training pursuits. There isn't a shred of anti-intellectualism visible in the characters' ideology, but a reflection of the (smaller range) of possibilities for adult life within an extremely shallow pool of resources and the inherent limits of their socioeconomic position.

### Resisting Inscribed Southern Family Values: Excesses of Vulgarity and Affection

The critical difference between the presentation and operation of family in the two shows is that *Duck Dynasty* exploits the family as the last frontier for neoliberalism (e.g. all family members are employees and colleagues united by their mutual interest in work, profits, and business). This is the primary reason that *Duck Dynasty* doesn't actually operate as an intimate program; the emphasis on family and affection functions like one of the duck blinds they use while hunting—a clever disguise to distract from the less appealing behind-the-scenes work, which is, in this case, the constant reinforcing of white patriarchy and heterosexism. *Duck Dynasty*'s prescriptive masculinity results in a harnessing of the domestic—the family unit—for profit and the assured security of their homegrown Duck Commander business. The success and security of their business interests take precedence over trivial things like love and affection. For the most part, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* resists the lure of leveraging their 15 minutes of fame into the seed of an empire that may not ever be realized. As Mama June says, “While the show is important to me and I love it, my kids are always my number one priority” (Shannon-Thompson Family, xv).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> One of the most public ways Mama June demonstrates her commitment to her children is by dividing up the money the family makes for each episode, and as she told *TMZ*, putting it into trust funds for her daughters that they won't be able to access (except for educational expenses or emergency medical costs) until they're 21. Shannon says, "I want my kids to look back and say, 'Mama played it smart. Not like those

Also in contrast to *Duck Dynasty*, the show centrally features a distinctly non-patriarchal family: Honey Boo Boo (Alana), her parents, and siblings. Alana's mother, Mama June (June Shannon), and her father, Sugar Bear (Mike Thompson) are romantically partnered, but Mama June makes no apologies for her unwillingness to marry. Season two saw the elaborate orchestration of a "commitment ceremony," that Mama June agreed to in order to satisfy Sugar Bear's desire to marry her (he proposed to her multiple times over the course of their relationship before she agreed to any ceremony at all) (Figure 13). The Shannon-Thompson household includes Alana's half-sisters, Lauryn, Jessica, and Anna Shannon, better known as Pumpkin, Chubbs, and Anna (nicknamed Chickadee), as well as Anna's infant daughter Kaitlyn. None of their fathers are named or have any visible engagement in their lives. Sugar Bear is the only consistent male figure on the show. As Mama June makes clear over the course of the show, she "wears the stretch pants in this relationship," by which she means that she's the one who makes the important decisions and directs the family (S03E01). June even says that she hopes that Sugar Bear isn't under any illusions that anything will change in their relationship or power dynamics now that they're "committed" (S03E01).

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other reality TV people." The only major purchase the family has made since the show began in 2012 is a used Ford Expedition ("Honey Boo Boo: First Redneck Trus' Fund Baby!").





Figure 13: Screenshot of Sugar Bear after his and Mama June's commitment ceremony in S02E12

The power dynamic in the Shannon-Thompson household should be evident to anyone who's ever seen an episode of the show. Sugar Bear takes his paternal duties to Anna, Jessica, Lauryn, and Alana very seriously and frequently talks about how he wants to be a good father to the girls. However, it's important to emphasize that June resists the rhetoric of dating to locate a good father for her children, a story well rehearsed by many single mothers (on *The Bachelor*, in particular). Sugar Bear willingly adopts a paternal role for June's daughters, but he is even more dedicated to being a good partner and lover to June. Sugar Bear is open about his sexual desire for June, the good things he wants for her, and the schemes he hatches to try and surprise or please her.

None of the family members challenge June's authority nor suggest that she's assuming that authority with a hidden agenda or to cover for some insecurity or past rejection. The Shannon-Thompson family is a textbook "blended" family. June expends no energy explaining her romantic history nor identifying or discussing the girls' fathers.

Whether she makes this choice to protect the girls' privacy or simply because she doesn't believe it to be anyone's business, her refusal to engage the subject is a singular move that few other reality television figures successfully maneuver.

June assumes the head-of-family role simply because it seems that she's always done so. Though she and Sugar Bear have been romantically involved for a decade, it's unclear when he was welcomed into the family fold or moved in to their home. Regardless of when it happened, the family was functional before him but made accommodations for Sugar Bear to join them. The show acknowledges this rather than narrating some sort of gap or "missing piece" that he filled. For June to have multiple children without a married partner and to *still* resist the notion that marriage and/or a husband would improve or stabilize her life is antithetical to the driving ethos of *Duck Dynasty's* male-centric, extremist conservative ideology. There is both an obviousness and a more subtle irony to the simultaneous emergence and popularity of these two shows that is indicative of the United States' ongoing cultural battle over these very issues.

#### Matters of Visibility and Solidarity: Resisting an Exclusively Whitewashed and Homophobic South

As working class, rural Southerners, the Shannon-Thompsons don't fit within our nation's longstanding paradigm—largely shaped by the Moynihan Report—of what a matriarchal, poor household looks like, which is: not white. In other words, this family makes white folks, especially Southern white folks, uncomfortable. Richard Dyer's call to "make whiteness strange" is being fulfilled here (10). In direct contrast to the overt neoliberal agenda of most reality programming, the Shannon-Thompson family seems

entirely uninterested in self-governance or discipline. Many articles on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* address the show's depiction of "family values" or lack thereof. Rod Dreher writes, "I don't actually think that government can do much to deal effectively with poverty caused in large part by the collapse of a traditional sexual ethic and the resulting collapse of family structure" ("Honey Boo Boo Nation"). It's important to point out the distinction on U.S. television between white and black (or brown) characters and bodies. Liberal sexual mores and non-normative family structures have long been assigned to people and families of color in the U.S. as reasons for their inability to advance socially, a strategy for displacing rather than acknowledging and addressing systemic, institutionalized racism. Though the Shannon-Thompson family, especially Alana and June, fulfill racialized stereotypes, they do not bear the burden of such representations since they receive the full benefits of white privilege. As Helena Andrews says, "Alana's occasional bursts of 'ghetto' are a weird appropriation of stale, decades-old stereotypes and Southern redneck colloquialisms." Andrews concludes that the Thompson family's appropriation of such language is probably for the best since associating colloquialisms born alongside the sassy black woman trope with a bunch of rural white rednecks removes the potency of the language. In other words, if "honey boo boo" now officially belongs to Alana, it leaves the previous owner empty-handed. And vacating or voiding harmful stereotypes is a good thing. Alana doesn't completely replace the initially signified, but she does throw a wrench into an otherwise smoothly running, racist meaning-making machine.

Andrews may not be entirely correct in arguing that Alana's appropriation of language born of black culture empties removes its potency, but it certainly changes the

terms of the conversation. The Shannon-Thompson family mobilizes stereotypes of white trash, backwoods rednecks, but these stereotypes lack the threat implicit in those applied to black bodies. The sassy black woman, the jezebel, the mammy, and other tropes of African American womanhood called upon by the Shannon-Thompson women's speech are subject to very real restrictions (at best) and violence (at worst). June's and Alana's white bodies are not pathologized in the same way as African-American bodies. June's body is frequently judged, but judgment in tabloids and on internet forums does not put her at risk of losing her children, her home, or her control over her body and its safety.

However, within the McIntyre community, it doesn't seem that the Shannon-Thompson family's relative obesity, "redneck" lifestyle, extreme frugality, and lack of interest in education is anything other than ordinary. What *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* does, then, is makes whiteness strange. The program destabilizes what—within their local community—wouldn't be a remarkable family or lifestyle. However, the structural logic on which TLC bases the program could operate in such a way that it presumes qualities such as obesity, comical frugality, or the inability to earn a high school diploma the coded territory of non-white communities or families. There is a risk taken in ignoring the possibility that *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* may only be exceptional—and popular—because the family exemplifies qualities and a lifestyle not typically coded as white. To return to Andrews' argument, we must ask ourselves if these powerful stereotypes are emptied simply because they're being appropriated by or newly applied to white bodies. Those white bodies are being made strange, but we must assess the grounding on which that work happens and who or what is being displaced for that work to be enabled.

In season 1, episode 8, entitled "Time for a Sketti!," Mama June says, "The girls go

over to the convenience store right in front of our house quite a bit.” “The store” as they call it, is located only “100 feet” from the Shannon-Thompson home, in Mama June’s estimation, and the girls make it clear that they are regular visitors. The store’s cashier and manager—both black—give individual interviews to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*’s crew. Donta introduces himself as the manager of the store. He and the cashier exchange smiles when the girls enter, a scene intercut with his voiceover in which he says, “When I see Pumpkin come in, I call that the Bamm Bamm look. Cause there’s no shoes on.” The convenience store scene cuts from the employees to Pumpkin’s bare feet and pants dragging the ground inside the store. Cut to the (unnamed) clerk good-naturedly defending Pumpkin during her interview saying, “Pumpkin’s my country girl. It feels better barefoot. We’re in the country. That’s how we do it.” She continues, “They’re a little different. They’re more interesting to me. Alana usually runs around the store turning flips and whatnot because she’s a ball of energy.”

The scene continues with Alana running around the store and Jessica somewhat begrudgingly monitoring her behavior, prompting her to put away the sunglasses she’s trying on so they can go home. Cut back to the clerk’s interview where she says, “We like their business. I think the store would go out of business if they didn’t come here everyday.” Cut to confessional filmed in the Shannon-Thompson home and Mama June talking about how much Pumpkin likes to spend time at the store and that sometimes Mama June has to call over to the store to tell Pumpkin to come home. Cut back to the girls checking out at the store intercut with a continuation of the manager’s, Donta’s, interview where he says, “The family adds a lot of flavor to the city of McIntyre. Just like my teeth.” He smiles big, showing off his all-gold full grill (Figure 14). Post-production

adds in a cheesy, fairy-tale sparkle.



Figure 14: Screenshot of Donta and his grill from S01E08

This sequence is significant for a few reasons. First, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* distinguishes itself from *Duck Dynasty* by refusing to set the show in a whitewashed world, since that would involve explicit manipulation of the characters surroundings and community. The population of McIntyre is primarily black and to create a show—even one featuring a white family—without any appearances from anyone who *wasn't* white stinks of racism and willful privilege (see: *Duck Dynasty*). Second, Donta and the unnamed cashier of the convenience store are positioned in a place of authority from which to speak about the Shannon-Thompson family and their place within the community as a whole. Their voices are valued and their insights presented at face value, even if only for this brief sequence. Thirdly, Donta's comparison of the Shannon-Thompson family's "flavor" to his "teeth," by which he actually means his gold grill indicates exactly whiteness made strange. The grill is metal jewelry worn over one's teeth and is a symbol of hip-hop culture with a long history, though it is closely associated with

the regional rap style that emerged from the South and rose to national prominence in the 2000s known as “Dirty South.” Donta’s grill explicitly identifies his particular racial and cultural identity performance and his statement essentializes the girls’ bodily comportment, vocabulary, as comparable explicit identity performance. Their whiteness is not naturalized or made invisible.

However, the post-production sparkle added to Donta’s grill effectively makes him into a cartoon. The after-effect of the tooth sparkle has a variety of connotations, ranging from fairy to sleazy used car salesman leveraging charm for dishonorable purposes, but the consistent characteristic among them is that the sparkle indicates a wink between the viewer and the producer, adding an extra narrative layer to which the characters aren’t privy. In this example, the moment of producer visibility reminds viewers of the editing and coaching that happens to create the characters on-screen. This moment also works to align Donta’s performance with the trope coined by Spike Lee as the “Magical Negro” (Seitz). The sparkle diminishes the latent risk inherent to Donta’s non-white, male body as framed diegetically with white, female bodies and its signifying of the Magical Negro opens a safe, recognizable narrative space for Donta to fit in as a supporting character.

The Shannon-Thompson family is only variably granted the racial invisibility and its subsequent power that is one of the primary benefits of whiteness in a country dominated by white supremacy. The family’s inability and apparent lack of interest in passing as middle class is the primary reason their whiteness doesn’t seem to serve them in the way the social power structures of the U.S. are designed for it to. The Shannon-Thompsons are solidly working class, and more importantly, unapologetic about that. Even more than refusing to apologize for their socioeconomic status, they refuse to

perform any kind of class or professional aspiration or ambition. The family seems to have all of their basic needs met as well as a dining room stockpiled with necessities and small luxuries (like Mama June's stash of scented candles) ("Honey Boo Boo's House Tour"). The way in which those needs are met and their particular consumption patterns and (vulgar) preferences clearly code them as working class.

Solidarity among working class families is justifiably borne of a sense that no one else is checking for you. The Shannon-Thompson family knows they have to stand for each other because if they don't no one else is going to. The shameful way in which the U.S. treats its poor fosters this sense of solidarity even without national criticism via reality television. As discussed in the previous chapter, in national conversations about politics the South remains the butt of the joke. It's true that rates of teen pregnancy and obesity alongside a poorly functioning public education system mark the failings of the South by national standards of living and production of citizens. Yet the Shannon-Thompson family defies many of the stereotypes about Southerners' prejudices, bigotry, and small-minded politics. They have proven to be quite progressive in their politics and values.

Alana's introduction of her Uncle Poodle—Lee, Sugar Bear's youngest brother—in the season one finale, "It Is What It Is," went viral across my internet spaces—saturated by media- and cultural studies-scholars—because of the charmingly sophisticated way she summarized Poodle's sexuality and its import (S01E10). Mama June introduces Poodle as he arrives at their home saying, "He's a poodle. And he's gay." Alana says, "Ain't nothing wrong with being a little gay! Everybody's a little gay." The family is unwavering in their love and acceptance of Uncle Poodle, despite perpetuating a few



unfortunate stereotypes in the episode about “sass” and gay men. GLAAD (The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) nominated the finale episode for an award in their Outstanding Reality Program category as one of the year’s best “stories that bring us closer to equality” (Koplowitz). *The Amazing Race* won the award for 2013, but Mama June attended the ceremony and posed for photos with some of reality television’s other stars doing the good work of denaturalizing performances of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality: Snooki and JWoww from *Jersey Shore*.

Mama June writes about the experience of attending the awards on Alana Thompson’s official Facebook fan page (Figure 15).<sup>27</sup>



Figure 15: Screenshot of Alana's Facebook page from March 16, 2013

These progressive politics resist a narrative of a monolithic South that is politically unified and always grounded in nostalgia for an (plantation) era past and a strictly conservative religion. The irreverence, vulgarities, and unbridled affection for marginalized people and bodies celebrated by *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* resists and

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<sup>27</sup> June (as well as her friend, Bobbie, who names herself when she writes a post instead of June) insists that she runs the fan page herself and the number of typos, middle-of-the-night, and personal updates suggest that she actually does. The page operates as an important part of the community-building work the Shannon-Thompson family does—both among their local community members and their national fan base.

undermines a narrative about the South that would promote bigotry, racism, misogyny, or homophobia. The Shannon-Thompsons go out of their way to affiliate themselves with the LGBT community and raise money for an anti-bullying campaign in honor of Uncle Poodle who was bullied for being openly gay while growing up in the South (“Honey Boo Boo Reveals”). The family also hosts an annual Christmas toy drive at their home to raise money for local underprivileged kids’ Christmas gifts (Carpenter). While the Shannon-Thompson family certainly disrupts longstanding narratives about the South, they also present alternative visions of what solidarity and coalition can look like and achieve.

By all accounts, it seems that *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* was created by TLC as a type of social experiment destined for failure—or at least a car-wreck style entertaining implosion on television—so what does it tell us that the experiment has instead succeeded?<sup>28</sup> The only dysfunction on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is that introduced or produced by TLC. The Shannon-Thompson family enjoys each other’s company, is supportive and loving, and offers a practical, accessible version of what it can mean to promote solidarity and community; their agenda of pursuing equality, supporting organizations doing good in their community, and actively looking out for their neighbors offers a cultural and community-specific version of coalition. As Mama June says:

Our family also believes strongly in giving back to our community. [...] We were in need once and someone helped us out, so now we try to be there for others who

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<sup>28</sup> This produced failure is evident in the first promotional spot TLC created for *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. The 30-second ad pulls the most controversial and recognizable moments from Alana and June’s appearance on *Toddlers and Tiaras* then promotes the most outrageous moments from the new series: the family fighting over whether or not they’re “rednecks,” a crowd of white people watching an overweight man belly-flop into a mud puddle, and Mama June scratching her scalp saying that “her bugs” itch (“Here Comes Honey Boo Boo Promo”).

are in that situation. And who knows, that could be us again one day—you never know what life is going to bring. I hope that reading about some of our community work inspires you to get involved, reach out to others, and help your own community. (Shannon-Thompson Family xv)

The Shannon-Thompsons leverage their show and celebrity (primarily via social media) into a platform for their charitable pursuits and causes of equality. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* highlights the solidarity of a nontraditional and loving family, and operates as a blueprint for how coalition can work in particular (and peculiar) rural, Southern spaces.

### Conclusions: Reimagining Coalition

*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* illustrates the political limits and potential of intimate reality television. The show's emphasis on the domestic sphere and family structure housed therein directly inherits the legacy of soap opera and the ways in which soaps paved the way for presenting politically daring stories and characters.<sup>29</sup> *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* also expands the national imagination of what it means to be Southern and the particular textures and flavors of that life. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s Southern frame offers a perspective on Southern identity and culture that contains enough condescension to assuage viewers that longstanding stereotypes of a monolithic, uneducated, bigoted South might just be accurate, but the Shannon-Thompson family candidly presents a progressive enough politics that the monolith is threatened.

As Mama June says, she imagines the show as operating as a potential blueprint for other families and communities to unite and support each other. It isn't very productive to

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<sup>29</sup> I am indebted to work by Mimi White and Charlotte Brunsdon on soap operas, Elana Levine on television history, and Jason Mittell on genre.

unreservedly laud the show (though I try) as an example of the potential inherent to intimate reality television since, as many critics have pointed out, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* can also be referred to as poverty porn, and the exploitation of the characters is always a concern. The dilemma of whether the show can be considered a progressive platform offering visibility to characters and stories that otherwise wouldn't receive national attention or whether it's an exploitative carnivalesque freak show isn't unique to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. Scholars such as Jason Mittell, Joshua Gamson, and James Twitchell have addressed this question at length regarding the afternoon talk shows of the 1990s.

One of the primary differences between those talk shows and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is the (seemingly) independent voice Mama June exercises in speaking for and portraying her family via social media, Facebook in particular. Facebook extends the platform and audience generated by *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, but it doesn't operate independently. And Facebook exists in the cultural imaginary as operating outside of the strictures of production and advertising that clearly limit the TLC program. This imagined independence thereby subjects (the Facebook version of) June to a kind of public scrutiny she might otherwise remain blissfully ignorant of (Figure 16).

This screenshot of Alana's Facebook fan page is only one instance when Mama June tries to dismiss people who were less than supportive from the space. The types of comments to which she refers are hateful. The variable anonymity of the internet grants users a kind of distance and liberty that makes for less than kind social interactions. Social media has given new visibility to a structure of power that's been in place long before its emergence: the politics of (dis)respectability.



Figure 16: Screenshot of Alana's Facebook page from March 5, 2013

Through the enacting of resistance discussed in this chapter, the Shannon-Thompsons frequently choose to bow out of or disregard the politics of respectability entirely. They are afforded this choice—or at least this choice seems viable to them—because of the relative privilege and security granted them courtesy of whiteness. For the Shannon-Thompsons, the stakes of ignoring a structure that seeks to police their bodies and behaviors are fairly low. That just isn't true for everyone in the South, as I'll discuss in the next chapter focusing on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

## CHAPTER V

### **“GONE WITH THE WIND FABULOUS”: THE REAL HOUSEWIVES OF ATLANTA AND THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY**

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta* entered the reality television landscape as the only show at the time that both fit within the intimate micro-genre and featured a primarily African American female cast (Kim Zolciak was the only white character and she left the show in 2012).<sup>30</sup> This cast enables a different articulation of Southern culture than the ones found in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* or *Duck Dynasty*. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*'s South is one of contested, risky, and communally defined identities. Atlanta was the seat of the Civil Rights movement and site of W.E.B. Du Bois' campaigns for racial uplift (Schenbeck 82). Though *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* was not likely the kind of black art Du Bois would have imagined as having counter-hegemonic potential, the characters' articulations and interpretations of black womanhood within a volatile cultural moment are indeed ripe with political potential. I argue that *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is operating in the space between the “diss” and the respect of respectability and finding ways to enact resistance, maintain visibility, and proclaim multiplicities of identity. The characters are sorting through prescribed lifestyles, restrictive codes of conduct, and their own professional needs and personal relationships to arrive at a place that insists on the unifying potential of race, gender, and class and asserting the riotous delights of disrespectability, specific cultural signifiers of

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<sup>30</sup> Happily, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* no longer stands alone. Other intimate programs featuring primarily black female casts include: *Basketball Wives* (VH1, 2010-present), *Basketball Wives L.A.* (VH1, 2011-present), *Love & Hip Hop* (VH1, 2011-present), *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* (VH1, 2012-present), *T.I. and Tiny: The Family Hustle* (VH1, 2011-present), and *The Sisterhood* (TLC, 2013).

blackness, and the excesses of ratchet.<sup>31</sup>

At the time of this writing *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is currently wrapping its sixth season and remains Bravo's most successful (ever) series. This chapter investigates the cultural work performed on and by the show and interrogates the underpinning power structures that direct and limit that work. The current cast includes: Nene Leakes, Kandi Burruss, Phaedra Parks, Cynthia Bailey, Kenya Moore, and Porsha Williams, each successful in her own right. The narrative revolves in and out of the characters' personal lives and their relationships with each other, following the structural formula established in earlier iterations of *The Real Housewives* franchise. The show is pure docusoap, taking stylistic, technical, and narrative cues from both documentary film and televisual soap operas. Its tone is more playful than didactic and its settings range from nouveau riche, gated mansions to up-and-coming but not there yet bars and shops. The characters pride themselves on being sophisticated socialites ready to go ratchet at a moment's notice. The ladies' sophistication is legible in their elaborate sets, luxurious homes and cars, and their ongoing conversations that discuss, evaluate, and catalog their designer wardrobes. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*'s production is glossy, elaborately lit, and reflective of the lifestyles the characters are invested in.

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is caught between creating a culturally specific space on national television within which the characters represent and speak directly to successful, Southern black women and of exploiting and stereotyping those same characters, sometimes even within the same scene. This tug of war between cultural

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<sup>31</sup> My thinking on "ratchet" as a cultural code, descriptor of media and taste, and register of behavior has been deeply influenced by countless conversations with scholars Racquel Gates and Kristen Warner. For more on ratchet, refer to Warner's forthcoming *Camera Obscura* article, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless: Ratchetness, Reality Television and Black Womanhood."

specificity and stereotyping is not unique to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, but one of the defining features of the program is the way that the characters and the narrative make that tension and the process of identifying and navigating sociopolitical boundaries explicit. I explore these tensions by analyzing examples from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* through the lens of politics of respectability, which writer Maurice Dolberry explains as “an undefined yet understood set of ideas about how Black people should live positively and how we should define Black American culture” as a way to pursue the betterment presumed to be needed by “broken” black Americans “in ways that already presume hierarchies of value for race, class, gender, and even media formations” (Dolberry; Warner, “They Gon’ Think You Loud,” 6). Though I applied the politics of respectability to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, they are most useful in analyzing the experience and representations of black Americans, long subjected to carefully prescribed behaviors as methods for survival and visibility, particularly in the South.

What does *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* tell us about the cultural value and positioning of the South that differs from, complicates, or nuances the visions of the contemporary South presented in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty*? *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* tells us that the South—as written onto modern-day Atlanta—can be urban, black, sophisticated, and progressive while still holding on to nostalgia for times past and alternately tracing and denying the imprint of pre-Civil War traditions, mores, and codes.

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta* functions as an intimate program within the map of micro-genres. The broader cultural work performed by the show grows directly out of this distinction. The ways that South allows, recognizes, and limits political identity



within *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is distinct from its operations in *Duck Dynasty* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* qualifies as aspirational programming in the way that it emphasizes luxury lifestyles and personal fortunes. Like *Duck Dynasty*, there is a significant amount of bootstraps rhetoric and lauding the virtues of hard work, but diverging from *Duck Dynasty*, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* has little to no interest in the trappings of white masculinity nor does *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* wield this aspirational element as a prescriptive mechanism. Though the same disinterest in white masculinity could be applied to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, their versions of the South couldn't be more different. Where *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* ignores, refutes, or is simply ignorant of the social codes and rituals that Southern culture so reveres, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is highly invested in such manners.

One of the defining features of Southern culture is its social graces and the open policing of behaviors that defy or disrespect the legacy, value systems, and preferences of authorities—be they familial or social (such as church pastors, community leaders, friends' parents, teachers, etc.). Beyond a general investment in these cultural and social boundaries and directions, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* does the work of identifying these boundaries and making them explicit. Typically, Southerners refuse to talk freely about anything that could be controversial or provocative, especially personal value systems and rules of engagement (included due to their subjective nature). Southerners inhabit these structures their entire lives, discipline perhaps counting as the *most* significant element of child-rearing in the South. Even if someone understands these rules and social expectations in their own bodies, it can be difficult to articulate since the

learning of them happens over a course of many years, every life an accumulation of small infractions against the strict (yet invisible) code either corrected or neglected, and the value of that individual's character assessed based on how well s/he received correction. Southern culture has long traded in these subtleties, implicitly expressed communications and understandings as a way of identifying insiders and outsiders. Those who require explanation or do not understand or take correction when they receive it? Outsiders.

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta's* cast is primarily comprised of Southern women, but there are also a few transplants not originally from the bible belt. Regardless of their place of origin, all of the characters are interested in understanding and assimilating—at least to the degree required to succeed professionally—into Southern culture and maintaining enough cultural (and financial) capital to count as tastemakers. However, the *Housewives* undermine and resist the same culture they claim by making explicit the boundaries, rituals, and rules that are otherwise invisible. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* picks out the thread of behavior-policing (under the guise of “manners”) that runs through the fabric of Southern culture, examines it, discusses it openly, and holds it up on a national platform for public analysis and critique. This chapter, interested in the cultural work and politics of respectability emergent in the post-recessionary period and located in a culturally specific South, posits that *The Real Housewives of Atlanta's* work of making visible and known what are otherwise implicit codes of conduct emphasizes the performativity of being Southern and resists the inherent, casual discrimination written into Southern culture.

Gone with the Wind Fabulous

Episode seven of season five illustrates tensions across identity, politics, and history as specific to the black, wealthy, culturally visible women of this show. In the episode, entitled “I Do...But, I Won’t,” the main characters are all on a group trip to Anguilla and the women have sent their partners away while they hang out by the pool and drink one night (S05E07).<sup>32</sup> Kenya—a former Miss USA who won’t let you forget it—and Porsha—best known for her family’s charitable legacy and as the divorcée of former pro-footballer Kordell Stewart—get into a heated argument. Kenya elevates the argument by getting out of her chair and raising her voice. Porsha responds by taking digs at Kenya’s “irrelevance” (Moore won her title in 1993). Kenya threatens to go “Detroit” on her so Porsha calls her a “hood rat.” The accusations and insults intensify from there. Porsha’s strategy during their argument is to rattle off a seemingly endless list of Kenya’s wrongdoings, misdeeds, and inappropriate conduct. In sum, Porsha’s primary complaint is that Kenya doesn’t behave or doesn’t adhere to the social contract that Porsha believes everyone in her social circles should abide by, performing proper Southern ladyhood. Kenya’s strategy is to call Porsha a variety of names and assert her dominance by listing her accomplishments. Porsha says that Kenya needs to go back to Detroit and stay there, again, drawing attention to her (respectable) Southernness and Kenya’s lack thereof.

Porsha—in this instance and others—identifies her problems with Kenya from the context of Kenya’s failure to understand or follow Porsha’s genteel Southern code of conduct, emphasizing that by focusing her insults on Kenya’s origins and irrelevance,

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<sup>32</sup>The group tropical vacation is a standard narrative feature of nearly every season of the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* but also of the franchise at large. The vacations tend to bring any interpersonal drama to the forefront since the group is forced to interact during planned excursions, activities, and meals with little to no reprieve from one another’s company or work and family demands to distract them.

implying that she doesn't belong in Atlanta or the social circle found on the show. Kenya asserts her relevance, her significance, her intelligence, and her contributions to the group rather than engaging Porsha on issues of manners or behavior. In an intercut confessional Kenya says, "All I heard was her call me a tramp and then I heard her call me ghetto. I *am* ghetto, but I am also sophisticated, educated, classy. I'm a lot of things." Kenya's insistence on maintaining a multi-faceted, intersectional identity is representative of the way that most of the characters on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* present and narrate themselves.

This intercut moment of introspection, courtesy of Kenya, substantiates Kristen Warner's claims about the use-value and function of "ratchet" in just such moments of excess, vulgarity, and drama. Warner says, "I posit that envisioning Black womanhood as a mosaic of self can generate possibilities not initially available in current dominant media and political discourses," and that the behavioral, representative register of ratchet is an effective, entertaining way of doing just that ("They Gon' Think You Loud" 7). Part of the entertainment and pleasure of engaging in ratchet behavior or consuming ratchet media is its culturally specific coding. It is not easily recognizable as distinct from camp, drag, or excessive affect without an understanding of the aggression and potency inherent to its performance. Warner argues that shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and its ratchet characters are a "contesting ground to work out issues of acceptability and intraracial discord is a necessary and worthwhile struggle to maintain the communal space and visibility of Black femininity" (17). These characters are using ratchet to negotiate external political forces among their (inter)personal conflicts.

As the argument winds down, Kenya stands and is surrounded by three of the

other characters trying to calm her. Kenya speaks with them, but directs most of her comments across the lawn where Porsha has returned to sit by the pool. Kenya says, in between bouts of twirling the floor-length skirt of her dress, “And I have been in this business for twenty years, and I’m still here. I’m *still* here and I’m still fabulous. Right? Fabulous. *Gone with the Wind* fabulous. Okay? Thank you” (Figure 17). The other characters seem slightly taken aback by the statement but don’t react much in efforts to keep intensity levels low. Kenya excuses herself to her room and exits the scene.



Figure 17: Screenshot of Kenya's twirl from S05E08

Debates and theories about what exact kind of fabulous *Gone with the Wind* might be emerged from popular press accounts following this episode. Kenya struck a nerve. *Gone with the Wind*, as a site of historical significance and a culturally resonant text, means a lot of things to a lot of people, ranging from nostalgia to aversion. The determining factor for how you understand *Gone with the Wind* is predictably linked to

your investment in or active work against white supremacy. Similarly, there are a wide variety of possible interpretations of “*Gone with the Wind* fabulous.” Nailing down Kenya’s specific intention is impossible, but I’m going to try and draw the circle of possibility in a little closer. First, the context from which the statement emerges is a filmed, possibly staged verbal argument between women (unwillingly) in the same social circle. Both lay claim to particular historical legacies of blackness, Kenya’s as the second African-American Miss USA and Porsha’s as the granddaughter of Hosea Williams, civil rights leader, philanthropist, and founder of one of the nation’s largest social services, Hosea Feed the Hungry and Homeless. Neither of these legacies or values associated with them would align themselves with the oppressive, revisionist history of *Gone with the Wind*, either Margaret Mitchell’s or David O. Selznick’s versions. However, *Gone with the Wind* sustains a remarkable currency and popularity in the United States, and is widely revered in contemporary white Southern culture. *Gone with the Wind*’s popularity is expressed in a number of ways including but not limited to: commemorative plates and prints, movie posters, or special editions of the book displayed in the home as well as annual events, themed parties, and look-alike contests (Auchmutey). Kenya’s explanations of her statement, now “catchphrase,” don’t offer much clarity. Immediately following the episode’s airing, Kenya addressed her statements in her (requisite) blog post on Bravo’s website. She contextualizes her words by positioning herself as part of a “legacy,” and emphasizing her intelligence, education, and historic achievements. She continues:

In 1939 (73 years ago) Hattie McDaniel was the first Black woman to win an Academy Award for her performance in *Gone With The Wind*. Ms. McDaniel

played a loyal maid in a time where roles for women of color were few and far between. Hattie was widely criticized for playing a maid, but without her inner strength, it's unclear what our legacy as a people would be now. Certainly, she has enriched my life. Her incredible feat defied racism, hatred, segregation and civil uncertainty and unrest.

In my eyes, Hattie McDaniel is a 'shero.' She is the sole reason that Halle Berry, Whoopi Goldberg, Mo'Nique, and Octavia Spencer, etc. (all Oscar recipients) can proudly wear their crowns of being legendary and fabulous Black women of film. I appreciate all the incredible women I have to admire and aspire to be like. I will strive to recover from my many missteps and win my fans over again despite the people who laugh when I stumble instead of offering me a hand. I hope that I can find a man who loves me for me. But in the meantime, I'll continue to be strong and humble and not let anyone steal my shine in order to gain fame off my misfortunes.

I'm Kenya Moore. I'm 41 and fabulous! My age, race, religion, social economic standing, and marital status are not indicators of my past, present, or future as I too can defy the odds just like Hattie. I am bold. I am humble. I am strong. I am complicated. I am complex. I am vulnerable. I am resilient. I am good. I am honest –That's what makes me fabulous. (Moore, “*Gone with the Wind* Fabulous' Explained.”)

Based on this blog post, Kenya is mobilizing the historical and cultural impact of *Gone with the Wind* to serve as shorthand for overcoming hardships, making a name for oneself, and celebrating the accomplishments of black women. But her celebration

doesn't meaningfully engage with the grievous ways in which actresses like Hattie McDaniel, who was supremely talented, were shortchanged and exploited for their entire careers because of Hollywood's institutional racism. A few months later in an interview with *Village Voice*, a reporter asks about the meaning of "*Gone with the Wind* fabulous." The reporter says of the phrase, "I assume you mean Scarlett, not Prissy or Mammy." Kenya replies:

I live for Miss Scarlett O'Hara. She was fabulous and gorgeous. All the boys wanted to date and marry her. She had a hard time in love—she loved someone who couldn't love her back—but at the end of the day, she was a firecracker. I relate to her. And on a serious note, the film represents the first black woman to win an Academy Award—Hattie McDaniel. It's of such great significance.

(Musto)

Kenya complicates things by expressing admiration for Scarlett, the quintessential embodiment of the Southern lady in whose name lives have been wrecked and taken. In our contemporary moment, the Southern Lady mythos, particularly as personified by the figure of Scarlett O'Hara, enables the celebration of a life of propriety punctuated by lapses in restraint identified as inherent to her brassy, unruly personality and admirably protective and survivalist instincts. It's unclear how far Kenya buys into the destructive mythos or if she imagines that she is working to subvert and reclaim it. If so, she isn't alone. Phaedra Parks, one of Kenya's fellow cast members and Georgian, also mobilizes and harnesses the myth and figure of the Southern lady. However, for now I am going to maintain a "straighter" read on the figure of the Southern lady, one that carries all of the historical baggage of slavery, oppression, and guilt. Within that frame, what room is



allowed for a Kenya Moore, an African American woman, to dress up in curtains like Scarlett or presume to revise, much less take part in, a mythic narrative whose primary objective is to write her out of it?

In the *Gone with the Wind*-fabulous example, the politics of respectability figure in the daily lives of the characters in Atlanta but not in a linear, straightforward set of relations and narratives. More than in any of the shows discussed in this project so far, the South of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is complicated, unstable, and can be both appealing and repulsive at the same time. As a brief example, both Kenya and Porsha knew well enough in their disagreement to articulate exact moments when the other “called [her] out of [her] name,” or, in other words, disrespected her by replacing her given name with “bitch” or “tramp,” and thereby violating the code of respectable behavior and manners by which all of the women tacitly agreed to abide. Their behavior—screaming loudly, swearing, insulting—would not be permissible within the code could either of them not provide sufficient evidence for how she had been provoked or harmed by the other. This code often isn’t visible until you bump up against its borders, but this altercation serves as an object lesson in (in)appropriate behaviors. This example also exemplifies both Porsha’s and Kenya’s need to define themselves against or aligned with Southern mores. Whether or not they were self-aware about that type of defining happening in the sequence outlined above is impossible to know, but the confessionals taped after and intercut within the sequence include self-reflection and justification of behaviors (or not) as respectable or not. The work of political identity is visible here in both women’s summoning of her “legacy” and positioning herself within a context of wealthy, upper-class, revered black people.

## Programming Context

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta* premiered in 2008, the third in Bravo's franchise of *Real Housewives* series ("The Real Housewives of Atlanta: Season 1"). It has since become not only the most successful within the *Real Housewives* franchise, but is the most-watched series in Bravo's history (Nededog; Kondolojy). It is also the only installation of the *Real Housewives* franchise to feature black women. The short-lived *Real Housewives of D.C.* (cancelled after one season) is the only other series to feature at least one black character. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta's* ensemble cast has always been primarily comprised of black women, but after Kim Zolciak's departure midway through season five, the cast features solely black women. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is not the first nor the only reality show to feature an all-black cast, but it is one of the few whose main characters are all women and at the time of its debut it was the only intimate reality program to do so. The show is significant for making visible the characters and stories that it does, offering a substantial platform upon which a different version of the South is articulated. As reality programs circulate with increasing ease, speed, and wider distribution, there's a fold added to the analysis and importance of whose stories get told and in what ways.

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta* qualifies as an intimate reality program for its focus on a small, family like group of characters and their daily lives and relationships. The primary setting is in domestic spaces and the primary conflicts are interpersonal between the central cast members and their families and partners. As is common to intimate programs, particularly those on Bravo, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta's* characters live in gated communities, dress in designer clothing, and (save a few notable

exceptions) have seemingly bottomless bank accounts. As a part of the Bravo network, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* dutifully performs its function of selling and promoting a consumption-heavy, aspirational lifestyle. As Jane Feuer argues, Bravo seeks to establish itself as the foremost purveyor of “quality” reality television and distinguishes itself from a saturated market by creating shows that emphasize luxury in both setting and narrative and highlight the pleasures of a capitalist, consumer culture (“Quality’ Reality”).

Whether or not this strategy has successfully translated into a popular perception of Bravo’s offerings as quality reality programming is perhaps still under consideration, but the strategy does work to create a distinctive brand for the network. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, as Bravo’s golden child, works overtime to fulfill its mission of making the consumption of luxury goods not only acceptable but desirable for an audience living in a precarious economic climate.<sup>33</sup> *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*’s post-recessionary logic doesn’t manifest in apocalyptic survival strategies (*Duck Dynasty*) or hoarding of paper goods (*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*) but instead revels in the hard-won glamour and privileges of those in elite tax brackets.

One characteristic that makes *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* unique among many intimate programs is its ensemble cast (with relatively high turnover). Anecdotally, the story of how *The Real Housewives* series are cast is that a producer discovers (or already knows) one character who then introduces that producer to her friends or acquaintances she thinks have big enough personalities and a friendly rapport with her to make the show enjoyable to watch. The majority of intimate programs outlined in chapter II center around families or pseudo-families with little to no turnover in recurring

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<sup>33</sup> See Diane Negra’s article, “Gender Bifurcation in the Recession Economy” for more theorization of how the recession has influenced gendered performances on reality television.

characters. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*'s exception to that rule and its continuing success is testament to the strength and appeal of the central characters who have remained consistent, as well as the producers' talent for continuing to cast replacement characters who appeal to the viewership already in place and gel with the other cast members.

#### Codes of Conduct: *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*'s Cultural Specificity

Each installment of *The Real Housewives* franchise features its setting in its title. Unlike some dramas (*Treme* or *The Wire*) or docusoaps (*The Hills*), the settings of *Real Housewives* programs don't usually function as characters. The setting demonstrates the wealth and access of the characters, but the characters' investment in and ongoing exploration of the local area and its histories is limited. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* does grapple with the setting of Atlanta in terms of the characters' gated communities and expensive lunch dates, but it also utilizes the setting as a storytelling device in a way that distinguishes it from the other installments in the franchise. The characters of each installment are understood as representative of the region or city in which the show is set (even if they all live in the same exclusive zip code and are far from representative of the complete picture). As pervasive and prominent as the mythos of the Southern lady/Southern belle and the attendant graces and codes of Southern manners are in Atlanta, so the characters of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* must either represent those structures or explicitly articulate why they refuse and how they will enact their resistance.

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta*'s version of Atlanta is an expensive one. The characters own or rent expensive, large homes, drive luxury vehicles, eat out constantly,

and seem to continually pour money into business ventures and investments. Atlanta's less desirable neighborhoods are acknowledged but not featured. Peter Thomas, husband to lead character Cynthia Bailey, opened a lounge and bar called Bar One in a location that the other characters mocked and referred to as "ghetto." A year later, Cynthia, former model and owner of modeling agency, moved The Bailey Agency across town to a location across the street from Bar One after Peter bought the building without telling her. The couple is optimistic about their business ventures and the area, but their respective locations are talked about by their friends in less than flattering terms.

Similarly, Kandi Burruss, successful musician and producer, bought a mansion in a gated neighborhood of an Atlanta suburb, but her choice is questioned by more than a few of the other housewives for being "so far away" and "near where drug dealers live." There's no actual evidence produced for the latter, and regarding the former, unless you live in downtown or the Buckhead area, everyone in Atlanta lives in a suburb and the way the city is designed plus its maddening traffic means that nearly *everyone* lives "so far away." It's not uncommon to drive 30-60 minutes to get to a friend's house "across town." These examples demonstrate the slipperiness and arbitrariness of what qualifies as "respectable" and acceptable within Southern culture and the show itself *and* the ways in which *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* does the good work of making that performativity visible rather than continuing to naturalize it.

Phaedra Parks, attorney-at-law, aspiring funeral home director, workout video star and producer, mother of two and wife of former client, Apollo Nida, tries to demystify some of these codes and expectations in her recent book, *Secrets of the Southern Belle: How to Be Nice, Work Hard, Look Pretty, Have Fun, and Never Have an Off Moment*

(2013) (Figure 18).



Figure 18: Cover of *Secrets of a Southern Belle*

Parks has no qualms about figuring herself as a Southern Belle, albeit a modern-day one. In the book she fondly recounts a tale of making a new friend who proceeds to tell Phaedra that she reminds her “of a Scarlett O’Hara dipped in chocolate” (23). Parks’ response to this statement in the story she tells is one of good humor and demure appreciation. Parks mobilizes this experience to demonstrate at least one way in which she imagines herself as a Southern belle and explain her access to a cultural heritage that actively sought to erase her. Parks’ friend reads Parks as so successfully coded as (upper) classed, respectable, and Southern that she is only able to integrate Parks’ visible racial identity as a superfluous yet sweet addition to Parks herself and her performance of belledom.

Throughout the book she dispenses advice and lays down strict rules for behavior, dressing and styling, polite niceties and manners for all occasions, romance, parenting,

food preparation, and gift-giving. Parks cites the authority of her mother whom she refers to as a “true Southern belle” as substantiation for the claims and rules she lays out in mini-chapter form. Examples of the kinds of advice the book prizes include, “If you don’t have a medical condition, you should just eat around anything you can’t identify or don’t like...chew with your mouth closed, and don’t talk until you’ve swallowed... and don’t ask for something that nobody has offered you unless you’re at a restaurant” (30-1). Most of the edicts, particularly the ones related to table and social manners, are fairly common across middle-class and upper-middle class and aspirational households in the U.S., but Parks sprinkles in enough colloquialisms and syrupy charm to distinguish herself as speaking from the pedestal of the Southern belle.

The images of Parks on the cover (and back cover) of the book, seen above, are important (Figure 18). The images identify Parks as a black woman, lest any readers are shocked after reading Southern belle how-to guide and later find out the author isn’t white. The images also carefully showcase the friendly, accessible-yet-glamorous image on which Parks bases her celebrity. In these images, Phaedra Parks doesn’t look like she regularly cleans her house, changes diapers, or even spends much time in a courtroom or funeral home, but that’s the point of the book—maintaining the image of oneself as coiffed (and chemically straightened), manicured, and desirable is more important than any other quality. The unfortunate part for Phaedra is that despite claiming to possess the secret of how to never “have an off moment,” many of hers are preserved for posterity via *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Each of these instances contributes to the network created by *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and that of its individual stars. Phaedra Parks is understood via her role on the show, the show’s paratexts, and all of the self-branding

efforts she's taken on, including this book, her workout DVD, and her promotion of her up-and-coming funeral home business using *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* as a platform. Of course, Parks isn't alone in using the show to promote her businesses or professional image, as I will discuss.

*Duck Dynasty* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* operate as branding platforms in similar ways to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Both shows also impose a (particularly Southern) politics of respectability onto their characters, a political structure emphasizing the values of marriage, education, following rules established by authority figures, being financially independent, and maintaining a dignified public appearance. These respectable behaviors seek approval from the same power structures that impose them and promise to reward them, but instead profit from generations' continuing investment in these clear rules and boundaries that serve as a map to a better, more successful life only in myth. These politics of respectability contain the particular brand of rural, Southern, and fundamentalist prescribed masculinity of *Duck Dynasty* but are more comprehensive than that. The politics of respectability, generally, don't appeal to or operate on any specific identity category, though their implications and limitations are more likely to cause greater suffering in more socially vulnerable populations. For example, the same "rules" apply to Phil Robertson of *Duck Dynasty* as to Phaedra Parks from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, but should one of those two stray from the rules or dismiss the structure entirely, Parks stands with much more to lose and as the more vulnerable party.

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta* makes efforts to portray an Atlanta that is more politically progressive and accepting of eccentricities and deviance from the norm than in



decades past. There are three characters who play into tropes of the gay male best friend but also push back against it on occasion. Miss Lawrence (Washington), stylist and friend to a few of the lead characters, wears lipstick and heels and is mortally offended when a valet uses “sir” to refer to her. Kenya expounds, “Miss Lawrence is a *lady*, honey!” (S06E17). Derek J, hairstylist, friend, and confidante to a few characters serves as sounding board for their interpersonal dramas and sometimes makes appearances at his friends’ events, often in heels, elaborate jewelry, and club-wear clothing. Dwight Eubanks, event planner and close friend to a couple of the characters, has distinctive effeminate mannerisms and always dresses in a dandy style with vests, cravats, and bright colors.

Many of the religious institutions the characters affiliate themselves with are reluctant to accept the idea that heterosexual preferences, lifestyles, and marriage are not the only and best way(s) to live, thus requiring an open shaming and condemning of anything that could threaten (read: throw into question/require critical thinking) those beliefs. To illustrate, Phil Robertson definitely qualifies as eccentric with his long beard, anti-social tendencies, and bizarre mannerisms, but his politics support misogynistic, racist, and homophobic power structures, so he is not silenced (see chapter III).

Despite my wishes, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is not a safe oasis of progressive politics and an open-arms policy. That isn’t to say that many, if not all, of the lead characters share my wishes, but to be clear about not using the beliefs of a few to misrepresent a security that doesn’t exist in the region at large. Instead, in this circumstance, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is exemplary of that prime feature of Southern culture: grace(s). Those who are the loudest proponents of Southern culture

prefer that anything or anyone who might throw their values into question be silenced because that culture is rooted in the value of appearances, finds strength in the ability to “never have an off moment,” and celebrates the performance of respectability despite adversity or provocation.

Again, it’s not that the representatives of the old guard wish that Miss Lawrence didn’t exist, it’s just that once Miss Lawrence oversteps her bounds and becomes more than a flamboyant eccentric, once she expresses any hint of sexuality or desire, she becomes inappropriate and dismissed. Social and cultural graces cover the ugliness of the rules that guide and limit expressions of identity beyond the few respectable possibilities. This process of policing and silencing also happens when there’s a fall from financial security. Poor people or financially needy people don’t fit within the structural paradigm of respectable identities because they *need* things and help so consistently. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* actually enacts this silencing at the expense of one of its own characters.

Sheree Whitfield filmed with *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* in seasons 1-4. Season four saw her increasing distress over money, pleas with her ex-husband to contribute more financially in child support, and the construction (and supposed foreclosure) of her mansion, Chateau Sheree. The rumors about her debts and dire financial straits flew fast and furious on the show and via its paratexts. The other characters lampooned Sheree about the status of her home’s construction during the reunion episodes, and her refusal to adequately address or negate their suspicions ultimately sealed her fate as a no-longer-elite undesirable and she was not asked to renew her contract for season 5.

## Politics of (Dis)Respectability: Policing Intersectional Identities

If *Duck Dynasty* wields “family values” as a way of promoting and centering respectability politics and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is grounded in disrespectability politics—the default assumption being that the behaviors and narratives featured on the show deserve derision and disrespect more than anything else—*The Real Housewives of Atlanta* lives somewhere in between (Cooper). Brittney Cooper, under her blogger pen name, Crunktastic, coins and theorizes “disrespectability politics” and their implications and imperatives for Jay-Z and Beyoncé’s baby, Blue Ivy, for the Crunk Feminist Collective. Cooper says:

I think we must consider the potential in the space between the diss and the respect—the potential (and the danger) of what it means to dis(card) respectability altogether. This space between the disses we get and the respect we seek is the space in which Black women live our lives. It is the crunk place, the percussive place, the place that makes noise (and music), the place that moves us, the place that offers possibility in the midst of two impossible extremes. (“Disrespectability Politics.”)

Cooper’s message to and theorization of Blue Ivy’s cultural positioning has direct implications for the *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. In this chapter’s introduction, I discuss the tension between cultural specificity and stereotyping. That tension is real though slightly different than that which interests Cooper here, but that tension informs our understanding and mapping of the space to which Cooper refers. The space between the diss and the respect is—quite literally—where most of time and space are directed on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. On the interpersonal level, the characters are frequently

fighting or otherwise negotiating their relationships, as is inevitable when a group of big personalities are thrown together with little to bind them beyond the thin threads of social connection and producer objectives. On a broader, social and cultural level, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* grants the viewer intimate, ongoing access into the daily lives of the characters as they navigate their lives in Atlanta, a space rife with potential professional success and the pulsations of white supremacy and the nostalgic Southern legacies of a pre-Civil War South that live on through social micro-aggressions and institutionalized racism (from federal to local and individual structures and operations of power).

The politics of (dis)respectability mirror similar structures of power that Bourdieu outlines in his theories of taste and distinction. The power structures of distinction are visible in the show through the privileged patterns of consumption and the lifestyles afforded only by those with vast amounts of disposable income. Distinction is established between the haves and the have-nots and implicit judgments are made about the appeal and importance of the have-nots (such as when Sheree was released from her contract). This pattern is repeated on a larger cultural scale through the marketing and positioning of reality television within the contemporary media landscape. Reality programming, as discussed in chapter I, is not considered quality programming alongside films, art, or literature. Reality programming, and the intimate micro-genre in particular, are trash, tabloid culture and our patriarchal, white supremacist national power structures rely on the continuing function of the distinction between the two, quality television and not, because of the cultural messages and values upheld by dividing viewers (society) effectively against one another. This explanation may seem like an over-simplification,

and indeed it does gloss over some of the nuances of historical and industrial influences on mass media and genres, but it is still worthwhile to consider the way that distinction operates as a social force in daily life.

The way that respectability and distinction circulate on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, particularly within a Southern frame, is inextricably linked to marriage and the quality of being marriage-able. Obviously the “housewife” designation is not unique to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, but it takes on a different significance in the South. Racquel Gates’ discussion of the respectability of wife-dom as related to *Basketball Wives* (VH1, 2010-present) applies here:

Perhaps the reason that the women on *Basketball Wives* cling so tightly to their ‘wife’ status is because black women have usually been excluded from an understanding of what it means to be one. Historically, the characteristics associated with the very image of a ‘wife’ (white, middle class, appropriately feminine) have been defined in contrast to the lived experiences of black women, and often used to exclude them from the social, political, and financial privileges associated with its status. The Moynihan Report and its scathing condemnation of the black single mother is a notable example, as are the recent flurry of books, articles, and news reports that focus on the ‘problem’ of unmarried black women. We should be careful, therefore, not to assume that the women’s claiming of ‘wife’ status is simply an adherence to gender norms. Instead, it might be productive to view it as an attempt to appropriate the signifiers associated with wifedom that are typically denied to black women: security, legitimacy, and respect. To borrow a common saying: don’t hate the player, hate the game. By

redefining the definition of ‘wife’ to include girlfriends, baby mamas, and even groupies, the women on *Basketball Wives* are opening up a space to contemplate the politics of who gets to be a ‘wife’ in our society.

As on *Basketball Wives*, the concept of wife, and of housewife, is extremely fluid, though at least the conversations about the spectrum of meaning are recorded. The significance of the term lies less in the occupation and daily doings of the women and more in their claim to respectability as evidenced by their wealth and class status. The addition of a husband is a woman’s and her parents’ crowning jewel in Southern culture; within Southern states, marriage is *the* most respected public institution and the industry surrounding it plays on the same nostalgia and values as upheld by *Duck Dynasty* and *Gone with the Wind*-themed parties. Even today, there is an alarming amount of web space dedicated to weddings, showers, and parties in the style of *Gone with the Wind*. All of these values are inextricably linked. It’s impossible and unproductive to try and understand Phaedra Parks as an educated attorney without also understanding her Southern upbringing, her investment in structures of power that undermine her very identity, and the double-consciousness of being black in the U.S. South.

Perhaps it is these very complications, nuances, and contradictions that make *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* the success it is. In a video interview with *The Insider*, Nene Leakes—*The Real Housewives of Atlanta*’s only remaining original cast member, breakout star with a recurring role on *Glee* (Fox, 2009-present), and regular character on the now-canceled *The New Normal* (NBC, 2012-13)—speculates about the popularity of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. She credits the show’s appeal primarily to herself (with her signature brash charm) then says that it popular because it’s the only series in *The*

*Real Housewives* franchise featuring “brown girls.” She continues:

...you can always turn on the TV and see those Beverly Hills girls, those Miami girls, those New Jersey girls, New York, and you still sorta kinda get the same flavor. But when you turn and see *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, you’re getting a group of brown girls. [...] What I do know is that we are super entertaining, we’re fabulous, we live in fabulous homes like everybody else, we have dreams like everyone, we have issues and problems like everybody else. (“Nene: ‘RHOA’ Is So Popular.”)

Nene continues to emphasize that she and her castmates are real. She contrasts *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*’s characters with those “plastic” women from the O.C., a statement both literal and figurative, as Nene sees her show as radically different in terms of physicality and personality from *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (Bravo, 2006-present) and emphasizes the regional, cultural differences between them. Part of the labor of starring in a reality program is denying the scriptedness or heavy hand of producers in the creation of the show, maintaining some veneer of authenticity. Nene successfully navigates each of these points in the interview, affirming the authenticity of the show and each of the characters’ personalities. The pleasures of visibility and representation shouldn’t be understated, particularly for minorities whose counterparts remain woefully underrepresented in mainstream U.S. television and film, but it is also important to question Bravo’s and the show’s motivations if the primary platform is simply that the show features African Americans.<sup>34</sup> Also, the connotations and

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<sup>34</sup> Relatedly, we must consider the undue burden placed on actresses and characters of color to be everything to everyone as a result of the scarcity of black bodies on television. For more, refer to Kristen Warner’s article, “They Gon’ Think You Loud Regardless: Ratchetness, Reality Television and Black Womanhood” and forthcoming book, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (2014).

implications of authenticity are complicated: those who marginalize and would make caricatures of the lived black experience and identity are also often the same people who label African Americans, particularly in the South, as “real” and “authentic,” because such labels obfuscate the details and depth of individual experience, sidelining and dismissing suffering and triumph alike under the guise of tolerance and multiculturalism.<sup>35</sup>

But for *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, authenticity has another layer of meaning as well. If a significant part of the cultural work performed by the show is the making visible and explicit the trappings of Southern culture, one consequence lies in the authentication of that culture. This rubric obviously wouldn’t apply to any or all other (sub)cultures, but does here because of the centralization of good breeding, bloodlines, and historical legacies in the South, with all of the ugly connotations and baggage that come alongside. The culture is heavily vested in mystery, subtlety, and graces, and to claim the relational systems, manners, and rituals that embody those values as legible and accessible to anyone effectively empties them of their value by the standards of the same system. This is where the resistance is enacted. Stripping away the mystique of what makes someone Southern or how to perform Southernness disrupts generations’ worth of closed-door conversations or implicit communication about authenticity, inclusion, and exclusion. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* interrupts and confuses a rather tidy system of sorting people. However, by the same token, the *Housewives* put themselves at risk by lowering the value of Southern culture in its traditional forms since their show’s brand is affiliated with it. The value of Southern culture is—in many ways—intertwined with the

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<sup>35</sup>These are also likely to be the same people who blame African American actors for taking roles as domestics or slaves then criticizing Hollywood.



national perceptions and value of their personal brands.

### Self-Branding, Para/Intertextuality, and Emotional Respectability

Kenya Moore transformed “*Gone with the Wind Fabulous*” into a multimedia marketing campaign, primarily for her personal brand but also for *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. In addition to a plethora of interviews—print, web, television, and radio—Kenya also produced and starred in a music video of her song by the same name that parodies other cast members and situations from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and offers a pastiche of Beyoncé music videos. Kenya is still new to cast in the fifth season; she goes out with some of the other characters and casually mentions that people in Atlanta are always confusing her with Beyoncé and asking her to sign autographs. The other women are blatantly skeptical of this claim, but the nickname “Keyoncé” still somehow emerges. Kenya is business savvy enough to know that any affiliation she can suggest between herself and Beyoncé is only a positive for her brand. And that brand got a boost following the 2013 Super Bowl during which Beyoncé led the halftime show. After her performance, Beyoncé did a quick interview with *Inside Edition* and responded to a question about how she felt about the show by saying, “It was fierce, honey. It was *Gone with the Wind* fabulous!” (Ravitz). Based on the context of Beyoncé’s comment, coming off an objectively impressive performance, it seems that perhaps Kenya’s initial self-evaluation of the statement’s meaning wasn’t inaccurate.

In a video for *BravoTV*, Kenya discusses the origins of *Gone with the Wind* fabulous to promote the release of her single by the same title (Figure 19). She says:

It means to me that you can be yourself; that you can believe in yourself no matter

what anybody else says. You're always going to have haters because if you're doing something right, you're gonna have haters. So when someone says you're not pretty or you're not good enough or you're lesser than, you don't have to accept it because you know who you are. And if you know you're gone with the wind fabulous, that's all you need. ("Genesis.")

There are layers of meaning, branding, intertextuality, and (dis)respectability in the rhetorical and political moves Kenya is making between the emergence of the phrase in *Anguilla* to her thoughtful reflections and inspirational speeches filmed for Bravo.



Figure 19: Screenshot from Kenya's video for *BravoTV* taken March 18, 2014  
The image above is a screenshot of the same interview. Comparing the framing and composition of this video with the original "*Gone with the Wind* fabulous" sequence shot in *Anguilla* reveals some stark differences. First, the original scene is shot outdoors, in the midst of a heated conflict, and with many women present. This video is set inside, in a cozy, domestic space that is brightly lit. For the video, Kenya is dressed in a flattering sweater and matching jewelry. The framing of the shot remains at this close-up length,

keeping the focus on Kenya's face and words. Her movements are restricted to facial expressions and hand gestures, unlike the full-body twirls, finger-pointing, and tense pacing of the original sequence. Kenya's tone in the video is light-hearted and sincere, as though she were speaking directly to a small group of middle-schoolers. The Rachel Maddow book that could easily have been cropped out of the left side of the frame is a nice touch to suggest Kenya's alignment with a well admired and progressive author and commentator.

Kenya's behavior during the Anguilla sequence, described by Nene as "cuckoo," is only reconciled with this video through Kenya's assertions of self-confidence and self-esteem. It seems likely that Kenya resists portraying herself as a victim in the conflict as it would damage her brand and give more credence to Porsha's insults. However, she also refuses to return the disrespect by explicitly attacking Porsha, so she inveigles both of those implications within respectable language meant to inspire and encourage her fans. However, spinning the initial conflict into a platform from which to motivate others to believe in themselves is somewhat undermined by the mean-spiritedness of the "*Gone with the Wind* Fabulous" music video where Kenya blatantly makes fun of Phaedra and her own ex-boyfriend (with whom she also got into an argument in Anguilla), Walter. The video suggests Phaedra's inflated sense of her own physical attractiveness and also implies that Walter's lack of enthusiasm for romancing Kenya was due to his own confused sexual preferences. But the video is styled and produced in an over-the-top, unquestionably campy style so as to suggest these messages may also be exaggerated and perhaps soften the blow. The messy overlap and intersection of each iteration of "*Gone with the Wind* fabulous" reflect the complex web of identity and (dis)respectability. The

currency and circulation of the phrase also make visible the same cycles and patterns of currency and circulation of the intimate micro-genre of reality programming.

Despite the celebration of performativity, the dramatic scenes, and the pleasure *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*'s characters take in accouterment, the *Housewives* resist being portrayed as freaks, eccentrics, or misfits. They all conform closely enough to the mainstream, as defined in the show, to demand respect, even if that respect is only manifested monetarily. The values that *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* promotes as Southern are individual and unique to the characters, accounting for their histories and political identities. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* resists and disrupts any essentializing, naturalizing, or implicit narratives about the South and what it means to be Southern, which perhaps is the most important story of all.

#### Conclusion: The South Like You've Never Seen It Before

Since the conception of this project, Southern reality programming has continued to expand at a dramatic rate. A non-comprehensive, roughly chronological sampling of shows that do not appear in this project include: *Swamp People* (History, 2010-present), *T.I. and Tiny: The Family Hustle* (VH1, 2011-present), *Hillbilly Handfishin'* (Animal Planet, 2011-12), *Rocket City Rednecks* (National Geographic Channel, 2011-present), *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* (VH1, 2012-present), *Snake Salvation* (National Geographic Channel, 2013), *The Governor's Wife* (A&E, 2013), *Big Rich Atlanta* (Style, 2013), *The New Atlanta* (Bravo, 2013-present), *Party Down South* (CMT, 2014-present), *Private Lives of Nashville Wives* (TNT, 2014-present), *Chrisley Knows Best* (USA, 2014-present), and *Southern Charm* (Bravo, 2014-present). This spate of primarily intimate programming further corroborates the melodrama intrinsic to the (Deep) South. It also

reveals that there are more unanswered questions, expanding horizons of progressive possibility, and new negotiations and articulations of political identity.

“Everyday Intimacies” had two primary functions. First, it established a genre-based map of reality television that reveals the variety of cultural and industrial ways that reality television works, and second, it mobilized that map in the service of theorizing the intimate micro-genre through analysis of three case studies.

Of course, as the field of reality television continues to mature and proliferate, the field of micro-genres has become full of hybrids. I maintain that these micro-genres are flexible and capable of comprehensively accommodating contemporary programming. Establishing this map of micro-genres has been essential to analyzing intersectional identities, analyses that were restricted by earlier scholarly approaches to reality television.

One of the primary questions pursued by this dissertation is how the micro-genres regulate and structure content. For example, how do we understand the ways in which Mama June’s love story on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* looks, sounds, and feels dramatically different from Andi Dorfman’s on the previous season of *The Bachelor* and her current season of *The Bachelorette*? How can we understand the implicit and explicit visions and operations of taste, distinction, and cultural values? How do narrative strategies, marketing, production values, formal techniques, and star texts shape our understanding of the stories we narrate about ourselves about our places in the world?

The case studies in the second part of the dissertation addressed these questions through analyzing the prolific site of intimate reality television. I chose this site as it is often host to the richest, most interesting and complicated conversations about identity.

Intimate programming's soapy heritage, focus on the everyday details of life, and sustained investment in its characters (usually across multiple seasons and media platforms) allows for deeply textured stories. The melodramatic, affective register of intimate programming also enables moments of resistance, which I suggest as particularly significant in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. I also attend to these programs as localized sites of change for how the media industry and culture at large absorbed and coped with the anxiety and melancholy that has followed the Great Recession of 2008. These changes are evidenced through the visible and varied patterns of political identities produced and negotiated by Southern reality programming.

As reality television continues to grow, southward and otherwise, it will require more robust and agile tools for critical treatment. In future versions of this project, I will research the intersections and patterns of how reality television is represented and discussed in popular media, fandom, and scholarly works in order to better map the cultural significance and currency of the mode. I am optimistic about the development of reality television and its potential for giving voice to resistance, hosting important national conversations about identity politics, and serving as a lab in which the forces of culture and politics can be scrutinized and reformed. It is my hope that the work of this dissertation will be foundational to future scholarship seeking to treat reality television as the complex, important, joyous site that it is.

## APPENDIX

### DIGITAL DATA VISUALIZATION TOOL

This project contributes to a developing theoretical vocabulary on reality television and offers a map of micro-genres to enable more sophisticated, nuanced analysis. I am also introducing a needed theoretical tool in the form of a dynamic, digital field map. A core component of this project is the creation of a new digital tool. In collaboration with University of Oregon faculty and students in Computer Science, I created an online data visualization of the map of micro-genres comprising the field of reality programming outlined in this dissertation.<sup>36</sup> This tool is designed to be collaborative and easily adaptable in order to accommodate the genre's changes in years to come. This tool will function as a database and a critical teaching resource by allowing scholars and students to visualize the patterns in reality programming from multiple metadata-shaped perspectives: chronological, production, generic, etc. The first iteration of the tool is currently in beta testing at [realitytvdata.org](http://realitytvdata.org). The code of the tool is open access, open source, and configured to allow users to register and contribute information. I am presently exploring funding opportunities that will allow me to expand its functionality and scope.

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