A defense of the modern, high-tech redneck on reality TV: Why the world loves *Duck Dynasty* and its resulting redemptive representation of rednecks

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Abstract

This article uses key terms and concepts from Television Studies to “close read” the reality TV show *Duck Dynasty* in its visual form. This article questions not only how *Duck Dynasty* represents rednecks, but also how the representation of the “redneck” is understood by the TV audience. It explores the success of *Duck Dynasty* as a reality TV show and argues that it redeems “rednecks” from Hollywood’s previous portrayals of the overly caricatured redneck stereotype. The Robertsons have the ability to convey truth – even if it is through a partially fake/mediated realm – and what they actually represent is a more subdued, modern form of redneck identity in comparison to classic Hollywood depictions. However, viewers cannot trust reality TV to wholly or singularly inform how they understand other social groups despite how “real” reality may appear on reality TV shows. Instead of viewing the redneck jokes and portrayal on reality TV as offensive, *Duck Dynasty*’s jokes and portrayals can be powerful tools for exposing the absurdity of the stereotypes previously perpetuated by Hollywood and can help subvert them.

Keywords: *Duck Dynasty*; Duck Commander; Buck Commander; Robertson; redneck (representations of); reality TV; television studies; hillbilly; Southern culture; stereotypes; sitcom; American dream; American television

“Move over Kim Kardashian, your crown as queen of reality TV has been stolen by rednecks. And not just one redneck, but many of them. Hollywood can’t get enough of redneck culture...”

–Dean Obeidallah, 2013

Since as early as 2010, there has been a big boom in redneck, reality TV with representations of rednecks ranging from rough to realistic (C. Robertson 2013). On August 14th, 2013, the Season 4 premiere of *Duck Dynasty* drew 11.8 million viewers, making it “the largest audience ever for a nonfiction telecast on cable television” (Cohen 2013). “The show also set an A&E record as the biggest telecast in the net’s history in all key demos” (Variety 2013). Part of this success may be attributed to the unconventionality of *Duck Dynasty* as a reality TV show and its unique portrayal of a functional family. In the past, Hollywood has reinforced the misconception of the overly caricatured redneck stereotype, but *Duck Dynasty* is one of the means through which the representation of the redneck is redeemed. Therefore, one may argue that *Duck Dynasty* shows that “rednecks” can

meet society’s standards of success, while taking pride in and claiming ownership over the term “redneck.”

Television Studies has considered “the questions of what is represented, in what ways and with what possible effects...with particular attention to the representation of groups who are relatively lacking in social power. This kind of study can illuminate the active contribution of television to the ways that viewers understand and experience their social environments, as well as how television reflects that environment to them” (Bignell 2013). These questions provide the foundation for this article and apply to a particular group of people identified as “redneck” who are often perceived by society to lack social power (and graces) or do in fact lack social power to a degree. *Duck Dynasty* shapes how viewers understand the modern “redneck” and studying television informs the viewer of how the “redneck” is portrayed by television. Therefore, important questions to consider regarding conventions and reception are the following: What does *Duck Dynasty* represent – this article argues rednecks – and how is this done? Additionally, how is the representation of the redneck understood by the audience?

It is important to note that this article utilizes the term “redneck” as a type of cultural identity that is a construct of popular culture. It refers “to working-class people and ideologies everywhere in recent decades, [despite]...still [being] an identity rooted in the southern United States, and... culture of the Confederacy” (Fox 2004). While it would be worthwhile to examine the relationship between rednecks and poor whiteness through the use of whiteness theory and to explore the origins and definition of the term “redneck” in relation to the redemptive representation of the redneck on *Duck Dynasty*, it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article. (If one is interested in the relationship between the “redneck” and whiteness theory, see Aaron A. Fox’s *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (pages 24-29 and pages 96-97) or Chapters 1-2 of *Whiteness and Leisure* by Karl Spracklen for a general introduction to theories of race and whiteness).

To return to topic, the epigraph of this article humorously illustrates the degree to which redneck culture is infiltrating reality TV and popular culture – “the texts created by ordinary people (as opposed to an elite group) or created for them, and the ways they are used” (Bignell 2013). For years, reality TV has been fascinated with the glamorous, upper class – the rich and the famous – but recently there has been a rise on reality TV of what TV critics are referring to as “poverty programming,” “hicksplotation,” “hillbilly genre,” “backwoods TV,” “redneck craze/culture,” and in general white, Southern culture. *Swamp People*, *Duck Dynasty*, *Hillbilly Handfishin’*, *Bayou Billionaires*, *Moonshiners*, *Redneck Island*, *American Hoggers*, *Rocket City Rednecks*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *My Big Redneck Wedding*, *Sons of Guns*, *Billy The Exterminator*, *Porter Ridge* and *My Big Redneck Vacation* are only a “few” of the current “redneck” shows on TV today. “Because of the assumption that television can and should reflect society to itself” and the sheer number of country/redneck reality shows today, “there have been many controversies about whether specific groups are represented fairly,” namely the South (Bignell 2013).

Some TV critics see the new, Southern reality TV shows as debasing to its participants and believe the shows reinforce Southern stereotypes. Hollywood “has demonized [country folk] for years. Hollywood has portrayed rednecks almost exclusively via a parade of inbreeds, morons, and bigots” (see the film *Deliverance* for evidence) (Obeidallah 2013). TV and media critic Eric Deggans (2013) says, “hicksplotation” shows compile the worst sort of stereotypes about white, working-class people while African-Americans and Latinos are highly protected on TV. To account for this, Deggans (2013) postulates that “too many folks see stereotypes as a problem mostly for people of color.” Similarly, Andrew Billen (2013) believes the “underclass is paraded for our entertainment rather than moral edification.” On the other hand, one might argue that with this “*Dukes of Hazzard*” redneck revival, these new reality TV shows allow rednecks to be themselves, creating an alternate version to Hollywood’s interpretations.

Duck Dynasty is a highly unconventional show by traditional reality television standards, yet it has been a huge success, breaking TV records for the largest audience ever to watch a non-fiction telecast on cable television (Cohen 2013). It was Episode 1 – “Till Duck Do Us Part” – of *Duck Dynasty: Season 4* on Wednesday, August 14th, 2013 that drew 11.8 million viewers to break the abovementioned records (Cohen 2013). “Till Duck Do Us Part” also “topped *Jersey Shore* and the highest viewed episodes of *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* combined” (Pulliam 2013). In its third season, *Duck Dynasty* increased its viewership by 95% from Season 2 (Carter 2013). *Duck Dynasty* is seen “in more than 100 countries, drawing strong ratings on networks from England to Latin America” (Carter 2013).

“Ask anyone in Louisiana and they’ll tell you that the Bayou State’s favorite first family doesn’t live in the governor’s mansion but in the backwoods” (*Duck Dynasty: Season 1* 2012). A&E calls *Duck Dynasty* a “cross between *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Waltons*” (Carter 2013). By traditional reality TV standards, *Duck Dynasty* is an anomaly and the Robertsons are the idealized family. In spite of climbing divorce rates in America, the Robertsons remain a model, close-knit, nuclear family on reality TV (although the life of the Robertsons was not always “as seen on TV” and their published books describe a past of mental illness, alcoholism, criminal records and poverty). Phil says, “People might watch *Duck Dynasty* and sometimes think we’re the perfect family. They see how much we love and respect each other. But the reality is that it wasn’t always easy” (P. Robertson 2013).

In the beginning, Phil Robertson, the Duck Commander, was reluctant to do a TV show based on his family. Phil says that at a meeting for new show ideas someone must have thought the idea of portraying “a functional American family...novel,” since he considers the last of the TV shows featuring functional families to be *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Waltons*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and *Little House on the Prairie* (P. Robertson 2013). It is indeed a rarity to find a reality TV show that does not revolve around cussing or fighting and on *Duck Dynasty*; any bickering that does happen is done jokingly for entertainment and is never serious.

While reality TV has had a trashy track record of content devoid of any moral substance (e.g., *Jersey Shore* or *Big Brother*), *Duck Dynasty* has taken a different approach by portraying good morals. For example, “The Robertsons of Monroe...don’t scream, threaten to reveal dark secrets (such as federal indictments or a history of pole-dancing) or roll around on the floor pulling hair” (Wheaton 2013). Likewise, Phil Robertson (2013) believes everything “on TV nowadays is dysfunctional and for the most part has been that way for forty years.”

Duck Dynasty teaches its audience many life lessons, but perhaps the most emphasized one across seasons is the value of hard work. For example, very early on in the production of the show – Season 1, Episode 2 entitled “CEO for the Day” – the importance of having a good work ethic is

stressed. Phil says, “The Robertson clan went from poor to rich, so now, I’m dealing with little rich kids” (*Duck Dynasty: Season 1* 2012). In “CEO for the Day,” Phil gets the grandchildren to help clean the yard of branches, fallen logs and leaves to make a football field for the annual Robertson family football game. He tells the grandkids, “Part of being a Robertson is knowing how to live off the land. We’re going to learn about a hard day’s work. It’s a new concept for y’all...work!” (*Duck Dynasty: Season 1* 2012). The Robertsons have enough money that they could have easily rented out the nearest football stadium, but by making the grandchildren work, Phil is “just trying to help them see their core values” (*Duck Dynasty: Season 1* 2012). It cannot get any more wholesome than that.

In contrast, while the show does promote the benefits of hard work, it also advocates for a balance as it often demonstrates and explains the value of slowing down as being equally important. Uncle Si Robertson says, “America, everybody is in too big a rush. Lay back, take a sip of tea, mow a little grass. Then if you get tired, take a nap” (Bise 2013). The concept is simple, yet overlooked in a fast-paced, high stress world where emphasis is largely placed on “doing” and “accomplishing” rather than “being” and relaxing as needed for one’s personal health. Furthermore, if one is not able to pick up on the little life lessons scattered throughout each episode, when the Robertsons sit down around the family dinner table and pray, there is always a voice-over of Willie explaining what he has learned through his experiences in that particular episode.

According to the back of the *Duck Dynasty: Season 1* DVD (2012), “This crew shows the world how a family can work together and be a success at the same time,” as well as demonstrates the idyllic operation of a multi-million dollar corporation – “Their booming business employs half the neighbourhood.” Moreover, through modeling, the show teaches viewers (specifically lower class rednecks) to be respectful members of society who are proud of their background. *Duck Dynasty* removes the shame from growing up poor and provides/promotes a positive perspective of growing up poor or coming from humble beginnings. This perspective is made even clearer in the book *The Duck Commander Family* when Willie gives the following advice based on what he learned growing up (Robertson 2012):

“[B]e content with what you have and don’t worry about what you don’t have. Even in the lean times, there was a lot of love and laughter in the house. Some of my best memories are from when we had nothing... We were thankful for what we had, comfortable with who we were, and always confident... When I was younger, I never believed I was different from anyone else – even if we were receiving free lunches.”

Another key contributor to the success of *Duck Dynasty* is its humour. *Duck Dynasty* is considered “one of the quirkiest, most enjoyable reality shows on television” and all

Robertsons “seem to have a natural gift for deadpan humor” (Genzlinger 2012). Everything about the show is comical down to the witty episode titles such as “The Grass and the Furious,” “Fowl Play,” “Of Mattresses and Men,” “Duck No We Won’t Go,” and “I’m Dreaming of a Redneck Christmas” (all examples taken from *Duck Dynasty: Season 2* 2013). Perhaps what most notably distinguishes *Duck Dynasty* from the new emergence of “backwoods TV” is that “any idiocy is deliberate” (Genzlinger 2012). The Robertsons have no qualms about making fun of themselves or other family members for a laugh; one must be able to take what one dishes out, but ultimately, the pranks, competition, and picking on one another are all in good fun.

“In a bid to differentiate [*Duck Dynasty*] from other shows in the ‘redneck space,’” executives at Gurney Productions and A&E say they “hope viewers will be drawn in by the Robertsons’ comic wit and sharp business instincts” (Ritchie 2012). It would appear that the Robertsons can turn even the most mundane events and activities into comedy and entertainment: a simple late-night frog hunting trip ends up with Willie overboard, Willie takes his employees to a team-building camp, Willie installs a surveillance system in the duck call room and Si mistakes raccoon poop for muscadine berries and consequently gets his eyes checked. Jase also gets a citation from the homeowner’s association for burning leaves in his backyard and defends himself at a meeting. These examples taken at random from Seasons 1 to 4 exemplify *Duck Dynasty*’s refreshing twist on reality TV – making running a multimillion dollar corporation and the ordinary comical – since traditional reality TV is not necessarily funny and is mainly concerned with drama and conflict.

In general, it appears that Americans love the Robertsons because they are real. “They came by their success honestly, with hard work and constant application of ‘the redneck way.’ They enjoy each other’s company. While many reality show families slowly fall apart season by season, theirs gets larger and more closely-knit. [They] live their faith in a way that’s rarely seen in modern popular culture” (Bise 2013). This assertion leads into discourse on the extent to which Christian faith – specifically Evangelism – plays a role in the Robertson’s daily life and their religious dialogue/portrayals in *Duck Dynasty* despite it being cast as a comedy show. A&E maintains that *Duck Dynasty* is not a show about religion nor is it about the Robertsons’ Evangelical beliefs while Willie Robertson often reminds his father Phil that *Duck Dynasty* is a “comedy show” (Carter 2013). Nevertheless, son Alan Robertson maintains, “For years, Hollywood missed a lot. It looks like they’re taking advantage of us, but we’re taking advantage of them to get the gospel preached” (Carter 2013; Pulliam 2013).

Evangelical is a religious denomination centering around spreading the word of God (through “saving” or baptizing) and it has been a long time since TV has aired a show with such strong, religious convictions that is watched by such a massive, widespread audience. Some information and new insights about the Robertsons can only be found

through Christian sources on the internet, so one must remain aware that the disseminated information is filtered through a Christian lens. However, the Robertsons' regular demonstrations of their faith on TV is arguably a significant component to the wholesomeness of the show, since one might reason that demonstrating and having faith in anything can never be a bad thing regardless of whether viewers agree with the Robertsons' Christian faith. One could even argue that it is better to have faith in something than nothing at all.

Most notably, the Robertsons have recently been attacked in the media and on the internet for patriarch Phil's comments on homosexuality in a January 2014 interview with *GQ*, but despite the scandal, 8.51 million viewers tuned into Season 5, Episode 2 of *Duck Dynasty* (Wikipedia 2014). 4.71 million viewers for Episode 9 was the lowest viewership out of the twelve episodes of that season, putting *Duck Dynasty* back to numbers seen in Season 2 (Wikipedia 2014). One may go so far to assert that there was no real decline in viewership of *Duck Dynasty* Season 5 (episode one airing January 15th, 2014) due to the *GQ* article that came out early January 2014 since the difference in viewership between the Season 4 finale and the Season 5 premiere was only 0.4 million. Additionally, the numbers for viewership each season fluctuates up and down episode to episode in a way that has been consistent since Season 1.

Turning now to an analysis of production in *Duck Dynasty*, there are several key aspects that make the show a success from the production standpoint. "Reality television is located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama [; thus, it] is a form of non-fiction television programming that encompasses a broad spectrum of different programs" (Hopkins 2012). Television genres mix and change over time and *Duck Dynasty*'s combination of reality TV and sitcom is highly effective. The series was originally pitched as a hunting show, but when producers "looked deeper into the story... [they found] a very unusual family" and saw its potential as a great family show (Genzlinger 2012). Some call *Duck Dynasty* a "charming family comedy" and executive producer of Gurney Productions Scott Gurney says, "It's like *Modern Family* in camo" (Ritchie 2012; Wheaton 2013).

First, if one examines *Duck Dynasty* from the perspective of a structured reality TV series, the following devices of fiction are important: the use of point of view to invite viewer identification with characters, music to underscore emotional tone, and dramatic structuring through editing (Bignell 2013). Often, in any given episode of *Duck Dynasty*, there is instrumental music playing in the background while action and dialogue are taking place at the same time. In addition to the conventional use of the musical backdrop, scenes flash back and forth between the actions taking place and the various characters' comments on it. One of the primary reasons that the scenes cut so frequently is to keep the witty, rapid-fire dialogue rolling as comedic timing is very important to the show. Overall, the episodes follow a basic structure; there is an introduction to different scenes

with captions/titles before diving into the scenes comprised of music, dialogue, and multiple points of view.

As mentioned earlier, reality TV shows emphasize intimacy and invite viewers to determine the degree to which the lives of the show's participants mirror or relate to their own (Bignell 2013). There are so many ways in which a "redneck" could identify with the characters (in ways that regular viewers might not); for example, when Willy takes the Tacoma mudding Jase says, "When you drive down the highway and you look out in the field and you see a truck out there, you know what happened – liberation" (*Duck Dynasty: Season 2* 2013). Regular viewers might not get this and even think it is kind of silly.

Viewers might also not understand another of Jase's comments – "Where I come from, your truck is an exact reflection of your personality" – since for the redneck, a vehicle is not mere transportation but a source of pride. By customizing it, the redneck claims further ownership over it that ensures its recognisability to others. These random examples may be further evidence that *Duck Dynasty* is a show made for a specific demographic. However, even those who do not self-identify as rednecks can relate to the show with its focus on family. For example, many fathers can relate to the anxiety of their daughter dating and parents to teaching their child how to drive for the first time or even general witticisms like Jase's line, "When you don't know what you're doing, it's best to do it quickly."

While *Duck Dynasty* is a reality TV show, it is also a sitcom that uses "real" people instead of trained actors. As a situational comedy, *Duck Dynasty*'s episodes follow a string of similar scenarios with a sitcom structure that switches between two story lines (Genzlinger 2012). For example, the older "redneck" generation feels compelled to "do something" about the young, "yuppy" generation, Jase thinks up a scheme that will irritate Willie, "Phil must do something slightly emasculating to make Miss Kay happy (or else she will withhold in the bedroom)," and Si does something crazy (Wheaton 2013). Lastly, every episode ends with the family gathered around the supper table praying and Willie speaks in a voiceover about what he has learned that episode.

Wheaton (2013) observes that by the end of Season 3, *Duck Dynasty* has already used sitcom tricks not typically seen until year four such as weird sidekicks and celebrity guest appearances. In the Season 3 finale, one of the Robertsons literally jumps over a shark (even if it is inflatable and in a swimming pool). Is this act symbolic, ironic or coincidental? "Jumping the shark" is an idiom created by Jon Hein that was used to describe a particular moment in a television series where the quality or content of the show starts to slide downhill beyond recovery (Wikipedia 2013). The term originated from the fifth season of the sitcom *Happy Days* from a scene where the character Fonzie jumps over a shark on water-skis (Wikipedia 2013). Typically, writers use some sort of "gimmick" in a "particular scene, episode, or aspect of the show" in an attempt to preserve their viewership (Wikipedia 2013).

Interestingly, Wheaton warns that if the Robertsons begin “to behave in manners inconsistent with the ‘reality’ [viewers] expect” then viewers might become fed up with situations that are too obviously set up.

This leads into the second part of *Duck Dynasty*’s success from a production viewpoint. *Duck Dynasty* is a “real” semi-scripted reality TV show. Today, “it has become increasingly difficult to draw a line in factual television between documentary and its related genre of reality TV” (Bignell 2013). On the production end, indications that *Duck Dynasty* is semi-scripted and not pure reality TV include “the setups and jokes, the multiple camera angles for dialogue and the complete absence of boom mics and camera men intruding on scenes” (Wheaton 2013). However, some directors use the question of authenticity for a reality TV show as part of the pleasure for the viewer in the series. Despite the semi-scripted nature of the show, *Duck Dynasty* viewers can still ask, “Is [this part] real? Are they acting [right now]? Is [this part] scripted? Is it not?” (Bignell 2013). As part of the pleasure for the viewer in the series, directors will often leave these questions open to the viewers’ interpretations (Bignell 2013). For example, some *Duck Dynasty* viewers may be wondering if Si can really sew and if he has really been driving around all these years legally blind without knowing it.

Despite the semi-scripted nature of the show, it is kept “real” (or at least more real than a fully scripted show). One might see the show as they see Si’s stories – they “are 95% true Jack!” (S. Robertson 2013). With *Duck Dynasty*, there is a high degree of realism – the aim for representations to reproduce reality faithfully, and the ways this is done – with a small amount of embellishment to take the show to the next level of comedy (Bignell 2013). Even Si (2013) says, “Hey, if I’ve learned anything from being a part of *Duck Dynasty* it’s that you can’t believe everything you see or read. It always amazes me that if people see something on TV or read it on the Internet, they instantly believe it’s true.”

In Si Robertson’s autobiography *Si-cology 101: Tales & Wisdom From Duck Dynasty’s Favorite Uncle*, Si shares a tale about an old lady in church who approaches him saying she is sorry about his vision; she says, “You’re blind honey... I saw it on TV. It was on *Duck Dynasty*” (S. Robertson 2013). No matter what Si told her, the lady was convinced that he was blind and even asked him if he needed to be escorted to a pew (S. Robertson 2013). Obviously this illustrates that *Duck Dynasty* is not always 100% truthful, but it also points to the viewers’ tendency to see the show as truth or “reality” reminding us that we must be a critical audience and always question the “reality” of TV. Additionally, this particular incident might also point to either the gullibility of the old lady or the skillfulness of the show at conveying what is perceived by the audience as actual reality. Furthermore, Si offers the following cryptic advice on discerning reality and truth from what is false: “Hey, just remember it isn’t a lie if you think it’s true! It’s up to you, the reader [or viewer], to figure out what’s true and what’s fiction” (S. Robertson 2013).

Another reason why *Duck Dynasty* may be so successful from a pragmatic production perspective is that the Robertsons already had a solid business background and prior experience making movies – at least two decades worth (W. and K. Robertson 2012). According to *An Introduction to Television Studies 3rd Edition*, “what distinguishes the performance of reality TV participants from actors in television fiction is the lack of training in creating character that actors will have received, and the consequences for production that result” (Bignell 2013). However, this might not apply so much to the “actors” of *Duck Dynasty*, who may look like amateurs to the average viewer but really are not. This may differentiate them from other participants on current redneck reality TV shows because they are more aware of the representations their action and speech produce.

Duck Commander has been making hunting DVDs for more than two decades (the first ones being filmed on VHS tapes) and in 2012, the family released their sixteenth *Duckmen* video called *Resurrection: Duckmen 16* (W. and K. Robertson 2012; P. Robertson 2013). The hunting DVDs were the Robertsons’ foot in the door to the television/film industry. Eventually they gained enough popularity to help Willie launch the family’s popular hunting shows called *Duck Commander* (2009-2010) and *Buck Commander* (2010-present). The Robertsons’ first appearance on reality TV outside of their hunting series was in 2010 when they were featured on A&E’s *Billy The Exterminator* in Season 2, Episode 7 titled “Snakes in the Swamp” where snakes and wasps infest the Robertsons’ duck blinds (W. and K. Robertson 2012). In 2010, the Robertsons got their big break when Scott Gurney from Gurney Productions e-mailed them after seeing *Duck Commander* on the Outdoor Channel; he made *Duck Dynasty* the show that it is on A&E today (W. and K. Robertson 2012).

Willie best sums up how the Robertsons’ prior experience with television and film is an important key to the success of *Duck Dynasty*. He says the following (W. and K. Robertson 2012):

“Most folks don’t do a show on a small network and then get discovered. But looking back, the experience we had on Outdoor Channel was invaluable. That’s where we learned our craft of making great TV. It was where we got a taste for fame, became prepared, and learned to focus. We witnessed the ins and outs of making television shows, and learned how to work on TV schedules, and, perhaps most important, saw what worked and what didn’t. Oh, did we learn!”

When casting agents are investigating leads for new reality TV shows, the prerequisite is always “colourful” and “bigger than life” (C. Robertson 2013). The Robertsons fit the criteria. Si says, “Every member of the Robertson family has the God-given gift of storytelling,” a gift that Willie

believes was first honed at the Robertson dinner table (S. Robertson 2013). Willie states (W. and K. Robertson 2012):

"I always thought of the Robertson dinner table as a stage in a Broadway play. Whoever was talking at the time had the spotlight and everyone else was the supporting cast. As kids, we learned about how to keep everyone's attention with a good story and about comedic timing. This is also where we perfected the art of exaggeration. I think Kay's the best at it, or the worst, depending on which way you look at it. She can turn a simple story about her dog going missing for thirty minutes into a long gut-wrenching tale of love, loss, and everything in between. Along with the comedic moments we've never lacked drama either! ... The Robertson dinner table is like a weekly debate session. If you offer an opinion about something, you better be able to defend it."

Now that the success of *Duck Dynasty* has been examined from both a viewer and production viewpoint, one can use the aforementioned research and discourse to discuss the ways in which *Duck Dynasty* redeems the representation of the redneck in popular culture after Hollywood's previously poor portrayals of the overly caricatured redneck. According to *An Introduction to Television Studies 3rd Edition* (2013), "television representations are ideological: they encode social points of view that condense, displace or forget social relationships." One could say that Hollywood has reduced the redneck to the overly caricatured redneck stereotype, displacing "rednecks" in society to a position of inferiority. As is evident from aforementioned discourse, the Robertsons promote a redneck ideology – "a set of beliefs, attitudes and assumptions arising from the economic and class divisions in a culture, underlying the ways of life accepted as normal in that culture" (Bignell 2013).

With the current debates over the fair and accurate representations of the South and rednecks on television, *Duck Dynasty's* production process of what Willie calls "guided reality" results in one of the most authentic portrayals of rednecks that one will currently find on TV today (Genzlinger 2012). "Guided reality" is a non-traditional filming process whereby the producers of *Duck Dynasty* suggest set-ups or ideas to get the show rolling, but the ensuing dialogue and plot comes from completely from the Robertsons (Genzlinger 2012). Jase admits, "I just say what I normally say" (Genzlinger 2012). Ultimately, "guided reality" means that the Robertsons have control of how they represent themselves to the TV audience.

For example, Korie said that the first script A&E gave them was "just so not us...the wives get up and go chase varmints; it was just total redneck. That is not us. That's not the way we live" (Genzlinger 2012). This shows that the Robertsons do not live the life of the overly caricatured Hollywood version of the redneck and points to how

misinformed Hollywood is regarding what being a redneck in the 21st century really entails. Because the show does not twist their words or manipulate their actions, one can argue that the high degree of control that the Robertsons exercise over their "redneck" representation redeems that of the redneck as a class or socially defined group, since their show is renowned without having to result to trashy TV tactics to attract attention. Therefore, the Robertsons have the ability convey truth – even if it is through a partially fake/mediated realm – and what they actually represent is a more subdued, modern form of redneck identity in comparison to classic Hollywood depictions.

When entering into the realm of reality TV, one must be conscious of the fact that reality TV is a space where private behaviour becomes increasingly public. The Robertsons display uniformity or consistency in their character, actions, and speech both on and off camera, whether it be *Duck Dynasty*, an appearance on a talk show, hosting an event, preaching at a church or speaking at a convention or music festival and so on. On *Duck Dynasty*, the Robertsons are portrayed with integrity; their performance of their character on the show even matches up with how the media publicizes them through various appearances, interviews, tabloids etc. The media can be a harsh critic, but so far, other than the outrage caused by Phil's homosexual comments in GQ, there are no scandalous tabloids with stories that seem completely contradictory to the image the Robertsons portray on *Duck Dynasty*.

One could argue that the Robertsons rather strategically try to establish a deeper trust with viewers through choosing to reveal further private details of their lives instead of the media digging them up and the Robertsons having to consequently confront them. For example, on November 21st, 2013, Phil, Miss Kay, Jep, and Reed Robertson starred in a 30-minute Christian motivational film by *I Am Second*, a confessional that divulges extremely personal information about their past demons with the hopes of inspiring others to rise above adversity. For example, Jase Robertson's eldest son Reed speaks out about his desire to commit suicide (a fact that was before then unbeknownst to fans and viewers of *Duck Dynasty*) (*The Robertsons* 2013). Perhaps it is the Robertsons' integrity and unwavering honesty both on and off the show that makes *Duck Dynasty* such an appealing reality TV show to watch. Through telling the truth about their previously imperfect lives (even though the show is staged), the crew is able to establish a close relationship between themselves and the viewers.

Another way in which the "redneck" is redeemed is through the Robertsons' personal success. Si describes the allure of *Duck Dynasty* the best saying, "we are the rags to riches story and everyone is trying to figure out what is behind it" ("Video: Uncle Si – 700 Club Story" 2013). The Robertsons' story resonates with American TV viewers in particular since the United States Declaration of Independence lists "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" as unalienable rights; thus many American TV viewers respond to stories of the pursuit and attainment of

the somewhat illusive American dream. The Robertsons are the underdogs whose pursuit of the American Dream actualizes. David McKillop, general manager and executive vice president of A&E, states, “The Robertsons represent a lot of things we as Americans cherish[:] self-made wealth, independence, [and] three generations living together” (Cohen 2013).

“Studying representation involves considering how audiences understand and respond to the representation of people they see” (Bignell 2013). Even though the Robertsons are now extremely wealthy, they still represent the “redneck.” Part of the draw of *Duck Dynasty* is not the Robertsons’ material wealth; their possessions never overpower their physical presence in the way that reality TV shows like *Cribs* or *My Super Sweet 16* do. On *Duck Dynasty*, people are always the Robertsons’ priority. If one were to take away Willie’s mansion and scale down the 800 acres of Louisiana swamp that Phil owns, then the Robertson family would look just like the average American family. Gurney says, “What intrigued me initially was not the fact that they’re rich rednecks, but that they’re extremely true to who they are and they’re extremely intelligent. Underneath those beards are some serious brains” (Ritchie 2012). One might hypothesize that the viewers do not respond to representations of the Robertsons as a rich family, but rather a family that was at one time/is just like them.

One might argue that viewers hardly notice that the Robertsons are rich or if they do, they don’t make a big deal about “some redneck family who suddenly is worth millions of dollars, because viewers know the story behind the money and the Robertsons earned it through hard work and the application of country values” (*Duck Dynasty: Season 1* 2012). The public – specifically the lower and middle class who do not have an unlimited amount of money – often pass judgment on who should be “allowed” to have a lot of money and who should not. The public would probably agree the Robertsons are a family that deserve the money, the idea being that only morally worthy people are deserving of lots of money. This may be a mentality that is reinforced by reality TV itself through shows such as *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* where “good people” down on their luck are bailed out and given beautiful homes; viewers while perhaps a tad envious, tear up watching the show and are thrilled that a poor family is being given a “better” start. “There is still some good left out there,” they say as they watch, in reference to the 21st century where capitalism and capital rules all.

Through *Duck Dynasty*, the family’s autobiographies and candid public interviews, viewers are aware of the Robertsons’ humble beginnings – that they were not born with a silver spoon in their mouth. Jep says, “[The Robertsons] didn’t have nothing. They were tough. My grandmother, she went through the Great Depression, she said they got an apple for Christmas. That was it. And I think my dad coming out of that it taught him how to be...strong and to work hard” (*Duck Dynasty: Season 1* 2012). Jase says, “I remember having nothing so I think it makes you

appreciate having something” (*Duck Dynasty: Season 1* 2012). Similarly, Si says, “You’ve got to have a few hard times, okay, to make you appreciate. That may be the difference in the generations, okay? And I wouldn’t say that the grandkids don’t appreciate it, but they don’t have the same kind of outlook on life” (*Duck Dynasty: Season 1* 2012).

Another appeal of *Duck Dynasty* and consequent positive portrayal of rednecks is summed up by Phil who says (P. Robertson 2013):

“For the life of me, I can’t figure out why people are so attracted to our family. Maybe it’s because we live our lives like people really want to live, how we all used to live before everything got so busy, busy, busy. Duck Dynasty has made us a little bit more famous, but it hasn’t changed much of anything about us. Miss Kay and I still live in the same house on the Ouachita River outside of West Monroe, and I’m still driving the same truck and hunting with the same guns and dogs.”

This may allude to why rednecks are so highly caricatured in Hollywood portrayals; it may simply be because they live their lives at their own pace. Rednecks do not try to keep up to a world that keeps increasing in speed through various means such as new technology, which is perhaps why Hollywood started portraying them as so backwards and backwoods in the first place. Rednecks are old-school, down to earth, simple, but happy and pure. On *Duck Dynasty*, the redneck is linked to a love of the outdoors, living simply, and living off of the land (in spite of the Robertsons’ mass of wealth). Generally speaking, rednecks stay true to themselves and continue living in a way that makes them happy regardless of how the rest of the society may view them. There is a lack of care surrounding how the dominant culture perceives them, which could be why rednecks are sometimes targeted with derogatory stereotypes and why these stereotypes continue to persist.

One must also recognize that as the Robertsons are performing on TV for entertainment, they have a certain degree of self-awareness. For example, one can easily argue that the Robertsons have a cultural awareness that influences the production of their show and are not “poor, taken advantage of rednecks,” a view often put forth by viewers concerned about negative Southern stereotypes given the rise of Southern reality TV shows. It “takes a particular type of person to be on a highly produced reality series, and they are more self-aware than you may believe” (Marechal 2013). This means that the Robertsons know exactly what kind of image of the South they are portraying to viewers: a positive one, this article argues.

Additionally, if viewers are falling for the embellished, negative Southern stereotypes, then they have a certain degree of naivety and need to become more informed about the medium of its transmission – reality TV. Instead of

pointing the finger at networks, producers, certain shows and its characters for sully the South with its redneck stereotypes, viewers must recognize that if they are going to watch TV then they have a responsibility too. They cannot trust reality TV to inform how they understand other social groups; to do so is a trap. Following Si's logic, just because it is "reality TV" it does not mean that it is real "reality."

Furthermore, instead of viewing the redneck jokes and portrayal on reality TV as offensive, *Duck Dynasty's* jokes and portrayals can be powerful tools for exposing the absurdity of the stereotypes previously perpetuated by Hollywood and can help subvert them. Willie says, "Let me tell you about redneck logic.... just blow it up... he's gonna be so enamored with the fire, he'll forget about what he's losing" in Season 2, Episode 3 "Truck Commander" where Si blows up his truck because he gets a new one (*Duck Dynasty: Season 2* 2013). This is an overly simplistic and offensive portrayal of the redneck spoken by a redneck himself. It should be obvious that "rednecks" are not so stupid that the distraction of fire cancels out their loss; this is a gross exaggeration and should be recognized as one. Part of the redemptive aspect of *Duck Dynasty* lies in the viewer's power of recognition or ability to distinguish the gross exaggerations from how the Robertsons consistently behave on the show.

One might also further point out that the jokes are harmless. Many times on *Duck Dynasty* when one of the guys does something "stupid," Si says, "you stupid redneck!" The statement should not be seen as a derogatory slur, because what the flip side of this statement implies is that there is such a thing as a "smart redneck." Jase says, "You can talk any redneck into a challenge. That's why so many rednecks die in strange ways." It is a funny joke, but has no real basis in fact and the only grain of truth to the statement is that rednecks enjoy a healthy, outlandish competition every once in a while like lawn mower races, for example. Like Jeff Foxworthy's hundreds of "You Might Be A Redneck If..." jokes, there is only a small grain of truth to be found in the redneck jokes, which are meant to be taken with a grain of salt. Arguably, being able to identify these grains of truth is part of the humour of the jokes that contain gross exaggerations of how rednecks behave, look, act, and live.

Not only are the jokes a way for those "stereotyped" to laugh at themselves, they also portray recognizable, gross caricatures of the stereotype, which should indicate to the public that the jokes are a misrepresentation, falsification, and exaggeration, and as a result should not be taken seriously. In a time where everyone is so concerned with being politically correct, it might be advantageous to bring up the old adage, "If you can't laugh at yourself then who can you laugh at?"

Moving on from how redneck jokes expose the absurdity of the stereotype and how the Robertsons' modeling of the redneck for reality TV rebukes Hollywood's past portrayals, one could say that instead of derogating the "poor redneck," reality shows like *Duck Dynasty* may demonstrate that these are some of the most grounded,

underestimated and underappreciated people. They are survivors with a good grasp of reality. They have their own set of ideologies and unique skills that are not necessarily always shared by the rest of society, hence their alienation from it in Hollywood's portrayals.

Moreover, in response to critiques of the new Southern reality TV trend, perhaps the shows are not so much about the exploitation of Southern people and the revival of the old Southern stereotype; rather, they fill a niche for rural viewers who want to watch their own "people" on TV as the rich are losing appeal. A significant proportion of the American population is working or lower class and there are certain things on these reality shows that only "redneck" or country people would truly understand (those who do not understand pass the show off as "trash"). There must also be a curiosity of outsiders to understand their unique lifestyle. This is arguably what has given the show universal appeal and made it the success it is today. One must also not forget the appeal of *Duck Dynasty* to the rednecks camouflaged in suits and ties, such as successful producer Scott Gurney – born and raised in Louisiana and Texas – who says, "Behind the white collar button down, I'm a redneck" (Ritchie 2012). "Redneck" is a mentality and "redneck living" is a way of life. For critics who may be tempted to contend that the Robertsons cannot be real rednecks because they are rich, they must take into account that "[i]t took forty years to build Duck Commander into what it is today" (W. and K. Robertson 2012). Thus, the Robertsons are the ultimate redneck to riches (and still redneck) story.

In conclusion, "Rednecks" can be redneck and intelligent at the same time (e.g., *Duck Dynasty*), but because in the past Hollywood has reinforced the overly caricatured redneck stereotype, the "resourceful redneck" seems implausible. This is a misconception that can be both reinforced and corrected through the rise of Southern reality TV shows (though country music has also had a huge role in generating "redneck pride"). Ultimately, *Duck Dynasty* demonstrates that those whom outsiders might be tempted to deem "the underclass" can be true to their roots while being successful businesspeople, taking pride in and claiming ownership over the term "redneck." To use Honey Boo Boo's catch phrase, one must "redneckognize" that the Robertsons are more than just a bunch of rednecks.

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