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Redneckaissance: Honey Boo Boo, Tumblr, and the Stereotype of Poor White Trash

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REDNECKAISSANCE: HONEY BOO BOO, TUMBLR, AND THE STEREOTYPE OF
POOR WHITE TRASH

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Abstract

Tumblr is an understudied social media site with a young, progressive, and queer user base of content creators. This study examines Tumblr posts about *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* to understand the nature of Tumblr and the way a convergent culture that includes non-viewers negotiates a television show dependent on stereotypes. Discourses around authenticity, LGBTQ issues, and body acceptance resist the negative white trash connotations of the show, but this resistance is embedded in stereotypes around race, class, gender, sexuality, and geography. The result is a continuum in which users negotiate what the show means in how they use that show to communicate about other issues based on which axes of power they resist and uphold. This analysis gives insight into how online culture serves to reflect hegemonies without necessarily undermining them, how Tumblr memes serve to define the values of the site, and how an individual television show is co-opted into the online language of memes.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My first realization that Honey Boo Boo¹ had become a complex discursive phenomenon came with the appearance of an image from the show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* in my social media feeds. In this animated image, June Shannon, the overweight matriarch of the show, careens down a waterslide in her bathing suit with joy on her face. Most of the previous discourse I had encountered around the show was negative and focused on how “trashy” the show was, but, in my social media feeds, people were now praising the show for “fat acceptance” of “real bodies,” and people were embracing June’s joy. There were still negative comments, but they were complicated by people who identified with June because of her weight, one of the things that had been used to mock her and call her “white trash.” This image became popular on Tumblr, with hundreds of reblogs, and it spread elsewhere online, including into my Facebook feed.²

Tumblr is a location of complex discourse creation, with users generating intricate languages of memes that go on to appear in places like my Facebook feed.³ The

¹ For purposes of differentiation, this study uses “Honey Boo Boo” for the overall phenomenon, “*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*” for the television show, and “Alana” for the girl also known as “Honey Boo Boo.” Tumblr users generally use “Honey Boo Boo” for all three.

² “Community Post: 25 Crazy Mama June GIFs,” *BuzzFeed Community*, October 2, 2012, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/hyvesredactie/25-crazy-mama-june-gifs-7j5s>.

³ A meme is a “contagious pattern of information” that is spread throughout a culture – fashions, catchphrases, and popular music are examples of cultural memes. Michele Knobel, “Memes, Literacy and Affinity Spaces: Implications for Policy and Digital Divides in Education,” *Learning* 3, no. 3 (2006), <http://labweb.education.wisc.edu/steinkuehler/curric606/readings/Knobel2005.pdf>.

appearance of this particular post spoke to me of the role that sites like Tumblr, Reddit, and 4chan play in developing online language.⁴ While Reddit and 4chan are dominated by white heterosexual men, Tumblr is a more feminine, queer, and diverse space.⁵ A post celebrating Mama June's body acceptance is representative of the kind of progressive space that Tumblr is understood to be.⁶ The relationship between Tumblr, as a progressive site of meme generation, and hegemonic television stereotypes, as seen in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, offers the opportunity to understand more about television, stereotyping, and social media.

This study explores how online content creators engage with television stereotypes online. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the ways in which online content that is created using a reality television show as source material supports, undermines, and interacts with the tropes of the white trash stereotype. It also seeks to

⁴ Ryan M. Milner, "Media Lingua Franca: Fixity, Novelty, and Vernacular Creativity in Internet Memes," *Selected Papers of Internet Research* 3 (2013), <http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/article/view/806>.

⁵ Alice Marwick, "Gender, Sexuality, and Social Media," in *The Social Media Handbook*, ed. Jeremy Hunsinger and Theresa Senft (New York: Routledge, 2014), 59–75; Parisa Zamanian, "Queer Lives: The Construction of Queer Self and Community on Tumblr" (M.A., Sarah Lawrence College, 2014), <http://search.proquest.com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/pqdtft/docview/1535729447/>; Alexis C. Madrigal, "Reddit Demographics in One Chart," *The Atlantic*, July 3, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/07/reddit-demographics-in-one-chart/277513/>; Kevin Morris, "Who's on Reddit?," *The Daily Dot*, September 12, 2011, <http://www.dailydot.com/society/reddit-survey-demographics/>; "Advertise - 4chan," *4chan*, accessed October 7, 2015, <http://www.4chan.org/advertise>; Maeve Duggan, "Mobile Messaging and Social Media 2015," *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*, August 19, 2015, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/19/mobile-messaging-and-social-media-2015/>.

⁶ Progressive meaning left and focused on issues of equality, but not necessarily radical, or focused on "comprehensive systematic change." Catherine Eschle and Bice Maiguashca, "Reclaiming Feminist Futures: Co-Opted and Progressive Politics in a Neo-Liberal Age," *Political Studies* 62, no. 3 (October 2014): 648, doi:10.1111/1467-9248.12046.

discover how online content creators take part in the construction of meaning using the show. This study will examine a selection of Tumblr posts about Honey Boo Boo for the ways in which Tumblr users uphold, undermine, and “play with” white trash stereotypes. The goal is to gain insight into online content creators’ participation in television culture and its use of the white trash stereotype as well as into how they use Tumblr to communicate. This research uses discourse analysis to examine the Tumblr content created with, around, and about the phenomenon of Honey Boo Boo.⁷

This study addresses the following research questions: How does Tumblr content use Honey Boo Boo in discourse explicitly and implicitly about race, class, gender, sexuality, and geography? What are these discourses? How do these discourses adopt, negotiate, or resist common U.S. stereotypes of “white trash” and “rednecks?” How does the online audience’s role as a secondary content creator change meaning and discourse around and about the show? As a progressive space, does Tumblr resist the hegemonic narratives of Honey Boo Boo?

The family on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* represents a unique intersection of poor, white, fat, southern, LGBTQ-allied, and female-dominated social actors, positioning the show along the power axes of class, race, weight, geography, sexuality, and gender. This study attempts to understand Tumblr discourse about Honey Boo Boo through the framework of intersectional theory. Intersectional theory assumes that social categories of race, class, and gender are intertwined and together constitute identity and

⁷ All discourse gathered for this study pre-dates the cancellation of the show. The analysis does not focus on the molestation scandal, which will be discussed briefly in the conclusion. Lisa de Moraes, “‘Here Comes Honey Boo Boo’ Canceled as TLC Wrings Its Hands and Details Get Worse,” *Deadline*, October 24, 2014, <http://deadline.com/2014/10/honey-boo-boo-cancel-tlc-child-molestation-mama-june-859493/>.

describe power relationships. How do these axes of power interact in online discourse? This study attempts to understand the online content creator's role in creating meaning around a show that relies heavily on negative stereotypes.

1.1 What is Tumblr?

Launched in 2007, Tumblr is an active, expanding Internet site with more than 166 million users from around the world.⁸ In May of 2013, Yahoo, Inc. purchased Tumblr from the founder, David Karp, for \$1.1 billion.⁹ This worried investors, who saw Tumblr as difficult to monetize, and it worried Tumblr users, who dislike corporations and feared the site would change to become easier to monetize.¹⁰ Currently, the site makes money through sponsored posts, initiated before the buy out, but the relatively small size of the Tumblr audience makes it a difficult space to advertise in.¹¹ These difficulties in monetizing the site are due to the things that are fundamental to the site as it exists now: lack of demographics data on users, difficulty counting users, and very little control over content; much of Tumblr's success comes from allowing users to post

⁸ Yi Chang et al., "What Is Tumblr: A Statistical Overview and Comparison," *arXiv:1403.5206 [physics]*, March 20, 2014, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1403.5206>.

⁹ Jenna Wortham, "Yahoo Completes Tumblr Acquisition," *Bits Blog*, accessed October 29, 2015, <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/20/yahoo-completes-tumblr-acquisition/>.

¹⁰ Jenna Wortham, "No Regrets for the Founder of Tumblr After Yahoo Sale," *The New York Times*, May 4, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/05/technology/no-regrets-for-the-founder-of-tumblr-after-yahoo-sale.html>; Molly Young, "'It Was the Biggest Game of Chicken I've Ever Seen.'" *NYMag.com*, September 29, 2013, <http://nymag.com/news/business/boom-brands/tumblr-2013-10/>; Richard Waters and Tim Bradshaw, "Yahoo Buys Start-up Tumblr for \$1.1bn," *Financial Times*, May 20, 2013, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f65828a6-c0c9-11e2-aa8e-00144feab7de.html#axzz3qRyZnP23>.

¹¹ Bryce J. Renninger, "'Where I Can Be Myself ... Where I Can Speak My Mind' : Networked Counterpublics in a Polymedia Environment," *New Media & Society*, April 9, 2014, 1461444814530095, doi:10.1177/1461444814530095.

animated images of pornography and copyrighted works.¹² Tumblr offers access to a progressive teen and young adult market that comes to Tumblr to avoid being a market.¹³

Tumblr is a microblogging site, somewhat like Twitter, that offers the full functionality of a blog with the interconnectivity of a social media site. Unlike Twitter, Tumblr has no character limits, deemphasizes the importance of individuals and conversations, and does not limit the kind or length of content posted.¹⁴ Like Twitter, users act as both content creators and content consumers. Tumblr offers full integration of animated gifs, which makes the content more dynamic than Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Pinterest, or Instagram.¹⁵ This is part of an increased functionality and customizability of Tumblr in general; like a blog hosted anywhere else, Tumblr users can use HTML and plug-ins to change backgrounds, add and remove features, and create unique spaces that meet their needs. The focus on gifs and image macros increases the importance of the hashtag system because they often serve as the only searchable information on a post. The hashtag functionality makes content easy to discover, and on Tumblr gives nearly equal footing to new users with few followers and large established blogs.¹⁶

Unlike other sites, there is not a comment feature on Tumblr posts; the only functionality is either liking or reblogging a post.¹⁷ Users can functionally comment by adding their thoughts to a reblog, but these comments appear in the middle of a list of likes and reblogs, with no priority given to reblogs that add content. There is no clear trail

¹² Adam Rifkin, "Tumblr Is Not What You Think," *TechCrunch*, February 18, 2013, <http://social.techcrunch.com/2013/02/18/tumblr-is-not-what-you-think/>.

¹³ Waters and Bradshaw, "Yahoo Buys Start-up Tumblr for \$1.1bn."

¹⁴ Matt Hart, "Youth Intimacy on Tumblr A Pilot Study," *Young 23*, no. 3 (August 1, 2015): 193–208, doi:10.1177/1103308815577878.

¹⁵ Rifkin, "Tumblr Is Not What You Think."

¹⁶ Renninger, "'Where I Can Be Myself ... Where I Can Speak My Mind.'"

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

of conversation on the original post. The result is a site where trolling and relationships between users are both deemphasized.¹⁸

This de-emphasis on relationships is also partly a function of the pseudonymity of users. Users are not required to fill out a profile, are allowed to have as many blogs as they want, and generally use a pseudonym as their username.¹⁹ Blogs can belong to groups of people, can require approval to be seen (private), and can be interacted with anonymously.²⁰ Tumblr creates a private and personal space distinguished from the public spaces of Facebook, leading to interesting demographics and content.²¹ If Facebook is where your mother is, Tumblr is where your teenager is.²²

Almost half of Tumblr users are young, between the ages of 16 and 24, and 66% are under 35.²³ They are balanced between genders, with 65% having some college education.²⁴ Tumblr users tend to spend more time on Tumblr than they do on other social media sites like Twitter and Pinterest.²⁵ Of particular importance to this study is a key trait of these Tumblr users: they engage in social media as a means of self-

¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹ Hart, "Youth Intimacy on Tumblr A Pilot Study."

²⁰ Rifkin, "Tumblr Is Not What You Think"; Renninger, "'Where I Can Be Myself ... Where I Can Speak My Mind.'"

²¹ Rifkin, "Tumblr Is Not What You Think."

²² Barry Graubart, "Tumblr Is Not a Blogging Platform," *Content Matters*, May 19, 2013, http://www.contentmatters.info/content_matters/2013/05/tumblr-is-not-a-blogging-platform.html.

²³ Cooper Smith, "Tumblr Offers Advertisers A Major Advantage: Young Users, Who Spend Tons Of Time On The Site," *Business Insider*, December 12, 2013, <http://www.businessinsider.in/Tumblr-Offers-Advertisers-A-Major-Advantage-Young-Users-Who-Spend-Tons-Of-Time-On-The-Site/articleshow/27250102.cms>; Albert Costill, "50 Things You Should Know About Tumblr," *Search Engine Journal*, January 9, 2014, <http://www.searchenginejournal.com/50-things-know-tumblr/84595/>.

²⁴ Costill, "50 Things You Should Know About Tumblr."

²⁵ Ibid.

expression.²⁶ The plurality of Tumblr posts and visits are from the U.S., with the U.S. generating four times the amount of traffic as the next country, making it an appropriate place to examine U.S. culture.²⁷ Tumblr is unique among the meme heavy sites in that it is not a heavily masculinized space. It is a site of feminist and trans-activism.²⁸ Milner describes 4chan as “antisocial,” Reddit as “leftist,” and Tumblr as “hipster,” but Tumblr is also extremely young, gender-balanced, queer, and radical.²⁹ Tumblr is not driven by the same kind of hegemonic masculinity as the other sites.³⁰ Renninger describes Tumblr as “a platform used by feminists, queers, trans* people, and alienated youth.”³¹ This is especially relevant to this study because Honey Boo Boo features young women who support gay rights.

1.2 What is Honey Boo Boo?

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo is a reality television show spin-off of the popular and much-maligned *Toddlers & Tiaras* that aired on the television channel TLC. The

²⁶ Young, ““It Was the Biggest Game of Chicken I’ve Ever Seen.””; Renninger, ““Where I Can Be Myself ... Where I Can Speak My Mind””; Hart, “Youth Intimacy on Tumblr A Pilot Study,” 201.

²⁷ Costill, “50 Things You Should Know About Tumblr.”

²⁸ Zamanian, “Queer Lives”; Sarah Connelly, ““Welcome to the FEMINIST CULT’: Building a Feminist Community of Practice on Tumblr,” *Student Publications*, April 1, 2015, http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/328.

²⁹ Ryan M. Milner, “The World Made Meme: Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media” (Dissertation, University of Kansas, 2012), 67, <http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/10256>; Duggan, “Mobile Messaging and Social Media 2015”; Zamanian, “Queer Lives”; Connelly, ““Welcome to the FEMINIST CULT.””

³⁰ Robert W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59; Lori Henson and Radhika E. Parameswaran, “Getting Real with ‘Tell It like It Is’ Talk Therapy: Hegemonic Masculinity and the Dr. Phil Show,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 1, no. 3 (2008): 287–310.

³¹ Renninger, ““Where I Can Be Myself ... Where I Can Speak My Mind,”” 8.

show focuses on the then-7-year-old Alana Thompson and her outspoken, overweight mother, June Shannon. They are poor and have been preceded in life by generations of poverty. June was 15 when she had her first child and was 32 when she became a grandmother. On the show, the family lives in rural Georgia with Alana's father, "Sugar Bear," to whom June is not married, and Alana's overweight older sisters, who all have different fathers. "Pumpkin" (Lauryn) is 12, "Chubbs" (Jessica) is 14, and "Chickadee" (Anna) is 17, single, and pregnant. Other family members appear throughout the run of the show, including a "gay" pig named "Glitzy," Alana's gay uncle nicknamed "Poodle," and Anna's newborn, Kaitlyn, who was born with a third thumb.

The show follows the family couponing, participating in pageants, and going on adventures to events like the Redneck Olympics. They have their own lexicon of words like "redneckognize" (recognize) and "biscuit" (female genitalia), and the show often subtitles their speech, even though they speak English, because their accents are heavy, underlining their difference and marginalizing them further. The show also includes moments of daily life that other shows usually edit out, like sneezing, passing gas, and burping, which would normally be cut from the footage for propriety's sake.

Alana first appeared on TLC's infamous child pageant show, *Toddlers & Tiaras*, and caused a sensation because she was chubby, hyperactive, and outspoken. Unlike other toddlers on the show, she did not throw tantrums and was not being controlled by a stereotypical "stage mother." Instead, June was funny and massively overweight. She gave Alana Mountain Dew mixed with Red Bull, a concoction the family called "Go-go juice," to get her energized for the pageants. Like many of the families that appear on *Toddlers & Tiaras*, they are from the South, and, like many families on the show,

pageants are a deeply ingrained part of their family life and culture. They view pageants as a way for girls to learn how to be successful women.³²

Child pageants are controversial in the United States, not least of all because they are expensive for the participants.³³ Alana's family is poor and has at times lived entirely off welfare, making their participation in the relatively expensive world of pageants potentially more offensive to viewers than it already is because of the sexualization and monetization of children. This use of money on pageants rather than on necessities plays into the idea that poverty is self-inflicted. According to Jillian Sandell, "Issues of economic marginality can be tolerated and articulated within the logic of liberal pluralism, so long as they can then be circulated as cultural, rather than economic, issues."³⁴ The show offers cultural resistance, however, to the frequent erasure of poor families and the existence of class from mainstream television and film. The representation of a poor white family in a mainstream television space is, even if a problematic representation, still resistance to erasure. By being a "real" poor family with their own television show, the Thompsons are offering resistance to the invisibility that the rural poor often face. Their presentation as "white trash," however, acts as justification for the very invisibility that people like them face: they are poor because that is what their behavior should lead to and that behavior should not be on television.

³² Elisabeth Thompson, "Trailer Park Royalty: Southern Child Beauty Pageants, Girlhood and Power," *Georgia Southern University*, December 1, 2007, 201, <http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/471>.

³³ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁴ Jillian Sandell, "Telling Stories of 'Queer White Trash,'" *White Trash: Race and Class in America*. Eds. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz. London and New York: Routledge, 1997, 213–214.

The show focuses on the Thompson family's weight, poverty, and apparent lack of shame for being white trash. Although this stereotype has been a prominent feature of daytime television talk shows since the 1980s, it has been rare during primetime, even on the more daring cable channels, until the recent past.³⁵ Like daytime talk shows, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* offers resistance to the erasure of class on television.³⁶ Because of the use of stereotypes and the behavior of the characters on the show, however, the news and entertainment review media has often represented the show as “the downfall of mankind,” but others have defended it as an honest representation of open-minded, poor, female, overweight people who have confidence and self-love in a way that is generally not expected for people who are neither rich nor beautiful.³⁷ The Thompson family's positive self-image is in direct contrast with the way the show aims to portray them as poor white trash. They are a tight-knit, cohesive family; they may eat “depression spaghetti” and roadkill, but they are cooking and eating these things together.³⁸ They

³⁵ C. Squire, “White Trash Pride and the Exemplary Black Citizen: Counter-Narratives of Gender, Race and the Trailer Park in Contemporary Daytime Television Talk Shows,” *Narrative Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (2002): 155–72, doi:10.1075/ni.12.1.22squ; Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows* (University of Chicago Press, 2002). Daytime talk shows occupy a place in the industry similar to the current position of reality television – it is cheap to produce, dependent on stereotypes, and a genre that is treated with disdain.

³⁶ Becca Cragin, “Beyond the Feminine: Intersectionality and Hybridity in Talk Shows,” *Women's Studies in Communication* 33, no. 2 (2010): 154–72, doi:10.1080/07491409.2010.507585.

³⁷ Tim Goodman, “‘Honey Boo Boo’: That Joke Isn’t Funny Anymore,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 22, 2012, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/bastard-machine/here-comes-honey-boo-boo-alana-mama-364933>; Daniel D’Addario, “We’re Sweet On Honey! New Yorkers Could Learn a Lot From TLC Pageant Queen ‘Honey Boo Boo,’” *Observer*, November 7, 2012, <http://observer.com/2012/11/were-sweet-on-honey-new-yorkers-could-learn-a-lot-from-tlc-pageant-queen-honey-boo-boo/2/>.

³⁸ *Making Sketti | Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KswWfq2drCM>. The recipe for “sketti” is spaghetti noodles, margarine, and ketchup.

work together to give to charity and to support each other in their hobbies and struggles. While being heavily dependent on tropes of white trash, the show also portrays the characters behaving in ways that work against many of the stereotypes associated with white trash. The white trash stereotype generally presents poor whites as racist, homophobic, and bible thumping, but this is not true of the Thompsons, who are not terribly religious and are supportive of their gay uncle and of their “gay” pig.³⁹ The show both supports and resists common stereotypes of white trash while also resisting the historic erasure of poor white people on television.

Honey Boo Boo has already been the subject of scholarly interest. As a popular reality television show relying on stereotypes of rural Southerners, it has offered scholars rich ground to explore those stereotypes. Bevie Tyo examined the redneck stereotype within the show, doing a cultural value analysis of the problematic representation of the main characters and noting that the show was constructed to use those stereotypes for entertainment.⁴⁰ Similarly, Ariel Miller did a quantitative content analysis of the show, alongside *Duck Dynasty* and *Buckwild*, to explore the construction of Southern identity

³⁹ “Reality TV Accepts Anyone and Everyone - Room for Debate,” *The New York Times*, accessed May 27, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/10/21/are-reality-shows-worse-than-other-tv/reality-tv-accepts-anyone-and-everyone>; Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Duke University Press, 2006); A. Newitz and M. Wray, “What Is ‘White Trash’?: Stereotypes and Economic Conditions of Poor Whites in the U.S.,” *Minnesota Review* 47, no. 1 (1996): 57–72. At one point in the show, the family adopts a teacup pig, who is a male pig named “Glitzzy.” Although Alana knows he is a boy, she wants him to participate in the pageant and dress up with her, so she decides that the pig is gay. Her older sister argues that it is not gay, but Alana fires back, “It can if it wants to, you can’t tell that pig what to do!”

⁴⁰ Bevie Tyo, “Coming to Appreciate the Redneck Stereotype: A Value Analysis of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo” (California Polytechnic State University, 2013), <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1144>.

on reality television and the frequency with which the shows used stereotypes.⁴¹

Unsurprisingly, these studies showed heavy reliance on negative stereotypes about “rednecks” and “white trash.”

However, scholarship on the show has not exclusively focused on the negatives. Scholars like Geoffrey Parkes and May Friedman have pushed back against a simplistic understanding of the show as merely exploitative of Southern stereotypes, suggesting instead that it also serves as a site of resistance.⁴² The show includes radical acceptance of fat bodies, female empowerment, and queer people in addition to the stereotypes about rednecks. The show also offers resistance to issues of class expectations and, in that way, serves, at least partly, as a site of resistance against the Southern stereotypes it uses.⁴³

Closer to this study’s interest, Andre Cavalcante has done a discourse analysis of the Facebook fan page of the show.⁴⁴ Reality television and social media have been intertwined over the past decade. For example, reality television is dependent on social media for generating interest and in voting on competition shows, and social media often

⁴¹ Ariel Miller, “The Construction of Southern Identity Through Reality TV: A Content Analysis of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, Duck Dynasty and Buckwild,” *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 4, no. 2 (2013), <http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/824/4/the-construction-of-southern-identity-through-reality-tv-a-content-analysis-of-here-comes-honey-boo-boo-duck-dynasty-and-buckwild>.

⁴² May Friedman, “Here Comes a Lot of Judgment: Honey Boo Boo as a Site of Reclamation and Resistance,” *The Journal of Popular Television* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 77–95, doi:10.1386/jptv.2.1.77_1; Geoff Parkes, “He’s Gonna Be a Little Gay: Redneckognising the Queer American Family in Here Comes Honey Boo Boo,” in *Proceedings of the 4th Annual International Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand Conference (PopCAANZ 2013)* (University of Southern Queensland, 2013), 138–46, <http://eprints.usq.edu.au/23932/>.

⁴³ Friedman, “Here Comes a Lot of Judgment.”

⁴⁴ Andre Cavalcante, “You Better ‘Redneckognize’!: Deploying the Discourses of Realness, Social Defiance, and Happiness to Defend Here Comes Honey Boo Boo on Facebook,” in *Reality Television: Oddities of Culture*, ed. Alison F. Slade, Amber J. Narro, and Burton P. Buchanan (Lexington Books, 2014).

focuses on television as a source of conversation topic. Social media has allowed audiences to interact much more closely with television while reality television has encouraged a sense of intimacy for audiences. These two phenomena have led to the creation of fascinating sites of discourse around reality shows.⁴⁵ The tension between the resistance that Parkes and Freidman note and the dependency on exploitative stereotypes that Tyo and Miller see is revealed in the attitudes and language used by the commenters on the Facebook page.⁴⁶ Audiences use “the Thompson family and their show as reasons to debate the ‘proper’ and moral parameters of self, family, society and nation.”⁴⁷

This intersection between stereotypes, power structures, identity formation, mass media, social media, reality television, and queer intersectional feminism is exactly where this research project is situated. These studies explore the idea of representation issues in television, especially the relationship between what is presented onscreen as the reality of the people’s lives and “actual reality,” and add to the body of feminist and critical television studies. Cavalcante even extends this research into online social media spaces, where there has been less analysis of stereotypes, by locating his discourse analysis in the medium of Facebook. This study wishes to add to that scholarship by focusing on an area of social media that has been under-studied (Tumblr and the image macro) and that offers new insights into the stereotypes and resistance to cultural expectations while also offering insight into the cutting edge of online communications.

⁴⁵ Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood, “The Labour of Transformation and Circuits of Value ‘around’ reality Television,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22, no. 4 (2008): 565.

⁴⁶ Cavalcante, “You Better ‘Redneckognize’!: Deploying the Discourses of Realness, Social Defiance, and Happiness to Defend Here Comes Honey Boo Boo on Facebook.”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

1.3 Social Media, Image Macros, and Reality Television: Talking about Stereotypes

The Internet has been studied extensively as a site of communication and location of discourse, but, in many ways, it also acts as a site of community creation. While social networks may offer a new kind of interaction between people, they also offer a new way to build communities. For example, many of Twitter's most popular hashtags are from people live-tweeting television shows and televised sporting events, including the most retweeted post of all time from the 2014 Oscars.⁴⁸ Those who lack a strong in-person community of people with similar interests can find those people online. Before the Internet, audiences had to wait to talk about *Seinfeld* around the water cooler at work the next day, but audiences are now able to talk to a much broader community of people interested in a show as it is happening, creating a sense of watching television together.⁴⁹

Likewise, television, especially reality television, encourages and depends on audience participation. Television shows have official hashtags that their networks promote on air and online, and reality television shows often ask for audience feedback and voting. The Internet, instead of replacing television, has expanded television's community creating potential.⁵⁰ Social media makes "a transition from an individual culture of reading to shared reading and writing practices" possible.⁵¹ Some shows

⁴⁸ Ruth Deller, "Twittering on: Audience Research and Participation Using Twitter," *Participations* 8, no. 1 (2011): 216–45; Sam Lansky, "Oscars 2014: This Is the Most Retweeted Tweet Ever," *Time*, accessed March 3, 2014, <http://entertainment.time.com/2014/03/02/oscars-ellen-meryl-streep-selfie/>.

⁴⁹ Stephen Harrington, Tim Highfield, and Axel Bruns, "More than a Backchannel: Twitter and Television," *Audience Interactivity and Participation. Brussels: COST Action Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies*, 2012, 406.

⁵⁰ Harrington, Highfield, and Bruns, "More than a Backchannel."

⁵¹ Eliisa Vainikka and Juha Herkman, "Generation of Content-Producers? The Reading and Media Production Practices of Young Adults," *Participations. Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013): 120.

contribute more to this participatory culture than others do. Competition shows are especially reliant on participation from viewers in their voting processes, but shows with large fandoms or that are popular in cultural discourse often feature heavily in Internet communications. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is an example of a show that became part of the cultural mainstream, primarily through mainstream news coverage, and found itself as both the subject of online communications and part of the online language used to talk about other things.

The Internet not only changes communication by creating virtual communities, but it also offers new ways of communicating. Thanks to the speed of modern Internet connections and the ready availability of simple and easy to use multimedia editing tools, people are no longer limited to text or speech as a way of interacting with others.⁵²

People use the Internet to communicate with one another through complicated combinations of *found* images, video, and text mixed with *newly created* images, video, and text.⁵³ These objects of communication become more complicated and intertextual as communities and individuals adapt and change these further; the objects form a kind of shared “meaning universe,” with constantly evolving references and texts used to discuss a wide range of issues.⁵⁴ Individuals do not simply talk about the television show; they take part in a distinctive online discourse about a range of other topics and issues, including the deeply personal and the broadly social, using the show as a signifier. Their

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Milner, “Media Lingua Franca.”

⁵⁴ Vainikka and Herkman, “Generation of Content-Producers?”

social media responses to and interpretations of television shows are also a way of performing identity.⁵⁵

A type of content of particular interest to this inquiry is the “image macro,” which mixes found and newly created images, videos, and text. Image macros are a kind of image-based meme comprised of still or moving images with text over them. It is important to understand that, although we tend to think of viral content as something that spreads and is replicated as is, the “ideas get transformed, repurposed, or distorted as they pass from hand to hand.”⁵⁶ The image and the text are being spread but they are also evolving new meanings and growing more complicated over time because of the image macro’s previous history. Thus, the original image macro can become the basis for jokes that play on the original. The image macro is particularly important in my study of Honey Boo Boo discourse on Tumblr because the majority of posts on Tumblr use both images and text to create meaning, and this content on Tumblr offers rich cultural content to analyze, richer than in other online spaces.⁵⁷

An example of this kind of evolution of an image macro is the “Condescending Wonka” meme.⁵⁸ A picture of Willy Wonka (played by Gene Wilder) that people have decided looks “condescending” is used as the image base and online content creators add their own condescending text in response to a social media conversation that they are participating in or as a comment on a broader cultural conversation.

⁵⁵ Deller, “Twittering on.”

⁵⁶ Henry Jenkins, “If It Doesn’t Spread, It’s Dead (Part One): Media Viruses and Memes,” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, February 11, 2009, http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html.

⁵⁷ Chang et al., “What Is Tumblr.”

⁵⁸ “Condescending Wonka / Creepy Wonka,” *Know Your Meme*, accessed March 3, 2014, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/condescending-wonka-creepy-wonka>.



Figure 1.1 Condescending Wonka⁵⁹

This pattern of use and repurposing is seen around television content as well. An image pulled from a television show can be used to illustrate an individual's day, paired with a funny quote, or edited into a new image entirely. All of these uses are memetic; they appropriate the image or catchphrase that has spread, but the resulting image macro yields new meaning. Many of the image macros and memes on Tumblr make use of humor, of course, but beneath the humor is serious engagement with issues.⁶⁰ Humor is often used as a form of social critique because it is “analytical, critical, and rational.”⁶¹ Humor is often conceived of as being about power, but it can act both to uphold and to undermine systems of power.⁶² The Internet is unique in that the kind of humor that might be censored elsewhere is easily accessible.⁶³

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Geniesa Tay, “Embracing LOLitics: Popular Culture, Online Political Humor, and Play,” 2012, <http://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/7091>.

⁶¹ Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, “The State of Satire, the Satire of State,” *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, 2009, 8.

⁶² Joanne R. Gilbert, “Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity, and Cultural Critique,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1997): 317–30, doi:10.1080/10462939709366196; Cynthia A. Ryan, “Reclaiming the Body: The Subversive Possibilities of Breast Cancer Humor,” *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 10, no. 2 (2009): 187–206, doi:10.1515/humr.1997.10.2.187; Simon Weaver, “Jokes, Rhetoric and Embodied Racism: A Rhetorical Discourse Analysis of the Logics of Racist Jokes on the Internet,” *Ethnicities* 11, no. 4 (2011): 413–35; D. Kim Reid, Edy Hammond Stoughton, and Robin M. Smith, “The Humorous Construction of



Figure 1.2 “A dolla makes me holla”⁶⁴

Honey Boo Boo has been the focus of many image macros and memes, often featuring the popular phrase of Alana’s, “A dolla makes me holla.” The original image is sometimes shared as is, as seen above, but it is often shared with an additional caption. Some captions make fun of the catchphrase or the show and some use the image to describe other circumstances. For example, one content creator uses the image to express his feelings about “Doing fee-for-service work on top of your full time job.” The process is iterative. A meme can be referenced in other media, like a different television show, and then that new reference can be used in a similar way that the first one was, but with different connotations. A great example of this is seen in the second image above, taken from *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, which features the Honey Boo Boo catchphrase as spoken by a drag queen, giving it new drag queen and gay connotations.

Disability: ‘stand-up’ Comedians in the United States 1,” *Disability & Society* 21, no. 6 (2006): 629–43, doi:10.1080/09687590600918354.

⁶³ Weaver, “Jokes, Rhetoric and Embodied Racism,” 417.

⁶⁴ Unless otherwise noted, images are from the posts collected for analysis and are not attributed to the Tumblr user who posted them to offer additional privacy to those users. For more information, see Chapter 3.



Figure 1.3 Les Miserables

Content creators may also take the image and phrase and create an entirely new image, often in relationship to other popular culture, like this reimagining of Alana Thompson as Cosette in *Les Miserables*. Alana’s face is photoshopped into the movie poster for *Les Miserables*, creating a new kind of image, rather than a found one. All of these different images play on the content of the original, offering moments of embracing or identifying with Alana and her catchphrase or mocking the character and the catchphrase. Often, both in positive and negative interpretations, stereotypes are relied on to convey messages. Many Tumblr posts about Honey Boo Boo are hashtagged “redneck,” for example.

Tumblr exists at the center of a new intertextual and multimedia way of communicating.⁶⁵ In addition to being an Internet platform meant for sharing video, images, and text mixed together, Tumblr is also built specifically to allow people to re-share and comment on the meaning of a post either directly or through the addition of tags. Unlike better-known social networks like Twitter and Facebook, which originated

⁶⁵ Milner, “The World Made Meme.”

as platforms for sharing written word posts, Tumblr depends on multimedia and animation. What Tumblr provides is a wealth of material to analyze that lives fully inside the Internet as an Internet-specific way of communicating. It is not possible to share in a print-based document most of the content as it actually appears on Tumblr.

Online content creators have collectively constructed a distinct online discourse about the reality television show and a range of other topics salient to U.S. culture and society. This study examines this online discourse as it appears on Tumblr in an attempt to understand how viewers interact with and communicate about television in the digital age. This study also attempts to understand how Tumblr users “talk about” the white trash stereotypes featured so prominently in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. Which stereotypes find their way into the Tumblr discourse? Are these stereotypes parroted and accepted? Are they challenged? Are they used to communicate different meanings than those seemingly offered in the show?

Reality television, especially shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, depend heavily on stereotypes for their success. For a show like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which peddles stereotypes, Tumblr offers the researcher a way of analyzing how online content creators use and respond to those stereotypes. *Honey Boo Boo* offers rich material for a case study of how images, video, and text interact to create meaning on Tumblr. The viewing demographic of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, like the user base of Tumblr, is quite young.⁶⁶ *Honey Boo Boo* offers the opportunity to study a unique

⁶⁶ Adam Kepler, “‘Honey Boo Boo’ Has the Ratings, If Not the Critics,” *ArtsBeat*, September 28, 2012, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/honey-boo-boo-has-the-ratings-if-not-the-critics/>; Joanna Brenner, “Social Networking Site Users,” *Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project*, February 14, 2013, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/02/14/social-networking-site-users/>.

intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Dependent as the show is on stereotypes of rednecks and poor white trash, especially white trash women, it is also remarkably progressive around issues of sexuality and body acceptance. Tensions between cultural expectations of bigotry and the actual behavior of the people on the show lead to a great deal of conflict in interpretations by Tumblr users. The same image can be used to denigrate rednecks and to support body acceptance, depending on the interpretation of the Tumblr user. Online content creators use tagging as well as images and text to comment on events and issues not directly related to the show itself; in this way, their posts rely on and invoke cultural values and beliefs about race, class, gender, and sexuality.

One might be tempted to call this study an audience reception study, but its focus is not on how the viewing audience of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* makes meaning of the show. Instead, this study examines how an Internet culture receives and reinterprets a show, using the stereotypes that the show presents as part of its discourse. Many people who use the memes and image macros based on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* have never actually seen the show; they may be only familiar with the meaning of the show and characters in a broader cultural context.

This study also has affinities with fan studies, in that there is a shared cultural language developed around a show, but this cultural language being developed by a mix of people; some are fans, some are “viewer-judges” who watch to mock, and some have never even seen the show.⁶⁷ Much of the language around Honey Boo Boo is using it to talk about other things. Honey Boo Boo is the subject of the Tumblr posts but often not the object. The content creators on Tumblr are using Honey Boo Boo as a basis for

⁶⁷ Michael J. Lee and Leigh Moscovitz, “The ‘Rich Bitch’ Class and Gender on the Real Housewives of New York City,” *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 1 (2013): 64–82.

creating expressions of self and identity and as a way of communicating complicated meaning through mixing image, video, and text. It is remix culture that uses this particular signifier as part of its language. These posts often reveal opinions and feelings, sometimes about Honey Boo Boo, but expressing feelings about Honey Boo Boo is not always, or even usually, the point. It is a location of convergence culture that is not focused on one thing, as one sees in convergence culture around fandoms, but instead it is about everything, using Honey Boo Boo as a way to communicate ideas.⁶⁸

Tumblr matters not only because it is new, but also because this way of communicating offers insights, unavailable in other forums, into how people create meaning. Understanding the way cultural memes draw from television shows and how stereotypes develop and are used to communicate is important because these memes and stereotypes are part of the broader culture. What is created on Tumblr does not always stay on Tumblr. Additionally, the meme is “an online community’s cultural artifact” that helps illuminate the ways the online content creators express “values and share interests,” and the meme has the ability to “significantly influence a community’s social values.”⁶⁹ People use image macros and memes not only to discuss their own lives and identities, but also to offer social and cultural critique.

As a space for doing work about race, class, gender, and sexuality, the Internet is ideal for getting at otherwise hidden cultural values and beliefs. Because online communication is done semi-anonymously, without personal contact and social cues, users are less guarded about their behavior, including behavior that might be

⁶⁸ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (NYU press, 2006).

⁶⁹ Carl Chen, “The Creation and Meaning of Internet Memes in 4chan: Popular Internet Culture in the Age of Online Digital Reproduction,” *Habitus Vol. III, Spring*, 2012, 6–19.

embarrassing or socially unacceptable in other circumstances.⁷⁰ Individuals are more likely to disclose information to a computer than to another person.⁷¹ This disinhibition is especially useful for getting information about opinions that would violate the social contract, including opinions about those issues in which intersectionality (the sociological theory used in this study) is most interested, including race, class, gender, and sexuality.

The cultural importance of Honey Boo Boo might not be immediately apparent. Yes, it has become a cultural touchstone, but that alone does not mean that the show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is important. It is part of a relatively large resurgence of redneck television, along with *Hillbilly Handfishin'*, *Duck Dynasty*, *Moonshiners*, and similar shows. It is rare, though, for a television show to present a very strong stereotype and also undermine it consistently. More than most television shows, especially shows that are dependent on exploiting stereotypes, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* presents a complicated portrait of its characters, and this portrait seems to elicit a range of interpretations. These different interpretations unveil different assumptions about race, class, gender, and sexuality that help distill meaning around what it is to be “redneck” in the mind of Americans. That Honey Boo Boo is very popular as an image macro and meme generator means that there is an unusual wealth of material to analyze for cultural attitudes towards this stereotype.

The intersection between new intertextual communication forms based around television, disinhibition from using the internet as the location of communication, and the

⁷⁰ Noam Lapidot-Lefler and Azy Barak, “Effects of Anonymity, Invisibility, and Lack of Eye-Contact on Toxic Online Disinhibition,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 28, no. 2 (March 2012): 434–43, doi:10.1016/j.chb.2011.10.014; Adam N. Joinson, “Disinhibition and the Internet,” in *Psychology and the Internet: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Transpersonal Implications* (Academic Press, 2011).

⁷¹ Patricia Wallace, *The Psychology of the Internet* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

popularity of the cultural phenomenon of a show heavily dependent on stereotyping makes the use of Honey Boo Boo image macros on Tumblr a rich vein for exploration of issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Analysis of the image macros should reveal cultural attitudes towards the show itself and to identity issues, stereotypes, and the ways memes evolve culturally.

1.4 Theoretical Perspective: Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a feminist approach to research and understanding the world that emphasizes the importance of revealing the different power dynamics and structures that create systemic inequalities. The goal of the intersectional approach is to understand “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations.”⁷² Intersectionality takes as its premise that there are different power systems around which inequality is built, such as race, class, and gender, and that the interactions of these systems affect the axes or “vectors of oppression and privilege.”⁷³ In addition to race, class, and gender, these power axes include any cultural markers that distinguish the normal (privileged) from the abnormal (oppressed), including geography, (dis)ability, religion, sexuality, beauty, weight, age, education, and language.⁷⁴ People are uniquely situated on these vectors such that the experience of power for individuals changes depending on which privileges they receive and which oppressions they face. To be male is to have cultural privilege over those who are not male; white over those who

⁷² Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* 30, no. 3 (March 1, 2005): 1771–1800.

⁷³ George Ritzer and Jeff Stepnisky, *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots: The Basics*, 4th ed. (McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 2012), 204.

⁷⁴ Lynn Weber, *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

are not white; rich over those who are not rich; straight over those who are not straight, etc.

Those who are privileged or oppressed on one axis may not be similarly situated on all axes, and so people within a group on one axis can have very different experiences from one another because of their positions on other axes. White Americans do not all have the same experience; to be white and poor is different from being white and wealthy in America today. That said, being white and poor is also different from being black and poor. The intersection of these different axes reveals oppressions and offers insights into how different positions in society affect the people who occupy those positions. These insights help us to conceptualize problems and offer us the opportunity to effect change informed by that insight.

Intersectionality got its name from Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 work "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." The concept grew from criticism of the white-dominated feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.⁷⁵ Women like bell hooks spoke to the exclusivity of the feminist movement, which continued to marginalize the black experience and black women.⁷⁶ Intersectionality led feminism to be more inclusive not only of the dynamics of race but of the dynamics of

⁷⁵ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *U. Chi. Legal F.*, 1989, 139.

⁷⁶ bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA.: South End Press, 1991).

many axes of power.⁷⁷ Intersectionality has become important to feminist scholarship because it takes into account all systems of power, not just systems of gender inequity.

Using intersectionality helps scholars to “make visible the interlocking structures of inequality to be found within the academic and everyday concerns that shape both our livelihoods and our experiences of the world.”⁷⁸ The intersectional approach is useful in many fields, but it is most frequently applied in the social sciences and humanities. The field of cultural studies, in particular, has embraced using feminist theory and methods in examining culture through the media. Intersectionality is useful in examining the media for stereotypes that reinforce hegemonic beliefs about those disempowered on axes of oppression.

This study applies an intersectional, multimodal discourse analysis to the Tumblr interpretation of show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, the phenomenon of Honey Boo Boo, and the “white trash” stereotype used within and around that show. The intersectional approach creates an imperative to explore the different axes of privilege and oppression that appear within and around the show as well as to understand the meaning of the representation of such people in a television show. Tumblr offers a venue to explore these discourses of stereotypes and beliefs about race, class, gender, sexuality, and geography not only in language, but also in visual, intertextual formats, with respect for the authenticity of the voices of those who talk about the show. What does it mean to be

⁷⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, “Gender, Black Feminism, and Black Political Economy,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568, no. 1 (March 1, 2000): 41–53, doi:10.1177/000271620056800105.

⁷⁸ B. D. Dill and M. Kohlman, “Intersectionality: A Transformative Paradigm in Feminist Theory and Social Justice,” in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, 2nd ed. (SAGE, 2012), 169.

poor, white, female, Southern, overweight, and the lead on a television show? What does it mean to be an audience that sees these people as leads on a television show?

1.5 Personal Background

In intersectional and feminist research, it is important for scholars to acknowledge who they are, why they are interested in the subject matter, and what their own biases and relationships to the subject are.⁷⁹ This is especially important for scholars working with human subjects who are less powerful and privileged than are the scholars themselves. Although I am studying a television show, the characters on that show are real people who occupy an oppressed place in U.S. society that I do not entirely share.⁸⁰

I used to work for the production company, Authentic Entertainment, that makes *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. While I worked there, I was involved in post-production on a number of shows, including the show *Toddlers & Tiaras*, which is where Alana Thompson (aka Honey Boo Boo) made her debut before spinning off into her own show. I was heavily relied upon for the transcription of *Toddlers & Tiaras* because, as a Southerner, I was sometimes the only person who could easily understand the thick Southern accents. I also did not *mind* working on it; many coworkers disliked working on

⁷⁹ Mary Hawkesworth, “Truth and Truths in Feminist Knowledge Production,” in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (SAGE, 2011), 92–118; Liesbet van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies* (SAGE, 1994).

⁸⁰ Sandra G. Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Cornell University Press, 1991); Sandra Harding, “Subjectivity, Experience and Knowledge: An Epistemology From/for Rainbow Coalition Politics,” *Development and Change* 23, no. 3 (1992): 175–93; Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is—strong Objectivity?,” *Knowledge and Inquiry: Readings in Epistemology*, 2002, 352–84.

a show that had developed an unsavory reputation for exploitation of children.⁸¹

Although I had a cultural comfort level with the Southern accents and the portrayal of pageants, something that I had been aware of as a child, the show disturbed me because of the way it mocked poor Southerners.⁸² It used poverty and stereotypes of the South to entertain outsiders. Reality television can be exploitative; much of it aims to mock, belittle, and shame participants so that the audience might feel some superiority or schadenfreude, but, through my work, I came to recognize and appreciate that reality television offers an interesting window into social and cultural norms, values, attitudes, and structures.⁸³

Like the Thompson family of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, I am a white, overweight, LGBTQ-allied woman from a rural area in the South. I feel a strong sense of kinship with these women. However, there are also significant differences between my background and theirs. My immediate family is upper middle class, but a family like the Thompsons helped raise me and played a foundational role in my childhood. From my teen years on, I no longer lived in rural areas. I have had access to higher education. These differences give me cultural privilege where they suffer from cultural oppression and, while I have experience with the rural South and have spent much of my childhood with people like those portrayed on the show, I have never shared the condition of being poor and not having access to education. The privilege that I do not share with the

⁸¹ Melissa Atkins Wardy, “An Open Letter to TLC: Cancel Toddlers & Tiaras,” *Pigtail Pals and Ballcap Buddies*, January 18, 2011, <http://pigtailpalsblog.com/2011/01/an-open-letter-to-tlc-cancel-toddlers-tiaras/>.

⁸² “Toddlers & Tiaras: Kentucky Southern Celebrity,” *TV.com*, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.tv.com/shows/toddlers-and-tiaras/kentucky-southern-celebrity-1291293/>.

⁸³ Steven Reiss and James Wiltz, “Why People Watch Reality TV,” *Media Psychology* 6 (November 2004): 363–78, doi:10.1207/s1532785xmep0604_3.

Thompsons has given me the opportunity to research and write about them and the white trash stereotype so often used to define them.⁸⁴

1.6 A Note about Language

Throughout this study, I use the language that is used in the Tumblr posts. The reader will encounter words that are not frequently used in scholarship, including obscenities and words related to body functions that may be considered impolite. As a study of discourse, the kinds of words being used are important to understanding what is meant and so they will not be changed or censored.

The language is also shared as it appears, with capitalization, punctuation, and spelling all preserved without commentary or correction. An edit of the language would serve to muddy the actual text being interpreted. If an edit added clarity, it would remove authenticity, and the original lack of clarity is relevant to its interpretation. The vast majority of the text in this study is easily deciphered, but a few are difficult to understand.

Finally, I sometimes use the singular “they” when referring to individual users of Tumblr. This study focuses on Tumblr posts from real, if unnamed, individuals who have gender identities but do not always specify what those identities are. Tumblr users often take gendered language seriously and put emphasis on respecting others’ preferred pronouns.⁸⁵ I choose to respect the conventions of the site itself and to use non-gendered pronouns when referring to people who request that pronoun in their profile or who do

⁸⁴ bell hooks, *Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination* (Routledge, 1992), 109.

⁸⁵ Ben Zimmer, “‘They,’ the Singular Pronoun, Gets Popular,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2015, sec. Life, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/can-they-be-accepted-as-a-singular-pronoun-1428686651>.

not specify their gender.⁸⁶ This is an imperfect solution, as many individuals have preferred pronouns that are not obvious, but it should avoid misgendering most of the users.⁸⁷

1.7 Conclusion

This study generates new knowledge relevant to intersectional research, critical television studies, reality television research, discourse analysis, social media research, and the stereotype of white trash. It offers new scholarship about the social media website Tumblr and about image macros generally, both subjects about which this author has been able to find few prior studies.⁸⁸ Image macros are a fertile ground for discourse analysis and offer an opportunity to expand the scholarship not only around Tumblr and stereotyping but also around how online communication works.

⁸⁶ Steven Petrow, "Gender-Neutral Pronouns: When 'They' Doesn't Identify as Either Male or Female," *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/gender-neutral-pronouns-when-they-doesnt-identify-as-either-male-or-female/2014/10/27/41965f5e-5ac0-11e4-b812-38518ae74c67_story.html.

⁸⁷ LGBT Resource Center, "Gender Pronouns," *University of Wisconsin Milwaukee*, accessed September 23, 2015, <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>.

⁸⁸ Tay, "Embracing LOLitics."

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to understand the ways in which the online content created around Honey Boo Boo supports, undermines, and interacts with the tropes of the white trash stereotype and to discover how online audiences construct meanings about the show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. A better understanding of the white trash stereotype and the online audience's use of that stereotype will offer insight into how these stereotypes are used in everyday discussion and how online content creators interact with reality television programming.

In Chapter 1, this study surveyed literature specifically about Honey Boo Boo and introduced intersectional theory and Tumblr. This chapter offers a literature review of several important fields of scholarship that this study will build upon and draw from: white trash stereotyping, reality television, online audiences, and critical television studies.

2.1 White Trash

Whiteness is a relatively new concept in the field of race studies. The seminal text in whiteness studies is David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness*, which focuses on the development of racism in the working classes in nineteenth century America to create cultural capital for working class men who were not black.⁸⁹ Roediger argues that

⁸⁹ David R Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London; New York: Verso, 2007).

whiteness is a cultural privilege granted to many different ethnic groups that sought to distance themselves from slaves and gain the privilege of whiteness; for example, Irish-Americans were once not considered white.⁹⁰ The concept of “white” as a racial identifier developed out of a desire to create distance between slave owners and slaves, and the concepts of whiteness and blackness kept those in the lower classes from uniting over economic interests.⁹¹

Before Roediger, however, black intellectuals had been discussing the problem of white privilege for many years.⁹² The central conceit in whiteness studies is that whiteness is not a skin color, but a social construction of cultural privilege that is afforded to certain groups of people. The concept of whiteness is constantly evolving; for example, many immigrant communities, such as the Irish, were once considered non-white, but are now generally considered white.⁹³ The field grew as scholars explored how the “imaginative construction of 'whiteness' had shaped American literature and American history.”⁹⁴

“White trash,” like the term “redneck,” is an epithet that has been historically used to delineate “good” white people and “bad” white people, usually along class lines. Like “redneck,” “white trash” is often applied to those who are rural or Southern, not just to those who are lower class. While some have reclaimed the term “redneck,” “white

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² David R Roediger, “Critical Studies of Whiteness, USA: Origins and Arguments,” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 98, no. December 2001 (2001): 72–98; hooks, *Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination*.

⁹³ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁹⁴ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Interrogating ‘Whiteness,’ Complicating ‘Blackness’: Remapping American Culture,” *American Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1995): 430.

trash” remains an insult – within *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, the characters often use the term “redneck” to describe themselves, but not “white trash.” Matt Wray, the preeminent scholar on the history of “white trash,” suggests the term originated from black slaves who referred to non-slaveholding whites by the term and quickly slaveholders adopted the term for the same purpose.⁹⁵ White trash is not simply a term denoting class, but also a “racial epithet that marks out certain whites as a breed apart.”⁹⁶

The difficulty of understanding whiteness is that, often, it is used culturally to signify not being a racial minority or occupying a place of racial privilege; white is an absence of being other, rather than a culture of “whiteness” unto itself.⁹⁷ Instead of having its own specific meaning, it has a meaning only in relationship to how it interacts with other races. Indeed, in intersectional studies, privilege often means being seen as culturally normal as compared to those who are abnormal and oppressed; white is culturally normal and privileged while black is culturally abnormal and oppressed. Within the term “white trash,” however, there is clear reference not only to “white” as a race but also to positive associations with the term rather than negative ones. In other words, “white” trash must be better than any other color of trash, but they are trash nonetheless. How does the term “trash” distort the power and privilege of whiteness? It is important to recognize the relationship between class itself and representation of class. As Jillian Sandell writes, “While the economic reality of class status is not interchangeable with representations of it, the discursive and social formations of class

⁹⁵ A. Newitz and Matt Wray, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (Routledge, 1996).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁷ Wray, *Not Quite White*.

identities are, nevertheless, related.”⁹⁸ Discourse around class is a key part of understanding class identity.

Being white trash is not simply a matter of socioeconomic status, though certainly poverty is part of it. White trash is also a moral term, so perhaps it is unsurprising that the representation of the women in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*—women at the edge of society—have drawn such strong condemnation from the media at large. The moral repugnance in the culture towards white trash is strong and deeply ingrained. According to Matt Wray, “In every period I examined, in every stigmatypical representation I analyzed, and in virtually every historical document I read, strong claims were made about the moral unworthiness of poor whites. [...] the passions evoked by disturbing images of ‘crackers’ and poor white trash sparked dramatic social action in the form of moral panics and symbolic crusades that led to changes in policies, laws, and institutional practices.”⁹⁹

This moral unworthiness is not only about poverty and work ethic, but also about sexuality and the threat of sexuality and bawdiness from the lower classes. The lower class threatens middle class ideas of propriety and must be condemned, lest the young men and women of the middle and upper class be drawn to the bodies of the poor; poor women’s offensive sexuality is why they breed young and perpetuate the welfare state and the cycle of poverty by having children out of wedlock to nameless fathers.¹⁰⁰ We see reference to this stereotype of hypersexual immorality in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* on

⁹⁸ Sandell, “Telling Stories of ‘Queer White Trash,’” 214.

⁹⁹ Wray, *Not Quite White*, 16–17.

¹⁰⁰ S. Cobb, “Mother of the Year: Kathy Hilton, Lynne Spears, Dina Lohan and Bad Celebrity Motherhood,” *Genders Online Journal* 48 (2008), <http://live.eprints.soton.ac.uk/79452/>.

several levels, made more powerful because it is a true story. June has had four children, two by the time she was 17, all with different fathers; she's not married to Sugar Bear, who lives with her and is Alana's father. She was also, at the age of 32, already a grandmother to newborn Kaitlyn, her 17-year-old daughter's first child. Kaitlyn's father is not in the picture. It is not only the sexuality that makes these bodies a threat to propriety; it is also their weight and their base body functions. Skeggs argues that white working-class women violate middle and upper class norms of propriety, which is "symbolically figured through the excess of the grotesque, weeping, leaking, excreting bodies of working-class women."¹⁰¹

Not only does the show portray an unmarried woman with four children from different men, but also it repeatedly portrays support for gay people. There is no condemnation within the show of either the "gay" pig or Alana's gay uncle. If there was no judgment, this representation would read as liberal, but the show does not shy away from playing up stereotypes – Uncle Poodle doing cartwheels and speaking with a lisp, for example – and makes it clear that these behaviors are objects of ridicule through music cues and cuts to reaction shots. Adding to the show's implications of sexual immorality is the specter of incest and inbreeding that often accompanies portrayals of those in the Deep South,¹⁰² thanks to newborn Kaitlyn's deformity – an extra thumb.

Those designated "white trash" blur the stereotypical differences between black and white social lines by being viewed as "lazy, licentious and prone to violence," traits

¹⁰¹ Beverley Skeggs, "The Making of Class and Gender through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation," *Sociology* 39, no. 5 (December 1, 2005): 968, doi:10.1177/0038038505058381.

¹⁰² Newitz and Wray, "What Is 'White Trash'?"

traditionally stereotyped to black people.¹⁰³ The term, then, creates “social distance and insist[s] upon a contempt-laden social divide, particularly (though not exclusively) between whites,” in an attempt to racially segregate the white trash from the “real” white people.¹⁰⁴ Scholars like Lockley point to the cooperation between black slaves and white trash in history as part of the need to mark white trash out as race traitors or a separate kind of white.¹⁰⁵ Media scholars point to miscegenation and mixed-race children as a marker of white trash on daytime television.¹⁰⁶ As Constance Penley writes, “A Southern white child is required to learn that white trash folks are the lowest of the low because socially and economically they have sunk so far that they might as well be black.”¹⁰⁷

The show itself is not racially diverse at all. The family interacts entirely with other white working-class, poor, and “redneck” people. The “redneck games” are white, the auctions for cheap food are white, and the majority of pageant participants are white. If urban poverty is the purview of the black poor, then rural poverty is the purview of the white poor, and that is clear in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.

Additionally, white trash is often signified by an appropriation of black culture – most familiarly in country music and Elvis, where we see white trash co-opting black music and making it white. One of the ways society culturally marks white trash is by associating them with black culture. In *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, this is seen most predominantly in the show’s focus on funny “catchphrases” from Alana, most of which

¹⁰³ John Hartigan, “Name Calling: Objectifying ‘poor Whites’ and ‘white Trash’ in Detroit,” *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, 1997, 42.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰⁵ T. J. Lockley, “Partners in Crime: African Americans and Non-Slaveholding Whites in Antebellum Georgia,” *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, 1997, 57–72.

¹⁰⁶ Squire, “White Trash Pride and the Exemplary Black Citizen.”

¹⁰⁷ C. Penley, “Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn,” *Pornography: Film and Culture*, 2006, 90.

are “informed by racist stereotypes of black women.”¹⁰⁸ The title of the show itself is thus informed, appropriating the stereotypical language of black women in the term “honey boo boo.”¹⁰⁹

There are other parallels in the treatment of black people and white trash in this country. The history of eugenics and social movements aimed at white trash mirrors in many ways the history of eugenics and social movements aimed at blacks.¹¹⁰ Forced sterilization was not unknown and constant attempts by the middle classes to reform the badly behaved, impure young white women flourished over the course of U.S. history.¹¹¹

As being openly racist in the United States became more taboo, the need arose for a safe stereotype not aimed at a race. This measurement of whiteness against white trash is partially a function of needing someone to be “better” than. If, in a post-racial society, it is not acceptable to “be better” than blacks, then who can “be better” than? As John Waters, a white trash film auteur, says, white trash is “the last racist thing you can say and get away with.”¹¹² Annalee Newitz explains that “whites in poverty make a perfect target for displaced white racist aggression, for one can denigrate them but avoid feeling like or even being called ‘racist.’”¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Michelle Dean, “Here Comes the Hillbilly, Again,” *Slate*, August 24, 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2012/08/here_comes_honey_boo_boo_and_the_history_of_the_hillbilly_in_america_.html.

¹⁰⁹ Helena Andrews, “Honey Boo Boo Child and Black Stereotypes,” *The Root*, August 15, 2012, http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2012/08/honey_boo_boo_child_and_black_stereotypes.html.

¹¹⁰ Wray, *Not Quite White*, 65–95.

¹¹¹ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Temple University Press, 1986), 168.

¹¹² Tad Friend, “Hot White Trash,” *New York Magazine*, August 22, 1994, 24.

¹¹³ A. Newitz, “White Savagery and Humiliation, or a New Racial Consciousness in the Media,” *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, 1997, 152.

Economically, calling someone white trash is “a way to pinion someone to his roots, to deny him upward mobility” and to keep the lesser subjugated in the capitalist system.¹¹⁴ The term functions in two ways: first, to confirm that “those who are mature, and hence deserving, always achieve upper or middle-class status,” and second, to suggest that “upper- or middle-class people in the First World should ‘lead’ their urban and rural poor.”¹¹⁵ To be white trash is to be disqualified from the American dream, or worse, to refuse to participate and believe in the myth. In other words, to be poor is a choice made by the poor white trash, not because they are victims of social systems and circumstances.

White trash are also portrayed as fundamentally lazy and as people who do not add anything to the culture; in this formulation, they are not people who do work, they are people who live off of and consume the work of others.¹¹⁶ This ties into the trope of the laziness of poor white trash as the cause of their fatness.¹¹⁷ Tropes of consumerism and materialism that are frequently assigned to women of all classes are often assigned to white trash men. As Gael Sweeney puts it when discussing the culture around Elvis, “White Trash is separated from the working class by their lack of connection with work or production,” and the “split between the producing man and the consuming female canonized in middle-class culture collapses in White Trash: both women and men love to

¹¹⁴ Friend, “Hot White Trash,” 26.

¹¹⁵ Newitz, “White Savagery and Humiliation, or a New Racial Consciousness in the Media,” 152.

¹¹⁶ Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine, “Regulating the Abject: The TV Make-over as Site of Neo-Liberal Reinvention toward Bourgeois Femininity,” *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 3 (2008): 228.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

shop, buy, dress, and display.”¹¹⁸ In *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, we see this consumerism in June’s love of couponing and pageantry; even Sugar Bear is strongly invested in the pageant culture. June does not work, but instead spends her time figuring out how to buy more stuff – more food, more dresses, more lessons for Alana.

The show debuted at a time when the economic disparities in the United States have never been greater, a time known as the “Great Divergence,” when income disparity means a shrinking middle class and a growing lower class.¹¹⁹ When there is such a large underclass, white people in power want to distance themselves from the poor whites and “other” them. As Michelle Dean commented in *Slate*, “These shows reassure us that our struggle is worth it, all economic evidence to the contrary—if only because *we would never* belly-flop into the mud on cable television. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* casts this socio-economic divide in especially sharp relief, since the show is rooted partly in beauty pageant culture, which, in its own idiosyncratic way, indulges the American belief that you can work and spend your way to greatness.”¹²⁰

2.2 White Trash Television

The history of white trash in the media begins with the work of the southern gothic writers of the early twentieth century, such as William Faulkner. The Southern gothic tradition continued throughout the century. In this tradition, the poor are often presented as tragic and pitiable, as in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and

¹¹⁸ G. Sweeney, “The King of White Trash Culture: Elvis Presley and the Aesthetics of Excess,” *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, 1997, 250.

¹¹⁹ Benjamin M. Friedman, “‘The Great Divergence,’ by Timothy Noah,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 2012, sec. Books / Sunday Book Review, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/27/books/review/the-great-divergence-by-timothy-noah.html>.

¹²⁰ Dean, “Here Comes the Hillbilly, Again.”

later in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), but they are almost always presented as human and victims of unjust social structures and systems. In literature, white trash life is "characterized by violence, poverty, hardship, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness."¹²¹ Outside of literature, white trash people are often presented as subhuman poor who deserve their congenital fate of poverty. The mass media which treats white trash as object lessons in how not to live life and what bad mothering looks like; the uncivilized lives white trash lead are simply entertainment. Television contrasts the upright middle classes with working class "white trash, buffoons, bigots, and snobs."¹²²

In film, the representation is not generally comedic, but often the source of deep horror. Films like *Deliverance*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, and *Kalifornia* all use white trash as the threatening other. In these films, being poor and white means that you are dangerous, likely to commit rape or murder, and almost certainly inbred and savage to the point of being sub-human. These stereotypes suggest that white trash "don't deserve the benefits of social welfare, sympathy, or national power," and the films thus convey "images and narratives about poor whites in order to provide something against which 'civilized' whites can measure themselves."¹²³

The white trash stereotype on television goes back to the original "redneckaissance" in the 1960s, with *The Real McCoys* on ABC followed by the rural explosion on CBS with *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*,

¹²¹ Sandell, "Telling Stories of 'Queer White Trash,'" 213.

¹²² Diana Elizabeth Kendall, *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 174.

¹²³ Newitz, "White Savagery and Humiliation, or a New Racial Consciousness in the Media," 136.

and their spin-offs. Just as contemporary television shows depend on stereotypes of the rural South, so did these. The discourse around these shows was also often about how the shows represented the cultural “end of the world,” with occasional defenses from those who saw the shows as basically harmless.¹²⁴ One issue that *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* explores, which these earlier shows focusing on the southern rural stereotype did not, is the issue of sexuality and gayness. These earlier shows did not deal as frankly with issues of teenage pregnancy, unmarried cohabitation, and gayness as does *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*; daytime television is the traditional location of such topics.

There is a history of poor and working class people on television, including shows from the 1970s, like *Good Times*, and the 1990s, like *Roseanne*, but most characters on television are portrayed as wealthy, even on shows that deal with “rednecks” or “hillbillies.” The characters in *Green Acres*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and *Dukes of Hazzard* may have been from or in the rural south, but they were by no means impoverished; this is true of most of the other primetime reality television shows that deal with “rednecks.” Shows like *Married with Children* or *The Jeff Foxworthy Show* have white, somewhat trashy characters, but they are suburban and solidly middle class, in many ways indistinguishable from other television families except for their accents.

The only places one regularly sees white trash depictions are in shows that feature a different group of people every week, usually in daytime television. Shows like *Maury*, *Jerry Springer*, *Ricky Lake*, and *Geraldo* often feature guests from marginalized groups

¹²⁴ Jack Gould, “TV: ‘Beverly Hillbillies’; C.B.S. Situation Comedy Is Steeped in Gingham, Drawl and Twanging Guitar,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 1962, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=FA0714F6345A127B93C0A9178AD95F468685F9>.

on their shows.¹²⁵ Daytime television has long been home to marginalized groups – women, minorities, and the lower classes often find more content aimed at and about them on daytime television than in primetime. In addition, historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups are more likely to be home watching television during the day.

Recently, however, thanks to the rise of digital production, reality television, and the proliferation of channels, the economics of television production have changed drastically, allowing white trash characters and storylines formerly relegated to daytime television to emerge into the light of primetime.¹²⁶

2.3 Reality Television

To discuss reality television, it is necessary to define it, a task that turns out to be surprisingly difficult. In such discussions, one often finds references to Justice Potter Stewart’s famous line, “I know it when I see it,” because it is so difficult to come up with a precise definition that covers all programming conventionally thought to be reality television. Scholars who have made an attempt do not always agree. Reiss and Wiltz, in defining the genre, emphasize the fact that reality television uses non-actors or “ordinary” people for the main characters and claim that this is the primary defining characteristic of reality television.¹²⁷ Kilborn argues that the genre is defined by the show claiming “the authenticity of the real life events depicted” and extracting “the maximum entertainment

¹²⁵ Squire, “White Trash Pride and the Exemplary Black Citizen.”

¹²⁶ Chad Raphael, “The Political Economic Origins of Reali-TV,” in *In S. Murray and L. Ouellette (Eds.) Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 119–36.

¹²⁷ “Why People Watch Reality TV.”

potential from the materials.”¹²⁸ Bente and Feist, who call the genre “affect television,” focus on public displays of intimate, private moments of “non-prominent people.”¹²⁹ Penzhorn and Pitout identify four main conventions that define the genre: “focus on ordinary people, voyeurism, audience participation, and the attempt to simulate real life.”¹³⁰

One might expect the industry itself to have a more precise definition, but the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC) offers only a curt and semi-accurate description of the genre: “Reality is a misnomer, as this type of show has a predetermined storyline.”¹³¹ While some reality shows are partially scripted beforehand, many reality shows are written using footage itself as the guide to write the show after it has been shot. For this reason, the LAEDC statement seems like a bad-natured barb aimed at the universally disliked genre. One of the more precise definitions comes courtesy of a Virginia tax code, which delineates reality, fiction, and news (among other genres) programming to determine which tax breaks a production might be eligible for: “Reality Television Production means a television production depicting real events

¹²⁸ “‘How Real Can You Get?’: Recent Developments in ‘Reality’ Television,” *European Journal of Communication* 9, no. 4 (December 1, 1994): 425, doi:10.1177/0267323194009004003.

¹²⁹ Gary Bente and Ansgar Feist, “Affect-Talk and Its Kin,” in *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of Its Appeal* (Psychology Press, 2000), 107–28.

¹³⁰ Heidi Penzhorn and Magriert Pitout, “A Critical-Historical Genre Analysis of Reality Television,” *Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research* 33, no. 1 (2007): 62, doi:10.1080/02500160701398995.

¹³¹ Jack Kyser et al., “Entertainment & the Media in Los Angeles” (LAEDC Economics, 2010), 4.

through actual footage which presents persons engaged in seemingly unscripted situations; no fictional characters are created.”¹³²

Despite its popularity, the public viewing audience claims a strong dislike for the genre.¹³³ This extreme distaste cannot be overstated, as even people who defend the genre tend to say negative things about it. Reality television is “mind-numbing, deceitful, and simplistic”;¹³⁴ it is “commercial, sensational, popular, entertaining, and potentially exploitative and/or manipulative”;¹³⁵ it “embodies the worst kind of common denominator”;¹³⁶ and “taken at face value, not much can be learned from reality television.”¹³⁷ Many viewers deny watching shows that they would not want to be associated with or dismiss it as a “guilty pleasure.” We are embarrassed by reality television and we feel that there is nothing respectable about it, with a few exceptions for shows that sell themselves as different from the exploitative reality shows that represent the norm.¹³⁸

¹³² Virginia Department of Taxation, “Guidelines for the Virginia Motion Picture Production Tax Credit” (Virginia Department of Taxation, September 9, 2011).

¹³³ Robin L. Nabi et al., “Emotional and Cognitive Predictors of the Enjoyment of Reality-Based and Fictional Television Programming: An Elaboration of the Uses and Gratifications Perspective,” *Media Psychology* 8 (November 2006): 421–47, doi:10.1207/s1532785xmep0804_5.

¹³⁴ Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray, “Introduction,” in *In S. Murray and L. Ouellette (Eds.) Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 6.

¹³⁵ Susan Murray, “‘I Think We Need a New Name for It’: The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV,” in *In S. Murray and L. Ouellette (Eds.) Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 43.

¹³⁶ Kilborn, “‘How Real Can You Get?,” 427.

¹³⁷ David R. Dreyer, “Learning from Popular Culture: The ‘Politics’ of Competitive Reality Television Programs,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 02 (2011): 409–13, doi:10.1017/S1049096511000254.

¹³⁸ Michael L. Wayne, “Guilty Pleasures and Cultural Legitimation: Exploring High-Status Reality TV in the Postnetwork Era,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 5 (October 19, 2015): 990–1009, doi:10.1111/jpcu.12337.

There is, of course, plenty of valid criticism to be made of reality television as an approach to storytelling and as an industry. Reality television productions do not hire as many people or support as large an industry as narrative “fictional” production does.¹³⁹ It does not necessarily pay well or offer benefits, and most people working on a reality television program will not get overtime regardless of the long hours worked.¹⁴⁰ Despite the fact that 82% of Americans think that reality television is scripted,¹⁴¹ production companies and executives refuse to give writers credit as such, which means that they cannot join the guild, which would offer job protections. This is not necessarily precipitated by financial need on the part of the production companies; because production is so cheap and profits from commercials so high, even unsuccessful reality television programming is massively profitable.¹⁴²

According to Ouellette and Murray, “reality TV supplies a multilayered viewing experience that hinges on culturally and politically complex notions of what is real and what is not.”¹⁴³ The entire idea of a part narrative, part real program is complicated because the viewer is constantly judging which parts are real and which are not. In addition to this mental activity, many reality programs encourage or require the audience to participate in the creation and outcomes of the show by voting on outcomes, auditioning, or submitting clips of their own. Reality television in many ways presages the rise of individuals as online content-creators; it is a large element of the evolving

¹³⁹ Kyser et al., “Entertainment & the Media in Los Angeles,” 4.

¹⁴⁰ WGA, “Harsh Reality: Working Conditions for Reality TV Writers” (WGAW, 2007).

¹⁴¹ Tania Dworjan, “Reality TV Statistics,” *LovetoKnow*, 2011, http://reality-tv.lovetoknow.com/Reality_TV_Statistics.

¹⁴² Gary Levin, “‘Simple Economics’: More Reality TV,” *USA Today*, May 9, 2007, http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2007-05-07-reality-TV_N.htm.

¹⁴³ Ouellette and Murray, “Introduction,” 6.

status of viewer as content creator.¹⁴⁴ As Kjus has put it, the “media landscape is changing at present due to the forces of convergence, digitalization, deregulation and globalization,” and reality television is symptomatic of those changes.¹⁴⁵

The current state of the television and film industry is seen in the rise of reality television. The 1988 Writers Guild of America Strike led to the development of early examples of the genre like *Cops* and *The Real World* because shows like this could be made quickly, were extremely cheap to produce, and did not require the involvement of any writers.¹⁴⁶ Likewise, threats of strikes throughout the late 1990s and 2000s cemented the place of reality television in broadcast and cable programming. Many point to the success of *Survivor* as the catalyst for the rise of reality television, but the economic and labor state of the industry is what allowed *Survivor* to be made in the first place.

Nowhere is the influence of globalization in the industry more apparent than in reality television. International companies sell the format of reality television shows to one another because it is easy to replicate the same formula in other countries with similar cultures. Countries still import television produced in the US, but they now have

¹⁴⁴ Rachel E Dubrofsky, “Surveillance on Reality Television and Facebook: From Authenticity to Flowing Data,” *Communication Theory* 21, no. 2 (May 1, 2011): 111–29, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2011.01378.x; Michael A Stefanone and Derek Lackaff, “Reality Television as a Model for Online Behavior: Blogging, Photo, and Video Sharing,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14, no. 4 (July 1, 2009): 964–87, doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01477.x; Michael A. Stefanone, Derek Lackaff, and Devan Rosen, “The Relationship between Traditional Mass Media and ‘Social Media’: Reality Television as a Model for Social Network Site Behavior,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 54 (August 17, 2010): 508–25, doi:10.1080/08838151.2010.498851; J. Wilkinson, S. McClung, and V. Sherring, *The Converged Audience* (Understanding Media Convergence. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁴⁵ Yngvar Kjus, “Everyone Needs Idols,” *European Journal of Communication* 24, no. 3 (2009): 287–304, doi:10.1177/0267323109336758.

¹⁴⁶ Murray, “‘I Think We Need a New Name for It’: The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV,” 7; Raphael, “The Political Economic Origins of Reali-TV,” 125.

the ability to cheaply create a show based on a successful format that can also be made culturally specific.¹⁴⁷ The US, of course, has long taken television from the UK and remade it for American audiences, e.g., *All in the Family* and *The Office*, but it is now much cheaper and easier to buy programs whose formats have a proven ability to sell. Shows that Americans have a tendency to think of as American are not necessarily from the US: *Big Brother* originated from Endemol in the Netherlands, *American Idol* comes from Fremantle Media in the UK, and *Survivor* comes from Castaway, also in the UK.¹⁴⁸

Reality television is also usually on the cutting edge of integrating new media and audience participation as part of the programming. Reality television exploits telephone, Internet, SMS text messaging, ringtones, and social network sites like Twitter and Facebook by encouraging audiences to vote for favorites or to get extra content outside of the program.¹⁴⁹

Thanks to the large amount of production and the lack of union involvement, reality television is the easiest part of the film and television industry in which to find jobs as a recent college graduate. It is one of the only places to work before having earned enough hours to join a union. The fact is that most people in “film” make “television,”¹⁵⁰ and almost half of television production in Los Angeles is reality

¹⁴⁷ Ted Madger, “The End of TV 101: Reality Programs, Formats, and the New Business of Television,” in *In S. Murray and L. Ouellette (Eds.) Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 137–56.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁵⁰ John Thornton Caldwell, “Welcome to the Viral Future of Cinema (Television),” *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (2005): 90–97.

television.¹⁵¹ As recently as the third quarter of 2011, reality television production was up 30.4% and over 100 new reality shows began production that summer.¹⁵²

Like much reality television, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is cheap to produce. Authentic Entertainment, the show's production company, sends a small television crew to McIntyre to follow the family around for several months. The crew sends the footage to Los Angeles, where it is logged and transcribed, and editors begin editing while shooting is still ongoing. The production encourages the family to go to special events, like the Redneck Olympics and small pageants to manufacture drama, but otherwise the filmmakers follow the family in more or less their normal lives. They film frequent "On the Fly" interviews with cast members, so that they will have voice over to explain the meaning of actions. The producers also help guide the interviews with the cast members to help construct the show's narrative structure.¹⁵³

Also relevant to this study of Honey Boo Boo is reality television's use of stereotypes that have fallen out of favor in fictional narrative television, partly because constructing characters from real people is difficult and stereotype construction is easy.¹⁵⁴ *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is also not the only show that depends heavily on the redneck stereotypes – *Duck Dynasty*, *Hillbilly Handfishin'*, *Moonshiners*, and *Myrtle Manor* all came out within a year of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s premiere. There was

¹⁵¹ WGA, "Harsh Reality: Working Conditions for Reality TV Writers."

¹⁵² James Thompson, "On-Location Filming Rises in L.A.," *P3 Update*, 2011, <http://www.p3update.com/news/location-news/1245-on-location-filming-rises-in-la>.

¹⁵³ Jennifer L. Pozner, *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV* (Seal Press, 2010).

¹⁵⁴ Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz, *Television Studies* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2012).

even an attempt several years ago to do a “real life version” of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, aptly titled *The REAL Beverly Hillbillies*, but it never came to be.¹⁵⁵

Reality television has been the focus of much scholarship, particularly around issues of authenticity, performance, and what “uses and gratifications” audiences get from watching such programming. The perception of the authenticity of the show varies by show and the reason people watch.¹⁵⁶ The third person effect is also strong; individuals generally believe that other people will be more influenced by the content than they are themselves.¹⁵⁷ Audiences get many gratifications from reality television, including gratifications that include schadenfreude and feeling superior to those onscreen, parasocial interaction (one-sided interpersonal relationships), and voyeurism.¹⁵⁸ A key point for this study is that “the interactive nature of Reality TV programming may contribute to the strong sense of personal identification that many viewers experience,”

¹⁵⁵ Angela Cooke-Jackson and Elizabeth K. Hansen, “Appalachian Culture and Reality TV: The Ethical Dilemma of Stereotyping Others,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 23, no. 3 (2008): 183–200.

¹⁵⁶ Alice Hall, “Perceptions of the Authenticity of Reality Programs and Their Relationships to Audience Involvement, Enjoyment, and Perceived Learning,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53, no. 4 (2009): 515–31, doi:10.1080/08838150903310468; Zizi Papacharissi and Andrew L. Mendelson, “An Exploratory Study of Reality Appeal: Uses and Gratifications of Reality TV Shows,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 51, no. 2 (2007): 355–70.

¹⁵⁷ Ron Leone, Wendy Chapman Peek, and Kimberly L. Bissell, “Reality Television and Third-Person Perception,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 50, no. 2 (2006): 253–69, doi:10.1207/s15506878jobem5002_5.

¹⁵⁸ Nabi et al., “Emotional and Cognitive Predictors of the Enjoyment of Reality-Based and Fictional Television Programming”; Robin L. Nabi et al., “Reality-Based Television Programming and the Psychology of Its Appeal,” *Media Psychology* 5 (November 2003): 303–30, doi:10.1207/S1532785XMEP0504_01; Lemi Baruh, “Mediated Voyeurism and the Guilty Pleasure of Consuming Reality Television,” *Media Psychology* 13 (August 31, 2010): 201–21, doi:10.1080/15213269.2010.502871; Lemi Baruh, “Publicized Intimacies on Reality Television: An Analysis of Voyeuristic Content and Its Contribution to the Appeal of Reality Programming,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53 (May 27, 2009): 190–210, doi:10.1080/08838150902907678; Pozner, *Reality Bites Back*.

making a reality show like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* a good site of investigation for issues of identity and stereotypes.¹⁵⁹

Because reality television “brings to the fore issues of representation and authenticity,” it has been a site of feminist investigation around issues of gender, racial, and queer representation.¹⁶⁰ Reality television provides fertile ground for studying stereotypes because it offers sexist, racist, classist, and highly stereotyped characterizations.¹⁶¹ According to May Friedman in her analysis of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, reality television can be “a means of exposing dominant discourses more readily than a presentation of any version of reality.”¹⁶² Examinations of the content have included feminist scholars analyzing stereotypes of black people; they have found, for example, that black people cast in such shows are frequently relegated to performing racist caricatures.¹⁶³ Likewise, there has been examination of the representation of gender

¹⁵⁹ Samuel Ebersole and Robert Woods, “Motivations for Viewing Reality Television: A Uses and Gratifications Analysis,” *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal* 23, no. 1 (2007): 23.

¹⁶⁰ Friedman, “Here Comes a Lot of Judgment,” 78.

¹⁶¹ Katrina E. Bell-Jordan, “Black. White. and a Survivor of The Real World: Constructions of Race on Reality TV,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 4 (2008): 353–72; Friedman, “Here Comes a Lot of Judgment”; Lee and Moscovitz, “The ‘Rich Bitch’ Class and Gender on the Real Housewives of New York City”; Debra C. Smith, “Critiquing Reality-Based Televisual Black Fatherhood: A Critical Analysis of Run’s House and Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 4 (2008): 393–412; Hamilton Carroll, “Men’s Soaps: Automotive Television Programming and Contemporary Working-Class Masculinities,” *Television & New Media*, 2008, <http://tvn.sagepub.com/content/early/2008/03/18/1527476408315495.short>; Heather Hendershot, “Belabored Reality: Making It Work on The Simple Life and Project Runway,” *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, 2009, 243–59; Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Antoine Hardy, “Performing Race in Flavor of Love and the Bachelor,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 4 (2008): 373–92.

¹⁶² Friedman, “Here Comes a Lot of Judgment,” 79.

¹⁶³ Bell-Jordan, “Black. White. and a Survivor of the Real World”; Robin M. Boylorn, “As Seen On TV: An Autoethnographic Reflection on Race and Reality Television,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 4 (2008): 413–33,

and performance of sexuality; these studies have often focused on the beauty standards in makeover shows.¹⁶⁴ Examinations of class have explored reality shows' dependency on people of lower socioeconomic status being willing not only to participate but also to undergo "improvement" from their lower class standards of dress or behavior at the hands of the show.¹⁶⁵ *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is at the intersection of stereotypes about race, class, and gender.

2.4 The Online Audience

To understand the online discourses that will be analyzed in this study, it is necessary to understand the environment in which they are created. Reality television audience members who are online not only consume television content but also act as online content creators. Online audience members act as reviewers, watchers, and remixers of mainstream content. Social media gives audience members the ability to "create their own content, distribute it online, and comment."¹⁶⁶ Online participants

doi:10.1080/15295030802327758; Tia Tyree, "African American Stereotypes in Reality Television," *Howard Journal of Communications* 22, no. 4 (2011): 394–413, doi:10.1080/10646175.2011.617217.

¹⁶⁴ Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer, "'I Just Want to Be Me Again!' Beauty Pageants, Reality Television and Post-Feminism," *Feminist Theory* 7, no. 2 (August 1, 2006): 255–72, doi:10.1177/1464700106064423.

¹⁶⁵ Beverley Skeggs, "The Moral Economy of Person Production: The Class Relations of Self-Performance on 'reality' Television," *The Sociological Review* 57, no. 4 (November 1, 2009): 626–44, doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.01865.x; Ringrose and Walkerdine, "Regulating the Abject."

¹⁶⁶ Gary Hanson et al., "The 2008 Presidential Campaign: Political Cynicism in the Age of Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube," *Mass Communication and Society* 13, no. 5 (2010): 32, doi:10.1080/15205436.2010.513470.

“think of themselves as producers of media, sharing things for the love of it.”¹⁶⁷ Media making is an important and meaningful part of social networking.¹⁶⁸

These phenomena have significant implications for the relationship between the audience and mass media. Digital media allows the audience to be producers, not simply consumers.¹⁶⁹ The tools to participate are cheap and easy to use, allowing a large cross-section of participants not only to comment but also to develop image macros and memes. Their motivation is more in creating a sense of connectedness than in earning money.¹⁷⁰ The Internet then creates spaces for people based on “affinities rather than localities,” providing spaces for people interested in a topic to interact with one another regardless of geography.¹⁷¹

One of the ways Internet communities participate in online spaces is through the creation and sharing of “image macros” and “memes.” The term meme was first introduced to the field of biology by Richard Dawkins, who used it to explain the genetic

¹⁶⁷ Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), 206.

¹⁶⁸ Lee Rainie, “Networked Learners,” 2009, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Presentations/2009/52-Networked-Learners.aspx>.

¹⁶⁹ Mark Poster, *Information Please: Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 244; Jeffrey Wilkinson, Steven McClung, and Vasha Sherring, “The Converged Audience: Receivers-Senders and Content Creators,” in *Understanding Media Convergence*, ed. August E. Grant and Jeffrey Wilkinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 64–84.

¹⁷⁰ Henry Jenkins, “Sharing Notes about Collective Intelligence,” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, February 4, 2008, http://henryjenkins.org/2008/02/last_week_my_travels_took.html; Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: How Technology Makes Consumers into Collaborators* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

¹⁷¹ Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (NYU Press, 2006).

replication of behavioral rather than physical traits.¹⁷² A meme is defined by Harrison and Hirst as “a thought or idea that spreads throughout society in an almost unconscious way” and “the ideas in our head that help us make sense of the world – that carries a particular set of social attitudes and directions about how we might think about an object, event, or social custom.”¹⁷³

The genetic comparison continues to be relevant in the ways that these memes are spread – by going viral. Viral content spreads quickly through the cultural DNA as it is slightly altered by successive users to include new memes.¹⁷⁴ A piece of content that goes viral is not a meme, but rather the way that content replicates itself and is included, expanded upon, and remixed is the meme.¹⁷⁵ Remixing in particular is key to memetic online activity, combining different products together to create new meaning.¹⁷⁶

2.5 Reality Television and Social Media

New media, Web 2.0, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube—these are the new frontiers of media research. Social network research has become a large part of what media studies is focusing on because “SNS [social network site] activities do not carry the social stigma associated with watching RTV [reality television].”¹⁷⁷ Havens argues that “TV includes

¹⁷² Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁷³ Martin Hirst and John Harrison, *Communication and New Media: From Broadcast to Narrowcast* (South Melbourne, Vic.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 22.

¹⁷⁴ Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus!: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1996).

¹⁷⁵ Jenkins, “If It Doesn’t Spread, It’s Dead (Part One): Media Viruses and Memes.”

¹⁷⁶ Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, *A New Literacies Sampler* (Peter Lang, 2007).

¹⁷⁷ Dubrofsky, “Surveillance on Reality Television and Facebook,” 115.

an emphasis on the continuities among new media and older media,” and nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the phenomenon of reality television.¹⁷⁸

While many studies of reality television have focused on voyeurism as the key feature of its appeal,¹⁷⁹ many others focus on the importance of viewer participation in content creation and the connection between social media use and watching reality television.¹⁸⁰ Dubrofsky observes that use of Facebook and reality television for personal sharing of oneself have risen at the same time, but Stefanone goes further and argues that reality television has served as the model for SNS behavior, particularly within the context of non-directed self disclosure.¹⁸¹

According to Stefanone, over half of all Internet-using teens are “content creators,” a proportion that has probably gone up, but the surprising thing he found was the connection between watching reality television and using social networking sites.¹⁸² The more reality television people watched, the more online content they created and the

¹⁷⁸ Timothy Havens, “Teaching the Lone Television Studies Graduate Seminar,” *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 4 (2011): 172–77.

¹⁷⁹ Baruh, “Publicized Intimacies on Reality Television”; Baruh, “Mediated Voyeurism and the Guilty Pleasure of Consuming Reality Television”; Nabi et al., “Reality-Based Television Programming and the Psychology of Its Appeal”; Nabi et al., “Emotional and Cognitive Predictors of the Enjoyment of Reality-Based and Fictional Television Programming.”

¹⁸⁰ Dubrofsky, “Surveillance on Reality Television and Facebook”; Kilborn, “How Real Can You Get?”; Kjus, “Everyone Needs Idols”; Anthony Patino, Veltichka D. Kaltcheva, and Michael F. Smith, “The Appeal of Reality Television for Teen and Pre-Teen Audiences: The Power of ‘Connectedness’ and Psycho-Demographics,” *Journal of Advertising Research* 51, no. 1 (2011): 288–97, doi:10.2501; Stefanone and Lackaff, “Reality Television as a Model for Online Behavior”; Stefanone, Lackaff, and Rosen, “The Relationship between Traditional Mass Media and ‘Social Media.’”

¹⁸¹ “Reality Television as a Model for Online Behavior,” 965.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

more time they spent on social networking sites.¹⁸³ Audiences see themselves not only as consumers of media but also as producers of media because “RTV and Web 2.0 set the stage for a major shift in the way individuals perceive their role in the contemporary media environment.”¹⁸⁴

There is a growing body of research about the way reality television and new media interact, and it is interesting to note that both media forms surged in popularity at the same time. Dubrofsky argues that this is because both reflect a new cultural value of being observed by other people, while Stefanone argues that reality television modeled the behavior that led to the rise of social media. Both agree, however, that there is a connection between social media behavior and the popularity of reality television.¹⁸⁵

2.6 Critical Television Studies

Critical television studies is an approach to understanding television that is part theory and part methodology. Television studies focuses on the interaction between the content of the program, audience reception, and the structure of the television industry and examines how they collectively participate in the creation of ideology, dominance, and power.¹⁸⁶ The fundamental assumption is that television both reflects culture and helps to shape and perpetuate it.

Critical television studies emerged out of two different fields – film theory and early communications research. While film theory focused on the text, communications

¹⁸³ Stefanone, Lackaff, and Rosen, “The Relationship between Traditional Mass Media and ‘Social Media,’” 508.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 509.

¹⁸⁵ Dubrofsky, “Surveillance on Reality Television and Facebook”; Stefanone, Lackaff, and Rosen, “The Relationship between Traditional Mass Media and ‘Social Media.’”

¹⁸⁶ Gray and Lotz, *Television Studies*.

studies was interested primarily in audience and media effects. Much of the early research on television was driven by a desire to prove that television was bad for audiences; television was seen as an assault on high culture and something that hurt viewers.¹⁸⁷

The Frankfurt School and Marxism influenced film theory heavily. Ferdinand de Saussure, also an important figure in critical discourse analysis, was a linguist interested in the ways language and words are symbols; he introduced the concept of words as signs or signifiers that only had meaning because they referenced something signified.¹⁸⁸

Roland Barthes, a key figure in early film criticism, whose work in *Mythologies* and elsewhere established semiotics as an important field, expanded upon his work.¹⁸⁹

Barthes was also interested in symbols and the levels at which they signified, but he expanded the focus of semiotics to the everyday, to hierarchies of power, and to how ideology was expressed through symbols.¹⁹⁰ De Saussure connected words and signs to what they were signifying, but Barthes took the first level that was signified and argued there were further cultural second-order signs. Expanding upon this, Michel Foucault argued that discourses systematically created the objects they were talking about, and Jürgen Habermas argued that language was a medium of domination and power.¹⁹¹

Clifford Geertz contributed to the growth of critical theory with the development of

¹⁸⁷ John Hartley, *Uses of Television* (Routledge, 1999).

¹⁸⁸ Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1995), 57.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of the Narrative* (University of Birmingham (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies), 1966); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Macmillan, 1972); Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (Macmillan, 1977).

¹⁹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, vol. 2 (Beacon press, 1985).

ethnographic research and symbolic anthropology; he proposed that to understand a culture it was also necessary to understand its web of symbols and their meanings.¹⁹²

In the 1960s, the Centre for Contemporary Critical Studies (CCCS) was formed in the United Kingdom as a pioneering program in the newly created field of cultural studies. Originally led by Richard Hoggart, an English professor at the University of Birmingham, CCCS was strongly influenced by French semiotics and the critical theory being developed by people like Barthes and Foucault.¹⁹³ Critical studies was driven by a focus on three things: emotional/intellectual distance to the data, an openly political stance, and self-reflection on the part of the researcher.¹⁹⁴ Stuart Hall took over CCCS in the late 60s, and he focused on how a program or text was both encoded (by the producers and industry) and decoded (by the audience). Hall analyzed the importance of different kinds of decoding on the part of the audience, who might find dominant narratives, oppositional narratives, or negotiated narratives.¹⁹⁵

It was this groundwork laid in the late 1960s and early 1970s that allowed the first critical television studies works to be published. Newcomb and Williams both released books in the mid-70s of television criticism, followed by the seminal work by Fiske and Hartley in 1978, *Reading Television*.¹⁹⁶ Television studies also grew with studies of gender and race, so gender analysis and issues of representation were some of the earliest and most important works in the field. Julie D'Acci's work on the television crime drama *Cagney and Lacey* and its representation of women is one of the most important works in

¹⁹² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973).

¹⁹³ Gray and Lotz, *Television Studies*.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (Methuen, 1978).

television studies, partially because of how thoroughly she managed to analyze the industry, the show, and the audience response through the lens of gender.¹⁹⁷

Scholarship on race, class, gender, and sexuality in television programming continues to be an important part of the field for scholars studying both narrative and reality television. Scholars have brought this work into the 21st century by expanding focus into the use of humor on issues of politics and race,¹⁹⁸ representations of gender in animated sitcoms,¹⁹⁹ the relationship between network shows aimed young people and online fandom,²⁰⁰ trans representation issues in shows for teenagers,²⁰¹ and doing extensive critical work on HBO television series.²⁰²

Of particular interest to this study are Ron Becker, Timothy Havens, Eileen R. Meehan, and Laurie Ouellette, who have contributed to knowledge around representation issues using feminism, critical race theory, and intersectional theory.²⁰³ Their work on

¹⁹⁷ Julie D'acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

¹⁹⁸ Lisa Glebatis Perks, "Polysemic Scaffolding: Explicating Discursive Clashes in Chappelle's Show," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 3, no. 2 (June 1, 2010): 270–89, doi:10.1111/j.1753-9137.2010.01070.x; Art Herbig and Aaron Hess, "Convergent Critical Rhetoric at the 'Rally to Restore Sanity': Exploring the Intersection of Rhetoric, Ethnography, and Documentary Production," *Communication Studies* 63, no. 3 (July 1, 2012): 269–89, doi:10.1080/10510974.2012.674617.

¹⁹⁹ Chase Wesley Raymond, "Gender and Sexuality in Animated Television Sitcom Interaction," *Discourse & Communication* 7, no. 2 (May 1, 2013): 199–220, doi:10.1177/1750481312472971.

²⁰⁰ Megan M. Wood and Linda Baughman, "Glee Fandom and Twitter: Something New, or More of the Same Old Thing?," *Communication Studies* 63, no. 3 (July 1, 2012): 328–44, doi:10.1080/10510974.2012.674618.

²⁰¹ Tom Sandercock, "Transing the Small Screen: Loving and Hating Transgender Youth in Glee and Degrassi," *Journal of Gender Studies* 24, no. 4 (July 4, 2015): 436–52, doi:10.1080/09589236.2015.1021307.

²⁰² Gary Richard Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones, *The Essential HBO Reader* (University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

²⁰³ Robert Clyde Allen and Annette Hill, *The Television Studies Reader* (Psychology Press, 2004); Jonathan Bignell, *An Introduction to Television Studies* (Routledge, 2012);

representation issues on television, particularly in reality television, informs this study's specific focus on the "white trash" stereotype, which has not been examined as thoroughly as other stereotypes in the context of television and reality television. Ron Becker has done work that informs this study's understanding of LGBTQ issues on television, Timothy Havens has done work that informs this study's understanding of race in television, particularly in sitcoms, and Eileen Meehan informs this study's understanding of television economics and power structures.²⁰⁴ Laurie Ouellette and Jennifer Pozner have written extensively about reality television and why it matters; their scholarship and criticism fuels this study's belief in the importance of understanding the discourses within and around reality television from a feminist, intersectional perspective.²⁰⁵

2.7 Conclusion

This study expands on the understanding of the "white trash" stereotype by looking specifically at how those stereotypes are not only used in reality television, but also extrapolated from their location in reality television into a broader cultural context online. Focusing on a site of discourse that is not controlled by a centralized production

Charlotte Brundson and Lynn Spigel, *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* (McGraw-Hill International, 2007).

²⁰⁴ Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (Rutgers University Press, 2006); Timothy Havens, "'The Biggest Show in the World': Race and the Global Popularity of The Cosby Show," *Media, Culture & Society* 22, no. 4 (July 1, 2000): 371–91, doi:10.1177/016344300022004001; Eileen R. Meehan, "Conceptualizing Culture as Commodity: The Problem of Television," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3, no. 4 (1986): 448–57, doi:10.1080/15295038609366675.

²⁰⁵ Ouellette and Murray, "Introduction"; Laurie Ouellette, "Inventing the Cosmo Girl: Class Identity and Girl-Style American Dreams," *Media, Culture & Society* 21, no. 3 (1999): 359–83; Laurie Ouellette, "Victims No More: Postfeminism, Television, and Ally McBeal," *The Communication Review* 5, no. 4 (2002): 315–35; Pozner, *Reality Bites Back*.

allows a view of the general cultural reactions, meanings, and use of the stereotype, not just that of powerful media creators. Likewise, this study reveals areas of resistance to those stereotypes. Because of the young age of the average Tumblr user, this study also grants a view of the discourse around “white trash” generated by a younger generation, who may use the discourse around the stereotype differently or have different discourse altogether.

This study also expands on the knowledge about reality television by examining how reality television is not only talked about but also used to create discourse about other things. There is a strong relationship between social media and reality television that needs to be further studied and expounded upon. The relationship between reality television and image macros has not been studied, nor has the relationship between reality television and Tumblr. This is partially because there is very little scholarship about either image macros or Tumblr in general, another area of scholarship this study adds to. There is also an important relationship between reality television and stereotypes that deserves additional scholarship. Reality television is particularly dependent on stereotypes, and this study adds to the body of knowledge by focusing on the white trash stereotype in specific.

Finally, this study adds to these subjects and to critical television studies by bringing an explicitly intersectional approach, one that incorporates understandings of race, class, gender, sexuality, geography, and more as one piece as a whole rather than identities and power structures to be studied separately. This study brings together many disparate streams of literature and scholarship, gaining new insights into them all by including them together in one study.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study explores how online content creators engage with television stereotypes in online spaces. This study will examine a selection of Tumblr posts that feature Honey Boo Boo for the ways that the online content creators uphold, undermine, and “play with” white trash stereotypes to gain insight into online content creators’ participation with television culture, the white trash stereotype, and Tumblr as a location of discourse. This research uses multimodal discourse analysis to examine the Tumblr content created with, around, and about the show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.

In seeking to explore this phenomenon, this study addresses the following research questions:

How do Tumblr users use Honey Boo Boo in discourse explicitly and implicitly about race, class, gender, sexuality, and geography?

What are these discourses?

How do these discourses adopt, negotiate, or resist common U.S. stereotypes of “white trash” and “rednecks?”

How does the online role of secondary content creator change meaning and discourse around and about the show?

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo represents a unique intersection of poor, white, fat, southern, LGBTQ-allied, and female-dominated social actors, positioning the show along the power axes respectively of class, race, weight, geography, sexuality, and gender. This study attempts to understand Tumblr discourse about the show through the framework of

intersectional theory. Intersectional theory assumes that social categories of race, class, and gender are intertwined and together constitute identity and describe power relationships. How do these axes of power interact in online discourse? This study is an attempt to understand the online content creator's role in creating meaning around a show that relies heavily on negative stereotypes.

3.1 Rationale

Although a primarily quantitative content analysis of this material would probably be possible, this study has chosen to use a qualitative, discourse centered analysis in an attempt to gain depth of knowledge and to preserve, to the extent possible, the authenticity of the voices documented. Because the focus of this study is content creation and stereotype use, qualitative analysis is an appropriate choice. Qualitative analysis is especially useful in informing researchers “how other human beings make sense of the world,” something key in understanding the ways stereotypes are used and what they mean.²⁰⁶ Qualitative analysis can be subjective and dependent on the researcher's point of view, especially because all media texts are polysemic, but it is also a highly valuable way of using “personal, professional, or cultural” perceptions to divine meaning.²⁰⁷

Electing to study these sites in situ offers the opportunity to examine cultural discourse in its authentic setting and to get at socially fraught stereotypes that might not be shared with a researcher. Studying “things” or cultural artifacts helps create sites of research that are naturalistic and have not involved the interaction of the researcher in the

²⁰⁶ Alan McKee, *Textual Analysis a Beginner's Guide* (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2003), 1.

²⁰⁷ Paul Martin Lester, *Visual Communication: Images with Messages* (Boston, MA.: Wadsworth, 2011), 117.

production thereof, retaining high authenticity levels in the content being analyzed; preserving this authenticity is important both to gaining insight into the discourse and in maintaining a feminist perspective that allows people to speak with their own voices from their own perspectives.²⁰⁸

Discourse analysis is “the study of the ways that language is organized in texts and contexts” that can help investigate sociocultural worldviews and beliefs.²⁰⁹ In discourse analysis, a researcher analyses a text or group of texts for information it reveals through language, be it visual or textual; this analysis can focus on anything from how individual words work to create meaning to how a group of texts reflect and communicate the social values of the society that generated them. The foundational assumption that underlies discourse analysis is that discourse is a location of power and that analysis reveals hidden power structures.²¹⁰ According to Cheek, “[L]anguage cannot be considered to be transparent at face value.”²¹¹ Discourse analysis developed from the influence of the same critical theory influences as television studies, but from a history of critical linguistics rather than film theory. Discourse analysis draws heavily from the semiotics tradition; semiotics is the study of signs and signifiers that was conceived by the linguistic scholar Ferdinand de Saussure and developed extensively by Roland Barthes. They called for a recognition of the way signs (words, for example) represent

²⁰⁸ Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 147.

²⁰⁹ Ellen Barton, “Linguistic Discourse Analysis: How the Language in Texts Works,” *What Writing Does and How It Does It: An Introduction to Analyzing Texts and Textual Practices*, 2004, 57.

²¹⁰ Gunther Kress, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 11 (1990): 84–99, doi:10.1017/S0267190500001975.

²¹¹ Julianne Cheek, “At the Margins? Discourse Analysis and Qualitative Research,” *Qualitative Health Research* 14, no. 8 (2004): 1144.

not simple, clear meanings, but complicated orders of meaning influenced by context and interaction with other signs.²¹² Discourse analysis primarily focused on verbal texts until Kress and Van Leeuwen constructed visual grammar to analyze discourse in visuals without text.²¹³ Multimodal analysis incorporates these traditions, along with other semiotic traditions, into a discourse analysis that is not limited to either texts or visuals, but interested in the interaction of all semiotic elements used to communicate.²¹⁴

In online settings, discourse relies heavily on video and images in addition to language, so an analysis of discourse on Tumblr requires multimodal interpretations of discourse.²¹⁵ The Internet, and Tumblr in particular, reflects a major shift in Western culture from a “distinct preference for monomodality” to increasing use of multimodality.²¹⁶ Closely related to the concept of multimodality are the concepts of hypertextuality and intertextuality.²¹⁷ Intertextuality is “how texts contain within themselves evidences of the histories of other texts,” which include both references to other texts and digital hyperlinks, which are hypertext that takes a user from one location

²¹² Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*.

²¹³ Gunther Kress and Theo V. Van Leeuwen, “Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication,” 2001.

²¹⁴ Jiayu Wang, “Criticising Images: Critical Discourse Analysis of Visual Semiosis in Picture News,” *Critical Arts* 28, no. 2 (2014): 265; Kay L. O’Halloran et al., “Multimodal Analysis within an Interactive Software Environment: Critical Discourse Perspectives,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 8, no. 2 (2011): 109–25.

²¹⁵ Yukari Seko, “Picturesque Wounds: A Multimodal Analysis of Self-Injury Photographs on Flickr,” in *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 14, 2013, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1935>.

²¹⁶ Kress and Van Leeuwen, “Multimodal Discourse,” 1.

²¹⁷ Phoenix W. Y. Lam, “Interdiscursivity, Hypertextuality, Multimodality: A Corpus-Based Multimodal Move Analysis of Internet Group Buying Deals,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 51 (2013): 13–39.

online to another.²¹⁸ Tumblr, like much of the web, is dependent on mixing and remixing ideas and media. Within a single post, you might find an intertextual reference to Honey Boo Boo or the gay Internet celebrity Tyler Oakley, but you may also find multiple reactions to that image via hyperlinks to what others have said when sharing it. Tumblr posts, unlike Facebook posts, are unique in that they do not contain a commenting function; the only way to comment on something is to repost it to your own Tumblr page with your own comments added. Users thereby “play a more active role in meaning making.”²¹⁹ One interesting part of analyzing Tumblr is that multiple interpretations of the main content of a post can be contained in the reblogs of that post, adding nuance and complexity to the researcher’s understanding of how readers read the text. While it is impossible to escape the fact that researchers “are not only readers but also producers of discourse,” those posting on Twitter and reblogging assume both roles as well.²²⁰ This situation produces a kind of in-text analysis by those on Tumblr that helps to capture “the cultural and political work a text may perform among the general population.”²²¹

Image macros on Tumblr can have many layers of meaning, making a qualitative, critical approach necessary for understanding the discourse being used on the site.²²² For example, take the following image posted on Tumblr:

²¹⁸ Chris N. Candlin and Yon Maley, “Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity in the Discourse of Alternative Dispute Resolution,” in *The Construction of Professional Discourse*, ed. Britt-Louise Gunnarsson, Per Linell, and Bengt Nordberg (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 201–22.

²¹⁹ Lam, “Interdiscursivity, Hypertextuality, Multimodality,” 14.

²²⁰ Ian Parker and Erica Burman, “Against Discursive Imperialism, Empiricism, and Constructionism: Thirty-Two Problems with Discourse Analysis,” *Discourse Analytic Research: Repertoires and Readings of Texts in Action*, 1993, 159.

²²¹ Edward Schiappa, *Beyond Representational Correctness: Rethinking Criticism of Popular Media* (Suny Press, 2008), 65.

²²² Milner, “The World Made Meme.”



Figure 3.1 Jennifer Lawrence and Honey Boo Boo

This very simple image is multimodal and intertextual. To understand the discourse contained in this post, one must know the following:

1. Visually, you must know that
 - This image uses the visual language of Twitter;
 - This is a screenshot of a tweet with a response;
 - The Twitter accounts represented in the image are not celebrity verified accounts.
2. Intertextually, you must know that
 - Jennifer Lawrence is an actress who stars in *The Hunger Games* movies;
 - Jennifer Lawrence loves the show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* to the extent that she once got in a car accident because she thought she saw Alana Thompson;²²³

²²³ “How Honey Boo Boo Caused Jennifer Lawrence’s Car Accident (VIDEO),” *Huffington Post*, November 20, 2012,

- *The Hunger Games* is about a dystopian society where children fight to the death for the entertainment of society;
- The show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* does involve children fighting over food for the entertainment of society.

The comparison in this tweet of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* to *The Hunger Games* is humorous, but it is also a commentary on the society in which the Thompsons live. *The Hunger Games* features a lead character from a futuristic Appalachia that features some of the same stereotypes about Southern white poverty deployed in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. The same rich versus poor dynamics exist in the fictional world of *The Hunger Games* as in real Southern areas and this post reveals an acknowledgement of the same problematic and exploitative nature of reality television entertainment between the two. Key to this comparison is that the critique is of the entertained and those making the show, not of the people who appear in the show. Given the opportunity, this Jennifer Lawrence stand-in has compared, indirectly, the cast of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* to the hero of *The Hunger Games* who this user admires so much that she has taken on that identity online. This Tumblr post is thus a sophisticated intertextual bit of humor and social commentary from a Twitter user posing as a famous actress. Intertextuality and multimodality are key to the meaning-making processes on Tumblr, making multimodal discourse analysis the ideal tool for understanding discourse on Tumblr.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/20/jennifer-lawrence-honey-boo-boo-video_n_2163517.html.

3.2 Sample

Tumblr is a free microblogging and social networking site used to post images, video, and text, but with a focus on animated gifs. With 158.6 million users generating 70.1 billion posts daily, it is one of the most popular microblogging sites.²²⁴ A search for the term “Honey Boo Boo” was entered into Tumblr’s search engine, with results ordered by Tumblr’s search algorithm to identify those most likely to be seen and commented upon rather than a random sample; only public posts were searched and analyzed. This sampling method of analyzing the most popular public posts that emerge from a search engine has previously been used in discourse and qualitative analyses of online content of blogs and forums; it is similar to the ways people search for content themselves and is thus unlikely to violate any expectations of privacy.²²⁵ However, the content is being analyzed around issues of stereotyping, race, gender, and sexuality, all of which can be upsetting and sensitive topics. Additionally, many of the images were not originally created by the user who shared them, meaning that most of the images studied here would have an attribution to someone who was not the original creator. Posts on Tumblr are short-lived and taken down frequently, which would make many links unavailable to

²²⁴ “Press Information,” *Tumblr*, accessed December 15, 2013, <http://www.tumblr.com/press>.

²²⁵ Kevin O. Hwang et al., “Quality of Weight Loss Advice on Internet Forums,” *The American Journal of Medicine* 120, no. 7 (2007): 604–9; Kevin O. Hwang et al., “Social Support in an Internet Weight Loss Community,” *International Journal of Medical Informatics* 79, no. 1 (2010): 5–13; Dina L. G. Borzekowski et al., “E-Ana and E-Mia: A Content Analysis of pro-Eating Disorder Web Sites,” *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 8 (2010): 1526–34; Wannes Van Hoof, Veerle Provoost, and Guido Pennings, “Reflections of Dutch Patients on IVF Treatment in Belgium: A Qualitative Analysis of Internet Forums,” *Human Reproduction* 28, no. 4 (2013): 1013–22; Ivan B. Dylko et al., “Filtering 2008 US Presidential Election News on YouTube by Elites and Nonelites: An Examination of the Democratizing Potential of the Internet,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 5 (2012): 832–49.

readers.²²⁶ For these reasons, this study will not be using the Tumblr names associated with the accounts that posted the images and text studied.

400 posts were gathered over the course of one month during the airing of the second season of the show and analyzed for discourse around white trash and associated stereotypes and discourses. I chose February 2014 because it was in the middle of a season of the show airing and needed the entire month to collect 400 posts; the first post was collected on February 1 and the 400th on February 28th. The number of posts was informed by referring to similar studies of online content, most of which analyzed either around 100 posts²²⁷ or around 400-500 posts,²²⁸ and by feasibility. Many days of searches were necessarily to gather posts using the search engine method because Tumblr's search returned a limited number of unique posts. Collecting each post,

²²⁶ Craig Parker, Dilal Saundage, and Chia Yao Lee, "Can Qualitative Content Analysis Be Adapted for Use by Social Informaticians to Study Social Media Discourse? A Position Paper," in *ACIS 2011: Proceedings of the 22nd Australasian Conference on Information Systems: Identifying the Information Systems Discipline* (AIS-Association of Information Systems, 2011), 1–7, <http://dro.deakin.edu.au/view/DU:30041098>.

²²⁷ Lam, "Interdiscursivity, Hypertextuality, Multimodality"; Tobias Denskus and Daniel E. Esser, "Social Media and Global Development Rituals: A Content Analysis of Blogs and Tweets on the 2010 MDG Summit," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2013): 405–22.

²²⁸ Seko, "Picturesque Wounds"; Connelly, "'Welcome to the FEMINIST CULT'"; Weaver, "Jokes, Rhetoric and Embodied Racism"; Patient Rambe, "Critical Discourse Analysis of Collaborative Engagement in Facebook Postings," *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* 28, no. 2 (2012): 295–314; Catherine Knight Steele, "Blogging While Black: A Critical Analysis of Resistance Discourse by Black Female Bloggers," *Selected Papers of Internet Research* 1, no. 0 (October 11, 2012), <http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/article/view/31>; Alexis Pulos, "Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games A Critical Discourse Analysis of LGBTQ Sexuality in World of Warcraft," *Games and Culture* 8, no. 2 (March 1, 2013): 77–97, doi:10.1177/1555412013478688; Line Nybro Petersen, "Sherlock Fans Talk: Mediatized Talk on Tumblr," *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook* 12, no. 1 (June 1, 2014): 87–104, doi:10.1386/nl.12.1.87_1; Ulrike Pfeil and Panayiotis Zaphiris, "Applying Qualitative Content Analysis to Study Online Support Communities," *Universal Access in the Information Society* 9, no. 1 (August 1, 2009): 1–16, doi:10.1007/s10209-009-0154-3.

especially those with many reblogs, was time consuming and involved extensive manual navigation of the reblogs.²²⁹

According to Parker, Saundage, and Lee, “the interactive, dynamic, transient, and abstract nature of the content makes it difficult to articulate the unit of analysis” in online texts, which is made more difficult in Tumblr because of the diverse locations and modes of discourse. However, for this study, the unit of analysis will consist of one Tumblr post, which includes the main content (most frequently an image macro) along with the hashtags and reblog notes that go with it.²³⁰ The text and context that surround the image inform its meanings, preventing the images from becoming “a message without a code.”²³¹ Thus, this study takes into account the multimodal nature of Tumblr posts rather than considering either the text or visual meaning in isolation.²³² Multimodal discourses are discourses that involve more than one mode of semiosis, with modes being the channels (textual, visual, aural) where semiotic activities take place.²³³

Of the 400 posts recorded, six involved text that was not in English. These were from Brazil, France, Canada, and Argentina and all used some English or had English in reblogs. The US makes up over 33% of Tumblr posts and visits, with the next highest country, India, only providing 8%.²³⁴ The language, focus on an American show, and the fact that the plurality of Tumblr users are from the US, suggests that the posts being

²²⁹ For these reasons, I would recommend scholars intending to do this kind of analysis on Tumblr to use purposive sampling or analyze a smaller number of posts.

²³⁰ Parker, Saundage, and Lee, “Can Qualitative Content Analysis Be Adapted for Use by Social Informaticians to Study Social Media Discourse?,” 5.

²³¹ Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 17.

²³² Seko, “Picturesque Wounds.”

²³³ Kay L. O’Halloran, *Mathematical Discourse: Language, Symbolism and Visual Images* (Continuum, 2005).

²³⁴ “Tumblr Usage Per Country,” *AppAppeal*, April 10, 2014, <http://www.appappeal.com/maps/tumblr>.

analyzed are predominately American users and a few people outside of America with a strong interest in American culture and who have relationships online with Americans.

Table 3.1 Distribution of Posts

Users	Posts
281	1
26	2
3	3
1	6
1	15
1	29

The 400 posts came from 315 Tumblr users. The vast majority of the posts represent the only post from that user, but there were a few more prolific users. 15 posts were from a Tumblr user who only posted about *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and 29 were from a prolific relogger who did not add their own commentary to the posts.

Table 3.2 Self-Reported Demographics of Users

Age	Users
14	2
15	5
16	10
17	3
18	5
19	10
20	7
21	7
24	1
26	1
35	1

Description	Users
Teen	9
In School	14
First Job	8
Professional	7
Fandom	54
Male	27
Female	116
Progressive	15
LGBTQ	17
Straight	3
Minority	9

Filling out profiles is optional on Tumblr and many users provided little to no demographic information, but the available demographics support the idea that Tumblr is a site with progressive, young, female users. 143 users directly or indirectly referred to

their gender in their profile, 81% identified as women. Of the 27 men, 2 identify as trans. Users who mentioned their sexuality and race were exclusively non-white and primarily LGBTQ, though this likely reflects the assumed norm of straight and white. Profile pictures and content in the posts suggest that most of the users are white. 52 users included their age in their profile description. The mean age was 18.58, the modes were 16 and 19, and the median age was 19. The youngest users were 14 and the oldest user was 35. Additionally, 9 users identified as “teens” or “teenage,” 14 identified as “in school,” 8 identified as in their first job, and 7 described themselves by a profession. Additionally, 54 users identified themselves in relation to fandoms or as members of fandom. Only 18 users mentioned any political or philosophical stance, but all of them mentioned equal rights, feminism, or social justice.

3.3 Analysis

First, data was gathered into a single spreadsheet that included the images and text featured in the posts along with any metadata information available from the page, such as the date it was posted. Each Tumblr post was on its own row in the spreadsheet, see Appendix B for an example section of the spreadsheet. Although it is ideal to view the pages in situ, pulling the data from the web is necessary because of the “ephemeral nature of website content” and the content on Tumblr can be erased at any time, and indeed much of it has since been deleted.²³⁵ These posts were coded for emergent ideas and repeated themes; these themes and ideas were grouped into larger ideas and concepts. Some early themes that emerged were food, fat jokes, body issues, gay rights support,

²³⁵ Parker, Saundage, and Lee, “Can Qualitative Content Analysis Be Adapted for Use by Social Informaticians to Study Social Media Discourse?,” 3.

identification, redneck, reaction gifs, Valentine's Day. After this coding process, major themes emerged around food, fat, sex, gay rights, rejection of heteronormativity, redneck comments and these were further consolidated into the three discourses analyzed here: body, LGBTQ, and redneck discourses. The posts were organized into these themes and into subthemes. Analysis of each page was written and compared to find example texts that were representative of the posts and all of this analysis was then used as a basis for writing the study.

This approach owes much to grounded theory, because it depends on analyzing and re-analyzing text for important discourses and themes in the language, seeking codes and commonalities.²³⁶ Using this approach, these posts were examined for patterns and repeated discourses, which were coded to reveal which discourses are dominant. This approach is primarily inductive and “requires an immersion of oneself in the textual themes.”²³⁷ This analysis created a small amount of quantitative data about the frequencies of discourses that may help “identify patterns,” but the bulk of the analysis is “qualitative data to place those patterns within an interpretive context discussing larger scale themes.”²³⁸ This kind of analysis is dependent on close, repeated viewings and analyses of both the individual elements/modes and the context of all the modes

²³⁶ Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Transaction Books, 2009).

²³⁷ S. Hesse-Biber, P. Dupuis, and T. S. Kinder, “HyperRESEARCH: A Tool for the Analysis of Qualitative Data,” *Computer Program*. Randolph, MA: Researchware, 1992, 292.

²³⁸ Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, 155; Patricia Leavy, “Feminist Content Analysis and Representative Characters,” *The Qualitative Report* 5, no. 1/2 (2000), <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR5-1/leavy.html>.

together.²³⁹ These individual analyses of the units and the context of the collection of units offer patterns, which help to identify “focal texts,” those that demonstrate the discourse most clearly, which are guided by the research questions. Though in-depth analysis of these focal texts focus on what stands out, they must be continually “compared with the whole data corpus to test our analysis of the selected texts against it.”²⁴⁰



Figure 3.2 Tyler Oakley as Mama June

The analysis of the posts themselves required looking at a number of areas of discourse. Above, for example, is a Tumblr post that was analyzed, with the richest areas of discourse noted (for definitions of Tumblr terms, see Appendix A): 1. The title of the

²³⁹ O’Halloran et al., “Multimodal Analysis within an Interactive Software Environment.” Jeff Bezemer and Carey Jewitt, “Multimodal Analysis: Key Issues,” *Research Methods in Linguistics*, 2010, 180.

²⁴⁰ Bezemer and Jewitt, “Multimodal Analysis,” 8.

Tumblr post, which is limited to text. 2. The user picture, which can include still images, animated images, and text. 3. The user description, which can include text and images. 4. The main content of the post. This can include multiple images, still or animated, with or without text. Some posts are only text. 5. The title of the post, which is limited to text. 6. The hashtags applied to the post, which are limited to text. 7. A list of reposts of the content with additional comments, limited to text. In aggregate, the Tumblr page is multimodal, but over half of these noted areas can be multimodal within themselves; almost all of these areas are or can be hypertextual and link to other Tumblr pages.

The above description of a Tumblr post is not an exhaustive list of the areas of text and context that can appear in Tumblr posts. The background image and arrangement of the page can be edited by the user, some users have “About” pages with more biographical information about the owner of the page, and there is a great deal of information in the hyperlinks to the people who have reposted. In fact, there is too much information to be analyzed or even collected. The most popular post had over 300,000 reblogs, twice as many as the other 399 posts’ reblogs combined. Therefore, this study limited the collection of reblogs to the first 20 with added content; this limit of 20 affected 4 of the 400 posts collected. This study analyzed the data of the added text, but did not pursue additional context by visiting rebloggers’ individual Tumblr pages. Aside from the image above, all images will be images from the post rather than of the entire page.

According to Chandler, analysis of cultural myths, such as stereotypes, “involves an attempt to deconstruct the ways in which codes operate within particular popular texts

or genres” to reveal cultural attitudes.²⁴¹ In the case of this study, that means that deconstructing the codes in Honey Boo Boo reveals cultural values and attitudes about the white trash stereotype. Analysis in this particular space requires the examination of multiple modes of visual systems and how they work alone and together to create meaning.²⁴² There are two layers of meaning in visual semiotics; the first layer meanings are the denotative, which are the intended, self-evident, and informational meanings while the second layer meanings are the connotative, which are the implied, extrapolated, and conceptual meanings.²⁴³ A denotative meaning of a Tumblr post like the one in this chapter might be “Tyler Oakley’s head roughly photoshopped on Mama June’s body,” but the connotative meaning might be about gay culture, meme culture, and white trash stereotypes. A fan of Tyler Oakley photoshopping Oakley’s head onto Mama June’s body and placing a positive spin on the image is literally turning Mama June into a gay icon: the icon that is Tyler Oakley. This is a kind of claiming of representation, realness, and identity. The discourse around the pasting of Tyler Oakley’s face on top of Mama June’s body contains no body shaming or insults about her weight and instead elevates June to a beloved figure. This resists dominant discourse about weight and class, turning June into someone as worthy of celebrity worship as the Tyler Oakley that the user is so devoted to.

Analysis of this study’s selected Tumblr posts reveals discourse threads about “realness” and disgust around a variety of topics, especially around the body. Some of

²⁴¹ Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics for Beginners* (Daniel Chandler, 2000), http://dominicpetrillo.com/ed/Semiotics_for_Beginners.pdf.

²⁴² O’Halloran et al., “Multimodal Analysis within an Interactive Software Environment.”

²⁴³ Theo Van Leeuwen, “Semiotics and Iconography,” *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, 2001, 92–118.

this discourse overlaps with the discourses that Cavalcante found in his analysis of the Facebook page about Honey Boo Boo, which found discourses around “realness,” social defiance, and the “happiness of the disenfranchised.”²⁴⁴ Although there is some overlap in themes, Cavalcante’s analysis focused on fans defending the show, while this study is focusing on general discussion that is less specifically aimed; it is a broader range of discourses, stereotypes, content forms, and individuals participating than were analyzed by Cavalcante.

²⁴⁴ Cavalcante, “You Better ‘Redneckognize’!: Deploying the Discourses of Realness, Social Defiance, and Happiness to Defend Here Comes Honey Boo Boo on Facebook.”

Chapter 4: Discourses of the Body

The overarching discourse found throughout the sample is that of two opposite reactions to the show or to memes and images related to the show. This is not to suggest a dichotomy; instead the posts offer a continuum from total rejection to total embrace of the characters and their identities, with many falling somewhere in between, trying to reject an association with some behaviors but ally themselves with others. Tumblr users both identify with the Thompsons and use their dislike of the Thompsons as a way to explicitly identify themselves as different from them. Honey Boo Boo gifs then become a kind of language of claiming or rejecting the identities that the show presents. The users of Tumblr divorce the gifs and memes from their original context and give them entirely new meanings, creating a straightforward visual and written way of easily interacting with complex issues of identity. These identities coalesce around two concepts: those who identify with the Thompsons frequently speak of “realness,” much like Cavalcante discovered in his analysis of the *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* Facebook page,²⁴⁵ and those who reject that identity frequently speak of “disgust.” They all use stereotypes related to rednecks and poor white trash throughout their discourse.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

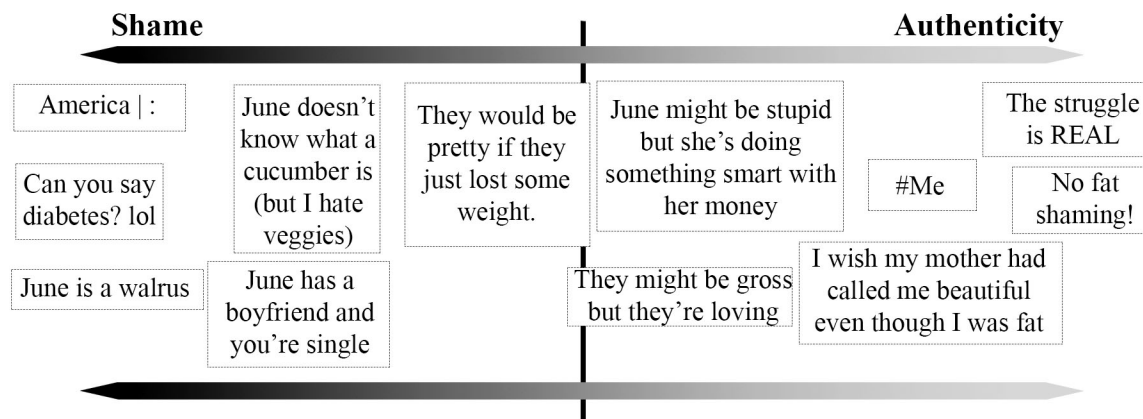


Figure 4.1 Shame to Authenticity Continuum

There are three main discourses in the sample, all of which feed into the use of gifs as a language of identification. The largest and most specific discourse is discourse around the body, which includes discourses around weight, body functions, food, and sex. Discourse about the body is also the site of the greatest variance in identification with the Thompsons, giving the fullest continuum between shame and realness. The other two discourses represent different sides of the continuum; discourse around LGBTQ support is mostly positive while discourse around redneck stereotypes is mostly negative. The discourse around the body is most illustrative around the larger discourses of realness versus disgust and conflicts of identity.

The narratives of the body, and more importantly, Tumblr users' interactions with these narratives, are the focus of this chapter. Bodies and their natural functions were found in over 100 of the Tumblr posts, by far the most unified identifiable theme in the sample. This discourse can be broken down into smaller, interrelated discourses: fatness, body functions, food, and sex. The chapter begins with analysis of the various fat

discourses through the Tumblr posts, which range from fat jokes at the expense of Mama June to appreciation and identifying with fat acceptance. Discourse around weight permeates the entire analysis. This section is followed by an analysis of the discourse around body functions. The third section is about food and the ways it symbolizes “realness,” weight, and trashiness. The final section is about sex, from most Tumblr users’ disgust at the idea of June having sex to the redneck specter of incest.

All of these sub-discourses are deeply entwined around issues of weight and stereotypes of poor white trash; those issues and stereotypes as presented in the show offer a simplified language for users less to debate issues of propriety, as Cavalcante found in his study of Facebook, but to navigate and declare their own identities.²⁴⁶ The nature of Tumblr encourages divorcing images from their original context and spreading them through people who are not necessarily watching the show while it discourages direct conversation about those images. Unlike Facebook, Tumblr does not easily facilitate back and forth conversations, instead giving users a platform to speak out to their followers with very little feedback beyond reblogging without comment. That the users of Tumblr are overwhelmingly young people, and much younger than the Facebook audience, means this location of rejecting and taking on identities speaks to the utility, for good or ill, of media driven stereotypes in expressing the self and one’s values, either through positioning oneself against or with those stereotypes.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Smith, “Tumblr Offers Advertisers A Major Advantage: Young Users, Who Spend Tons Of Time On The Site.”

4.1 Fat

Mama June's and, to a lesser extent, the entire family's weight is subject to much commentary on Tumblr. The commentary is frequently in the form of juvenile insults, like photoshopping an image of June's head on top of other bodies, or sharing gifs from the show of the family insulting fat people. However, a large minority of the discourse on the family's weight comes from users who appreciate that June accepts her weight and never shames herself or her family for being heavy. Tumblr users frequently identify with the realities that June faces in having a bigger body. There are also those who defend the family while also upholding norms about weight and beauty. Mama June's status as the fat matriarch of a sometimes loved, sometimes hated show often puts her body at the center of the discourse.

One of the reasons that it is easy to joke about weight in relation to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is that the characters know that they are overweight and commonly make jokes about it themselves. Alana frequently makes jokes about her mother's weight on the show, as seen in the following gif set (a collection of related images shared in one Tumblr post.)



Figure 4.2 Mama eats Glitzy, show style

When Alana got Glitzy the Pig as a pet, she confided to the camera, “I hope Mama don’t eat Glitzy. She eats everything else.” The show helpfully subtitled this insult, in case the audience might miss it. The show therefore encourages and shares the mocking of Mama June for her weight. Tumblr users likewise use the show to talk about weight. In this vein, a Tumblr user shared the above gif set and commented, “I wish I had an extra finger then I could grab more cheese balls,” which is something Alana said in a different episode. The user went on to write that the show is her “new favorite thing in the WORLD.” This user is a self-described fan of the show, so fandom of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* does not prevent jokes about weight and poor white trash stereotyping. From the start, we see that liking the show, and even having positive feelings for the people on the show, is no hindrance to engaging in stereotyping behavior. There is

similar behavior in the fans of other reality shows.²⁴⁸ The joy of the show for those who watch it appears, at least partially, to come from seeing people unselfconsciously embody stereotypes of the overweight and poor white trash. They eat bad food, they speak poorly, and they do not feel bad about it.



Figure 4.3 Mama eats Glitzy, meme style

Another user shared the same quote, but this version was done in meme style on a different image of Alana (likely because the subtitles in the original interfered with the Impact font text). Unlike the previous user, this one says she does not watch the show and is only sharing this because it scared her so much when she saw it that she felt compelled to share it on her Tumblr page. This plays into tropes that a body that consumes is scary, rather than a source of “love” or amusement. The stereotypes the show embodies, perhaps especially to non-viewers, can be seen as grotesque and frightening rather than funny. This is likely the result of both a lack of context and of self-selection in choosing whether to view the show or not. It is worth noting that Glitzy is a pig, which many people find perfectly acceptable for eating. However, the threat of June eating everything speaks to a fear of the huge body taking more than it deserves and suffering from

²⁴⁸ Lee and Moscovitz, “The ‘Rich Bitch’ Class and Gender on the Real Housewives of New York City.”

uncontrolled urges.²⁴⁹ A fan finds this body amusing, and possibly relatable despite the stereotypes, while a non-viewer finds this representative of poor white trash “scary,” and a threat to “decency.” With these two posts, we learn that there appears to be a difference between those who watch the show and those who do not, that there is a stark difference in people’s reactions, and that those reactions seem tied up not only in behavior but also in the very bodies of the people on the show.



Figure 4.4 Mama is the opposite of a skeleton

A related meme from the show portrays Alana mocking her mother’s weight by contrasting her with a skeleton. A user shares this gif with a tone reminiscent of a parent trying to scold a child who has been awful, but funny, saying, “Oh, Honey Boo Boo.” The comments in the reblogs offer additional interpretations. Seven of the 13 reblogs with comments are about how good the joke is: “She always got fat jokes for her mom lol,” or “FATALITY finish her,” which is a reference to the fighting game *Mortal Kombat*. These seven responses are all joining in on the fun of a good fat joke. June’s weight is not the only focus of the reblogs, though. Four of the reblogs are comments on

²⁴⁹ Joan C. Chrisler, “‘Why Can’t You Control Yourself?’ Fat Should Be a Feminist Issue,” *Sex Roles* 66, no. 9–10 (November 24, 2011): 608–16, doi:10.1007/s11199-011-0095-1.

June's ability to hold a baby properly, offering parenting advice to a mother of four holding her granddaughter. In the gif, the baby is squirming and June is trying to hold her still while listening to Alana. The comments imply that June is too ignorant to be able to correctly hold a child. Despite the fact that these comments are from people who, based on their profile information and demographics, have yet to have children, the Tumblr users feel qualified to critique her ability to hold a child, despite the fact that this is the fifth child she's helped raise. Her place as a mother, which is normally one of reverence in American society, is here an opportunity to criticize her because she is not the ideal woman²⁵⁰. It is unsurprising, then, that June's experience with rearing children is not taken into consideration by the Tumblr users; June is read as poor white trash and therefore incapable of competently caring for children. Her incapability is indicated within the clip not only by her supposedly incorrect hold on the baby but also by allowing her daughter to say rude things about her.

The fat jokes shared on Tumblr do not exclusively come from Alana and other individuals within the show. Other kinds of insults come directly from the users themselves. A teenage student shared an algebra worksheet, given to her by her math teacher, that she had photographed. In an apparent attempt to keep the questions asked on worksheets relevant and interesting to her students, an algebra teacher used the weights of the characters on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* as an opportunity to put together the following math question: "Honey Boo Boo and her sister, Chubbs, have a combined weight of 241 pounds. Mama June weighs 555 pounds which is equivalent to 3 Honey

²⁵⁰ Susan Jeanne Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (Simon and Schuster, 2004); Cobb, "Mother of the Year."

Boo Boos and 2 Chubbs combined. How much does Honey Boo Boo weigh and how much does Chubbs weigh?"

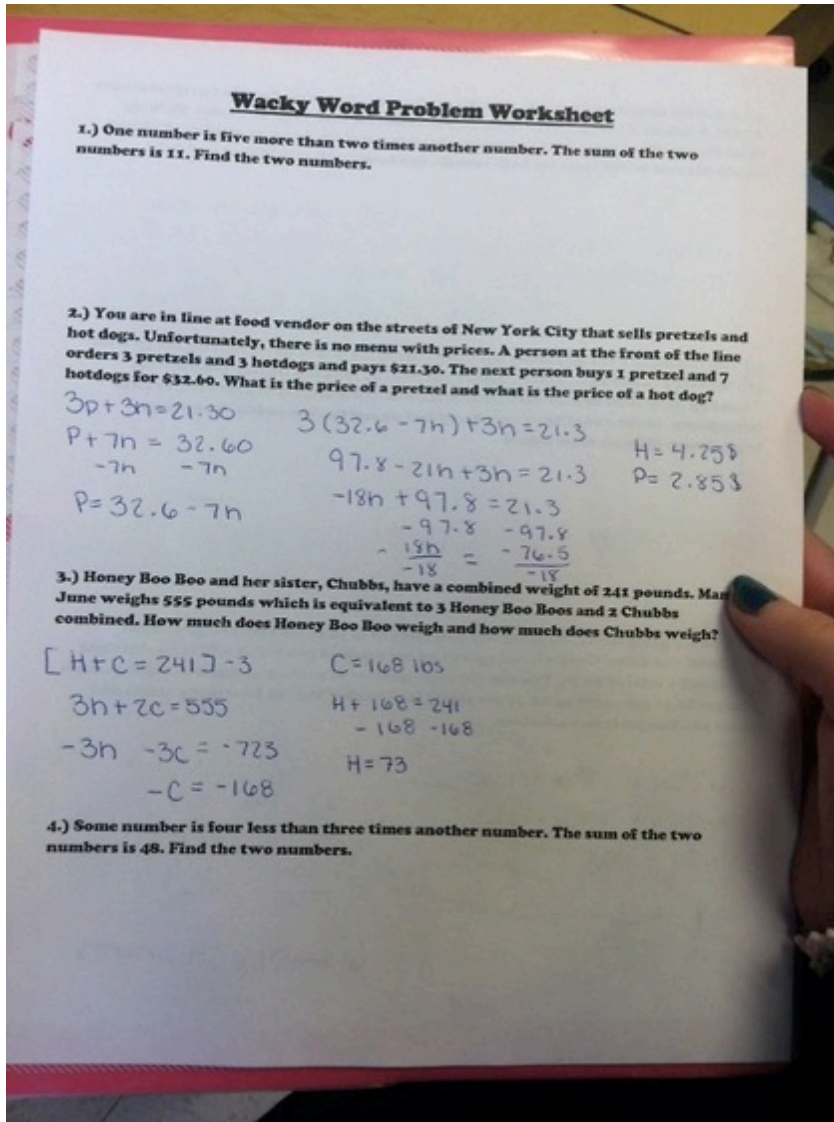


Figure 4.5 Honey Boo Boo math problem

After doing the algebra, the math comes very close in guesstimating Alana and Chubbs' weights; they have been weighed on-air at 69 and 175 pounds, versus the math problem's solution of 73 and 168, respectively. Disregarding for the moment the appropriateness of highlighting the weight of adolescents to a group of adolescents in a

math class, the error here is negligible. June's weight, however, is far less accurate; the teacher's estimate of 555 pounds is off by at least 246 pounds. June weighed 309 pounds on-air in 2012 and is reported to have lost 100 pounds.²⁵¹ This high weight, possibly more than double her actual weight, is not necessary to make their weights into an algebra problem; it is simply a choice made by the teacher. This extra weight is absurd and renders a moral judgment of June; this is a judgment meted out by a hugely exaggerated weight, to symbolize the unworthiness of June.²⁵² As for the fifteen-year-old girl who shared it, she seems to think it is indicative of something being wrong with her math teacher, but also seems to think that the mention of Honey Boo Boo might gain her new followers; half of her tags are about how she follows anyone who follows her.

Another kind of discourse introduced from outside the show is fat jokes made by associating another pop culture character with June. Three of the cruelest weight jokes in the sample came from the same user, who we can call "Sol." From Sol's other posts and her profile picture, she presents herself as a young, practically minded African-American woman whose interests lie in identity politics and hip-hop. Aside from her posts about June, she does not appear to make jokes at the expense of anyone. I found four posts of hers about Honey Boo Boo from early 2014, three of which are discussed in-depth here and one in the following section on body functions. Her profile showed that Sol had made at least four similar posts about June's weight that did not come up in the search; these will not be analyzed here, but they help underline Sol's focus on June's weight. The posts

²⁵¹ Eleanor Gower, "Mama June Sports Bright Bathing Suit but Hides 'Forklift Foot,'" *Daily Mail*, July 30, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2711139/Mama-June-shows-100lb-weight-hides-forklift-foot-Florida-holiday-Honey-Boo-Boo-clan.html>.

²⁵² April Michelle Herndon, *Fat Blame: How the War on Obesity Victimized Women and Children* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2014); Chrisler, "'Why Can't You Control Yourself?'"

examined here all include a reference to other media, and one insults Alana's weight in addition to June's. The posts all include 22-24 tags, the most of any found in this study. Tumblr only indexes the first five, making numbers 6-24 nothing but commentary. In these posts, Sol uses 15-17 tags just to indicate that the post is funny.



Today on "Here Comes Honey Boo Boo", we watch a rare moment as Honey Boo Boo enjoys a bite to eat before Mama June comes along and sucks it up....

gif source: foodriot.com



  FEBRUARY 6, 2014 (9:15 PM) 34 NOTES #HONEY BOO BOO
#HONEY BOO BOO GIF #PATRICK STAR #PATRICK STAR GIF
#SPONGEBOB #SPONGEBOB GIF #LOL #LOL GIF #LMAO #ROTFLMAO
#LMFAO #LMFAOOO #LMFAO GIF #LAUGH #LAUGHING #LAUGHTER
#IM LAUGHING #IM LAUGHING SO HARD #IM LAUGHING SO MUCH
#IM LAUGHING STILL #IM STILL LAUGHING #ROTFLOL #ROTFL #EATING
#EATING GIF #FOOD GIFS

Figure 4.6 Honey Boo Boo as Patrick Star

In her single post about Alana, Sol compares Alana to the lazy, fat, and stupid-but-lovable character of Patrick Star from *SpongeBob SquarePants*. She does not call Alana by her name, but rather by the sobriquet that gives the show its name and that is rarely actually used within the show itself. This hints that, while Sol mocks Honey Boo Boo and June, it is not from watching the show, but rather from her cultural

understanding of the show and her character. The comparison of Alana to Patrick is interesting as he is a fat, male, asexual starfish that plays sidekick to the main character of SpongeBob. Along with the caption, it implies that the supposed star of the show plays a secondary role to her mother who not only takes up most of the space and food, but also takes over the show from her daughter. June's bigness is a threat to everyone else's space.

The fat joke highlights the inappropriateness and self-centeredness of Mama June. June not only eats too much, she takes too much in general. This links back to tropes around competence, laziness, and selfishness that we have already seen associated with poor white trash. June's fatness illustrates her inability to support others and she fails even to share space on the show. As with the image of her holding the baby, it is implied here that both her weight and her social status make her incapable of being a good mother and caregiver. Strangely, the comment here implies that Alana struggles to get enough to eat, despite the fact that she is also overweight and is represented here by another overweight character. That June is an adult seems to make mocking her weight fair game, but representing Alana as Patrick is a not so subtle statement about Alana's own size. As for June, because she is a mother, fat, and poor white trash, judgment is both allowed and encouraged.²⁵³

²⁵³ Cobb, "Mother of the Year."



Honey Boo Boo's mama (June) at her wedding....

source: wiflegif

DECEMBER 29, 2013 (10:11 PM) 22 NOTES #HONEY BOO BOO
#HERE COMES HONEY BOO BOO
#LOUIS THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG #LOUIS THE ALLIGATOR #LOL GIF #LOL
#LOL GIF #LMAO #LMFAO #ROTFLOL #ROTFL #ROTFLMAO #ROTFLOL
#ROTF #LAUGH #LAUGHING #LAUGHTER #IM LAUGHING
#IM LAUGHING SO HARD #IM LAUGHING SO MUCH #IM LAUGHING STILL
#IM STILL LAUGHING #HONEY BOO BOO WEDDING

Figure 4.7 June as Louis the Alligator

Sol also compares Mama June to the hugely overweight, trumpet-playing alligator named Louis, from the film *The Princess and the Frog*. Louis is an alligator who wants to be human so that he can play music, but he is also overly emotional and easily frightened. Like with Alana in the previous post, Sol is comparing June to a lovable, if not bright, fat animated character. *The Princess and the Frog* was Disney's first and only animated feature film to portray a princess that was black, Southern, or working class; June is not black, but she is very much Southern and working class and her status as trash makes her "less white."²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ Neely Tucker, "Disney Introduces First Black Princess, Tiana, in 'The Princess and the Frog,'" *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2009, sec. Arts & Living,

By making June a black male alligator and Alana an asexual male starfish, both cartoons, these posts serve to deny them their humanity and their “realness.” The poor white trash status of the people involved here appears to make it completely acceptable to use these stereotypes, which are derived from stereotypes about black people in order to make white trash seem less white.²⁵⁵ It is worth underlining that this comparison of a white trash woman to a black man is coming from a woman who is not only black but who also touts her own awareness of race and gender issues throughout her Tumblr; it is the primary thing she discusses. Here, though, Sol not only calls Mama June fat and ugly, but also implies that June is neither fully white nor fully woman. June being white, but white trash, makes her a safe target, even for a racially aware Tumblr user, while masculinizing her serves to desexualize and marginalize her as not properly feminine. To call Alana and June male animals is to remove their femininity and personhood and it is not seen as problematic because they are fat trash and therefore not proper women at all.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/16/AR2009041603139.html>; Newitz and Wray, *White Trash*, 2.

²⁵⁵ Hartigan, “Name Calling.”



Next week on "Animal Planet", we watch rescue workers release walrus back into the wild....

gif source: wifflegif.com

DECEMBER 20, 2013 (12:21 AM) 126 NOTES #ANIMAL PLANET
#HONEY BOO BOO MOM #HONEY BOO BOO GIF #HONEY BOO BOO
#WALRUS #WALRUSES #RELEASE #THE WILD #RESCUE #LOL #LOL GIF
#FUNNY #FUNNY GIF #LAUGH #LAUGHTER #LAUGHING #IM LAUGHING
#IM LAUGHING SO HARD #IM LAUGHING SO MUCH #IM STILL LAUGHING
#IM LAUGHING STILL #LMAO #LMFAO #ROTFL #ROTFLMAO #ROTFL
#HILARIOUS #NATURAL HABITAT #WILDLIFE #REDNECK

Figure 4.8 June on a water slide

Of all Sol's posts, though, the walrus post is the cruelest because it shares a gif of June smiling and enjoying herself, but with the caption, "Next week on Animal Planet, we watch rescue workers release walrus back into the wild." The post calls her an animal twice, and repeats the motif three times in the tags. This portrays white trash people as no better than animals. Fat people, especially fat women, are not better than animals, either. Fat, white trash women are simply not human. Further dehumanizing June is the fact that this post never gives her a name and she is called "Honey Boo Boo mom." Her value, to the extent that she has value, is as someone's mother, but we have seen that her motherhood is not valued by Sol in her previous posts; here it is simply serves to deny June the humanity of a name. All three posts dehumanize their subjects by

turning them into other animals; Alana is a fat starfish, and June is a fat alligator and a walrus. This dehumanization plays into stereotypes of poor white trash as subhuman animals.²⁵⁶ Making fun of white trash is not racism and so mocking them is allowed, despite the fact that it is upholding stereotypes based on negative stereotypes of black people. Likewise, making fun of fat people is mocking someone for their own choices and equally allowed.²⁵⁷

Contrast June's joy at being in the waterslide to the harshness of the joke at her expense. Here is a depiction of a big woman seemingly unembarrassed by her weight enjoying herself on national television, unapologetically. The response is a fat joke. The comments on reblogs reveal others laughing with Sol, but one female user identifies with June, saying, "My life in a nutshell," while a male user protests the fat joke by saying, "Don't bully, that's not nice." A black woman is positioning herself as better than June, because of June's weight, but this positioning is being resisted by a man who dislikes fat bullying. Sol positions herself as thin and female and he positions himself as a fat ally. Here we see the weight issue being used differently by those in need of different cultural capital: the black woman, whose status is seen as undesirable, positions herself against fat while the man, who has more cultural capital, is willing to stand up against other people's marginalization. His maleness makes him immune to the most devastating effects of being fat, that of being no longer sexually desirable.²⁵⁸ Men who are overweight have

²⁵⁶ Wray, *Not Quite White*, 76.

²⁵⁷ Chrisler, "“Why Can't You Control Yourself?”"

²⁵⁸ Herndon, *Fat Blame*; Chrisler, "“Why Can't You Control Yourself?”"; Sarah Elsea, "Fat, Drunk, and Barely There: Mapping Deviance, Obsolescence, and Unsophistication onto the Ethnic Redneck Subject in Jeff Foxworthy's Serialized One-Liner Comedy," 2014, http://scholar.colorado.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1084&context=honr_theses;

accepted roles in society, fat women are considered unwelcome, undesired, and invisible. Defense here risks him less than a similar defense would risk a woman.

Similar to the jokes using other characters to represent June are jokes in which her image is combined with other images to create new meaning. These digitally altered images generally include June's face, neck rolls included, photoshopped onto the bodies of thin people. This is not necessarily mean-spirited and can be a combination of two things the photo-manipulator loves, be it fashion and June, One Direction and June, or *Mean Girls* and June. The tone of these posts is not always negative or insulting. Several are from users with a self-declared love of June.



Figure 4.9 June's face on famous thin bodies

Ralina L. Joseph, "'Tyra Banks Is Fat': Reading (Post-)Racism and (Post-)Feminism in the New Millennium," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 3 (2009): 237–54, doi:10.1080/15295030903015096.

The users making these images highlight the difference in weight and glamour between June and other celebrities and often use unflattering pictures of June, but they describe their work as “awesome” and June as “BEAUTIMOUS” and “heavenly.” These users are elevating June by combining her with celebrities that they love and find attractive, but also contrasting her with people who meet an ideal that she does not. There appears to be a mix of mockery and love for June in these images. June does not look the way celebrities are supposed to (beautiful, thin), but these users say that they like her because she is funny and charming. They create images that might be mocking her but also imbue her with star power and beauty.

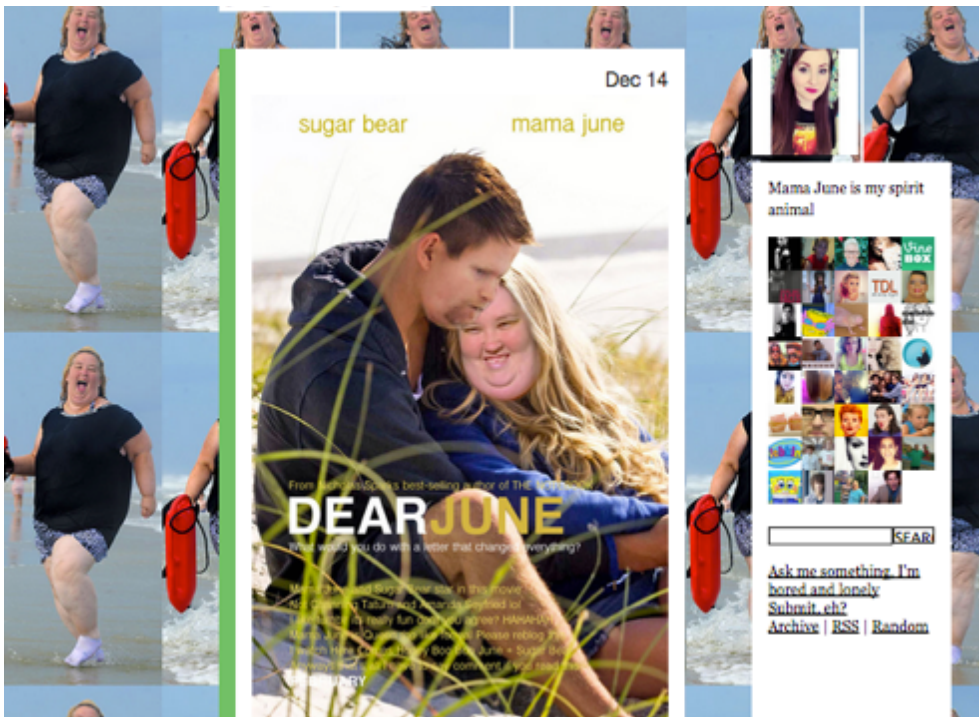


Figure 4.10 “Dear June”

One of the best examples of a positive reclamation through mash-up is from a user who added June and Sugar Bear to the *Dear John* poster. *Dear John* is a hit romantic

drama set in South Carolina, based on a Nicholas Sparks novel. This user is a young white woman who posts about pop culture phenomena like Taylor Swift and High School Musical, but her primary fan obsession is with Mama June. Her background is a tile layout of Mama June on the beach posing for the camera. Her user description reads, “Mama June is my spirit animal.” Though it is funny to see June’s head swapped for Amanda Seyfried’s and Sugar Bear’s for Channing Tatum, it is also a testament to the love between Sugar Bear and June, which is mentioned with positive tones on Tumblr. It is a mash-up, yes, but one made out of a stated love for the people in it. The post also takes care to include flattering images of June and Sugar Bear and the image manipulation is done with care. The post offers June and Sugar Bear’s love as something as valid as the romantic love shown in the movies. This is a major resistance to the idea that white trash people and fat people are less deserving of things like love and happiness.

The use of the term “spirit animal” also reveals a blind spot in racial sensitivity on Tumblr. “Spirit animal,” as it is used on the Internet, generally refers to anything an individual feels represents their true self. It is also a kind of cultural appropriation from Native Americans, who use the term as a serious religious concept. Tumblr itself is responsible for some of the mainstreaming of the meme as it is used.²⁵⁹ As much as this study discusses Tumblr as a progressive space, particularly around LGBTQ issues, it is not homogenous and not always or entirely progressive.

²⁵⁹ Megan Garber, “Your Spirit Animal: An Investigation,” *The Atlantic*, November 6, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/11/your-spirit-animal-a-cultural-investigation/382369/>.

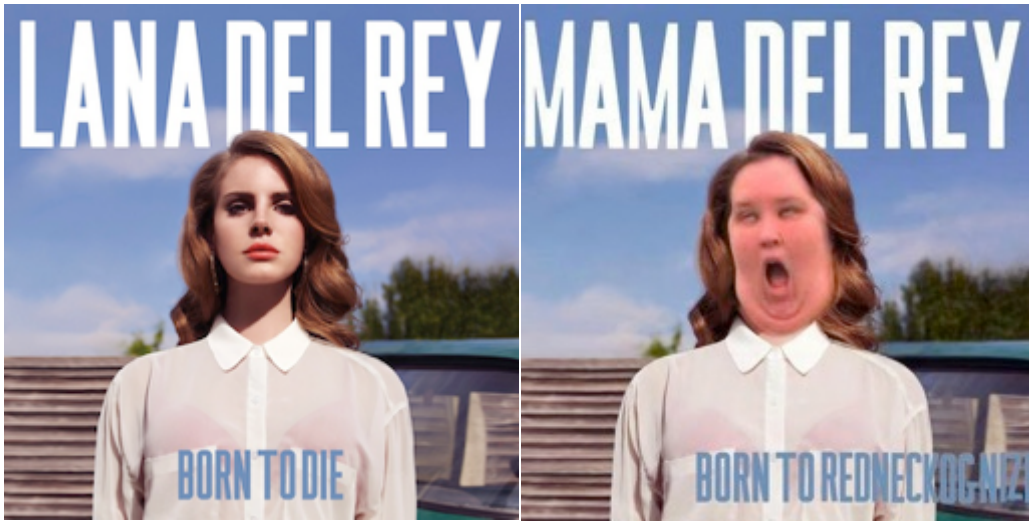


Figure 4.11 “Mama Del Rey”

Then there are posts like the “Mama del Ray, Born to Redneckognize” album cover. This meme/reworking of Lana del Ray’s album *Born to Die* shows up many times in this study’s search results, but most poignantly shared by a 15-year-old girl who appears to suffer from an eating disorder. This girl is fifteen, white, and a self-described fan of Lana del Ray and pop music in general. In her user description, she describes the content of her posts as “quite a bit of thinspo <3 sex softcore porn <3 and naked women, everything else is things I LOL at :D.” While this picture is a fat joke, the significance of that becomes much clearer in light of her description. “Thinspo,” short for “thinspiration,” is a tag or code for a certain kind of content frequently posted online by those suffering from eating disorders.²⁶⁰ Pro-ana (pro-anorexia) and Pro-mia (pro-bulimia) communities share these images of bone-thin women as “inspiration” and an

²⁶⁰ Laura Stampler, “Inside Pinterest’s Frightening Pro-Anorexia ‘Thinspo’ Cult,” *Business Insider*, March 22, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/inside-pinterests-frightening-pro-anorexia-thinspo-cult-2012-3>.

unattainable ideal.²⁶¹ Sometimes, however, thinspo comes in the form of shaming and what not to look like. In addition to images of thin bodies that are goals, thinspo also offers “what not to do” bodies of normal-sized or overweight women. June’s weight makes her seem barely human and, to this user, she is a signal of what one could become if eating *normally*, to say nothing of eating too much. In these communities, any extra fat is a sign of failure of willpower and mind over body.²⁶²

The user does not even get June’s name right, calling her “Joan,” suggesting that she is unfamiliar with the show and the people on it. June here has no context to explain herself beyond her weight. Here, then, is June as an explicit signifier of fat and worthlessness, used as a comparison point to the thin and useful. She is of so little value that this Tumblr user does not bother to find out her correct name. Her fatness is so defining that despite the user’s apparent lack of familiarity with the show, according to the tags, it is still funny and grotesque to see this woman’s head on Lana del Ray, someone the user idolizes. Knowledge about June and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is not a prerequisite for being able to judge June as lacking any value beyond a “what not to do.” Divorced from context, with only her face and the word “Redneckognize” to guide the viewer, June’s apparent weight and social status are something to identify against, not with. June becomes thinspo because looking like June means that one will be mocked as June is.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Borzekowski et al., “E-Ana and E-Mia.”



Figure 4.12 “If they just lose a bit of weight”

Even those apparently trying to be kind to the Thompson family proclaim the women and girls have worth because, when or if they lose weight, they will be pretty. The reblogs with comments on this post were entirely resistant to the idea that the girls needed to lose weight to be beautiful, but in doing so, held up the idea that beauty is the same as worth. Beauty is so conflated with worth that the defenders proclaim the Thompsons already beautiful because of their behavior and never challenge the idea that beauty is the only measure of worth. One reblogger says, “They are a caring, loving, and accepting family which is more beautiful than a 24-inch waistline will ever be.” The language here is not “more valuable” or “more important,” but instead, more *beautiful*. She conflates worth and beauty entirely, redefining beauty as simply meaning “having value,” and thus upholding the cultural idea that beauty is fundamentally important for women to attain.²⁶³ She does not resist that cultural norm, but instead redefines the concept so that the cultural norm can be more inclusive. This is the mirror to the idea that

²⁶³ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Harper Collins, 2009).

fat makes one bad; either goodness makes you beautiful (the rebloggers) or beauty makes you good. Because fat is not beautiful, June is seen by many as being not good.



Figure 4.13 Alana grabbing her belly

Others Tumblr users, however, use the bodies as a resistance to societal expectations of female physical perfection. Rather than redefining beauty to give the characters worth, they instead personally identify with the bodies that they see. One user posts a popular image from Alana's appearance on *Toddlers & Tiaras* and tags it, "Me, after watching the Victoria's Secret fashion show." This user, a self-described engineer and polyglot, uses this image to reject beauty norms as embraced by the models of Victoria's Secret and to acknowledge that she does not meet the beauty standards of Victoria's Secret. She believes that media makes women, including her, feel fat. In the tags, she brings up eating disorders, as well, implying that the Victoria's Secret models have them. She also claims the non-ideal body explicitly as a representation of herself, identifying both with Alana and with Alana's weight. Here Alana is a representative of

“realness” fighting the “fake” bodies we normally see in women on television. It helps that Alana is young enough for her weight to still be read as “cute.”

The same meme is used by a gay man to discuss his reaction to the Victoria’s Secret show, tying in the pressure of gay men’s body norms with women’s body norms.²⁶⁴ This same image, with and without text added, is also used to describe menstrual periods, being ready for bikini season, and checking abs after a workout. The image is used by a diverse group, representing different genders, sexualities, and races, and they all identify with the struggle in meeting the ideal expected by society. Alana’s weight makes her mockable in some circumstances, but despite the explicit inclusion of her fat in the image, none of the people sharing it mock her weight, nor do they express disgust. Instead, they all see realness and personally identify with that realness.



Figure 4.14 From princess to Boo Boo

²⁶⁴ Scott J. Duggan and Donald R. McCreary, “Body Image, Eating Disorders, and the Drive for Muscularity in Gay and Heterosexual Men: The Influence of Media Images,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 47, no. 3–4 (2004): 45–58.

In the final use of this picture, a 20-year-old black woman who describes herself as a mother-to-be²⁶⁵ contrasts a picture of Charlotte La Bouff from *The Princess and the Frog* with the picture of Alana to illustrate the body changes that happen after birth. Being fat takes one from being a beautiful, rich princess to being a poor, chubby girl who cannot even win pageants. Interesting is the fact that this black woman uses Southern, pale, blonde women as a comparison point to talk about her body. Here we see other hegemonic symbols of beauty in addition to thinness. Blonde hair, expensive clothing, and whiteness are all markers of conventional beauty.²⁶⁶ It is also worth noting that blonde, white Charlotte is a minor character in a film that has a beautiful woman of color as the princess of the film's title; this black woman uses the minor, white character as emblematic of how beautiful she felt before childbirth rather than the black princess. The deterioration from princess to Honey Boo Boo is about not only weight but also class and ability to maintain beauty standards. The differences here are not just weight, but also style and substance. Also embedded here are feelings of loss of control over one's body in motherhood and pregnancy. Again, motherhood is seen as something negative.



Figure 4.15 “My size is cute”

²⁶⁵ Notably, this is the only mention of anyone being or becoming a parent in the profiles.

²⁶⁶ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 1.

Another popular meme shared on Tumblr is Alana saying, “Pretty comes in all different sizes. My size is cute.” Despite her frequent jokes at the expense of her mother’s weight, Alana resists the narrative that being overweight makes her ugly. The majority of blogs with this meme are accompanied with a positive note of identification from the Tumblr user, but not all the blogs are positive. Alana’s lack of shame around her weight is seen by some as a problem. One user posted this gif with the description “KILL ME” and the tags “size” and “bad parenting.” The post argues that parents who teach size-acceptance to their children are instilling bad values; this bad parenting is exacerbated by the fact that the mother and everyone else in the family are also overweight. Reblogs reveal mixed feelings about Alana’s size-acceptance, from support for the original message to anger at his fat shaming. Most users, including the original poster, are careful to avoid insulting Alana herself for her weight, instead focusing their ire and disapproval on the mothering skills of June. Again, her poorness, fatness, and Southernness collude in putting her parenting skills up for debate by those who are not parents. The assumption always appears to be that she is too incompetent to parent well. Throughout all the posts with this image, however, the anger at bad parenting was in the minority; most saw this as an affirming picture with personal meaning around body acceptance and realness. This highlights how some Tumblr users are resisting the negative discourse about women’s bodies, especially around weight, as we will see in the discourse around the following post.



Figure 4.16 Alana is a beautiful chunky lemon

This picture was the most shared and commented-on post found, with over 301,253 notes as of February 20, 2014; only a few other posts reached as many as 1,000. The image depicts an exchange on the show in which June responds to Alana’s comment that her life jacket makes her “look like a chunky lemon” by saying, “It does, it makes you look beautiful.” Although many responses couch their praise for June’s supportive behavior with claims of not liking the show, for being exploitative or stereotypical, the comments are nearly universal in praise for the love and kindness displayed from June on the subject of her daughter’s weight. Here is June as a fat, but good mother who separates the concept of weight from the concept of beauty for her daughter, and again users define beauty as something closer in concept to “value.” As one reblogger puts it:

all humor aside, i really love the way mama june doesn’t say something along the lines of “no it doesn’t” or “you’re not chunky” bc she knows she is. yes. honey boo boo is a heavy girl, as is most of her family and mama june lets her know that because of this, she is beautiful. she let’s her know that shes beautiful no matter what and that’s really important in my opinion

To many women on Tumblr, this message was deeply moving, particularly because the concept of beauty is being conflated with the concept of value. If society teaches that being beautiful is what makes women valuable, but some physically unattractive women demonstrate other kinds of value, then they must be beautiful in some other way. The definition of beauty must be adjusted to include ugly women who are valued. For overweight users who never heard praise for their own beauty, this is an opportunity to redefine beauty in a way that allows them to claim beauty and value. If kindness is valuable, and teaching your child to believe she has value is valuable, then June is clearly someone with value and therefore beauty. Some rebloggers note the personal resonance of the message because June's response is better than the responses they have gotten to their weight from their own mothers and families. June is still grotesque (as seen in the comment "June, aka #howdafuckshegetlaid"), and the family is still "weird" and "fucked up," but they love each other unconditionally and accept each other for who they are, which makes them *beautiful*.

4.2 Body Functions

The fat bodies themselves, however, are not beautiful, regardless of the positive values and self-acceptance they may demonstrate. Often they are grotesque. The show makes a point of including references or instances of, in its own language, farting, pooping, and pissing, among other things. These things are normally edited out of other shows, but *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* will include these things even if they were filmed during the set-up or tear down of a set; something that would never be included otherwise. Unlike the fat itself, this behavior rarely elicits disgust from the Tumblr

audience. Mentions of farts and fart jokes earn comments like “amen” and “the genius.” The exception to this comes from Sol, who was so cruel with her weight jokes. Here, although she is mocking June, she is not nearly as barbed, and for once compares June to an animation featuring a human rather than an animal. June is still being represented as overweight and male.



Figure 4.17 NemO’s *Cagacemento*²⁶⁷

This animated painting is of a naked, hairless white man eating trees and defecating houses; the original and unanimated *Cagacemento* by NemO’s is a commentary on the destruction of the environment to make way for housing.²⁶⁸ Here Sol uses it as a way to illustrate “nervous pooping,” a term June uses to describe her stomach problems when she experiences anxiety. While the original piece condemns the consumption because it leads to destruction, Sol uses it because when she came across the image elsewhere it reminded her of June’s phrase, “nervous pooping.” Sol continues to use male figures to represent June, which serve to deny June’s status as a woman, but

²⁶⁷ NemO’s, “Cagacemento,” *Whoisnemos?*, January 1, 2010, <http://www.whoisnemos.com/2010/cagacemento/>.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

this post compares June to a white male figure rather than a black one. Unlike the other posts from Sol, it is not explicitly a joke about June being an animal or fat, but instead simply illustrates a “gross” concept introduced by June on the show and in memes. We see that for some users the body functions are not nearly the source of negativity for the family as their weight is, but also that the show itself is focused on those body functions.



Figure 4.18 “About to piss all over myself”

Another popular gif is of Alana saying, “I’m so excited that I’m about to piss all over myself.” Originally exclaimed over the imminent arrival of her new niece, Kaitlyn, it has been taken up by Tumblr as a reaction gif to anything they are excited about, be it One Direction, vacations, or graduations. The idea of peeing oneself might be grotesque, but the extremeness is perfectly suited to reaction gifs. The emotion it is meant to illustrate, that of “excitement,” is written within the picture, which helps improve its chances of being used as an illustration of excitement. This image and the variations of it on Tumblr are shared because the hyperbole of the statement adds emphasis to the idea of excitement. Again, despite the grotesque nature of the act and the normally unspoken nature of the body function being discussed, Tumblr users identify with Alana and her

“realness.” Something that makes the family unusual on television makes them more real and relatable to some.



Figure 4.19 Sugar Bear is proud

The other Tumblr post from this study that mentions urinating is one of Sugar Bear talking about his teenage daughter Pumpkin.²⁶⁹ More than the other characters, Sugar Bear speaks in a redneck style, and this quote is no exception. In it, he expresses his approval of Pumpkin learning to pee standing up because it is the closest he will come to having a son. The image also features the hashtag "#TrouserSnake," which is TLC's recommended hashtag and the name of the episode. Unlike reactions to Alana talking about pissing all over herself, the reactions to this image are from users who are mildly shocked by the content. Alana's excitement (and age) was enough to make the possible "pissing" funny and useful as a reaction gif, but this is a more difficult to grasp emotional response. The sentiment expressed by Sugar Bear is a contemplative and wistful one.

²⁶⁹ Technically, he is not her biological father nor is he married to June, but their relationship is father-daughter.

Sugar Bear is the biological father of only one of June’s four daughters, Alana, but he has become the father figure for both Pumpkin and Chubbs. Although June is still young enough at 33 to have more children, she is already a grandmother. It is unclear whether any more children are in their future, but this comment from Sugar Bear suggests not. Here, then, is a semi-sad statement from a father who believes he will never have a son, but worded in a way that grosses out the users of Tumblr. It is not the body product itself that disturbs viewers, instead it is the sentiment attached to that body product. Tumblr users do not identify with Sugar Bear, perhaps because he is older than they are and dealing with issues that they do not identify with or perhaps because he speaks in a way that is so clearly demarcated as “redneck.”



Figure 4.20 June’s neck crust

The final body product discussed on Tumblr in this study is directly to do with June’s weight. Her weight has created rolls of flesh on her neck and, in between these rolls, dead skin and oil build up creating what she calls her “neck crust.” References to the neck crust are used by Tumblr users to demonstrate the “grossness” of being fat. The

response to the existence of this body product are strictly disgust, but usually amusement at how disgusting it is. Before Valentine's Day, one user created a Valentine's Day card featuring June's "neck crust." The card reads, "My neck crust won't be the only thing I'll have you touching tonight," and is accompanied by a picture of June blowing a kiss. The image juxtaposes a flirtatious image of June and sexual innuendo with the gross body product of her neck crust; the joke is in how disgusted one would be to receive this card because June's weight and the products of that weight are disgusting.

The young woman who shared this on Tumblr was the original creator of the image and phrase, and thought the idea was funny enough and relevant enough to the Valentine's Day season that she spent a long time learning how to use an image editor apparently in order to produce the image before Valentine's Day had passed.²⁷⁰ According to the post's hashtags of "it took me forever" and "photoshop is hard," the user is an amateur at image manipulation and found this simple image difficult to create. This reveals that wanting to participate in a cultural dialogue on Tumblr leads individuals to learn skills related to image production. In this image, we see someone not only developing new skills of communication, but also doing so specifically so that they can make a fat joke. The themes introduced in this post, the Valentine's Day Card, and the juxtaposition of grotesque weight and being sexual, become prevalent in the next two sections.

4.3 Food

In addition to discussion of the weight and gross bodies, the Tumblr posts offer much focus on the foods and patterns of consumption that help make the family's bodies

²⁷⁰ The posts were gathered in February.

overweight and grotesque. The Thompson family is a group who are obsessed with food, who have overly strong feelings about food, and who do weird things with food. Their overweight and therefore offensive bodies are a result of their gluttony and refusal to eat a proper diet. Their terrible diet and the fat bodies that diet creates are a result of being rednecks and white trash who eat trashy food. From cheeseballs to roadkill, this section explores Tumblr users' fascination, disgust, and identification with the food of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, revealing attitudes about class and Southernness.

The predominant attitude towards the Thompson family's relationship with food, and especially their relationship with hunger, is one of identification and appreciation for the "realness" of it. Their diet is not healthy, involves eating too much, and relies heavily on junk food, but many people's diets are not ideal and, even those who eat well often want to eat what they should not. For some, it is reassuring to see people on television who have relationships with food that are similar to their own. The Thompson family's dislike of healthy food and constant hunger, especially when divorced from their weight, is generally seen as real and identifiable.



Figure 4.21 Alana and Pumpkin are always hungry

One of the common tropes seen in the Tumblr posts is the idea that the family is hungry all the time, and when this is shared, the Tumblr users identify with the sentiment.

Alana saying, “This is making me hungry, too,” is met with, “Basically me in every situation,” by a self-described gay man and, “Let’s Be Real. Pretty Much Everything,” from another user who is apparently a gay man. Likewise, Pumpkin gets this treatment when uttering the similar, “It just kinda made me hungry,” which is shared by an African-American woman saying, “Me at everything.” In these posts, the idea of everything making someone hungry is something Tumblr users identify with rather than censure. In some ways, this divorces the ideas of weight and food, and therefore the consequences of eating all the time. It also is a result of acknowledging and identifying with the common human urge to eat, often when one does not need to, something not often shared on television.

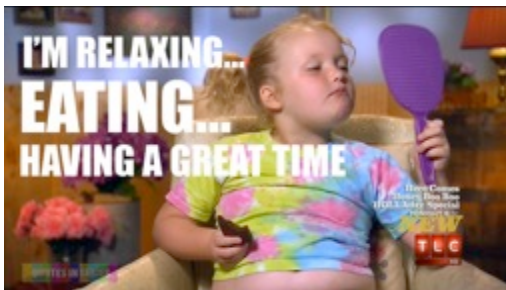


Figure 4.22 Alana relaxing and eating

Another frequently-shared image is that of Alana looking into a handheld mirror, eating, and describing what she’s currently doing – “I’m relaxing, eating, having a great time.” In the many blogs and reblogs of this and variations on it, Tumblr users are using it to describe their weekends or vacations. While most of the posters find this humorous, it is implied through hashtags or other context that this is not ideal. One ironically calls this “inspiration quotes.” Another tags it, “Single,” “dating,” and “drunk.” Although there is identification, it is specifically identification with fat and food. Comments like, “I’m fat,” accusations of the family being “redneck,” and references to being single as either

the cause or the effect of the fatness permeate. Others add thoughts offer indifference: “mehhh.” The consensus seems to be that it is not the best use of time, but it is better than working. Laziness and food obsession are not things to aspire to in life, but they are enjoyable.

What the family represents in this discourse, then, is not a representation of an ideal but instead a representation of reality. For many people, it is difficult to identify with characters in media who never eat bad food or gain any weight; many people gain a great deal of pleasure from eating, especially in eating the kind of junk food you see primarily in commercials rather than in shows. The Thompsons offer an identifiable and relatable picture, which makes it easy for Tumblr users to then use the family as stand-ins for themselves. The things that make them detestable white trash on some fronts also make them more realistic people on other fronts.

“We called to see if you wanted food from McDonald’s, but you didn’t answer in time so we didn’t get you anything.”

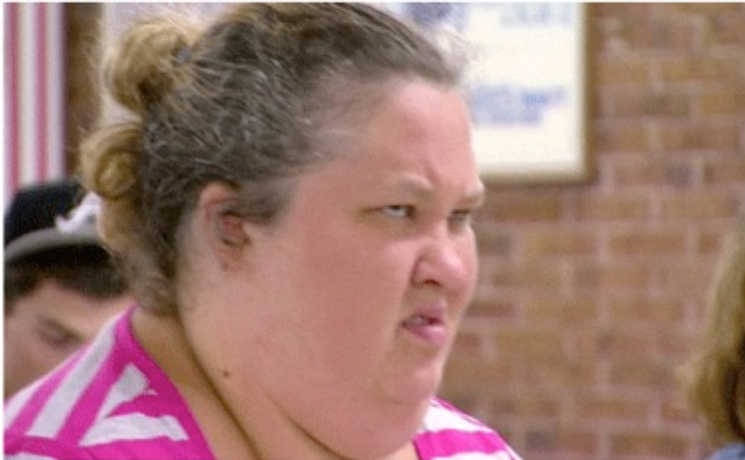


Figure 4.23 Upset because of no food from McDonald’s

Users also use screen-captures from the show wholly unrelated to food to describe their own feelings about food. Because the family is so wrapped up in ideas about food,

because of their weight, and because of their on-camera eating habits, the show provides plenty of reaction gifs that are appropriate to use as stand-ins for the users' own food issues, whether it be frustration at not getting McDonald's from their parents (particularly appropriate given Alana's obsession with McNuggets) or having to watch your food being served to the wrong table. Tumblr users use the Thompsons as representations of themselves and are comfortable reworking images to make new, personalized meanings around food. For example, June's "redneck dance" is used to show users' excitement for pizza, despite the fact that the dance has nothing to do with food. Since Tumblr users have identified the Thompson family as people who care about food, especially food like pizza and McDonald's, it is logical to appropriate their emotions from the show and apply them to food-related content. The family's poor white trash status makes them one of the few families on television that would be excited about eating the lowbrow food that many Americans enjoy regardless of class.

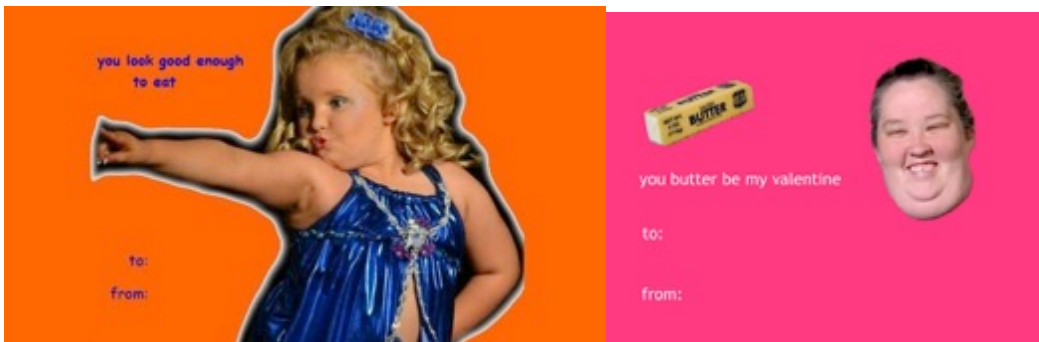


Figure 4.24 Food for Valentine's Day

The repurposing of gifs that are not food related is not strictly identification related, however. Users also use the specific food that the Thompsons eat to mock their weight and eating habits. When using the show to make Valentine's cards, the Tumblr

users make non-food-related pictures into food or eating references. Alana blowing a kiss is captioned, “You look good enough to eat.” June’s disembodied head with a stick of butter next to it reads, “You butter be my Valentine.” Obviously, neither of these is intended to be romantic, they are both jokes at the expense of Alana and June. It is worth noting, however, that these jokes are not mean-spirited in the same way as the fat jokes in the previous section, nor do they seem to play on issues of class.



Figure 4.25 Snacks in “The Love Room”

In the show, the Thompsons fixate on food over other important things in life, and Tumblr users tend to identify, even when making jokes. June especially has much more interest in food than other pleasures, including her relationship with her partner. While Sugar Bear is interested in sex and romance, June is much more interested in snack food. June explicitly ranks food as far more interesting than romance. Of the seven reposts of the above gif set, six are people claiming to be the same; notably, one says, “me on my honeymoon.” It seems this show is offering a voice to people who have different priorities than they are expected to. These are primarily straight women and gay men, two identities that are associated with unhealthy eating and dieting and a need to be thin to be

attractive, expressing their love of eating, even at the expense of other things in their lives.²⁷¹ It is worth noting, then, that certain marginalized ways of being are offered representation by the family, not just representations of poor white trash, fatness, or Southernness. The show also offers a somewhat non-judgmental portrayal of opinions and desires not commonly seen on television. Male romanticism, female dislike of romance, and unabashed love of food may be related to their other marginalized identities, but they also seem to stand separate from them to the Tumblr users. Because of their class, their gender, and their weight, the family has little cultural or political capital, leaving them free not to engage with expectations generally applied to women. They have no shame around something that commonly causes shame in mainstream society because they lose nothing in rejecting those norms. The behaviors make them grotesque and shameful to some, but identifiable and real to others.



Figure 4.26 Cranberry sauce on Alana’s face

²⁷¹ Duggan and McCreary, “Body Image, Eating Disorders, and the Drive for Muscularity in Gay and Heterosexual Men”; Borzekowski et al., “E-Ana and E-Mia”; Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*.

The Thompson family's relationship with food is not completely identifiable for the users of Tumblr, especially when they use food in unusual ways. They do unusual things with food in addition to eating it. One of the girls uses butter as a hair conditioning treatment, prompting a user to write, "America |: [discontented face]." Anything strange on the show is assumed to be a basic part of "redneck" culture and, for many, this redneck culture is about our entire country being fat and gross with food, not just the poor white trash of the American South. Here on Tumblr there are Americans who are ashamed of their fellow Americans' behavior. In another Tumblr post, Alana's obsession with cranberry sauce, American for its association with Thanksgiving, involves her spreading it all over her face; this is shown as reason to "hate that shit [the show] so much" by a straight man. Another user uses the blood red cranberry sauce on Alana's face to represent herself "after killing all her haters."



Figure 4.27 Chicken as moisturizer²⁷²

In addition to her behavior with the cranberry sauce, Alana uses chicken to moisturize her knees. One user responds to this with, "can you say?! Diabetes?! lol." In addition to misunderstanding the nature of diabetes, the user takes the opportunity to

²⁷² The statement is the extent of the explanation. Some mysteries...

mock Alana's weight and health for doing something with food that has nothing to do with eating it. Here we see the tropes of food as heavily related to the weight of the Thompsons. Even if there is no reason to think the food is unhealthy or even being eaten, any weird behavior with food is indicative of an inappropriate relationship: the kind of relationship that leads someone to being trashy and fat.

It is likely that their inappropriate relationship with food *is* a factor in their struggles with weight. Alana, for example, appears to have an addiction to chicken nuggets. Again, users on Tumblr tend to identify with the struggle between eating and not being "chunky." "the struggle is real," "my life basically," and "the reason I'm taking up yoga" are the reasons AR, a young woman, posts this image. "#lifestory" agrees one of her followers. The Thompsons have no self-control and food is to be eaten and is addictive. They are lazy and have no discipline, but users identify because it is genuinely difficult not to eat food you love.



Figure 4.28 But really, why can't sides be meat?

The Thompsons' preference for "bad for you" food also leads to users identifying with them, from their avoidance of vegetables to their wish that there be more butter in food. When Alana and her sisters eat meat and wish for no vegetable sides, the Tumblr

users respond, “same,” and, “In that moment, I swear we were all honey boo boo.” This identification is primarily coming from teenage women and teenage gay men.



Figure 4.29 Alana has never eaten a salad

The same is true of the popular gif of Alana saying, “The last time I had a salad was never.” “true story,” “Totally me,” “Me trying to eat healthy,” “my life goal,” and “I often think I AM Honey Boo Boo” are the reblogs and comments. This authenticity of her struggle with weight and food that she does not find appealing is meaningful to Tumblr users. While most people weigh less than June Shannon and were not as heavy as Alana is at that age, people struggle to eat well, especially in teen years. Teen girls and gay men are finding an icon, a representative of themselves, in Alana’s love of food.



Figure 4.30 Alana’s roadkill wish list

This identification is surprisingly present even when Alana talks about eating roadkill, which is well outside the mainstream. When she lists her roadkill wish list, something the producers asked her for, it is posted with the comment, “I bloody love Here Comes Honey Boo Boo,” from a teenage woman who wishes she was slimmer. One might expect shaming, but instead there is self-proclaimed love. The closest to shame around roadkill comes from a user who describes herself as a young, vegan, Moorish-American, Black Nationalist woman in New York City.

So I’m watching honey boo boo . The pastor said “I don’t eat road kill, I couldn’t eat something someone ran over” my question is wth is the difference from store brought meat? I rather eat road kill (if I was a meat eater) then eat gmo meat. A wild animal isn’t injected with hormones.

This user thinks that it would actually be far more ethical to eat roadkill than to eat other meat. Here, Alana is a moral leader in eating roadkill. It is interesting, too, that a self-defined black nationalist in New York City would find something to praise in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. Contrasted with Sol, it is clear that young, politically aware black women on Tumblr are not a monolith and have complicated and different relationships with the show. Sol takes issues with June's weight, while others find something identifiable or even noble in Alana or June's behavior.

4.4 Sex

The discourse around Honey Boo Boo and sex on Tumblr, like much of the discourse around the show, is centered on the disgust or reclamation of the fat body. For the most part, this discourse centers on June, who is an openly sexual woman, and, to a lesser extent, on her partner Sugar Bear, who is much more romantic and sexual than June. Likewise, the relationship between food and sex is explored. June sexualizes her excitement about food, and Tumblr users sexualize it for her, often to the disgust of other Tumblr users.



Figure 4.31 June is excited about mustard

A self-described “weirdo” whose user description mentions being mistreated by “rednecks,” posted the above image of June sexually wiggling her tongue in response to the price of mustard. Excerpt of his user description:

I've always felt out of place, like no one would ever get me.. I thought that I wasn't normal. Tennessee redneck teenagers made fun of me and called me fag, druggie and hippie.. and they all said I was a pretentious hipster because of the "weird" and "obscure" movies, music and shows I wasted my time enjoying.
..... Then one day I made a Tumblr and shit changed FOREVER!!

As his description suggests, he posts anything that he finds “weird.” Much of his Tumblr shares obscure images, but this relatively mainstream piece from a widely watched cable television show is weird enough to qualify for his feed, especially considering the disdain for rednecks he includes in his user description. In the context of his user description, it is hard not to see this as redneck bashing. Here we see an urbane white man who enjoys obscure culture and does not repudiate the label “hipster” mocking a poor white woman for her excitement over a good financial deal on mustard. From his privileged position, he can easily judge June’s behavior as “wtf.” The premise of his entire Tumblr is weirdness, and on his page, June is situated between an animated head vomiting pink ice cream into cones and a close-up of a man blowing his tongue and lips in slow motion. To him, June’s excitement is equally mystifying.



Figure 4.32 June calls vaginas “biscuits”

Several users shared a Valentine’s Day card featuring June and her unique vocabulary regarding genitalia. It reads, “With your sausage and my biscuit, we could make a delicious breakfast sandwich.” “Biscuit” is one of June’s many euphemisms for “vagina.” This Valentine’s Day joke is accompanied by June doing a sexy and cute pose for the camera. The humor depends on knowing June’s vocabulary and that she is obsessed with food. Although done as a joke, one reblog says, “Biscuits are dry. No, thanks.” This dig, aimed at June’s sexuality, is meant to deny her sexual power, in no small part because of her weight.



Figure 4.33 June seducing the camera

Mocking June for her lack of embarrassment about her interest in having sex is popular. Even when users identify with her flirting in an intentionally self-deprecating manner, these are meant to point out that when June tries to be sexy she is, instead, laughable. Mama June’s sexy face gets tagged “#4chins,” but also has many identifying it as their own inept flirting styles. Latinas join the fun by calling June “mijitarica” (hot girl) and “loqueta” (flirtatious). Mocking fat women trying to be sexy transcends cultural

barriers. When June acts more overtly sexual by, for example, bouncing her large breasts in her hands, this leads to users being more uncomfortable and less willing to identify with her.

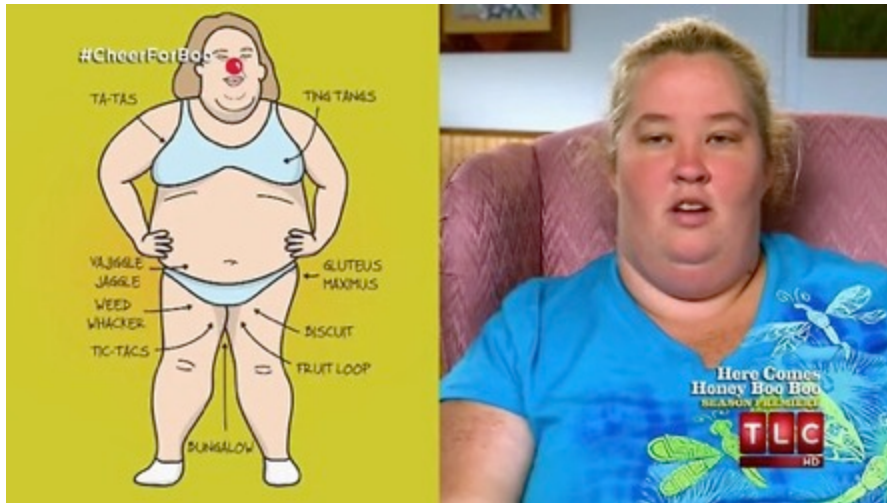


Figure 4.34 June as the board game *Operation*

While June is happy to be openly sexual with her body, she does not like to use real words for sexual body parts. In an image from the show, June is drawn as the *Operation* board game with her sexual parts labeled using her slang. When this image is shared, it garners an ironic “Mmmmmm” from one reblogger. Her weight, even when portrayed in cartoon form, is grotesque, and it is made more grotesque by the emphasis placed on her sexual body parts. That emphasis is further exaggerated by June’s own preoccupation with developing alternate words to describe private parts. Perhaps the only thing less appealing to the average Tumblr user than highlighting the sexual parts of her body is that June actually does have sex.

Honey Boo Boo's mother has a boyfriend and you're single.



Just let that sink in.

Figure 4.35 June has a boyfriend

One of the Honey Boo Boo memes experienced a resurgence around Valentine's Day. This image points out that June, divorced of all self-identity and known only as "Honey Boo Boo's mother," has the ability to be in a relationship while others are single. If June can get a boyfriend, how sad and "forever alone" is your future if you have not managed the same feat? Similarly, "the sisters of Honey Boo Boo" are also able to get boyfriends, while teenage girls on Tumblr cannot. To the teenage girls on Tumblr, this is a tragedy. If fat, trashy, ugly women and girls can get boyfriends, what is wrong with the user that they are "boyfriendless?" This is teenage angst and self-pity, but premised entirely on the idea that the women in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* are unworthy of affection and or sexual attraction. These women are trash and even the Tumblr population of teenage girls that otherwise finds ways to identify with them thinks it is a bad reflection on them that the Thompson family can get boyfriends but they cannot.

Interestingly, however, the boyfriends wooing the Thompson women do not draw the same gloom as merely noting that the boyfriends exist. Sugar Bear is frequently openly romantic toward June, even though she is not always that receptive. His romantic

affections, like waiting in a bubble bath with champagne for June or bringing her flowers, are warmly received by Tumblr users, especially gay men and straight women. Sugar Bear's romantic love for June earns him praise, "what a man," "Awwwwwww," and "my goal in life to find someone who loves me as much as Sugar Bear loves Mama June."



Figure 4.36 Sugar Bear on trouser snakes

When the show allows Sugar Bear to be sexual rather than romantic, however, the response from Tumblr is less enthusiastic. Sugar Bear with flowers may be the Platonic ideal of love for average people, but Sugar Bear with a "trouser snake" is reason for one's "dinner coming back up." For Tumblr users, it is acceptable for Sugar Bear to love this fat woman and offer her romantic gestures, but as soon as he is sexual, thus identifying June as sexual, it is disgusting. Likewise, it is disgusting that a man is interested in June at all, also thereby sexualizing her. Male romance is a positive, but fat female sexuality, and perhaps even male redneck sexuality, is something the Tumblr users would prefer not to think about.



Figure 4.37 From the movie *Bad Grandpa*

Tumblr users may refuse to sexualize June, but many users sexualize Alana, the eight-year-old, almost entirely because of her participation in pageants. Pageants have a cultural reputation for being nothing more than the sexualization of little girls.²⁷³ It is unsurprising, then, to find under a gif from the film *Bad Grandpa*, in which a boy is dressed like a pageant girl and performs a sexual dance for an old man, his grandfather in the film. This scene is likely a parody of a scene from *Little Miss Sunshine* in which a young girl does a dance to the song “Superfreak,” but it is also meant to parody *Toddlers & Tiaras*. Although tagged “Honey Boo Boo,” it has nothing to do with Alana or the show beyond portraying a child pageant. The “Honey Boo Boo” tag is partially to get more views, but also to intentionally associate Alana with the sexualized behavior in the film. Even though she is a child, her status as trash and as a pageant girl make her eligible for this sexualization without protest from other Tumblr users.

²⁷³ Wardy, “An Open Letter to TLC: Cancel Toddlers & Tiaras.”



Figure 4.38 Valentine's cards featuring Alana

Alana was also included in a series of sexual Valentine's Day card designs. The most popular card was a play on her famous catchphrase, "A dolla makes me holla, Honey Boo Boo child." The card said, "heres a dolla cuz you make me holla," and included an image of a dollar bill next to Alana in her midriff-revealing pageant swimwear. Like the other Valentine's Day cards found in this study, this is intended to be funny rather than romantic as seen in its hashtags #lol and #notsromantic. It was shared by many users, including a twenty-two-year-old woman "looking for a sugar daddy or two, holla at me if you're rich and willing to bankroll my lifestyle." Alana's catchphrase was also reworded to be made sexual: "a DOLLA ain't the only thing that's gonna make you HOLLA tonight." The card that earned the most laughs from other Tumblr users referenced a Round2Crew song, "Booty had me like," which is a song about a man checking out a woman's "booty." While much of this feeds off content in the show, the cards all involve additional sexualization of a child by Tumblr users.

One of the more striking aspects of this sexualization of Alana is that it is so similar in tone to the way June is spoken of, but without any of the disgust. The idea of Alana as sexual is funny, because she is a child, and it is acceptable to make her sexual because she is white trash on television. June makes herself sexual, but it is considered equally implausible that she could be an object of sexual interest, despite the fact that she

is a known object of sexual interest. Jokes about Alana's sexuality are absurd because she is a child and jokes about June's sexuality are absurd because she is immensely fat, and permission to make these jokes is granted for both by their status as white trash reality television stars. The sexualization of Alana will be seen again in the following chapter, in Tumblr users' response to her normal childhood dislike of the opposite sex and dating.



Figure 4.39 “Get outta my ass”

The final prominent sexual trope about Honey Boo Boo on Tumblr is incest. Incest is always a specter when talking about rednecks and poor white trash. Jokes about inbreeding and deformities as a result thereof are frequent when discussing the South.²⁷⁴ Although a few gifs from the show of the family playing and slapping each other's butts get shared, most of the hinting at incest comes from baby Kaitlyn's third thumb.

²⁷⁴ Wray, *Not Quite White*, 177.



Figure 4.40 Alana is jealous of Kaitlyn’s extra thumb

This is played heavily within the show itself, but on Tumblr and users respond positively to Alana’s love and jealousy of Kaitlyn’s extra thumb. Although Kaitlyn is her niece, at only eight years her junior, their one-sided rivalry is much more like that of a youngest child getting a new sibling. Although Alana has never won a pageant, despite participating in many, baby Kaitlyn won the first she competed in, “cutest redneck baby,” which Alana is convinced is because of the extra thumb. Alana is also jealous of the extra thumb because she thinks it would allow her to eat more cheeseballs. When Kaitlyn has a party and Alana thinks it is outrageous for a one-year-old, a user writes of Alana, “This party and two thumbs? Kaitlin’s got it all, huh?” On Tumblr, where incest is not divorced from the idea of “redneck,” it becomes a G-rated part of adorable almost-sibling dynamics. Rather than invoking a sense of censure or shame, the redneck family dynamics are sweet and the show offers an authentic portrayal of a child who loves and is jealous of the new youngest member of her family.

The continuum of shame and realness seen throughout the Tumblr discourse about the body reveals a complicated relationship between Tumblr users and stereotypes of fat and redneck bodies, their functions and behavior. In the following chapter, this study explores the much more dichotomous discourse Tumblr users have about LGBTQ

support and redneck behavior. In many ways, the subject matter of the body plays as a specific kind of redneck discourse, one that is conflated with other societal beauty and behavioral norms. That women and gay men are those most responding to the body discourses relates to the dichotomy covered in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: LGBTQ and Redneck Discourses

Though discourses of the body are the most cohesive and specific discourses observed in the Tumblr posts analyzed in this study, two other discourses appear throughout the posts, including those about the body. LGBTQ and redneck discourse permeate the sample, influencing the reading of most of the posts. The previous chapter explored the role the body played in supporting redneck stereotypes, but also showed how some users embrace the show for portraying women who love their fat bodies. This chapter will first explain the relationship between the LGBTQ and redneck discourses. It then analyzes the LGBTQ discourses found in the posts, followed by an analysis of the redneck discourses. The end of the chapter focuses on the shame and realness concepts found throughout the discourse on rednecks.

The conflict between condemnation and support plays out in the LGBTQ and redneck discourses, and these discourses stand on opposite ends of the realness to shame spectrum. The family's support of the LGBTQ community forgives or redeems the Thompsons' redneck behavior for many Tumblr users, but the family is still defined by redneck stereotypes. The family's support of LGBTQ causes and Alana's outspokenness on the subject of being gay makes the family valuable to LGBTQ people and their allies. Because they are rednecks, they prove that there is no reason other Southerners or self-identified rednecks cannot be LGBTQ friendly. The LGBTQ discourse is similar to the fat-positive discourse around the family; it is supportive and speaks to how loving and

happy the family is. LGBTQ support stands as one pole in the continuum while the redneck stereotypes and hatred of fat bodies stands as the opposite pole. However, these discourses are all continuums and there are varying degrees of support and disgust in both the discourses examined in this chapter.

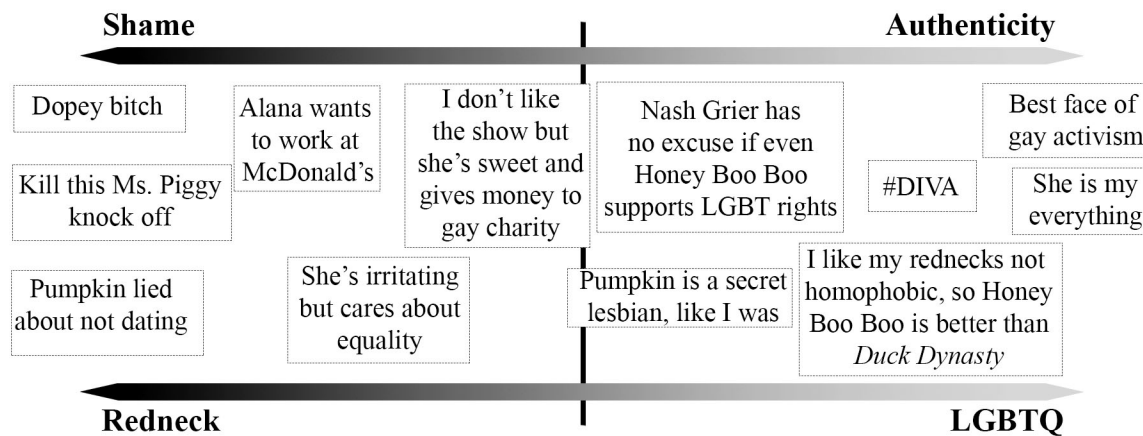


Figure 5.1 Redneck to LGBTQ Continuum

5.1 LGBTQ

Discourse around LGBTQ issues permeates the sample. Alana’s role as a pageant performer trying to become a “queen” and her over-the-top “sassy” behavior earns her fans, either of her self-love and glamour or of her attitude. It is worth noting that this sassiness that is attributed to gay culture throughout the posts and in mainstream culture often explicitly and implicitly co-opts black women’s vernacular.²⁷⁵ The kind of “diva culture” that Alana is a part of is a mixture of gay attitude and black attitude and creates a femininity that is not coded as white female. There is tension between the black woman community and the white gay male community because of gay, and especially drag

²⁷⁵ Sierra Mannie, “Dear White Gays: Stop Stealing Black Female Culture,” *Time*, July 9, 2014, <http://time.com/2969951/dear-white-gays-stop-stealing-black-female-culture/>; E. Patrick Johnson, “Snap! Culture: A Different Kind of ‘Reading,’” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (April 1, 1995): 122–42, doi:10.1080/10462939509366110.

queen, cooptation of black vernacular and stereotypical black female codes of speech and “attitude.” Alana’s age helps insulate her from accusations of co-optation or appropriation, though certainly not completely.²⁷⁶ That she is white trash also insulates her because the label “white trash” serves to take away whiteness and confer blackness onto white people who are poor and to separate them from “good whites.”²⁷⁷ Alana’s popular catchphrase, which predates the *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* television show, is “A dolla makes me holla, honey boo boo child.” This catchphrase illustrates the overlap in language that speaks to blackness, gayness, and white trashness.



Figure 5.2 Alana threatening to “go ghetto”

One of the more frequently shared memes features Alana saying, “Don’t make me go ghetto on you” or “Don’t make me go ghetto on your ass.” One share of this image comes from an English teacher and trans man, who captions it, “Miss, can I get an extension.” Although the user identifies as a male in their profile description, he still passes as female in his face-to-face interactions. Here the user co-opts a black vernacular

²⁷⁶ Andrews, “Honey Boo Boo Child and Black Stereotypes.”

²⁷⁷ Hartigan, “Name Calling.”

phrase from Alana to express his own frustration with students. The frustration appears to stem from two separate issues: one, that the students want an extension and two, that he is being misgendered, possibly because he is not out.

This same image is shared by a 20-year-old lesbian, a couple into BDSM, and two other users. All but one have reposts, adding up to 18 takes on this quote from Alana, and they are almost all positive and involve self-identification (“Me all the time!”). The one exception is brutal: “I want to kill this hideous Ms Piggy knock off so badly.” As we saw in the previous section, Alana’s oversize body and lower class status make her not only non-human (in this case, a pig), but also disposable, a kind of vermin. Fatness is a way to subjugate the unwanted, and denying them their humanness is a way of removing both their power and their value to others.



Figure 5.3 June thinks she is “beautiful”

The posts with LGBTQ text or subtext are frequently in the form of LGBTQ and allied people sharing reaction gifs. A gay man shares an image of June saying, “Shoot, I look beautiful,” with the added caption, “Basically me getting ready every morning.” Another shares pictures of Alana modeling clothes and labels it “diva.” Alana and June’s sassiness is very popular in reaction gifs, but most shares lack any additional

commentary. Many of the posts lack even a title, making the only discourse available the fact that they shared the image without commentary. A significant portion of the ones that do offer additional commentary simply have a title that expresses identification with the emotion at certain times, “Me when school is out,” etc. The word “sass” is frequently used, along with the words “diva,” “fabulous,” “queen,” “gives me life,” and “get it girl.” These words and phrases are all coded as gay. Indeed, words that are explicitly related to sexuality appear frequently; “gay,” “queer,” “LGBTQ/GLBT,” “bi,” “not straight,” “lesbian,” “dyke,” “fag,” “homo,” and “trans” are littered throughout the sample, appearing in user descriptions, captions, and tags.



Figure 5.4 Alana being sassy

These posts contribute to an understanding of what is in the show and what people positively respond to, but do not offer a great deal of discourse to analyze. They form a kind of atmosphere in which it is apparent why there is gay discourse and creating a general background of gayness, which is so pervasive that, even without additional commentary, it is clear that Honey Boo Boo itself is coded as gay-related. A telling example is a post from a gay Australian that has no description or title, just an image of 4 people from the show, with Alana posing for the camera and the others standing around.

Alana's attitude and noticeable difference from others makes her identifiable to many, but especially to gay Tumblr.

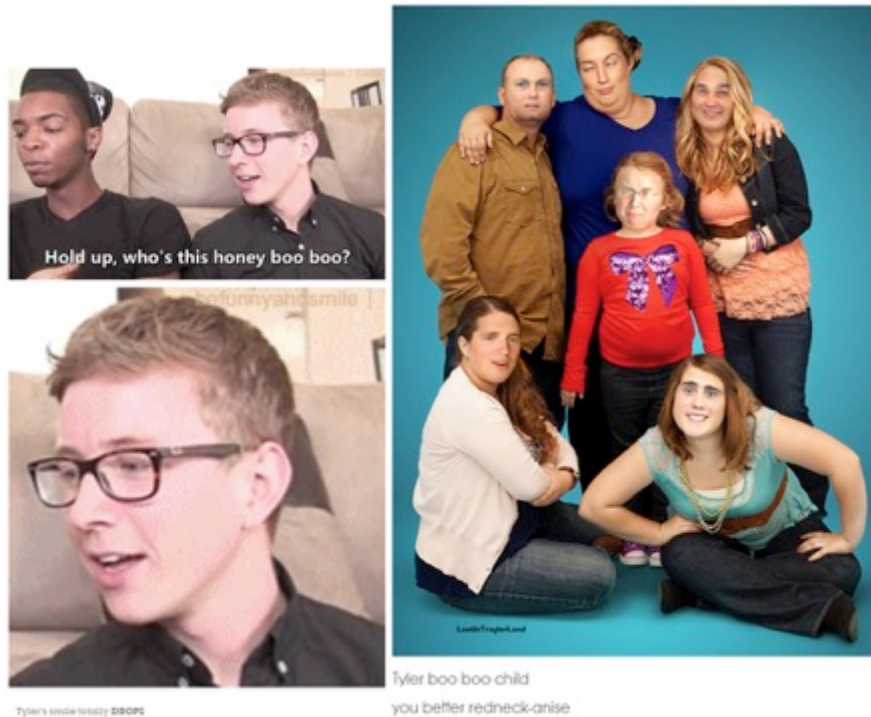


Figure 5.5 Tyler Oakley, the Honey Boo Boo fan

The discourse and reasons behind the discourse become more apparent when looking at posts that explicitly connect Honey Boo Boo to gay rights and gay celebrity.

Tyler Oakley is a social media and YouTube celebrity who is also a big fan of Honey Boo Boo, as he says on his YouTube channel:

Honey Boo Boo is a phenomenon. She is a pop culture icon. She is a spiritual goddess. She is everything to me. She stopped Kony single-handedly. She is the reason we went to Mars and you will redneckcognize. She is everything. If you don't know who Honey Boo Boo is you need to put down your books and pick up the TV remote and educate yourself.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁸ Tyler Oakley, *Vajiggle Jaggie & Neck Crust*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdi4_OjGjnc.

Oakley appears in four different posts and is connected to Honey Boo Boo either by his own speech or by someone photoshopping his face onto Alana or June. One image shows another YouTube star, Kingsley, who is gay and black, asking Oakley who Honey Boo Boo is and shows Oakley’s speechless reaction. There is an implied racial divide in who watches and is familiar with the show. Another image has the faces of many online celebrities photoshopped onto the characters in the show and Oakley himself is Alana. It is captioned, “Tyler boo boo child you better redneck-anise.”



Figure 5.6 Adore Delano quotes Alana

A similar shared image is one of the finalists from *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, Adore Delano, repeating Alana’s catchphrase, “A dolla make me holla!” These shares reveal that Honey Boo Boo has become part of gay culture beyond Tumblr. Gay television and Tumblr have both co-opted Honey Boo Boo as part of their cultural language. Although this co-opting stems partially from Honey Boo Boo’s participation in pageants and her sassy attitude, it seems to be influenced greatly by her support of LGBTQ rights.

A post from user TC helps reveal why LGBTQ millennials on Tumblr might be drawn to Honey Boo Boo. In this post, TC compares *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* to *Duck Dynasty*. The self-described redneck men of *Duck Dynasty* are vocally

homophobic.²⁷⁹ TC writes, “I prefer my redneck reality stars to be more open minded. Therefore, Honey Boo Boo is where it’s at.” The Thompsons’ support for gay people seems to redeem them from the redneck reality television that is so much against them on issues like their weight and class. Their modeling of LGBTQ acceptance from a group considered homophobic makes them heroes. They resist the stereotype, which makes them appealing as unlikely and strong allies for the LGBTQ Tumblr crowd.



Figure 5.7 Alana is a gay rights activist

J is a 21 year old from Louisiana and a self-described “Southern Belle.” She shares a gif set of Alana saying that Glitzzy the Pig can be gay “if he wants to” with the caption, “The best face of gay activism,” and four reposts agree: “Pigs have gay rights too,” “Yesssss boo,” “She’s my spirit animal,” and “K.” These users all love Alana for

²⁷⁹ Drew Margary, “What the Duck?,” *GQ*, December 17, 2013, <http://www.gq.com/story/duck-dynasty-phil-robertson>.

being so aggressive in her defense of gayness and for being so young and sassy in attitude in doing so. Here again is the use of the term “spirit animal,” co-opted from Native American religious beliefs, revealing cultural and racial insensitivity in the users who are so sensitive to LGBTQ rights. This insensitivity, along with the co-optation of black women’s language as gay language, reveals the users of Tumblr to have a worldview strongly shaped by LGBTQ issues. Alana channels gay and drag culture in her attitude and speech and this resonates with Tumblr. Another frequent share is Alana’s quote, “Ain’t nothing wrong with bein’ a little gay. Everybody’s a little gay.” These shares all agree with the sentiment or appreciate it. Here Alana is lauded as a gay ally on mainstream television even while her co-optation of language reinforces a hegemony in which a white woman can take the culture of others.



Figure 5.8 Alana does not want a boyfriend

Relatedly, there is a lot of discourse around the ways characters violate gender norms and users often offer queer readings of the Thompson women, queering the show

as well.²⁸⁰ The women in the family are in charge, not interested in male approval, and happy to be single, situating them among those “who are not heterosexual, heteronormative, or gender-binary.”²⁸¹ Even Alana’s disinterest in men and dating, which is more indicative of her age than of her actual future behavior, is taken up as representative of the adult users’ dislike of dating and men. Two frequently shared memes feature Alana talking about how she does not want a boyfriend. Including reposts, there are around 1000 shares and reposts of these two. They are accompanied by comments like “wisdom,” “truth,” “same,” “me too,” and “preach it.” The posts with no comments simply imply the user’s agreement with the statement. Like other gifs of Alana, this one is coded as “sassy,” but her rejection of “drama” and relationships speaks to many queer young people on Tumblr. One gay man uses it to lament dating network sites that have a prevalence of “straight and taken” profiles. While not explicitly coded gay, this image uses gay-coded hand motions and speech patterns. It also speaks to people rejecting societal emphasis on heterosexual coupling.

²⁸⁰ Joshua Gamson, *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* (University of Chicago Press, 1998); Molly Merryman and K. G. Valente, “Queering the Academy,” *Expanding the Circle: Creating an Inclusive Environment in Higher Education for LGBTQ Students and Studies*, 2015, 65.

²⁸¹ Welby Ings, “Performing Prodigals and Dissident Acolytes: Supporting Queer Postgraduates in the Visual Arts,” *Higher Education Research & Development* 34, no. 4 (2015): 746, Note 2.



Figure 5.9 Pumpkin is too busy for men

The other images in this discourse are of Pumpkin, Alana’s older sister. On two separate occasions in the show, she says that she will probably never have a boyfriend or get married because she has other things to do. These two posts have over 2,600 reposts between them. Similar to Alana’s sentiments against boy drama, but more relevant to Tumblr users because of Pumpkin’s age, these posts reject conventional female focus on marriage and state outright that there are more important things in life than relationships. The second of these two posts is one of the most reposted gif sets in the sample and offers a variety of responses in the reposts. Of the 20 collected reposts with words, two are people laughing (“lol”) and 10 are various declarations of the truth of Pumpkin’s statement, (“truth,” “#facts”). Four are more lengthy claims that the sentiment Pumpkin expresses is a lie that single people, particularly single women, tell themselves so they

will not “feel bad” about being single: “I’m going to use that as my excuse,” and “Keep telling yourself that.” These point to the idea that rejection of normative heterosexuality is not borne of genuine rejection but out of an attempt to determine why you are “single” in a way that is not ego bruising. For women who cannot achieve the goal of being in a relationship, which would prove that they have worth and value by virtue of being valued by men, they must instead declare that their value is located elsewhere. The connection to this alternate location of value is so strong that one user rejects Pumpkin when she learns that Pumpkin has been dating someone, in violation of her apparent beliefs.

I liked her aot because of this statement but couple of days ago i found out that she’s having a boyfriend :/ since 2 monts..and they writing those terrible sweet messages to each other on instagram (taken_by_dawson) ‘oh i love you you are my other half i will love you forever’ if you already wanna say it, do it in private..what is wrong with you Pump?? i know that we can’t believe in everything what’s on tv especially in so called reality shows but.. are they all pretending someone they aren’t just to make the show more interesting? is it all scripted???

This comment speaks to the unique intersection of reality television, alternative sexuality, and social media in which this study is located. This is also one of the strongest examples of a parasocial relationship in the posts.²⁸² This user feels *personally* betrayed by Pumpkin, the real person, who she has never met. Many of the posts have demonstrated a kind of separation of the figures and quotes from the real people presented in them, but here we see a relationship between the Tumblr users and the Thompsons. This is likely because, on Tumblr, the images of the Thompsons are divorced from their context serve less as actual people or characters and more as deliverers of meaning. The relationship between people and the images is usually a

²⁸² Paul W. Ballantine and Brett A. S. Martin, “Forming Parasocial Relationships in Online Communities,” *Advances in Consumer Research* 32, no. 1 (2005).

relationship with the quote or emotion being illustrated in the image rather than necessarily with the people on the show. Users either identify with or reject a mostly self-contained message. Because the people using these quotes are not exclusively fans or watchers of the show, their understanding is driven less by a relationship with the show or the characters, who are also real people, and more by a larger cultural understanding of what the show is combined with a specific interaction with a single image, quote, or gif set.

This post about Pumpkin, however, is indicative of a fan and watcher of the show who has developed a strong enough one-sided bond with Pumpkin that she is capable of feeling personally rejected by Pumpkin's behavior; this goes much further in terms of relationship than liking the quote or agreeing with its message. The user not only follows the show, but she also knows and follows Pumpkin's personal Instagram account, which is not associated with the show. Pumpkin's failure to live up to her own rejection of dating not only leads this user to reject Pumpkin but also to question the nature and truthfulness of the show itself. Although people generally know they "can't believe in everything what's on TV especially in so called reality shows," they still look for authenticity within them.

In this case, the difference between the show and the real world is likely a function of the time lapsed between recording and airing the footage rather than dishonesty on the show or Pumpkin's part. It is easier for the user to think the show is making this up than to recognize that Pumpkin might have changed her mind or been "telling herself" a comforting lie. The pressure towards heterosexual coupling is such that

it is likely, even if Pumpkin had felt strongly about rejecting dating, she would have tried it.

Two more comments in reblogs of this post latch onto the specificity of the word “boyfriend” in the phrase “I don’t need a boyfriend,” in order to discuss gay issues. The first reads, “her bangs kill me. And I’m convinced she’s a secret butch lesbian.” The second reads, “what i say to everyone who thinks i’m straight.” Both point to the idea that rejection of the idea of having a boyfriend from a woman is likely a cover-up. However, unlike those who think this lie is to salvage a bruised ego, these women think it is an attempt to pass as straight without actually having to participate in heterosexual coupling. Rejection of dating is suspect either because it is a possible admission of being unattractive and therefore lacking worth or because a woman who does not date men may be a lesbian.²⁸³

The final reblog is not related directly to the discourse of heterosexual normality, beyond its support of Pumpkin, but focuses on class. The user writes, “If you don’t like this show you either (1) haven’t watched it, or (2) are classist as fuck.” Not only does the user support the message and the show, she also rejects the mainstream narrative of the show being reprehensible. She is progressive, enjoys the show, and feels that others who are progressive would likewise enjoy the show if they watched it. The rejection of conventional expectations for women, like the rejection of conventional homophobia, makes the show an admirable one for a progressive young person. This comment is one

²⁸³ A year after the collection of this data, Pumpkin came out as bisexual and said she had dated a woman. This underlines these users’ understanding of what was happening. June also revealed that she “experimented with it, never went pro though just played the minor leagues.” “Honey Boo Boo’s Mama June And Sister Pumpkin Come Out As Bisexual,” *Queerty*, April 25, 2015, <http://www.queerty.com/honey-boo-boos-mama-june-and-sister-pumpkin-come-out-as-bisexual-20150425>.

of the few that explicitly mentions class. Although users are concerned with issues of equality, their focus is on LGBTQ and gender, not on issues of class. That said, this post serves as further evidence of the progressive nature of Tumblr.



Figure 5.10 June is in charge of her family

Similar to these posts about Pumpkin are responses to images of June and Alana refusing to give men status over them. June’s quote, “I wear the stretch pants in the relationship,” is shared with simple yeses and Tumblr users respond positively to her dominant place in her heterosexual relationship. Alana and June are dominant personalities and Tumblr users enjoy having a “woman power” moment with them. Tumblr users do not, however, always respond positively to explicitly feminist messages.



Figure 5.11 Misandrist Alana

Above is an image macro created from an image of Alana on a balcony with her arms spread wide and two common meme-phrases, “Look at all the fucks I don’t give” and “male tears.” It is hashtagged “misandry” along with the description, “I made a thing. Supes²⁸⁴ proud.” “Look at all the fucks I give” is a meme phrase used in many image macros, usually over images of anyone with their arms opened wide, and it means, “I don’t give a fuck.” The original and most representative image macro of this is an image of Julia Andrews as Maria in *The Sound of Music* singing “The Hills are Alive.”



Figure 5.12 Maria does not care²⁸⁵

“Male tears” is a form of ironic misandry, as is the hashtag “misandry” itself. Feminists use both to signal that they are making a joke; feminists are interested in gender equality but are often accused by anti-feminists of wanting female-supremacy and perpetuating hatred of men. Feminists consider this idea ridiculous and mock it by using the label “misandry” and other similarly over-the-top expressions. Feminists claim to drink, bathe in, or relish male tears. The goal is to illustrate how absurd claims from anti-

²⁸⁴ Means “super.” Similar to “totes” for “totally” and “amaze” for “amazing.” Associated with teen girls, often tongue-in-cheek as in, “OMG I totes spent a fruitless hour searching for a nonexistent cite, it was supes amaze.”

²⁸⁵ “Look At All The Fucks I Give,” *Know Your Meme*, accessed September 25, 2015, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/look-at-all-the-fucks-i-give>.

feminists are while also identifying as feminist. “Misandry” is a punch line to highlight reasonable stances and point out the way anti-feminists blame all bad things on feminists.²⁸⁶

Even on Tumblr, which seems to be a young and progressive atmosphere, using hashtags of “feminism” or “misandry” attracts people who are strongly opposed to feminism. The reblogs in response to this image macro are dominated by a single user who is an MRA (men’s rights activist/anti-feminist) and objects to both the image and text.²⁸⁷ More than any other post collected, the reblogs of this image form a conversation, making them function more like comments than reblogs.

MRA’s first reblog insults Honey Boo Boo (referring to Alana) as a “selfish washed up brat” and notes that the image’s creator, who is “supes proud” of the macro, only “put words on a picture.” The words themselves offend him because he reads them as a serious indication that the creator does not “give a fuck about the pain of men.” He also calls her “sweetie.” He misses or ignores the joke because he believes misandry is really intended and that sexism is something women do to men. He is patronizing and uses belittling, gendered language in the term “sweetie,” trying to make the female author seem young and dismissible because of her gender; he highlights the phrase “supes proud” in an attempt to make her seem silly because of the slang she uses. In addition to attacking the creator, MRA also attacks not the show but the young girl who is in the

²⁸⁶ Amanda Hess, “Ironic Misandry: Why Feminists Joke about Drinking Male Tears and Banning All Men.,” *Slate*, August 8, 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/08/08/ironic_misandry_why_feminists_joke_about_drinking_male_tears_and_banning.html.

²⁸⁷ Mariah Blake, “Mad Men: Inside the Men’s Rights Movement—and the Army of Misogynists and Trolls It Spawned,” *Mother Jones*, February 2015, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/01/warren-farrell-mens-rights-movement-feminism-misogyny-trolls>.

show. His aggressive attacks on Alana reveal that he is unfamiliar with the show; he is unaware that the show is still on the air and that people still watch it (February 2014). He is also angry at the “male tears” phrase because he reads it at face value.

Another user, EB, responds to MRA’s post. She is angry with MRA because of his language around Alana. She points to Alana’s work with charity for local children and her support of LGBT rights as a sign that Alana is neither selfish nor spoiled.²⁸⁸ Again, Alana’s support of LGBTQ rights signal her place as a good person to the users of Tumblr and signal the show having some worth. EB thinks the original author should not have put her own words in Alana’s mouth.

MRA replies to EB with, “Who the fuck is alana? Isn’t this that unflushable turd Honey Boo boo?” On unsure footing because of his unfamiliarity with the show, he switches the focus back to attacking the original author, picking up EB’s concept of putting words in other people’s mouths, and reiterating how offensive the support of misandry and male pain is. Then he adds, directed at EB, “SHE gave to charity NOT you so shut the fuck up and stop trying to act like you are some how awesome because you ‘Totes like’ this pic.” Here he tries to silence a woman’s voice that is not, contrary to his claim, saying anything positive about the original post. Here he uses “totes” (totally) in the same way he used “supes” (super) to attempt to make EB look immature and ridiculous, despite the fact that EB used no such language herself. He is trying to make them look juvenile because they are women and not as rational as he is. Because MRA is

²⁸⁸ Natalia Perez-Segnini, “Sweet ‘Feud’ Face-off: ‘Honey’ vs. ‘Cake,’” *CNN*, July 22, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/22/showbiz/family-feud-honey-cake/index.html>; Rich Juzwiak, “Honey Boo Boo Family Delivers a Truckload of Toys for Needy Kids, Continues to Kill with Kindness,” *Gawker*, February 11, 2013, <http://gawker.com/5983371/the-honey-boo-boo-family-delivers-a-truckload-of-toys-for-needy-kids-continues-to-kill-with-kindness>.

wholly unfamiliar with the show and simply hates it on principle and his vague cultural understanding, he is unable to engage with the merits of her argument and resorts to insulting her and making things up.

There are three replies to this reblog from MRA. User F explains that Alana *is* Honey Boo Boo and, though the show is “irritating,” she is a “lovely girl.” F agrees with MRA’s disapproval of the original post, which she sees as unkind and disrespectful. Though this user is not an MRA, she is also not in the loop of feminist memes and finds them mean-spirited. Another user objects to the “unflushable turd” comment from MRA and his characterization of Alana as selfish but agrees that the picture is “shitty.” The third user thinks Alana may be spoiled but that should be a criticism of her parents, not the child. This user rejects the insults of Alana and questions the morality of MRA, but agrees that the image creator is sexist against men. Here then we see rejection of the negative portrayal of Alana but also rejection of the feminist meme, partially because the meme seems incongruous with Alana’s own morality and acceptance of others. Alana’s defense and support of gay people lead those who are familiar with her to dislike her being associated with something that seems hateful.

The MRA re-enters the reblog conversation and responds to these posts. Although he still considers Honey Boo Boo (possibly the show or Alan) to be a “very annoying blemish on pop culture,” he picks up the idea that the original image is offensive because Alana would never say what is written there. User F replies that she finds the show “irritating” and she “can imagine the rest of the show is the same,” but agrees that writing opinions over other people’s faces makes the creators of those images, “irritatingly pretentious and usually hateful twats to boot.”

It is very unusual for people to protest others using images of people for an image macro. *Condescending Wonka*, *Fucks I Give Julie Andrews*, and others are not generally subject to objections because the words being used do not belong to the people in the image. In this case, the objection does not originally come from MRA, who does not know the show well enough to take that tack. Instead, his objection to the language is ultimately picked up by people who know the show better, though have not necessarily seen it (like F), and turned the image macro into a betrayal of Alana's values. The defense is aimed at Alana, not necessarily the show itself, implying a dislike of people insulting a child, even if they do agree she is "spoiled."

Unsurprisingly, given her age, Alana's discussions of men have been dismissive. While she is supportive of LGBTQ causes, she is no fan of boys, who create "drama," and she does not know why anyone would want to have a boyfriend. Her belief that boys are "gross like boogers" is jokingly called misandry and used by adults to express their queer sexuality or dislike of men. Alana's normal childhood dislike of boys with "cooties" is frequently read as joking misandry. The image that others dislike because "Alana would not say that," is similar to the ways others use Alana's words. Furthermore, there is no indication that the meme is the sincere opinion of the author, as so many rebloggers think it is. It is a joke and meant to be read as such.

That said, although the discussion dominates those reblogs with added commentary, the number of reblogs without any commentary outnumbers the ones with commentary. A majority of people who interacted with this image on Tumblr reposted it in agreement or, more accurately, amusement. It is a perfectly serviceable combination of three meme concepts played against one another.

Looking at all the posts in this section together, there is a clear narrative of the show and people in the show being identified as resisters to the dominant heterosexual narrative. Alana is portrayed as a “diva” that LGBTQ individuals are fond of for her use of gay-coded language, hand motions, and attitude as well as for her support of LGBTQ people and rights. Her support for gay people makes her popular among the millennials of Tumblr and among those with alternative sexualities. Alana and Pumpkin’s disinterest in heterosexual coupling is identified with to the extent that people feel betrayed if they fail to live up to that rejection of heteronormativity, despite the fact that the rejection is predicated on their youth. Alana is used as a feminist icon and thereby subject to the normal Internet backlash against feminism but again her support for LGBTQ issues protects her from insults and criticism. Alana’s support for the LGBTQ community makes her beloved by the millennials who use Tumblr and are largely supporters of the gay rights movement. There also seems to be an outsized representation of LGBTQ people on Tumblr at large and within the posts studied for this research. Unlike other image sharing sites, Tumblr does not censor images of nudity.²⁸⁹ Because of this, erotic and pornographic images are popular on Tumblr, which may in turn draw people with varied sexualities. Add to that the anonymity for users and Tumblr becomes an ideal space for young people grappling with sexual issues.

5.2 Redneck Discourse

The final major discourse centers on stereotypes of poor white trash and rednecks. These discourses highlight the Thompsons’ poverty, stupidity, dirtiness, and lack of

²⁸⁹ “Community Guidelines,” *Tumblr*, January 26, 2015, <https://www.tumblr.com/policy/en/community>.

refinement. They also reveal the conflict between people who are ashamed of liking the show and those who perceive the show as more “real” than other shows on television. The shame and realness discourses are inspired by the same stereotypical behavior and represent different reactions to that behavior. Some find the Thompsons’ behavior offensive and some find it identifiable; all see it as redneck. This is as the show presents them and the Thompsons describe themselves as rednecks.

A phrase that came up frequently is Alana’s catchphrase, “A dolla makes me holla, honey boo boo child.” The phrase pops up in many posts, from screenshots of her delivering the line to random images from the show. At times, it functions as an alternate way of tagging the show, as though “Honey Boo Boo” is synonymous with “A dolla makes me holla.” This phrase partakes in the sassiness that is often coded as gay, mentioned in the previous section, but it also uses dialect that is coded as redneck and Southern. The statement itself highlights the family’s lack of money. Indeed, it is often shared by people who are struggling with making sufficient money.



Figure 5.13 Alana’s catchphrase

A young woman of color shares the image with the caption, “Why do you deserve the scholarship?” This underlines the conflation of class and race in this country and the

way poor white trash is coded as black/minority rather than white.²⁹⁰ That the poster needs a scholarship points to her own struggles with money and specifically with obtaining money for an education; this points to the connection between stereotypes of poverty, stereotypes of ignorance, and the difficulties low-income people face in trying to get higher education.



Figure 5.14 Alana’s first money

In the same vein, another image shared of Alana features her saying, “Our first money!” with captions like “receiving ur paycheck like” and “a refund from school.” Both posts point to the youth of the users, one is getting their first paycheck and the other is still in school. The second user also ties these posts to education. Here again class is tied to ability to get an education.

²⁹⁰ John Hartigan, “Who Are These White people?: ‘Rednecks,’ ‘Hillbillies,’ and ‘White Trash’ as Marked Racial Subjects,” *White out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, 2003, 95–111.



Figure 5.15 Alana getting a manicure

Another user shares an image from a magazine where Alana says she wants “to be a manicurist and work at McDonald’s.” The Tumblr user thinks this is hilarious because these jobs should not be seen as aspirational. Working at McDonald’s especially is read as a job of desperation, so Alana’s desire to work there reveals her limited understanding of what she should want. As a redneck, Alana does not know any better than to want to work at McDonald’s and does not know that she would be expected to be ashamed of doing so. Being a redneck has presumably limited Alana’s ability to see career paths that might be more prestigious. It is likely, however, that Alana’s aspirations are driven by a dream of eating her favorite chicken nuggets all day and having fun with fingernail polish. Despite the redneck connotations of the answer, it reflects a fairly typical childish desire to eat and play.



Figure 5.16 June likes free stuff

Alana's relationship with money is highlighted, but so is June's. Within the show, June is obsessed with couponing and saving money when she goes to the grocery store; she is presented as an extreme couponer rather than someone feeding a family of six on a single income. An image of her saying, "It's free. Hellooo?" is shared with laughter. June's difficulty affording food for her children fails to register with a young audience privileged enough to be able to use Tumblr, and her behavior plays directly into stereotypes of poor people trying to get something for nothing. The stereotype here is that of a freeloader or drain on the economy. June contributes nothing, but takes anything she can.

Honey Boo Boo's Mom is Actually Doing Something Smart with Her Reality Show Money

By Samantha Grossman @sam_grossman | Jan. 08, 2013 | 48 Comments

Share Like 4.5k Tweet 308 +1 28 in Share 4 Pin Read Later

Say what you will about 7-year-old pageant star Alana Thompson — a.k.a. Honey Boo Boo — and her proudly redneck family, stars of the hard-not-to-watch-it TLC show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. But thanks to her mother, June Shannon, Honey Boo Boo is set up for some long-term financial stability.

Shannon, also known as Mama June, told TMZ that she's taking all the earnings from the show and dumping it directly into five separate trust funds. One, of course, is for HBB; three are for Mama June's other daughters and one is for her granddaughter. According to TMZ, the family reportedly earns between \$15,000 and \$20,000 an episode.



June Shannon and Alana Thompson 'Honey Boo Boo' are seen at The Grove on October 15, 2012 in Los Angeles, California. JB Lacroix / Getty Images

Figure 5.17 June is saving the money from the show

Other Tumblr users are able to develop a grudging respect for June's way with money. One user shares a screen-capture of an article about what June is doing with the money from the show and says that no one should "hate honey boo boo" because June is putting the income from the show in trusts for her four daughters and one granddaughter.²⁹¹ The screen-captured article begins, "Say what you will," and that is very much the attitude of the post. The Thompsons may be poor white trash and rednecks, but at least the money they are making will help the lives of the children. There is surprise at June's ability to save money rather than simply spending it, which creates a kind of grudging respect for her. The support seems primarily about her being able to buck stereotypes of poor white trash being bad with money, but it also makes the show seem less exploitative. If June has the wherewithal to save money, perhaps she is not being duped by the reality television company, the posts seem to say.

²⁹¹ Samantha Grossman, "Honey Boo Boo's Mom Is Actually Doing Something Smart with Her Reality Show Money," *Time*, January 8, 2013, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/01/08/honey-boo-boos-mom-is-actually-doing-something-smart-with-her-reality-show-money/>.



Figure 5.18 Pumpkin and Chubbs mispronounce words

Other posts highlight how unintelligent the Thompsons appear to be. In one shared image, Pumpkin calls mayonnaise “marannaise,” which is defined as “something you put on a sammich.” The subtitles on the image are directly from the show, ensuring that the audience can catch Pumpkin’s inability to speak correctly or to know the proper terms for things. Half of the tags on the post highlight the incorrect words “marannaise” and “sammich.” The user intentionally focuses on Pumpkin’s mistake in addition to the highlight given to it by the show itself, functionally underlining why she shared the image: to mock a stupid redneck. In a similar post, Chubbs, here called Jessica, pronounces the word “duress” as “durets.” Again, the show itself highlights the mistake by subtitled it and the user highlights it by sharing it.

Another user shares an exchange from an episode of the show, “What if I said I wanna be a teacher?” ‘ God help them fuckin' kids.’” The tags on the post are interesting, though, because they reveal that, while this exchange spoke to the user, it spoke to her precisely because she considers her family to be white trash. Her second tag: “this show is my life for real”; her third tag: “my heritage is white trash and poor-ass country Japanese.” Therefore, despite highlighting the judgment, the user shares some identification with it. It is possible to reclaim some ownership over the negative stereotype of white trash while also participating in promoting the negative aspects of that stereotype.



Figure 5.19 Anna thinks her brain has no lightning

Another identification comes in a post that features Anna saying, “I don’t think there’s lightning in my brain at all. I think there’s nothing in my brain actually.” The original share offers no commentary, but the lone reblog with a caption says, “me when i’m high, jesus.” In other words, it is initially shared because it is absurd and represents a stereotype of white trash stupidity, but a second user co-opts it to be about the stupidity caused by smoking pot. The caption highlights the absurdity by stating that one can only behave and speak as Anna is doing here when one is on drugs. Anna is functionally no

smarter than someone who is stoned, even when sober. This also plays into stereotypes of white trash drug use and white trash being like black people. Marijuana is associated with black culture, though drug use and crime among white people is similar or higher, so calling Anna stoned is marking her as criminal and black.²⁹²

Not all references to the intelligence of the people on the show agree with the label of stupidity for the characters, but all refer to a common cultural understanding that the people on the show are stupid. The defenses against the people on the show being stupid fail to dispel the stereotype that rednecks are stupid, but plead special for the people on the show. A user shares, in all caps, the opinion that, despite the fact people think Honey Boo Boo is stupid, Sugar Bear is a genius for making a “CRAP LOAD OF SMORES USING A RAKE.” This highlights the Thompsons’ relationship with bad food, their backward way of living, and fails to undermine the meme about their redneck stupidity. Genius it is not, just practical-minded and possibly lazy, playing into another redneck stereotype.

Another user defends the clan from accusations of stupidity by saying at least they are “smart enough to support gay rights so there’s no excuse for nash grier.” Grier is a celebrity on the social video platform Vine, which allows users to post videos that are six seconds long at most. In 2013, Grier created a Vine that included his response to an Oraquick HIV testing ad. Within the video the ad says, “Testing for HIV, it’s not a gay thing,” and Grier responds, “Yes it is, fag!” Grier has a history of using homophobic

²⁹² Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New Press, 2010), 7.

language, though this was the most outrageous example.²⁹³ Therefore, being smarter than Grier on gay rights is damning with faint praise, but this comment helps highlight again how important the Thompsons' support for LGBTQ rights is to fans and to the mitigation of any negative effects of their perceived redneckness and stupidity.

The two posts with the most traction that play into this “stupid redneck” stereotype are both from the same user. These two posts have over 80,000 reblogs between them. The user does not add commentary to their posts, but within the reblogs, there is a great deal of commentary and this commentary plays on issues of fatness and stupidity.



Figure 5.20 Alana staring contest

The first of these posts is a gif set of Alana staring at the camera, trying to have a staring contest with it. Of the 20 comments collected, 14 call her “creepy,” “stupid,” or

²⁹³ Audra Schroeder, “Vine Star Nash Grier under Fire for Homophobic Comments,” *The Daily Dot*, July 8, 2014, <http://www.dailydot.com/entertainment/nash-grier-vine-tyler-oakley/>.

“likely to eat you.” They also include comments like: “You can SEE the brain cells dying,” “dopey bitch,” and, “Her face is the human form of bulbosaur.” The only slightly positive reblog is focused on Alana wanting to eat, “Me when my friend has food I want.” This user identifies with Alana, but still ties Alana to being food driven in an inappropriate, if identifiable, way.



Figure 5.21 June calls a cucumber “carrot”

In the next post, June calls a cucumber a “carrot,” apparently not knowing the difference. Sixteen of the twenty posts are variations on calling her stupid: “okay, so you got stupid people, and you got stupid people,” “america,” and, “iq dropping rapidly.” These comments believe that the Thompsons are so unintelligent that even stupid people are smarter than they are; they are so stupid that they actually make other people stupid just by being on television. The posts also posit that Americans in general are ignorant because they choose to be and because of redneck influence on American culture.²⁹⁴ The Thompsons are part of a culture of dumbing down and redneckifying America. There is also an implication that June’s inability to label a cucumber correctly is a result, or

²⁹⁴ Greg M. Smith and Pamela Wilson, “Country Cookin’ and Cross-Dressin’ Television, Southern White Masculinities, and Hierarchies of Cultural Taste,” *Television & New Media* 5, no. 3 (2004): 175–95.

possibly the cause, of her being so fat, another trait associated with the redneckification of America.²⁹⁵

One of these rebloggers not only thinks the Thompsons are not smart, but also adds the belief that people as stupid as June should not have children. “It’s worrying that people like this are allowed to breed freely.” This ties into stereotypes about rednecks being unable to control their bodies in any way and a societal need to control those bodies to prevent them from doing improper things. It also heavily underlines the idea that rednecks are not, in fact, people, but some kind of animal that is to be controlled and managed by proper humans. This is the same kind of language that is used to subjugate black people.²⁹⁶

Three of the twenty rebloggers do not mock the intelligence of June but instead add commentary identifying with the image, because they hate vegetables. As one user puts it, “my best understanding of a salad.” Obviously, these people understand a cucumber is not a carrot, but they feel enough disdain for healthy food that they identify with the ignorance. Their comments represent the appreciation for realness that stands in opposition to the shaming of the Thompsons.

Moving from food, another way Tumblr users mock Honey Boo Boo is by highlighting the difference between Honey Boo Boo and another piece of culture, showing that Honey Boo Boo is less classy, important, or artistically valid than the other culture. The contrast between the thing with “class” and the family without it is meant to make them look ridiculous. This is not always clearly mean-spirited, with many examples

²⁹⁵ Elsea, “Fat, Drunk, and Barely There.”

²⁹⁶ Paul A. Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell*, 1st ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

being relatively mild-mannered, but it is always predicated on a shared understanding of the Thompsons as low-class. This humor comes from a “clash between expectations and experience.”²⁹⁷



Figure 5.22 June dancing

Some of the posts compare June to current pop musicians. The above example, which shows June bucktoothed and dancing, is called “oppa southern style,” referring to the phenomenon of “Gangnam Style” by Psy. That song is a critique of wealthy people in South Korea and the lifestyle that they live, but the music video that made it popular involves a lot of quite silly dancing.²⁹⁸ The comparison is ridiculous but not insulting. A similar example is another post in which June is dancing and the user adds, “PLAY ANY LORDE SONG AND LOOK AT THIS GIF.” The joke here is in the contrast between June’s active and silly dance and Lorde’s slow and sincere music. Interestingly, Lorde’s most popular song, “Royals,” is also a critique of wealthy people’s lifestyle, just like the

²⁹⁷ Ryan M. Milner, “FCJ-156 Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz.,” *The Fibreculture Journal*, no. 22 2013: Trolls and The Negative Space of the Internet (2013): 66, <http://twentytwo.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-156-hacking-the-social-internet-memes-identity-antagonism-and-the-logic-of-lulz/>; Limor Shifman, “An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 2 (2012): 187–203.

²⁹⁸ Kirsten Acuna, “Here’s The English Translation Of ‘Gangnam Style,’” *Business Insider*, September 19, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/gangnam-style-translation-2012-9>.

song “Gangnam Style.”²⁹⁹ While it is unlikely that these users were intending to critique the upper class, they are particularly appropriate for June to dance to.



Figure 5.23 #HanniBooBoo

Some posts combine Honey Boo Boo with other television and movies. An image from critically acclaimed show *Hannibal* has a caption added from *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, “It smells like hairspray and desperation in here.” In the image, famed cannibal Hannibal Lecter smells FBI agent Will Graham. The comment from the user is:

okay since some brilliant soul is doing ‘it’s always sunny’ quotes for Hannibal imma do the strangest possible mashup of things and see if anyone likes it. Hannibal + Honey Boo Boo=I have been laughing on my couch for about fifteen minutes.

The user clearly thinks that *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Hannibal* represent two polar opposites; one is a complex drama featuring intelligent people and beautiful cinematography, and the other is a reality television show featuring unintelligent rednecks. The joke is in the disparity.

²⁹⁹ Nathan Heller, “Lorde: The Music Phenomenon of the Year,” *Vogue*, February 20, 2014, <http://www.vogue.com/865161/lorde-music-phenomenon/>.



Figure 5.24 Anne Rice, Tom Cruise, and Honey Boo Boo

A similar post is a screen-capture of the author Anne Rice’s Facebook page, on which she has posted a photoshopped image from the film of her book *Interview with the Vampire*. In the image, Alana in her pageant outfit and makeup acts as a stand-in for Claudia, the original child character in the movie, and is saying, “Rats again, Lestat?” Anne Rice, a stated fan of Honey Boo Boo,³⁰⁰ adds her own reasoning for posting the image, “Things are quiet on this page. Maybe it’s time to stir them up.” The Tumblr user offers a public service announcement that Anne Rice is “nurturing a sense of humor.” A reblog adds, “This is why she [Rice] is my idol,” because of Anne Rice’s ability to take a joke about her own work and pass that joke along to her fans. The joke here is partially in contrasting Alana with the original character, a child turned vampire who ages mentally, but not physically, and dresses in luxurious fashion, but it is also a reference to the Thompson family’s tendency to eat unusual food, like roadkill.

³⁰⁰ Anne Rice, “Honey Boo Boo. I’m a Fan.,” *Facebook*, September 30, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/antericefanpage/posts/10151259937690452>.



Figure 5.25 Honey Boo Boo is not elegant

Honey Boo Boo is also compared to other things on Tumblr; in particular, it is compared with a site focused on beautiful and inspirational images for young women called JustGirlyThings. JustGirlyThings is the way femininity should be properly expressed and Honey Boo Boo is an example of how femininity should never be expressed. An image from JustGirlyThings shows a woman in white going for a swim in a pristine body of water. This is juxtaposed against an image from *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* in which the girls on the show, dressed in an array of colors, are playing in a mud pit they made themselves in their yard. The post is hashtagged “redneck.” Here we see that redneck means physically dirty not just lower class. In a similar post, an image of a perfectly composed room with a consistent color theme and beautiful collages on the wall is juxtaposed against a man putting together a collage of “Honey Boo Boo Child” pictures on his wall. The joke is twofold: first, in the contrast of a poorly made Honey Boo Boo collage to a beautiful room and second, in the contrast between men and women’s decoration skills. Honey Boo Boo is represented as a man’s version of

femininity, which is to say, not feminine at all. Again we see that, in the eyes of Tumblr, the behavior of the women on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is not only improper but also not feminine.

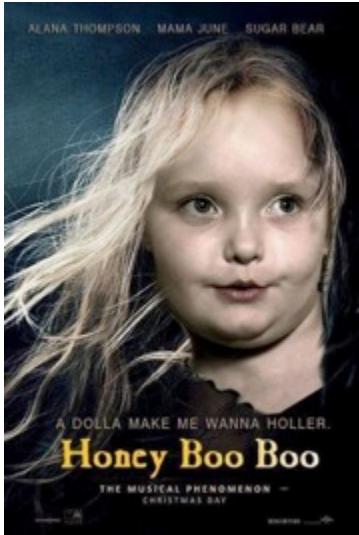


Figure 5.26 Les Miserables

This pop culture comparison is also done with Broadway musicals. Broadway, for the Tumblr users, is considered art while *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is considered a sideshow attraction. Alana is considered talentless which makes the contrast with *Les Miserables* amusing, but she is also poor, like the character she is meant to be portraying. Even in being poor, Alana fails to be as classy as Cosette, because of her redneck behavior. Another post, this one entirely text, says that Honey Boo Boo (Alana) will be taking over the role of Matilda in the musical of the same name. “It’s the year 2016. Honey Boo Boo is now playing Matilda. Miranda Cosgrove will soon star as Elphaba. Kanye West is now Jack Kelly. Carly Rae Jepsen has her own self-titled musical.” Six of the reposts are horrified, and one is someone saying that a Kanye musical would be great. The joke here is that musical theatre will soon have untalented famous people taking the

good roles away from the talented performers; their unsuitability to be on Broadway is exacerbated by the roles they will be playing. *Matilda*, *Wicked* (Elphaba), and *Newsies* (Jack Kelly) are Tony Award winners and unsuitable for a reality television star, a Disney Channel *iCarly* star, and a rapper. Alana is even more unsuitable than the others given that she does not sing and the character *Matilda* is a genius child prodigy. The person who posted this also chose to refer to Alana as “Honey Boo Boo,” either to highlight that she is redneck or because her familiarity with the show is limited to the greater cultural understanding of it. Alana again is used as a simple signifier for “stupid redneck” by someone who likely does not watch the show.



Figure 5.27 Alana as Nietzsche

A popular Tumblr page focused on the Honey Boo Boo phenomenon shares gifs of Alana speaking with quotes from classical philosophy texts superimposed. This one was shared twice by the same woman; one post has no captions and the other is captioned, "went down to Georgia." The image in both is Alana talking animatedly with Nietzsche's quote, "And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you" superimposed. Notably, while they both have tags for Honey Boo Boo and characters on Honey Boo Boo, neither are tagged "Nietzsche." The line, "went down to Georgia," is from Charlie Daniel's Band's "The Devil Went Down to Georgia." It is unclear if the

user is implying that Georgia is the abyss and Alana is the devil or that Alana herself is both the abyss and the devil. Because Alana lives in McIntyre, Georgia, the post implies that, by gazing into the abyss that is the show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, the abyss gazes also into us. The implication is that Alana is immoral or empty-headed, both common redneck tropes.



Figure 5.28 *Portrait of a Young Lady* and a portrait of June

The contrast of culture is not limited to pop culture. A frequently shared image features June photoshopped onto Giovanni Battista Moroni's *Portrait of a Young Lady*. The image originates from Worth1000's Modern Renaissance 18 contest, which challenged users to combine celebrities with classic paintings.³⁰¹ The image of June chosen for this is extremely unflattering and focuses on her double chin, squinted eyes, and lolling tongue; this is done to maximize both her grotesqueness and the contrast between her and the actual portrait. The image also points to the difference between June,

³⁰¹ HarryPeters, "Honey Boo Boo Mama," *Worth1000*, February 10, 2013, <http://www.worth1000.com/entries/705185/honey-boo-boo-mama>.

and reality television generally, and art, especially classical art; reality television is not a presentation of the world that is meant to be aesthetically appealing, it is meant to be real and “unedited.” A portrait of June should show her at her most composed and beautiful, but this shows her at her most grotesque. The painting also contrasts June’s poverty with the opulence of the original sitter. June could never afford the expensive brocade clothes, the jewelry, or even the artist to paint a portrait.



Figure 5.29 Alana as Jesus, June as the Virgin Mary

Content that is more blasphemous comes in the form of photoshopping Alana into religious iconography or implying images of Jesus are Alana. An image of Alana is photoshopped onto an old icon of Christ and has reblogs with phrases like “cheeseballs unto all of mankind” and “bless ya.” These comments add to the joke and highlight the absurdity of Alana as a religious figure; she lacks gravitas. A similar image shows June as the Virgin Mary and Alana as the baby Jesus with the comment, “The Christmas cards I’m giving out this year.” This is given additional humor because June is an unmarried mother of four children from four fathers, not a virginal figure. These two images play on

idea of Alana and June as rednecks who lack the beauty, class, and self-control that marks religious figures.



Figure 5.30 Alana as the child Christ

Two similar images show unaltered religious iconography featuring nearly identical images of Jesus as a child; one is a religious poster and the other is a votive candle. The question posited by both users is whether the image is meant to be “baby Jesus or honey boo boo.” The butt of the joke is the art, which features an Aryan and feminine Jesus, rather than Alana, but the humor is in the contrast between the holy and perfect Jesus and the redneck reality television star Alana. That said, there is an almost redeeming connotation to these posts; these users saw an image of what appears to be a young girl and thought of Alana, not as a redneck or moral travesty, but as a little girl who looks like another little girl.

Another thread that is found in the Tumblr posts is a conflict between people who are ashamed of liking the show and people who find it to be “real,” and are therefore proud of liking it. This conflict is similar to those in the discourse around food and body; some users find the Thompsons’ relationship with food and body to be valuable

representations of the real while others find it to be shameful. Here, some users find the representation of rednecks to be refreshingly real while others feel guilty for watching the show because of the portrayal of rednecks. It is worth noting that this conflict between shamefulness and realness, or authenticity, is not exclusive to *Honey Boo Boo*, but appears to be a factor in reality television itself. Reality television has claims, regardless of how accurate it is, to being “real” but is also associated with the lowbrow and shameful behavior it frequently portrays.

Posts about watching *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* are tagged “fml” (fuck my life) and “bad tv” by those who are watching it. People seem to feel obligated to specify that their love of the show is sincere rather than ironic. Three separate posts are about how people keep their “love” and “passion” for the show a secret from other people. One poster acknowledges that they would be “massively ridiculed” if others knew they enjoyed the show. Another says her boyfriend is going to have her committed to an asylum once he sees the show that she talks about all the time.

Most of the posts that are explicitly positive about the show are defensive; the users know that other people hate it and feel obligated to make an argument for why those people are wrong. One user writes, “If you don’t respect Honey Boo Boo and her family then I don’t respect you.” Another writes, “If you can’t appreciate the love and realness in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, we cannot be friends.” The themes of “love” and “realness” seem to predominate; the family may be “weird” or “redneck,” but they are “real” and that makes them more loving. Users argue that the family is not “fake” like so much reality television.

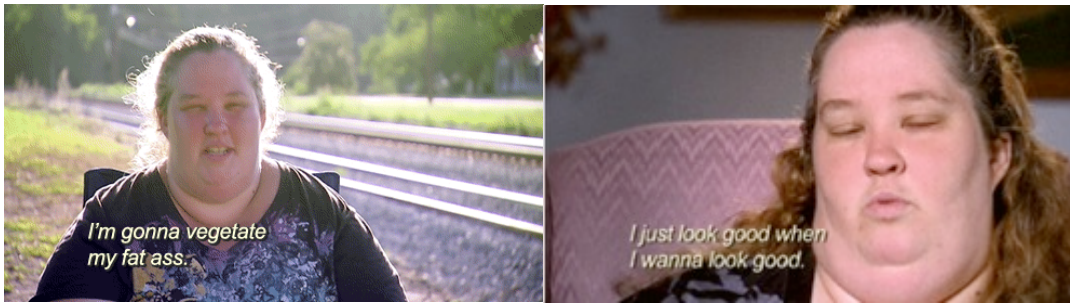


Figure 5.31 June being real

June's self-love and contentedness with her redneck ways is another theme that is weaved through the support of the show's realness. When June wants to sit around all day and "vegetate," when she rejects the need to wear makeup and look "good" every day, and when she does not feel the need to dress nicely, she is being "real" in a way women do not get to see on television very often. These behaviors may play into stereotypes of laziness or non-feminine behavior, but to many women on Tumblr they seem to represent the way women actually live their lives behind closed doors and off television screens. The Tumblr audience is young and non-mainstream, so it makes sense that they are drawn to a public figure who is willing not to try to hide her unfeminine behavior for the purpose of attracting men. It is something that is not often seen on television.

The most real thing about the Thompsons in the eyes of Tumblr users is the love between the family members, which is something many users wish that they had and think should excuse any of the family's "different" behavior. The Thompsons may be "cray cray" or "gassy" but "they keep their head held high and they call themselves beautiful whenever the entire world is telling them that are ugly and that they should change who they are and how they act." They are "one of the happiest families around"

and, if we could be like them and “start loving ourselves the way they love themselves, the world would be a happier place.”

Tumblr offers a discursive space in which there is resistance to negative stereotyping and nearly universal support for LGBTQ and gay culture. The support that is so dominant on LGBTQ issues does not extend fully to support of fat bodies and redneck behavior, which many still find appropriate to mock. The space still resists the understanding of redneck or abnormal bodies as always detestable, often with LGBTQ support acting as a mitigating factor, but often generates humor based on stereotypes. The analysis reveals the way that the Thompsons behavior on the show and the individual memes generated create symbols representative of something other than the original person and divorced from the content of the show. Users do not all watch the show, but they share a cultural knowledge of what “Honey Boo Boo” means (redneck, bad manners, LGBTQ support, sass) and can make jokes and comments contrasting expected meaning to their own added content or opinions.

The following chapter will situate Tumblr and its user base among other social media. It will reexamine all of the discourses in light of one another and in light of what has been learned about Tumblr itself. The discourses around LGBTQ support and redneck stereotypes play into similar concepts of shame and authenticity as the body discourses. The posts also help reveal the kind of community that has developed on Tumblr and offers clues as to why that community has developed into what it is now.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusions

Tumblr, as a location with primarily young people and users who are interested in media representation and minority issues, offers an important space with alternative viewpoints and developing identities.³⁰² A study of stereotyping in this space reveals prejudices within a progressive, non-masculine, and queer space, individuals dealing with important personal issues, and sites of resistance to and reinforcement of dominant cultural narratives. Through active participation in television culture and the nature of the content production on Tumblr, users create and debate meanings of cultural artifacts, and the things they create, the image macros and memes, spread beyond Tumblr to change cultural conversations.

This study is primarily an attempt to understand how content creators interact with reality television stereotypes online and asks the question, “How does content created by Tumblr users interact with the white trash stereotypes in the show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*?” This study also seeks insight into the way that the meaning of a television show is constructed by people, including those who do not watch the show, and not just by the show itself. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* exists at the intersection of many stereotypes about white trash, and Tumblr has a user base of young people grappling with issues of identity through a participatory reinvention of popular culture. Tumblr is the ideal site to see the process of content reinterpretation and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*

³⁰² Smith, “Tumblr Offers Advertisers A Major Advantage: Young Users, Who Spend Tons Of Time On The Site.”

provides stereotypes that are easy for Tumblr users to reinterpret, resist, and promote. Where the show is situated offers an opportunity to see how the culture interacts with stereotypes — female, poor, young motherhood, fat, Southern, LGBTQ supportive – and to see what the meaning of the show ultimately becomes after passing through the interpretation of convergence culture.

This chapter reviews and summarizes the research and discusses the implications of the findings. It begins with a discussion of Tumblr and a review of the discourses found in the posts. The chapter then explores the implications of these results for theory, discussing this study's relevance to the fields of intersectionality, white trash studies, discourse analysis, critical television studies, reality television studies, and social media studies. The chapter ends with recommendations for future studies, a discussion of the limitations of this study, and a conclusion.

6.1 Tumblr

Tumblr provides a reality filtered through the minds of the audience and recreated from their perspective – a reflection akin to a funhouse mirror. Comparing the reflection to the reality shows us the contours of the mind serving as mirror and helps us see reality in a new way. So often in studies of reception or convergence culture we look at a particular kind of mind (e.g. the fan) and a certain kind of reflection (e.g. a viewer), but the mirrors of Tumblr offer a spectrum of minds and reflections, offering individual personal insight and a big picture of cultural interpretation of the show being studied and how that interpretation is used in user generated content. What we witness is an edit of the show and reactions to the show from people who are actively participating in creating and changing meaning. Tumblr users are not passive, and this makes the content they

share as much theirs as it is TLC's or Authentic Entertainment's or the Thompsons'. The users are empowered; they take power away from the network and the production company and even the family themselves and control interpretation. Indeed, much of the content of Tumblr is derivative content, combining themes or content to create new meaning. Often, the users are doing this not to engage in an active discussion about Honey Boo Boo, but passively in how they use Honey Boo Boo to talk about other things.

Sometimes Tumblr users are trying to remove the filter created by the show, other times they are simply reinterpreting or queering it to their own ends. Either way, we get reality triple-filtered – one filter is how people act in front of a camera, the second filter is the edit of the footage into a show, and the third filter is the interpretation of the show by Tumblr. Although some people just share images directly from the show, this practice tells us something, for it is at these points that the funhouse mirror is exactly accurate, that the user's identity and voice are so totally represented in that moment that it does not need alteration or commentary. Even in a funhouse mirror, there is a place you can still see yourself.

Here, then is a vision of Web 2.0 as the utopia of hegemonic resistance, but of course it is not that simple.³⁰³ Tumblr emerges a site of activists on a particular topic, LGBTQ issues, and that is the location where hegemonic resistance is primarily situated. Issues of feminism and body are hotly debated. Even in this group dedicated to progressive politics and equality, the users still frequently uphold and exaggerate the negative stereotypes from Honey Boo Boo. Often the shares that are directly from the

³⁰³ Henry Jenkins, "Rethinking 'rethinking Convergence/culture,'" *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 267–97.

show serve not to undermine the stereotypes, but to promote them without comment, the accurate reflection revealing hegemonic beliefs about poor white trash. Users who add their own commentary use language and ideas that reveal racism, classism, sexism, and prejudice against the South. This progressive site is a location of many regressive stereotypes, some that are not even part of the show.

The users of Tumblr have created meaning around a show that read straight might only be seen as a generator of negative stereotypes and a way to mock the poor to instead include radical fat acceptance, female empowerment, and queer identities. The meaning they add takes messages of how fat, uncouth, and stupid the people on the show are and instead turns them into representatives of something positive. It does not do this without resistance; even the users who push for these new meanings are often promoting hegemonic beliefs about white trash and women. Still, Tumblr edges out a corner of respectability for the Thompsons that the show does not attempt to do on its own. It asks people to consider the feelings of the real people involved, to respect their real, material support for gay people, and to rejoice in their rejection of harmful beauty standards. This support of the real within *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is not coming from people who consider themselves to be rednecks or trash, but people who are offering a different reading on the show; the support and reinterpretation is not even strictly coming from viewers of the show.

To understand media and television it is not enough to analyze the content of a show or survey those who watch a show. Even television that is not part of a cultural moment or notable in the same way as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is subject to memefication, cooptation, and being rewritten by those on the Internet who are constantly

creating a language in which any moment can become representative of a specific idea. Those who have not seen *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* still use Alana and Mama June as part of their memes for reasons that do not necessarily have anything to do with the show or the real people who appear on it. The original content creators have little control over the ultimate use and meaning of their creations, less than ever before, and it is impossible to have a conversation about the effect or meaning of media without addressing how those with access to the Internet are using it. The creators of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* were not attempting to create a symbol of fat body acceptance or to celebrate an unabashed love of food, but Tumblr users reworked the content in order to do just that. Tumblr also adds new meanings that expand stereotypes or hegemonic practices. It would be easy to miss both these potential reads of the show without seeking online discourse.

To understand the meaning of the findings, it is important also to situate Tumblr, both as a site of study and as a web community among web communities. Tumblr allows users to share anonymously, multimodally, and in unlimited length or form. It combines the hashtag discoverability of Twitter with even more flexible posting than Facebook, and adds more user control and less reliance on direct response. It is a space that functions as an expression of preferences or opinions without cultivating strongly differentiated individual communities (think a friend's list or group on Facebook). The site itself functions as a broad community in which people come across new individuals and new content frequently.³⁰⁴

The site is also barely regulated. On Facebook a user might have a post taken down merely for writing about sex with too much "vivid detail" but on Tumblr a user

³⁰⁴ Chang et al., "What Is Tumblr."

can, and likely will, find images of hardcore pornography, whether they are looking for it or not.³⁰⁵ This lack of boundaries on what is contained in a post and what an individual might easily come across, combined with the lack of constraints on the form of the content a user can share, makes Tumblr uniquely freeform. Even within the results of the search for “honey boo boo” there is great diversity in the opinions of Tumblr users. This diversity is not universal, there is a great deal of agreement on issues like LGBTQ support, and the diversity is in some ways bounded by the freedom of Tumblr. The freedom limits the size and kind of people who can use Tumblr.

Table 6.1 A comparison of social media networks, blogs, and Tumblr

	User Base	Content	Communities	Username
LinkedIn	Mainstream	Limited	Separated	Legal Name
Facebook	Mainstream	Freeform	Separated	Legal Name
Twitter Pinterest Instagram	Mainstream	Limited	Open	Both
Reddit 4Chan Forums	Marginal	Limited	Separated	Pseudonym
Blogs	Both	Freeform	Separated	Both
Tumblr	Marginal	Freeform	Open	Pseudonym

At this juncture, it is useful to consider the relative position of Tumblr in the social media space. Tumblr can get neither the traction of Facebook and Twitter nor the respectability of LinkedIn. It cannot have the focus of Pinterest and Instagram, nor can it develop the insular communities of Reddit, forums, and blog commenters. People who use Tumblr must be at home with the idea of being exposed to different things frequently.

³⁰⁵ “Community Guidelines”; “Community Standards,” *Facebook*, accessed September 26, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards>.

Users must gladly accept the likelihood of pornography, LGBTQ people, and diversity appearing in their experience of the site. This is why the site is predominantly young people, LGBTQ supportive, and progressive. Tumblr is a group that may be predisposed to offer judgment but is not predisposed to insulate themselves against the other. This is both good and bad for Tumblr, which occupies a space that people find useful but is also limited and not mainstream. Politics of respectability and conservatism pushes such total freedom of speech and limited ability to control one's exposure to the fringes, to the alt-lit and zines of the world. There is insufficient ability for users to protect themselves and put walls between themselves and other people, so Tumblr cannot be a competitor for the eyes and voices of the moms and dads of Facebook.

The relative position of Tumblr matters here because it has a particularly open-minded group of people in a space that encourages them to be as much themselves as they can. The two other major sites with image macros, 4chan and Reddit, are heteronormative and masculine spaces with less varied content and more conversation; posts there would likely be less resistant to hegemonies around women's bodies and less interested in queering the show. If we were to go to a local newspaper's commentary or even to a Facebook page, as Cavalcante did, we could use the same method but find much different reflections.³⁰⁶ Older and more conservative voices would be much more in evidence and the resistance to stereotypes might be different in form and focus. The continuum of shame and realness might be present, but different, and there would be primarily text rather than content creation and experimentation in form. The experimentation itself is an important site of study. Users understand complex

³⁰⁶ Cavalcante, "You Better 'Redneckognize'!: Deploying the Discourses of Realness, Social Defiance, and Happiness to Defend Here Comes Honey Boo Boo on Facebook."

relationships between different memes and histories of those memes.³⁰⁷ To see Willy Wonka does not imply anything about chocolate.³⁰⁸ This alternative language, this development of unintuitive signified and signifiers, produces a rich, culturally specific text that cannot be easily understood by outsiders to the culture.³⁰⁹

The multimodal discourse that is prevalent on sites like Tumblr offers an opportunity to understand a way of speaking that involves constant remixing of culture and to understand the often unintuitive ways that an individual piece of pop culture or media ends up working its way into much broader discourse that initially had little to do with it. The discourses that will be recapped in the following section point to a specific phenomenon around Honey Boo Boo on Tumblr, but the posts also point to something unrelated to the specifics of the discourses: that complex ideas, including sophisticated cultural criticism, are happening in spaces like Tumblr and in forms that look nothing like traditional analysis.³¹⁰ The democratization of content creation has meant that more people are creating more content, but it also has meant that people are coming up with new ways to discuss traditional media forms among themselves.³¹¹ These forms are something academia is ill equipped to discuss or understand, much less engage in. This study itself points to how difficult it is to convey the posts *ex situ*, using words on paper.

³⁰⁷ Jenkins, “If It Doesn’t Spread, It’s Dead (Part One): Media Viruses and Memes”; Tay, “Embracing LOLitics.”

³⁰⁸ “Know Your Meme.”

³⁰⁹ Chen, “The Creation and Meaning of Internet Memes in 4chan”; Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*; Milner, “The World Made Meme.”

³¹⁰ Tay, “Embracing LOLitics”; Chen, “The Creation and Meaning of Internet Memes in 4chan.”

³¹¹ Poster, *Information Please*; Stefanone, Lackaff, and Rosen, “The Relationship between Traditional Mass Media and ‘Social Media’”; Vainikka and Herkman, “Generation of Content-Producers?”

This study offers only an entrée into the Tumblr world of image macros, animated gifs, and memes. It offers a roadmap for navigating discourses that branch off a single idea or show into a complicated mix of many shows, many people, and many cultures. It also offers a way to try to understand how television stereotypes are interpreted, recreated, and resisted by web users.

6.2 Discourses

To understand these issues, this study took an approach derived from multimodal discourse analysis, which focused on all possible signifiers of meaning within an individual Tumblr post.³¹² This included the user profile name, picture, and description; the post's text, images, and title; and the reblogs. 400 posts were gathered in February 2014, a month when the show was on air, and these posts were coded based on the discourses within them.

Discourse analysis revealed three interrelated discourses around Honey Boo Boo: Body issues, LGBTQ support, and redneck discourses. These discourses reveal a conflict in interpretation of the show and in the interpretation of the people in the show. There is a continuum ranging from absolute censure of the show to absolute support, and those poles are represented by vastly different interpretations. On one side are users who find the Thompsons' LGBTQ support or body positivity redemptive and on the other are those who find the Thompsons' grotesque bodies and redneck behavior irredeemable.

³¹² Lam, "Interdiscursivity, Hypertextuality, Multimodality"; Kress and Van Leeuwen, "Multimodal Discourse"; Bezemer and Jewitt, "Multimodal Analysis"; Norman Fairclough, "Discourse and Text: Linguistic and Intertextual Analysis within Discourse Analysis," *Discourse & Society* 3, no. 2 (1992): 193–217; Wang, "Criticising Images"; Lester, *Visual Communication*.

These discourses reflect the way online user generated content often reveals a great deal about the creator.³¹³ People are using images to establish identities: “I am an LGBTQ ally,” “I don’t believe in fat shaming,” “I am not ignorant,” “I am not trash,” “I am relatable,” or “I have self-control.” Although the Thompsons are real people, they turn into signifiers of particular qualities: sassiness, pageantry, fatness, stupidity, ugliness, and poverty.

Importantly, though analyzed separately, the discourses are all reflective of the same kind of judgments around class. The discourses around the body are partially about beauty but are all deeply entangled with ideas of class. The discourse around the body is primarily about white trash, rednecks, and poor people. These discourses are all interconnected and all speak to both the kind of people on Tumblr and the nature of white trash stereotyping by progressive young people. Shame and realness are conflicting values in the interpretation of white trash behavior. Are fatness, crudeness, and ignorance something one should be ashamed of or something that represents a lack of pretention and willingness to embrace the self? As we see in the posts, it is both and neither.

One of the more interesting findings is that among users of Tumblr, LGBTQ support is so fundamental that the question almost becomes moot. While white trash is a signifier of moral inequity, support of gay people is a signifier of moral righteousness.³¹⁴ What matters is that the Thompsons are good people and goodness is defined as necessarily LGBTQ supportive. This speaks partially to the alternative nature of Tumblr

³¹³ Vainikka and Herkman, “Generation of Content-Producers?”

³¹⁴ Wray, *Not Quite White*, 16–17; Cobb, “Mother of the Year”; Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles*; Skeggs, “The Making of Class and Gender through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation”; Newitz and Wray, “What Is ‘White Trash?’”; Hartigan, “Name Calling”; Penley, “Crackers and Whackers.”

but also speaks to how important gay rights and trans acceptance are to these young people. It also gives rise to the concept that progressive values are antithetical to being trash; not only are progressives “our people” but by sharing this value the Thompsons display themselves as enlightened, in conflict with the white trash stereotype to the contrary.³¹⁵ Even when being called out for their “stupidity,” the Thompsons earn positive comparison to the closed-minded rednecks of Duck Dynasty. Social liberalism then marks one out from being trash. We see a similar conflict in interpretation of the rejection of traditional gender roles. When these are associated with gayness, the interpretation is positive, but when associated with class, the associations are negative. Pageantry offers the same conflict; if the pageantry is camp and gay, it is good, but if it is white trash social climbing, it is bad.³¹⁶

LGBTQ identity is also an issue of shame versus authenticity. It is easy to see how individuals with LGBTQ identities or strong allies to LGBTQ people would see living life authentically to yourself as a virtue. There is a complicated conflation of otherness, reflected in the language. To be black, LGBTQ, or redneck is to live authentically to oneself but also to be marked out as different; and while these groups are all othered, they do not always have the same experience, equal power, or respect for one

³¹⁵ Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 10; Parkes, “He’s Gonna Be a Little Gay”; Perez-Segnini, “Sweet ‘Feud’ Face-Off”; Wray, *Not Quite White*.

³¹⁶ Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, “‘I Just Want to Be Me Again!’ Beauty Pageants, Reality Television and Post-Feminism”; Lance Weldy and Thomas Crisp, “From Alice to Alana: Sexualities and Children’s Cultures in the Twenty-First Century,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2012): 367–73; Fabio Cleto, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (University of Michigan Press, 1999).

another.³¹⁷ The cooptation of black women's dialect by rednecks and the LGBTQ speaks to a tension and to a relationship of otherness between these groups.³¹⁸ It is notable, too, that the LGBTQ version of this othered language is the most acceptable and most understood connotation in this group of people. This is underlined in the post where Tyler Oakley, a gay white man, is shocked that his black friend does not know who Honey Boo Boo is.

The body is equally a conflict between realness and disgust. There are the norms and there is reality. Weight is classed and the Thompsons lack shame about their oversized bodies.³¹⁹ Here their gender is taken away from them as punishment to say they are not real women rather than celebrating their rejection of traditional gender roles. Their very humanness is taken away and they are represented as animals. Being fat opens them up to criticism on a number of fronts, from parenting to intelligence. Worse, these people have the audacity to be happy and seek fulfilling relationships.

The results support the idea that audiences are trying to determine what is real and that the realness is important.³²⁰ One user's rejection of Pumpkin for dating in real life when she said she would not on the show underlines how important that realness is to

³¹⁷ Cooke-Jackson and Hansen, "Appalachian Culture and Reality TV"; Cavalcante, "You Better 'Redneckognize'!: Deploying the Discourses of Realness, Social Defiance, and Happiness to Defend Here Comes Honey Boo Boo on Facebook"; Fishkin, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness'"; Andrews, "Honey Boo Boo Child and Black Stereotypes."

³¹⁸ Hartigan, "Name Calling"; Mannie, "Dear White Gays."

³¹⁹ Skeggs, "The Making of Class and Gender through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation"; Elsea, "Fat, Drunk, and Barely There"; Herndon, *Fat Blame*; Chrisler, "Why Can't You Control Yourself?"

³²⁰ Hall, "Perceptions of the Authenticity of Reality Programs and Their Relationships to Audience Involvement, Enjoyment, and Perceived Learning."

those who support the show.³²¹ Tumblr is like a second iteration of reality television; if reality television's interactivity creates strong personal identification, how much more is created by the interactivity of developing one's own content?³²² The results also support the idea that Tumblr is like reality television in that it exposes dominant discourses readily; classism and dislike of white trash is very much surface level.³²³ But it is so unlike reality television because, rather than create a narrative from events to compel viewers to watch, the community creates a set of narratives, memes, and interpretations that transcend traditional media forms.³²⁴ If reality television's goal is to create cohesive and linear stories, Tumblr's goal is to do the opposite and create an explosion of meanings and ideas that build on one another, but also argue with one another. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* the show is a story; Honey Boo Boo on Tumblr is a conversation.

The resistance at the LGBTQ site of support shows that there is an important sense of connectedness even in a site as diverse as Tumblr. This sense of connectedness is important for the development of audiences and for the development of an online community. Although the number of posts was not measured, some of them were very popular (with hundreds of thousands of reblogs), supporting the idea that there is a connection between reality television and social media.³²⁵

Perhaps the most valuable offering of this study is a model for analyzing multimodal, polysemic, intertextual, and hypertextual web like Tumblr. To understand

³²¹ Ouellette and Murray, "Introduction," 6.

³²² Ebersole and Woods, "Motivations for Viewing Reality Television"; Vainikka and Herkman, "Generation of Content-Producers?"

³²³ Friedman, "Here Comes a Lot of Judgment," 79.

³²⁴ Kilborn, "How Real Can You Get?," 432.

³²⁵ Stefanone, Lackaff, and Rosen, "The Relationship between Traditional Mass Media and 'Social Media'"; Stefanone and Lackaff, "Reality Television as a Model for Online Behavior."

the web one must understand the text, profiles, language, images, animation, video, music, commenters, links, self-analysis, etc., all of which any individual user is likely to encounter at the same time. This study offers insight into the way Tumblr works. It also analyzes a site that proves rich in data for critical television studies, intersectional studies, and studying the connection between traditional media and social media. Critical television studies emphasizes the importance of understanding the industry, the content, and the audience together, but they should also include the greater cultural context, something we now have easy access to.³²⁶

6.3 Future Studies

This study revealed a number of avenues for further study. The method, the site, and many of the specific posts on Tumblr all offer a number of questions that could be examined. This study could be directly expanded on by interviewing the content creators to gain more information about them and their relationship to the show; this would be extremely difficult in light of the show's cancellation. Another study that could expand on these results would be a comparison of the evolution of a single image macro and meme to see how it changes over time and what meanings it gains and loses in those changes. One could also compare the content of the text-only posts to the content of the image-based posts. These studies would help us better understand how memes work, evolve, and die. Though it is doubtful one could discover the secret to producing virality, one might be able to learn how to disrupt or change the growth of memes as they spread.

³²⁶ Gray and Lotz, *Television Studies*; D'acci, *Defining Women*.

In the wake of the molestation scandal and subsequent cancellation of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, a study about the discourse before and after would likely reveal even more polarization on these continuums and move people from the middle ground.³²⁷ It might also be revelatory to compare the discourse around *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s molestation cancellation with the discourse around another TLC show, *19 and Counting*, that was also cancelled in the midst of a molestation scandal.³²⁸ How does the trash status of the Thompsons help or hurt their interpretation compared to the self-sufficient and Christian Duggars?

This study's discovery, a continuum between fat redneck and gay body positivity, suggests further studies about white trash stereotyping are needed to investigate the relationship between progressive values and being labeled trash. Questions might include: "Do non-conservative values limit the ability for a progressive to dismiss a person as white trash or redneck?" "Is there a place for white trash in progressive circles?" and "Is there a difference in how progressives and conservatives determine who is trash?" The results also suggest that similar studies about different kind of shows might offer different insights both on their own and in comparison to the results here. What would be found in a study of other reality shows, fiction shows, network distributed shows, Internet distributed shows, or pay channel shows? This fourth dimension of critical television studies could be used to expand our understanding of any number of shows, particularly shows that do not have large fandoms. Understanding how

³²⁷ de Moraes, "'Here Comes Honey Boo Boo' Canceled As TLC Wrings Its Hands And Details Get Worse."

³²⁸ Lisa de Moraes, "'19 Kids And Counting' Cancelled Officially At TLC," *Deadline*, July 16, 2015, <http://deadline.com/2015/07/19-kids-and-counting-cancelled-officially-tlc-1201477067/>.

hegemonies that are present in the content of shows and in the industry producing those shows could help us understand how these hegemonies are upheld and whether they are being changed. In particular, it is worth looking at shows that are progressive to see what ideas are spread through image macros online. Which image macros from *Last Week Tonight* or *The Daily Show* become popular and why them and not others? What can this tell us about gender, race, sexuality, and politics?

The subject matter seen on Tumblr suggests a number of research subjects. The method may be a useful way to compare different equally multimodal sites (e.g. Reddit, Instagram, etc.) with one another to see what about these sites leads to the kind of behavior seen on them. The approach could also be used at different levels of analysis, from an individual's Tumblr account to comparison of multiple subjects. It could also be used to compare discourse around different kinds of people, reality show characters and fictional characters, to see if they are treated differently by the Tumblr content creators; this could be especially useful in elucidating the concept of "real" that pervades this study. Another area for exploration is in the relationship between black woman coded, gay male coded, and redneck coded language, which is beyond this study's ability to explore thoroughly but could reveal complicated interrelationships between different kinds of oppressions.

Other content on Tumblr discovered in this research suggests that it would be a fertile ground for exploring the relationship between female sexuality and content creation online. Discourse from the fandom Superwholock³²⁹ would be especially worth

³²⁹ Superwholock is a fandom of the shows *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and *Sherlock*. Aja Romano, "WTF Is Superwholock?," *The Daily Dot*, October 5, 2012, <http://www.dailydot.com/entertainment/superwholock-fandom-supernatural-sherlock/>.

analysis because of the relationships created between multiple shows and products. How are women empowered and driven to participate in cross-pollinated fandoms. Relatedly, a study of the relationship between fans and anti-fans on Tumblr, or online generally, would likely elucidate other complex continuums of interpretation of texts. As seen with *Twilight*, for example, there are those who are as dedicated to hating media as others are dedicated to loving it.

6.4 Limitations

There are several limitations to this study, because of both the method and the nature of Tumblr. The results are not generalizable, either to the cultural understanding of Honey Boo Boo or to the way people use Tumblr as a space to interpret media texts. It offers insights and suggestions for future research and ways to predict what one might find in those studies, but the results are specific to the question and exact point in time the sample was collected.

All knowledge of the users is based on anonymous and optional self-reporting, which makes it impossible to verify any user's details. Without speaking to the users, it is impossible to confirm their apparent motivations or the intent of the interpretations they offer. It is also difficult to know with certainty whether they watch the show and whether they consider themselves fans. It is also difficult to know if they understand the context from within the show of what they post. That said, how users choose to present themselves offers insight into their interpretations and choices, regardless of whether it is an accurate description. In future studies, it might be helpful to do a smaller sample that

includes interviews with some of the users, but those interviews must be done concurrently with sample collection.

Tumblr itself is young and still growing. Whatever insights into Tumblr that might be offered by this study, and they are not generalizable, there is no reason to believe that the Tumblr examined in these posts is what Tumblr will be in three years. The rapid evolution of a site like Facebook highlights how quickly and frequently a social media site can change. Other limitations come from the subjective nature of qualitative research. The work and even the sample cannot be replicated exactly because of how fast Tumblr users delete their posts and how rapidly the site cycles content. This study does not examine the effects around the molestation scandal and cancellation of the show and so does not offer the most recent interpretations of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.

The media landscape is always growing and changing, but in many ways the academy lacks the tools and cultural knowledge to examine, explain, and understand online communication. The lack of ability to incorporate new communication techniques into scholarship also limits the growth, expression, and reach of academic works, including this one. Established methods and tools can only get to small pieces of the puzzle when those tools are limited to expression on paper. Even the method developed here is unwieldy and requires a great deal of pre-existing, almost ethnographic outsider-insider knowledge. This study is an attempt to find a way to incorporate online communication into our understanding of media effects, taking into account all of the hypertextual, intertextual, and multimodal aspects that are intuitively understood by the users but opaque to outsiders. More are needed.

6.5 Conclusion

This study helps to lay a foundation for the study of future media forms and for new kinds of studies on traditional media within an expanded critical television studies lens. New media has changed the way people connect to discuss media and build community, and new tools are needed to understand both the new media and their relationships to traditional media. Tumblr is an early generation of social media and only one example, but what is developed here is a way of seeing the online world with an intertextual, intersectional, and multimodal awareness that can help us understand more about our world, online and off.

It is clear that hegemonic practices are both upheld and undermined on Tumblr. Honey Boo Boo may now mean fat acceptance and LGBTQ support in addition to white trash stereotypes, but this kind of queering and reclamation of media is not a new phenomenon and not web-dependent. That it is done offhand, using Honey Boo Boo as a subject but not always the object of conversation, shows the change in language that image macros and memes allow. The public conversation on Tumblr makes this reclamation and queering more visible and mainstream; it also makes it easier to analyze. That said, Tumblr users are also reinforcing and expanding stereotypes that speak to the strength of power structures around class, race, and gender. Honey Boo Boo discourse on Tumblr shows how powerful these structures remains, even for users explicitly trying to fight those structures.

In many ways, these progressive users who see themselves as social justice advocates but promote hegemonies about class are reflected in the situation of Tumblr itself. The users think of themselves as resisting the mainstream and fighting for equality

while writing on a site that is owned by Yahoo, Inc., a major capitalist corporation looking to exploit their work for its profit. Tumblr becomes a space that offers a venue for fighting for some social justice issues, particularly around gender and sexuality, while failing to offer a venue for fighting capitalism. The difficulties in using Tumblr as an advertising space speak to a fundamental conflict between the user base and capitalism, but the free content created by Tumblr users is turned into money not for the content creators but for Yahoo, Inc.

The Internet and participatory culture may help dismantle hegemonies, but the space that enabled the Arab Spring and Occupy also enables Stormfront and ChimpOut. To echo Jenkins, there is nothing inherently good or challenging to the status quo in participatory culture, but that does not mean it is not and cannot be a force for good.³³⁰ What we have seen here is that participatory culture helps reveal what was already there but difficult to see; it offers a reflection to be analyzed, the funhouse mirror of culture that reflects the thinking of the user. This gives us, as scholars and activists, the opportunity not just to understand television or the social web's relationship to wider culture, but also to see how, where, and to what extent change and resistance to harmful ideas is taking place. Knowing what this looks like encourages us to question our own ideas, tactics, and views so that we can do better and find ways to help others do better, too.

³³⁰ Jenkins, "Rethinking 'rethinking Convergence/culture.'"

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Appendix A – Tumblr Definitions

Animated gif: an image file that offers limited animation on a loop

Gif set: a collection of related images in one post

Hashtag: hypertext that is a metadata tag; clicking it will bring up posts from the same website that have the same word hashtagged.

Hypertext: links or ways to get to other web locations, internal and external to a page

Image Macro: an image superimposed with text, often for humorous effect

Reaction gif: the use of an animated gif to explain how the poster feels about something; instead of saying, “*Cosmos* blew my mind” a user would post, “*Cosmos*” followed by an image of someone miming their head exploding



Figure A.1 Jon Stewart’s head explodes

Reblog: on Twitter this includes people who mark the post as something they love and those who repost the content onto their own Tumblr page, where they can add their own comments

Appendix B – Spreadsheet Example

	A	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	
1	Image	User Description	Notes	Date Posted	Date Access	Text in Post	Text in Image	Animat y=1; n=0	Animated brief description	Tag 1	Tag 2	
9		Hey hey hey this is just a fanblog about Smosh, Pewdiepie, Danisnotonfire, Amazingshi, Joey Graceffa and Shane Dawson [EH] [[Image of a swimming sea turtle]]		851	1/27/2014	1/30/2014	Just girly		Wanting a cute room of your own.	0	smosh	lan hecox
10		This blog is dedicated to the queens: Marina, Lana, Miley		83	1/22/2014	2/22/2014	[[none]]	[[none]]	[[none]]	0	mama june	miley cyrus
11		[[none]]		310	2/9/2014	2/14/2014	june "mama" shannon when your crush looks at you	[[none]]	[[none]]	0	mama june	honey boo boo
12		[[none]]		150	2/9/2014	2/14/2014	at you	[[none]]	Mama June 1 dancing	funny	relationship	
13		Shit happens.. move on		245	1/21/2014	2/21/2014	KILL ME.		Pretty comes in all different sizes. Mine size is cute.	Honey boo boo making assy head 1 motion.	honey boo boo	child
14		[[none]]		168	2/9/2014	2/14/2014	[[none]]	It's the year 2016 Honey	The last time I had a salad was never.	Honey Boo Boo talking 1	quotes	funny

	A	AL	AM	AN	AO	AP	AQ	AR	AS	AT
1	Image	Repost 1	Repost 2	Repost 3	Repost 4	Repost 5	Repost 6	Repost 7	Repost 8	Repost 9
9		HONEY BOO BOO CHLD!	I'm not sure what I'm looking at....	Just Girly Thinks	#honeyboobocanthony	lan u r not as cute as anthony	XD	oh lawd	they should do a thing where they take advice from lumber and stuff and make a video idk	I'm actually crying
10		well well well	WHAT THE FUCKING ACTUAL FUCK honey fucking boo boo's mother has met Miley and I will ever even see her live! WHATS...	ARE YOU KIDDING ME.	What is this?	idols	My queens			
11		kisses 2 da ll one	Yes.	#you know you want it	Wasn't she on the Drew Carey show ?	june "mama" shannon	Hot stuff			
12		yuss	Me on crack. Lol	FRECKLES!	..	Me.	I			
13		lol the emphasis on the cute just kills me	Lol	Right	oh so you think I ate too many fudged covered cookies? no such thing. Hell i might even wash the taste out of my mouth...	Mine to	honey boo boo tells the truth			
14		Haha	Lmao	Me trying to eat healthy	Totally mee	My life goal :p				

Figure B.2 Example part of spreadsheet used