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'He's gonna be a little gay': redneckognising the queer American family in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and the Implications for Cultural Studies

ABSTRACT

Alana Thompson, aka Honey Boo Boo Child, emerged as an unlikely but loveable pop culture sensation from the series Toddlers & Tiaras, *earning her family it is own reality TV show. Reflecting, at bare minimum, a change in American viewing habits, episode 4 drew more viewers than the Republican National Conference. This paper considers how the show challenges traditional representations of white trash through a prism of queerness. It draws links between class, gender, sexuality and contemporary identity in the United States. Finally, the paper also challenges the reader to consider their own involvement in the practice of popular cultural studies.*

KEYWORDS

Honey Boo Boo
Queer Theory
class
reality television

Before I begin, I want to outline the structure of this paper, as much as it is content. The paper is an exploration of issues presented by *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and a recognition of possibilities of viewing and making meaning. But this presentation is also a dialogue, especially given the intersectionalities of experience that viewing the show entails. As a white male from a working class background who now works on casual contracts at a regional Australian university, I want to make note of my own intellectual class, cisgender and race, which therefore affects how I interpret the show. I also finally want to explore the privileges of this position, and of cultural studies – of the relative luxury we all have, interrogating a television show, even one that does, to an extent, offer a view of contemporary living in rural poverty in the United States. Therefore the context of where this paper was presented – the 2013 POPCAANZ conference which cost $570 to attend – is as important as the text considered.

Consequently, I would also like to ask you, as reader, to interrogate what it is 'we' do. While it is possible that, for many, issues of consumption, subjectivity and analysis of

culture have been debated and solved, I feel that reality TV shows offer us the chance as practitioners to consider, much as the final point of this paper does, the opportunity for us to examine our own consumption and reflections. I use here Joanna Zylinska's articulation of the possibility of cultural studies:

> Questioning the nature of established 'cultural values', cultural studies has examined the ideological assumptions that have shaped our thinking about the world, but it has also proposed a reengagement with the ordinary and the everyday in an attempt to bring about a fairer and more just society. It is in this sense that the critical project of cultural studies has had, from its inception, a political agenda (2005: 2).

It is this possibility, not just the content analysed, that I suggest this paper makes queer – we need to not only challenge our assumptions about redneck culture and aspirations, but redneckognise our selves as practitioners of cultural studies and the consumption of others' lives. If, as Nikki Sullivan argues, 'we are never simply consumers of popular cultural texts, but in and through our very 'reading' of them we actively (re)create them' (2003: 189), then this analysis and it is call to queer contemplation requires a (re)viewing of how we do our own work as we look at others. The temptation may be to view the antics of the Thompson family as high-camp, hillbilly kitsch that 'is the fever dream of John Waters' (Frost 2013). My argument however suggests that the resistance of Mama June to ideas of propriety under the glare of significant media attention represents something very queer indeed, requiring us, as viewers and analysts of popular culture to not take an ironic distance but, where possible, participate in a critique of ourselves and cultural studies that does so with equal joy. That said, this paper will not be theory heavy. What I offer here are questions, glimpses, ways of looking that might be useful for a more in depth look at the queerness of popular cultural studies and contemporary reality TV.

Alana Thompson, aka Honey Boo Boo Child, first came to fame on Season 5 of the Learning Channel's *Toddlers and Tiaras* show, a reality-based TV show looking at the US phenomenon of children's beauty pageants. Alana's catch-phrases, including 'hollah for your dollar' and 'you better redneckognise' went viral, as did her pre-show dependence on 'Go Go Juice', a home mix of caffeine and energy drinks. As a result of the publicity that Alana and Mama June's appearances caused, the spin-off show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* was launched. Much of the initial attention focussing on the Thompsons seemed based on what Jennifer Kizer (2012) claims: 'Everyone loves a train wreck.' Here it is important to draw

attention to the tone of discussion that surrounds debates on Honey Boo Boo – Kizer's own piece, though celebratory, wonders:

> Why hundreds of millions of Internet users would across the planet be interested in a pudgy, loud, nose-picking second grader who competes in child beauty pageants because "a dolla" makes her "holla"? What interests people in her mother, Mama June "The Coupon Queen" Shannon, and her usually shirtless, always hapless father, Sugar Bear, who regularly feed her "go go" juice (Red Bull and Mountain Dew) to keep her alert at her cloyingly cutesy pageants?

From the first trailer advertising *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, we are immediately positioned to interpret the show through a particular viewpoint – the use of subtitles, especially in American television, is both rare and indicates something foreign and strange. Given the trailer clip's focus on bodily activities and the weight of the family, I think it is fair to say we are also meant to question the performance of femininity, of healthiness, of family. Numerous articles were published in the popular media decrying the celebration of obesity, of redneck culture, and the cult of celebrity that promotes the unmeritorious likes of Honey Boo Boo and her family (Paskin, 2013). Such representations are nothing new in the American cultural experience. As Michelle Dean (2012) writes:

> No matter where an alleged country bumpkin comes from, he will be derided for his crass behavior. And such ridicule has always been politically coded: The hillbilly figure allows middle-class white people to offload the venality and sin of the nation onto some other constituency, people who live somewhere—anywhere—else. The hillbilly's backwardness highlights the progress more upstanding Americans in the cities or the suburbs have made. These fools haven't crawled out of the muck, the story goes, because they don't want to.

But here is where Honey Boo Boo queers the equation; and I am using queer in its political context to challenge traditional representations of gender, as much as it is previous context, to represent that which is strange, other. Mama June is presented as the matriarch of the family; Sugar Bear pales in comparison and his attempts at romantic courtship and displays of traditional heterosexual male horniness are often rebuffed. Whether through legal arrangement or directorial preference, Sugar Bear's daily work is rarely mentioned. It is Mama June's focus on a family that has fun, nurtures its daughters and pays only small

attention to the fat-shaming, thin-bodied commercialisation of the female body so typical of beauty pageants that represents an intriguing threat to those who wish to see her family as a train wreck. The threat can be measured in expressed terms, such as June's 'You like us, or you do not like us. We just do not care' comments early in the series.

This lack of care for middle-class white convention has drawn concern; Child Protective Services investigated and later cleared the Thompson family of negligence, stemming from the Go Go Juice and Sketti incidents, the latter a meal based on the use of freshly-gathered road kill (Felice 2012). What Mama June makes clear is that the Thompson family aspires not to material or cultural wealth, as traditionally defined by the American dream; in essence, they are happiest when they are being who they are. It is this lack of aspiration, an embracing of their socio-economic status and more explicitly a rejection of the bootstrap American dream that has drawn the most criticism.

Dean (2012) asserts that Alanna 'is too crass and too happy' to understand that she is 'failing' at the game, and in that, partly, lies some of the pleasures of our viewing:

> 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.

I would however argue that producers have had to shift the focus of the show from beauty pageant culture to something more profound – that of working class family culture, and the show's rating success against the Republican National Convention also queers the politics of the United States. While the 2012 convention nominated a multi-millionaire from the north-East to run as President for the Republican Party, the Thompson family could be seen as the traditional target market for Republicans – a white, heterosexual, working class family from the south.

But it can also be seen as the traditional enemy – a blended family, four daughters from four different fathers (Walker, 2012), refusing to identify with the Tea Party vitriol of white victimisation via the economics of a black Democrat president. Mama June is close to that other woman of white trash who queered our screens in the 90s, Roseanne Barr, who introduced regular and prominent gay, lesbian and bisexual characters on her sitcom, Roseanne. Long before the safe middle-class world opened its closet doors for Ellen

DeGeneres and *Will and Jack*, Roseanne's show featured a kiss between the main character and the girlfriend of her co-worker. Roseanne's relationship with her body and its meaning is similar to Mama June's; as Kathleen Rowe argues, 'It is [Roseanne] Arnold's *fatness* … and the *looseness* or lack of personal restraint her fatness implies, that most powerfully define her and convey her opposition to middle-class and feminine standards of decorum and beauty" (Rowe 1995: 60, cited in Rhyne 2004: 190).

The family also resists a Republican interpellation by its incorporation of Uncle Poodle, Sugar Bear's brother, Lee Thompson. Sugar Bear's brother, Uncle Poodle is introduced mid-way through the first season. Later, he plays a more important role in the Honey Boo Boo Story as he teaches Alana her new routine for the upcoming pageant. His role in Honey Boo Boo's life and success is confirmed when the season ends with Uncle Poodle bringing Glitzy, the little gay pig, back for a surprise appearance after Alana wins the people's choice section of her pageant.

However, rather than his appearance in the series, it was Uncle Poodle's revelations outside the show that created a significant impact. Though always out as gay since the public knew of him, in early 2013, at the same time that Thanksgiving and Halloween specials were screening, Uncle Poodle came out to various gay publications as HIV positive (Thompson-Sarmiento 2013). This coming out was accompanied by a story of how he sero-converted, how he had pressed charges against the man who infected him, and how Uncle Poodle would be using his new found fame as a safer-sex advocate. Lee went on to detail his experiences with bullying, and would later participate in a variety of anti-bullying gay events, with a t-shirt line directing proceeds towards scholarships for bullying victims. Lee's integral role in the family refutes the redneck southern stereotype of homophobia – the family is accepting and welcomes his additional craziness. His knowing use of his public position for health campaigns again challenges the traditional representation of redneck stupidity and the perception of this family's life as a train wreck. Here again is another occasion where the possible intent of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*'s producers and the reception by its viewers is queered: a gay pig called Glitzy, an Uncle Poodle and a maternally guided family nucleus contests dominant discourses relating to the intersections of class, sexuality, the cultures of whiteness and gender performance in contemporary America.

If this has been a paper about participation and resistance, of queering and acceptance, it is time perhaps to step back to our role as viewers. Cultural studies has always involved a cultural critique, from its beginnings as an academic pursuit, whether in the works

of the Frankfurt School or the later emergence of popular cultural studies in the UK. Returning to Nikki Sullivan's notion that we, as an audience are active participants in the creation of further texts and discourses, I would like to finish with the lowest moment of Honey Boo Boo, the infamous birthday sneeze. I think published responses to it articulate the way we might need to re-watch ourselves as practitioners of cultural studies and recognise again the intersections of class representation and shame that white producers of the show have attempted to draw attention to. Sara Clemens, in her article 'A dolla make me holla – In defense of Honey Boo Boo', describes this well, and I find it apt to include the full paragraph, which I hope can initiate a discussion of our roles, as queer viewers and participants, with our own intersectionalities and privileges:

> The show has taught me to cast a more discerning eye towards myself. At the end of one episode, Alana is sitting in a lawn chair speaking to the camera. In the middle of a sentence, she sneezes and a huge snot rocket shoots out of her nose and hangs there. Alana reacts totally naturally for a six-year-old, and covers her nose with both hands to hide the offense from the camera. She's clearly embarrassed and clearly at a loss for what to do next. She's six. It seems like the crew are the only other people around. The camera, and thus the audience, stays trained on her like a pointing breed. The seconds tick away and no one says anything. No one offers or suggests a tissue. If we just sit here long enough, surely something good—something gross—will happen and… wait, who are the shameless ones again? (N.pag.).

There exist political dimensions to the work we do as students and practitioners of popular cultural studies. We therefore need to be careful, and ask ourselves certain questions about our own production of meaning, and what it means to consume the televised lives of others as part of the production of our own cultural texts. We need to take into account the intersectionalities or assemblages of our own everyday lives as we rework and refashion the texts we consume into the production of materials for an academic elite. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* reminds us that what we theorise and practise when we discuss 'reality' television is not an abstract program, separated from its actors. The actuality of the Thompson family, whether it be Allana's weight or Uncle Poodle's HIV-status, cannot be used as fodder for a practice of analysis that suggests either neutral, 'academic' observation or one that un-reflexively passes judgement as it churns through texts in order to publish or perish.
Again, Zylinska's approach is helpful here:

> We can say that the description of the cultural studies project can never be just a neutral description of what is going on in the discipline. Its very condition of possibility is a *normative* element governing, from the very beginning, whatever apprehension of 'facts' as facts there could be (2005: 4).

In re-examining how we look at class and the refutation of aspiration as the American Dream, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* gives us the chance as academics, especially those of us from working-class backgrounds, to reconsider our own positions within the academy and our motivations for practising popular cultural studies. Like Honey Boo Boo, we are not able to avoid the gaze and moralisation of a broader academic society that relegates what we do to the fringes of work at universities. Like Honey Boo Boo, we are shaped by the decisions of our producers, our managers and senior academics, still predominately white males, who have the capability to enable or deny us progress towards tenure. Honey Boo Boo reflects our gaze and reminds us that, as Mica Nava writes:

> As cultural studies scholars we must remember not to invoke and critique theory as though it were produced in a vacuum, without roots. All theorists are people who live at specific historical moments and produce theoretical propositions as part of their engagement with or against other theorists and bodies of thought in specific historical and political contexts (2013: 30).

Taking note of the cultural texts that have produced us as scholars of popular culture, Honey Boo Boo calls us to resist the urge to abstract our work, to pretend that what we do with ourselves and our academic products should be reified or removed from the practices of everyday life. As scholars and, as many of us are, as teachers, in a time of continued economic crises and unemployment, as well as the casualisation of the academic workforce, the being and doing of popular cultural studies might well benefit from a long gaze into Honey Boo Boo's mirror. What do we consume and what do we produce, how we are consumed and produced, and what, if any, are the ways in which we might resist these positioning and challenge the inequities? Aren't these the core questions of cultural studies that need to be redneckognised?

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